

# Religion, Religious Education and Nation Building:

Nigeria and the world in the 21st century  
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Very Rev. Fr Prof. Joseph Haruna Mamman

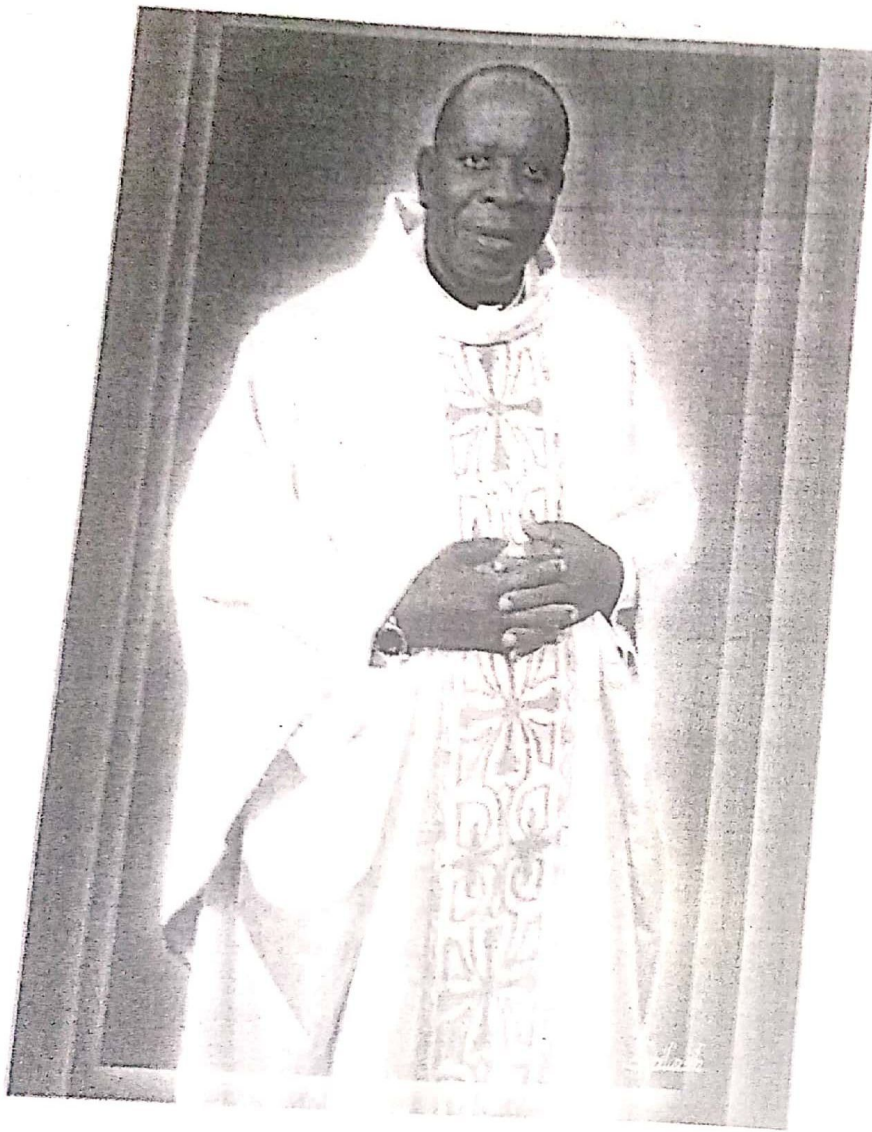


Edited by

Emmanuel Osewe AKUBOR PhD

Rev. Fr. Dr. Barnabas Sama'ila Shabayang





**VERY REVEREND FR. PROFESSOR JOSEPH HARUNA MAMMAN**

Published by



**DAROSAT GLOBAL LIMITED**  
3, SW8, Anfani Layout, Ring Road, Ibadan  
08131166996, 09027777382  
E-mail: darosat2013@gmail.com  
Website: info@darosatglobal.com

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## CHAPTER NINE

# 'Forging An Interfaith Cooperation in A Multi-Religious Society: The Case of Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (Nirec), 1999-2015'

Babajimi O. Faseke

### INTRODUCTION

With a population of over 180 million Nigeria is by far the most populous country in Africa. It is also described by Pew Research Centre as 9<sup>th</sup> in the world in terms of people with the most religious views.<sup>104</sup> While it is incontrovertible that an overwhelming majority of the people are either Christians or Muslims, the exact percentage of adherents of each religion is usually contested with different sources providing varying figures. For example, the 2008 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) found 53% Muslim and 45% Christians and 2% other, while a 2008 Afro-barometer poll suggests 50% Christian, 49% Muslim and 1% other. Pew on the other hand, in 2011, suggests 52% Muslim, 46% Christian, and 1% other.<sup>105</sup> It will be safe to say, therefore, that Christian and Muslims are almost evenly numbered in the country. The Muslims are mainly Sunnis, while the Christians are largely Protestants (broadly defined to include Pentecostals) with about a

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104. Nigerian Monitor (Online), [www.nigerianmonitor.com/list-of-most-religious-countries-in-the-world/](http://www.nigerianmonitor.com/list-of-most-religious-countries-in-the-world/) accessed 06/08/2017
105. Pew Research Centre (online), 'Global Christianity: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population', Dec. 2011, <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2011/12/Christianity-fullreport-web.pdf> Accessed 05/08/2017



quarter of them being Catholics.<sup>106</sup> Significantly, the spread and practice of these religions is also dependent on ethnicity, with the northerners being predominantly Muslim, south-easterners Christian, while we have a delicate mix of both Christians and Muslims in the South-West.

