TOPIC:

INTER-RELIGIOUS RELATIONS AMONG THE IGALA PEOPLE OF NIGERIA

By

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Statement of Independent Work

I, Charles AJOGI, hereby declare and assure that this thesis is my original work, that I did not use any other sources or tools other than the ones indicated, and that I marked those parts of the text derived from the literal context from other works by making them known as such by indicating their sources.

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# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements ......................................................................................... 2

Statement of Independent Work ........................................................................ 3

1. **Chapter One: General Introduction** .......................................................... 6
   
   1.1 Background of the Study ..................................................................... 6
   
   1.2 Statement of the Problem .................................................................... 7
   
   1.3 Purpose of Study ............................................................................... 8
   
   1.4 Scope of the Study ........................................................................... 9
   
   1.5 Significant Contribution .................................................................... 9
   
   1.6 Methodology .................................................................................... 10
   
   1.7 Division of Work .............................................................................. 10

2. **Chapter Two: An Overview of Inter-faith Relations in Nigeria** ............... 12
   
   2.1 Inter-Religious Relations in Nigeria .................................................... 12
   
   2.2 Religious Tolerance and Peaceful Co-existence Among Nigerians ............ 15
   
   2.3 Factors that Contribute to Religious Violence in Nigeria ....................... 18

3. **Chapter Three: Inter-Religious Relations Among the Igala People** ......... 30
   
   3.1 Igala Life-enhancing Cultural Values .................................................. 32
   
   3.1.1 Igala Worldview ......................................................................... 32
   
   3.1.2 The Igala Identity ....................................................................... 33
   
   3.1.3 Respect for Culture and Human Life ............................................ 34
   
   3.1.4 Family System .......................................................................... 35
   
   3.1.5 Affinal Relationships .................................................................. 37
   
   3.1.6 Community Life ........................................................................ 37
   
   3.1.7 Observations from Igala Cultural Values ..................................... 39
   
   3.2 Efforts Geared Towards Sustaining Peaceful Co-existence in Igalaland ...... 42
3.2.1 Summary.......................................................................................................................44

4. Chapter Four: Lessons From Igala Cultural Values and Further Reflections for Peaceful Co-existence..............................................................................................................46
4.1 Evaluation in View of Lessons..........................................................................................46
4.2 Recommendations for Other Regions...............................................................................55

5. Chapter Five: Summary and Conclusion..................................................................................58
5.1 Summary..............................................................................................................................58
5.2 Conclusion............................................................................................................................59

Bibliography ......................................................................................................................................63
CHAPTER ONE: General Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study:
Nigeria is a country where peace and unity are seen as lofty goals to be pursued and embraced. This is even inscribed in the National Anthem, where the desire for peace and unity remains a daily prayer. The most populous country in Africa, Nigeria is regarded as one of the most religious countries in the world, going by the number of houses of worship as well as the number of adherents of the various religions known and practiced in the country. There is first of all African Traditional Religion, which is an indigenous religion; there are also foreign religions with few adherents and identified with specific nations, such as Buddhism (India), Hinduism (India), Shintoism (Japan), Judaism (Jewish). But the presence of Christianity and Islam (regarded as the largest major world religions) is overwhelming and cuts across ethnic and regional lines. Some statistics give large percentages to Christianity and Islam, with a very minimal or no consideration for African Traditional Religion. Reliance on such statistics could be deceptive. It is true that many people publicly profess Christianity or Islam. But this may be at the surface; a curious look at the underbelly reveals that African Traditional Religion lies at the heart of most religious observances for many Christians and Muslims. In fact, “for many people, combining traditional religion with either Christianity or Islam is also a way of life.”\(^1\) It is during real life crisis and difficult situations that the true religious identity is revealed. It fits well to say that Nigeria is a land “where there is a real battle raging between Islam and Christianity to win the hearts of the ‘untouched’, but where Indigenous Religions remain the foundation of most people’s everyday lives”\(^2\). So, I consider African Traditional Religion as one of the major religions in Nigeria today. Former president Obasanjo’s response to a question about the breakdown of the country’s population with regard to religious affiliations might appear funny, but it addresses a fact: 50% is Muslim, 50% is Christian, and 100% are traditional African worshipers. This shows how far hard statistics might differ from reality.

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The relations between Christians and Muslims have gone through different phases, sometimes from peaceful co-existence to bitter rivalry and vice versa. Some of these phases of relationship are characterized by mutual respect, mutual assistance, confrontations, sincere dialogue, but also violent clashes. Akintunde Akinade (2014:6) captures it well when he says that, 

Throughout the world, the relations between Christianity and Islam have gone through many incarnations, which have been marked by dialogue, polemics, cordial disputation, vitriolic confrontations, and, at times, war. Christian-Muslim encounters, in their various forms, represent an important global reality that affects people in different parts of the world”.

3. Whichever way one looks at it, violence or conflict goes against “the true nature of religion. It is the antithesis of religion and contributes to its destruction”. It is against this background that this thesis comes as a denouncement of the aberrations perpetuated in the name of religion, and also a call for mutual respect, peaceful co-existence and social cohesion.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

At a time when people of different races, tribes and cultures are being drawn together to celebrate the humanity we all share, some regions in Nigeria are being polarised by religious sentiments. This has led often to conflicts (usually termed ‘religious violence’), which have tainted the image of Nigeria as an infamous example of religious intolerance. This has in turn led to an exaggerated assumption that Nigeria is a land flowing with human blood on account of religious violence. And unverified reports might make one to believe that no part of the country is spared of this menace. To some extent, religion has been used as a major tool for violence in some regions of the country. These conflicts have led to destruction of lives and properties on a large scale, leading to mutual mistrust and suspicion of the religious other. This situation calls for serious measures to help prevent further escalation of violence. As Akintunde succinctly captures it, “the gravity of religiously fueled conflict and violence has exposed our fragility and a distressed world that is crying out for new and creative models that will foster peaceful


interpersonal and interreligious relations. The search for an enduring prescription for harmony demands resources and insights from various worldviews, traditions, and faiths”

1.3 Purpose of Study

Religious violence often makes bold headlines in the newspapers, but the fact is that there are millions of Nigerians living in peace. It is true that as a nation, whatever affects one affects all; when a region is troubled, all other regions share in the pain. As it is popularly expressed, “when one finger is stained with oil, the other four fingers are affected”. There are sincere efforts made by individuals and groups to ensure peace and mutual co-existence in the country. Among the many regions and people who make efforts to live in peace despite their religious differences are the Igala people, a minor ethnic group in Nigeria. The three major religions practiced in Igalaland are Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion. Despite the differences in religious affiliations, there is no violence in the name of religion. The Igala people undoubtedly stand out as a noble example of peaceful co-existence. The main questions this paper seeks to address are: i) What makes Igala people live peacefully despite their religious differences?; and ii) what can other regions learn from the Igala people?

My assumption is that it is possible to live in peace irrespective of our differences. I wish, therefore, to use the Igala people as an example of mutual co-existence, irrespective of their religious differences. Not that Igalaland is a perfect society by any standard, and Igala people are not saints. All the regular crimes that disturb other regions of the country are present in their own measures. But when it comes to inter-faith relations, Igalaland stands as an example of a society where people do not allow themselves to be blinded and driven crazy by religious affiliations. Their sense of identity and solidarity could serve as an example for others in this regard. It is becoming increasingly necessary to pay attention to traditional values that enhance mutual co-existence. And this paper looks at some traditional Igala/African values that could help uphold peaceful living amidst religious plurality. This is because diversity in religious belief and practice could be a catalyst for growth and cooperation rather being used as instrument of violence.

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5 Akintunde, ix
Of great importance also is the necessity, on the part of the Igala people, to uphold the values that have helped them to live in peace with people of other religious traditions. Peace is everyone’s business, and peace among religions is essential for peace among nations. Thus, the two-fold purpose of this work is to encourage the Igala people to guard what they have and also to point them out as an example to other regions that are afflicted by religious violence. The goal is to advocate a move from competition to co-operation and from persecution to tolerance.

1.4 Scope of the Study
This paper will focus mainly on inter-religious relations among the Igala people of Nigeria, with particular reference to their cultural values and beliefs which enhance mutual co-existence despite religious differences. However, since Igala people do not live in isolation, reference will also be made in this work to other ethnic groups as well. For a better appreciation of peaceful co-existence, a section of the work gives attention to the religious atmosphere in Nigeria, to see some efforts that have been made for peaceful co-existence as well as the negative impact of religious violence.

1.5 Significant Contribution
Religion ought to have within it the mission of breaking down walls of hostility. This is because “religions do not merely exist, or simply survive...in the present context of religious plurality, the important role played by religious traditions cannot be overlooked”6. Part of the role of religion is its ability to dissolve every form of alienation and unite people. But there is dilemma in mutual co-existence between Christians and Muslims in some regions of Nigeria. Rather than fulfilling its role as a resource for peace, religion now bears the infamous title as one of the leading causes of violent conflicts in Nigeria. In the face of this ill, the attitude of acceptance and tolerance is needed in order to foster peace and growth. A lot of scholarly works have been done in this regard on the need for inter-religious dialogue and respect for the religious other. As human beings living in the same society, groups can also learn from groups and individuals can learn from individuals. As a nation, the troubled regions can learn (and of course they have a lot

to learn) from those regions that are handling their religious differences well. This is where the relevance of this study lies. It comes as an additional voice that calls for peaceful co-existence. But in a unique way, it invites other regions in Nigeria to learn and benefit from the *spiritual* gift of the Igala people. It is an invitation for a deeper appreciation of peace-enhancing cultural elements.

1.6 Methodology

To accomplish my research objective, this thesis will employ a qualitative research method. This is done with the purpose of gaining a better understanding of the religious situation in Nigeria, to investigate more into the *why* of religious violence, as well as *what* constitutes the uniqueness of the Igala People that help them to live peacefully irrespective of their religious differences. The work will be based majorly on library research, and part of the input will come from my lived experience both as an Igala and as a missionary who had done some pastoral work in Idah Diocese (the home of the Igala people).

1.7 Division of Work

To achieve this task, the thesis is divided into five chapters. The first chapter serves as the general introduction to the whole work. For a better understanding of the conflicts in some regions of Nigeria, Chapter Two will discuss inter-faith relations in Nigeria in a bid to explore the relationship between Christianity and Islam with emphasis on the factors that contribute to religious violence, as well as some socio-economic challenges this has brought. This exposition aims at discussing what people suffer when religion betrays its mission. Part of the mission of religion is to respect the religious other. This is because, no matter how devoted one might be to his/her own religious tradition, it is difficult (even impossible) today to ignore the existence of other faiths. The chapter explores the knotted contours of religious differences that give birth to religious violence. This will be based mainly on the review of relevant literature.

The third chapter focuses on inter-religious relations among the Igala people of Nigeria. As will be shown throughout this work, Igala is a generic term used to refer to an ethnic group as well as the language spoken by this same people, found in Kogi State, a middle-belt region of Nigeria. Since religion is only an aspect of the entire Igala life, other aspects of Igala traditional
worldview will be discussed. This will take into consideration their cultural values that enhance respect for human life and communal peace and growth. Eboh (2004:219) favours the same thrust when he says that, “the way to social harmony and peaceful co-existence lies in going back to our African past and emulating the rich treasures and precious strands of our cultural heritage”7. The traditional values that will be discussed in this chapter are by no means peculiar to the Igala people; many other tribes and ethnic groups (both within and outside Nigeria) share these values. Their ability to uphold these cultural heritage in the face of modernization, coupled with the overwhelming presence of Christianity and Islam makes a difference. The fruits of my exposition on Igala cultural values will bear out on three levels using the method of the Pastoral Cycle of Observation, Evaluation, and Recommendation.8 While the observation forms part of Chapter Three, the evaluation and recommendations for other regions will form the bulk of Chapter Four. In drawing out the lessons, the cultural values will be interpreted in light of the Gospel values to see to what extent they further or hinder human growth as people created in the image and likeness of God. This theological reflection is necessary because cultural values (as human inventions) might also carry with them some imperfections. According to Frans Wijsen, “a theory of interreligious relations from an African perspective should be based on values from the African cultural heritage, but not naively so”9 (my italics). This statement will serve as a guiding principle in the evaluation which forms part of this chapter. It helps to sieve Igala cultural values in the light of Christian faith and other human values to see what could be fortified or modified. The final chapter (Chapter Five) will be the summary and conclusion of the work.

