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## Dialogue as a Nation-Building Mechanism

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### **Abstract:**

*The paper presents dialogue as a conflict resolution and nation-building mechanism. Its focus is on the need for dialogue of living faiths and ideologies in the wake of sudden upsurge of religiously based conflicts in Ghana today. The use of Muslim dress in public schools, particularly the veiling question, the compulsory church attendance by all students in second cycle schools irrespective of faith and other religious practices which are considered an affront to other faiths, Christianity in particular since they form the majority, resulting in the presidency issuing a directive to mission supported institutions to place higher premium on the requirements of the 1992 Republican constitution of Ghana above that of the church. The paper uses dialogue as a device for resolving this Muslim-Christian discord which has gained space in both the print and electronic media as well as human minds. Dialogue is clearly distinguished from what it is not. This is followed by an enumeration of the conditions that must exist to make dialogue succeed. Its objectives as well as challenges are also addressed. The essay then shows how successful dialogue could lead to cohesion, progress in a positive direction and national development. The future of dialogue forms the concluding part of the paper albeit, in a summarized form.*

### **1. Introduction**

The world has become a global village where developments in one part of the world have their bearing on the rest (Examples: The South Sudan Conflict, Boko Haram insurgency in Northern Nigeria, Al-Shabab disturbances in Somalia, Protestant-Catholic violent conflicts in Northern Ireland, Tijāniyyah–Ahlus-Sunnah intra-faith discord in Ghana, Ga traditional worshippers and the Charismatic churches violence in Accra, Ahmadi–Sunni conflict in Wa in the 1930s, ISIL in the Arab world and the Houti Shi'ite insurrection in Yemen etc). Therefore, the need to foster positive understanding and communication among all religions and ideologies has increased manifold, especially in view of the peculiar nature of threats posed to global order and peace.

It is important to note from the onset that there is no need to eliminate differences in order to build a good society. The need to respect and understand the belief of others is what is cardinal in our quest for concord and elimination of discord. These are the basis on which believers of different faiths and ideologies can live in peace together. The followers of living faiths and ideologies need to join hands in opening the doors of dialogue and interact in order to live in harmony and to eradicate extremism. Without peace and justice among Muslims, Christians, Traditional worshippers etc, society will witness chaotic conditions which will leave an unpleasant taste in the mouth of all who cherish peace.

### **2. What is Dialogue and Inter-faith Dialogue?**

The Encarta World English Dictionary sees the word 'dialogue' from different angles. It has these entries for the word dialogue: CHARACTERS' WORDS the words spoken by characters in a book, a film, or a play, or a section of a work that contains spoken words; FORMAL DISCUSSION a formal discussion or negotiation, especially between opposing sides in a political or international context; CONVERSATION talk of any kind between two or more people (formal); LITERARY WORK IN CONVERSATION FORM a work of literature in the form of a conversation (-logues, -loguing, -logued) TAKE PART IN TALK to take part in a conversation, discussion, or negotiation.

As shown above, the word dialogue is subject to different interpretations depending on individuals thinking perspectives. Mala (n.d.) rightly asserts that the word today even though widely used, has become more difficult to explain as a result of its various meanings and applications in respect of relationships existing between adherents of various religions. Some religious adherents have taken the word to mean a strategy for conversion into other people's faiths. But new research has shown that dialogue in practice is as old as the human race itself. Regardless of its angle of conceptualization, the basic concern is to take examine various definitions of dialogue.

Dialogue, is an amalgamation of the two Greek words, 'dia' meaning two and 'logos' meaning 'a word'. The two words have come to mean a word spoken or a conversation between two peoples of two or more belief systems. It could also be applied to a conversation between peoples of two or more belief- systems.

One cannot resist the urge to accept the view that dialogue is a conversation between two or more persons in the hope of ultimately reaching agreement. This definition highlights on an important word 'agreement' which is indispensable to any successful dialogue.

Dialogue is not comparative religion and so any conversation that centres on comparative religion cannot perform the work of dialogue for its focus would be on convergences and divergences of religions/ ideologies.

