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Christian Religion and Its Commitment to Unity and Peace in Nigeria: Towards a Paradigm Shift

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Abstract:
The Christian religion is committed to the realisation of unity and peace in Nigeria. However, the multi-religious nature of the nation demands a fundamental change of the basis of operations of the Christian religion to this project. This study proposes a paradigm shift that would make the commitment of the Christian religion to unity and peace in Nigeria more inclusive and effective. The work is qualitative and used descriptive and functional approaches to gather and analyse information. The conclusion reached is that a shift from a Christ-based to a Spirit-centred paradigm has many benefits that will make the commitment of the Christian religion to unity and peace in Nigeria more inclusive and effective. It is recommended that further studies be done on the implications of a Spirit-based paradigm for the promotion of unity and peace in the country.

Keywords: Christianity, religion, unity – peace, Nigeria, paradigm shift

1. Introduction

Unity and peace are among the most crucial and current issues, challenges, and needs of Nigeria as a sovereign nation. Every nation in the world desires unity and peace as necessary conditions for its existence, wellbeing, and growth. The absence of unity and peace impacts negatively on the structures and people of any socio-political entity. The Nigerian national anthem, pledge, and motto, all with one accord, highlight unity and peace as matters of great concern to the nation. The anthem testifies that Nigeria wants to be 'One nation bound in freedom, peace, and unity', the motto is 'Unity and Faith, Peace and Progress', and the pledge of every citizen is 'to defend her unity'. In these national anthem, motto, and pledge, one finds that right from the beginning, unity and peace were highlighted as the most fundamental aspirations and desires of the nation. Speaking on the significance of unity for the continued existence of Nigeria, Odumegwu-Ojukwu (1989)said, 'Nigeria cannot progress without unity. Without unity, Nigeria cannot hope to re-establish the black personality which should be respected by all humanity and recognized fully as an integral, free, and equal part of the human race' (p.19). The problem lies with the actualisation of the aspirations Nigeria for unity and peace.

Individuals, associations, politicians, governments, scholars, and other stakeholders are constantly being called upon to make contributions to the realisation of sustainable unity and peace in Nigeria. Coming in contact with Emile Durkheim's explanation of the function of religion in society set in motion the idea of looking towards religion for meaningful contributions to unity and peace in Nigeria. Durkheim is of the view that religion is a force that brings about and reinforces harmony, integration, order, control, and solidarity in society (qtd. Haralambos and Heald, 1980, p. 456). Sometimes, the experience of religion within and outside Nigeria does not seem to support the above perspective. There have been repeated cases of violence and crises that are religiously instigated in the country which ultimately cause instability and insecurity in Nigeria. Besides, renowned world scholars like Karl Marx and Friedreich Feuerbach espouse very negative conceptions of religion in society. Marx made jest of religion and dismissed it from the list of things to consider if one were planning for a constructive transformation of society. According to him, 'religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of the soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people' (Marx, 1964, pp. 43-44). Similarly, Ludwig Friedreich Feuerbach (1957) portrays religion as part of the infantile stages of human development of humanity, which will necessarily disappear when humanity attains maturity and is ready to put an end to the oppressions and exploitations that characterize their present existence (p.13). Emejulu (2009) is also of the view that so many wars, violence, and conflicts have been inaugurated and sustained by different religions or on religious grounds. Religious fundamentalism, terrorism, extremism, and wars are challenges for the world of the 21st Century.

Contrary to the negative perspectives on the impact of religion on society, Weber observes that under certain conditions, religion is a great influence or agent of positive social change. According to him, the ethics of asceticism, hard work, and frugal spending that are characteristic of Calvinist Protestantism helped to accumulate the capital that ultimately gave rise to modern Western capitalism (Weber, 2003). Experiences also show that prompted by religious beliefs, many Christian Churches and people contribute meaningfully to the development of society. Religion helps to build and promote peace in the individual and society at large (Arinze, 1990). This is more so in traditional African societies like Nigeria where religion is a key element in the life and politics of the people. The Christian religion is deeply committed to

promoting structures, programmes, and projects that contribute to national development in Nigeria through the promotion of unity and peace in the country.

This work aims at proposing a paradigm shift that would make the commitment of the Christian religion to unity and peace in Nigeria more inclusive and effective. The challenges associated with unity and peace in Nigeria will be examined as the background of the discourse, the foundational credentials of the Christian religion for its engagement in matters of unity and peace in society will be highlighted, and practical Christian commitments to unity and peace in Nigeria will be presented. Then, the paradigm shift will be proposed with reasons to show its proclivity to inclusivity and effectiveness.