CHAPTER TWO: An Overview of Inter-faith Relations in Nigeria

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8 Wijsen, *ibid*, pp. 54-55 writes about “three mediations”: Socio-analytical, hermeneutic and practical.
9 *Ibid*, 243
2.1 Inter-religious Relations in Nigeria

Nigeria is a heterogeneous society, both in its ethnic composition and in religious affiliation. A famous line from J. S Mbiti (1969:1) holds that “Africans are notoriously religious.”\(^{10}\) By this Mbiti means that religion permeates every fabric of the African life. This assertion holds well for Nigerians. Religion defines people’s worldview, and in most cases outshines ethnic sentiments. Religion furnishes most of the categories through which people are classified. And it stands as a central factor in much of the country’s debates and policies today. According to Yahaya Hashim, et al (2017:217),

Whereas, in the past, religion’s social impact was filtered through an ethnic prism, today’s Nigeria is seeing more instances of the reverse happening, with ethnic groups being subsumed under a larger religious political identity of a Muslim North or a Christian South, or in other instances, of religion standing relatively alone as the driver of conflicts. By no means has ethnicity lost its prime position in the nation’s politics overall, but religion is clearly now a growing divide over which the unity of the nation is increasingly stretched.\(^{11}\)

Any rigid division or classification of regions based on religion, however, could be deceptive. Due to migration, trade, works and other factors, there is a spread of both Christianity and Islam in every region of the country today. Onaiyekan (2013:88) summarises this perspective, holding that, “those who speak of the ‘Muslim North’ and the ‘Christian South’ often do not appreciate that the reality on the ground is much more complex than that. We do know that there is appreciable presence of Muslims in the South and of Christians in the North. We all have to admit that we are neighbours with one another and that diversity of faith is a reality wherever we are”.\(^{12}\)

Due to the leading roles of Christianity and Islam in public domain, it is easy to think of relegating African Traditional Religion (ATR) to the background or even neglecting it altogether. But any relevant discourse on religion in Nigeria must acknowledge the strong presence of African Traditional Religion. Any attempt to focus on Christianity and Islam, to the exclusion of ATR, will only amount to giving a half picture of reality. This is because, as Frans Wijsen (2007:60) captures it, “indigenous religiosity persists beneath the surface of Islam and Christianity, on an individual or institutional level, in folk religiosity and African Instituted Churches”\(^{13}\). The presence of Christianity and Islam is overwhelming, but “in spite of the effort made by both Islam and Christianity, from the very beginning until now to exterminate ATR, the religion tends to survive, suffering both losses and gains like its counterparts”\(^{14}\).

It is true that “Nigerians widely hold to their traditional African religious beliefs in addition to subscribing to various branches of Islam and Christianity.”\(^{15}\) This is perhaps due to the manner of conversion from African Traditional Religion to either Christianity or Islam. Many Africans were forced in the past (not really converted) to adopt Christianity or Islam, seen as major world religions, thereby abandoning the faith of their ancestors. But there is sometimes disillusionment or a sense of frustration when faced with crisis. As Mbiti (1989:3) opines,

In these circumstances, Christianity and Islam do not seem to remove the sense of frustration and uprootedness. It is not enough to learn and embrace a faith which is active once a week, either on Sunday or Friday, while the rest of the week is virtually empty. It is not enough to embrace a faith which is confined to a Church building or a Mosque, which is locked up six days and opened only once or twice a week. Unless Christianity and Islam fully occupy the whole person as much as, if not more than, traditional religions do, most converts to these faiths, will continue to revert to their old beliefs and practices for perhaps six days a week, and certainly in times of emergency and crisis\(^{16}\).

\(^{13}\) Frans Wijsen, *Ibid*, p. 60


\(^{16}\) John S. Mbìti, *Ibid*, p. 3
African Traditional Religion is “said to be a very resilient religion that continues to constitute various forms of attraction to many Africans, including many Christians and Muslims”.\(^\text{17}\) This religion (ATR) is so tied to people’s culture and worldview that any abrupt separation seems meaningless. Or, as Mercy Oduyoye (1995:12) postulates: “Culture and religion are so significant within African life that neither Muslim nor Christian in Africa can be totally free of the values that emanate from the traditional African religions”.\(^\text{18}\)

There is also that longing for the cultural values found in the indigenous religions that appeal to people’s conscience even when they embrace Christianity or Islam. This longing for the richness embedded in African culture was part of the factors that gave birth to African Independent Churches. Aloysius Lugira (2009:13) favours the same thrust when he says that, “for many people, combining traditional religion with either Christianity or Islam is also a way of life. In particular, what is known variously as indigenous Christianity or Independent Churches have arisen throughout sub-Saharan Africa and probably represent the largest current manifestation of traditional African religion, albeit in a pluralistic context”.\(^\text{19}\). Part of the mission of these African Independent Churches is to make the Christian message more relevant to African culture (and also as a reaction to the disdain by early missionaries towards ATR). Frans Wijsen (2017:61) reasons along this line when he says that, “members of African Instituted Churches always felt that mission churches did not take their African Indigenous Religions into account. Thus they developed forms of Christian worship and church structures in continuity with African religiosity”.\(^\text{20}\).

The relationship between African Traditional Religion and African Independent Churches could be seen in light of the relationship and connection between the Old Testament and the New Testament. There is a connecting-link between both as being mutually engaged. Wijsen stresses this point further:

\(^{17}\) Abioje, \textit{Ibid}


\(^{20}\) Wijsen, \textit{Ibid}, p.61
These Christians maintain that there is a fundamental continuity between African Indigenous Religion and the Christian faith. The spirit that was present in Jesus Christ was none other than the spirits who are active in African Indigenous Religions. Thus African Indigenous Religions are themselves full and fully saving religions. This perception leads to a practice of mutual enrichment and critical interrogation in interreligious relations.\(^{21}\)

As regards Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria, the result from a 2010 Pew survey gives more joy than sorrow, even though the high level of ignorance of other religions (other than one’s own) remains a source of concern: 54% of Christians say they do not know much (or know nothing) about Islam; 63% of Muslims say they do not know much (or know nothing) about Christianity. 53% of Christians express a positive view of Muslims; 63% of Muslims express a positive view of Christians. 23% of Christians are of the opinions that Muslims are hostile towards Christians; 16% of Muslims believe that Christians are hostile towards Muslims. The report also shows that large majorities have positive views of the religious other.\(^{22}\)

### 2.2 Religious Tolerance and Peaceful Co-existence Among Nigerians

Ever since their arrival on the African continent, Christianity and Islam have gone through different phases of relations, sometimes from peaceful co-existence to mutual hostility. This is a fact underscored by Festus Mkenda (2016:270), when he says that,

> Muslims and Christians have interacted at different places, within Africa since the seventh century. The mode of this interaction differed from one context to another depending on socio-political factors like numerical strength, economic power and military capacity. What seems to have remained constant is a tendency to think of the “religious other” as a stranger who did not quite belong. Stemming from this regard were relations that ranged from outright conquest (subduing “the other” by means of violence) to tolerance (quietly suffering the irritating presence of “the other”), and from simulated mutual ignorance to laudable acts of understanding across the creedal divide.\(^{23}\)

\(^{21}\) Ibid, 75


This section focuses precisely on the ‘laudable acts of understanding across the creedal divide’. Despite the differences in creed and religious practices, adherents of both Christianity and Islam have often worked hard towards peaceful co-existence. These efforts remain an achievement that should be both acknowledged and encouraged. Onaiyekan (2013:88) was emphatic in stressing this point:

> We live in a nation that is the most populous black nation in Africa, with a population of about 170 million. This population is now almost equally divided between Christians and Muslims. We are proud to live in a country where about 80 million Muslims live side by side with 80 million Christians. It is not something to be taken for granted that, with this kind of mixture, we have been able to live in relative peace and harmony. This fact should be acknowledged as a major achievement.\(^{24}\)

The regrettable tensions that plague some regions of the country in the name of religious violence should not take attention from the fact that millions of Nigerians are living in peace and are constantly working towards peace. It is just that the voice of violence often sounds louder than that of peace and tends to overshadow efforts geared towards peaceful co-existence. To this effect, Onaiyekan (2013:88) reiterates that,

> The basic message of peace, love, solidarity and honesty has not been absent in promoting a good society in our nation. It is also true that generally, Nigerians live at peace with one another across religious lines at the grassroots level. We see this in our daily life conditions of business, professions, politics, etc. Whether in the market or in the Government offices, in the Armed Forces barracks or in the Universities, Nigerian Christians and Muslims go about their business, making friends and cooperating with colleagues, sometimes even marrying across religious lines. It is unfortunate that this fact has not been given adequate publicity. Maybe this silence is because, as it is often said, “good news does not make big news”.\(^{25}\)

The Federal Government, religious bodies and institutions have put in place several structures and programmes aimed at ensuring peace and mutual co-existence among adherents of different religions. Some of these structures include the Project for Christian-Muslim Religions in Africa

\(^{24}\) Onaiyekan, *Ibid*, P. 88  
\(^{25}\) *Ibid*
This began as Islam in Africa Project (IAP), established in 1959 with the aim of fostering Christian-Muslim relations. The goal is well spelt out in its mission statement: “To keep before the churches their responsibility for understanding Islam and the Muslims of their region, in view of the Church’s task of interpreting faithfully in the Muslim world the Gospel of Jesus Christ; and to effect the research and education necessary for this”

Another initiative is the Nigeria Interreligious Council (NIREC). This initiative came to birth in 2000. It is a non-governmental organization established by the leadership of both Christianity and Islam. The Committee began with fifty members, evenly divided between Christians and Muslims. The aim was to address the menace of religious conflicts in Nigeria. But the group now goes beyond conflict resolution to efforts at fostering peaceful co-existence in the country. The Council employs dialogue and peace initiatives as its major tools. Other initiatives include the Nigerian Association for Religious Tolerance (NARETO), formed in 1987; and the Council for Inter-religious Intervention (CII), established in 1999. The main goal of these groups is to foster mutual respect, cooperation and harmony among the various adherents of the different religious bodies. Worthy of mention also is the positive attitude of the academia towards the establishment of Religious Departments in higher institutions. This promotes inter-religious relations and dialogue in institutes of learning. Seminars and conferences are also organized regularly to this effect.

The Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) also plays a major role in fostering peace and harmony in the country. In addition to the numerous administrative and pastoral tasks, the Conference is also highly involved in inter-faith relations. Onaiyekan (2013:89) gives a concise description of this important function of the Conference:

For many years now, the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) has established a Catholic-Muslim Dialogue Committee within its Inter-religious Commission, headed by a bishop with practical experience of living in a Muslim-dominated environment. The Committee has been engaged in fruitful discussions with some Muslim leaders, men and women, who are well disposed to such a dialogue. The

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conversations have continued even at the highest points of religious tension in the land\textsuperscript{27}.

The edifying story of Imam Muhammad Ashafa and Pastor James Wuye (popularly called the Imam and the Pastor) stands as a testimony to efforts towards peaceful co-existence. It is a story that celebrates a move from antagonism to comradeship, from hatred to love. It is a story of growth from grudges to forgiveness:

In the 1990s, Pastor James Wuye and Imam Muhammad Ashafa led opposing, armed militias, dedicated to defending their respective communities as violence broke out in Kaduna, northern Nigeria. In pitched battles, Pastor James lost his hand and Imam Ashafa’s spiritual mentor and two close relatives were killed. Now the two men are co-directors of the Muslim-Christian Interfaith Mediation Centre in the city, leading task-forces to resolve conflicts across Nigeria\textsuperscript{28}.

Despite the noble efforts by individuals, groups, and the government towards peaceful co-existence, some regions of Nigeria are perturbed by religious violence. It has to do with the strained relationships between the adherents of Christianity and the adherents Islam in some parts of the country; these two religions that unfortunately see themselves as arch-rivals. Religious violence is an exception to the rule. The succeeding section discusses some factors that contribute to such conflicts. The aim is not to provide statistics of the violent clashes; rather it is an attempt to diagnose the causes of those conflicts and the accompanying challenges.

2.3 Factors that Contribute to Religious Violence in Nigeria

A proper analysis of any menace necessarily takes into consideration the factors, both immediate and remote, that are related to the situation. Religious violence is not different in this regard because many factors often combine to give birth to this complicated phenomenon. As Akintunde (2014:6) rightly observes, “anywhere in the world, Christian-Muslim relations defy one narrative. It is a phenomenon that is shaped by other factors and considerations. The Nigerian story does not deviate from this norm. The encounters between Christians and Muslims

\textsuperscript{27} Onaiyekan ibid, p. 89
\textsuperscript{28} Video and Documentary, available at: https://www.iofc.org/imam-pastor
exhibit a protean dimension that is shaped by many factors.”

Though dressed in the guise of religion, what we call “religious violence” in Nigeria is not entirely for religious reasons; other factors lie at the background. The World Council of Churches’ 2012 report shows that, “in Nigeria, three things are intertwined—religion, politics and ethnicity—and the three are beclouded with corruption, poverty and insecurity.”

In his analysis of this complicated fact, Matthew Rowley (2014) believes that “violence in the name of God is a complex phenomenon and over simplification further jeopardizes peace because it obscures many of the causal factors.”

Bromley and Melton (2002:1) draw attention to a variety of distinct issues involved in violence. According to them,

> Violence is variously conceptualized as an act, a process, or a relationship. Violence may involve individual actions, as in the personal murder of one religious group by another, an outsider by an insider, or an insider by an outsider. It may also involve collective action by or against a group, as in the cases of war, revolution, repression, and terrorism. Violence may or may not explicitly invoke religious objectives…it is clear, then, that studying the connection between religion and violence involves a variety of distinct issues and relationships that require invocation of very different types and levels of theoretical explanation.

