

**Inter-religious Conversion Experiences and Sustaining the Peaceful Co-existence Among  
Christians and Muslims in Yoruba Society of Nigeria: A Critical Conversation Between  
Christian Theology of Conversion and Yoruba Comparative Religious Theology.**

**By**

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## **DECLARATION**

I, Ayodeji Michael Ayodele, declare that I have written this thesis under the supervision of Prof. Benno van den Toren. I also declare that I have not submitted this thesis for any other degree or professional qualification.

Signed:

Date:

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this thesis to God Almighty and my late Mother, Mama Juliana Ayodele. May the Lord rest her soul in perfect peace! Amen.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### ASSESSING THE LIVED THEOLOGY OF INTER-RELIGIOUS CONVERSION AND RELIGIOUS CO-EXISTENCE IN YORUBA LAND

#### 1.1 Introduction to the Thesis

The mission mandate of the Church calls for soul-winning and conversion of people into Christ's Kingdom. This is a mandate that gets more difficult by the day because of the multiplicity of religions, most of which are also mission conscious and mostly antagonize the gospel of Christ and in some places persecute the Church and disrupt social stability. Religious conflict is one of the major societal ills that has bedeviled most pluralistic countries like Nigeria and has indeed become a global menace. We cannot underestimate the importance of conflict prevention and peace building when speaking of the growth and development of any society. To sustain social peace and development, various concerned stakeholders and scholars made various efforts, which results in suggestions about the causes of conflict and its remedy. Some of these opinions have indicted religion as a culprit of violence for obvious reasons like exclusive salvation message and proselytization, the tone of which some referred to as hate speeches and judgmental.<sup>1</sup>

Religion has been accused in some quarters as one of the major factors attributed to various conflict experiences, especially in a pluralistic society, like Nigeria and many other nations where multiple religions are practiced. There have been several occurrences of religiously motivated and escalated crises in various parts of the country. Nigeria is one major example of a nation that has experienced a series of conflicts and civil unrests and yet is unable to deal with it. Religion has been alleged in various quarters as one of the major causes of violence in Nigeria, and we could attribute this to the intrinsically religious nature of the people and their culture. Religion conversion could be seen as one reason for tension, persecution, and conflict between Islam and Christianity in a multi-religious society. There have been various occurrences of inter-religious violence that often erupt because of the rivalry between the

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<sup>1</sup> Akintunde E. Akinade, *The Precarious Agenda: Christian-Muslim Relations in Contemporary Nigeria*, (High Point, North Carolina: High Point University, 2002), 1-10.

adherents of the two major religions, i.e. Islam and Christianity in Nigeria; so stakeholders and scholars have attempted many efforts to proffer lasting solutions to this social menace. Like many other nations of the world, this standpoint has led the government of Nigeria to adopt secularism and democracy, which promotes equality, equity, freedom of expression, and so on. The constitution of the country recognizes the three major religions of Islam, Christianity, and the Traditional religion, and also pays attention to some of their interests, having acknowledged the fact that almost every citizen of the country belongs to at least one of these religious groups.

The socio-political stakeholders in the country, as a way of creating balance and sustaining peaceful coexistence among these religions and also among the various ethnic tribes within the country, espoused a neutral political position on issues of religion. Neutrality as a position taken by the social elites and the academics is also being supported and defended by the theology and theologians of the African Traditional religion. The idea of neutrality and equality of religion implicitly considers inter-religious conversion and mission a threat to social peace, and inter-religious co-existence. Mission and conversion is an essential aspect of the Christian faith, which can also be found in the belief and practice of Islam. This has been described in some socio-political quarters as a danger that can pose a serious threat to the sustainability of peace within a pluralized community.<sup>2</sup>

Nigeria is indeed a good example of a pluralistic society. It is a country that is heterogeneous in so many contexts. There are over 500 languages or dialects being spoken by over 250 ethnic groups within the six geo-political divisions of the country.<sup>3</sup> Religiously, the nation has been home to the two largest international religions, Islam and Christianity. It was even referred to as the greatest Islamo-Christian country in the world. Apart from the two foreign and major religions in the country, the Traditional Religion also struggles to maintain a place and importance among many; while some other New Age religions and Scientology are also increasing in numbers as the nation grows and develops with western influence. While there have been several records of religiously related violence in the Northern part of the country, we can affirm that the situation in the southern part of the country when discussing inter-faith conflict and the inter-faith relationship has been relatively peaceful despite some significant

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<sup>2</sup> Akinade, *The precarious Agenda*, 5-7.

<sup>3</sup> Akinade, *The Precarious Agenda*, 2.



records of inter-religious conversions in the area. Some scholars have attributed this to the influence of culture and beliefs of the Yoruba Tradition and communality. Benson Igboin called it “Africa communalism and palaver”<sup>4</sup> which expounds belief in the communal virtues of “live and let’s live” a virtue that is entrenched in love, care, hospitality, and other moral values.<sup>5</sup>

I am giving particular attention to Muslim-Christian conversion experiences because it is implicitly seen as problematic by many theorists on religious peace and in many contexts, for instance, in the northern part of the country it does indeed lead to persecution of the individuals and the Christian community and sometimes causes serious conflict. This will be addressed by engaging in a critical evaluation of the formal academic theological position which advocates equality of all religions as a way of ensuring peaceful co-existence. Thus, I will embark on an empirical assessment of the espoused theology of mission in the Church within the Yoruba context, which has produced so many practical experiences of devoted converts who have changed from Islam to Christianity within the community, and in contrast to the academic stand, it has been with no visible threat to the peace and co-existence of the people.

Nigeria is a country of very complex ethnos-religious grouping. The social relationship between the two major religious groups in the country has always been a major topic of discussion, both in academic research and social development. The Christian religion came to the country with mission orientation and has been expanding by converting many adherents of the Traditional religion and Islam. While it is near impossible to convert a Fulani/Hausa Muslim from the north, and when such ever happens, it could instigate a serious social tension and violence; there are significant experiences of Muslims converting to Christianity in the south without serious tension on the community. The Yoruba nation within Nigeria seems to have some degree of peaceful inter-religious co-existence despite the conversion experiences.

The scope within which I write this paper will be limited to the assessment of the lived theology of inter-religious conversion among the Yoruba Churches in critical dialogue with the

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<sup>4</sup> Benson O. Igboin, “The Concomitance of Religious Conflict in Nigeria: Secularity, Tolerance and Dialogue”, in *Human Views on God: Variety, not Monotony: Essay in Honour of Ade P. Dopamu*, ed. Chepkwony, Adam K. Arap and M.J. Hess, Peter, (Eldoret: Moi University Press, 2010), 146.

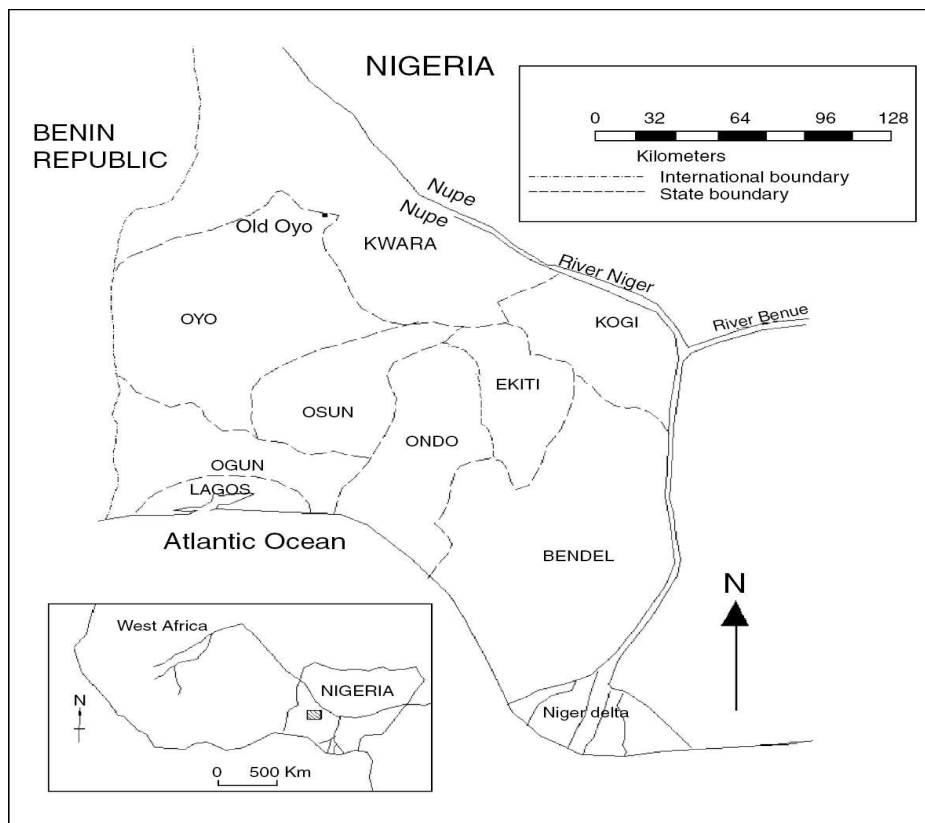
<sup>5</sup> Igboin, “The Concomitance of Religious Conflict in Nigeria”, 147.

comparative religious theological views that sees inter-faith conversion as a potential cause of inter-religious conflict. As much as this could be true of the inter-religious situation in the Northern part of Nigeria, the southern experience seems relatively different; especially in the south-western Yoruba community, where they widely practiced both Islam and Christianity hand in hand with an almost equal population yet no visible inter-religious clash. So, I intend to find out how the evangelists and the Yoruba society maintain a visibly relatively peaceful inter-faith co-existence despite conversion experiences. I will do this by looking into specific conversion stories and analyzing practical experiences of converts; while some related research works of literature on inter-religious co-existence in Nigeria will be explored.

## **1.2 Background of the Study Area**

It is germane at this point to bring to the fore a brief description of the structure and composition of the Yoruba community and the reality of inter-religious conversion in Yoruba land. Inter-religious conversion is being experienced by various people in various parts of the country, but we should appreciate the rate and number of Christians who confess to having Islamic background within the Yoruba society, yet with no visible conflict related to it. In contrast to the impression by popular opinions that Inter-religious conversion could add to the tension between the two major religions in the country. The Yoruba community's experience gives the impression that Christians and Muslims can live peaceably together despite the inter-religious conversion of some people. The outcome of various practical experiences of people converted through marriages and evangelism is evidence of the lived theology of conversion within the community. Despite the various numbers of Muslims or Christians who had changed loyalty from either of these two religious ideologies to the other, there seem to be no serious visible conflicts attached to such development.

Fig. 1- Map of States in Nigeria with Yoruba-speaking Communities.<sup>6</sup>



The map above shows eight out of thirty-six states in Nigeria where Yoruba-speaking communities can be found. While Kwara and Kogi being part of the North Central geo-political zone of the country and comprise other tribes, the remaining six states which make up the southwestern geopolitical zone are the dominant areas of the Yoruba people. The religious composition of the states further shows that some states like Osun, Oyo, Ogun, Lagos, Kwara,

<sup>6</sup>Aribidesi Usman and Toyin Falola, *The Yoruba from Prehistory to the Present*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 6. Doi: 10.1017/9781107587656.

and Kogi have a significant number of Muslims that are almost on a par with the Christian population, while Ondo and Ekiti are predominantly Christians.<sup>7</sup>

I use personal observations as an insider within this community and some other research investigations already conducted in the area to attest to some other related works like J.D.Y. Peel's assertion that states the fact that several individuals and families have at various points changed their allegiance from one religion to the other without creating social unrest.<sup>8</sup> Both Islam and Christianity in Yoruba land had recorded a massive growth in the last one and a half-century apart from the massive conversion of the people from the traditional religion to either of the two world religions.

The tide also involved movements between the two religions. Although conversion from Christianity to Islam is rare, it is not impracticable. Some Christians had allegedly changed religion because of marriage, politics, and other personal reasons. Apart from that, Islam also grows through multiple childbearing and polygamy. Christianity has made conscious efforts towards evangelizing Muslims, using the school system, humanitarian efforts, sponsoring Christian's involvement in Islam and Arabic education, mission services to Islamic communities, and many other evangelical strategies.<sup>9</sup> This effort has not been without significant results seen in the numbers of converts who were formerly adherent of the Islamic faith but have now become Christians and some evangelists too. The Third Chapter of this project will address the testimonies and experiences of a few converts who attest to the continuing conversion experience within the society, and how they could sustain their relationship with families, friends, and the community.

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<sup>7</sup> Insa Nolte, Rebecca Jones, Khadijeh Taiyari and Giovanni Occhiali, "Exploring Survey Data For Historical and Anthropological Research: Muslim-Christian Relations In South-West Nigeria", *African Affairs* 115, No. 460 (July 2016): 541-561, doi: 10.1093/afraf/adw035.

<sup>8</sup> J.D.Y. Peel, *Christianity, Islam, and Orisa-Religion: Three Traditions in Comparison and Interaction*, (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2016), 46.

<sup>9</sup> Mujahid Hamza Shitu, "A Review of the Activities of Christian Missionary, Clergy, Experts and Writers on Islam in Nigeria", *Journal of Islamic Studies and Culture* 2, No. 3 (September 2014): 8, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/272364513>.

### **1.3 Research Question**

How does Christianity as a missionary religion that implies a call to conversion co-exists peacefully together with Islamic religion in Yoruba land, in the light of the critical attitude of the comparative theologians to proselytization and conversion?

#### **Sub Questions**

- i. What is the position of the comparative theologians in Nigerian on inter-religious relationships, peaceful co-existence, and inter-religious conversion?
- ii. What is the espoused theology on Inter-religious co-existence and conversion of Muslims to Christianity in Yoruba land?
- iii. Can we sustain mission and evangelism without jeopardizing the peaceful inter-religious coexistence in a pluralistic Yoruba society and the world at large?