2. The Challenges of Unity and Peace in Nigeria

There is hardly anything in the history of Nigeria as a nation that has been so frequently questioned, threatened, and discussed as unity and peace. The way the nation came to birth, by rather a forceful amalgamation of people of different ethnic origins, cultural affinities, languages, and religious beliefs made unity and peace a fundamental challenge in the polity right from the start. Almost all the constitutions that prepared Nigeria for political Independence tried to address the problem of unity and peace among the constituting ethnic groups. The Richards Constitution of 1946 set out to promote the unity of Nigeria but ended up doing the contrary through its creation of three regional assemblies along ethnic lines: the North, West, and East. This helped to strengthen the existing bonds of people of similar ethnic origins and directed their loyalties to the regions rather than the center. In fact, 'The regional assemblies sharpened and intensified regional diversities, which made national unity a mirage'('Features of Richards Constitution', n.d.). From this point onwards, the elections that ushered into power the government at the Independence were chiefly marked by ethnic tensions which helped to further deepen the lack of trust and hatred among the people of the different ethnic and religious groups.

From January 1966, when the first coup d'état was staged by some young Nigerian army officers, the government of the nation became unstable and handled by the military who ruled by decrees. For some Nigerians, the Civil War of 1967-1970was fought to defend the oneness of Nigeria (Ejike, 2010), but it helped in many ways to shatter the national aspirations for unity and peace. Religious fundamentalists and terrorists contribute greatly to the weakening of national integration. Between 1980 and 1985, there were a series of an uprising by the Maitatsine Islamic sect in the areas of Northern Nigeria, which claimed the lives of many citizens and created an atmosphere of insecurity throughout the whole country. The Maitatsine riots 'prompted immense ethnoreligious discord between Muslims and Christians in years to come' ('The Maitatsine', n.d.). Another radical jihadist group known as Boko Haram emerged in 2009. Initially, the group claimed to have the mission of combating all forms of corruption, crime, and injustices in the country, but it quickly moved away from this original goal and began to carry out heinous crimes and violence. It also pledged to have Nigeria become part of the Islamic State governed under Islamic law or the Shariah. ('Boko Haram', n.d). The actions and goals the Boko Haram stand against the integrity of Nigeria as an undivided nation.

The emergence and activities of some group of nomadic herdsmen said to be Fulani by origin, have helped to create a situation of widespread insecurity and instability throughout Nigeria. A chain of wanton destruction of lives and properties in different parts of the country is attributed to these herdsmen, which put the unity and peace of the nation on edge. People whose lives and properties are destroyed by the herdsmen do not feel protected by the government whose primary duty is the security of its citizens and their possessions. Moreover, justice is denied to them as their aggressors are not made to face the responsibilities of their actions. Tensions build up and those who feel most affected and aggrieved by the killings lose hope in the unity of the nation.

The integrity of Nigeria as a nation is currently under serious threats on account of pressures from the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and the Oduduwa Agitators' Alliance; movements from the Igbo and Yoruba ethnic groups respectively. Each of these movements identifies marginalization, inequitable resource distribution, the unchecked nefarious activities of the herdsmen, and being treated as second-class citizens in its own country as the reasons for its demand for the independence of its ethnocultural group. As a result of all these, Nwanaju (2012) observes that 'at the rate at which Nigeria is experiencing conflicts and crises...a possible disintegration is looming unless an urgent solution is proffered' (p. 42).

It is, therefore, obvious that the journey of Nigerian towards the realisation of their aspirations about unity and peace is a very challenging one. The Christian religion stands a good chance of helping to respond to the challenge. However, for it to produce more results in its commitment to unity and peace in Nigeria, it needs to let its belief in the Holy Spirit guide its outlook, approach, and framework for engagement in the project. The Christian religion needs to make a shift from a Christ-centred to a Spirit-based paradigm.

In what follows, a presentation will be made of some characteristics, beliefs, and practices (credentials) which form the background of the commitment of the Christian religion to unity and peace in Nigeria.