The fact that Nigerians are generally very religious allows faith to permeate both the private and the public sphere. Also, the fact that ethnicity is a major determinant of choice of belief further accentuates the pungency of religion in the country. It is, therefore, not surprising that religion—more than any other singular factor—has been responsible for the highest amount of deadly conflicts in the nation.<sup>107</sup> Such a scenario calls for interfaith dialogues through interfaith organizations as a means to peaceful coexistence. The main objective of an interfaith dialogue is to emphasize the similarities inherent in the separate religious doctrines since most of the major world religions preach the same central theme, which is peaceful living among men and obedience to the Supreme Being. And the overarching goal is to allow people live in harmony (not unity).<sup>108</sup> The idea of inter-religious organizations cum interfaith dialogue is not new; Emperor Akbar of India organized interfaith dialogues between Hindus, Sikhs, and Christians in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, so also did we have a similar practice in the Balkans where, under the Ottoman Turks, Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Jews and Muslims dialogued between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. In contemporary times there has been the establishment of a plethora of international interfaith organizations like Religion for Peace, the

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106. *Ibid.*

107. For a list of religious conflicts in Nigeria between 1999 and 2010 alone, see Isaac T. Sampson, 'Religious violence in Nigeria: Causal diagnoses and strategic recommendations to the state and religious communities' *African Journal on Conflict Resolution* Vol. 12 Issue 1 (2012): pp. 107-112.

108. Olusola O. Isola, 'Inter-Faith Conflict Mediation Mechanisms and Peacebuilding in Nigeria', Paper presented at the First Annual International Conference on Ethnic and Religious Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding, New York, 2014, <https://www.icermediation.org/news-media/meeting-coverage/inter-faith-conflict-mediation-mechanisms-and-peacebuilding-in-nigeria/> Accessed 20/06/2016



World Vision International, KAICIID Dialogue Centre, and United Religions Initiative, just to mention a few.

It is worth mentioning that there have also been a number of interfaith bodies in Nigeria. There are, for example, Universal Peace Federation (UPF), *Nigerian Inter-faith Action Association* (NIFAA), and the Interfaith Mediation Centre (IMC), among others. Most of these, however, are NGOs, which makes the establishment of the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) in 1999 unique in the sense that it is the sole government-established interfaith organization saddled with the primary responsibility of mediating between the two dominant religions in the country. The essay, therefore, seeks to examine the evolution of the body and do an appraisal of its efforts since 1999. The rest of the work is divided into five major sections: the first provides an overview of religious conflicts in Nigeria before 1999; the next, the founding of NIREC; third, NIREC's implementation of its mandate; the fourth section discusses the organization's contribution to national development, followed by the challenges hindering NIREC.

### Religious Conflicts in Nigeria before 1999: An overview

Nigeria has recorded more religious conflicts than the rest of Africa put together.<sup>109</sup> While there are no precise records on the exact number of these religious conflicts in the country, an overwhelming majority of them (95 percent) have occurred in the Muslim-dominated northern region of Nigeria.<sup>110</sup> This, however, has not always been so. In fact, before the 1980s there hardly was any major hostility between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria. In the North there is a jocular interaction between

109. Abiodun Alao, "Islamic Radicalisation and Violence in Nigeria." 2009. <http://www.securityanddevelopment.org/pdf/ESRC%20Nigeria%20Overview.pdf>. Accessed 16/07/2017

110. Isaac T. Sampson, 'Religious violence in Nigeria' p. 106. It is important to mention that despite being a Muslim-dominated region there is also the presence of a significant minority Christian population.



Muslims and Christians, with the former referring to the latter as *kafiri* (pagans) and the latter referring to the former as *kulle-kulle* (meaning those who lock up their wives). The situation changed in the 1980s when we had an increased spate of religious crisis. Fundamentalism best describes the reason for this new development. For example, starting from the late-1970s there was the emergence of a new wave of Pentecostal Christians made up of mostly youths that engaged in radical evangelism. It was this 'radicalism' that sometimes pitted them against their Muslim counterparts. Also, some Muslims during this period became radicalized as well, setting the stage for a more heated atmosphere.