I will address these questions in this paper. This first chapter is the background of the study, the second chapter will address the existing theological views of some scholars of comparative religion within the Academics sphere in Nigeria; the third chapter will document and analyze the empirical research observations through semi-structured interviews with some selected Muslim converts and evangelists within the Yoruba Christian community. The final chapter will be the evaluation of the academic point of view in the light of the lived experiences of conversion on the Yoruba axis of Nigeria, its connection with the peaceful co-existence within the community, and the way forward for a mission without jeopardizing inter-religious relationships in the world of heterogeneous faiths.

I am engaging with the formal (academics) and Yoruba religious theologians who claimed that there is a tension between social peace and inter-religious conversion; and so advocate for equality of religions, a notion that discourages inter-religious conversion to ensure social peace. There is a need to examine the many experiences/testimonies of Muslim-Christian conversion among the Yoruba people in Nigeria, to find out the degree to which inter-religious conversion threatens peaceful co-existence in the community and how this has been managed by the converts and the evangelists. The major focus of this research involves a critical assessment of the comparative religious discussions and academic theology of peace which tend to discourage religious conversion. This will be done in the light of the lived theology of conversion among

the Yoruba Christians, and help in making a progressive contribution to the quest for a more appropriate theology of mission and peaceful inter-religious co-existence in our complex modern society.

#### **1.4 Methodology**

The research method of analysis involved in this study will base on the four voices theological approach. This will be engaged in the analysis of the normative theology of the Church and society with the formal academic theological position on inter-religious peace, while the espoused theological voice evidence in the practice of religious conversion and various experiences will be examined through interviews with some selected converts and evangelist within the community. This will form the empirical/field research evaluation of the operant theology in connection with the mission teachings and practice of the Christian Church.

According to Helen Cameron et al, the concept of the four voices of theology is an important aspect of the Theological Action Research (TAR) which provides processes and skills by which we can speak about practices and also reflect on their significance. It shows that the Christian practice is a faith-seeking understanding. This means that our practices lead us into theological reflections and awareness of what we believe, what we believe and teach becomes a doctrine or tradition that source from somewhere and became acceptable practice within the community of faith.<sup>10</sup> I will not adopt all aspects of the Theological Action Research, but mainly their distinctions of four theological voices i.e. the normative theology of the Church on mission based on Scriptural authority, the formal theological view of the comparative religious scholars, the espoused theological voices of the converts and evangelist that will be involved in the research and the operant theological voice seen in the act of mission and conversion experiences.

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<sup>10</sup> Helen Cameron, Deborah Bhatti, Catherine Duce, James Sweeney, en Clare Watkins. *Talking about God in practice: theological action research and practical theology*, (London: SCM Press, 2010), 49-60.

Cameron et al give this description and the inter-relation between these various theological voices by categorizing them into four voices, which shall be used in analyzing the subject of this research.

**The Normative Theological voice:** This has to do with what the practicing group refers to as its theological authority. The primary or supreme theological foundation or authority on which they derive the practices and beliefs of a particular community. This could be the Scripture, the creeds- that is their statement of faith, the liturgy, or official teachings of the Church. The normative theological voice in the context of this paper is the scripture as upheld by the missionaries and the evangelist. The supremacy of the scripture and especially the words of the great commission by Christ that the disciples should go to all the world and preach the gospel is quite paramount to mission and conversion which is very vital among the churches in the Yoruba environment. The church authorities and leaders also play notable roles in emphasizing the importance of mission in obedience to Christ and the visible structures within the church system are also patterned towards evangelization and proselytization. The normative theology is in place to correct and informs the espoused theology and the operant theology of the group. It is also associated with the communal identity and relationship of the people.<sup>11</sup> In the case of this research, the leadership of each denomination and the evangelical departments put in place at various levels and committed to reaching out to the community and other people outside the faith.

**The Formal Theological Voice:** This has to do with theological views from theologians creating grounds for critical assessment, in-depth study, and understanding as well as providing a platform for open-minded dialogue with other disciplines like social science, anthropology, and in this case, African Traditional Religious theology and academics theology of religious peace. This will help us to look from the perspective of the formal theological voice of the Church which has its unique and distinct role in the conversation with the Yoruba comparative theological voice about conversion and inter-religious co-existence. The role of the formal voice is to offer an intellectual

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<sup>11</sup> Cameron et al, *Talking about God in practice*, 54.

articulation of faith seeking understanding by using the biblical form of thoughts which inform the practices and expression of mission and conversion to engage in critical conversation with the Yoruba comparative religious thought on inter-religious relationship and conversion. This will involve the use of the formal academic thoughts within the church to engage Yoruba comparative theological thoughts and to challenge other assumptions that are inimical to its faith and understanding about mission. The formal theology also helps in constructing and developing a broader perspective that can aid further reflections on practices and the expression of the espoused theology within it.<sup>12</sup>

**The Espoused Theological Voice:** This has to do with the theological expression within a particular church or community which can be learned implicitly or explicitly by the people as expressed in their testimonies and beliefs. The doctrine of mission, soul-winning, and radical evangelism can be seen both implicitly and explicitly in the messages and writings of the Church within the society. I will focus on the espoused understanding of mission and conversion among the Yoruba Christians, using a few experiences of Muslim converts and evangelists within the area. The espoused theology is the expression of the converts and evangelists about mission work and how this is justified in their beliefs and practices. The cases of the testimonies of the respondent that will be involved in this research will help to affirm the continued belief and practice of mission in Yoruba land and its effects on inter-faith relationship in the area. The concepts of the converts and the way they sustain their relationship with friends, and families in other religion will also be used in conversation with the Yoruba comparative skepticism about mission and inter-religious conversion

**The Operant Theological Voice:** This is about the common understanding that is expressed in the actual practices within the Christian church and the community. This is clear in action. I will not lay much emphasis on this aspect of the four theological voices as it is better experienced in action. The act of mission and consequential conversion experiences from other faiths remain evident in Yoruba communities which

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<sup>12</sup> Cameron et al, *Talking about God in practice*, 55.



has not jeopardized the generally accepted peaceful inter-religious relationship the community is known for.

This study will also involve the intercultural approach, a comparison of the Yoruba culture and religion with the Christian religion which is believed to have been most influenced by western culture. It will also serve the purpose of creating ground for dialogue between the formal academic position which also co-operates with the socio-political standpoint on inter-religious coexistence and peace in the community, and the lived experiences of mission and practices of the Church which involves evangelism and conversion experiences while still maintaining a peaceful relationship with other religions in the community. The method to be involved in this research will be a descriptive analysis from emic's perspective. That is from my observation as a Christian and evangelist from this society and the practical experiences or testimonies of people who were direct converts from Islam to Christianity. Further exploration of the experiences of few converts through semi-structured interviews will be conducted to form the empirical aspect of this study.

The scope of this research is limited to conversion experiences from Islam to Christianity in order to reduce the load of the research within the allotted time frame for this study. I study from the formal theological position, creating a platform for dialogue between the formal comparative theological view base on Yoruba culture, and the normative theology of the Church base on the scripture. It is important to note that I can personally relate to these two positions as a graduate of comparative religious studies and also an evangelist who has been involved in reaching out to Muslims and disciple them after conversion. I will therefore address this study both as a researcher and a witness through my personal experience as a Yoruba Christian, an Anglican Priest, and an evangelist. I believe this would help to corroborate the result of this research and not influence the freedom of the respondent to express themselves without any reservation. I will therefore play a neutral position for research purposes, even though I can easily relate to some extent with the experiences and testimonies of the converts.

This study involves a critical conversation between the formal theology of peace or comparative religious studies and the lived theology of inter-religious conversion and inter-faith relationship in Yoruba Land. This research is to create a platform for a critical dialogue between the Yoruba

comparative religion theological voice which is influenced by African traditional religion and the normative theological voice base on the authority of the scriptures, which informs the espoused voices of mission and conversion as well as some relevant formal Christian theological voices.

I will also employ a qualitative analysis by consulting and interacting with existing literature from related works and researches, reports from a few inter-religious conferences and seminars, and empirical analysis base on online (field) semi-structured interviews with selected evangelists and converts. This research takes a critical theological assessment of the formal Yoruba comparative religious theology in the light of the normative theology of the scripture and the espoused theology of conversion among Yoruba Christians and evangelists. This will be done in connection with their positions on inter-religious peace within the heterogeneous Yoruba society. I will assess the connection between the formal theologies of peace, African religion, and comparative religious theology, using the espoused Christian theology of mission and conversion visible in the action, relationship, and organizations of various denominations within the country with particular focus on Yoruba society.

## CHAPTER TWO

### CONVERSION EXPERIENCES AND INTER-RELIGIOUS CO-EXISTENCE IN YORUBA LAND, NIGERIA

#### 2.1 Introduction

I center this segment on the analysis of some existing literature and the formal theological perspectives about conversion experiences in the Yoruba communities, the subsequent effects on the co-existence of the two major religious groups (Islam and Christianity) in the area. It will analyze the influence of the Traditional religious belief system and Yoruba culture on the theology of selected comparative theologians and inter-faith dialogue. Nigeria is an ethnoreligious pluralistic country where Christianity and Islam have almost equal percentages of members distributed across various communities of about 250 different ethnic groups across the six geopolitical divisions of the country.

The incessant religious violence across the northern part of the country seems to give a sort of generalized idea that the entire nation is bedeviled by the untoward experience. This makes it necessary to investigate and promote the projection from the southwestern Yoruba part of the country; where the inter-religious relationship is relatively peaceful despite a significant presence of the two religions in the area with active mission practices. I will also examine the historical antecedents of the two Abrahamic religions, which have found a home among the people and in society. The extent which shows that both Islam and Christianity today form the major identity and boundary marking of the people within the society and the country at large.

The composition of this chapter, therefore, begins with the concept of Conversion and its effects on the inter-religious relationship in the Yoruba society and also gives attention to the influence of the formal theological perspectives of the comparative religious scholars in connection with the African (Yoruba) religious beliefs on inter-religious conversion and peaceful co-existence within the community. Researches and clear practices within the society show a relatively peaceful co-existence and enduring inter-relation among the adherents of both Islam and Christianity in Yoruba land. They have attributed this to a lot of factors like culture and Yoruba

Religious beliefs and practices that seem to accommodate a variety of beliefs and ways to worshipping the Supersensible.

## 2.2 Christian Mission and Conversion Experiences in Yoruba Land

We could describe conversion as a radical change or transformation that happens in the life of a particular person or people. It could also involve a change of character, belief, culture, or religion. Conversion, according to J.D.Y. Peels, has to do with a significant idea of religious change. It is a concept that is derived from and rooted in the history of the West and Christianity. To him, it could be problematic when it is linked with any other religion apart from Christianity.<sup>13</sup> From the anthropological point of view, conversion has been described as a transition from one form of belief or worldview to another. According to Robin Horton, conversion can be described as a process of adaptive change into a wider world view through the process of cognitive change.<sup>14</sup> It is a process whereby the life of an individual or group of people adapt to a new way of life, change of mental perspective, reasoning, or adopting a new thought or belief that is completely different or opposite to one's initial worldview. Although conversion might not be as popular in Islam as in Christianity, it is a reality that can be seen within it. Conversion is not just about the change of religion by the people who were formerly traditional worshippers alone, but also the conversion of Muslim Youths to Reformist Islam, which can be compared to the processes of self-transformation that are found within many Pentecostal Christian denominations.

Conversion has to do with the change of religious belonging, confession of faith, beliefs, and practices. It is a process that involves the denial of one's former religion in favor of a new one, and also involving the movement of people from one religion to another because of a changed conviction or understanding about God and the means of salvation. The ethnographic conversion experiences among the Yoruba people in Nigeria is not just a change from the traditional African religion to Christianity or Islam, but also various experiences of conversion within the religious groups because of Pentecostalism, charismatic reform movements, and

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<sup>13</sup> J.D.Y. Peel, *Christianity, Islam, and Orisa-Religion: Three Traditions in Comparison and Interaction*, (Oakland California: University of California Press, 2016), 127.

<sup>14</sup> Robin Horton. "African Conversion", *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 41, No. 2 (April 1971), 85-108, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1159421>.

modernity. The contemporary situation of the society gives a clear affirmation to the fact that many young adults are being converted from Islam to Christianity.

Peels gave detailed research and comprehensive anthropological and historical analysis of the emergence, relationship, and development of Islam and Christianity in Yoruba land. He noted how the two world faiths responded to the traditional 'Orisa' religion which was and still is the symbol of the identity, culture, practices, and originality of the Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria. Conversion experiences and history in Yoruba land and the entire African world started from a radical change from the African traditional religion to the foreign Abrahamic religions of Islam and Christianity between the fifteenth century and twentieth -century A.D.<sup>15</sup> This evolution from traditional religion began with Islam which was believed to have found acceptance among the people earlier than Christianity. Islam came to the region through Islamic merchants from the Sahara mostly from Mali. This further attests to the fact that Islam in Yoruba land did not come through Jihad like the Northern part of the country but through Islamic merchants from the Sahara around the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

The only part of Yoruba land that was forcefully Islamized through the Jihad of Uthman Dan Fodio in the 18th century was Ilorin, having been conquered by the Fulanis and became the southern part of the Sokoto caliphate, being ruled by an emir. Although Islamic Jihad by the Fulanis could not penetrate the southern part of Nigeria, Islam already had a place and a modest number of believers in some parts of Yoruba communities like Oyo, Ijebu, and Lagos because of trade interaction with Islamic merchants who had come along with the practice of Islam and introduced it to some locals. Therefore, before Christianity finally had its stand in the latter part of the 19th century because of the influence of the British expedition and colonization in West Africa, Islam had already become popular in most of Yoruba Land, though with a mixture of a lot of traditional practices which are connected with the culture and religion of the society.<sup>16</sup>

Christianity was introduced to the Yoruba land and Nigeria as a whole through the Christian Missionary Society (CMS), an arm of the Church of England, in the wake of colonization and British control of the Niger River area. There were records of an earlier failed attempt at

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<sup>15</sup> Peel, *Christianity, Islam and Orisa-Religion*, 126-135.