3. The Credentials of the Christian Religion for Commitment to Unity and Peace

The Christian commitment to unity and peace, particularly in Nigeria, is rooted in its religious belief systems, values, principles, structures, and practices. These foundations are evident in Christian Scriptures, literature, teachings, and traditions. Primarily, the key messages of Jesus Christ, his pattern of life, prayer, and ministry, all together point to the importance of unity in the world. One of the key declarations of Jesus Christ in his inaugural Sermon on the Mount reads: 'Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God' (Matthew 5: 9). By giving peace a place in the Sermon, among the Beatitudes, Jesus Christ indicated that it is one of the cornerstones of the new world order that he

intended to inaugurate by his coming. He taught his disciples that while on the mission, the first thing they are to do as they enter a house is to impart peace on everybody who lives in it (Matthew 10: 12). On the evening of the day of his Resurrection, Jesus Christ met his disciples gathered in a room under locked doors and the first thing he did was that he bestowed peace upon them (John 20: 19, 21). Unity was the central theme of his priestly prayer (John 17), and he made non-violence the way of life because it mediates unity and peace in the world (Matthew 5: 38-42). Jesus related to God as Father, and 'he invited his hearers to accept God as a loving, merciful Father.' (O'Collins, 1995, p. 126).Having God as the father of all implies the brotherhood and sisterhood of all men and women on earth. To preserve the bond of unity, Jesus taught his followers to forgive those who hurt them and to desist completely from acts of vengeance.

From Jesus Christ, Christians inherited the understanding of God as a communion of three divine persons as a unity of eternal co-existing persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) bound by love in the dynamism of life and complete union (Boff, 1988). The logic of the trinitarian existence means that relationship, communion, love, and personhood are essential to God's existence (Lacugna, 1991; Ukwuije, 2013). The character of God as a relationship draws him personally to matters about or affecting people in the world. God is moved to compassion by the situation of a people that are suffering under the bondage of oppression, and he takes concrete actions to positively change their condition. Even though Jesus did not get directly involved in the social or political affairs of the society of his time, his heart-driven identification with those whom society rejects: the poor, marginalized, sick, possessed, and outcasts leave nobody in doubt about his commitment to their well-being.

Having its origin in the person and actions of Jesus conditioned how the Christian religion perceives history, relates with it, and is committed to its positive transformation. Christianity is a revealed and transcendental religion, but it is at the same time firmly rooted in this world; it operates within the context of history and it is in turn affected and shaped by history. While the emphasis is placed on the importance of eternal salvation, the fundamental beliefs, teachings, and practices of the Christian religion are concerned with life, justice, peace, reconciliation, and the joy of people and groups in this world. The Second Vatican Council succinctly notes that 'The joys and hope, the grief and anguish of the men of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts' (*GaudiumetSpes*, no. 1). This profound sense of solidarity explains the interest which Christianity shows in the affairs of the world and the well-being of human beings who dwell in it.

The commitment of the Christian religion to the affairs of human society is also informed by its belief in the goodness of creation. Christianity holds that even though creation is not perfect, it is good. God communicates himself and his plans through created things, and the human response to divine outreach also takes place through the same created realities (McBrien, 1994). This would not be the case if creation were essentially evil. Even in the face of natural disasters, diseases, sicknesses, crimes, poverty, ignorance, and all sorts of misery in the world which raise serious questions about the goodness of creation, Christianity stands firm on its belief in the goodness of created things. The shadowy aspects of existence rather provide Christians with reasons to apply themselves assiduously to actions and services aimed at restoring or renewing the face of the earth. If creation were not good in itself, there would be no reason to speak of its renewal, and neither would there be the need for spending time, energy, and resources working for a better world. The Christian religion commits itself to programmes and projects for the betterment of the world as a result of its belief that creation is good.

Furthermore, the connection between the Christian religion and the transformation of the world, particularly, in terms of unity and peace is firmly rooted in the concept of the kingdom of God. Israel's expectation of the reign or kingdom of God envisioned the restoration, transformation, and renewal of their nation and, the figure which would come to bring (Feullenbach, 1995). Of the different dimensions of the conception of the kingdom of God, namely, the religious, spiritual, political, and social, Scripture (both the Old and New Testaments) puts a strong emphasis on this-worldly restoration. The expectation of a new heaven and a new earth, which is part of the eschatological dimension of the Kingdom of God, is not diminished by the human commitment to the betterment of the world. In fact, 'Far from diminishing our concern to develop this earth, the expectancy of a new earth should spur us on, for it is here that the body of a new human family grows, foreshadowing in some way the age which is to come' (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 39). Hence, human labour and effort towards the development of the world are considered important for the growth of the kingdom of God on earth.

Therefore, influenced by the notion of a personal and relational God who is interested in the welfare of people in society, the historical nature of Christianity, belief in the goodness of creation, and the understanding of the kingdom of God, the Christian religion has, down the ages, committed itself resolutely to works intended for the good and transformation of the physical world. In what follows, a presentation will be made of some empirical commitments of the Christian religion in Nigeria that have direct impacts on unity and peace in the nation.

