

Interfaith Relations and Human Development in Southwest Nigeria: An Islamic Perspective

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Abstract

Southwest Nigeria is known for its peaceful accommodation of people from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds. By the 19th and 20th centuries, interfaith relations were, to a considerable extent, cordial among Muslims, Christians, and practitioners of Traditional Religion. This harmony contributed meaningfully to human development in the region. However, in recent times, the situation has changed due to the influence of religious fundamentalism, particularism, exclusivism, and politics, which have, in some instances, strained the relationship, particularly between Muslims and Christians. Despite efforts by faith-based groups and government agencies to promote harmony through interfaith dialogue and peace initiatives, the emergence of Islamic fundamentalism/Salafism and Christian evangelism/Pentecostalism has led to increasing tension in Muslim-Christian relations. Islamic teachings permit Muslims to engage peacefully with non-Muslims, especially Jews and Christians, in worldly matters. This paper, therefore, examines Islam's attitude towards people of other faiths and, from a historical perspective, explores the interreligious interactions that have existed among Muslims and adherents of other religions in Southwest Nigeria. It further analyses how interfaith-based organizations can contribute to human development, particularly in education, healthcare, and the economy. The paper concludes that the absence of harmonious interfaith relations may have a negative impact on human development in the Southwestern states of Nigeria.

Keywords: Interfaith relations; human development; Islam; Christianity; Traditional Religion; Southwest Nigeria

Introduction

The present-day Southwest Nigeria comprises the states of Lagos, Oyo, Osun, Ogun, Ondo, and Ekiti. These states are largely inhabited by the Yoruba people, whose population is estimated at 42,844,000, representing about 15.5% of Nigeria's total population.¹ Before the advent of Islam and Christianity, the Yoruba were predominantly traditionalists who worshipped Olodumare (God) through intermediaries such as idols, divinities, ancestors, and spirits. Between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, Islam had spread to several Yoruba communities—namely Oyo-Ile, Iwo, Iseyin, Lagos, Epe, Abeokuta, Ijebu-Ode, Ede, Osogbo, Ibadan, and Ikirun—where mosques were constructed and Islamic scholars, particularly from Ilorin, were present.² Christianity became prominent in 1842 in Badagry, a Yoruba town in Lagos State, where the Methodist Mission settled. Subsequent missionary activities led by Samuel Ajayi Crowther and Reverend Gollmer extended Christianity to other Yoruba towns such as Abeokuta, Oyo, and Ogbomoso, resulting in the establishment of churches and schools.³

Initially, both Islam and Christianity faced resistance and hostility from Traditional Religion practitioners during their spread. However, over time, they gained converts, and their adherents coexisted peacefully within Yoruba communities. Consequently, it became common to find Muslims, Christians, and traditionalists within the same families, living together and practicing their respective faiths without fear or intimidation.⁴ Yoruba Muslims would typically dine and celebrate with their Christian relatives and neighbors during Christian festivals such as Christmas and harvest, and Christians would do the same during Muslim festivals like *Ileya* (‘Īd al-Adhā) and *Itunu Awe* (‘Īd al-Fiṭr).⁵ Some Yoruba Muslims and Christians also sought spiritual or health-related services from traditional healers such as the *Babalawo* (Ifa priests) and *Onisegun* (herbalists).⁶ This atmosphere of peaceful coexistence contributed significantly to the region's educational, social, and moral development. Faith-based organizations and religious groups in the Southwest purchased land and established worship centers, schools, and health institutions.⁷ Such harmonious interfaith relations were particularly evident during the colonial and early post-colonial periods of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, beginning in the late twentieth century and continuing into the twenty-first, the region has witnessed increasing religious

¹ Yoruba Population, www.en.m.wikipedia.org, 2022.

² Ogunbado, Ahamad Faosiy, "Historical Development of Muslim Education in Yorubaland, Southwest Nigeria," *Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies* 4, no. 8 (2016): 13-21.

³ Peel, J.D.Y, *Christianity, Islam and Orisa Religion* (University of California Press, 2016).

⁴ Opeloye, Muibi O., "Islam and Inter-Religious Relations in Yorubaland," in *Islam in Yorubaland: History, Education and Culture*, ed. Muibi O. Opeloye et al. (Lagos: University of Lagos Press, 2018), 120–135.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Babalola, E.O., "The Impact of African Magic and Medicine on the Growth and Development of Modern Nigeria: The Yoruba Experience," in *Religion, Governance and Development in the 21st Century*, ed. Raji, Dopamu, et al. (Ago-Iwoye: NASR, 2006), 155–167.