Indeed, fundamentalism was one of the most important causes of religious crisis in Nigeria—not in its benign form as with the radical evangelicals—but in its extreme form wherein violence became a tool of expression. In 1980, for instance, there was the Maitatsine uprising. Led by Mohammed Marwa, the Maitatsine Islamic sect was a fundamentalist group that opposed the Nigerian state and any form of westernization including education and technology. A Cameroonian living in Kano, Marwa and his members terrorized the city of Kano from the late 1970s culminating in fatal uprisings in December 1980. The first unrest that month started on the 8<sup>th</sup> when, having received series of complaints of the sect's disturbance and violence from residents, the Nigerian police attempted to disperse their meeting at Shauchi Playing Ground, Kano with the use of teargas.<sup>111</sup> Instead of disassembling, the sect members launched a fatal attack on policemen causing loss of lives and properties. It was not until the military intervened on the 28<sup>th</sup> of that month that the Maitatsine uprising was put to rest and Marwa was killed. There were, however, remnants of the sect that fled to various locations in the north and staged a series of reprisal attacks between 1981

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111. Toyin Falola, *Violence in Nigeria: the Crisis of Religious Politics and Secular Ideologies* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 1998), 153



and 1985. It was indeed Muhammadu Buhari's military administration (84/85) that put a permanent end to the operations of the sect.

Disparaging proselytization is another factor that has fuelled faith based conflicts in Nigeria.<sup>112</sup> A perfect example that typifies this is the Kafanchan, Kaduna Crisis of 1987, where the Federation of Christian Students (FCS) at the College of Education, Kafanchan (also known as Advanced Teachers College) had invited a certain Rev. Abubakar Bako, a Muslim convert to Christianity, as the guest speaker for a counseling session during their 'revival'. Being a Muslim convert, Bako had reasonable knowledge of the Quran and, therefore, made reference to it to elucidate his point on the *supremacy* of the Christian faith to Islam. In doing so, he allegedly misinterpreted some portions of the Quran, including Chapter 3:13 and 43:46. This action degenerated into a fracas as a Muslim lady, Aishatu Garba, who had heard the Reverend's reference to the Quran accosted him and further mobilized other Muslim students to the scene. What had seemed as a small college disturbance snowballed into a state-wide crisis, as major Kaduna cities—including Kaduna city, Zaria, Wusasa, Kankia, and Funtua—experienced one form of religious riot or the other as a consequence.<sup>113</sup> It is important to note, however, that smaller religious crises borne out of disparaging proselytization abounded all over the country during this period.

Without a doubt, the battle for space between the two dominant religions in the country has proved to be one of the most important factors that bred animosity and conflict between adherents of both religions. In Nigeria, religion and geopolitics work hand in glove. The East is predominantly Christian; there is a delicate balance of Christian and Muslim populations in the West; and the North is mainly Muslim. However, there is good

112. A.O. Omotosho, "Religious violence in Nigeria – the causes and solutions: An Islamic Perspective." *Swedish Missiological Theme* (2003): 15-31.

113. Toyin Falola, *Violence in Nigeria*, 183



number of Christians in the north-central part of the country (Kogi, Niger, Benue, Kwara, Plateau, and Nassarawa). This makes the 'core' northern states, where Islam is prevalent, to be hostile to any major form of Christian infiltration. This fact is best illustrated by the October 14, 1991 Kano violence caused by the proposed Reinhard Bonnke crusade. The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) had invited the German evangelist to hold a crusade in the popular Race Course, Kano. The fact that such a central location was to be used for such purpose and the fact that an Islamic organization had just been declined approval to use the same facility a few days earlier.<sup>114</sup> Although the venue for the proposed crusade was changed late on, Christians still went about their vigorous publicity and the Muslim leaders opined that Christians had polluted the city by elevating the name of Jesus over that of Prophet Mohammed.<sup>115</sup> In an attempt to foil the crusade, wide-spread riots broke out in the city with twelve deaths recorded and severe loss of properties reported.<sup>116</sup>

It is important to note, however, that religious conflicts in Nigeria have not always been violent; some have remained in the realm of ideology, but have been no less pungent. Two examples of such are most outstanding. The first pertains to the secular debate in Nigeria. Nigeria inherited a secular state system from the British and the constitution of the First Republic specified that Nigeria was to remain a secular state. Northern Muslims were not particularly receptive of this idea since Islam and politics were inseparable, thus causing a number of agitations ever since. The 1970s was therefore characterized by secular debates on whether or not the 1979 constitution should be made secular. After series of heated deliberations that divided Christian and Muslim segments of the population, a compromise was agreed with the result that the word 'secular' was omitted from the constitution and replaced with multi-religious. The government

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114. *Ibid.*, 211

115. *Ibid.*, 212

116. *Ibid.*



of the day, in effect, called Nigeria a religious country without an official religion.<sup>117</sup> Subsequent constitutions retained this provision, and till this day the secular status of the nation is at best hazy.

The second is Nigeria's enrolment into the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC). Eminent Muslims in the country had ensured that Nigeria had an observer status within the OIC since its creation in the late 1960s. During Gen. Buhari's regime in the early 1980s, however, Muslim elites in the country lobbied the government to make Nigeria permanent members of the organization. Many Arab governments also mounted pressure on Buhari's administration to yield to such request, promising economic and financial assistance to the country should it become a full member of the organization. Citing economic gains and solidarity among third world countries,<sup>118</sup> it was Gen. Buhari's successor—Gen. Babangida—that executed the plan to make Nigeria a permanent member of the OIC in January 1986. The immediate fallout of Nigeria's full membership of the OIC is that it deeply divided the country along religious lines. As a resolution, Babangida set up a committee, led by Lt Col. John Shagaya that was saddled with the responsibility of examining the implications of Nigeria's membership in the OIC. The religious divide among members of the committee prevented a concrete unanimous decision. Instead, the most tangible outcome of the panel was the recommendation of the need for inter-religious cooperation and the necessity to create a body to foster such. Following the report of the committee, Gen. Babangida decided to make the consultative committee permanent and christened it 'the Advisory Council on Religious Affairs (ACRA). While the membership of the new body was slightly increased, it was largely constituted of the same participants of the original panel.