4. Christian Commitment to Unity and Peace in Nigeria

Light will be shed here on the actions of the Christian Church which help in creating, promoting, sustaining, and restoring unity and peace in Nigeria. These actions of the Christian religion will be considered from the standpoint of its commitment to justice, education, dialogue, reconciliation, provision of good health services, and the promotion of morality.

Unity and peace in every human society are closely connected to justice. The promotion of justice and the integrity of human beings is one of the essential areas of focus of Christian actions in Nigeria. The Catholic Church in Nigeria, for example, has played and continues to play laudable roles in helping to establish and maintain justice in different parts of the country. Ani (2001) notes that 'Justice and Peace's Departments have become one of the central organs of pastoral

ministry in every Catholic diocese in Nigeria and all over the world' (p.183). The departments of Justice, Development, and Peace Commissions (JDPC) are created at the parish, diocesan, provincial and national levels in the Catholic church in Nigeria, and through them, programmes are executed to promote justice and peace in the nation.

The Catholic Institute for Development, Justice, and Peace (CIDJAP) is a household name in Enugu Diocese, and it has a lot of positive achievements to its credit. It serves as the voice of the voiceless for tenants with landlords or for wives who are oppressed by their husbands. It empowers the less privileged by offering them financial assistance with very low-interest rates. This is done with the belief that by doing this, people will be set free from the conditions of life that make them victims of injustice. The CIDJAP also helps to promote and create equal opportunities for persons regardless of gender and religion for assessing benefits and assistance from the government or other agencies. Gender and religion are two major pillars for discrimination in Nigeria and CIDJAP fights against these through its activities (Ani, 2001).

The Christian religion in Nigeria promotes unity and peace through committed involvement in the provision of formal education at all levels. The Christian Church in Nigeria recognizes that there is a strong link between quality education and unity and peace in society and that denying people of the inalienable right to true education amounts to robbing them of the opportunities of developing their physical, moral, and intellectual qualities and skills for participating meaningfully in the life of the nation. Kukah points out that illiteracy is one of the conditions that helped to bring about and sustain Boko Haram and its nefarious activities in Nigeria. According to him, many young people are deprived of basic Western education in Northern Nigeria, and 'the region remains unable and unwilling to rescue its children from the darkness posed by illiteracy and ignorance. The proponents of Boko Haram saw in this chasm a hunting ground for recruits for their devious beliefs' (Kuka, 2010, p. 22). He goes further to note that 'The solution to this disillusionment lies in the restoration of the primacy of scientific inquiry as means of giving the educated youth a prominent place in national life' (p. 24).

The Christian missionaries in Nigeria vested a lot of interest and resources in building schools and encouraging people to embrace Western formal education. According to Ebelebe (2016), 'Education was one of the greatest and most enduring legacies of the Spiritans in West Africa. Nowhere was this legacy as visible and as dominant as it was in Southeast Nigeria or Igboland' (, p. 66). In continuation of this tradition, there is hardly any parish and diocese in the Catholic Church in Nigeria that does not own and run a school ranging from kindergarten to tertiary institutions. In addition to the values that promote unity and peace which the students are taught in these institutions, the schools provide the context of meeting and interaction for the youth from different ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds. Such interactions build bridges of relationships that narrow or destroy gaps and barriers that exist among people.

Through a commitment to dialogue, particularly the interreligious one, the Christian religion in Nigeria contributes immensely to the promotion of unity and peace in the country. The meeting of people of various religions, cultures, and ethnic origins is something that cannot be avoided in Nigeria at present. This makes dialogue very necessary to reduce the tension usually caused by prejudices and negative biases. The Christian religion is at the forefront of the major moves for dialogue in the nation. Kaigama provides a very good example of both insight and example of the commitment of Christians to inter-religious dialogue in Nigeria. In his book, *Peace, not War: A Decade of Interventions in the Plateau State Crises (2001-2011)*, published in 2012, he gives an account of what he and others did in terms of dialogue during the decade-long crises in Plateau State. The inhabitants of Plateau State consist of people of different cultural, ethnic, and religious orientations and yet it used to be so peaceful a place that it was officially designated 'the home of peace and tourism'. This peaceful feature of the State was ruptured in the year 2001 by series of crises that continued for years and claimed a lot of lives and properties. Kaigama used his office as the then Archbishop of Jos to show how a religious leader and Christianity can contribute to peace-building in society. Among other things, he gave speeches, presented papers, held meetings, made interventions, granted interviews, wrote letters, and organised prayers as concrete efforts to bring violence to an end and have peace reign in Plateau State. Through his efforts in solidarity with other Christians, Muslims and governments, the crises were arrested and Plateau State started to enjoy relative peace again.