This section discusses some of the factors responsible for the spread of religious violence in some regions of Nigeria.

One contributive factor to religious violence in Nigeria is religious intolerance. This has to do with “hostility towards other religions, as well as the inability of religious adherents to harmonise between the theories and the practical aspect of religion.”

With 23% of Christians being of the opinion that Muslims are hostile towards Christians; and 16% of Muslims

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30 (A Report issued on the Nigerian Situation by a 12-member joint delegation led by the World Council of Churches (WCC) General Secretary Olav Fyske Tviet and Jordanian Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad, Chairman of the Board of the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute of Islamic Thought in May 2012).


expressing the same opinion about Christians (as demonstrated in the Pew Survey cited earlier), one sees to what extent intolerance could be a contributive factor to religious violence in Nigeria. This is because, in a country with a population of about 180 million people, either 23% or 16% with hostile tendencies is enough to disrupt peaceful co-existence. Religious intolerance considers one’s opinions as superior to those of others, and feeds on prejudice. In this obstinacy, one develops hatred and animosity towards those of other religious traditions. Intolerance only breeds religious bigots who see adherents of other religions as people without faith; as such the bigots feel that infidels should either be forcefully converted or eliminated. In their quest for violence, these elements “are entirely motivated by their own psychological problems or collectively by groups of people as part of their social, cultural, national or communal expression and dominance.”

A major part of the prejudice against the adherents of other religions comes from people who have never really encountered the “other”. Based on what they heard or read from books about them, they develop their own stereotypes (often negative) and relate with others as such. Religious intolerance often carries with it the strange conviction that the adherents of other religions are either forced to abandon their beliefs or they are doomed for eternal damnation.

Both Christianity and Islam (in Nigeria) have a good dose of fundamentalists who are so rigid in their belief, and are ready to go against any rule of reason to attack those who do not share their faith or religious conviction. Toyin Falola (1998:47) underlines this fact. He holds that “the post-1975 Islamic tendency toward radicalism and fundamentalism has been evident among Christians as well, partly because of the Nigerian state’s failure to meet the expectations of its citizen, and partly because of the increased challenge posed by Islam”.

Fundamentalism only ferments violent clashes because there is no respect for the privacy or opinions of others, and thus no respect for the religious other. As Jayaram enunciates,

Instead of practicing their religion to improve themselves or spread peace and happiness, they rally people against others and draw them into conflicts for domination and suppression. Ignoring the highest values, which are

enshrined in their scripture and selecting information or passages from the same scriptures to justify their evil actions, they violate the very principles which their religions seem to uphold.\textsuperscript{36}

Extremism could be considered as one of the most fertile grounds for violence. According to Eric Brah, “religious extremists can contribute to conflict escalation. They see radical measures as necessary to fulfilling God’s wishes. Fundamentalists of any religion tend to take a Manichean view of the world. If the world is a struggle between good and evil, it is hard to justify compromising with the devil. Any sign of moderation can be decried as selling out, more importantly, of abandoning God’s will.”\textsuperscript{37} This rigid and intolerant attitude towards adherents of other religions has had and continues to have negative consequences on Christian-Muslim relations in some regions of the country.

It is difficult to separate fundamentalism from religious violence. This is because, “religious fundamentalism involves believers returning to the fixed laws whereby only one interpretation can be used amongst all to preserve religious laws over profane laws.”\textsuperscript{38} Religious extremists are intrinsically fundamentalists who are opposed to the preaching of other faiths and employ violence against any opposing views. The \textit{Boko Haram} insurgency in northern Nigeria is a typical example of a misguided orientation whereby the members believe that the society is adulterated due to western education (which they often associate with Christianity). As Oritsejafor puts it, “\textit{Book Haram} has waged a systematic campaign of terror and violence. They seek an end to western influence and a removal of the Christian presence in Nigeria.”\textsuperscript{39} In their bid to restore what they call the “purity” of Islam, the violence has gone to an extent difficult describe. Against this backdrop, Abdullahi An-Na’im (1997:26) makes clear that, “Muslims must appreciate the moral and political untenableness of a modern state based on traditional \textit{shari’ah}; creative and vigorous debate and reformulation on Islamic jurisprudence and political

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{36} Jayaram, \textit{Ibid}
  \item \textsuperscript{37} Eric Grah, “Religion and Conflict”, \url{https://www.studymode.com/essays/Religion-And-Conflicts-45685414.html}
  \item \textsuperscript{38} Jayaram Ibid
\end{itemize}
philosophy cannot begin until the false prophets of Islamic self-determination through the shari’a are exposed and discredited”

Violence in the name of religion is a contradiction in terms because it argues against the very tenets on which religions are built. As Kaigama (2013) upholds, “it is falsely believed by some fanatics that the committing of crimes in the name of religion is an expression of religious fervor and an automatic guarantee for heaven if they die or kill others in the process. This is wrong theology, either in Islam or Christianity.” Painfully enough, this ‘wrong theology’ has attracted many supporters today who see violence as an intrinsic part of religion. This tallies with Karen Armstrong’s assertion that “there is a violent essence inherent in religion, which inevitably radicalizes any conflict—because once combatants are convinced that God is on their side, compromise becomes impossible and cruelty knows no bounds”. It appears like an irony when Richard Dawkins states that “only religious faith is a strong enough force to motivate such utter madness in otherwise sane and decent people”.43

Another factor that fires the flame of religious violence could be located on theological grounds. This has to do with the “common grounds” shared by the two leading religious bodies in Nigeria, namely Christianity and Islam. In Akintunde’s description of this fact, he holds that, “in a certain way, Christian-Muslim encounters have been shaped by the high level of theological affinities that Christians and Muslims have in common. We should note that groups are animated by a competitive spirit when they have many things in common. Unbridled theological jealousies on matters like monotheism, prophecy, eschatology, and revelation may add fuel to the embers of rivalry and polemics”. Rather than being united by these common grounds, they use this same grace as a catalyst for violence. Each claims to be better than or superior to the other; each claims to have better doctrines than the other; and at the end of the day, the adherents of both religions are divided by that which should have united them. As Laura Shulman describes it, “they are like children fighting over the same toy, each claiming exclusive ownership of the full

41 Ignatius Kaigama, https://www.vanguardngr.com/2013/10/arinzecalls-religious-dialogue
44 Akintunde, Ibid, p.32
The truth of this fact comes out clearly in the fact that religious violence in Nigeria today is not targeted against adherents of African Traditional Religion, but simply a fight between Christians and Muslims who see the religious other as an enemy. Lamin Sanneh (1979:410) laments this fact when he states that, “Christianity and Islam are united perhaps less by the things they have in common than the things which divide them. It is true that both traditions teach doctrines of the virgin birth and of the messianic role of Jesus, among other things, and yet the Crusades took place when these things were common knowledge”.

Furthermore, the radical mode of evangelisation employed by some preachers of these two religions remains an easy access to religious violence in Nigeria. In a bid to out-shine the other, some preachers and leaders (both Christians and Muslims) emphasise the reasonableness of their own position and attack the other’s viewpoint with derogatory, scornful and disparaging terms. A basic human tendency in this regard is to respond to such an attack with an equal measure. And so the other religious group goes on revenge either with words or physical weapons because they feel insulted and see it as a duty to defend their God whose image (they believe) has been dragged to the mud. This gives rise to a spiral of retaliatory moves, leading to heightened tension and eventual conflicts like killing, burning down of places of worship and destruction of properties. Instead of expounding the tenets of their religion and exhorting their believers, some of these preachers direct their teachings against other religious traditions. Maryellen Weimer talks about the power of language to influence thought and action. According to her, “language influences thought and action. The words we use to describe things—to ourselves and others—affect how we and they think and act.” Religious language is not different in this regard. But unfortunately, “in a language that is analogous to medieval polemics and diatribes, Nigerian evangelicals and Pentecostals have demonized the theological credentials of Islam, Prophet Muhammad, and the ethical message of this religious tradition. Sometimes the language of

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45 Laura E. Shulman, “Religious Intolerance: Causes and Solutions. Some observations”, online article at: www.religioustolerance.org/religious-intolerance-causes-solutions


47 Maryellen Weimer, an article in Faculty Focus, Teaching Professor Blog, 2015, available at: https://uocutjlt.wordpress.com/2015/06/26/the-power-of-language-to...
warfare is deployed to capture the battle between Christians and Muslims”.  

This fact is further stressed by Cardinal Arinze when he asserts that,

Some Christians are sometimes guilty of hasty generalisations because they conclude falsely that because some Muslim fanatics advocate violence and terrorism, Islam itself is a terrorist religion. Christians too have their share of violent fanatics. Just as Muslims do not want to be branded as terrorists, so do Christians take offence if they are referred to by some Muslims as unbelievers or kafirs, feeling that sharia is being applied without sensitivity to Christians.

Closely related to this derogatory method of preaching is another practice that is evidently anti-social. This concerns the modes of worship used by some religious groups in Nigeria without regard for public peace. Some Christian groups organize their crusades in public squares and along major roads, and they demand total compliance from road users. But this attitude often turns out to be an infringement on other people’s rights as well as a disturbance of traffic flow. Any attempt to call them to order is judged as a lack of respect for their religion. Some Muslims, on their own part, have now taken pleasure in organizing their Friday prayers (jumaat) right in the middle of the road (instead of going to the mosques), thereby causing total breakdown of any movement till the prayer session is over. Travelers either seek different routes or are condemned to wait till normalcy returns. In either case (whether during Christian programmes or Muslim prayer sessions), there is no regard for the feelings and sensitivities of other groups, and any attempt to call for maturity or discipline is often met with aggression from the so-called religious people. These anti-social behaviours (from both Christians and Muslims) often raise tensions in the community. This is because, “when community interests are threatened, aggressive elements within the community may arise in protest to protect them. In turn, it may create a counter reaction in other communities and provoke the extreme elements within them to register their feelings and concerns”.

Hypocrisy and prejudiced approach, on the part of the government, to national matters have contributed immensely to the growth of violent activities in Nigeria. On the one hand, rather than

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48 Akintunde, Ibid, 64
50 Jayaram, Ibid
addressing issues of national interests on the basis of “one Nigeria”, those in top government positions are beclouded by ethnic and religious sentiments, thereby jeopardizing the peace and harmony of the general populace. Bishop Hassan Kukah sees this policy as one of the causes of religious conflicts in Nigeria. He notes that “the greatest source of tension in Nigeria has been the lack of an adequate power-sharing mechanism to institutionalize and guarantee the pursuit of a good society based on justice, equity and fairness. Whereas other parts of Nigeria have tended to concentrate on democracy and the building of a secular state, the Muslims in Nigeria have focused more on some form of a theocracy and a variant of feudalism”\textsuperscript{51}. On the other hand, even when sincere efforts are made by the civil authorities (in some cases) regarding sensitive matters, some religious bigots either accept or reject such decisions based on the faith of the leader in question. Thus, it is easy for some Christians to take sides with a Christian civil leader and some Muslims taking part with a Muslim civil leader without any other logic than religious sentiments. As such, some religious conflicts arise from the government’s refusal to maintain an impartial position in issues of national interest; and other clashes arise due to the fact that some members of the public are blinded by religious affiliations and refuse to see things through the lens of reason. And in either case, some people are ever ready to take up weapons to defend whatever position they take, because “there are people who fervently wish for the destruction of the world so that they can go to heaven and live forever.”\textsuperscript{52}

As a follow up to the biased approaches and reactions that sometimes accompany national issues, another factor responsible for the spread of religious violence in Nigeria is the unrestrained involvement of some religious leaders in partisan politics. Religious leaders have a prophetic role to play in the smooth running of the state; but when they become partisan, they create tension in the society by pegging the supporters of different politicians against one another. The conflict often quickly degenerates from party affiliation to religious grounds. The adherents of the religion to which the religious leader belongs begin to see any reaction against his partisan attitude as an attack on his personality and consequently on his religion. Thus, rather than addressing issues, religious fanatics attack religious leaders from other faith tradition with

\textsuperscript{51} Bishop Hassan Kukah, “Aid to the Church in Need”, a conference held at the Cardinal Egan Catholic Centre of New York University, USA, April 26, 2016.

\textsuperscript{52} Jayaram, \textit{Ibid}
abusive names and comments. Once the tension moves to religious grounds, it gathers more supporters. And if it is not properly managed (of course, such situations are often not properly managed), the next stage is physical attacks without regard for human lives and properties.

Poverty also contributes to religious conflicts in Nigeria. The power structure in Nigeria since the country’s independence (in 1960) is such that while political power resides largely in the North, economic power finds major concentration in the South. This has resulted in the fact that poverty level is highest in the northern part of Nigeria, compared to other regions of the country. And these are the regions affected mostly by religious violence in Nigeria. As Akintunde (2014:35) succinctly puts it, “the general consensus is that northern states are conspicuously more underdeveloped than their southern counterparts, lagging behind in infrastructural development and societal transformation.”