117. Ibid., pp. 75-77

118. Chuks Anyanso, 'Babangida on Why Nigeria joined OIC' *Guardian (Nig.)*, 4th February, 1986,



ACRA had been constituted to mediate between the two religions and to advise the government on religious matters. The body, however, turned out to be a miserable failure. This was on account of the council's Muslim and Christian members' inability to agree on a chairman. In fact, ACRA seldom agreed on anything, and they usually refused to hold meetings. On the few occasions they met, usually at the behest of the government, hardly was there any concrete decision reached.<sup>119</sup> Charles N. Ubah has also suggested that the ill-success of the body was occasioned by the belief of Nigerian Christians that 'they are always disadvantaged whenever government interferes in religion.'<sup>120</sup>

### The Nigeria Inter-religious Council (NIREC): Establishment and Objectives

ACRA's inefficiency meant that religious divide was still rife throughout the 1990s. It, therefore, did not come as a surprise that when the democratically elected government of Olusegun Obasanjo assumed power in 1999 it was a problem that needed to be tackled. It was, however, the then Presidential Villa Chaplain, Rev. Yusuf Obaje that advised President Obasanjo on the need to establish a body that will address religious bickering in Nigeria.<sup>121</sup> Consequently, the idea was communicated to religious leaders in the country, resulting in the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) leading a delegate, led by the then CAN president, Dr. Sunday Mbang, to visit the late Sultan of Sokoto, Alhaji Muhammadu Maccido, who was the President General of the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA), on 11<sup>th</sup> September 1999.<sup>122</sup> The rationale behind the visit was to seek the

119. Toyin Falola, *Violence in Nigeria*, 163

120. Interview with C.N. Ubah, Kaduna, January 26, 1991. Cited in Iheanyi M. Enwerem, *A dangerous awakening: the politicization of religion in Nigeria* (Ibadan: IFRA, 1995), 140

121. Oliver C. Igwe & Uchenna M. Ugorie, Christian-Muslim Conflicts In Nigeria: An Assessment Of The Role Of The Nigerian Inter-religious Council (NIREC), *ABSU Journal of Arts, Management, Education, Law and Social Sciences (JAMELESS)*; Vol 3 (2013), 14

122. *Ibid.*



Sultan's support on the establishment of a body that will promote interfaith dialogue and stem frequent religious crises that might threaten the peaceful existence of the Nigerian polity. The Sultan accepted the idea and it was agreed that the body be christened Nigeria Inter-Religious Council. It was additionally decided that membership of the body should be a total of fifty, with twenty-five members emanating from CAN and the other twenty-five, NSCIA. In a matter of days their decision was communicated to President Obasanjo, who in turn inaugurated the council on the 29<sup>th</sup> of September 1999 in Abuja.<sup>123</sup>

From the outset, the objectives and functions of the body were clearly articulated. They centered on interfaith cooperation and were broken down to eleven. Chief amongst them is 'To honestly and sincerely endeavour, by themselves, to understand the true teachings of the two religions – Christianity and Islam including their peculiarities and personal mannerisms through dialogue, discussions, workshops, seminars, conferences, pamphleteering. A second objective included creating a permanent and sustainable channel of communication and interaction in order to promote dialogue between Christians and Muslims. Another objective is the promotion of co-existence among all people of Nigeria irrespective of their religious or ethnic affiliations. Mutual co-operation and promotion of the welfare of all citizens, as well as the creation of channels for peaceful resolution of misunderstandings were two other important objectives.<sup>124</sup>

Other goals of NIREC included articulating cordial relationships amongst the various religious groups and between them and the

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123. Peter Tanko "Inter-Religious Dialogue as a Tool for the Transformation of Northern Nigeria". In Elochukwu, E. Uzukwu, ed., *Bulletin of Ecumenical Theology: Inter-religious Dialogue, Inter-religious Dialogue vol. 15* Enugu: SNAAP, 2003.3-36., 5
124. Is-haq O. Oloyede, 'NIREC and Conflict Management In Nigeria', Public Lecture, *Religion for Peace (RfP) consultation on Reflection on Best Practices scaling-up multi-religious Action, Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina (BIH)*, 24-26 July 2015



government, and assisting the federal, state and local governments of Nigeria accentuate the positive roles religion should play in nation building and development. The mandate of the council also included serving as a forum for achieving national goals like economic and political growth; making recommendations to the government on matters that might foster the spiritual development of Nigerians; and making general recommendations to government at the instance of the government. Finally, the council saddled itself with the responsibility of establishing networks of similar goals, both locally and internationally.<sup>125</sup>

The administrative structure of NIREC was also detailed. It was agreed that the body will be co-chaired by both the president of CAN and that of the NSCIA. This translated to Dr. Sunday Mbang, CAN's president (1995-2003), and Alhaji Muhammadu Maccido, the then Sultan of Sokoto and President General of NSCIA being the first chairmen. After Maccido's demise in 2006, his successor as Sultan and NSCIA president, Alhaji Muhammed Sa'ad Abubakar III, automatically took his place within NIREC. Mbang, on the other hand, has had more successors by virtue of the fact that CAN's presidency is tenured. Thus, Most Revd. Peter Akinola (2003-2007), Archbishop John Onaiyekan and Pastor Ayo Oritsejafar have between 2003-2015 served as CAN's president and, by extension, co-chaired NIREC in that time.