⁷ Banji, Baiyeri Hezekiah, "The Role of Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs) in Human Development: A Study of Kogi State" (M.A. Dissertation, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, 2013).

enmity, intolerance, violence, and exclusivism, all of which have negatively impacted interfaith relations and human development.⁸

Despite the efforts of faith-based groups, individuals, and government agencies to promote peaceful interreligious relations through dialogue and peace initiatives, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism/Salafism and Christian evangelism/Pentecostalism has contributed to a breakdown in Muslim-Christian relations.⁹ It is against this backdrop that the present paper explores the attitude of Islam toward people of other faiths, particularly Jews and Christians—and examines how interfaith relations, viewed through the Islamic lens, can foster human development in the areas of education, health, and the economy in Southwest Nigeria.

Understanding Interfaith Relations and Human Development in the Nigerian Context

Interfaith relations and human development are two closely related concepts. Harmonious interfaith relations can promote development within a human society, while hostile interfaith relations may hinder such progress. The term "interfaith" refers to relationships or interactions among people of different religious backgrounds. It is defined as “between or connected with people of different religions,” and also as “involving persons of different religious faiths, or relating to actions occurring between or involving persons belonging to different religions.”¹⁰ The World Council of Churches distinguishes between *inter-religion* and *interfaith*, explaining that while the former often refers to interactions among Christian denominations, *interfaith* specifically concerns relationships among followers of different religions such as Muslims, Christians, Hindus, or Jews.¹¹ In this context, interfaith is better understood as a cooperative and respectful engagement between people of different religious worldviews and traditions.

Carey Inbuon, quoting Jesudason Baskar, defines interfaith relations as:

...a cordial and meaningful relationship between different religious communities. It includes understanding the faith and practices of others, appreciating the good elements in their culture and valuing the contribution of the people of other faiths towards establishing peace and harmony, restoring justice and the rights of people and working together for the welfare and equality of all people¹²

On the other hand, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) defines human development as “a process of enlarging people’s choices—to lead a long and

⁸ Salisu, Moshood Taiwo, “Custom and Customary Practices (Adah/’Uruf): Implications for the Contemporary Practice of Islam in Yorubaland,” in *Religion, Peace and Development in Nigeria: A Festschrift in Honour of Professor Odumuyiwa*, ed. Akanni et al. (Olabisi Onabanjo University, 2014), 15–29.

⁹ Akintola, Ishaq L., “Contemporary Challenges Facing Islam in Yorubaland,” in *Islam in Yorubaland*, 2018.

¹⁰ *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, 10th ed., Oxford University Press, 2020.

¹¹ *Interfaith*, www.thefreedictionary.com/inter-religion, 2020.

¹² Inbuon, Carey. “Inter-Faith Relations and the Different Approaches in the Theology of Religions.” www.academia.edu, 2022.

healthy life, to be educated, and to enjoy a decent standard of living, as well as having political freedom, guaranteed human rights, and self-respect.”¹³ Human development, therefore, involves building human capacities and ensuring people’s access to quality education, healthcare, and social services. It also includes removing obstacles to personal freedom and empowering people to reason critically and participate actively in governance.¹⁴ Sadly, Nigeria ranks low on the Human Development Index (HDI). As of 2020, most Nigerians lived on less than \$1.50 per day, life expectancy stood at 53 years, and only 0.98% and 5.7% of the national budget were allocated to the health and education sectors respectively.¹⁵

In the Nigerian context, interfaith relations refer to the interactions and engagements between adherents of the three dominant religious traditions: African Traditional Religion, Islam, and Christianity. These interactions may be peaceful or tense, depending on the prevailing religious and socio-political atmosphere. Importantly, human development efforts in Nigeria are often led by faith-based organizations such as the Federation of Muslim Women’s Associations in Nigeria (FOMWAN), Nasrul-Lahi-il-Fatih Society of Nigeria (NASFAT), the Christian Rural and Urban Development Association of Nigeria (CRUDAN), and the Christian Health Association of Nigeria (CHAN).¹⁶ These groups mobilize resources and support for the poor and less privileged, sponsoring and managing programs that address poverty, illiteracy, and social exclusion.¹⁷ For instance, interfaith initiatives like the Nigerian Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) and the Interfaith HIV/AIDS Council have promoted mutual understanding among Christians and Muslims, especially during public health emergencies such as the HIV/AIDS and COVID-19 pandemics.¹⁸ Furthermore, missionary organizations such as the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), Catholic missions, NASFAT, and FOMWAN have all contributed significantly to human development through service delivery in education, healthcare, and economic empowerment.¹⁹