Okereke (2013:172) gives a graphic description of this: “The average poverty rate in the entire Northern Nigeria is 70.1%. High rates of poverty have alienated many young people in the relatively poorer north, and the associated frustrations have been galvanized by opportunists to foment crisis across the region. The incidence of poverty and scourge of unemployment combine to produce an army of aggrieved population that is easily mobilized for violence.”

Closely related to the issue of poverty is the high level of illiteracy in the regions of the country that are prone to conflict. This leads further to crimes and other unethical practices in the society. As Pope Francis laments, “sadly, not a day passes that we do not hear of acts of violence, conflict, kidnapping, terrorist attacks, killings and destruction. It is horrible that at times, to justify such barbarism, the name of a religion or the name of God himself is invoked”. Take the menace of Boko Haram for example. The insurgents clearly manifest their hatred for western civilization/education (as their name suggests); they wage war on schools and even go to the extent of abducting and killing the children who embrace formal education. Paralysed by fear,

53 Akintunde, Ibid, 35
55 Interreligious Audience: Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Representatives of Different Religions, at the Clementine Hall, Thursday, 3 November 2016
many people in those regions stay out of school. This situation encourages indecency, crime, poverty, and injustice. A disturbing result of this scenario is the high number of almajiris we find in the northern part of Nigeria. Originally a term with a noble meaning, almajiri is derived from Al-muhaajirun, an Arabic word which describes a learned scholar (ulama) vested with the responsibility of championing the course of Islam. But the term now bears a derogatory sense in Nigeria today. This is because, rather than being trained as Islamic scholars, the almajiris are on the streets as beggars, usually under the tutelage of some extremists and illiterate teachers or masters. They often graduate to become terrorists and criminals. The almajiris we have in Nigeria today are better described as victims of child-abuse and potential terrorists.

Religious conflicts in Nigeria do not go without some consequences. On the international level, the rate of violence in Nigeria has earned the country a very bad name which puts it in a negative light as an infamous example of religious intolerance. The story is often exaggerated to such a level that the efforts of the millions of Nigerians that are living in peace are not appreciated at times. It now gives rise to a threatening belief that Nigeria is becoming the most dangerous place to be a Christian today. This carries with it (in certain cases) the burden of social exclusion, because the story of Nigeria can hardly be told anywhere in the world today without reference to religious violence. On the general economic plan, foreign investors are scared; businesses and investments are closed as violence spreads. Even some Nigerian businessmen prefer (reasonably of course) to invest outside Nigeria. This has a great effect on the economy.

Aside the socio-economic consequences of religious violence in Nigeria today, there are also some pastoral challenges that accompany this undesired situation. The first pastoral challenge being witnessed in the country today is the threat to religious freedom. According to Akintunde (2014:33), “although the Nigerian constitution provides and guarantees the freedom of religion, religious practice, and religious association, one of the daunting tasks in Nigeria today is how to provide a safe and stable haven for religious liberty and peaceful co-existence. The institutionalization of religious violence and the aggressive competition for dominance continue to have deleterious impact on the Nigerian nation”\(^56\). With the spate of killings and persecution, many people now find it difficult to practice their religion freely. Even with the best

\(^{56}\) Akintunde, *Ibid*, 33
qualification, some people are denied some special positions because of the faith they profess. Some family members have been denied inheritance simply because they adhere to a religious tradition different from that of the influential members of the family. In this regard, people are sometimes compelled to practice a particular religion due to material benefits (or simply put, for economic reasons). In this situation, authentic religious practice is thwarted, because some people are driven by fear rather than conviction. This attitude in turn hampers the growth of religion, and instead of fulfilling its role in mediating a relationship with the Ultimate Being, religion is now seen as a burden. This makes any authentic discussion on religion difficult.

Another pastoral challenge that comes with religious violence is that the good side of the relationship between Christians and Muslims is now overshadowed by mutual fear, mistrust, aggression, hostility and eventual violence and bloodshed. This violence (painfully called religious violence) puts a dent on religion as a dividing factor. This is a reality described by John Micklethwait (2009:297) when he says that, “Nigeria, evenly split between Christians and Muslims, is a country where people identify themselves by their religion before they call themselves Nigerians or members of a particular tribe”57. Rather than being a uniting factor, religion is now becoming a threat and some religious people are now looked upon with apprehension. In this case, religion is being used against itself, for rather than advancing the course of peace, the conflict propagated by some misguided elements makes religion abhorrent to many. It is increasingly becoming difficult to preach religion as an instrument of peace. There are instances of clear divisions between Christians and Muslims. This calls for serious reflection on Sam Harris’ assertion that “religion itself produces a perverse solidarity that we must find some way to undercut”58.

Due to the numerous violent clashes that have recently engulfed some parts of Nigeria in the name of religion, the relationship with people of different religious traditions is often characterized by prejudice and stereotypes. People relate more based on religious affiliations rather than the common humanity we all share. Some people even offer help to those in need

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58 Sam Harris, “New Atheism”, online article available at: https://samharris.org/recommended/the-new-atheism-taking-a-stand
based on the religion they profess. What readily comes to mind here is the parable of the Good Samaritan. Yoshiaki (2017:124) captures it well when he says that, “without extending any help urgently needed by the stricken man, a victim of robbery, a priest passed by. Because he felt so secure in his own religious tradition, he did not care about the fate of a man who belonged to a tradition other than his own. Then the Good Samaritan came and made every effort to help the poor victim disregarding religious and racial differences because he was ready to help any human being in need”\textsuperscript{59}. The major pastoral here challenge is how to cross the divisive line drawn by religious affiliations and be authentic humans once more. Compassion mirrors the true image of religion because, “to bow down with compassionate love before the weak and needy is part of the authentic spirit of religion, which rejects the temptation to resort to force, refuses to barter human lives and sees others as brothers and sisters, and never mere statistics”\textsuperscript{60}.

This is an overview of the religious atmosphere in Nigeria where religion permeates every facet of existence, and where adherents of different religions live side by side. In such a heterogeneous society, the call for peace remains a staple diet. Hence efforts are made at all levels to ensure mutual respect, tolerance and peaceful co-existence. Great success is recorded in most parts of the country as millions of Nigerians live in peace irrespective of their religious differences. Despite the appeals, discourses and efforts geared towards happy co-existence, however, some over-zealous adherents see their religion as the only genuine one, and they continue to perpetuate acts of violence against adherents of other religions. In the face of such violence and loss of human lives, it is necessary to take an excursion into some cultural values that enhance peaceful co-existence and respect for life. This is because “one function of culture is to unify people in times of distress”\textsuperscript{61}. This will be the focus of the next chapter.

\textsuperscript{59} Yoshiaki Isaka, “The Significance of Inter-religious Dialogue for World Peace”, in Inter-religious Dialogue, Peace and Reconciliation, Berkley Centre, Georgetown University, 2017, p. 124  
\textsuperscript{60} Pope Francis, \textit{Ibid}  
\textsuperscript{61} Frans Wijsen, \textit{Ibid}, 247.
CHAPTER THREE
INTER-RELIGIOUS RELATIONS AMONG THE IGALA PEOPLE

This chapter discusses interreligious relations among the Igala people of Nigeria. Like many other parts of Nigeria, Igalaland is heterogeneous in its religious composition. The major occupation of the Igala people is farming. They cultivate a wide range of crops like yam, cassava, beans, maize, millet, melon, groundnut and benniseed. Some of those in the riverine areas (like Idah) are into fishing. Igala land is also endowed with rich mineral resources such as coal (which is present in commercial quantities), clay, gold (in few deposits), and kaolin. The three major religions practiced in the land are African Traditional Religion, Islam, and Christianity. The 2006 Census by the National Population Commission put the number of the Igala people at 1,483,373. The 2017 survey by the Joshua Project\textsuperscript{62} gives a population of 1,566,000. According to the religious statistics given by this survey, Christianity is 78\%, Islam 21\%, and Ethnic Religions 1\%. Even though statistics could sometimes be slippery, what is clear is that the overwhelming majority of the Igala people are either Christians or Muslims. However, care should be taken not to dismiss the influence of African Traditional Religion as it enjoys the patronage of both Christians and Muslims especially in times of crisis like sickness. The high influence of Traditional Religion could be traceable to the fact that ethnic religiosity continues under the label of Christianity and Islam. This ethnic group is one out of the many groups and regions in Nigeria where religious differences do not generate violence. According to Ayebome (2018:105), “the religious scenario is generally a relaxed one despite the diversity of religion in Igala/Bassaland. The people have very high religious tolerance”\textsuperscript{63}. This chapter seeks to address the thesis question: What makes Igala people live peacefully irrespective of their religious differences? The chapter is divided into two parts. The first part discusses the values in light of which mutual relations among the Igala people so far could be appreciated. These are some Igala traditional values and customs that enhance respect for life and peaceful co-existence. These cultural values are based on their worldview, which embraces family system, marriage, community life, hospitality, and the effects these values have on their relationships with one

\textsuperscript{62} Igala in Nigeria, Joshua Project: \url{https://joshuaproject.net}

\textsuperscript{63} Emmanuel Oyarekwa Ayebome, \textit{The Humanitarian Engagement of the Church in Nigeria: The Example of the Catholic Diocese of Idah} (Munster: LIT Verlag, 2018), p. 105
another. They are values believed to be handed down by the ancestors. It is therefore considered an offence to the land and especially to the ancestors when these precepts are violated. In discussing these cultural values, reference will also be made to wider African culture, since Igala land is not an island. The second part looks at efforts being put in place at various levels to forestall deviation from the existing harmonious relationship in the face of religious differences.

Igalaland is naturally positioned at the heart of Nigeria, occupying the eastern region of the Niger-Benue confluence. The landmark is approximately between latitude 6°30′ and 8°40′ north, and longitude 6°30′ and 7°40′ east, covering an area of about 13,665 square kilometers. As a major ethnic group in Kogi State, the Igala people exercise a considerable influence on the surrounding tribes and cultures. Igalaland is situated in the Middle Belt or Central Belt region of Nigeria. According to Grimley and Robinson (1966:17), “the Central Belt, which includes about four-sevenths of the Northern Region in Nigeria, lies between two extremes of topography, as well as between two extremes of religious thought. To the south are the luxuriant rain forests that merge into the mangrove swamps of the coastal area, and to the north are the dry, open savannas and thorn thickets that fringe the encroaching sands of the Sahara.”

Boston (1968:1) gives a graphic description of Igalaland, saying that, “the Igala kingdom is skirted on two sides by the great waterways that divide Nigeria into its major natural and cultural regions, the river Benue and the river Niger. In shape it is roughly triangular, with the confluence of the two rivers forming the apex and the base extending irregularly into Idoma and Igbo country”. He explains further that, “its strategic position is of key significance in the historical development of the kingdom. Their geographical position has brought the Igala into contact with a wide range of peoples and a great variety of cultures, including contact with the Igbo, the Yoruba, the Edo-speaking peoples, and the Jukun, to name only the principal groups.” In this chapter we deal with the first step of the Pastoral Cycle, namely observation, as introduced in Chapter One.

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66 *Ibid*
Section One:
Igala Life-enhancing Cultural Values

3.1.1 Igala Worldview

According to Aba (2012:63),

a people’s world-view deals with the beliefs, attitudes, nature, structures and interaction of beings in the universe with particular reference to man. It seeks to answer fundamental questions about the place and relationship of man within the universe. This therefore aids man with the blue-print for controlling his environment and for establishing his social, political and religious institutions. To put it differently, knowledge of a people’s world-view is a key to the understanding of their social, political, and even psychological problems67.

Relating this understanding to the Igala people, Okwoli (1996:1) holds that “Igala world view, therefore, is an attempt by Igala people to interpret and give meaning to their experiences and reflections about the universe. In other words, when we talk about Igala worldviews, we talk about the beliefs, assumptions, myths, legends, proverbs, rituals, symbols and sentiments with which Igala people organize their life68.

In Igala worldview, there is a general belief in a Supreme Being called Ojo (God). There are other gods and spirits who serve as intermediaries between the Supreme Being and the rest of creation. As Aba (2012:66) enunciates, “He is regarded by the Igala as being at the apex of creation. He is all powerful and the source and creator of the universe and every other things that exist. God is believed to sustain and control the world and the Igala people sometimes address him directly in prayers and other common expressions”69. Ojo is regarded as the creator of all things, and the General Overseer of the whole of creation. The different religions practiced by the people (African Traditional Religion, Islam, and Christianity) use the term Ojo in the same sense. Thus, in addition to his creative and life-sustaining functions, Ojo is also seen as a

69 Aba, Ibid, 66
unifying factor, because the people believe that their worship is addressed to the same Being, though in different ways. It is common to see adherents of a particular religion soliciting prayers from members of another religious group. The Supreme Being stays at the top of Igala religious ranking. This is followed by other beings known as divinities, gods, or deities. The hierarchical structure is in order of their function. The divinities are followed by the spirits of the ancestors. Like many other cultures and traditions, the Igala believe that death is not the end of human existence; there is life after death. For this reason, a traditional Igala community is made up of the living, the dead and the yet unborn. The Igala believe in the communal aspect of human life and society. The three different groups (the yet unborn, the living, and the dead) are maintained by a common bond such that whatever affects one affects the other. All are considered important parts of the community.