Next in hierarchy to the co-chairmen was the National Coordinator/Executive secretary of the Council. Prof. Yusuf Obaje, who had been instrumental to the founding of the council, served as the inaugural occupant of this position (1999-2007). He was succeeded by Prof. Is-haq Oloyede, who occupied the position beyond 2015. The main role of the occupant of this position is to head the secretariat and liaise with the government

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125. Ibid.



and other relevant partners.<sup>126</sup> It is indeed worth pointing out that surviving members of both present and past chairmen and national coordinators belong to the council's Board of Trustees (BOT). These include, Alhaji Muhammed Sa'ad Abubakar III, Dr. Sunday Mbang, Archbishop John Onaiyekan, Pastor Ayo Oritsejafor, Prof. Yusuf Obaje, and Prof. Is-haq Oloyede.

There was also the creation of a secretariat which was located in Abuja. It was saddled with the responsibility of coordinating all correspondence between NIREC and other bodies. The secretariat also prepares for quarterly meetings and handles every form of documentation that involves the council.<sup>127</sup> The existence and functions of the secretariat was also replicated through the body's youth wings in different states of the country. Perhaps, most tellingly, there was the constitution of nine 'Standing Committees' (SC) that were meant to facilitate NIREC's operations. They include: General Purpose SC; International Relations SC; Public Policy Issues; Education SC; Inter-religious Dialogue and Public Enlightenment SC; Peacebuilding/Conflict Resolution SC; Finance Committee; Planning, Research and Development SC; and Projects and Development SC. NIREC achievements and operations have mainly been carried out through these SCs, particularly at grassroots level. It is to this achievements and operations over the last decade and a half that we now turn.

### Swinging into Action: NIREC's Operations and early Successes

It is only fitting to discuss the operations and successes of NIREC in line with what the body stated as its methods of operation. These include openness, frankness and inclusiveness.<sup>128</sup> The body also claims to have fidelity to

126. Ibid.

127. Peter Tanko "Inter-Religious Dialogue as a Tool for the Transformation of Northern Nigeria", p. 6

128. Is-haq O. Oloyede, 'NIREC and Conflict Management In Nigeria'



respective faith traditions, to observe the principles of equity and equality, accountability and transparency, as well as integrity and commitment to volunteerism and selflessness. Such methods informed their strategies, which include the adoption of faith-based channels and institutions, grassrootsing, dialogue of action, resistance to government intrusion and mutual collaboration with government agencies.<sup>129</sup> As we will find out, a combination of these methods and strategies was the bedrock upon which NIREC created platforms for their engagements.

One of such platforms was the rotational quarterly meetings that NIREC holds across the six geopolitical zones in Nigeria.<sup>130</sup> Meetings have therefore been held in major cities like Enugu, Maiduguri, Lagos, Kano, Jos, Port Harcourt, Abuja and even Bauchi.<sup>131</sup> It is instructive to note that the idea behind such rotation is the fostering of the spirit of inclusiveness, particularly because each of the six zones is predominated by either Christians or Muslims. Before such quarterly meetings, NIREC also held interactive sessions between religious and community leaders within the zone. By so doing, NIREC would interact with religious and community leaders who sometimes held prejudices, misconceptions, preconceptions, suspicions, grievances and sad memories of the past. It is worth mentioning, however, that such interactive sessions did not always clear the doubts and misconceptions of these religious and community leaders since some of their differences were irreconcilable. But in the main, NIREC tried in fostering cooperation and reconciliation through this action.

Apart from the zonal rotation of meetings, as part of its strategy of reaching the grassroots NIREC also established its equivalent at state level so as to facilitate peaceful co-existence among religious groups in such states. Niger and Kaduna are two states that have

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129. Ibid.

130. Oliver C. Igwe & Uchenna M. Ugorie, *Christian-Muslim Conflicts In Nigeria*, 18.

131. Is-haq O. Oloyede, 'NIREC and Conflict Management In Nigeria'



profited from this arrangement and the bodies have been supported by state government finances.<sup>132</sup> Riding on such a platform, NIREC used this avenue to organize youth summits. For example, in 2002 a youth summit on inter-religious dialogue and peaceful co-existence was arranged under the auspices of the Interfaith Mediation Centre Kaduna, which happens to be the NIREC equivalent body in Kaduna State. One positive effect of the summit was that both the Christian and Muslim youths combined efforts to rebuild all the mosques and churches that were destroyed during the Kaduna religious crisis.<sup>133</sup> They also committed themselves to other aspects of peace building in Kaduna. A similar summit was held in Minna, Niger State a few years later, in 2009, where youths again committed themselves to religious peacebuilding. This time, the summit had been triggered by the Jos crisis of 2008 that was occasioned by the violent conflicts between indigenous Christians and settler Muslims in the city of Jos, Plateau State. The public lectures and paper presentations at the summit were geared towards providing skills for the promotion of peace and interreligious harmony in the country.<sup>134</sup>