Islam’s Response to Interfaith Relations

Islam is one of the major monotheistic religions, with an estimated 1.9 billion adherents globally. Other world religions include Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Baha’i, Shinto, Jainism, and Zoroastrianism. The Glorious Qur’an refers to non-Muslims using various terms such as polytheists (*mushrikūn*), pagans, Jews, Christians, and Sabians (Q2:62; Q2:221; Q109). The Qur’anic expression *Ahl al-Kitāb* (People of the Book) specifically refers to Jews and Christians, whose prophets—Mūsā (Moses) and ‘Īsā (Jesus)—were given divine

¹³ *The Real Wealth of Nations: Pathways to Human Development*, UNDP, <http://www.undp.org>, 2022.

¹⁴ *The Real Wealth of Nations: Pathways to Human Development*, UNDP, <http://www.undp.org>, 2022.

¹⁵ Ita, Ene Blessing. “Human Development in Nigeria.” *International Journal of African and Asian Studies* (2020): 40–49.

¹⁶ *Ibid*

¹⁷ Banji, Baiyeri Hezekiah. “The Role of Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs) in Human Development: A Study of Kogi State.” (M.A. Dissertation, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, 2013)

¹⁸ *Ibid*

¹⁹ Ibrahim, Rafiu Adebayo. “The Role of Muslims in Healthcare Service Delivery in Nigeria,” in *Religion and Development in Nigeria*, ed. Y.A. Quadri et al. (London: Adonis & Abbey, 2018), 104–116.

scriptures: the *Tawrāt* (Torah) and the *Injīl* (Gospel), respectively.²⁰ Islamic teachings, including the Qur'an, Hadith, and historical practices of early Muslims, support peaceful relations with people of other faiths. For example, Muslims are permitted to eat food prepared by Jews and Christians and to marry their women (Q5:5). Islam also upholds freedom of religion and calls for respect toward all places of worship. The Qur'an states:

“...And had it not been that Allah checks the people, some by means of others, there would have been demolished monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques in which the name of Allah is much mentioned...” (Q22:40)

Historically, Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and his companions coexisted peacefully with Jews, Christians, and other religious communities in Madinah. The Prophet established the *Constitution of Madinah*, which granted equal protection and rights to all residents—including Jews and polytheists—regarding life, property, religious freedom, and social justice.²¹ Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are collectively referred to as the Abrahamic faiths due to their shared lineage from Prophet Ibrāhīm (Abraham), who is regarded as a patriarch of monotheism. These three religions share fundamental teachings in belief in One God and righteous living. The Qur'an acknowledges this common spiritual heritage:

“Mankind were [of] one religion [before their deviation]; then Allah sent the prophets as bringers of good tidings and warners and sent down with them the Scripture in truth to judge between the people concerning that in which they differed...” (Q2:213)

Muslims are encouraged to establish friendly relations with peace-loving, kind, and honest people of other faiths. The Qur'an praises the uprightness and integrity of some members of the earlier religious communities:

“They are not all alike. Among the People of the Scripture is a community standing [in obedience], reciting the verses of Allah during periods of the night and prostrating [in prayer]... And whatever good they do—never will it be removed from them...” (Q3:113–115)

In the early years of Islam, Prophet Muhammad entrusted the safety of Muslim refugees to the Christian king of Abyssinia, Negus Ashamah ibn Abjar (al-Najāshī), who offered them protection from persecution. Similarly, a Jewish rabbi named Mukhayriq fought alongside the Prophet at the Battle of Uhud.²² Sayyid Sabiq, quoting Ibn Muflih, states that a credible Jew or Christian with medical expertise may treat a sick Muslim, and such individuals may also be entrusted with financial dealings.²³ Islam permits hospitality, visitation, and the exchange of gifts with non-Muslims. During religious festivals such as Easter, Passover, Hanukkah, and Diwali, Muslims are allowed to

²⁰ *The Glorious Qur'an*, Q2:62; Q2:221; Q5:5; Q109

²¹ Thowhidul, Islam Md., “Peaceful Coexistence of Various Religious Groups in Islam,” *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 8(2), 2018: 183–203.

