Gender, Peace and Religious Coexistence: Insights from Nigeria

Sr. Kathleen McGarvey, OLA, Ph.D.

Good Shepherd Major Seminary Kaduna

Abstract

Although peace is a value that most major world religions uphold, throughout the ages people of all religions have carried out very inhuman and violent acts towards their fellow human beings. Religions have played and continue to play a central role in the understanding and establishment of peace in our societies, and yet religion is at the core of so much of the strife experienced in our world today. Religion, which is very closely intertwined with culture, is also at the core of much of the gender inequality and subordination experienced by women throughout the world. Because of gender inequalities and differences, women are often hindered in conflict management processes and are prevented from offering their particular skills and perspectives on both the conflict and on its resolution. The question of gender which is often times forgotten in the search for peace in a pluri-religious society cannot be ignored. This paper considers the relationship between the three complex issues of gender, religion and conflict/violence/peace and proffers some suggestions on how to shape the dialogue which in any pluri-religious society is necessary for peaceful coexistence.

Introduction

Peace, which I believe is an ideal dear to every human heart, has been described in many different ways. By and large it is 'that situation of justice and rightly ordered social relations that is marked by respect for the rights of others, that provides favourable conditions for integral human growth, and that allows citizens to live out their lives to the full in calm and joyful development' (Arinze, 2002, 1). This definition given by Cardinal Francis Arinze raises so many issues that it clearly points to the complexity of what is involved in Peace.

Peace is a value upheld by most major world religions. Yet throughout the ages people of all religions have carried out inhumane and violent acts towards their fellow human beings, including of their own faith community. While religions have played and continue to play a central role in the understanding and the establishment of peace in societies, simultaneously, as even a casual glance around the globe today would suggest, religions are at the core of so much of the strife being experienced.

Just as neither violence nor peace is the prerogative of any one religion, neither is any one of them the forte of any one gender although women and men might negotiate conflict and peace in different ways. Gender social analysts and feminist theologians maintain that religion, which is closely intertwined with culture, is also at the core of the gender inequality and female subordination experienced by women in so many societies throughout the world.

The words, Gender, Peace and Religion, therefore, are very much related. Each one of these terms hides a multitude of complex issues and experiences. To paraphrase Ursula King who wrote on the relationship between gender, religion and diversity, each of these terms is surrounded by a vast hinterland of debates, theories and positions which need to be explored through the multiple lenses of different disciplines and cultures (King, 2005, 1). Put these three terms together in a multi-religious and multi-ethnic society, such as Nigeria, where poverty is great and where the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) with regards to women's rights are severely lagging behind, and imagine the acrobatics involved!

This paper examines the complex and seldom considered relationship between these three issues - gender, religion and peace - to see how all three can be better integrated in the quest for peaceful pluri-religious coexistence. The issues are viewed under four broad but related thematic areas, namely Religion and Conflict, Religion and Gender, Religion and Peace, and lastly Gender and Conflict and its parallel Peace. In the light of these relationships some recommendations are made for the shape of the Dialogue which would best facilitate peaceful religious co-existence. Observations are based on concrete examples taken particularly, but not only, from Nigeria.

Religion and Conflict

Religion without doubt can be a contentious issue and is susceptible to being a latent source of conflict that can escalate into open conflict by seemingly insignificant events. For many people worldwide, and for some people more than for others, religion, as with ethnicity and race, serves as a central part of an individual's identity and as a way to distinguish oneself and one's community from the other. Any perceived threat to one's beliefs is a threat to one's identity. This is particularly so when the goals or gains which a group seeks are shown to be closely tied to the strict adherence to religious beliefs and when these beliefs are shown to be diametrically opposed to the beliefs of a threatening Other.

Religions teach a body of dogmas and articles of faith that believers are expected to accept unquestioningly as true. However Scriptures and dogmas are often vague and open to diverse interpretations. In circumstances of social, political or economic instability, it is only too easy to convince the general body of believers that the cause is the moderate attitude with which they interpret and practice their religion and that more extreme interpretations are necessary as a solution. Thus, religious revivalism becomes widespread. Religious revivalism can achieve positive results such as producing a sense of pride and purpose and community responsibility and can result in the provision of social and other welfare services which the government may be failing to do. However, it can also produce a strong sense of intolerance and discrimination of the Other if believers sense their religious identity is infringed upon or threatened in any way

(Brahm, 2005). The truth is, however, that religion serves as an identity factor. Conflicts in the name of religion are seldom if ever just that and in fact the actual role of religion is difficult if not impossible to ascertain.