To compare one religion with another is not dialogue because it does not necessarily lead to encounter. The comparison may be done through correspondence or in the four walls of a classroom. In such a situation it is ideas that are compared but there is no real contact between men at the level of their personal relationship with God. In dialogue, personal encounter of minds is what matters most. No wonder man stands as the object and subject of dialogue as God is to religion. A good dialogue must give credence to the day-to-day problems facing people and seek the contribution of each faith for their resolution.

Consequently, dialogue ought to be taken as a form of communication for mutual understanding, a means of expanding self-knowledge as well as self-transcending knowledge. In fact, it is an attempt to establish a two-way traffic in what has hitherto been a one-way street, (an) attempt to find “positive values” in religious and secular culture. In effect, one can also say that dialogue is the contact that is established between peoples of different and even sometimes opposing views, who are attempting to overcome their mutual prejudice and broaden, as far as possible, their areas of mutual agreement. Thus, it involves understanding emanating from personal encounter, meeting and co-operation between two or more persons in work and worship.

It can be seen from the fore-going that dialogue differs from usual conversation because although one may dislike what the other person stands for, one still listens and work to value the person. Although “one cannot value all human behaviour positively,..one can value each human positively” (Stewart, 1978). Dialogue is possible only between two persons or two groups whose power relationship is more or less in balance (Tournier, 1978). One constructively confronts the other so that “the answer to a conflict merges ‘between’ the conflicting parties” (Arnett, 1980: 113).

In the dialogic view of conflict, neither party alone possesses truth; truth emerges during the struggle with each other (Buber, 1972; Stewart, 1978). As one could well imagine, dialogue is not easy. Kelley (1998) succinctly points out: “The true test of dialogue is in conflict, not in casual conversation”. Engaging in dialogue requires an “immense toughness of self,” demanding that one confirms the opposing party while in conflict (Brown & Keller, 1973). Engaging a person in dialogue is an act of commitment to the relationship and to one’s own principles at the same time. If a person can find the courage to meet aggression with calm friendliness, this may have a powerful inhibiting effect (Frank, 1978).

One of the ways dialogue differs from normal conversation is that in dialogue, both people speak and listen to help each other clarify what is being said. One actively asks questions and probes what the other implies by his utterances, not for purposes of refutation, but to help even an opposing viewpoint become crystallized and understood. This radical active listening, according to Wilmot and Hocker (2001), requires belief in the transformative power of hearing and being heard. They opine further that quality dialogue is slow, careful, full of feeling, respectful, and attentive. One “moves toward bad news” so that an opposing opinion can be fully heard. This movement toward an apparently opposing viewpoint must be learned; few develop this approach to others without a deep sense of the importance of each human being and a belief in collaboratively searching for new solutions that honour each person. It is worth noting that successful dialogue leads to collaboration and implementing the following steps could deepen the level of collaboration:

- i- Explore different assumptions. Listen with respect, without attacking the other’s point of view.
- ii- Develop an objective view and description of the conflict, as if you were outside the conflict. Practice describing your opponent/partner’s position.
- iii- Give up persuasion in favour of exploration of different perspectives. Treat each person as intelligent and worthy of attention.
- iv- Look critically at all sides to the controversy. All sides have strengths and weaknesses that can add to the analysis (adapted from Freeman, Littlejohn, and Pearce 1992).
- v- Express hope, belief in the goodwill of the other person, and your intention to work out your differences.

Having looked at what dialogue generally means, it is the meaning that comes with it when the word wears a religious garb that one ought to turn to in advancing to the next stage of this discussion.

A documentary definition by the Catholic Church considers interreligious dialogue as: “All positive and constructive interreligious relations with individuals and committee of faith which are directed at mutual understanding and enrichment in obedience to truth and respect for freedom” (Dialogue & Proclamation 1991-A document of the Catholic Church p.7). This definition shows that dialogue is about building constructive relationships with people of other faiths. It is about mutual understanding. It is about each partner, respecting the religious freedom of the other. Each party remains true to their own beliefs while respecting the right of the other to practice and hold on to their faith or ideology without hindrance. Put differently, it is an interaction between people who live by different religious traditions in an atmosphere of mutual trust and acceptance

According to Arnold Temple, interfaith dialogue: “is an attempt by the church to act in partnership with those outside its institutional life in the promotion of the kingdom of God, the resultant effect being the renewal of societies to manifest the value of the Kingdom – love, justice, freedom and truth. It is from these value that peace proceeds” [“Inter-faith Praxis in the African Context” Voice from the 3<sup>rd</sup> World Vol. XXV, Nos. 1&2 Dec. 2002 p. 51].