Christianity encourages unity and peace in society through its teachings, practices, and ethics of forgiveness and reconciliation. Nigeria, like some other countries in Africa, is a nation with many bruises. Its history is marked by the devastating saga of slavery and slave trade, colonization, neo-colonialism, civil war, military dictatorship, nepotism, ethnic and religious violence, constant crises, corruption, political instability, and economic misery. Therefore, 'In this context, the Church has the task of ensuring social cohesion, promoting forgiveness and reconciliation in places where the social fabric is in danger of being torn apart, and teaching people tolerance' (Muono, 1998, p. 50). The Catholic Church gives forgiveness and reconciliation a very important recognition by placing them in the category of the sacraments (Emejulu, 2009). A sacrament in the Catholic Church refers to the fundamental means of salvation which are expressed in visible, tangible, sensible, and perceptible ways. Through the sacrament of reconciliation, the Church helps individuals and groups in the community 'to mend shattered, marred, ruptured and broken history of relationships, to move forwards, and live in peace' (Emejulu, 2009, p. 115). Forgiveness and reconciliation bring interpersonal healing and build bridges in the community to facilitate peace, unity, and solidarity.

These days, the Christian religion explores ways of incorporating the African traditional rites of reconciliation into their sacramental practices for more effective results. To this effect, 'Many Catholic priests adopt a Christianized pattern of *igbandu* ritual as an answer to deep crises in interpersonal relationships (whether between individuals or groups)' (Uzukwu, 1997, p. 254).*Igbandu* is a form of ritual covenanting among the Igbo that means binding or joining lives together and is believed to be effective, and acceptable to the adherents of different religions and Christian denominations. Committed involvement in providing and promoting health and medical services is another means through which Christianity contributes to national unity and peace. There is a close association between good health and peace and unity

in human society because it is said that a healthy mind and peaceful heart resides on a healthy body. Access to health care is one of the rights of every human person, but it is not readily available to a lot of people in Nigeria. Amid serious diseases such as malaria, Ebola, laser fever, AIDS, tuberculosis, and lately COVID-19, so many people cannot afford minimum medical care for themselves or their dependents. Health insurance schemes are not yet well established and so patients are expected to bear the cost of all their medical treatment. The number of hospitals in the country is like a drop of water in the ocean when compared with the population of the nation. The existing hospitals are faced with the challenges of poor infrastructure, the dearth of genuine drugs and not having enough trained health care personnel (Iwuamadi, 2014). So, 'In the absence of reliable public health structures, the Church strives to offer a minimum of health assistance to the underprivileged, especially in the rural areas' (Muono, 1998, p. 50). The early missionaries in Nigeria built hospitals, medical centers, dispensaries, and maternities as part of their strategies of evangelization. The indigenous Christian Church inherited this legacy and continued with it such that today there is hardly any Catholic diocese in Nigeria, particularly in the Southeast, that does not have one or more health institutions.

Commitment to the promotion and protection of morality is yet another very important way through which Christianity contributes to unity and peace in the nation. Generally, 'morality is the quality in human acts by which we call them right or wrong, good or evil' (Iwe, 2003, p. 13). While the ability to act morally is natural to human beings, the determination of what is right and wrong which informs their decisions is greatly determined by factors such as culture or religion. In many ways, religion and morality are inter-connected and cannot be separated (Ejizu, 2008), and it is by reinforcing moral values and beliefs that religion strengthens unity and solidarity in society (Haralambos and Heald, 1980). With the idea of rewards and punishment built on the precept of charity, Christianity has shaped the conscience and life of millions of men and women down the centuries. The influence of Christianity on the behaviour and conduct of its adherents in Nigeria can be measured from the fact that despite all tendencies towards fanaticism which is inherent in almost every religion, and despite all kinds of provocations, Christians in Nigeria are restrained from taking to violence as a way of defending their rights and existence. Similarly, Christianity in Nigeria has not given rise to a sect or movement whose activities threaten the corporate existence of Nigeria as a nation. The religious uprising that resort to the maiming and massacre of human being and the destruction of their belongings are not associated with Christians in Nigeria. This is a result of the impact of Christian moral beliefs and control on their members.