Nigeria is an obvious case in point. In many ways Nigeria with its national population of approximately one hundred and fifty million people who belong to over four hundred different ethnic groups can serve as a model of religious co-existence (Paden, 2007). Nigeria is the only country where both Islam and Christianity are present as the two major religions, coexisting alongside a small minority who adhere to the African Traditional Religions, with neither religion predominating at national level. It is a country with great prospects, but unfortunately, it has not been able to achieve national cohesion and continues to struggle, fifty years after independence, with quite a number of internal weaknesses and divisions (Osaghae & Suberu, 2006). Prominent among these weaknesses is what often rears its head in the form of inter-religious violence. Since the Nigerian civil war (1967-70), nothing has claimed as many lives in Nigeria as the crisis surrounding the issues of relations between Christians and Muslims. Although in their daily lives, Muslims and Christians in Nigeria live together in peace most of the time, taken together with other forms of inter-communal violence in Nigeria, ethno-religious conflict, which can erupt at any given moment in any given place but most particularly in the Northern part of the country, has cost the country tens of thousands of innocent lives (Falola, 2005). Against this backdrop, it may be true to say that there is a high level of distrust among Muslims and Christians in Nigeria. Although it is tempting to use this religious divide, the truth is that things are not quite so straightforward. In their daily lives, most Nigerian Muslims and Christians live together in peace most of the time, many are friends, some are intermarried, most work, study and play together on a daily basis, sharing life as human beings in a multi-religious society must do.

The relationship between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria cannot be explained in just a few sentences. There are historical, political, economic, ethnic and many other factors that must be taken into consideration in any attempt to somehow understand why over the years there is a continuous high level of distrust between Muslims and Christians in the country which on too many occasions has expressed itself in open, destructive and fatal violent conflicts (Kukah, 1993). However, the fact that attempts at democratic rule, overshadowed by longer periods of military rule, have not resulted in a stable secure social and economic environment, has certainly added to the readiness with which people have believed promises that the answer to their social woes lay in a more faithful adherence to their religions. Thus, we find the introduction of religious sentiments at key moments such as the return to democratic rule in October1999 which

coincided, just three months later, with the extension of the shar'ia criminal code in twelve northern states.

The scope and status of Islamic law, the Shar'ia, in both the Nigerian Constitution and the Judiciary has been an ongoing problem even during colonial times and although since independence it has been addressed at every constitutional national debate it has remained very controversial. The decision, in the year 2000, by the Governor of the State of Zamfara, who was quickly followed by eleven other northern state governors, to adopt the extended jurisdiction of Shar'ia to include criminal law cases, brought the nation to a serious crisis. Although the Governor claimed that he was acting according to the Constitution, it was clear that he was playing politics more than practicing religion. He was expressing the dissatisfaction of the north with a president from the south, a Christian, and was rallying the support of the Muslim masses by playing on their religious sentiments.

As it happened, many Muslim groups, including women's groups, also hopped on the bandwagon and called the bluff of these politicians: if they were to insist on ruling by the shar'ia, they must ensure the social circumstances were put in place for shar'ia, that is social welfare, women's Islamic rights, social security and so on. Before long, the fervor with which Islamic law was adopted and implemented by self made hizbah teams and illiterate Islamic judges who seemed to focus almost exclusively on poor women and illiterate farmers who were sentenced to stoning to death for adultery or amputation for minor theft, soon began to lose energy. However, much damage was done and many lives lost in the fracas, caused by the whole sad event particularly through the anti and pro shar'ia demonstrations. The tensions generated by what became known as the shar'ia crisis of the year 2000 further widened the chasm in the relations between Christians and Muslims (Kirkwin, 2009).

The majority of Muslims who are poor and illiterate are easily convinced that the lack of freedom to practice their religion faithfully in Nigeria is the primary cause of their social problems. This lack of freedom is epitomized by constitutional involvement in shar'ia. Simultaneously, Christians and other non-Muslims easily see the cause of their woes as Muslim dominance and quest for power, which they also quickly believe is inherently natural to Islam.