Multi-faith dialogue on the contrary, refers to dialogue situations where a group or body of people from a variety of different religious backgrounds, including the secular come together for discussion on a common subject with the hope of increasing understanding building confidence and mutual trust.

What then can one consider as the objects or aims of dialogue? Successful dialogue aims at achieving the following goals:

- i- Increase mutual understanding and ground relations
- ii- Identify causes of tension in Inter-faith relations. These are often economic, social or political rather than religious.
- iii- Build understanding and confidence to overcome or prevent tensions between different groups.
- iv- Break down the barriers and stereotypes which lead to destruction, suspicion and bigotry.
- v- Interfaith dialogue is not

about taking away or brushing aside differences. It does not aim at coming to a common belief. It is not a way of converting the other. In dialogue each party remains true and loyal to their faith.

### 3. Conditions for Dialogue

i-Understanding each other's religion. ii-Broad mindedness. iii-Readiness to learn from one another. iv-Availability of suitable topic for dialogue. v-Venue for dialogue must be known by all parties involved. vi-Time for dialogue must be agreed upon by all. vii-Provision of necessary things for a successful dialogue. viii-Adequate publicity of the dialogue by both parties. ix-Existence of presence of audience from both parties for the dialogue. x.-Unbiased chair person for the occasion. xi-Readiness to accommodate one another by avoiding abusive or provocative language, attitudes etc. xii-Maturity of dialoguing partners. xiii-A life-threatening conflict must be present, a solution to which a dialogue offers hope. xiv- A communiqué signed by both parties at the end of dialogue. xv- Participants must be intelligent and have the ability to argue logically xvi-They must be honest in their submissions. xvii-The dialoguing partners must be flexible in their stance.

### 4. Qur'an and Ḥadīth on Dialogue

Muslims have often been seen by outsiders as unnecessarily polemical, uncompromising, militant and unaccommodating. These Non-Muslims externalize these bad qualities in strict obedience to certain Qur'anic injunctions. How authentic are these descriptions for Muslims and the Qur'an? What is the position of the Qur'an and Ḥadīth on inter-faith dialogue? These and some other related issues will be the focus of this section.

The Qur'an and Ḥadīth have clear injunctions on dialogical approaches to issues of life be it political, economic, social and religious. First and foremost, Islam makes a consistent claim of universality of all men and sanctions exemplary respect for the dignity of all human beings. "Verily, says the Qur'an, "We have honoured the children of Adam". This verse as could be seen, is addressed to the generality of mankind and not Muslims alone. This is because humankind is seen as having descended from one pair of parents (Adam/Ādam and Eve/Hawa). The Qur'an admits of racial, geographical and natural differences among peoples but firmly disowns this as the basis of the classification of humanity. It states in clear terms that tribes, races and nations are convenient labels by which we may know certain different characteristics. God regards all humans as one and demands good works from all and sundry. Honour is given to the most righteous person. Transparency with each other in our interactions is a key requirement from God irrespective of faith.

### 5. Challenges to Dialogue

Already on a purely human level, it is not easy to practice dialogue. Interreligious dialogue is even more difficult. It is important to be aware of the challenges which may arise. Some would apply equally to the members of all religious traditions and impede the success of dialogue. Others may affect some religious traditions more specifically and make it difficult for a process of dialogue to be initiated. Some of the challenges may range from human factors. These are listed hereunder: i- Insufficient grounding in one's own faith. ii- Insufficient knowledge and understanding of the belief and practices of other religions, leading to a lack of appreciation for their significance and even at times to misrepresentation. iii-Socio-political factors or some burdens of the past. iv- Wrong understanding of the meaning of terms such as conversion, baptism, dialogue, etc. v- Self-sufficiency, lack of openness leading to defensive or aggressive attitudes. vi- A lack of conviction with regard to the value of interreligious dialogue, which some may see as a task reserved to specialists, and others as a sign of weakness or even a betrayal of the faith. vii- Suspicion about the other's motives in dialogue. viii- A polemical spirit when expressing religious convictions. ix- Intolerance, which is often aggravated by association with political, economic, racial and ethnic factors, a lack, of reciprocity in dialogue which can lead to frustration. x- Certain features of the present religious climate, e.g., growing materialism, religious indifference, and the multiplication of religious sects which creates confusion and raises new problems.