Unlike the youths, the place of women in NIREC's peace efforts has been slightly obscure. It is worth noting, however, that as at the creation of the body in 1999 only two of the fifty members were women, and these came from the Christian wing. Perhaps as a result of the pressures mounted against this paltry representation of women or because the Muslims wanted to match their Christian counterparts within the organization, the Federation of Muslim Women's Association in Nigeria (FOMWAN) was in 2004 invited to form part of the Muslim

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132. Olusola O. Isola, 'Inter-Faith Conflict Mediation Mechanisms and Peacebuilding in Nigeria', 18

133. Oliver C. Igwe & Uchenna M. Ugorie, *Christian-Muslim Conflicts In Nigeria*, 19

134. Rosalind J. Hackett, 'Nigeria's Religious Leaders in an Age of Radicalism and Neoliberalism' in Timothy D. Sisk (ed.) *Between Terror and Tolerance: Religious Leaders, Conflict, and Peacemaking* (Washington D.C: Georgetown University Press, 2011), 129



representation within the body.<sup>135</sup> Subsequently, NIREC through its female members at various fora espoused the relevance of women to the society and their role as mothers within the community in maintaining peace and harmony.<sup>136</sup> Through this medium they also dispelled stereotypes that religion relegates women to the background, arguing that both Islam and Christianity have granted women undeniable rights which protect their dignity and equality with men within well-defined and complementary gender roles.<sup>137</sup> In addition, NIREC also collaborated with the Nigeria Women of Faith Network in organizing a seminar in April 2008 on the theme: "Eradication of HIV/AIDS and Gender-based Violence (GBV)" wherein GBV was discouraged and women were sensitized on HIV/AIDS.

NIREC's activities, however, extends beyond conflict prevention to include conflict resolution. It has in this regard achieved relative successes. As earlier observed, religious conflicts in Nigeria have not always been overtly violent, they sometimes remain in an ideological realm, like matters that pertain to—take for instance—the practice of Sharia in northern Nigeria or Nigeria's membership of the OIC. One of the important contributions NIREC made to this end was in its nascent years when it organized a seminar on Sharia in June 2000.<sup>138</sup> During the seminar, the Christian segment of the body reiterated their commitment to collaborate with Muslims towards greater social justice for all Nigerians but their non-acceptance of the full implementation of the Sharia, because of its negative effect on Christians and because it was contrary to the Constitution, was unequivocally stated. Though the Muslim speakers insisted that non-Muslims would not be affected, Cardinal John Onaiyekan,

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135. Kathleen McGarvey, *Muslim and Christian Women in dialogue: The Case of Northern Nigeria*, Religions and Discourse vol. 42 (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 124

136. Is-haq O. Oloyede, 'NIREC and Conflict Management In Nigeria'

137. Kathleen McGarvey, *Muslim and Christian Women in dialogue*, 124

138. The mooted idea of the strict practice of Sharia across the northern states of Nigeria was at this time a heated debate that sharply divided Muslims and Christians in the country.



quickly pointed out that, 'the foot that wears the shoe knows best where it pinches.'<sup>139</sup> Though the debate was not definitively settled at the seminar, the reservations expressed by the Christian segment of the body might have made Muslims soften their stance on the matter.

NIREC was also active in violent conflicts that were motivated by religion. A case in point is the Bauchi crisis of December 11, 2007 when Muslim and Christian segments of Yelwa population were embroiled in a deadly confrontation that started as a result of the erection of a Mosque at the Government Secondary School, Babantakko in the Yelwa area. The genesis of the crisis had been the destruction of the mosque (twice) by those, believed to be Christians, opposed to the idea of siting the mosque within the secondary school premises. Following the pulling down of the structure for the second time, a group mounted vigil to see the perpetrators and staged a full scale assault on them and their sympathizers, causing several deaths and loss of properties. On the 31<sup>st</sup> of December, the co-chairmen of NIREC, Alhaji Abubakar Sa'ad and Pastor Ayo Oritsejafor visited the area to sue for peace, and in a dramatic turn of event there was an immediate end to hostilities as a result of such intervention.<sup>140</sup>

Apart from these interventions, NIREC through its executives, also campaigned for the compensation of victims of religious violence as well as recommended the death penalty for culprits of such aggression. For example, in a NIREC meeting held in Maiduguri on the 6<sup>th</sup> of May, 2008, the Sultan of Sokoto, Alhaji Abubakar Sa'ad called on the government to compensate all victims of previous religious crises across the country.<sup>141</sup> His