<sup>16</sup> Peel, *Christianity, Islam and Orisa-Religion*, 127.

introducing Christianity to the area by the missionary activities of the Portuguese and the Spanish between 1485 and 1655.<sup>17</sup> Christianity finally gained foot and was established in Nigeria in 1864 and the first major ethnic group to receive this in Nigeria, were the Yoruba people of the southwestern part of the country. Within the first thirty years of the twentieth century, most of the Yoruba people had become members of either of the two religions of Islam and Christianity; today virtually every Yoruba person is a Christian or Muslim.<sup>18</sup> The two religions had their most important growth after the imposition of colonial rule at the end of the 19th century. Though there are still many enthusiast loyalists of traditional religion, many of them are at the same time associated with either Islam or Christianity. With no gain saying both Islam and Christianity witness massive growth and mission expansion in various Yoruba communities and in turn contributed immensely to the development of the area.

Christian mission could penetrate and appeal to the need of the people through several humanitarian services. The establishment of schools by the missionaries and promotion of the western system of education, health care through hospitals, and social help for the people without discrimination on the ground of religion turn the tide towards the Christian faith and therefore, brought about a significant growth through the conversion of many children and parents from the traditional religion and also from Islam to Christianity. The Yoruba people, being the first to be in contact with Christian education, is popularly accepted as the gateway to Christianity, education, and modern development in Nigeria; and this also influences the manner of interaction among the people. A focus on the history of Christian missionary and enterprise in the southern part of Nigeria, especially since the nineteenth century, reveals the contributions of various missionary bodies to the civilization and development of the area. Kanayo Nwadior's attention on Christian mission, conversion, and growth further attests to the enormous contributions of the missionaries to the development of the area. He points out that from the 1840s, various Christian missionary bodies have done a lot to evangelize different

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<sup>17</sup> E. B. Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, (London: Longman, 1963), 207.

<sup>18</sup> Peel, *Christianity, Islam and Orisa-Religion*, 128.

parts of southern Nigeria, and also had brought about the growth of education and social developments of various forms in the area.<sup>19</sup>

In contemporary times, we can assert that the major challenge facing Christian mission and conversion work has always been with its encounter with other faiths. In Nigeria especially, the traditional religion of the people has been before Christianity, as well as Islam, while Christianity is the last religion among the three, it is possibly the most successful of them. So, the first encounter with traditional worshipers might not pose many difficulties, even though it was difficult; but because of the tolerant nature of the Yoruba religion and so many developments brought by the Christian mission, it gained popularity and acceptance among the people.

The emergence of the evangelical and Pentecostal movements around the first quarter of the 20th century led to drastic conversion from both Islam and traditional religion. The power of ministrations and charismatic spirituality led by the African Indigenous Churches like Christ Apostolic Church, the Aladura Churches, and Pentecostalism brought about spiritual succor. The testimonies of divine healing, deliverance from diabolical curses, and oppressions associated with some spiritual forces like witches and wizards corroborate the relevance of Christianity to the people. Mission work and conversion continue to date. Virtually everyone within the contemporary Yoruba society now belongs to either Islam or Christianity. Although some might still maintain their loyalty to the Traditional Religion, they identify with either Islam or Christianity in the public sphere. Therefore, most experiences of conversion recorded in present-day Yoruba society were from Islam to Christian or from Orthodox mainline Churches to Pentecostalism or charismatics.

### **2.3. Religious Plurality, Peace, and Co-existence in Contemporary Nigeria**

The conversion issue played a major role as one factor contributing to religious tension and violence in various multi-faith countries of the World. Religious violence has been one of the

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<sup>19</sup> Kanayo Louis Nwadiakor, "Christian Missionaries and Civilization in Southern Nigeria, 1841-1960: Implications for Contemporary Christians", UJAH: Unizik Journal of Arts and Humanities 14, No 2 (2013): 173-193, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ujah.v14i2.9>.

major social menaces that Nigeria, as a country, has been plagued with in recent years. Lack of tolerance between the two major religions is one cause of religious violence in many places where it has become a regular menace to society. While politics and ethnic-related issues cannot be exempted, religion cannot be out-rightly exonerated. We cannot overemphasize the effects of religion and its contributions to communal harmony in a society. Some extremists have also used it as an instrument of violence to the detriment of the same peace and harmony it was meant to promote<sup>11</sup>. An assessment of some religious violence in Nigeria by Sampson, I.T., suggests the causes and gave strategic recommendations, having evenly analyzed these conflict-inducing elements of religious practice by both Islamic and Christian religious communities.<sup>20</sup>

Nigeria is a country of over 200 million people while Islam, Christianity, and Traditional Religion are the dominant religions. While the state officially recognized the first two, it recognized the latter at the unofficial level. In the words of Akinade 2002, we can classify Nigeria as the greatest Islamo-Christian Country in the world. The two religions are almost evenly popular and equally represented in every socio-political sphere in the country.<sup>21</sup> A short survey data analysis given by Insa Nolte et al. shows the strategic composition of the southwest religious demarcations;<sup>22</sup> and also corroborated with Sampson's analysis, which shows the Muslim-Christian relationship in Nigeria. Islamic faith dominates the northwestern and northeastern parts of the country (comprising Sokoto, Zamfara, Borno, Yobe, Katsina, Kano, Kebbi, Jigawa, Bauchi, Taraba, Gombe, and Adamawa states). Christianity is more prominent in the South-East and South-South geographical zones (comprising Imo, Enugu, Anambra, Abia, Ebonyi, Delta, Edo, Bayelsa, Rivers, Cross River, and Akwa Ibom states); while the southwest and the North central (comprising Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ondo, Ekiti, Kogi, Kwara, Kaduna, Plateau, Benue, Nassarawa, and Niger states) have a considerably balanced number of Muslims and Christians.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> I.T. Sampson, "Religious Violence in Nigeria: Causal Diagnosis and Strategic Recommendations to the State and Religious Communities" *African Journal on Conflict Resolution* 12 No. 1, (2012): 2.

<sup>21</sup> Akinade, *The Precarious Agenda*, 1-10

<sup>22</sup> Nolte et al., "Exploring Survey Data for Historical and Anthropological Research", 542.

<sup>23</sup> Sampson, "Religious Violence in Nigeria", 5-9.



Although, when issues of religious violence are being discussed, the traditional religion is often left out, as if it is no longer in existence nor has any contribution to offer. It will be necessary to note here that the Traditional religion is not completely isolated from religious violence, as few incidences were associated with Traditional religion in the data of religious crisis recorded in Nigeria since the inception of the present democratic regime.<sup>24</sup> In the assertion of Sampson, there is no adequate statistical record to show the exact number of religious crises experienced in the country, especially since the return to democratic government in 1999, when it seems the challenge of religious violence took an exponential level of growth. However, it can be established that 95 percent of religious crises in Nigeria occur in the northern part of the country.<sup>25</sup>

#### **2.4 Yoruba Theological Understanding of Inter-religious Relation and Attitude towards Religious Conversion**

According to the comparative theologians among Yoruba, the traditional Yoruba religious perspective promotes the belief in equal religious access to One God. They believe that God, the supreme being- “Olodumare”, created everything in the Universe and also made and put the lesser divinities in charge. So, all the gods, divinities, and ancestors sourced and receive instructions from Him and report to Him.<sup>26</sup> This concept shaped the contribution of the leading comparative theologians like E.B. Idowu and Ade Dopamu in their quest for a peaceful inter-religious co-existence in Nigeria.

E. Bolaji Idowu is an astute champion and patriarch of the study of African traditional religion. He suggested the name Orita for the Ibadan international journal of religious study before the religious department at the University of Ibadan appropriated it and was later adopted and published in 1967.<sup>27</sup> Idowu used this concept in the attempt to emphasize his belief in a common stand and projecting a unifying factor for the three major religious groups in Yoruba land. We

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<sup>24</sup> Sampson, “Religious Violence in Nigeria”, 4.

<sup>25</sup> Sampson, “Religious Violence in Nigeria”, 4.

<sup>26</sup> J.O. Awolalu and P.A. Dopamu, *West Africa Traditional Religion*, (Ibadan: Onibolaje Press, 1979), 5.

<sup>27</sup> Deji Okegbile, “Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief, Bible of African Religion and a Master-piece for Scholars: Patriarch Bolaji Idowu, 26 Years After, We remember Him”, *The Deji Okegbile blog*, Nov 27, 2019. <http://dejiokegbile.com>.

can associate this with the quest for a fair representation of the Traditional religion and the culture of the African people in the social strata. Orita in the Yoruba language shows a junction where three routes/roads meet.<sup>28</sup> This is to present all the three major religions strongly represented and practiced in Africa, especially among the Yoruba people, as having equal access to the same God.

Though the manner of approach and revelation might be different, his opinion means that the same God who revealed Himself to the Jews as Yahweh or Elohim is being worshipped in Islam as Allah and also the same as the concept of 'Olodumare' or 'Olorun' (the Supreme Being and creator)<sup>29</sup> in Yoruba religious understanding. In contrast to the backdrop of criticism against the African religion as polytheistic, Idowu adopts the term Diffused Monotheism to describe the African Religion as having a similar concept of God like other monotheistic religions.<sup>30</sup> He proves that the Yoruba religion is also Monotheism because it believes in only One God, the Supreme Being, while other Orishas- the gods or divinities are His subordinates. They are His ministers in carrying out specified functions in connection with the creation and administration of the earth.

According to Idowu, God is very real to Africans- He has revealed himself to the people uniquely, and He is been worshipped through the divinities as practiced in various forms like in other world religions.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, the uncouth terms like primitivism, polytheism, fetishism, idolatry, and the assumption that God of African Religion is a kind of high God, were termed improper and derogatory.<sup>32</sup> He asserted that God had made himself known to the African people before Islam and Christianity, through the natural phenomena of the visible cosmos and the inner link with the deities.<sup>33</sup> Idowu noted that the self-disclosure of God is evidence for Africans as part of humanity, insinuating that the revelation of God given to the African mind is

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<sup>28</sup> Peter McKenzie, "Hail Orisha! Defended: A Response to James Cox". *Journal of Religion in Africa* 32, no. 1 (2002): 110-19.

<sup>29</sup> E.B. Idowu, *Africa Traditional Religion: A definition*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1973), 142.

<sup>30</sup> Idowu, *Olodumare*, 18.

<sup>31</sup> Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, 149-153.

<sup>32</sup> Idowu, *Olodumare*, 202.

<sup>33</sup> Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, 54-55.

sufficient for the Africans.<sup>34</sup> He affirmed that Africans have a wealth of a spiritual heritage that God has given to them through their ancestors in the Traditional religion which should not be thrown away for any other.<sup>35</sup> Idowu equates the revelation in ATR with other world religions especially, Islam and Christianity, and believes there is no need for Africans to denounce their religious heritage.

I would like to align myself with Bulus Galadima's assessment of Idowu's Theology, who believes with an uttermost conviction that religious revelation is progressive and asserted that the spiritual world is too deep for our full comprehension; that God's understanding by each culture varies according to their abilities and so, every culture has one or more things to contribute to the larger realm of apprehension of the spiritual things.<sup>36</sup> Idowu's perspective on revelation in African Traditional Religion discourages conversion and antagonizes the Truth claim in the Christian understanding of the revelation of Christ and his place in the Salvation process. There is no adequate distinction between general revelation and special revelations, especially when discussing the mystery behind the redemptive work of Christ and the goal of humankind's salvation.

Another general of African Comparative Religion is Ade Dopamu, who also believes that the African religion is the worship of one true God, through the mediation of the divinities and the ancestors. In the words of Dopamu, African religion believes that the Orisas, or African pantheon of divinities, have power over the created order; they have ranks and can interfere with the works of one another. They are not ends in themselves but means to an end. To him, God is the end, while the Orisas- Primordial deities or the ancestors- are intermediaries between God and humanity. He recognizes the Supreme Being as the cohesive factor- "The cohesive, unifying and supernatural ultimate that holds all religion together and so, all divinities are answerable to Him".<sup>37</sup> African religion believes that the Supreme Being (God) cannot be

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<sup>34</sup> Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, 57.

<sup>35</sup> Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, 207.

<sup>36</sup> Bulus Galadima, "Evaluation of the Theology of Bolaji Idowu", in *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 20, Issue 2, (2021): 124-127.

<sup>37</sup> Awolalu et al, *West Africa Traditional Religion*, 2-3

accessed directly by mortal men, so they consult the deities in different forms as intermediaries. God brought them forth and owe their existence and activities to Him.<sup>38</sup>

Dopamu further opines that no religion may monopolize the truth or salvation. To him, every religion leads to the same God, and should all, therefore, see themselves as equal. This is to establish the fact that religion is all-encompassing and all-pervading.<sup>39</sup> Alamu Akiti associated this view with E.J. Shape's statement that 'he who knows one knows none.'<sup>40</sup> Therefore, in the African religion, every religion should be tolerated and given an allowance for togetherness and communality. In the Yoruba religion, there are over three hundred and sixty divinities worshipped in different parts of the society with distinct followers. They enjoy each one to follow his chosen god without fighting another. This concept of varieties in worship is embedded in the religion and the number of divinities or pantheons being found and venerated in Yoruba religion. The devotees see themselves as one and found the basis for communal tolerance and cohesion.<sup>41</sup>

Dopamu asserts that what matters to the people is not the religion per se but the development of community and the good of all humanity within it. "It is the anthropocentric and humanity that is at the center of everything; the metaphysical and the physical, the supersensible, and the sensible, the invisible and the visible are all conceptualized concerning humanity on this planet earth".<sup>42</sup> In the words of Alamu, Dopamu was used to saying, "God loves varieties and hates monotony".<sup>43</sup> This statement summarizes Dopamu's theology that the creator of the Universe, God- 'Olodumare', created the world in varieties and revealed Himself to humanity in various peculiar ways, from one context to another. The term- 'Olodumare or Olorun'- the common name of God among the Yorubas depicts their understanding of God as the maker and owner

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<sup>38</sup> E.J. Sharpe, "Comparative Religion" in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987), 578.