In Igala traditional worldview, human life is sacred and religion is meant to help people appreciate the sacredness of human life. To shed the blood of one’s brother or sister is considered one of the worst abominations against the land. The blood of the son or daughter of the soil shed on the land cries out for vengeance; and many things could go wrong in the community if proper steps are not taken to placate the aggrieved spirit. There is a special recognition of the dignity of human life. The easiest way to evaluate an ethical norm is to place it in relation to human life. If it promotes the fullness of humanity, it is accepted and appreciated; but if it hinders the growth of community life, it is regarded as bad.

3.1.2 The Igala Identity
The Igala people regard themselves as a family, they see themselves as kits and kins, ruled by the Atta Igala (meaning the Father of the Igala) who is regarded as the highest human authority in the land. Therefore, all are considered sons and daughters of the Atta; and people see themselves as brothers and sisters (am’omaye). This Igala identity unites the Igala people regardless of their religious affiliations. Talking about the creative power of identity, Toyin Falola (2003:129) holds that, “whether it is regarded as intended, imagined, or real, ethnicity is about creating a strong and unified identity among a group of people. In cultural terms, members

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of an ethnic group strongly believe that they are united by history, tradition, and customs. Over time, a consciousness emerges that all the members of the group are ‘one’”. More than a mere concept, Igala people see their identity as a treasure of great value to be both appreciated and preserved. For them, it is a goal to be pursued. This identity is not in isolation from other values. It is tied to every other value that gives meaning to individuals and their existence in the community. The loss of identity equals non-existence.

Igala people see themselves not only as products of their culture, but as people intimately tied to this culture. It is the culture that defines an individual. When asked to identify themselves, they do so in relation to their community. Rather than asking an individual ‘who are you?’, a traditional Igala person will ask ‘which family are you from?’ or ‘whose son/daughter are you?’ They have no identity outside their community. They see themselves not just as people, but as people defined by their particular culture. This particularity is very much cherished by the Igala people, and they define themselves more along the line of Igala identity.

3.1.3 Respect for Culture and Human Life

Igala people believe strongly (like some other ethnic groups) that people derive life, meaning and values from their cultures. They hold their culture as a reality that answers a lot of, or almost all, questions in life. Traditional Igala people look at reality through the lens of their culture. Their culture defines their attitude towards everything including religion. They see religion not just as a set of principles or guidelines for worship, not just as a relationship with the divine; but as something practical and functional. Religion for them is practical in the sense that it must help human beings conquer the evil forces that surround them. It is functional in the sense that it must be an instrument of peace and harmony. Religion is either useful in this regard or else it is worthless. Since religion is seen as an instrument of peaceful co-existence, it is illogical to fight in the name of religion.

Based on this cultural perspective, life is seen as the goal of ethical conduct. Compared to the spirits and divinities, human beings may be less potent, but the human person remains the centre of activities. The worship offered to God or the gods has as its goal the well-being of human

beings and the proper ordering of the society. John Ebeh (2015:129) summarises that, “the Igala society views man as a being at the centre of everything that exists. It is thought of as if God created everything for man alone. It is also thought that the ancestors are there for man alone and his environment”\textsuperscript{72}. There is a religious consciousness present in every activity, and whatever one does is said to have religious implications. Human beings occupy a central position in this worldview. In this regard, laws are made and norms are enacted with regard to the sanctity of human life.

Consequent upon this anthropocentric worldview, the dignity of the human person is given a place of honour, because the respect for human life is also respect for \textit{Ojo} (Supreme Being) who is the author of life. In Igala worldview, the best way to please God (and the ancestors) is to pay heed to the dignity of the human person. The goal of religion, for them, is the dignity of the human person and the sacredness of life.

3.1.4 Family System
Like many African societies, the Igala people practice the extended family system. A typical Igala community/clan could be described as a place where everyone is related to everyone else; and members of a community can easily claim common ancestry. The extended family system is the model and the basic understanding of family for the Igala people. The idea of nuclear family remains foreign to this worldview. This extended family includes children, their direct parents, grand-parents, great grand-parents, as well as uncles, aunts, cousins, nephews and nieces. In this system, a child refers to his/her uncles and aunts as his/her fathers or mothers, just as cousins, nephews and nieces are referred to as brothers and sisters. The family system is also such that, in most cases, family members live together and form community. The community is not just people physically living together and sharing common geographical territory. It includes that, but much more. It is a unity of both the visible and the invisible worlds. A community is a communion of the living, the dead and the yet unborn. Talking about the Igala understanding of family, John Ebeh (2015:132) asserts that:

The Igala people see themselves as kits and kins. The people think that they descended from the same ancestral root as a result of which they see themselves as being linked together. One obvious fact is that most Africans who speak the same language and sometimes the same dialect are drawn together as kits and kins. But one of the key characteristics of the Igala people is that they do trace their family origin through several generations and chart it like a tree with a stem with different sectional branches depicting their linkages. One obvious thing a person notices when he listens to Igala family stories is the fact of one lineage, with different clans and with different extended and unit families.73

In Igala worldview, family is everything. Since blood-ties are taken seriously, the desire to cause violence in the name of God (the creator of humanity) contradicts reverence for this same God. Ayebome (2018:105) corroborates this view that, “in spite of the heavy Muslim settlement in Igala/Bassaland there is hardly any religious hostility for many reasons. The jihad which violently islamised other parts of Nigeria never surfaced in Igala/Bassaland, so much so that family members and relatives live side by side with both faiths”74. This is a point further explained by Aba (2012:108-9), when he talks of Islam in Igalaland not witnessing the jihadist movement that characterized conversion to Islam in some parts of northern Nigeria. For him, “this development was made possible for the simple reason that apart from the Muslim visitors, mostly the votaries of the different three dominant religions in Igala land can be found in the same family. This means that people from the same family can belong to any of the religions and still relate as brothers, sisters, and neighbours professing their faith in one God”.75

The family serves as a channel through which lives are sustained. Cut off from the family, a person’s life loses relevance. This consanguineal relationship takes precedence over faith-based relationships. One first of all raises the family ‘flag’ before that of religion. The saying that “blood is thicker than water” holds true for the Igala people; and I dare add that blood is thicker than even the water of baptism. The emphasis on family bonds makes it difficult for people to engage in acts of religious violence because the religious other next to you (whether Christian or

73 Ibid
74 Ayebome, Ibid, 105
75 Aba, Ibid, 108-9
Muslim) could be your brother or sister. And since it is considered a taboo to inflict pain on your own blood, religious differences hardly generate violence. Members of the same family can adhere to different religions and still live peacefully together.

3.1.5 Affinal Relationships
Family ties remain the most basic form of relationship in Igalaland, but such relationships hardly exist without the relationship effected through marriage (affinal relationships). Marriage among the Igala people creates a bond between communities and religious groups. This is because they do not consider marriage as a private affair between the man and the woman alone; the families of the couple are involved, so also are the communities. To put it concisely, marriage has both social and communitarian character. This is evident in the fact that a rift or enmity between two clans/communities can affect the relationship between two individuals irrespective of the depth of their love for each other.

In the Igala marriage system, it is the two families and the two communities that are married. The family and community of the man see the woman as their wife and daughter, and the family and community of the woman do the same with regard to the man (he is seen as their husband and their son). From that moment onwards, the injunction to do no harm to one’s neighbours assumes a wider coverage, taking into consideration the families and communities of the in-laws. The in-laws could very well be regarded as part of the extended family. This understanding helps in building peace among different clans and communities, thereby reducing threats to life and property that could arise from religious differences.

3.1.6 Community Life
The appreciation and practice of community life also adds some value to peaceful co-existence among the Igala people. This is a typical example of a society where people place accent on the communal aspect of their lives. They strive to maintain the pride and good name of the community. Hence whatever enhances the peace and well-being of the community is encouraged, just as whatever poses a threat to peaceful co-existence is seen as a common enemy. Their strength and security lie in this community spirit. The Igala believe that if an individual’s life is to have any importance, he or she needs the protective cover that the community offers. It
is in the community of other human beings that life can be meaningful. For this reason, an Igala man or woman does not see himself or herself as an autonomous individual (such a thing does not exist), but as a person belonging to a specific community. It is a society where one defines himself or herself in relation to others. This goes on still to show that whatever affects one affects the other. Community life is the soul of Igala traditional society.

The emphasis on community life is not an invitation to uniformity. People are different, and the differences are respected. But these individual differences are to be harnessed and used for the good and growth of the community. This is based on the understanding that whistling is possible only with the cooperation of the two lips, and also on the belief that the joy of one person is the joy of others. These differences can sometimes lead to misunderstanding, but it is not enough to break the communal bond. As Igala people themselves understand it, the space between the nose and the mouth is not enough to dig a grave. Without the community support, individuals wither. Mutual support sustains this community life, because the Igala belief is that when ants unite they can even carry an elephant; and when both hands wash each other mutually, both hands come off cleaner. For this reason, community members are obliged to contribute to the peace, growth, and harmony of the society. Whoever destroys the life of the community is seen as a threat. The emphasis is placed on communion, cooperation and mutual responsibility, rather than individualism. They believe that loneliness is a bad name. Life is realized in the community of other human beings.

The fact that the Igala people attach great importance to community life does not mean that the uniqueness of the individual is lost or submerged in the identity of the community. No, individual prowess and uniqueness are appreciated, celebrated and encouraged. But the fact remains that no single individual stands taller than the community. In Igalaland, an individual does not claim absolute right to do as he or she wishes. No matter how powerful an individual is, the will of the community supersedes and limits his desire to act in certain ways. This also finds expression in the belief that the chief owns the subjects as much as the subjects own him. Igala ethics is built on communalism. This is a major force in maintaining law and order. Deviation from this communal spirit only leads to Hobbes’ state of nature. A world characterized by “continual fear, and danger of violent death”; and “the life of man solitary, poor, nasty, brutish
and short.” Every effort is made to avert such crisis. The Igala basic orientation is that good religious observances bear fruit in harmonious relations with the community. Religion either helps people to live in peace, or it is useless.

Based on the value placed on community life, both Christian and Muslim feasts are celebrated with mutual sharing of meals and exchange of visits. Fund-raising programmes (organized by either Christians or Muslims) enjoy the support of the other religious group. Events such as marriage, child-naming ceremony, burial, etc, also enjoy community participation. At such events, even when people do not understand the prayers and rituals of the other religious group, their presence and solidarity serve as testimony to their oneness. With this attitude, there is a minimal risk of religion-induced violence and conflict among the Igala people.

Closely related to the emphasis on community life is the value placed on hospitality. This involves the duty to show kindness to strangers by welcoming them and providing for their needs according to one’s capacity. For the Igala people, kindness to strangers is a noble and sacred practice. This kindness goes beyond community lines. Hospitality is not just normative; it is regarded as a sacred duty. This is based on the belief that there is no alien in this world because the world is a home to all, and the sharing of material and spiritual blessings makes life beautiful.

Observations From Igala Cultural Values
The foregoing shows that peaceful co-existence is highly appreciated among the Igala people of Nigeria. Their worldview is centered on the human person. It is safe to say with John Ebeh that, “Igala ontology places man at the centre of everything that exists. It is thought all things that are in existence and everything that exists are there for the good of man.” As such, words and actions are evaluated, appreciated or condemned based on their ethical consequences. Whatever promotes life is good and accepted, while whatever harms life is bad and rejected. The goal is the well-being of individuals and the peace of the community. With all these belief systems and ethical norms, the Igala people see themselves as so united and bonded that it is considered a serious taboo to shed the blood of a fellow Igala man or woman. The blood-tie and the common

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ancestry are held stronger than religious affiliations. The emphasis is on common humanity, rather than religious differences. The underlying principle is that whatever affects one affects the other, whether good or bad. Efforts are made to settle differences through dialogue, both on the family and community levels. In this way, deadly tensions are resolved. In some clans, there is an informal or unwritten agreement/oath to protect the kindred and to expose any evil plans or threats to one’s life. Even though fundamental human rights are not officially/formally written like the United Nations Charter, or presented in the form of the Decalogue, the dos and don’ts of Igala land are “written” in the heart of each person.