Insufficient knowledge and lack of understanding of the *raison d'être* of interreligious dialogue poses the greatest of the challenges confronting dialogue. There is therefore the need embark on continuous education of the masses till they become enlightened. This requires patience and endurance so that the effort is not jettisoned mid-way.

Despite the reality of the challenges staring at our efforts to encourage dialogue and eliminate discord in order to attain concord, we should continue exploring all ways and means of achieving success in the light of the gains already made.

### 6. Indispensability of Dialogue

Peaceful coexistence based on mutual understanding and respect in a multi-religious country as Ghana is the desired goal of religious dialogue. Mutual trust being expected to replace suspicion and affection to replace antagonism.

Besides historical as well as scriptural evidence exist to lend support in both Christianity and Islam to the relevance of dialogue. For instance, Jesus and most of his immediate followers were Jews and after the Resurrection experience, the disciples continued to go to the Temple and saw themselves as part of the Jewish tradition- The "Gentiles".

Act 15 is the story of how the church struggled with this new situation. The challenges that came up had far-reaching implications. Was it important to preserve the Christian roots in Judaism? And if so, how much of Judaism was to be accepted in order to be faithful to the tradition out of which the church was growing? Could circumcision, the sign of belonging to the covenant community be so easily given up? Was the Torah to become part of the Christian heritage?

These were difficult questions, indeed and of course there was at the time no New Testament to provide its authority. There were also no ready-made answers but there were strong reasons, with vocal advocates, to present both sides of the argument.

Finally, the community's decision was that the "Gentile" Christians need not accept circumcision, and that they were not required to keep the law. They should however abstain from certain food habits and social behaviour that will make it difficult for Christians of Jewish origins to have fellowship with them. Here the community of faith reformulated its stance for the sake of unity and peaceful coexistence.

In many ways, Act 15, prefigures what is likely to become an equally painful and decisive debate in our time, namely: the Christian response to religious pluralism.

Similarly, when Prophet Muhammad migrated to Yathrib (later to be named Madinah), he noticed signs of disorder and varying opinions within the Muslims. In a kind of intra-faith dialogue, he performed the Ukhwwah – a formality to unite those who migrated from Makkah (Muhājirūn) with the natives of Yathrib who had just accepted Islam (Ansār – Helpers). He also engaged the non-Muslim residents of the community (Jews and Christians) in an inter-faith dialogue culminating in a document popularly referred to as the Madinan Document/Constitution. This document sought to unite all residents of Madinah irrespective of faith to ensure the progress and development of the city. This provided the peace of mind required to overcome external enemies of the new faith such as the Quraysh idol-worshippers of Makkah. This subsequently led to their defeat at the Battle of Badr in 624 C. E.

Therefore, by interacting with each other both Christians and Muslims – the two dominant faiths in Ghana will be respecting their leaders: Jesus and Mohammad as well as the scriptures associated with their religions (The Bible and The Qur'an).

Besides, the fact of human origins (from Adam and Eve/Hawa) and the Abrahamic roots of Christianity and Islam are both reasons why dialogue is relevant. Humankind traces its origins to the first created pair who lived peacefully in Eden – one being the other's keeper. This served as a good precedent for all to follow.

Another fact is that most Ghanaians profess a faith of a kind. Every living faith or ideology has its culture. It is through meaningful dialogue that understanding of each other's practices, doctrine and dogma is reached and respect accorded them. Once this level of understanding is reached, the likelihood of conflict is checked if not eliminated entirely.

Again, humanity's quest for liberty and freedom in a democratic setting has brought in its trail what Jurgen Moltmann described in an Article titled: "Is Pluralistic theology helpful" In Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The myth of a pluralistic theory of religions, "as the freedom to worship at the church of your choice (or in one's preferable way without hindrance) or not to worship at all. The Ghanaian constitution which contains these guaranteed democratic principles, have crept into religious traditions. Religions are objects of subjective choices in much the same way as brands of toothpaste and laundry soap".