<sup>39</sup> Ade P. Dopamu, "African Religion and the Humanist Perspective in the Global Age", *Science and humanities Journal* 1, No.1 (2006): 16.

<sup>40</sup> Akiti Glory Alamu, "On Dopamu's 'God loves Variety and Hates Monotony'", in *Human Views on God: Variety, not Monotony, Essay in Honour of Ade P. Dopamu*. Ed. Adam K. Chepkwony, and Peter M.J. Hess (Eldoret: Moi University Press, 2010), 1.

<sup>41</sup> Ade P. Dopamu, "Religious tolerance and Peaceful co-existence: the case of African Religion in Nigeria", *Dialogue and Alliance* 2 No 4, (1988-1989): 62.

<sup>42</sup> Dopamu, "African Religion", 21.

<sup>43</sup> Alamu, "On Dopamu's God loves Variety and Hates Monotony", 1.

of the universe. God- the Super-sensible, cannot be consulted directly by humans but through the divinities who serve intermediaries and have been given the government of the world as messengers, overseeing the affairs of the universe on behalf of the Supreme Being- ‘Olodumare’ and mediate for the people.<sup>44</sup>

Therefore, Yoruba religious beliefs and traditions show that the divinities are not ends in themselves but means to an end. They receive different authority from the same God and are answerable to Him. They are not the end in themselves, but the means to an end. It is the practice of different communities, families, or clans to be loyal and committed to definite Orisas (idols), while others within the same community or outside could be loyal to another; but they expect all to respect the right of the others to the worship of any Orisa they worshipped as they connect it with their ancestry. This same concept of the equal right of worship in the Yoruba religion permeates all aspects of Yoruba beliefs and relationships with other religions in their communities.

This standpoint further establishes the concept of Dopamu that no religion is superior to the other, and no religion can claim the monopoly of truth because they all emanated from the same God, they only connect to Him through different ways and liturgies.<sup>45</sup> Dopamu was quoted to have said that before his retirement, he would establish what he referred to as ‘AFROCHRISLAM’, that he was going to establish a temple where the adherents of African religion will keep their rituals worship on Saturdays while Muslim prayers will be held on Friday and Christian worship on Sunday. Even though he never lived long enough to do this, but in his lifetime, he loved to be referred to as High Priest (African Religion Priest), Baba Ijo (Church Chief) of Anglican Church, and Alfa Issa (Islamic cleric).<sup>46</sup>

Dopamu further posited in his description of African religion and peaceful co-existence that African religion has cohesive factors, unlike Christianity and Islam, which are divided because of so many factors. To him, African religious worshippers may be loyal to different divinities but do not see themselves as having different religions. The devotees of one

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<sup>44</sup> Awolalu et al, *West Africa Traditional Religion*, 3.

<sup>45</sup> Dopamu, “African Religion”, 24.

<sup>46</sup> Alamu, “On Dopamu’s ‘God Loves Variety and Hates Monotony’”, 5.

divinity never dispute with another, no court or jury, the oracle has the final say, and its judgment is binding on all. He stated that “African religion provides internal cohesion among its adherents”.<sup>47</sup> African religious devotees might be loyal to different divinities, they do not see themselves as belonging to different religions. And that is why a person can worship several divinities at the same time.<sup>48</sup> They extend this same attitude to Islam and Christianity. African religion has related constructively to them without competition and never attempts to convert. Affirming that, both religions have a lot to borrow from it in order to fit in and function in the society; while African religion borrows nothing from them to function, but considers them as counterparts with so many similarities about the view of God, morality, and human relationship.<sup>49</sup> He further posits that,

Dialogue should not aim at making converts, but at understanding each other's faith. People should avoid the use of terms and expressions that will degenerate into heated arguments and controversies. Each participant should allow others to define their faiths and the principles they uphold, and no one should define for others in a wrong way. Every participant should show how the resources of his faith can be useful for the peace and well-being of humanity. Since the true mother of intolerance is ignorance, people should try to learn something of other people's faith, since such knowledge will lead to greater understanding and appreciative sympathy of others”.<sup>50</sup>

This assertion about the uniqueness and close similarities among religions discourages conversion but advocates more inter-religious associations for dialogue and mutual understanding among religions, identifying their common ground, avoiding heated arguments and misconceptions. To him, all religions should come together in solidarity as different ways to the same God, and work together for peace and harmonious co-existence in society.

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<sup>47</sup> Dopamu, “Religious Tolerance and Peaceful Co-existence”, 62.

<sup>48</sup> Dopamu, “Religious Tolerance and Peaceful Co-existence”, 62.

<sup>49</sup> Dopamu, “Religious Tolerance and Peaceful Co-existence”, 67.

<sup>50</sup> Dopamu, “Religious tolerance and Peaceful co-existence”, 67.

## **2.5 African Communalism and Tolerance: An Essential Element of Inter-religious Relationship in the Yoruba Land**

The Yoruba society is reputable among other ethnic divisions in Nigeria for its unique and relatively peaceful inter-religious co-existence despite the popularity and massive influence of both Islam and Christianity in the area. Scholars have attributed this to the culture of the people, which promotes the communal spirit and social morality that ensues public violence and self-destructive acts. The Yoruba community has the popularity of hospitality and tolerance towards others. Family connections and kinship are highly revered and promoted above the religious dichotomy. It is very hard to find a household without the presence of an adherent of either Islam or Christian religion, and this has never stopped or impeded their cordial family relationship. They celebrate their religious festivals together as well as local festivities and resolve their difference according to the community's structural rules and order, which is embedded in mutual respect, love, and peace. They embedded the practice of tolerance in the concept of "live and let's live"- we can live together without disturbing one another. This has to do with mutual respect for other people's choices. It emphasizes the freedom of each person to do and practice whichever religion they choose without disturbance or intimidation by other views. It is an important aspect of communal morality that has been pointed out as one of the major influences on religious co-existence among the Yoruba people.<sup>51</sup> We cannot over-emphasize the place of communal living and mutual care that characterize the African society while discussing peace, development, and inter-religious co-existence within the African society.

According to Benson Igboin, "the commensal meal that the Africans partake in speaks volumes about their spirit of love, trust, care, unity, and togetherness and expresses the communal spirituality in the composite cosmos in which they live"<sup>52</sup>. It is a philosophy of life that expresses a bond that cannot be easily broken and also a religious vow that secures the lives of the partakers, just as it denotes a social function that reminds them of their brotherhood, which transcends blood relations. The meal deepens the level of confidence in one another and realistically promotes dialogue, speaking from heart to heart. It humanizes the partners because

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<sup>51</sup> Alamu, "On Dopamu's 'God Loves Variety and Hates Monotony'", 1.

<sup>52</sup> Igboin, "The Concomitance of Religious Conflict in Nigeria", 146.

it shows that “blood is thicker than water”. Thus, peace, harmony, and friendliness are achieved and restored. Igboin emphasized that African communalism espouses values, which are intrinsic and essential to human society. And that it is these values such as co-operation, collective action, mutual aid, interdependence, which provide grounds for such virtues as love, honesty, sincerity, trust, and care. These virtues are not conditioned on any circumstance for as long as the persons live together sharing a family experience and relationship. Therefore, it is not out of place to find people of different religious loyalty like Christians, Muslims, and African Religion Practitioners, who belong to the same family and do not see themselves as different people but members of the same household, working for the unity of the family.

Igboin infers African communality has a communicative action approach that summons all parties to express themselves unreservedly. They do not make a judgment until they scrutinize the root of the matter. The aim of this is not just to settle a quarrel; it is to reconcile and heal the wound that disagreement must have caused.<sup>53</sup> He further strengthened his opinion with the affirmation of Eugene Uzukwu, who noted the traditional community act of leadership that,

For the chief to be fair, he must be a patient listener. And this listening takes plenty of time. This is what he referred to as African palaver: the liberation of speech at all levels of the community to come close to that word which is too large for an individual mouth, the word which saves and heals. African palaver should not be confused with interminable, time-consuming, endless, aimless discussion.<sup>54</sup>

Listening is an ethic of African culture, which helps every member of the group to express his/her grievances to the chiefs without interruption. This enhances proper comprehension of issues, digestion, and being able to come up with brilliant suggestions which are grounded in love as a remedy to the cases in question. So, if a partner is not psychologically relieved after the session, it is taken that healing has not taken place. To appreciate the enormity of the case, they can repeat the process just to ensure that there is a genuine reconciliation between the conflicting groups or individuals. The judgment, when finally reached, it is sealed with the

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<sup>53</sup> Igboin, “The Concomitance of Religious Conflict in Nigeria”, 146.

<sup>54</sup> Igboin Cited it from F.C. Ezekwonna, *African communitarian Ethics: The basis for the moral Conscience and Autonomy of the Individual-Igbo Culture as a Case Study of Igbo Culture*, Bern: Peter Lang, (2005), 159.



commensal meal, which is believed to involve the ancestors or the divinities and the people. The seal, therefore, guarantees trust, healing, and real reconciliation<sup>55</sup>.

In conclusion, it is imperative to note that the history of conversion experiences in Yoruba land has not really been problematic as suggested by the comparative religious scholars. Their aim at preserving the place of tradition and culture is more prominent in their reason for discouraging interreligious conversion, and when the reason has to do with conflict it is basically because of the religious situation in the northern part of the country. The state of the traditional religion and culture in the Northern part of the country, which tends to have been completely transformed by Islam, might have a lot to contribute to religious conflict in the region, I do not want to go into such details as it is beyond the scope of this study. It has been shown that in the Yoruba community, their tradition and culture have not been totally abrogated by Christianity or Islam, and this culture and tradition has continued to help them to co-exist peacefully together despite conversion to Islam and Christianity. The gospel within the community fuses into the culture and language of the people brought out the good part of the culture and used it for continuing inter-relationship which does not prevent conversion nor encourage conflict. Further analysis to buttress this reality will be considered in the next chapter of this paper.

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<sup>55</sup> Igboin, "The Concomitance of Religious Conflict in Nigeria", 147

## CHAPTER THREE

### EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS OF MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN CONVERSION EXPERIENCES AND SUSTENANCE OF PEACE IN YORUBA LAND

#### 3.1 Introduction and Methodology

This section describes the practical experiences of conversion of a few Muslim-Christian converts within the Yoruba community in Nigeria. I have stated earlier in the previous chapter, the position, and suggestions of some Yoruba comparative religious scholars like Idowu and Dopamu about inter-religious co-existence and how it discouraged inter-religious conversion. Idowu's idea on equality of religion and the reason for the three dominant religions in the community to come together for the sake of peace; and Dopamu's idea that God is a lover of variety and hater of monotony; a view that condemns exclusivism in favor of pluralism. He bluntly rejects religious conversion but advocates for tolerance and religious cohesion, using the African Traditional religion as the basis of his argument. In reaction to this stand-point by these highly esteemed comparative theologians, I attempt an empirical analysis of some conversion experiences from Islam to Christianity to show the espoused theology of mission and inter-faith conversion among the Christian churches in Yoruba land where the inter-religious relationship is believed to be peaceful and yet mission and conversion have never stopped.

This research work involves a qualitative method. I gathered data information from the insiders' perspectives, collected through semi-structured interviews. I am using the practical anthropological experiences of about twelve converts to show the continuing impact of the Christian mission and evangelism in Yoruba land and its consequent effects on inter-religious co-existence in the area. It has been noted in the previous chapter that almost every Yoruba person belongs to either Christianity or Islam. The major conversion experiences in recent times have to do with Muslim-Christian conversion or movement from one church to the other. This research investigates the nature of relationships among the converts, their families, friends, and their general co-existence within the society.

The interviews involve semi-structured questions used to probe into other related details in the course of the interviews. I did the interviews using online machines and electronic means, (i.e. zoom meetings, WhatsApp chats, assisted video, and audio recordings). Some of these data were originally conducted in the Yoruba language, translated to English, and transliterated along with others that were done in the English language. I used labeling and coding methods for the data analysis, while I analyze descriptively the most relevant parts in line with the primary research question. In describing the testimonies of respondents, for confidentiality, I tried to use coded names to make them completely anonymous.

This study aims to use the empirical research analysis presented in this chapter is to find out how Christianity as a missionary religion that implies a call to conversion co-exists peacefully together with Islamic religion in Yoruba land, in the light of the critical attitude of the Yoruba comparative Religion's theologians to proselytization and conversion. Thus, this section will be structured:

- i. Social Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents
- ii. Selected Muslim -Christian Conversion Experiences in Yoruba Land
- iii. Reactions to Conversion Experiences and Consequential Influence on Inter-religious Co-existence in the Community
- iv. Engaging with the Yoruba Comparative Religion's Theological Position
- v. Conclusion

### **3.2 Social Demographic Characteristics of Respondents**

This section is a presentation of the social demographic features of the thirteen selected respondents interviewed. They consist of twelve Muslim converts, most of whom are also priests, pastors, and evangelists, while the thirteenth respondent is a Priest who lives within a mixed religious community in Ibadan.