Among the Igala people, the emphasis placed on community life has been a factor in favour of mutual co-existence. This is an invitation to recognise and uphold the things that unite rather than those that divide a people. With this community spirit, efforts are garnered towards growth and development, such that whatever threatens the peace of the society is seen as a common enemy. Too much emphasis on religious identity (that is, the name of the religion with which one identifies himself or herself) could be a source of religious violence. When people place more value on religious affiliations than on other human values, it could even lead to an extreme where one can sacrifice any other value on the altar of religious identity. But when people lay emphasis on their national, ethnic or communal identity, the result is often different because they see themselves as compatriots fighting a common course. According to Kwame Gyekye (1997:41),

The notion of shared life—shared purposes, interest, and understandings of the good—is crucial to an adequate conception of community. What distinguishes a community from a mere association of individuals is the sharing of an overall way of life. In the social context of the community, each member acknowledges the existence of common values, obligations, and understandings and feels a commitment to the community that is expressed through the desire and willingness to advance its interests. Members of a community society are expected to show concern for the well-being of one another, to
do what they can to advance the common good, and generally to participate in the community life\textsuperscript{78}.

In a heterogeneous society, characterized by religious plurality, inter-religious dialogue, \textit{inter alia}, has helped the Igala people to enjoy a peaceful religious atmosphere. For proper understanding, it is good to know the various angles to inter-religious dialogue. The Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue distinguishes different levels of dialogue:

There is the level of living together as people of different faiths, the dialogue of everyday life. There is also the level of working together for a common good, the dialogue of cooperation. Then there is the level of praying and worshipping together; this is interreligious dialogue in the strict sense of the word. Lastly, there is the level of reflecting together, which is inter-theological dialogue\textsuperscript{79}.

Life, for the Igala people, is dialogical. It is the \textit{dialogue of everyday life}, the \textit{dialogue of cooperation}, and the dialogue which exists on the \textit{level of praying and worshipping together} that have hitherto sustained peace in Igalaland. Dialogue on the intellectual level is beneficial, but the emphasis of the Igala people lies on the dialogue of life. With the emphasis on personal interactions among people of different faiths within the same society, dialogue of life is sure to create a deeper and wider awareness than intellectual dialogue which involves (quite often) a few experts or leaders from different faith groups. As Olorunnisola puts it, “interreligious dialogue exists for religious cooperation, understanding, learning and bridge building for the sake of knowing more about religious other for common good, while dialogue of life occurs because human beings are created as social beings who function by interactions, relationships, collaboration for mutual enrichment on social and communitarian levels”\textsuperscript{80}.

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{78} Kwame Gyekye, \textit{Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 41-42
\item \textsuperscript{80} Titus Olorunnisola, unpublished article “From Interreligious Dialogue to Dialogue of Life: A Proposal for Peaceful Coexistence and Mutuality in Nigeria”, 2018.
\end{itemize}
Section Two:
Efforts Geared Towards Sustaining Peaceful Co-existence in Igalaland

It is quite commendable that respect for culture and its life-enhancing values has helped Igalaland to experience peace in the face of religious diversity. With the rate of growth and openness to different ideologies in this contemporary time, how certain can anyone be about the sustainability of peace in the future? What efforts are being put in place to see that the enemy does not have the occasion to sow weeds among wheat while people sleep? Change is said to be the only thing that is constant; and this change could go in any direction (either towards peace or towards violence). Suffice to say that the regions experiencing religious violence today once lived in peace. This section looks at efforts currently being made at different levels to maintain mutual co-existence and avoid battles and wars that are predicated on religion.

There is a noteworthy effort on the part of the Catholic Diocese of Idah in the area of inter-faith dialogue. Idah Diocese is home to the Igal and Bassa ethnic groups living in Igala kingdom. Inter-religious relations are given priority in the pastoral activities of the Diocese. Among the various ecclesiastical functions in the Diocese is the Committee for Inter-religious Dialogue. This Commission is made up of the clergy and the lay faithful; it is charged with the responsibility of making the Church’s inter-religious initiatives a reality within Igala/Bassaland. This has helped greatly in building on the existing peace as well as initiating and sustaining peace efforts in villages, communities, and Igala/Bassaland as a whole. This is in line with the prescription of the Episcopal Committee for Inter-religious Dialogue (IRD), a unit of the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria (CSN), which promotes peace and harmony through its engagement in various forms of dialogue with people of other religions. As clearly stated in Article 16 of the Statutes for Inter-religious Dialogue Committee, “the Diocesan think-tank on IRD is a step down of the Provincial think-tank on IRD in all the ecclesiastical jurisdictions all over the country. It performs the functions of the National/Provincial think-tank at the diocesan levels and reports to the local ordinary and the National think-tank through its provincial representatives at the National think-thank.”

Idah Diocesan Commission for Inter-religious Dialogue follows this same procedure in its activities at ensuring peaceful co-existence in Igala

81 Statutes for Inter-religious Dialogue Committee, Department of Mission and Dialogue Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria. Online: https://omonokhua.blogspot.com/2014/07/statutes-for-interreligious-dialogue
and Bassaland. The functions of the Diocesan think-tank on Inter-religious Dialogue (as enumerated in article 18 of the *Statutes for Inter-religious Dialogue Committee*) include:

- dissemination of the teachings of the Catholic Church on matters of inter-religious dialogue
- formation of Catholics at all levels on the Church’s principles of IRD
- establishment of good relationships with the leaders/adherents of other faiths in the diocese
- monitoring and identifying potential hot spots for brewing religious intolerance and violence
- preventing and managing conflict
- engaging other religions in the area in on-going dialogue: dialogue of life, social engagements, theological exchange, etc
- supporting people that are marginalised because of their religious identity through advocacy and capacity building
- advising and empowering for the provision of legal protection for those suffering from religiously motivated violence
- investigating and reporting on religious tension
- working out strategies for collaboration in the support of human dignity and for the freedom of religion. (Culled from the *Statutes for Inter-religious Dialogue Committee*).

Traditional rulers are not left out in this effort at maintaining and sustaining peace in their communities. Beginning with the paramount ruler of Igalaland (the *Atta*), the constant call is one of “*udama kpai ebo*” (unity and peace). *Udama* finds its resonance not only in its phonetic resemblance with *ujamaa*, but also shares almost the same meaning. *Udama Igalal* is a call to the unity of all Igalala sons and daughters based on the common brotherhood/sisterhood they share. It is a call to celebrate the things that unite rather than those that divide members of a community. Every ruler has the duty (as a priority) to ensure that this unity is upheld. This is based on the understanding that peace is possible where *udama* is given a primary place. Community leaders do not hesitate to call for peace when there is any form of misunderstanding. Whether the ruler be Christian or Muslim, the council is made up of representatives from different religions. The criterion for ascension into office (or the throne) is not religion, but qualification is based on ethical conduct and lineage. Every effort is made to see that people are not divided along religious lines. Songs, folklores, proverbs are constantly employed at various gatherings to drive home this point of *udama Igalal*.

The activities of the Centre for Peace Advancement in Nigeria (CEPAN), with its presence in the Middle-Belt Region of Nigeria (the geographical location in which Igalaland is found), is a great boost to peaceful co-existence. CEPAN is a non-profit organisation which works for peaceful co-existence among different groups. For a number of years, it has enjoyed funding from Catholic
Organisation for Relief and Development Aid (CORDAID), which is a relief and development aid organisation with the headquarters in the Hague, in the Netherlands. The staff of CEPAN enjoys a balanced composition of Christians and Muslims. As stated in its major goal,

…CEPAN works to strengthen the values of peace, cultural and religious harmony among the diverse people of Nigeria through a broad spectrum of community-based peace building and people-oriented development activities. The organisation believes that people are the real pillars for peace building and therefore strives to enhance their capacity. CEPAN’s programmes are predicated on the belief that people and development are intertwined.\(^{82}\)

Furthermore, in institutions of learning in Igalaland, attention is also now given to inter-faith relations (something that was not given pride of place in the past). In addition to the curriculum that incorporates both Christian and Islamic studies, conferences are sometimes organized to sensitize people on the constant need for religious tolerance and peaceful co-existence. In this way, the youth (who are often regarded as leaders of tomorrow) are charged with the duty of upholding and sustaining the peaceful religious atmosphere they received from their elders. It is often interesting to see youth of different religious backgrounds organising programmes under the umbrella of “Vanguard for Peace”.

Summary
The first part of this chapter demonstrated that the Igala people have a rich cultural heritage that has helped them maintain a peaceful religious atmosphere despite differences in religious affiliations. However, since the past or present does not necessarily guarantee the future, the second part of this chapter draws attention to something much more urgent, that is, the need to be very vigilant and engage in efforts geared towards sustaining this peace. In celebrating the past and present relaxed religious environment, it is necessary to hold this treasure with care and to make provision for the future. Given the fact that there is a good dose of Christian and Muslim

\(^{82}\) Culled from CEPAN website at: [https://www.peaceinsight.org/conflicts/nigeria/peacebuilding-organisations/cepan](https://www.peaceinsight.org/conflicts/nigeria/peacebuilding-organisations/cepan).
fundamentalists everywhere (Igalaland is not an exception), it is both necessary and urgent to make peaceful coexistence a priority. While the cultural values discussed so far have, to some extent, impacted positively on Igala people, a proper analysis is also necessary to ensure that they are not taken as absolutes. Reflections on these cultural values will be the focus of the next chapter.
CHAPTER FOUR

LESSONS FROM IGALA CULTURAL VALUES AND FURTHER REFLECTION FOR PEACEFUL CO-EXISTENCE

The preceding chapter discussed some peace-enhancing cultural values that have contributed to a relaxed religious atmosphere among the Igala people of Nigeria. As individuals and groups, human beings can always learn from one another for mutual growth and enrichment. My assumption is that it is possible to live in peace irrespective of our religious differences. Rather than being an instrument of violence, religious plurality can be a catalyst for peace and growth.

In a heterogeneous nation like Nigeria, if some regions can live in peace, why not others? This chapter evaluates the experience of the Igala people, and expands the lessons for the regions that are perturbed by the menace of religious violence. It also offers some recommendations for peaceful coexistence. Two major points from the Igala people that contribute to good practices (as seen in the previous chapter) are the sacredness of human life and the ethical consequences of religion. This is based on the central position human beings occupy in Igala worldview. Religion has both vertical and horizontal dimensions; and this vertical dimension has meaning only when it assures peace and harmony on the horizontal level. Steve Biko (1978:42) talks of the necessity of placing man at the centre of activities. According to him, “we believe in the inherent goodness of man. We enjoy man for man himself. We regard our living together not as an unfortunate mishap warranting endless competition among us but a deliberate act of God to make us a community of brothers and sisters jointly involved in the quest for a composite answer to the varied problems of life. Hence in all we do we place man first”83. In this chapter we deal with step two and three of the Pastoral Cycle, namely Evaluation and Recommendations, as introduced in Chapter One.

4.1: Evaluation in View of Lessons

In an effort to overcome fear, prejudice and a defensive attitude towards the religious other, the Second Vatican Council makes a significant contribution to the expansion of thought and openness towards non-Christian religions. This is expressed in the opening words of Nostra Aetate, which carries the weight of a solemn invitation towards unity:

In this age of ours, when men are drawing more closely together and the bonds of friendship between different peoples are being strengthened, the Church examines with greater care the relation which she has to non-Christian religions. Ever aware of her duty to foster unity and charity among individuals, and even among nations, she reflects at the outset on what men have in common and to what tends to promote fellowship among them.\footnote{Nostra Aetate: Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (October 28, 1965), in Flannery, Vatican Council II, no. 1}

Apropos of the call for fellowship and universal brotherhood/sisterhood as promoted by Nostra Aetate, Gerald O’Collins (2014:52) makes clear that, “seeing all men and women as not only created by God but also created in the divine image will prove an effective mindset; it dramatically puts back on display how we should interpret and understand “the religious others”, whoever they may be. The declaration draws a practical conclusion from the doctrine of all people being created in the divine image: there is no basis for any “discrimination” that offends or curtails “human dignity and the rights that flow from it” (NA 5).\footnote{Gerald O’Collins, The Second Vatican Council: Message and Meaning (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2014), p. 52.} In this regard, the book of Genesis could be a good reference point for both Christianity and Islam since both religions claim a common ancestry. The image of God portrayed therein is one of creator and originator of all lives. While bearing the image of this creator, human beings have the responsibility of fostering peace and mutual co-existence irrespective of their perceived differences. To this effect, Marjorie (2003:70) further notes that,

The Genesis text bespeaks not only a past, but a future in saying that we are created in the image of God. Insofar as that image is one of irreducibly diverse people joined together in communal efforts of righteousness, then the image is one that always calls us to ever-new instantiations. It is a call from our future. It requires more than a simple affirmation of our religious differences; it requires rejoicing in those differences and caring for one another across differences. Through them we can become a people who
together create a shimmering image on earth of the God whose nature and name is Love\textsuperscript{86}.