Martin Marty, in Introduction to William James', The varieties of religious experience, aptly describes the situation: "Religion is now a consumer item for a nation of spiritual window shoppers". The puzzles to be solved then are: Can there be a Christianity without the Cross? Islām without Sharī'ah? Judaism without land? May such truncated forms of religious pluralist identity be not the beginning but the end of all true dialogue?

The foregoing questions imply that differences in religious culture, doctrine and dogma should not be a barrier to true and authentic dialogue. Rather it must create an inquisitive mind in us that brings true knowledge of what others hold in high esteem.

Furthermore, Ghana has tasted some disturbances in the name of religion in different parts of the country in the past based on religious or doctrinal differences as early as the 1930's when the Ahmadi Mission clashed with the Sunnis in Wa. One can also cite the Tijaniyyah – Ahlus – Sunnah violent clashes beginning in the 1970's to date as well as the fracas between the Ga Traditional worshippers and some charismatic churches in Accra.

In all these incidences, lives and property running into billions of Ghana Cedis were vandalized in the name of religion. Money and material resources meant for development were used in alleviating the suffering of victims – Thus retarding progress and national development. A recurrence of this carnage is not a wish any sensible and responsible person harbours, hence the need for dialogue.

Dialogue is also important because certain anti-religious individuals and groups have described religion as a destructive element in the life of humanity. This puts a question mark on the relevance of religion for Ghanaians. It has been observed however, that most often religious disturbances are stage-managed by outsiders who cannot be considered serious – religious people. Their aim of doing so is to find a proof of their assertion that religion is violence – prone. It is therefore necessary for people of living faiths and ideologies to join efforts in exposing the bad plans of anti-religionists through dialogue.

A pragmatic necessity for dialogue can be chattered out when one considers the fact that there are a large number of communities in which Christians and Muslims now live side by side, sometimes as the minority and sometimes as the majority religious grouping. Hence, there arises an imperative necessity for finding a sound foundation for solidarity and reformulating a concept for development which is acceptable to both Christians and Muslims. The Christian and Muslim faiths and worship of the one living God represents a challenge to joint endeavour in order to curb the secularistic tendencies evident in both collective and individual sphere and to guide the development of our technological civilization into a form which is compatible with belief in God.

Let it be borne in mind that dialogue should not be carried on "for the sake of dialogue." Rather its motivation should be to change conditions which are life threatening, in other words, directed toward practical consequences. In fact, as Ariarajah rightly puts it: 'the motion can be described as one of moving from anathema to dialogue, from dialogue to coexistence, and from coexistence to cooperation'.

In addition, both Christians and Muslims in Ghana are equal citizens and therefore have equal stake in the development of their fatherland. For example, together the adherents collaborate in their efforts at their respective communities in building of schools, hospitals, markets and provision of other social amenities to move their communities forward in a positive direction.

Finally, the statement of V. O. Adefarisan captioned "An Exposition of manipulation of religions in society" in Religion, leadership and society: Focus on Nigeria is worth citing in this case "... Our clarion call is that whatever religion people belong to, they must

make patriotism their watchword....We should equally note the popular Chinese proverb which goes thus: It is better to light candle than cause darkness”.

### 7. Dialogue and National Development

Any serious nation that aspires to grow and develop must place a high premium on the culture of religious tolerance. In this direction the foremost ingredient must be the recognition of the existence of other faiths by religious leaders and their followers, and recognizing the fact that other faiths share a common claim to truth. When this happens, there will likely be mutual understanding and peaceful co-existence. For dialogue to pave the way for peaceful co-existence leading to growth and development of a nation depends on leadership and their followers.

In fact, Ade Odumuyiwa was right in noting that: “Leadership determines the type of followers. When religious leaders preach the tenets of their religion well and followers put these into practice in their interactions with other people, then there will be peace in the social life of the people. This is the result of religious tolerance, faithfulness, integrity, love for one another, forbearance and good rapport. Consequently, the country will enjoy peace and society becomes egalitarian with the security of life and property assured”.