**Residence-** Lagos, Abeokuta, and Ibadan (i.e. Lagos, Ogun, and Oyo states). Two of the respondents were from Ebira tribe in Kogi State (North-central Nigeria), but lives and work as evangelists in southwest Nigeria.

**Gender-**Four males and Nine Females

**Marital Status:** Eleven of them are married while two are widows.

**Profession:** 5 teachers, 3 clergy, 3 self-employed, while 2 are retirees

**Family:** All are monogamists. But 10 came from polygamous families while the three came from a monogamous home.

**Position in Church:** One Pentecostal pastor, two Baptist evangelists, two Anglican priests, a priest's wife, and the rest were members of the Anglican Church.

**Age of Conversion:** Their ages range from 32 to 65 years- most of them were converted in their youths except for a woman who became converted as a widow.

### **3.3. Selected Muslim-Christian Conversion Experiences in Yoruba Land**

The Yoruba society of southwestern Nigeria, which forms the basis of this research, shows that the experiences of people who have been converted from Islam are realistic and progressive. To ensure the anonymity of the respondents, I do not mention their names in this paper, but use coded names in few cases. The conversion experience most time begins with an individual, and somehow extends to other members of the family and, sometimes, the entire family might be influenced to change their religious profession to Christianity. Two of the respondents came from the same family of a Muslim father who is married to six wives and all the wives are Christians; who in their way influenced their children's religious allegiance to the extent that the family has almost transformed entirely to Christianity.<sup>56</sup> In addition, one other respondent was converted, having seen the great transformation and testimonies in the life of his elder

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<sup>56</sup> Research Data, Interview 1&3, Appendix

brother. Both are now pastors in a Pentecostal Church and continue to help others see the light of Christ.<sup>57</sup>

Our first respondent, Mr. Andrew, a Baptist Church Evangelist in Ibadan, was formerly a Muslim scholar and Quran teacher but became a Christian after series of arguments with Christian friends. His curiosity and interest in reading the Bible and Christian books started thereafter, and in the process, he was convinced, and confessed to having seen the light of the truth and followed Christ, who he believes is the only way to salvation. To him, there are a lot of false teachings about Christ in Islam which he came to see the true understanding while studying the Bible. He is now a devout evangelist in the Baptist Church who is ready to preach the gospel of Christ without shame.<sup>58</sup> Also, a Pentecostal Pastor in Lagos (Pastor Stone), got convinced about being born again having seen his elder brother's passion and understanding when he became a Christian. Though they faced serious challenges and punishment from their father, they remained focused and determined, the two brothers are currently pastors in a Pentecostal church in Nigeria. In his words, "The reality of the Gospel about our Lord Jesus was first introduced to us by our eldest brother in my family, who was the first to convert to Christianity. It sounded so strange to us talking about being born again, being filled with the Holy Spirit".<sup>59</sup>

In addition, one of the nine women involved in this research was (Mrs. Thomas.), a Baptist Church evangelist who was the first generation convert in her family. According to her, she used to attend church services and special programs secretly with her friend. She said, "I used to go to Church secretly before and also go for prayers at the mosque. I used to be a member of NASFAT [NASFAT-(Nasrul-Lahi-L-Faith Society) is an Islamic Association for Muslim professionals mostly in the southwest of Nigeria], and we were the ones that usually clean the prayer centers at the secretariat. Everyone knows me as 'Iya store'- (i.e. the store woman)."<sup>60</sup> She eventually renounced her Islamic faith during one program she used to attend secretly after being convinced about the superior power of simple Christian prayer over Islamic prayers aided

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<sup>57</sup> Research Data, Interview 6, Appendix.

<sup>58</sup> Research Data, Interview 5, Appendix.

<sup>59</sup> Research data, Interview 6, Appendix.

<sup>60</sup> Research Data, Interview 10, Appendix.

by local charms. In the words of Mrs. Anne, who was born of a Muslim father and Christian mother; to show that there are some families with mixed religious parents within the community, and this further facilitates the conversion process of some converts. She said, “I became a Christian when I was living with My Mother’s family, who were all Christians. So there was no problem for me at all, and when I left their place and got married, my husband’s family and friends were also Christians, so I had no problem”<sup>61</sup>.

The experiences of these people and other respondents show some factors like parenting, marriage, school, and personal encounters play major roles in their conversion process. The common connection among all the respondents is the fact that they all took conscious decisive steps while changing their religious loyalty. They saw Christianity as a better understanding of the person of God and Christ as the correct way to salvation. I can describe the conversion experiences of the converts in three ways, individual encounter, family influence, and marriage.

**a. Individual Experience:** five of the respondents identified as the first-generation converts in their family. They changed their religious belonging while the rest of the family were Muslims. They noted that their Muslim family members often confront them with strong oppositions and trials of faith but were resilient because they were convinced they have found a better way in Christ. Mr. Andrew, a Baptist Church evangelist, used to be a scholar and defender of Islamic tradition, even though friendly with many Christians. His relationship with Christians often led to several arguments which also increase his curiosity about the Bible and Christian books. Sharing his experience and how he changed to Christianity, he said:

Consequent to the argument we had, I tried reading the Bible to find out certain things we had argued over. I read from Matthew chapters 1 to the end and I discovered that our Islamic cleric and the Quran have fooled me... I was afraid of renouncing Islam because I was a scholar myself, did “wolimat’ - Islamic marriage rites. Taught people in the Arabic school. I also considered my father and my cleric....On this fateful day, I watched the clips on 'church of Satan' and I couldn't explain what happened to me that

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<sup>61</sup> Research Data, Interview 12, Appendix.

night. I felt a spirit urging me to give my life to Christ, and I did. I was prayed for that night by the man I was living with before my pastor prayed for me the next day.<sup>62</sup>

In the same vein, Rev. Dan, a priest in the Anglican Church, encountered Christ through a local Evangelical program, He stated, “I was a Muslim, and I became a Christian by His grace in a particular village in Ondo state, through the message of the servant of God in that years evening and I was touched by his message to give my life to Christ. And since then I keep on walking in that message till today”.<sup>63</sup>

b. **The Family Influence:** When parents are the first to change religion, it becomes very easy or rather automatic for the children to emulate them. And where one parent belongs to the Christian religion, the children find it easy to choose their preferred faith. About five of my respondents were born in a dual religious family, which made it easier for them to choose Christianity. Such families are open-minded when it comes to religious belonging. The testimonies of these respondents show they found it easier to become Christians because one of their parents, especially the mother, has a Christian background and was allowed by the father to continue her faith. According to the words of another respondent who was a Christian from the Northern part of Nigeria, Muslims do not stand against their men getting married to Christian women because they use such means to convert them to Islam.<sup>64</sup> This might be the case in some parts of the country where Islam is said to be more rigid, the case of most of these respondents show that in Yoruba communities, a woman can be allowed to continue and practice the religion of her choice without much intimidation by the husband or his family. The experience of two siblings involved in this research shows that they have been following their mother to the Church from childhood and when they stopped taking part in the Islamic prayers and festivals being done by their father and the rest of the family, there was no opposition at all<sup>65</sup>.

Apart from the extended family members who were Christians from the onset, some conversions experiences started with one child or parents whose influence eventually led to the

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<sup>62</sup> Research Data, Interview 5, Appendix.

<sup>63</sup> Research Data, Interview 11, Appendix.

<sup>64</sup> Research Data, Interview 2, Appendix.

<sup>65</sup> Research Data, Interview 1 & 3, Appendix.

conversion of others within the family. The Revd. Dan stressed though he was initially rejected and abandoned by the entire family, he stated that “to the glory of God, some of my family members have now given their lives to Christ through me when they see the light of God shown in my life”<sup>15</sup>. There are also reports of converts who were influenced by their friends or converts who also influenced the conversion of other friends. Revd. Dan noted further in his testimonies that some of his friends ran away from him when he gave his life to Christ then, “but now some of them are now giving their life to Christ, for what God has done in my life”<sup>66</sup>.

**c. Marriage Effect:** Marriage is another way by which some respondents identified as the factor aiding their conversion process and sustainability. Many of them had loved to be married to Christians for several reasons, like monogamy, in contrast to Islamic support for polygamous marriage and some other factors which have to do with their fascination. The contribution of Mrs. Ruth who, like many others had developed a strong interest in the faith and had been covertly loyal to some churches within her vicinity until she was mature for marriage and in her words, “I have been going to Church secretly before I met my husband. So, I have already liked Christianity as a better way compared to Islam where we have a lot of diabolical practices which I did not like”<sup>67</sup>. She further stated that “aside from my marital intention, I have already found a better religion in Christianity. I discover that going to church was more convenient for me than Islam. I saw a lot of light in Christianity. For instance, my father often takes us to visit an ‘Alfa’ [Islamic Cleric] who used to giving us some charms to use when we have major decisions to take we may have to get incisions on our body for favor or protection, which I dread a lot, I didn’t like the pain involved. So, I often ran away from such practice”<sup>68</sup>.

Mrs. Agnes is another member of the Anglican Church who was converted from Islam to Christianity through her marriage to a Christian man. Though in her words, it was a tug of war but she remained focused, and today she lives peacefully with her husband and relates well with other members of her family even though they are still practicing Muslims up to date. With Mrs. Esther, who despite the fact that her mother was a Christian but being the only daughter of the family, her father wanted to force her to marry a Muslim. She stated that “my

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<sup>66</sup> Research Data, Interview 11, Appendix.

<sup>67</sup> Research Data, Interview 9, Appendix.

<sup>68</sup> Research Data, Interview 9, Appendix.



father wanted me to remain and also marry a Muslim, but I did not follow his thought. He never conducted a marriage ceremony for me because he wanted me to be married in a Muslim way, so, till he died, my marriage was not celebrated, even though he eventually accepted that I should marry the man of my choice”<sup>69</sup>.

### **3.3 Reactions to these Conversion Experiences and Consequential Influence on Inter-religious Co-existence in the Community**

The relationship between Christians and Muslims in Yoruba land is relatively peaceful, and this relationship has not changed despite inter-religious conversion. The reactions that follow each person’s experience were also unique; while some faced serious opposition, rejection, and suffering of various degrees in the hands of the family members and close associates, some were indifferent about it, some even experience the conversion of some of their family members, friends, and relatives. Islam is the religion commonly called “Imale” [meaning forced knowledge or religion of force] by some Yoruba people, which most of the respondents attribute to its forceful Jihad and rigid nature, especially as practiced in the Northern part of the country. This makes it less appealing to many Yorubas who chose Christianity instead. The ‘Imale’ concept is to emphasize the attitude of the extremists within the Islamic faith. Although there are no deadly extremist groups in the southwest, some could show their aggression in words or arguments with Christian evangelists.

The opinion of Mrs. Faith attests to the fact that some Muslims in the southwest might not be aggressive and violent, but they engage in what she called subtle hostility towards converted members and Christians. Converts face persecutions of various kinds, but not to the extent of physical violence. She called it subtle hostility because it is not always direct, open, or violent. There was no physical harm done to any of these converts or the Christian body within the area, even though there might be some level of negative body reactions and verbal intimidations<sup>70</sup>. Some respondents attested to some forms of hostility they faced because of their conversion, but people like Mrs. Faith and her Sister just referred to the response of their father and other Muslim families as indifferent. This is to show that the family did little or nothing about their

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<sup>69</sup> Research Data, Interview 13, Appendix.

<sup>70</sup> Research Data, Interview 1, Appendix.

choice of religion. She further attested to the fact that their father and some other family members did not discriminate against any faith, while some after a while saw reasons to accept their decision and may also decide to follow the same step by converting to the new faith. Rev. Dan noted that most of the family members and friends who were initially against him are now accepting Christ into their lives<sup>71</sup>.

These further show the extent to which there could be crisis after the conversion experience; but we need to acknowledge the fact that it was minimal and only limited within some families, as against the usual news of several cases of religious violence in the Northern part of the country. The reactions or hostility experienced by most Muslim converts in Yoruba land has to do with temporary rejection by family or friends, suspension of parental support like school fees, refusal to accept Christian marriage partners, or conduct a proper wedding ceremony for such a child. None of these respondents went through any violent crisis that could threaten their life because of their newfound faith. Almost all the respondents noted they had challenges after conversion, but not to the extent of violence or killing. This shows that the peaceful inter-religious co-existence in the community was not in any way threatened by conversion. This does not mean they never had problems or various levels of intimidation and oppression because of their faith in Christ, but such is always limited within the family circle. Even though the Yoruba environment is set to be receptive, there were oppositions for most of the converts who said their loved ones deserted them because of their conversion to Christianity. Mrs. Esther said, "They all abandon me, even when I had a delay in childbearing, even when I was seriously sick they left me"<sup>72</sup>.

It is pertinent to note that reconciliation is often achieved after the trial episode. These respondents noted the fact that reconciliation was being achieved by conscious efforts and prayers, despite the various forms of internal persecution and rejection they often face after conversion. They noted that several processes of reconciliation were being employed by both the family and the converts to keep the family together. None of the respondents was disowned, even though one said she was threatened to be disowned by her father if she continues as a Christian, but they did not carry the threat out. They still find ways of reconciling with family

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<sup>71</sup> Research Data, Interview 11, Appendix.

<sup>72</sup> Research Data, Interview 13, Appendix.

members once they could not pressure such to retract his or her decision for Christ. Mrs. Anne stated in her testimony that “We prayed seriously without fainting and believed that with God they will accept me. Today, we often celebrate various festivals together as a family. They do nothing without informing me today”;<sup>73</sup> while Mrs. Ruth said she took a conscious effort to appeal to her father after being convinced to do so by her pastor.