From the foregoing, it is abundantly clear that the Christian religion is committed, without reserve, to the building up, safeguarding, and strengthening of unity and peace in Nigeria. In recognition of this fact, this study proposes a shift in paradigm that would enable the existing commitment to become more inclusive and effective for the realisation of the desired goals, which is, unity and peace in the nation.

5. The Need for a Paradigm Shift

For Christian religion to make more effective and fruitful contributions towards the realisation of sustained unity and peace in Nigeria, it needs a shift from Christ to the Spirit as its basis of actions and engagements. In what follows, the reason for this paradigm shift will be articulated, together with the advantages which the Christian religion stands to gain from the shift for its commitment to the issues of unity and peace in Nigeria.

Christian religion holds that Jesus Christ is the fullness of the revelation of God in history, the only name under heaven by which the world can be saved (Acts 4: 12), and the only mediator between God and humanity (1 Timothy 2: 5). Christianity holds these claims to be absolute truth, and no form of respect for other religions would make a Christian withhold, de-emphasize or compromise them (*EvangeliiNuntiandi*, no. 53). Kenny (2003) notes that 'Many writers view these dogmatic positions as an obstacle to dialogue and peace in the world and as an invitation to rivalry and confrontation' (2003:76). On account of this, he further observes that attempts are being made by some Christian thinkers to re-think Christology so that it will no longer constitute a challenge to inter-religious dialogue. The re-thinking of Christology meets with obvious difficulties because it implies making doctrinal concessions by Christians to accommodate the beliefs and practices of the other religions. A shift from Christology to Pneumatology, from Christ to the Holy Spirit, would save Christians from such concession. Instead of Christians surrendering some essential elements of their belief in Christ to engage in common projects with the adherents of other religions, they can simply make a shift to the direction of the Spirit. This shift is expedient in many ways for the effective contribution of the Christian religion to unity and peace in an African nation like Nigeria.

The African worldview is predominantly Spirit-entered. Africans believe that the world is filled and controlled by spirits capable of assuming various dimensions whenever there is a need for such to accomplish specific missions. The spirits are hierarchically graded; there are higher and lower spirits. The highest of all spirits is God (the Supreme Being), the Creator of the universe, and after he is the divinities or deities, the ancestors, and other spirits. This ranking is usually done based on the function they perform or the power they wield over human beings and other created realities. Generally, 'Spirits, according to African belief, are ubiquitous; there is no area of the earth, no object or creature, which has not a spirit of its own or which cannot be inhabited by a spirit. Thus, there are spirits of trees, that is, spirits which inhabit trees' (Idowu, 1973, p.174). There is nothing and nowhere in the life of an African that the presence and operation of spirits are not experienced.Spirits can be good or bad, and this conditions how human beings relate with them. Africans experience the positive effects of the spirits in their relationship with the Supreme Being, the divinities, and the ancestors. On the other hand, people are aware of the presence and operations of the evil spirits through experience or divination, and they try to avoid them or control them by the use of magic.

Shrines and temples in most African communities are of deities who serve as intermediaries of the Supreme Being. Duties are assigned from top-down, starting from the highest to the lowest ranks of spirits. Africans believe that God

entrusted some power to the lesser spirits with which they continue the work of guiding and protecting the people. They can equally inflict some punishment on some people when someone offends them (Onuigbo, 2009). Given the belief in the hierarchy of spirits, Africans appeal the decisions of lower spirits to higher ones. If a person or a community is not satisfied with the decision of a particular deity as communicated by the diviner, he would go to consult with another deity considered to be higher in rank to decipher the true situation or cause of things (Uzukwu, 2012). The history of every African is hammered out in relationship with spirits of all kinds and no one can live outside this situation of a Spirit-filled life.