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139. Kathleen McGarvey, *Muslim and Christian Women in dialogue*, 124
140. Thaddeus B. Umaru, *Christian-Muslim Dialogue in Northern Nigeria: A Socio-Political and Theological Consideration* (Indiana: XLIBRIS, 2013), 190
141. Abubakar Siddeeq, 'The Nigerian Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) Meeting in Maiduguri' *Focus on Faith*, Dec. 19, 2010. <http://www.abubakarsiddeeq.com/2010/12/nigerian-inter-religious-council-nirec.html> Accessed 15/08/2017



position was strongly backed by the Christian wing of the body. In the same vein, in December 2011, NIREC advocated for the death penalty 'for anyone found guilty of killing innocent citizen under pretense of belonging to any group in the country.'<sup>142</sup>

As earlier hinted, collaborative efforts with local, regional and global organizations was part of NIREC's modus operandi. For instance, the body formed links with the Nigerian Women of Faith Network, African Council of Religious Leaders (ACRL), and Inter-religious Council of West Africa among others. Its most tangible contribution to national development in Nigeria could, however, be traced to its collaboration with local agencies in Nigeria like the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC). NIREC collaborated with EFCC to establish Inter-Faith Anti-corruption Advisory Committee (IAAC). The committee was saddled with the responsibility of coordinating religious communities to promote faith-based anti-corruption messages to Nigeria. Between 2008 and 2015 the IAAC succeeded in hosting summits and producing teaching and preaching manuals for use by Muslims and Christians that will promote anti-corruption sermons.<sup>143</sup>

### **NIREC's waning impact in the wake of religious terrorism and internal cleavages**

Despite the best efforts of NIREC it is crystal clear that religious schisms were on the increase in the country. And loss of lives and properties since 2009 were on the increase. The advent of Boko Haram terrorist group in 2009 is in no small measure responsible for this development. According to Human Rights Watch research, an estimated 10,000 civilians have died in Nigeria

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142. Cornelius Omonokhua, 'Where is NIREC?' Daily Trust (Online) Dec. 9, 2012 [www.dailytrust.com.ng/sunday/index/index.php/sunday-sermon/5371-where-is-nirec](http://www.dailytrust.com.ng/sunday/index/index.php/sunday-sermon/5371-where-is-nirec)  
Accessed 15/08/2017

143. Oliver C. Igwe & Uchenna M. Ugorie, *Christian-Muslim Conflicts In Nigeria*, 17



between 2009 (when the group began its attacks) and 2015.<sup>144</sup> This is not to mention the destruction of valuable properties to the tune of billions of Naira. For example, between 2009 and 2015, attacks in northeastern Nigeria destroyed more than 910 schools and forced at least 1,500 to close.<sup>145</sup> There is also the case of about 2,000 abducted children. Besides, some of the non-terror related religious conflicts that NIREC thought had been put to rest through its efforts in the late 2000s resurfaced by the turn of the decade. Examples of such abound in locations like Kaduna, Jos and Bauchi.

Whether as a cause or a consequence of the above, internal cleavages started manifesting within NIREC in the early 2010s. In general terms, it is notoriously difficult for Christians and Muslims in Nigeria to agree on issues, not to mention co-exist under a single umbrella body. Yet the distrust, mutual suspicion and lack of cooperation experienced in NIREC during this period took a new dimension that undermined any successes previously achieved. To be sure, the findings of the international joint delegation of World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Royal Aal al-Bayat for Islamic Thought (RAITT) in May 2012 revealed the low level of cooperation within NIREC relative to what was obtainable in previous years.<sup>146</sup> Josiah Atkins Idowu-Fear on, the Secretary General of the Anglican Consultative Council and a renowned interfaith proponent, attributed the cause of this problem to the selfish interest of the Christian representation within the body. He opined that 'if Christian leaders were like the Sultan of Sokoto (NIREC's co-chair), Nigeria will be better

144. Bede Sheppard, 'They Set the classrooms on fire' *Human Rights Watch (Online)* April 11, 2016 <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/04/11/they-set-classrooms-fire/attacks-education-northeast-nigeria> Accessed 10/09/2017

145. Ibid.

146. Uchenna M. Ugorie, 'Peaceful Co-Existence In Nigeria: The Role Of The Nigerian Inter-Religious Council (NIREC)', *Academia.com* [https://www.academia.edu/27673163/PEACEFUL\\_CO-EXISTENCE\\_IN\\_NIGERIA](https://www.academia.edu/27673163/PEACEFUL_CO-EXISTENCE_IN_NIGERIA)  
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off.<sup>147</sup> The national secretary of NIREC, Ishaq Oloyede was also said to have accused CAN of being selfish and political, thereby sabotaging NIREC's operations.<sup>148</sup>

CAN, on the other hand, apart from shelving allegations leveled against them, attributed NIREC's ineffectiveness to the insincerity of the Muslim representatives and their being political. Sunday Oibe, the CAN Director of National Issues, for example, opined that 'NIREC cannot function because it is a conglomeration of religious leaders from one group (CAN) and mix-grill of politicians and traditionalists on the other hand. That is the reason for all the confusion in NIREC.'<sup>149</sup> The composition of the Muslim representation within the body was additionally questioned by Obie, who queried that,

How do we explain the exclusion of respected Sheikh Dahiru Bauchi and astute Islamic preachers like Sheikh El-Zaki Zaki, and an amiable President of Supreme Council for Islamic Preachers in Nigeria, Sheikh Mohammed Ahmed Ibn Nurain, from an umbrella body of religious leaders like NIREC, whereas CAN comprises all Christians in the country?<sup>150</sup>

It was also noted by CAN representatives that Oloyede had been occupying his position as national secretary/national coordinator for over ten years without having plans to relinquish power.