So I went to my dad and begged him at midnight during his usual night prayers. I cannot forget, it was around 2 a.m. that I went to meet him that night. So I knelt and cried that I have no other person to marry and I was no longer young, already 26, while most of my peers around were already married. To the glory of God, he listened, and that was how he was pacified and allowed me to marry my husband.<sup>74</sup>

It was also noted that most families accept the decision of their converted kins as an act of fate which nobody can change nor alter, and so should be left to God. For instance, one respondent noted that after several intimidations by her aunt to pressurize her to take part in Islamic rites as the only female child of her parent, her father asked her to be left alone for God. She said, “She often invites me to the mosque but I would not agree and when she was pressing me too often, my father asks her to let me be. He said that is where God wants me to be.”<sup>75</sup>

### **3.4 Engaging with the Yoruba Comparative Religious Theologians**

I will at this juncture analyze the implications of the perspective of the Yoruba Comparative Theologians on Christians, mission, and the church. The respondents unanimously observed that the concept of religious equality and that God is the same in every religion has resulted in some level of compromise by many Christians and Church leaders. It encourages spiritual flexibility, a nominal attitude to the faith. They also complain of some level of syncretism in the Church, which could be attributed to the importation of superstitious beliefs and traditional practices. They agreed that such beliefs indirectly challenge and reduce the passion needed for

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<sup>73</sup> Research Data, Interview 13, Appendix.

<sup>74</sup> Research Data, Interview 9, Appendix.

<sup>75</sup> Research Data, Interview 12, Appendix.

mission, evangelism, and soul-winning. I sum up the consequential points under the following themes:

**Dual religiosity:** It takes a Christian or Muslim who does not see any difference between the two faiths to engage in inter-religious marriage, which often results in dual religiosity. This could be as dual religious belonging, which is the effect of mixed religious parents. The situation of three families with Muslim fathers and Christian mothers was the reason the Children identifying with the two religions at the same time. For instance, a respondent said, “I grew up like a Christian, let me put it that way, like a Christian and also a Muslim, because during Salah celebration, we celebrate Salah and during Christmas celebration, we celebrate Christmas. And for us as children in those days, it was a plus, because there is always a Salah dress, and there is a Christmas dress and the presents associated with these occasions”.<sup>76</sup>

**Double Standard:** Many of the respondents also accused most Church leaders and Christians of practicing double standards of faith because they want to be on par with society. They compromise the most important message of the Scripture about salvation through Christ alone, in other to maintain peace and cordiality with other religions. They promote equality of faith outside the Church, emphasizing that the same God is being served by every religion differently. For instance, one respondent said, “I think the foundation of the problem is from some of our so-called pastors of these days. I've heard some of them even on the pulpit saying we are serving the same God which has actually brought lots of confusion into Christianity”.<sup>77</sup> Another respondent believed that there are a lot of people in the church who sees no difference among all of this religion, that's why it's so easy for them to practice whichever religion they want to practice. She further noted that such a mindset will truly reduce the importance of the gospel and deny true Christianity.<sup>78</sup>

**Syncretism:** one respondent expressed his shock when he first got to the parish where he was posted as a priest and discovered the mixed practices of the members, which he noted were products of their exposure to Islam and traditional religion. He saw this as a strange doctrine

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<sup>76</sup> Research Data, Interview 2, Appendix.

<sup>77</sup> Research Data, Interview 3, Appendix.

<sup>78</sup> Research Data, Interview 2, Appendix.

that was difficult for him to correct because most of the members saw nothing wrong with it.<sup>79</sup> He further noted that the infiltration of foreign practices adopted from other religions as polluting sound biblical doctrines. He spoke about prayers being made in the name of God rather than the name of Jesus. He saw this as a reflection of the Islamic mode of prayer within the community. The development that comes because of the infiltration of traditional practices into the Church, which most church members do not see as wrong, is what one respondent called spiritual pollution. And that the church comprises a mixed multitude. One of the wrong practices common in the church and difficult to cancel is polygamy. The Africa culture supports it, so also Islam. Many people in the Church also engage in polygamy and are not always willing to renounce it<sup>80</sup>.

Islam in Yoruba society has accommodated some traditional medicine and practices as noted by one respondent who had to give up all her charms and amulets when she became converted. When such traditional beliefs or their equivalent package in the Islamic religion is allowed in the Church, it is an act of syncretism. Syncretism with Islam and traditional practices have to do with the use of herbal medicine, 'Tira' (Muslim Charm), traditional charms, and amulets. Some Christians are also in the habit of participating in Traditional Religious festivals and cultural practices which to some evangelical Christians are diabolical and idolatry.

It was also noted that religion is seen as a heritage of the family. Therefore, every child is expected to automatically key into the religion of their parents and defend it, while they are also under the obligation to pass it to the next generation. For instance, the father of one respondent who was the only child, despite his love and liberal disposition to Christianity, would not denounce Islam because, to him, it is the family heritage which he must keep in loyalty to his ancestral family. The cultural traditionalist also holds on to this concept and most Yoruba people, whether Christian or Muslim, remain loyal to their cultural heritage and Traditional religion. They say and sing, "Igbagbo ko ni ki a ma soro ile baba eni" i.e. "Faith does not prevent one from worshipping one's ancestral deities"<sup>81</sup>. It was also noted that the mixture of Traditional beliefs and Islamic concepts with Christian practices has resulted in

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<sup>79</sup> Research data, Interview 4, Appendix.

<sup>80</sup> Research Data, Interview 4, Appendix.

<sup>81</sup> Research Data, Interview 4, Appendix.

heresies. For instance, that some Christians and church leaders believe God is the same in every religion is termed heresy by some converts and evangelists. “They say they have divinities, they say they have various departments. One was called for the creation of the world the other one was called for the creation of man. My Bible has not said that to us, we must not stand by it. We just cannot believe it. These are just heresies”<sup>82</sup>.

Furthermore, there is the need to compare the espoused theological views of the respondents and the formal Yoruba comparative thoughts on conversion, peace, co-existence and effect of culture on Christianity. Conversion, in the context of the interviewees, has to do with salvation and being in close fellowship with God who they see as the only way to lasting peace, healing, and salvation of their soul. To these people, Christianity is more than just a religion, but the only way to salvation which should not be confused with other religious thoughts. A respondent said, “As a child of God and a Christian, I have come to see the difference because I have practiced the two. And I must tell you that Jesus is the way the truth and the life.”<sup>83</sup>

The perspective of the Yoruba comparative theology might want to equate God and salvation in all religions. This is not the case as practiced and believed by these respondents. It can be deduced from the experiences of the interviewees that there is a significant number of inter-religious conversions within the society without physical conflict. And when I asked one of them about what she would do if she is given the chance or forced to return to her former faith, she said, “Never! God forbid! Nothing can make me return to Islam... I would not leave Christianity. I willingly decided to become a Christian and was baptized, so, I have made up my mind that nothing can make me return to Islam.”<sup>84</sup> Another respondent said, “I pray to God that whatever we make me return to Islam should first kill me. I will rather die and be with God than return to Islam.”<sup>85</sup>

It must also be noted that there are some fundamental differences between these religions which make it difficult to advocate cohesion and discourage conversion as opined by Dopamu. To a particular respondent, conversion is necessary for all because of the sacrificial work of Christ

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<sup>82</sup> Research Data, interview 4, Appendix.

<sup>83</sup> Research data, interview 1, Appendix.

<sup>84</sup> Research data, interview 13, Appendix.

<sup>85</sup> Research data, interview 12, Appendix.

for their salvation. She believes that Christ has redeemed her from the Islamic concept of 'slave of God' to become a Child of God. She said, "They must understand that Jesus has paid the price of being a slave. We have been taken out from slavery into the kingdom of His dear Son. So we are not slaves, they must understand that we are no longer slaves to sin. So I am not a slave."<sup>86</sup> This shows that the understanding of the converts goes beyond the physical or social reasons which informed the notion of the formal Comparative Theologians about the choice of religion, it is more about their life's hope, here and hereafter. It is about their salvation, spiritual needs, and conviction about the true means of salvation and spiritual identity.

A respondent further noted,

But as a convert, as a converted soul. By the grace of God, I can tell you that the God that the Muslims serve is not the same as the God that the Christians serve. Because the Muslims by the standard will tell you, Jesus is not the Son of God. They will tell you Jesus is just one of the prophets. But a child of God, a Christian that is actually converted to Christianity, converted to Christ, will tell you, the only means by which you can be saved. The only means by which you can see God after death is given is by giving your life to Jesus Christ. The Only Way.<sup>87</sup>

When it comes to the issue of peace, the respondents see it beyond social and physical peace in the community which is the essence of the position of the comparative theologians. A respondent noted that peace is spiritual and can only be given by Christ. She noted that,

Peace is from within, and when you have the peace within you it extends to every aspect of your life. It means having the peace of Christ in you, it helps you not to see the other party as a torment. You see it as okay, the same God created us all. And it will help to bring forth the fruits of the spirits which helps you to be patient and kind to other people, not living the life of competition with people around you. But if you are not in Christ you always see that somebody wants to hurt you, you always see negativity in every other person around. But when there is the peace of Christ within you, you see it as maybe that's how the person wants to do his own; let me just allow

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<sup>86</sup> Research data, interview 3, Appendix.

<sup>87</sup> Research data, interview 1, Appendix.

him to be. Without you taking it up as an offense or seeing it as an avenue to fight back. There's something that will be holding you back to just allow peace to reign.<sup>88</sup>

On Yoruba culture and Christianity, it is generally accepted at every level of thought (i.e. both the espoused theology and the formal voices) that the culture of the people influences every aspect of their lives and religion. They see every religion as equal, and as different ways to the same God. But the converts see the place of Christ and salvation beyond culture and religion. For instance, one respondent said,

What I would say is generally in the Yoruba culture here, there seems not to be a serious dichotomy between the Christians and the Muslims. That also means what is happening in my own family. The Muslims and the Christians live (and relate together) like a single religion, it's like they are practicing the same religion. So to say, but really converted Christians who're not just going to church are the ones that will know that there is a little difference, there is a difference not even little, that there is a difference. Hence, you will see a lot of church people that would not still mind getting married to Muslims.<sup>89</sup>

### **3.5 Conclusion**

Mission, evangelism, or conversion remain vital aspects of the Church's duty to the world and obedience to the normative authority of the Christian faith. This is an essential aspect of the Church that cannot be expunged for any reason. Christ gave the great commission to His disciples and the same responsibility is passed from one generation of the Church to the order. The contemporary Church all over the world continues in mission despite the challenges posed by pluralism or secularism. The church in Nigeria and especially in Yoruba land is also playing its part in fulfilling this purpose and has gained massive converts from the traditional religion and Islam since the inception of the CMS mission in the 19th century, up till now. Apart from converts from the traditional religion, many other experiences of conversion also show that many people of Islamic background are being won by Christ all across the country.

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<sup>88</sup> Research data, interview 3, Appendix.

<sup>89</sup> Research data, interview 1, Appendix.



Muslim-Christian conversion remains a common phenomenon in the Yoruba land and has not jeopardized the peaceful communal co-existence between the two religions in the area, in contrast to the fear of the Yoruba comparative theologians about inter-religious conversion and inter-religious, peaceful co-existence. The pieces of evidence here presented show that conversion is not threatening inter-religious, peaceful co-existence within the community. The harmonization of religions which seem to be the aim of theologians like Dopamu does not look like the best solution in contemporary society. It might not ensure cohesion among the people but create another religious ambiguity. I wish to instead, advocate for religious freedom, mutual respect, and understanding of the right of every human to his/her choice of religion, and expression of it whether as mission or any other way would do better good to the society.

The Yoruba environment can boast of a considerable number of Muslims who are almost at an even population with their Christian counterparts in some states. Just like Christianity, Islam is also a mission-based religion and has recorded a lot of converts from the Traditional Religion and even from Christianity. The Muslim-Christian relationship in the area remains relatively peaceful despite the many inter-religious conversion experiences. Islam, Christianity, and traditional religion are being practiced concurrently with no physical conflict. This is clear in the many inter-religious marriages and so many mixed religious families all across the community.

The situation of the relationship in the area was adjudged peaceful by all the respondents and supported by their experiences as converts, even though there are subtle disagreements and systematic rivalry between the two faiths, it has never degenerated into physical violence. This could be seen to some extent as a healthy rivalry. There seems to be a commendable level of tolerance and understanding among the people and they also respect the choice of an individual's religious interest and practice. The disposition of many of the people to the other religion is inclusive. Although there are some individual fundamentalists, the popular opinion within the area about religion is mostly open-minded and the relationship between the practitioners is, to a great extent, cordial and mutual. They share a lot of things in common, mourn together, and also share their joyful moments as humans and families.

The mutual co-existence among the people and their family members after conversion also fit into the relatively peaceful state, because they all affirm that, though they often had it tough with families and friends at the beginning; they eventually reconcile with their families consciously or unconsciously, while some of their earlier antagonists sometimes became Christians, too. They continue in their relationships at every level of endeavor and respect each other's differences. Family festivals are celebrated together irrespective of anyone's religious affiliation and some attend worship centers together during special occasions like burial, birthdays, weddings, naming ceremonies, etc. Christians share foods and other gifts with their Muslim neighbors during Christmas and other Christian festivals and they celebrate with Muslims, and many even party together during religious festivals even though they do not accept the other person's faith. There is an appreciable level of cordiality among the people despite their differences and the possibility of conversion. Some converts who married Christians had Christian weddings with the full support of their parents.