Some few years ago, as a result of a BBC survey carried out in 2003, Nigerians were voted both the happiest and the most religious people on earth. Ironically, this apparent happiness and religiosity live side by side with corruption, violence and injustice. The social poverty which results to a great extent from the mismanagement of public funds and to a form of governance which leaves much to be desired, all contribute to a vulnerable society in which violence can only

too easily erupt along ethnic or religious lines which in Nigeria continue to serve as platforms of identity and security.

Global media today reinforces the view that religion is conflictual and destructive while very little attention is given to the peacemaking role which religions have always played. This excessive emphasis on the negative side of religion and the actions of religious extremists and of religious leaders generates interfaith fear and hostility and promotes secularism.

Religion and Gender

Over the last three to four decades a wealth of studies has been carried out, particularly by women but also by some men, on the whole area of religion and gender. The birth of a critical study of religion from a gender perspective, not only in Christianity but in all major world religions, can be traced to the rise of universal education which has greatly benefited women who until then were exempt from this field in most cultures. It can also be traced to the secular movement for women's rights and equality which is a phenomenon of the last two centuries but which has blossomed since the 1960s. As Ursula King has put it: 'gender studies in religion raise challenging questions about the gendered nature of religious phenomena, the relationship between power and knowledge, [and] the authority of religious texts and institutions' (2005, xiii). She provides four succinct and relevant observations about the relationship of religion and gender:

1) Without the incisive, critical application of the category of gender it is no longer possible to accurately describe, analyze or explain any religion.
2) Gender issues are ubiquitous in religion; they are also highly complex and multi-layered in being local, particular and universal at the same time.
3) Religion and gender are not simply two analogues or parallels existing independently of each other, but they are mutually embedded within each other.
4) Gender in religion is not a directly comparable analytical category to that of race or class, each of which derives from different origins and contexts, and functions rather differently in any given group (King, 2005, 8-9)

Certainly the questions posed by a gender sensitive historical-cultural critical analysis of religious texts and teachings pose many challenges to interpretations, doctrines, practices, religious and social norms within the diverse religions of the world. Indeed the need for such a gender-awareness in all areas, which King calls a gender-critical turn, including therefore in theological and religious studies, was alluded to by Pope John Paul II when he wrote in his Letter to Women of 1995 that "we are heirs to a history which has *conditioned* us to a remarkable extent. In every time and place, this conditioning has been an obstacle to the progress of women. Yes, it is time to *examine the past with courage,* to assign responsibility where it is due in a review of the long history of humanity" (n. 3).

Today women of all faiths enter into what can be called feminist religious discourse. Motivated by and rooted in their faith, but aware that their religion has been used to justify the oppression and exclusion of women, they seek to develop their religion's unifying and liberating potential, convinced of its relevance for human well-being, justice and transformed human relations. Although universal, feminist religious discourse is rooted in particular socio-cultural contexts and addresses those contexts (O'Neill, 2007, 17-95; McGarvey, 2009, 67-86). Not all women who bring a gender-critical study to their religions will consider themselves feminist theologians or even identify with the label feminism since many consider this to be a white western women's category of thought. Therefore they specify their project as Womanist or Mujerista or African/Asian/Latin-American or Islamist or Islamic, and so on. But, a common denominator is that they all seek to overcome those interlocking and varied relationships of dominations in their societies and cultures which cause male/female and other forms of inequalities. What is important to note is that women's perspectives, based on their own experience, of whether an interpretation of God's revelation is liberative or oppressive, is the criterion which orientates the method used by women as they approach their scriptures and traditions.

The driving force of women theologians in the diverse faiths is generally resistance to patriarchal domination as experienced by women today in their societies and religious communities. An observation often made by studies is that there is usually a great contrast between the classical teachings of religions about the equality of men and women and the actual lived experience of women. Although Paul may have said that there was 'neither male nor female for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Gal. 3:28) and although Muhammad is believed to have enhanced the status of women in Arabia, and so on, women's experience in their traditions, while positive in many respects, has been overshadowed by notions and practices of patriarchy, male domination, oppression, inferiority, ritual impurity, practical absence in the religious history, generalizing predetermined and restrictive gender definitions and female roles, and so on. Since throughout history in most traditions it has been men who have formulated and transmitted the religious texts, been their interpreters, created the religious and secular institutions in their societies, and controlled worship and other important religious rituals, women today add their voices and perspectives. Unfortunately, in many mainstream faculties and schools of theological and religious studies it is still not uncommon to find little or no inclusion on the curriculum of the enormous amount of work produced by women religious scholars today.