Another reason in favour of the paradigm shift is that belief in spirits is common to the three major religions in Nigeria. Everything said about spirits in the African worldview holds of the African Traditional religion. The Islamic religion is strictly monotheistic — Allah (God) is one, unique, and ultimate being, and only him exists, and there is no other but him (Smith, 1991). This Islamic understanding of God strongly objects to the Christian belief in Jesus and the Holy Spirit as God. Nevertheless, the concept of spirits, ghosts, and the supernatural is present in Islam, and Muslims believe and relate with such spiritual realities. Islam believes that there are both good and evil spirits. Muhammad 'the Prophet was a believer in the spirit world and sought to pacify any evil potential or influence it had. Multiplied millions of his followers have followed his example down through the centuries' (Parshall, 1994, p. 159). He ascribed the revelations he received that led to the founding of the Islamic religion to have come from Allah through the angel Gabriel and attributed his protection in Medina to the heavenly presence of angels. Islam also believes in the existence and operations of Satan or the Devil as a force of evil that exerts a pervasive influence on human bodies in such a way that makes him a great adversary of all living beings. Hence, protection is highly required on the part of people and their possessions from the destructive attack of Satan (Parshall, pp. 152-155). Some mentions and indications in the Quran suggest that the term 'holy spirit' may not be lacking completely in Islam. The Arabic word, *Ruh al-qudus* is translated in English as 'the holy spirit' or 'the spirit of holiness'. Similarly, the term, *al-ruh al-amin* translates as 'the faithful/trustworthy spirit' (*Wikipedia*, 'Rūh'). Even though the identity of the 'holy spirit' mentioned in the Quran does not have the same status as the Holy Spirit in Christian religious belief (Slick, https://carm.org), the notions of spirits and the holy spirit form part of the Islamic belief system.

Belief in the Holy Spirit is one of the three most fundamental pillars of the Christian religious faith. The Christian creed consists of three principal confessions: 'I believe in God the Father', 'I believe in his Son Jesus Christ' and 'I believe in the Holy Spirit'. Christians believe that God is one, but that he exists as three distinct divine persons. A Christian is one baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28: 19) and whose life and conduct are guided by faith in these three divine persons. Christianity recognizes the Holy Spirit as one of the two principal ways by which human beings are adopted by God as his sons and daughter. Besides believing in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, and being baptized, and born again to become God's children, the Christian religion holds that 'all those who are moved by the Spirit are God's children' (Romans 8' 14).

The logic of adoption through Jesus Christ is exclusive, and thus, constitutes a serious hindrance to unity and peace commitments in a religiously pluralistic nation like Nigeria. It makes a distinction between human beings as the image of God and as the children of God. Every human being, by the fact of creation, is the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1: 26-27) but becomes a child of God through baptised. Non-Christians are not God's children because they do not believe in Christ, they are not baptised, and are not members of the Church. On the contrary, the Spirit-portal for adoption into the family of God is very inclusive of all men and women from every religion, nation, and race. The operations of the Spirit of God are not restricted to the followers of Christ or any particular group of persons. Thus, the Christian belief in the Holy Spirit offers greater opportunities that would make the commitment of Christianity to the unity and peace project in Nigeria more inclusive and effective.

In the Christian religion, the Holy Spirit is the recognized principle of unity and peace in both human societies and creation as a whole. In places where references to fellowship or unity are made in the New Testament to the three divine persons, fellowship is usually ascribed to the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 13: 13). Judging from the activities of the Holy Spirit in creation, it can be readily inferred that he is by nature social and relational. In fact, 'He is a counterpart that joins and does not divide. He is a counterpart in his presence, not in the remoteness of his absence' (Moltmann, 1992, p. 305). Unity is both a special gift and fruit of the Holy Spirit. Through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost day, a community made up of people from the different nations of the world was created. Thus, in the words of Moltmann (1992), 'Fellowship comes into being when people who are different have something in common, and when what is in common is shared by different people' (p. 217). Congar (1997) uses the Church to demonstrate that the Holy Spirit as the principle of unity. He notes that the Church is by constitution pluralistic, which is evident in marked differences in traditions, spiritualities, theologies, customs, devotions, modes of worship, and organizations. The Church consists of individual members who are endowed with different charisms and have distinctive needs, backgrounds, outlooks, and opinions. These differences and the tensions that go with them are held together by the Holy Spirit. For, 'Nothing less than the Spirit of God is needed to bring all these different elements to unity, and to do so by respecting and even stimulating their diversity' (Congar, 1997, p. 17).

The Christian religion also recognizes the Holy Spirit as the principle of peace. Peace is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5: 22) and through the fruit that the Spirit produces in human beings, he transforms their attitudes and interior dispositions to embrace peace. He also brings peace by overcoming sin by acts of forgiveness and reconciliation. John Paul II observes that it is extremely difficult or even impossible to establish and preserve peace in the world without a higher principle that operates with divine power within the human mind. Moreover, 'According to revealed doctrine, this principle is the Holy Spirit, who gives spiritual peace to individuals, and inner peace which becomes the basis of peace in

society' (John Paul II, 1996, p. 412). The Holy Spirit establishes a right relationship between human beings and God and among men and women in society.