It is also a common trend in the Yoruba community for Muslims to seek spiritual help from pastors and even attend special revival programs when they needed divine intervention for one challenge or the other, and when they see the power of God, they decide to make an open decision for Christ<sup>90</sup>. In such a case, the converts themselves are more convinced that there are differences in these two faiths and choose the one they believed is better. One way noted here by which the Church has affected society is because of her ability to appeal to the spiritual yearnings of the people. Africa is an environment where people believe so much in spirituality and attach almost everything to the spirit world most of which could be evil, and to combat them, one needs the intervention of God. The so-called derogatory names attached to African religion are not just used by the western writers most of the converts also see ATR from the same perspective and see Christianity as the only superior faith which has provided solutions to a lot of spiritual challenges that could not be resolved by any other religion. The power of the Holy Spirit, the efficacy of prayers, and deliverance from evil spirits are part of the ways the spiritual needs of the people are being met through the Church.

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<sup>90</sup> Research Data, Interview 9 and 10, Appendix.

Conclusively, inter-religious conversion is a phenomenon that cannot be prevented in a sovereign society. The quest for social peace does not stop the freedom of people to information or publicity, and the right of will to change one's perspectives because of the information given and received. I see mission and evangelism as publicizing or giving information about the Christian faith and the gospel of Christ to the world. The people, or rather, the listeners, should be free to respond to it as they like. Every religion has the prerogative to sell itself to the people and persuade them as well, while the receivers should be free to make personal decisions as they deem proper. The beauty of pluralism is the fact that there are varieties of options for everyone to explore and choose what they prefer. It makes society like a marketplace where you have plenty to choose from. Therefore, it will be aberrant to force cohesion or try to fuse every religion in the same box of unity or prevent people from moving from one faith to the other.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

#### **4.1 Critical Comparison of the Yoruba Comparative Religious Theology on Inter-religious Peace and the Lived Theology of Conversion**

Mission and inter-religious conversion is a global phenomenon. It is indeed a phenomenon espoused among Christians in Yoruba land, as shown in the testimonies of the respondents examined in the previous chapter. We can at this point infer that the Muslim-Christian conversion experiences within Yoruba communities have not hindered the notable peaceful co-existence within the region. The interviews conducted with the thirteen people selected through personal contacts, and presented in the previous chapter, attest to the reality of inter-religious conversion and inter-religious, peaceful co-existence within the community. This is in contrast to the comparative theological views of E.B. Idowu and Ade Dopamu which seems to negate any reason for inter-religious conversion in order to ensure peaceful co-existence among religions in the society. These converts and respondents whose testimonies formed the basis of the previous chapter of this paper had more personal spiritual reasons for conversion and found ways of maintaining their cordial relationship with their Muslim friends, and family.

The second chapter of this study has shown the formal theological thoughts of the Yoruba comparative religion theologians about inter-religious co-existence and its connection to conversion in Yoruba Land. I have given a short history of conversion in Yoruba land which was mainly from the Traditional Religion to either Islam or Christianity, and also the intention of two notable Yoruba comparative theologians at using their understanding of the nature of Yoruba religion to harmonize all the religions in the community in order to facilitate their peaceful co-existence. This move results in their notion of discouraging inter-religious conversion and the mission purpose of the Church. The formal (academic) theological voice proposed by E.B. Idowu and Dopamu seems to clash with the normative theology of the church which saw mission and propagation of the gospel as divine command and the primary responsibility of the Church to the fallen world.

Therefore, from the perspective of the evangelists, the normative theological voice has to do with the primary or supreme theological authority of the Church, i.e. the Scripture, creeds, liturgy, or official teachings on mission and evangelism which take precedence over any external thought. This accounts for why mission and conversion remain espoused both implicitly and explicitly within the Christian communities and the general society. It is a major doctrine of the church and common belief that modes the understanding of the people and is clear in practices within the Christian church and the community. The espoused theological view has to do with the theological confessions and beliefs on mission, soul-winning, and radical evangelism, which are both implicit and explicit in the practice of the missionaries in relation to society. The position of the formal theological voice from the academic point of view, i.e. the Yoruba comparative theologians, would not be appealing to the evangelists because of its disposition to mission and conversion, even though its purpose was to create an avenue for dialogue for peaceful co-existence among religions, especially Islam, Christianity, and African Traditional Religion.

I am taken a dialogical position in this discussion to create a balance channel between the formal theological standpoint of the church which is the basis for the espoused theology of mission and conversion as informed by the scripture as the normative theological authority. The espoused theological expression on conversion and inter-religious co-existence among Yoruba Christians has shown that conversion does not threaten peaceful co-existence among them. If there have been any reasons to feel that inter-religious conversion could threaten peaceful co-existence in a community especially in Nigeria, it is based on the Northern Nigeria experience which is mostly because of other factors like politics, ethnicity, and Islamic extremism. I see the position of the Yoruba Comparative perspective on inter-religious conversion, majorly influenced by the Traditional religion. I will therefore align myself with the normative theological voice on conversion as espoused in the experience of the interviewees and some other mission focus theological thoughts to engage in conversation with the Yoruba comparative voice which underplays mission and conversion.

The purpose of this study is not sociological but theological. Although, it difficult to separate religious discussion and inter-religious conversion without considering the sociological aspect of it. This research more about the theological effect of the Comparative religion on Christian

mission. It is not just about inter-religious co-existence in Yoruba land but a critical reaction to the position of the Yoruba comparative religion theologians who advocate equality of religion and religious cohesion at the expense of the gospel of Christ and salvation message which is the essence of the espoused theology of mission and conversion. The major aim of this research is to critically assess the Formal theological view on inter-religious peace as promoted by Yoruba comparative theologians in the light of the normative theology of the church on mission and conversion which is based on the scripture- the basic authority of the Christian faith, and tradition, using the espoused theology of mission and conversion as obvious in the testimonies and experiences of many converts in Yoruba land. Having conducted some practical evaluation of the espoused and operant understanding of the people about conversion and mission concerning inter-religious conversion and co- existence, it is crystal clear that the converts and evangelists see the normative theological view of the church as superior to the formal theological perspectives espoused within the purview of comparative religious studies and social arena.

In a nutshell, the authority of the gospel does not source from any secular power or political power. It is a divine command. The gospel and doctrine of salvation are explicit within the church's theological concept and mission practice in society. This is the major bone of contention with other religious ideologies, especially Islam, which is also a mission-driven religion. This led to the theology of inter-religious co-existence and tolerance by Dopamu who saw no reason for the inter-religious conversion, but that every religion should rather acknowledge and respect each other as equal means to the same God and then look out for religious cohesion which is being provided by the African Traditional Religion<sup>91</sup>. This concept sees mission as a potential threat to inter-religious co-existence within a pluralistic society and sees no need for conversion<sup>92</sup>.

In the light of this, this chapter will give a critical evaluation of the formal theological voice presented in chapter two, using the espoused theology of inter-religious conversion analyzed in the third chapter of this study to respond to the central question of this research- the

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<sup>91</sup> Dopamu, "Religious Tolerance and Peaceful Co-existence", 62.

<sup>92</sup> Dopamu, "Religious Tolerance and Peaceful Co-existence", 62.

relationship between inter-religious conversion, inter-religious co-existence, and the standpoint of the Yoruba comparative religion's theologians in connection to mission and proselytization.

#### **4.2 Comparison of the Espoused Theology of the Interviewees and the Formal Yoruba Comparative Theology on Inter-religious Conversion and Peaceful Co-existence**

The most important focus of this research is the disparaging gap between the formal (academics) theology and the espoused theology on mission, evangelization, and conversion. We have been able to show in this study that the espoused theological voice strongly attaches their conversion experiences to salvation and their various spiritual needs which can only be met by Christ. They saw Christianity as more than mere religiosity, but a life-changing experience with God and total transformation of their lives and thought. This is evident in their distinction between “a church goer and a Christian.”<sup>93</sup> Contrary to the Yoruba Comparative theologians who do not see any difference among religions, the opinion of respondents shows that they see a superior God, or “power” in Christianity. The power of a greater God who can solve all lives problem by the simple act of prayer that does not involve any traditional or Islamic charm<sup>94</sup>.

Even though the opinions of both the formal and espoused theology on the effect of culture on Christianity are generally the same, the espoused theology still believes that Christ is supreme. Therefore, there are some aspects of Yoruba culture that cannot be brought into Christianity. When such infusion is allowed, they refer to it as syncretism, compromise, and spiritual pollution<sup>95</sup>. Some aspects of cultural values and morality fit perfectly into Christian values and morality, but the espoused theology of mission shows that Christianity is more than morality. There is the place of the Holy spirit, which helps us to live above our human frailties, the Holy Spirit enables our weak human nature to overcome our sinful nature. It is therefore not sufficient to be morally upright to be saved, we need to be redeemed by Christ and accept His as the savior, this is what conversion experience is all about and why it is necessary for all men irrespective of their religious affiliation or culture.

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<sup>93</sup> Research Data, Interview 1 & 3, Appendix.

<sup>94</sup> Research Data, Interview 9 & 10, Appendix.

<sup>95</sup> Research data, Interview 3 & 4, Appendix.

The espoused theological understanding of the converts also shows that Christ is our peace and peace is from Christ. They see a difference between inner peace and physical peace. Peace is more than just the physical co-existence which is the major concern of the comparative theologians. Peace is spiritual, and the spiritual actually controls the physical. One respondent noted that peace is from within, that when you have the peace of Christ within you, it will enable you to live in peace with all men irrespective of the religion. In this view, for the world to experience the true meaning of peace, Christ is essentially needed.

I have used the practical experiences of selected converts to look at the continued influence of Christian mission and conversion of Muslims in Yoruba land, Nigeria. We have also seen how they have continued their peaceful co-existence despite some experiences of inter-religious conversion. Although the testimonies of the respondents show that there are some levels of persecution from parents, family members, or friends, it has not resulted in physical harm or destructive conflict. The practical experiences of these people affirm that inter-religious conversion has not stopped family's connections with one another, neither has it hampered friendliness and neighborliness among the people. This is noted in their continuing collaborations during festivals and social celebrations. Although, the converts are sometimes challenged with some opposition, persecution, and hard experiences, they see it as part of their trial of faith that they must endure in love and perseverance until they find a way of reconciling and sustaining their relationships with affected families and friends. Mission and conversion in the Yoruba society have not created unnecessary tension except for some level of systematic rivalry. The converts make efforts consciously or unconsciously towards sustaining their relationship with family and friends, so does the Islamic faith learn and adopt ways of preventing the further conversion of their members without violence in response to the conversion experiences of Islamic youths to Christianity in contemporary days.

The espoused understanding of inter-religion relationships and co-existence is further corroborated by some formal theological voices on inter-religious co-existence in Yoruba land. Marloes Janson stated that Muslims in Yoruba land rather than result into conflict with Christians has developed several movements and groups like NASFAT (Nasrul-Lahi-L-Faith Society) - an association started in Lagos, Nigerian about twenty-one years ago by Muslim professionals- This group has adopted and inculcated most Christian practices they observed

**Commented [WU1]:** Engage in a richer theological conversation between formal and espoused theological voice and show how formal theological voices help you evaluate this debate.



fascinating and attractive to their children into their worship style and practice. This includes steps like mixing Islamic education with western education rather than concentrating only on Arabic and Quran. They also influenced the taking over of missionary schools by the government to avoid further conversion of Muslim children to Christianity through western education that was initially the sole prerogative of the Church. The government also took other developmental projects like health care and social services over. Apart from that, some Islamic organizations were formed to accommodate modern realities that attracted the youths to the churches. They conduct vigils, special prayers, conferences, and even worship on Sundays; they sing and adopt the use of musical instruments like the piano and drum set just to match up with the Pentecostal charismatics where most of the young generations found their sense of belonging<sup>96</sup>.

This act indicates the several aspects of the Muslim-Christian rivalry in Yoruba land which can further be supported by the argument of Marloes Janson who stated that to attain a better understanding of the dynamics of religious plurality in Yoruba land where Muslims and Christians intermingle, emulate and copy from each other, “we need to bridge the common gap in the study of religion along theological boundaries and overcome essentialist notions of religious difference”<sup>97</sup>. Mission and conversion remain a vital part of Christianity that might not be possible to discard for any reason. The reality of the state of inter-relationship between Muslims and Christians in Yoruba land is a confirmation that anything is possible where there is mutual respect and understanding among the people. Therefore, peaceful inter-religious co-existence is possible without discarding the idea of conversion. To discard or downplay the idea of mission and the possible conversion is termed compromise, syncretism, and pollution by the interviewees as earlier noted in the previous chapter.

#### **4.3. Evaluation of the two Positions in the Light of the Normative Theology**

I have shown earlier in Chapter two of this paper that the Yoruba comparative religious theology championed by Bolaji Idowu uses the “Orita” concept to unite the three major

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<sup>96</sup> Marloes Janson, “Crossing Borders: the case of NASFAT or ‘Pentecostal Islam’ in Southwest Nigeria”, *Wiley Online Library- Social Anthropology* 28, Issue 2, (2020): 419.

<sup>97</sup> Janson, “Crossing Borders”, 420.

religions of Islam, Christianity, and the African religion itself. He coined the idea of Orita to establish a reason for the three predominant religions in Nigeria to come together as one to ensure a peaceful society, while each acknowledges and respects the others as fresh revelations about the same God<sup>98</sup>. The third chapter has also shown the espoused experiences of the interviewees which is the product of obedience to the evangelical mandate commanded by the scripture. Galadima Bulus, an evangelical theologian from the Muslim-dominated Northern part of Nigeria where the culture and religion of the people have been subjugated completely by Islam, took a defiant position like any other evangelicals, against Bolaji Idowu. To him, Idowu's concept of revelation is not specific. There is a difference between general revelation and specific revelation. The concept of the revelation observed by Idowu did not address man's sin and salvation; and failed to see the significance of Christ's event concerning salvation and human limitations<sup>99</sup>. Galadima Bulus, thus, brought out the importance of Christian theological engagement and dialogue with African Religious theology to avoid self-alienation and theological deficiency in the quest of interpreting Christianity within its concepts and belief system.