It must be noted that women are aware that they must work within certain parameters. They cannot out-rightly challenge religious teachings when these would seem to be deeply embedded

in the culture. One concrete example is that of Christian women in Nigeria. While Catholic Church teachings as well as that of other mainline Christian denominations have explicitly stated and promoted the equal dignity of man and woman and their shared responsibility for both family and society, most Christians continue to teach the traditional notion of male headship, taking a literal reading of biblical texts where this would seem to be authorized, for example Eph. 5: 22 – 25. This is of course very much in consonance with the patriarchal culture wherein authority figures, elders, heads of families and of communities are male. While women, both Christian and Muslim, challenge such an order of relationships and of leadership in the secular world of politics and professions, and speak out forcefully as members of NGOs and as activists for women's rights in the domestic and customary sphere, they do not challenge the patriarchal structures of their faith communities and they themselves will even speak about a woman's role to humbly obey her husband in all things. There would seem to be a contradiction in this but it is probably better explained by the obvious fact that women need the support of their religious leaders and therefore must subtly and diplomatically negotiate the limits within which they can challenge traditions and bring about change in their societies and cultures.

Muslim women in Nigeria, as in many other parts of the world, supported by some male as well as female Islamic scholars, today use Islamic arguments to show that many practices in Muslim society which discriminate against women and are oppressive reflect cultural malpractices or cultural prejudices rather than Islamic truths. Using such discourse, instead of relying on secular decrees or on UN Conventions, Muslim women know that there is greater possibility that their arguments will be acceptable at the local level and that their efforts will be successful.

An observation which needs to be remembered when discussing religion and gender in a context where religion is enmeshed in politics and is harkened to as a strong identity factor is the tendency to use 'woman' as symbol both of a group's religious identity and of a religion's supposed superiority or inferiority to another religion. The piety of a Muslim man is seen by the fact that his wife is wearing correct hijab. The vibrant presence of Christianity is made evident by the visibility of veiled Reverend Sisters. The picture of the silent Muslim woman, perpetually a victim, feeds the notion of Western or of Christian superiority. Meanwhile, the truest evidence of the superiority of Islam and of Christian immorality is the uncontrolled interaction of men and women in the public space and the immodest dress and supposedly promiscuous behavior of Christian women. Such generalized notions about woman are very often the justification people find for their prejudices about the other religious group. Throughout Northern Nigerian history, particularly among the Muslim leaders, the symbol and visible affirmation of a distinct, superior,

pious Islamic identity has been women – seclusion, hijab, segregated public space, refusal of suffrage, controlled sexual behaviour (McGarvey, 2009, 89-142; Abdullah, 2002, 151-191; Imam, 1991, 4-17).

Another important observation is the tendency of women, particularly in Africa, to be organized in women only groups. In Nigeria there are vibrant women's organizations in virtually all faith communities, such as the Women's Wing of the Christian Association of Nigeria (WOWICAN), Federation of Muslim Women's Associations of Nigeria (FOMWAN), Catholic Women's Organization (CWO), National Council of Women Religious (NCWR), Zumuntar Mata Katolika (ZMK - Catholic), Mothers' Union (MU – Anglican Communion), Women's Missionary Union (WMU – Baptist). These organizations are all organized at parish/local, diocesan/state, and national levels. Their membership in these organizations plays a strikingly important and influential role in women's lives. Christian women consider membership in a faith-based group as almost mandatory. The Federation of Muslim Women's Associations of Nigeria (FOMWAN) is gradually making membership of a religious women's association common place for Muslim women also.