The plea for mutual understanding and peaceful co-existence put forward by the Second Vatican Council many years ago also holds true today, especially in this era of heightened tension between Christians and Muslims: “Over the centuries many quarrels and dissensions have arisen between Christians and Muslims. The sacred Council now pleads with all to forget the past, and urges that a sincere effort be made to achieve mutual understanding; for the benefit of all, let them together preserve and promote peace, liberty, social justice and moral values”\textsuperscript{87}. With special reference to Muslims, the same document holds that:

The church has also a high regard for the Muslims. They worship God, who is one, living and subsistent, merciful and almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has also spoken to humanity. They endeavor to submit themselves without reserve to the hidden decrees of God, just as Abraham submitted himself to God's plan, to whose faith Muslims eagerly link their own. Although not acknowledging him as God, they venerate Jesus as a prophet; his virgin Mother they also honor, and even at times devoutly invoke. Further, they await the Day of Judgment and the reward of God following the resurrection of the dead. For this reason, they highly esteem an upright life and worship God, especially by way of prayer, alms-deeds and fasting\textsuperscript{88}.

The acceptance of the religious other is also a sign of respect for one of the greatest of all human values, namely freedom. The Second Vatican Council places emphasis on religious freedom in its celebrated document, \textit{Dignitatis Humanae}, stressing that, “freedom of this kind means that all men should be free from coercion on the part of individuals, social groups and every human power so that within due limits, nobody is forced to act against his convictions nor is anyone to

\textsuperscript{86} Marjorie, \textit{Ibid}, p. 70
\textsuperscript{87} \textit{Ibid}, no. 3
\textsuperscript{88} \textit{Ibid}
be restrained from acting in accordance with his convictions in religious matters in private or in public, alone or in association with others.\textsuperscript{89}

Furthermore, since both Christians and Muslims rely on the authority of their sacred texts (that is, the Bible and the Qur’an respectively), these sacred texts could be invoked since they provide enormous resources for the appreciation of oneness as well as mutual respect among human beings. Adherence to the injunctions of these texts is not only a religious duty, but it also fosters peaceful co-existence among people who otherwise see themselves as radically different from one another. Situating peace as a valuable treasure in Islam, Riffat Hassan (1987:96) notes that, “not only is the idea of peace of pivotal significance in the theological worldview of Islam, it also permeates the daily lives of Muslims. Each time two Muslims greet each other, they say salam alaikum, “peace be on you”, and alaikum assalam, “peace be on you (too)”. The regularity and fervor with which this greeting is exchanged shows that it is not a mechanical reiteration of words that have little or no meaning but a religious ritual of great importance.”\textsuperscript{90} She elaborates on the ethical consequences of this religious ritual by stressing that,

In qur’anic terms, then, peace is obtained in any human society when human beings, conscious of their duty to God, fulfill their duty to other human beings. In fulfilling this duty they honor what I call the “human rights” of others. These rights are those that human beings \textit{ought} to possess because they are rooted so deeply in our humanness that their denial or violation is tantamount to negation or degradation of that which makes us human. These rights came into existence when we did; they were created as we were, by God in order that our human potential could be actualized. These rights not only provide us with an opportunity to develop all our inner resources, but they also hold before us a vision of what God would like us to be: what God wants us to strive for and die for. Rights given by God are rights that ought to be exercised,

\textsuperscript{89} Dignitatis Humanae: Vatican II Declaration on Religious Liberty (7 December, 1965) in Flannery, Vatican Council II, no. 2

because everything that God does is for “a just purpose”
(Surah 15.85; 16.3; 44.39; 45.22; 46.3)\(^{91}\).

The desire for peace cannot be divorced from the demands of love. This is the central message of the Christian sacred text (the Bible), which places accent on love. This love which covers both family members and fellow Christians also finds its broader and essential expression in one’s relation to the whole of humanity. The love demanded here (as summarized in the Sermon on the Mount, cf. Matt. 5) could effectively be seen as an antidote to hostility and division. In reference to the Sermon on the Mount, Ingo Baldermann (1987:80) summarizes that, “…the survival of humanity depends upon our ability to live in accordance with this mandate”\(^{92}\); adding that, “Jesus’ demand for love is a long-term program for overcoming hostility”\(^{93}\). Reflecting on the centrality of love in the Bible, Frans Wijsen (2007:209) holds that,

It is noteworthy that in the New Testament there are two attitudes towards neighbours, rendered with two different words: philadelphia and agape. Philadelphia is love for physical (family members) or spiritual brothers and sisters (fellow Christians). Agape is the unconditional love shown to all humanity. The former is a function of the latter. Neighbourly love within the Christian community must strengthen Christians to practise neighbourly love outside their community. Just as Christians practise neighbourly love among themselves, breaking down walls between Jews and gentiles, they must practise universal love, breaking down walls between all people\(^{94}\).

The Christian image of the Trinity brings the message further closer as it affects individuals in their mutual existence. Marjorie (2003:66) develops a logical argument from this image:

A Christian understanding of the Trinity necessarily argues that the very nature of God is a depth of unity that is established in and through irreducible diversity. The image of God in us, then, if it is truly analogical (as aspects of the tradition maintain), must likewise be a kind of unity that is

\(^{91}\) Ibid, p.98
\(^{93}\) Ibid, p. 84
\(^{94}\) Frans Wijsen, Ibid, p.209
established in and through irreducible diversity. But this cannot be achieved by any individual alone. To the contrary, it requires communal development. For the human to be made in the image of God is for the human to exist in community that is itself created in and through irreducible diversity.\textsuperscript{95}

In order to reflect the image of God, both Christians and Muslims need to remove the veil of ignorance and reach out to the religious other for proper understanding and mutual co-existence. Talking about the complexity in understanding Christian-Muslim relations, the World Council of Churches invites us to pay attention to some issues. It relates that “one of the distinguishing characteristics of modern society today is its pluralistic nature. No society in the world today, whether traditional or technologically advanced, is homogenous. Everywhere we find social groups made up of people of different backgrounds, in terms of language, culture, ethnic origin, socio-economic class, race, religion”\textsuperscript{96}. This plurality calls for respect, tolerance, and acceptance of the religious other.

Furthermore, inter-religious dialogue remains a valuable path to mutual co-existence. According to Pope John Paul II, “the dialogue between ordinary believers, harmonious and constructive sharing in the situations of daily contacts is truly a basic form of dialogue, and the one which lays the foundation for more specialized encounters.”\textsuperscript{97} The truth of this assertion bears out in the fact that “when interfaith dialogue is confined to talk and conversation, little is accomplished.”\textsuperscript{98} This dialogue between ordinary believers (the dialogue of life) remains a useful tool today in the fight against religious extremism. Unless we place a great value on life as a uniting force, other preoccupations will surely tear us apart, not minding our religious proclamations. This is an invitation to approach the other person as a fellow human being (based on the common humanity we share), and not necessarily based on any religious affiliation. In this way, people run a common course based on their fundamental values.

\textsuperscript{95} Marjorie, \textit{Ibid}, p. 66
\textsuperscript{97} Pope John Paul II, “Address to Participants in the Annual Meeting Between the Secretariat for Non-Christians and the WCC Sub-unit on Dialogue”, \textit{Bulletin} 6 (1986):146
Chia (2018:54) also sees the dialogue of life as the most basic form of dialogue. He stresses further that, “this is the day-to-day dialogue that people engage in and is obviously nonformal, unstructured, and unplanned. It is a dialogue that everyone can and should participate in. It is a dialogue that involves our whole selves as individuals and persons. It happens when we unconsciously relate with our neighbours of other faiths in the lecture hall or dining room or sports complex instead of avoiding them because of their religious difference”\textsuperscript{99}. In this form of dialogue, “there is no need for any discussion on religion; the simple act of interacting positively with someone who is of another religion is already the dialogue of life. It happens when we are nice to people of other faiths and extend our hands of friendship and hospitality to them for no reason other than because it is the appropriate thing to do”\textsuperscript{100}.

More than a mere prescription, Chia sees the dialogue of life as a Christian imperative:

> Of course, it is also the Christian thing to do, especially when authentic values and convictions are brought to the fore. In other words, the dialogue of life is “purposeless” and manifests itself when peoples of different religions welcome one another wholeheartedly while respecting the religious difference between them. It may sound easy and effortless, but it is a much-needed alternative to the demeaning and disparaging ways some people treat those who are of another religion\textsuperscript{101}.

Another level of dialogue that contributes to peaceful co-existence is what Chia (2018:55) calls the ‘dialogue of action’. This form of dialogue occurs “when people of different religions come together to address an issue or problem of common concern, they are engaged in the dialogue of action. It is also called the dialogue of the hands, as people join hands and lock arms as they go about confronting together the challenges posed to their communities”\textsuperscript{102}. It is by encountering the religious other that authentic dialogue could be initiated. The world will be a better place if we are fully committed to our faith tradition, and fully open to others, especially those who differ from us. It behooves the dialogue partners then to put away any form of prejudice and bias in order to engage in a sincere relationship with others.

\textsuperscript{99} Edmund Kee-Fook Chia, \textit{World Christianity Encounters World Religions: A Summa of Interfaith Dialogue} (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press Academic, 2018, p.54
\textsuperscript{100} Ibid
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid, p. 55
In addition, respect for culture remains a positive paradigm for inter-religious relations. Culture is a unifier. According to Frans Wijsen (2007:127), “it unites people who are otherwise divided, and it does so in situations of distress. When security is threatened people seek the support of other people, with whom they share ethnic, national, gender or religious orientations”\textsuperscript{103}. Cultures do not grow overnight. A culture holds the treasure and the story of a people. In a way, it is correct to say that culture has a creative capacity as it births and molds people, giving value to their existence as they live together in a community. Marjorie (2003:47) favours the same thrust when he says that, “each culture is a story, built up through many centuries, through which humans have developed and honed the capacity to exist meaningfully together in community. Communal existence is essential for our survival. We are social creatures with many needs, requiring one another for the fulfillment of those needs and thus for our continuation in time. Our bonding together is our survival. Cultures are the stories of our survival through generations”\textsuperscript{104}.

Flowing from the respect for culture is the emphasis on community life which is a great support and encouragement for mutual co-existence among Africans. Frans Wijsen, notes that “for most Africans, coexistence is the normal state of affairs”\textsuperscript{105}. The journey back to our cultural heritage, with a focus on communal living will, to a great extent, put us back on the right track as we look for lasting peace amidst religious differences. But community spirit could also be a double-edged reality; it could serve as a fertile field for peace, and at the same time it could create occasions for unnecessary tensions among people. Frans Wijsen (2007:127) demonstrates a good understanding of this double-edged reality, noting that, “it is seen as the foundation of peaceful coexistence of African people. Less well known are the disadvantages and risks of the same community spirit, both internally and externally. Internally there is strong solidarity and neighbourly love, but consequently also group pressure and social control. Not infrequently this leads to witchcraft accusations and violence against members of the in-group, especially those who prosper, thus giving rise to jealousy”\textsuperscript{106}. And there are instances of violence, accusations and counter-accusations, jealousy and other tensions that people experience in communities (though not often predicated on religious grounds), but which could otherwise be avoided were

\textsuperscript{103} Frans Wijsen, \textit{Ibid}, p. 127
\textsuperscript{105} \textit{Ibid}, 139
\textsuperscript{106} \textit{Ibid}, 127
individuals allowed some space outside the community pressure. This goes to say that the emphasis on community spirit is beneficial, but efforts should be made to address the not-so-desirable friction that might occur. On the external level, community spirit could be an instrument of segregation and tension. As Wijsen further captures it, “externally, outsiders or strangers are not seen as neighbours, hence neighbourly love does not apply to them”\textsuperscript{107}. This calls for moderation because too much emphasis on communal living could lead (and often leads) to the “us versus them” syndrome. The tendency here is to build and raise the walls of ethnicity so high that the boundaries become so strong separating insiders from outsiders; the insiders here being beneficiaries of communal solidarity, while the outsiders are considered as strangers and possible enemies.

One other area that needs proper balance is excessive emphasis on ethnic identity among the Igala people. This is because narrow-minded ethnic identity is a threat. Ethnocentricism could lead to cliquism which could in turn lead to intra-religious challenges. Just as we have religious bigots, there are also ethnic bigots. Quite often, what happens in politics is brought right into the churches or mosques, and people are voted into offices or rejected not based on their qualifications and talent, but based on their ethnic background. Some people pay so much allegiance to their tribal or ethnic roots, to such extent that when they mix with people from other ethnic groups, tensions are often created even within the same religious family. Within the same Christian community, for example, one hears comments like “Christians of northern extraction”, or Christians from the south”, etc. And when it comes to important functions within the Christian community (or Parish), some members rally round to gather support for their tribesmen or tribeswomen. In this case, some benefits are accorded, not based on one’s needs, but rather based on ethnic sentiments. As Bishop Kukah captures it, “regional, ethnic, cultural identities continue to weaken the emergence of a unified, cohesive Christian identity”\textsuperscript{108}. Oborji (2013:21) captures this fact very well when he describes the ethnic sentiments found in the Church in Nigeria today. He rightly holds that “exaggerated ethno-centricism and intra-religious disturbances have continued to frustrate the ongoing work of evangelisation and Church formation in the

\textsuperscript{107} \textit{Ibid}

\textsuperscript{108} Bishop Hassan Kukah, “Aid to the Church in Need”, a conference held at the Cardinal Egan Catholic Centre of New York University, USA, April 26, 2016.
continent”\(^\text{109}\). Muslims are not spared of this menace either, because tribal and regional sentiments play out greatly in their relationships with one another. For example, Muslims from the Northern part of Nigeria consider themselves to be better and purer than those from the Western part. In the face of this complicated way of living, characterized by in-fighting and division (both within the same religion and in an encounter with members of other religious groups), there is a great pastoral challenge as to a way forward. It is therefore necessary to have a mature and balanced approach that could move one out of the ethnic cocoon.