Corresponding to these values is the economic progress, growth and development of the nation. When there is peace, commercial activities during festivals and afterwards result in economic boom, foreign investors are then attracted into the country to invest. Thus drawing in the much needed foreign exchange whilst unemployment is reduced. This leads to improvement in the socio-economic life of Ghanaians. As a result, crime rate also drops if not eliminated entirely.

Furthermore, the moral foundation of every culture comes from its religion. It follows therefore that no nation can survive too long if it opposes or even ignores religion because religion provides the moral foundation to the society. Now since religion or ideology is part of any nation’s culture, the governed are under the moral obligation to respect cultural practices. Upholding our culture and moral integrity paves the way for cultural and moral upliftment. Ghanaian cultural practices that are archaic such as female genital mutilation, human sacrifice, forced marriage among others should be proscribed to pave way for good ones such as decent dressing, respect for the aged and constituted authority, music, arts and dance etc.

In addition, it has been observed that differences in religious beliefs have played a major role in fanning the embers of inter-group conflicts among world communities. During such conflicts billions of human resources perish and development greatly hampered. Consequently, dialogue between Christians and Muslims would help followers of the two religions to understand and appreciate the values contained in each other’s faith. Such understanding and appreciation would help them avoid useless arguments, which often stem from ignorance. Religious leaders have an uphill task to educate their followers to love one another work together to promote unity which leads to sustained economic growth and development.

On the contrary, when religious leaders fail to impart the right message and instead preach negative ones, peace, development and progress becomes a mirage to the nation. Instead, religious disturbances, armed robbery, rape and other vices become the norm. Things will then fall apart and the consequences would be unbearable. People will live in perpetual fear and the stability of the nation will be in limbo.

The ideals mentioned above must be worked for, as nothing good comes on a silver platter. Religious leaders and followers should endeavour to put them into practice. When this is done the common good of the public is served and Ghana will be a better place to live in. This would pave the way for peaceful coexistence, growth and sustained national development.

Failure or refusal to place premium on these positive values results in moral decadence. Then the ground becomes fertile for social vices such as hooliganism, adult delinquency, teenage pregnancy etc.

To check the onset of these canker so that the nation can progress and develop, the following should be observed by both religious leadership and Followers. Tenets of the respective religions should be propagated and practiced in relation to other Ghanaians. Misconduct or abuse of these tenets must be sanctioned to deter others from repeating same.

Educational activities such as seminars and conferences should be organized to teach members and to assess public opinion so as to keep both religious leaders and followers striving towards the attainment of national developmental goals.

There is also the essential need for public office holders to exhibit transparency, honesty and accountability. There should be no discrimination or witch-hunting based on ethnicity, religious affiliation, gender and association. Leadership should be by good example for followers to emulate.

The teaching of religious and moral education should be intensified in all educational institutions. This will promote sound moral minds, which will promote and help develop the nation with the fear of God. - Government and NGO’s should liase with one another to check moral decadence in the country.-For these noble goals to be achieved, all people must prove responsible by acting as watchdogs to ensure strict compliance to the set rules. Erring leaders and followers should be called to order publicly without prejudice or malice.

To ensure effectiveness of sanctioning, the following recommendations of Ade Odumuyiwa should be seriously explored. These include:

- i. Publishing a disclaimer in the dailies/magazines of such erring persons.
- ii. Ex- communicating erring persons from the religion.
- iii. Encouraging and enforcing registration of religious leaders and followers for easy identification and effective discipline
- iv. Blacklisting and severing ties with incorrigible leaders and followers.
- v. Demotion or outright suspension of religious leaders depending on the degree of offence.

## 8. Future of Dialogue

In conclusion, the most appropriate and equally interesting question to pose which also requires a response is: Has dialogue any future at all? The simple straight forward answer is in the affirmative. That is, if by future prospects, one means the envisaged progress and unity that dialogue among people of living Faiths and ideologies can bring in the years ahead. When dialogue among people of living faiths and ideologies is seriously pursued the following prospects are anticipated: i- Peaceful co-existence ii- Social and economic growth iii- Trust among practitioners of various Faiths iv- Future advancement of National and International relationship v- Better understanding of religions and their creed vi- Elimination of religious war and antagonism vii- Cordial inter-personal relationship which could lead to forming strong nuclear families and ties.

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