Religion and Peace

Just as religions are not inherently divisive but are susceptible to being a source of latent conflict, so too religions can be a very effective power for promoting and enabling adaption to social change and for bringing about those social conditions of justice, equity and active concern for the common good which are necessary for sustainable peace in any society. Religions offer an ethical vision that can motivate believers to constructive action for peace and positive change. Religions are organized at national and international levels and provide already existing and well established channels for communication and organization of peace efforts. In social and political situations where the government appears to have failed in its commitment to the people, religious organizations are often the only institutions with some degree of credibility, trust and moral authority (Sampson, 1997, 273-316). The challenge of dealing with conflict in non-violent ways finds much wisdom and insights from diverse teachings of most of the world's major religions just as religions have served to motivate people and strengthen them in a spirituality which allows them to forgive and to be reconciled with one another (Smith-Christopher, 1998; Soni, 2000).

Religious leaders in Nigeria are often called upon by the Government and other stakeholders to instruct their adherents on the positive elements of their faiths, to refrain from misleading their followers by indoctrination, to control their followers, and to take precautions so as to avoid the eruption of violence by preaching peace and openness. Religious bureaus and advisory

initiatives, formed of religious leaders, have been set up by Federal and State governments primarily as platforms for peace.

The top-level official structure of Muslim-Christian dialogue in Nigeria is the Nigerian Interreligious Council (NIREC). This was established by the leadership of the two faiths, with the strong support of the government, in Sept. 1999 as the country prepared to return to civilian rule. It is a fifty-member council, consisting of twenty-five top leaders from both faith communities. NIREC primarily exists to address the incidents of religious conflicts in the country. Undoubtedly its work has borne fruit even though this is not always evident, since we see only the conflicts that explode, not those that may have been averted or resolved through the intervention of this Council. Since 2007, attempts are being made to form NIREC in every state so that religious leaders at the grassroots will work together to promote a more positive impact of religion in public life. Although women of both faiths have a token representation in NIREC and it is to be hoped that serious consideration will soon be given to the oft repeated call by women to have a greater participation there, attempts have been ongoing since 2008 to establish a Nigerian Women of Faith Network.

In recognition of the fact that religions are more effective at grassroots level than are NGOs, in Kaduna we have started a project where the leaders of Muslim and Christian women's groups come together to work on conflict resolution and peace-building and also on the very concrete and serious problems that women of both faiths face daily: many girls and women in Northern Nigeria are not sent to school, are married early, have little access to health care, have little or no voice in their homes or in the wider community, and so on. We have formed the Interfaith Council of Muslim and Christian Women's Groups of Kaduna to tackle these problems together as women of faith. So far, women leaders have shown great enthusiasm in the project and it is to be hoped that as the Interfaith Council is consolidated it will serve to facilitate bringing women's faith groups together in a very concrete and effective way. In Northern Nigeria very little is allowed unless it is given a religious framework, especially for many of the Muslim population; hence, it is important that the problems women face are confronted from within their faith community and in their own religious terms. However any problem shared is a problem halved. Hence in discussing common concerns, women motivate and inspire one another both to recognize and to challenge injustice. The Women's Interfaith Council also gives women a louder and hence more influential voice. There is reason to hope that this project will bear positive fruit in strengthening the foundations for peaceful coexistence and in improving the lives of a great many poor and vulnerable women.

Gender and Conflict/Peace

Studies carried out have discovered that women experience war and violent conflicts in ways that often differ from men, and equally that there are particular connections between gender and peace activism (Lorentzen & Turpin, 1998; Turshen & Twagiramariya, 1998). With reference to violence, while much literature, such as a volume of poetry by Robert Graves entitled '*Man Does, Woman Is*' (1964), has given the impression that women are victims while men are combatants, the sad truth is that women also fight on the frontline, provide key positions within war efforts, suffer countless casualties, loss and pain, and in summary, are deeply implicated, as are men, in violent clashes. As civilians, women are more likely to be killed, to become war refugees and to suffer abuse and loss than are men.

Many studies on the uniqueness of men and women's responses to conflict focus on women's generally less public position in society and hence their more informal, invisible and silent networks and daily actions. Noticeable are the two kinds of power, institutional power and relational power, seen in the contrast of public (men's) and private (women's) conflict strategies (Augsburger, 1992, 169-171). Analysts notice a contrast between a public orientation among men, tending towards extra-domestic affairs and matters of political and military importance, and a domestic orientation of women, tending towards family, community and relational concerns. This is not due to any natural tendency in the male or female but rather would seem to result from the established gender roles of many cultures and societies where women's influence is somewhat relegated to the domestic or private sphere while that of men is predominant in the public sphere and is often legitimated to limit and channel, if not also suppress and deny, women's power. This legitimization of male dominance is often presented as being for the good of women, men having been divinely ordained to lead and to care for the supposed weaker and more vulnerable sex. Such socialization results in women themselves preferring to nominate men as peace negotiators and mediators for their community, since they have been taught to believe that men are naturally more knowledgeable, skilled, articulate and even rational.