Ani (2001) asserts that 'Peace can only be achieved through the Spirit of God who anoints and sends his followers to break down the walls of injustice and oppression so that peace will take its rightful place in the hearts of peoples' (p.184). Samartha (1982) goes further to say that issues about life, inspiration, freedom, and dialogue in a world of people of various faiths, cultures, and ideologies cannot be treated without bringing in the Holy Spirit. In his opinion, the work of God through his Spirit should not be limited to the realm of religion or the Church because every dimension of human life, people of different faiths, cultures, and ideologies come within the purview of the activity of God's Spirit (p. 1982). The symbolism of the dove is about the most commonly used image of the Holy Spirit in the history of Christianity (*Catechism*, no. 701). It is the favourite of sacred artists. The image of the dove with an olive branch in its mouth is a universally recognized symbol of peace. The symbolism of the dove establishes a link between the Holy Spirit and peace, and thus makes the Holy Spirit an image that can be readily accepted by people of different religious and human orientationsin matters concerning peace in society.

The Spirit-based paradigm promises greater opportunities and more room for interreligious dialogue in Nigeria. In a country with a multi-religious population as Nigeria, and with histories of religiously induced tensions and conflicts, dialogue holds a key role in all the processes meant for the realisation of unity and peace in the nation. In terms of merits, inter-religious dialogue makes for mutual enrichment of those who participate in it because by meeting people of other religions, one comes to know more about them and their beliefs and convictions. One also gets to know more about one's religion and at times gets challenged to be more faithful to one's faith. Apart from the individual participants, the whole religion gains from the inter-religious dialogue. Thus, one 'can find in interreligious dialogue a help to build up and strengthen harmony in society' (Arinze, 1997, p. 27). The Holy Spirit stands a greater chance of providing better grounds for meaningful dialogue between Christians and the practitioners of Islam, and the African Traditional Religion because they are share a spirit-oriented worldview as Africans, and belief spirits is part of their religious traditions. Moreover,'all people are open to the activity of God's Spirit' (Samartha, 1982, p. 63). A Christian would find it less difficult using the Spirit as the starting point of a conversation with the adherents of the other religions than Christ.

These arethe strengths of the Spirit-centered paradigm which form the grounds on which the proposal is made for a shift that would make it (the paradigm) the basis of Christian commitment to national integration and peace.

6. Conclusion

This study shows that Nigeria as a nation has benefitted immensely from the contributions of the Christian religion to its unity and peace especially through the promotion of justice, reconciliation, dialogue, education, health services, and morality. The story of the struggle and search for lasting and sustainable unity and peace in the country cannot be told without the recognition of the part played by Christianity. It is also evidenced by the study that the Christian commitment to unity and peace in Nigeria is strongly informed and influenced by its belief systems which are heavily Christological. The historical nature of Christianity, its belief in a personal God that is committed to the welfare of humanity, and its deep conviction about the goodness of creation, are the foundations for the Christian actions that promote unity and peace for integral national transformation in Nigeria.

The study demonstrates that, to a certain degree, the Christian belief in Jesus Christ militates against the inclusivity and effectiveness of the commitments of the religion to unity and peace in a multi-religiousnation like Nigeria. Some of the foundational Christian claims about Jesus are very exclusive and do not guarantee the type of inclusiveness that is required for the actualisation of unity and peace in the nation. This limitation will be overcome by a shift to a Spirit-based motif for Christian actions aimed at promoting unity and peace. The shift offers a greater advantage for the reasons that the African worldview is typically spirit-oriented, the spirit is a common factor in all the three dominant religions in Nigeria, and the Spirit motif gives more room for dialogue, has more to say to the people about unity and peace, and italso provides a fertile ground for a morality that cuts across religious, ethnic, and culture boundaries. Therefore, the study concludes that for the Christian religion to achieve its best in promoting unity and peace in Nigeria, it has to adopt the Spirit motif as its basis of discourse, action and interaction with the other religions. Adopting the Spirit motif will make the Christian religion more inclusive, open, and receptive to other religious beliefs, and promote healthy collaborate and dialogue with other religions for the realisation of unity and peace in the country. With the capacity of the Christian religion for interaction, dialogue, and collaboration with other religions thus expanded through the shift from Christ-based to Spirit-centered paradigm, its commitment to the realisation of long-lasting unity and peace in the nation will yield more fruits. A recommendation is made for further studies on how the Spirit-centered paradigm would be adapted to fit the common grounds of play for the diverse groups of people that work with the Christian religion for unity and peace in Nigeria.

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