### 4.2 Recommendations for Other Regions

This stage entails recommendations or suggestions for improvement in inter-religious relations. In the first place, there is need for better appreciation of life-enhancing cultural values. In an epoch like ours when extremist ideologies and intolerance are on the rise, a return to cultural values could be a remedy in healing the hurts of division and hostility. The emphasis on *udama Igala*, for example, remains a constant reminder of the unity and oneness of the Igala people. Without running the risk of over-generalisation, it is convenient to say that each ethnic group in Africa has something similar in their own terms, which places accent on oneness. Frans Wijsen, (2007:81) gives an example of this when he says that, “Afrocentric studies emphasise community spirit, neighbourly love, solidarity, respect for strangers and so on, using such labels as *ujamaa, harambee* and *ubuntu*”\(^\text{110}\). Other terms like *igwe bu ike* (among the Igbo people of Nigeria), *botho* (among the Sesotho), and *koroyƐ mma ahoŒden* (among the Twi of Ghana) also speak to the same reality. These are values inherent in cultures; and they can help to quench the fire of division. As the story of the Igala people has shown, religious plurality can be a blessing rather than a catalyst for violence. Hewitt Marjorie (2003:81) says it much the same way that, “differences, especially religious differences, need not be the occasion for hostilities and wars, but may become the occasion for friendship, where we reach out to the other, the stranger. Difference, otherness, invites respect and friendship, rather than fear, defensiveness, and injustice.”\(^\text{111}\) This calls for a more devoted effort in appreciation of those things that unite.

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\(^{110}\) Frans Wijsen, ibid, p. 81

Furthermore, hospitality to strangers is a recommended course of action because it could contribute to peaceful co-existence among people of different backgrounds. This is not just in the acceptance of the other, but also in the acceptance of belief systems that are strange to one’s way of thinking. Hospitality to strangers is predicated on the belief that no one is a stranger on earth. Kindness to strangers is considered a sacred duty. Sometimes there is a tendency to shut out the stranger because we consider him/her an outcast, as one who is totally different from us. But, as Marjorie (2003:86) asserts, 

A theology of the reign of God can lead us to dare encountering the stranger, those of other religions. This encounter will be reaching out in friendship, and the friendship itself will be expressed in modes of dialogue and in works of mercy. Dialogue will not only give us an understanding of the other, it can give us a deeper understanding of ourselves. Interreligious dialogue, and indeed, the diversity required in the image of God and the reign of God, calls upon us not to a superficial Christianity, but to a deep Christianity. We must know ourselves historically and culturally, and offer this truth that is ourselves to the other in friendship. From the sureness of our Christianity, we are called to be open to the sureness of the stranger as well.¹¹²

By extending a hand of fellowship to those whose religious orientation differs from ours, we also learn to respect and appreciate individual differences. This enables us to relate rather than segregate. For this purpose, good religious formation is required. Ignorance is a disease, and only proper education can get one out of its shackles. Hostility towards the religious other is related to religious ignorance. The statistics from the Pew Survey (cited in chapter two) shows to what extent good religious formation is needed in Nigeria. As clearly shown, 53% of Christians express a positive view of Muslims, and 63% of Muslims express a positive view of Christians. It also reveals that the percentage of Christians who hold the opinion that Muslims are hostile towards Christians is higher (23%) compared to the percentage of Muslims who think same towards Christians (16%). In a country where every form of religious violence is blamed on Muslims, this survey is a clarion call for Christians to review the type of orientation they have

¹¹² Marjorie, Ibid, p. 86
towards Muslims. While religious education is everybody’s business, I think Christians need to make more effort in this regard in order to correct some negative impressions about Islam. Instead of playing blame game, each religious tradition needs to devote more time to good religious formation. To be effective, this education could begin with religious leaders, and then it can effectively permeate from the top to the grassroots level. This formation will first of all help one to have a good understanding of one’s religion, and in turn develop a proper approach to the adherents of other religions. This need for a better understanding of the “other” is absolutely necessary as it leads to mutual respect. This is the same stance taken by Edmund Chia (2018:53) when he calls for a change of attitude from hostility towards the ‘religious other’ to an attitude of acceptance and mutual engagement. According to him,

There is a tendency within particular religions to view religious diversity negatively, as an undesirable situation that has to be tolerated if doing away with it altogether is not a viable option. But in our increasingly globalised world where we are almost forced to come face-to-face with others who adhere to different religions, either in our own backyards or in our living rooms or on our iPhones, denying the need to engage with the religious other is probably no longer an option.\footnote{Edmund Chia, \textit{Ibid}, p.53}
CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Summary
Nigeria is a country blessed with both ethnic and religious diversity. In the face of its religious diversity, there are various instances of cooperation, mutual assistance and a united effort in the pursuit of a common goal. The two religions that claim prominence in the land (Christianity and Islam) are both united (to some extent anyway) in the fight against religious radicalism as well as anti-religious sentiments and bias. But this present age is characterized by inter-religious conflicts in many quarters, and these conflicts have pitched some Christians against some Muslims as arch-rivals. As a result, the good side of the relationship between Christians and Muslims seems to be overshadowed by the mutual fear, mistrust, aggression, hostility and eventual violence and bloodshed that have marred the history of Nigeria. This violence (painfully tagged “religious violence”) takes many forms and shapes, and it has led to deteriorating living conditions in some regions of the country. These violent attitudes have become encrusted on core authentic religious teachings. Amidst the tension and hostility, some regions live in peace irrespective of their religious differences. Saying that some regions are living in peace does not mean that these regions are not affected by the tension in other parts of the country. Whatever affects one affects the other, and when one region of the country is in pain other parts of the country feel the pinch. Among these regions that have a peaceful religious atmosphere are the Igala people. Using Igalaland as an example of a region that enjoys relative peace, Chapter Three discussed the secret to this mutual co-existence as well as efforts that are currently put in place to forestall conflicts that might be predicated on religious affiliations. The secret lies in the treasure found in their cherished culture which places emphasis on the sacredness of human life and the ethical consequences of religion. While the Igala people could serve as a lesson to other regions of the country, caution is called for so that ethnic affiliations and blood-ties do not lead to a neglect of ‘outsiders’, or those outside the consanguineal relationships.

In a country where people die in great numbers due to religious violence, it is easy to brush aside any meaningful discourse about peaceful co-existence. However, discussing inter-religious relations among the Igala people of Nigeria is a way of drawing attention to the fact that it is possible to live in peace amidst our religious differences. Violence in the name of religion is a
contradiction in terms, because religion ought to have within it the mission of breaking down walls of hostility. It should be able to dissolve every form of alienation. Where religious violence has registered its mark, efforts can still be made to restore tolerance and peace. In a heterogeneous society like Nigeria, the culture of religious tolerance is a necessity. The story of the Imam and the Pastor (seen in Chapter Two) is a testimony to the fact that the greatest hero is one who is successful in transforming a foe into a friend. If people can learn to hate, they can also learn to love. This is part of the testimony recorded by Nelson Mandela (1994:542) in his reflections on his prison experience:

I have always known that deep down in every human heart, there is mercy and generosity. No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite. Even at the grimmest times in prison, when many comrades and I were pushed to our limits, I would see a glimmer of humanity in one of the guards, perhaps just for a second, but it is enough to reassure me and keep me going. Man’s goodness is a flame that can be hidden but never extinguished.  

5.2 Conclusion
The thesis question seeks to find out what makes the Igala people live peacefully irrespective of their religious differences. Many societies and communities today are heterogeneous in their religious composition. But while some live in peace, others use the religious differences as a catalyst for violence, and even conflicts that are due to some other factors are easily baptized “religious violence”, thus making religion one of the single largest factors responsible for violence in our world today. The Igala people are not alone in their efforts at maintaining a peaceful religious atmosphere. But what makes them different from the others? Two things that make the Igala people stand out are i.) the central position given to the Ancestors; and ii.) the sacred position of Attah Igala as a unifying figure.

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Belief in the ancestors, as well as the veneration that accompanies this belief, is not unique to the Igala people. Almost every African believes in life after death and in the existence of the ancestors. It is a belief that nurtures the worldview that life does not end with physical separation. This belief cuts across religious differences. The cult of ancestors is also a celebrated phenomenon among Africans. But the Igala people not only cherish this belief, they also accord the ancestors a central position in everything, and they accord them an almost equal status with the Supreme Being. This is due to the fact that, for the traditional Igala people, the Supreme Being is so highly exalted that it is almost impossible to address him directly. The ancestors are considered to be directly responsible for the day-to-day running of earthly affairs. They play the role of God in the lives of human beings, and they are believed to be powerful enough to do ‘all things’. Thus, they evoke both reverence and fear. According to Isaiah Negedu,

> There is almost a thin line between divinities and ancestors in Igala culture. However, the ancestors (*Ibegwu*) rank second in authority to the Supreme Being. Some persons extol the *Ibegwu* as having a direct link with God himself. This is due perhaps to the role of *Ibegwu* as messengers or representatives of God. In interior villages where Igala culture is practiced to its fullest, God is not even mentioned when *Ibegwu* is the topic of discussion because it is taken for granted that they act in place of God.\(^{115}\)

Stressing further the central role of the ancestors, Negedu asserts that, “if we compare the interaction of vital forces in the universe to a spider’s web, then in day to day life, the ancestors form the principal strand without which the fabric collapses. Thus, it is the superhuman quality of their power, not the omnipotence, that makes them so valuable, and sometimes, so dreadful, to their descendants in any extremity. The ancestors are therefore both the protectors of the society as well as the source of punishment.”\(^{116}\). For the Igala people, life revolves around the ancestors, and this colours their religious worldview.

The proscription of shedding the blood of one’s relatives is dependent upon this very fact that all Igala people share a common ancestry. John Ebah (2015:132) underlines this fact that “the Igala people see themselves as kits and kins. The people think that they descended from the same


\(^{116}\) ibid
ancestral root as a result of which they see themselves as being linked together.” One cannot, therefore, conveniently invoke God and the ancestors in prayers or any other religious rituals while at the same time maltreating their descendants. Such a prayer is believed to bring curses rather than blessings on the individuals. As a religious observance, the veneration of ancestors finds its ethical consequences in the respect for the lives of their descendants. Even though the Igala people are sometimes criticized by some of their neighbours for the excessive emphasis on the role of ancestors in almost every area of their lives, their respect (and fear) of the ancestors plays a crucial role in maintaining peace among their descendants who, though separated by religious affiliations, belong to the same root. All the other life-enhancing values that ensure peaceful co-existence among the Igala people are tied to the reverence and fear of the ancestors since they are precepts believed to be handed down by the ancestors themselves. Hence, for the Igala people, the best way to please God (and the ancestors) is to pay heed to the dignity of the human person. The goal of religion, for them, is the dignity of the human person and the sacredness of life.

The second thing unique to the Igala people, which has served to maintain peace in the land, is the sacred position of the Attah Igala. The Attah is the highest human authority in Igalaland. He is not just a king, but the father of all Igala people. There are many other tribes in Nigeria that claim common ancestry (just like the Igala people do). For example, the Yoruba people believe to have descended from Oduduwa, the Idoma people descended from Iduh, and the Igbo people from Eri. They all have kings or authority figures, but none of these ethnic groups has a living human figure whom they all regard as a common father to all. This is unique to the Igala people. Their identity is built on this family bond, and it unites them regardless of their religious affiliations. There is a big difference between a king and a father. While the authority of a king is respected, having a common father gives an added sense of oneness. The fact that Igala people have a ‘father’ to whom they can all look up to as a unifying factor plays a major role in their relationships. This is because, the term Attah creates a sense of family relationship, and as many as call the man who sits on that exalted throne Attah, they see themselves as bound by a common bond which religious differences cannot separate. In asking what other groups could learn from

the Igala people, it is necessary to appreciate that which holds them together. For them, it may not necessarily be the image or position of Attah, but there is at least a unifying factor in every ethnic group. Just as a father unites his family members and protects them from life-threatening situations, so does the Attah unite and assure the peace and harmony of the Igala people. In a world characterized by religious violence, therefore, one thing to learn from the experience of the Igala people is the need to recognise and uphold the unifying figure or thing. Even on the global level, strict boundaries that once separated peoples, regions and territories (in terms of races, cultures and religions) are becoming fluid. As the talk of the world as a “global village” gains prominence, people concentrate more on things that unite rather than those that divide. Today, more than ever, we need to build bridges across religious demarcations so that where division and hostility have built a tent, a new era of religious tolerance and mutual co-existence can be celebrated.
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