Women's more invisible and private networks of conversations and personal relations which are often used to resolve conflicts might in fact be where the crucial consensus and resolutions between conflicting parties are reached rather than the public mediation among men wherein this resolution is formalized. Examples of such cases are given in Augsburger (1992) and by others who have analyzed or been involved in conflict and peace efforts worldwide (Lorentzen & Turpin, 1998, 289-367). Examples of women's methods include that of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, the Women in Black in Israel, the Israeli and Palestinian Women's network for Peace, and so on. In Nigeria, from time to time we have heard of women baring their breasts

as a way of resolving conflict or refusing to sleep with their husbands unless such and such a dispute were clarified. More recently we had hundreds of Muslim and Christian women going together, dressed in mourning cloth, through the streets of Abuja to demonstrate their dissatisfaction with the Jos conflict.

Certainly, the maternal nature of women has been emphasized by many who speak of women's important role in peace building, insisting that women's greater affiliation with life and its value somehow naturally orientates them to resolve conflict in a peaceful way. Others are critical of this view, and emphasize that women are not more naturally endowed to peace and reconciliation but are forced into doing so as a matter of justice since it is women who suffer most when there is violence (York, 1998, 19-25).

From my own experience of working with women in Nigeria, I have found that they are more ready to form friendships across the religious and ethnic divide and are more concerned about the concrete necessities of everyday existence than about political parties and affiliations. Thus, they can quite easily find themselves in solidarity with their sisters of other religions, forming what one American theologian has termed hybrid religious identities (Fletcher, 2005) wherein each one remains a member of her religious tradition while recognizing herself simultaneously as a 'feminist', or in words more acceptable in Nigeria, a woman committed to the well being of her fellow women.

Women's readiness to come together to share on their common concerns, be it in Nigeria or globally in countless women's rights forums, is also an indication of their response today to the conflict they feel with the issue of male dominance and abuses of the prerogatives which their religious and cultural communities give them. The issue of liberation from the structures which cause conflict is seen here. Women today are ever more aware of and ready to voice their objection to the cultural domination permitted men and the discrimination which favors men. Women of all religions and cultures are increasingly making men aware of their responsibility for having accepted and abused the advantageous cultural privileges given them and of actively imposing injustice, violence and exploitation, or of upholding and even profiting from social and religious structures which cause gender injustice and marginalization. Many women are today not willing to be submissive or intimidated or tolerant of sexual and other forms of violence and they are more ready to speak out about these and reject them. Women's groups and individuals, faith based as well as secular, are calling out loudly for equal opportunities for men and women in all spheres of life, political, economic, athletic, educational, and so on, and with somewhat greater timidity they are also calling for equal opportunities in the ecclesiastic and religious communities. Women in Nigeria and in so many societies around the world, again of all religions and cultures,

are effectively and determinedly committed to educating women about their rights and empowering them to speak out against them.

From his study of patterns of handling conflict, Augsburger (1992), found that women tend to be gentler, more human and more relational; they prefer non-violent social change to armed resistance and revolution; they show a positive orientation toward negotiation, verbal bargaining and nonviolent demonstration rather than power or coercion; they make stronger use of communication networks [and gossip] to effect nonviolent social change rather than resort as readily to coercion and violence. Augsburger concludes:

> In the midst of conflict, women's core identities are more secure, less threatened, than are those of men. Males distance themselves via warrior images, macho styles, power postures, and rule limitations so conflict and control press them into more exaggerated either-or, win-lose oppositional stances. Women are more grounded in their female identity, more connected by biology and reality. They do not play out cultural acts with dreams of status and power, achievement and validation, to the same extent males are programmed to do, so they are less fragile, less delicate in ego, and closer to actual interpersonal realities (1992, 186).

Not everyone would agree with such generalizations about men and women, but there may indeed be quite a bit of truth in what he says, thus reminding us that the exclusion of any one gender from the mediation procedures is not only a matter of injustice. It is also a great impoverishment which we would do well to be aware of and to avoid as we move forward on the path of mutual understanding and peaceful co-existence.