Whatever might be the reason for the schism within NIREC, particularly in relation to members' politicization and self-interest, the public perception of them also appears to be

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147. Ibid.

148. News Express, 'Crisis hits Inter-Religious Council; CAN takes on Sultan, Islamic Supreme Council Secretary-General', News Express (Online), 17/07/2015 <http://www.newsexpressngr.com/news/detail.php?news=12985> Accessed 16/08/2017

149. Ugwuanyi Nnamdi, 'CAN tackles Islamic council over NIREC leadership' *National Accord (Online)*, July 16, 2015, <https://nationalaccordnewspaper.com/can-tackles-islamic-council-over-nirec-leadership/> Accessed 16/08/2017.

150. Ibid.



negative. Members are generally believed to be not just political, but after self-aggrandizement. Igwe and Ugorie noted that NIREC's national and international social connections generate enormous personal benefits and financial remunerations, which some of the members were primarily interested in.<sup>151</sup> Additionally, it is worth noting that apart from the Federal Government (FG) sponsoring the council, the sitting allowance of NIREC is a hundred thousand naira (N100, 000) paid by the FG. It is argued therefore, that the revenue generation accruing from these sittings is attractive and induces them to meet regularly without actually establishing pro-active structures that will reduce the problem of religious violence in the nation.<sup>152</sup>

The analysis of NIREC's waning impact will, however, be inadequate without identifying some other mitigating factors that impair its effectiveness outside of the schism within the body. For instance, while it is true that the council is government sponsored, there are suggestions that starting from the early 2010s government's financial commitment towards the council has been declining, thus hindering the operations of the body. For example, Oloyede, in an April 2014 interview with **Kamarudeen Ogundele**, the Secretary-General of the NSCIA, affirmed that,

NIREC is making efforts to continue to survive and be relevant. We try to derive 80 per cent of our resources outside the Federal Government. Despite this, the 20 per cent from the Federal Government is not forthcoming. So, that is why you have a lull in the activities of NIREC. As soon as the government provides its little quota, NIREC will meet and continue to carry out its mandate. In the past, the Federal Government provided the 100 per cent of

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151. Oliver C. Igwe & Uchenna M. Ugorie, *Christian-Muslim Conflicts In Nigeria*, 20  
152. Ibid.



the resources to my predecessor. But this has not been so in the last two to three years.<sup>153</sup>

From this submission we can gather that not only did the government scale down its financial support towards the council to twenty percent, the sum was also not forthcoming as at when due. The timing of this change in financial commitment on the part of the FG also corresponds with the period NIREC started experiencing its decline. Apart from the financial apathy displayed by the FG, some of the council's recommendations to the government, like the suggestion of compensations to victims of religious conflicts, for instance, were not acceded to. A collage of all these factors ensured that by 2015, when Oritsejafor was getting ready to relinquish his position as CAN's president and Gen. Muhammadu Buhari had succeeded Goodluck Jonathan as the nation's President, NIREC was experiencing a decline that threatened its survival.

## CONCLUSION

When in 1999 NIREC was established optimism was high that the inter-religious divide that plagued the country in the 1980s and 1990s will be a thing of the past, and that the newly established body will be effective in ameliorating, if not eliminating, religious conflicts in the country. Having started on a promising footing, the body began its decline in the turn of the new decade. The body that had promised so much had delivered very little in relation to stemming the deaths and losses that were recorded as a result of religious strife. Mutual distrust and suspicion between the Christian and Muslim component of the body crept-in, and members were being accused of politicization and self-aggrandizement. The credibility of members has therefore been questioned. In short, the activities of NIREC have been so crippled that meetings were no longer regular as of 2015.

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153. Ilorin Info, 'I don't have any moral burden because of Boko Haram – Oloyede' *Ilorin Info*, 12/04/2014 <https://www.ilorin.info/fullnews.php?id=10270> Accessed 12/09/2017



It should not be forgotten that these were some of the symptoms manifested by the Advisory Council on Religious Affairs (ACRA) in the early 1990s before its eventual obliteration.

Going by antecedents, religious tensions in Nigeria will continue to exist, thereby breeding conflicts that will endanger lives and properties. This calls for an urgent fix of NIREC so as to stem this tide. It will be in the interest of the council to significantly expand its composition to incorporate more religious leaders at both the national and local level. For the purpose of credibility, it would perhaps be useful for the leadership structure of the body to be changed to ensure public figures like the presidents of CAN and NSCIA are not seen as the focal point of the council. This is because, such positions naturally place the occupants in the public glare, making politicians court their friendship so as to ingratiate themselves with members of their constituency. Such a status will only make them appear political and lose their credibility among common men. This is not to suggest, however, that the CAN and NSCIA presidents shouldn't have a significant role to play in the council since they are revered by members of their constituency. Instead, such a role should be symbolic and ceremonial whereby moral and logistical support is given to whoever is leader of the council.



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