The purpose of mission according to the normative understanding of the church is for the salvation of every human, which can only be achieved through the atoning sacrifice of Christ. I presume Bolaji Idowu's aim was not to diminish the authenticity and sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures or the salvation truth claim, considering his background as an Evangelist, a Priest, and Bishop. But I see his claims to equality of religion as an obvious challenge to Christian's claim on salvation through Christ alone. It would be tantamount to trivializing the importance of mission and the primary purpose of the Church and the gospel in the world. Although Idowu's effort was aimed at finding a home for Christianity within the context of Africa and Yoruba religion, his resolution is problematic for Christianity and mission.

African comparative religious scholars built their academic standpoint on neutrality and the African Religious concept of God being the creator of all and a lover of varieties who can be accessed in diverse ways. This concept is against the Christocentric message of salvation, which is the center of the Christian mission. When we consider the position of these academicians on

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<sup>98</sup> Galadima, "Evaluation of the Theology of Bolaji Idowu", 127.

<sup>99</sup> Galadima, "Evaluation of the Theology of Bolaji Idowu", 127.

religious peace, there is no doubt about the fact that it appeals to some level of doctrinal compromise. The normative understanding of the church, espoused in mission and evangelism, centers on Christ as the only way to God the father. (John 14:6), and as far as the scripture is concerned, there is no other way under heaven given to man to be saved except through Christ (Acts 4:12). This is the primary essence of the gospel commanded by Christ to the disciples and the Church as a whole, to go to the world and preach. This same message is what theology of comparative religion and inter-religious peace seem to want to expunge from the inter-religious conversation.

Igboin's point of view on variety and not monotony affirms that comparative religion as a theology for inter-religious, peaceful co-existence should not be one-sided. If it is, then it is monotonous. Emphasizing the meaning of monotony as "a tedious lack of variety: boredom or dullness because nothing different happens"<sup>100</sup>. This state of boredom and lack of variety means absolutism in the understanding of comparative theology and has become monotonous, which shows it gives no room to the diversification of thought and pluralism. In his view, acknowledging and accepting the areas of divergence in various religions can work better in achieving positive tolerance, especially when this topic is discussed in a broader context of globalization. He asserts that globalization strives towards a unipolar worldview, which does not annihilate exclusivism or particularism.<sup>101</sup> He believes that both variety and monotony have their advantages and disadvantages. Both have contributions towards the society's goal of peaceful co-existence when constructive dialogue is involved.

The normative understanding of the Church on mission is a form of particularism that cannot be expunged from Christianity because of its interaction with other religions. Christology and salvation are at the center of every Christian mission which I believe cannot be traded for any price. The Scripture already alerted believers and evangelists on the possible hostility they could meet from the world and are so encouraged to be of good cheer when faced with rejection,

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<sup>100</sup> Benson O. Igboin, "On Dopamu's 'God loves Variety and Hates Monotony': A Review", in *Human Views on God: Variety, not Monotony, Essay in Honour of Ade P. Dopamu*, Ed. Adam K. Chepkwony and Peter M.J. Hess, (Eldoret: Moi University Press, 2010), 7.

<sup>101</sup> Igboin "On Dopamu's 'God loves Variety and Hates Monotony'", 7.

persecution, and hatred. For instance, let us consider the following words of Christ in the scriptures.

*“I have said this to you, that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer. I have overcome the world.”* (John 16:33)<sup>102</sup>.

*Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you.”* (Matt. 5:11-12).

Furthermore, Jesus told his disciples when he sent them out, *“And you will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all towns of Israel before the son of man comes. Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter in law against her mother in law; and a man’s foes will be those of his own household.”* (Matt. 10: 21-22 & 34-36).

These and many other scriptural passages are the basic motivation for missionaries and evangelists who are ready to keep the faith without considering the consequence or disposition of any other authority. It is a call they consider more important than any other thing in life and many are willing to sacrifice their entire life for it.

#### **4.4 Sustaining Mission and Inter-religious Peaceful Co-existence in a Pluralistic World**

Can missionary religions co-exist in peace? This is a question that needs a collaborative assessment and constructive dialogue. Mission and conversion are fundamental and pertinent in many world religions, like Christianity, Islam, and possibly Buddhism. The mission purpose of these religions has enabled their dispersion from their original home to various parts of the world. Christianity and Islam, for instance, have been acculturated into the lifestyle and politics of many countries in the world and they have become inseparable part of the identity of individuals and some communities. The experience of the Yoruba society shows that these two

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<sup>102</sup> All Bible quotations are from the Revised Standard Version

missionary religions can actually co-exist together in peace when the freedom of individuals to personal decisions is not tampered with by structural factors, political powers, and religious extremism.

The United Nations and the world bank in their shared commitment to the prevention of conflict as expressed in the 2030 agenda for sustainable development observed that structural factors that have to do with institutional operation and decisions by its actors determine the nature of the environment. When there is justice, political and economic stability and cohesion in a society, experience of violence will be minimal<sup>103</sup>. Most of the challenges and conflicts associated with religion in most part of the world have more to do with structures that are more connected with politics, economy, the justice system, ethnicity, and other social factors than religion. Therefore, they suggest a need for social justice, communal stability, and social cohesion among people, irrespective of their religious differences and ideology. This will go a long way in ensuring amicable resolution of differences and conflict prevention. In view of this, I believe we should be committed to our general territorial development as Christians but our loyalty to Christ is paramount.

The Church should, therefore, continue to dialogue with Islam locally and globally for a religiously free society in sustaining a peaceful co-existence among religions in a pluralistic community. The church and the missionaries have to also broaden their perspective on mission and the reaction of people to it. Mission should also appreciate other religions without compromising the basis of its message. The fact remains that the purpose of the church is not to change or convert the entire world to Christianity but to witness Christ and the gospel to the world. Evangelism and witness, whether in words or action of love, is only possible in an environment where there is freedom of speech, association, and religion. The effort of mission, according to Andreas Feldtkeller, further supports that the purpose of mission is to enhance, respect, and benefit from freedom of religion. He noted that freedom of religion may not be

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<sup>103</sup> United Nations and World Bank. *“Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict—Main Messages and Emerging Policy Directions.”* (Washington DC: World Bank, 2017), 1-44, doi: 10. 1596/978-1-4648-1162-3.

one-sided, neither is it an attempt to secure freedoms for one's religious group, but should also apply to others<sup>104</sup>.

Therefore, people should be free to make the choices of religion to accept or ignore. Evangelism is not supposed to judge or condemn others and never to be carried out by enforcement. This emphasizes the fact the religious freedom can only be maintained if it is based on reciprocity. It should accord the same freedom to everyone to follow their consciences and do what pleases them. The place of freedom of choice or freedom of religion is central to mission actualization within any system. Freedom of religion is a product of mission and mission should also be cautious of this when relating to other religions in a community. An environment where there is freedom of religion helps the actualization of mission communication and dialogue with other people and faiths. This does not stop the freedom of the people from choosing whether to accept the word. Christian mission should continue to respect the free will of all about religion, their acceptability, practice, and communication of whatever they choose to believe. Mission and evangelization is possible only in an environment of tolerance and religious freedom and so it can be a channel of promoting religious freedom and tolerance<sup>105</sup>.

To achieve a peaceful society in the world of inevitable mission reality, proselytization and plurality, there should be a mutual understanding among religious bodies. Mission and conversion are not peculiar or limited to Yoruba land or Nigeria alone, it is a global phenomenon that deserves global attention. In a recent 2021 summit for international religious freedom at the Nation's Mosque in Washington, DC, as reported by "Christianity Today News",<sup>106</sup> Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the world's largest Muslim organization in Indonesia, accepts the fact that inter-religious conversion of Muslims is inevitable. Rather than allowing it to result in conflict, it advocates for dialogue and partnership with the evangelist or missionaries to do it in a way that will not lead to violence. This further attests to the reality of

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<sup>104</sup> Andreas Feldtkeller, "Mission and Religious Freedom", in *Question and Context- Reading a Century of German Mission Theology*, Ed. John G. Flett and Henning Wrogemann, (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intersity Press, 2000), 197.

<sup>105</sup> Feldtkeller, Mission and Religious freedom, 197-198.

<sup>106</sup> Jayson Casper, "Christian and Muslim Leaders agree on legitimacy of Evangelism", *Christianity Today News*: July 22, 2021, 1.  
<https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2021/july/nahdlatul-ulama-nu-wea-evangelical-alliance-nations-mosque.html>.

conversion and that the Islamic world is aware of it. It was further noted in the report that the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) recently signed a statement of cooperation with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). The report continued that the NU secretary stated that Christian evangelists and missionaries will always desire proselytism, and so does Islam, a development he believes will naturally result in a competition. But he suggested they should conduct this competition in a harmonious environment.

The alliance between the evangelicals and the NU was called cooperation that came out of a deep theological dialogue that is contrary to academic predisposition, like the position of the Yoruba comparative theologians, which downplayed the truth claims and the need for conversion. According to the statement of Schirrmacher, a German theologian and the secretary of the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), when the church champions the move to find common ground with Islam in order to see the reason for religious freedom, the focus is mission. He noted the evangelicals are working together with the Islamic body for the right to convert each other. Stressing that religious freedom is not all about agreeing with the other faith, but living peacefully together with their deep differences<sup>107</sup>.

Contrary to the opinion of the Yoruba comparative scholars, the opinion of the stakeholders at the summit on international religious freedom, shows emphatically that inter-religious conversion cannot be stopped or be eradicated for the sake of peace in contemporary society. Rather than advocating for religious cohesion or unity among religions that discourage or see no need for conversion, freedom of religion which also include freedom of conversion as noted by Andreas Feldtkeller and corroborated by the statements of the stakeholders at the freedom of religion summit 2021 will be more practicable in contemporary society. We are supposed to advocate for a situation where everyone makes his/her choice of religion without force or intimidation. Every religion should be able to express itself openly and constructively while giving each individual the liberty of choice. Life is more interesting and enjoyable when it includes and respects the many things in it and the liberty of individuals to be loyal to specific interests or convictions.

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<sup>107</sup> Casper, “Christian and Muslim Leaders agree on legitimacy of Evangelism”, 1.

#### **4.5 Conclusion**

To answer the research question: How does Christianity as a missionary religion that implies a call to conversion co-exists peacefully together with Islam in Yoruba land, in the light of the critical attitude of the comparative theologians to proselytization and conversion? I have examined the history, progression, and inter-relationship of the two major world religions (Christianity and Islam) in Yoruba land; and the critical theological disposition of the Yoruba comparative religion's theologians to conversion and proselytization. It was imperative to investigate the espoused theology of conversion in Yoruba land and its influence on inter-religious co-existence in the area. This was achieved by consulting and sharing the experiences of some converts. These experiences had further opened our eyes to the fact that mission and conversion are possible in an environment of tolerance, mutual understanding, respect for religious freedom, and constructive dialogue.

The contemporary understanding of the Muslim-Christian relationship in Yoruba land is a prototype of how global inter-religious relationships should be harnessed. Our humanity, neighborliness, and co-existence should never be traded on the grounds of fundamentalism. The freedom of everyone to choose religion and propagation of their faith should not be restricted or castigated. In our quest for continuing inter-religious co-existence in contemporary society; we have been able to conclude that, instead of harmonization of religions suggested by the Yoruba religious concept which condemns and restrict mission and conversion, we have adopted a more global idea of religious freedom, constructive dialogue and the possibility of inter-religious alliance which does not restrict mission and proselytization.

As much as I believe no religion is superior to the other, individuals should be free to follow their consciences and decide their choice of faith. Christ is the main focus of the mission. The gospel of Christ is not about religion but salvation. Christianity is not supposed to be presented as superior to other religions, but the crucified Christ who has atoned for the sins of the world. What is most important is the message of salvation in Christ. As it was noted by a few of the respondent for this study, it is not everyone that attends a church and called themselves Christians have a relationship with Christ or have the assurance of salvation. Not everyone practicing Christian religion emulates the life of Christ or obeys his teachings as recorded in the Holy Scriptures. Such people to me are not in any way better than the so-called unbelievers



or unchristian. Christianity is not supposed to be a mere religion, but an emulation of the lifestyle of Christ as established by the Scripture. Christianity without godly virtues is worse than heathenism.

Therefore, missionaries and evangelists should be strategic and open-minded in their quest for an approach to evangelism and mission. They should also avoid judgmental statements that promote monotony of religion, especially when dealing with other religions. Christ is the center of the gospel and the principal subject of mission, which can be shared outside Christianity. Christ was born and nurtured in Judaism. Islam has some level of Christology in the Quran and the Africa culture also has a way it can accommodate Christ. It is, therefore, possible to evangelize other religions by starting from the premises of what they already believe about Christ. Most of the tension and conflicts experience in most multi-religious communities could be avoided if the manner of communicating the messages was refined and considerate.

This researched work has brought out the need for further intervention by academics in providing practical theological solutions to the effects of religion and proselytization on human co-existence in our pluralistic world. I limit this research to the experiences of Christians who came from Muslim backgrounds within Yoruba society. There are further research areas in the experiences of Muslims who were formerly Christians which time and contingencies will not allow within the scope of this paper. Although this study did not dig deeper into the extent of conversion from Christianity to Islam, I do not write off the possibility of such experiences in Yoruba land and the other part of Nigeria especially in the predominantly Christian southeastern part of the country where Islam is thriving considerably in recent times. Further studies are therefore necessary in this aspect and also to create a more comprehensive theology of inter-religious co-existence and mission, to find out how to consolidate and further improve the peaceful inter-religious co-existence in Yoruba land and Nigeria as a whole, how this could be explored for social-political benefits of the nation and how it could serve as a paradigm for other pluralistic nations across the world.

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