Shape of the Dialogue towards Peaceful Religious Coexistence

1) Importance of working with faith-based groups at interfaith level

While the efforts of government bodies and NGOs which focus on conflict resolution and peace building certainly bear positive fruit, their effect cannot be compared to that of religious organizations. This is largely because NGOs are usually short-term and have not been a central or influential part of people's lives as have faith-organizations. NGOs are often externally funded and hence are viewed with some suspicion. NGO personnel although they may be very committed to the aim of the organization will not be shown the same respect and obedience as a religious leader. These are some of the reasons, and no doubt many others can be thought of, that religious communities as a whole, and faith-based organizations in particular, have an irreplaceable role to play in the area of peace. Bringing these organizations together to work at interfaith level is, therefore, also irreplaceable.

2) Importance of including women and gender issues in mainstream dialogue

It is largely recognized that male religious leaders can no longer legitimately voice the concerns of women, nor speak on their behalf as though women could not speak for themselves.

The well-known phrase, 'the people of today listen more to the witnesses than to the masters and if they listen to the masters it is because they are witnesses' (Evangelii Nuntiandi 41; Redemptoris Missio 42) highlights the importance of witness as a primary path through which we proclaim our truths. The lack of women representatives of religious communities at mainstream interreligious encounters speaks more to the world of the gender awareness of that religious tradition than any amount of words will do. I believe this is an important point that needs to be taken into consideration when encounters of religious leaders are organized. Since women are, as yet, rarely leaders of faith communities, leaders of women's faith-based groups should also be invited to participate.

Not only are women themselves visibly absent at interreligious encounters of religious leaders, but gender issues have been given little serious treatment in mainstream or even academic interreligious discussions (WCC, 2005). Most focus has been on the contribution of religious thought to the suppression or oppression of the Other, defining that otherness in terms of religious adherence; little attention has been given to how within religious thought woman has also been viewed as Other (King, 1998, 40-55). Addressing this question should not be a rejection of the religion or even of its symbols and rituals but rather a constructive criticism that looks at what can be done today about those aspects that have affected women or any other group in a negative way.

3) Importance of listening to the poor in our society

As religious leaders and representatives of religious bodies in society we have a responsibility to listen not only to women but to the voice of any poor and marginalized in our society. This permits us to examine in sincerity how the manner in which our religion is interpreted or practiced allows or even leads to exclusion and injustice in society. Such humble and sincere dialogue in a spirit of truth will save us from the danger of religious competitiveness and claims of superiority or otherwise. It will allow our religions to be renewed and transformed and be a truly positive factor in our pluri-religious society. Such an examination at interfaith level will require even more humility and will allow us to confront injustices and exclusions in society from within the riches of our respective faiths wherein we will find many shared values for a just society.

4) Forming dialogues of hybrid identities on common concerns/professions

In a pluri-religious society, the danger is to associate only with our religious identity which as we have seen, given its nature of being very close to the heart, can be divisive. However, religion

is only one aspect of any person's identity; people may find it easier and even more fruitful to meet across other factors of their identity: their common concerns as for example women or youth, their professions as lawyers or human rights activists, and so on. Thus, people of different faiths cross the religious divide to build friendships and also commitments to building together a just and peaceful pluri-religious society.

5) Importance of dialogue not just of leaders but of every level of society

Interreligious dialogue is often conceived of as round-table discussions of religious leaders. Dialogue is certainly not just about talking together; it includes every part of human existence: living, acting, thinking and reflecting together. It is important that spaces be provided to allow not only leaders but all sectors of society to experience dialogue. Thus bridges will be built at every level which will help people meet as human beings and will help weaken those abounding prejudices and stereotypes of a generalised, strange, unknown religious Other.

Conclusion

As noted in the introduction, the terms gender, religion and peace are each complex in their own right just as is the challenging imperative of religious coexistence. These complexities have been looked at in this paper and there is no need to repeat them here. The simple fact is that in a society where two or more religious communities struggle to coexist, dialogue on the real needs of all parties concerned is the only viable option; all parties concerned must be involved in this dialogue so that the voice of all is heard and the needs of all are met. Women and women's issues cannot be considered to be parallel to any of these realities, either to the difficulties of coexistence or to the dialogical process that is necessary to establish together a society of social justice, equity and peace. Notwithstanding the simplicity and seemingly obvious logic of this fact, a long road lies ahead before it will become the universal norm. However, it is to be hoped that the recommendations made above, if put into practice, might serve to put us on the right path.

References

Abdullah, H. J. (2002). Religious Revivalism, Human Rights Activism and the Struggle for Women's Rights in Nigeria. In A. A. An-Na'im (Ed.), *Cultural transformation and human rights in Africa* (pp. 151 – 191). Zed Books Ltd.

Arinze, F. (2002). *Religions for peace: A call for solidarity to the religions of the world.* London: Darton-Longman-Todd.

Augsburger, David W. (1992). Conflict: Gender differences and conflict styles. In *Conflict mediation across cultures: Pathways and patterns* (pp. 169 – 171). Louisville/London: Westminster John Knox Press.

Brahm, E. (2005). Religion and conflict. In Guy Burgess and Heidi Burgess (Eds.), *Beyond intractability*. Boulder: Conflict Research Consortium. University of Colorado.

Falola, T. (1998). *Violence in Nigeria: The crisis of religious politics and secular ideologies*. University of Rochester Press.

_____. (2005, May 22). Nigeria: Violence fuelled by impunity. *Human Rights Watch Report*, London.

Fletcher, J. H. (2005). *Monopoly on salvation? A feminist approach to religious pluralism*. New York: Continuum.

Graves, R. (1964). *Man does, Woman is*. London: Cassell.

Imam, A. (1991, Nov./Dec.). The development of women's seclusion in Hausaland, Northern Nigeria. In *WLUML* Dossier, (9/10), 4 – 17.

King, U. (1998). Feminism: The missing dimension in the dialogue of religions. In J. D'Arcy May (Ed.), *Pluralism and the religions: The theological and political dimensions* (pp.40 – 55). London: Cassell.

_____. (2005). *Gender, religion and diversity: Cross-cultural perspectives*. London & New York: Continuum.

Kirkwin, M. (2009, Feb.). *Popular perceptions of sharia law in Nigeria*. Afro barometer: Briefing paper (58).

Kukah, M. H. (1993). *Religion, politics and power in Northern Nigeria*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books.

Lorentzen, L. A., & Turpin, J. (Ed.). (1998). *The women and war reader*. New York & London: New York University Press.

McGarvey, K. (2009). *Muslim and Christian women in dialogue: The case of Northern Nigeria*. Oxford/New York: Peter Lang.

O'Neill, M. (2007). *Mending a torn world: Women in interreligious dialogue*. New York: Orbis Books.

Osaghae, E. & Suberu, R. (2006, Jan. 6). *History of identity, violence and stability in Nigeria*. Oxford: Centre for Research on Inequality, Human Security and Ethnicity, CRISE, Queen Elizabeth House.

Paden, J. (2007). *Faith and politics in Nigeria: Nigeria as a pivotal state in the Muslim world*. Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace Press.

Sampson, C. (1997). Religion and peacebuilding. In I. W. Zartman & J. L. Rasmussen (Eds.), *Peacemaking in international conflict: Methods and techniques* (pp. 273-316). Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1997,.

Smith-Christopher, D. L. (Ed.). (1998). *Subverting hatred: The challenge of non-violence in religious traditions*, Cambridge, MA: Boston Research Centre for the 21ˢᵗ century.

Soni, V. (2000). Watching, dreaming, waiting: Non-violence, social change and the re-imagining of religion. In *Online Journal of Peace and Conflict Resolution*. Retrieved Oct. 20, 2009, from Web site: http://www.trinstitute.org/ojpcr/6_lsoni.pdf.

Turshen, M. & Twagiramariya, C. (Ed.). (1998). *What women do in wartime: Gender and conflict in Africa*, London & New York: Zed Books Ltd.

World Council of Churches (WCC). (2005, June 7-9). Critical moment in interreligious dialogue. Retrieved July 10, 2005, from World Council of Churches Website: http://www.wcc-coe.org.

York, J. (1998). The truth about women and peace. In L. A. Lorentzen & J. Turpin, (Ed.). *The women and war reader* (pp. 19 – 25). New York & London: New York University Press.