²² Gulen, Fethullah, *Muhammad, the Messenger of God* (USA: Tughra Books, 2014)

²³ Sabiq, Sayyid, as quoted by Ibn Muflih in *Islamic Education Trust, Muslim Relations with Christians, Jews and Others* (Minna: Dawah Institute, 2018).

receive food and gifts. Ibn Taymiyyah opined that accepting gifts on such occasions does not imply approval of religious beliefs but rather reflects social courtesy. Ashraf Ali Thanawi similarly permitted the practice, emphasizing that the intention is to honor the individual, not the religious celebration itself.²⁴

Regarding festive greetings like "Merry Christmas" or "Happy Easter," opinions among scholars differ. However, prominent Islamic jurists such as Abdullah bin Bayyah, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Mustafa Zarqa, Rashid Rida, and Hatim al-'Awn have allowed such greetings under *mu'āmalāt* (social interaction), as distinct from *'ibādah* (acts of worship). They argue that goodwill greetings during others' religious festivals are a reciprocal act, just as non-Muslims extend greetings during Ramadan and the Eids.²⁵

The Qur'an enjoins Muslims to show kindness and justice to peaceful non-Muslims:

“Allah does not forbid you from those who do not fight you because of religion and do not expel you from your homes—from being righteous toward them and acting justly toward them. Indeed, Allah loves those who act justly.” (Q60:8)

Interfaith dialogue is encouraged in Islam, especially among the Abrahamic faiths. The Qur'an calls Muslims to engage in theological discussions that emphasize shared beliefs and mutual respect:

“Say: O People of the Book, come to a word that is equitable between us and you—that we will not worship except Allah and not associate anything with Him...” (Q3:64)

Thus, Islam's teachings and historical precedents support interfaith engagement based on justice, kindness, cooperation, and shared human values.

Interfaith Relations in Southwest Nigeria – A Retrospect

By the close of the nineteenth century, both Islam and Christianity had gained significant followership in the Yoruba-speaking region of Southwest Nigeria. Following British colonization in the 1890s, a large proportion of the Yoruba population had converted to either Islam or Christianity, resulting in a decline in the number of adherents of Traditional Religion by the 1950s.²⁶ With support from European missionaries and the introduction of Western education, Christianity spread rapidly and attracted many converts. Eventually, even Muslim families began sending their children to Christian missionary schools—many of whom converted to Christianity. During this era, a notable feature of Yoruba society was the spirit of religious tolerance among Muslims, Christians, and Traditional Religion practitioners. This was reflected in the popular Yoruba proverb: “*E j'oni Ifa o bo Ifa, e j'olosun o bo Osun, e j'elegun o bo egun re, k'ayé le gùn,*” meaning, “Let the Ifa devotee worship his

²⁴ Sabiq, Sayyid, as quoted by Ibn Muflih in *Islamic Education Trust, Muslim Relations with Christians, Jews and Others* (Minna: Dawah Institute, 2018).

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Peel, J.D.Y., *Christianity, Islam and Orisa Religion* (University of California Press, 2016).

Ifa, the Osun devotee his Osun, and the masquerade worshipper his Egun, so that the world may be peaceful.”²⁷

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Yoruba Muslims and Christians maintained interpersonal and informal relationships based on maturity, mutual respect, love, and solidarity. Families often had members from more than one faith tradition, and religious identity did not prevent celebration or communal participation. Muslims would often join their Christian relatives in celebrating Christmas, while Christians reciprocated during the *Ileya* (‘Īd al-Adhā) festival.²⁸

As Muibi Opeloye recalls:

“Recalling our childhood days, the Muslim and Christian festivals provided unique opportunity for social interactions, as Muslims would normally felicitate with their Christian relations and friends during Christmas while Christians on the one hand would felicitate with their Muslim friends and relations during *Ileya* festival. Indeed, it was a common practice during Christmas for the Christians in the spirit of religious accommodation and understanding to invite a Muslim cleric to help slaughter his goat or chicken to make it lawful for the Muslim relations and friends to consume. Personally as the son of recognized Imam in the neighbourhood, it was my fortune to be invited to slaughter goats for Christmas festivities. Rendering such a service had customarily entitled me to be compensated with the neck of the goat so slaughtered after roasting.”²⁹

In Ekiti State, adherents of all three major religions—Traditional, Christian, and Islamic—participated in shared socio-religious events such as funerals, weddings, and naming ceremonies. It was also common for some individuals to practice **syncretism**, worshipping or fasting together. In 2009, the Catholic Bishop of Ekiti, Michael Olatunji Fagun, attended the ‘Īd al-Fiṭr celebration. In return, Imam Jamiu Kewulere, President of the League of Imams and Alfas in Ekiti State, joined Christians in Easter celebrations.³⁰ This interfaith spirit extended to participation in traditional Yoruba festivals such as the Egungun, Ogun, Osun, and Eyo festivals. Some Muslims and Christians saw these events as cultural—not religious—practices. For instance, the *Idiroko* festival in Ado-Ekiti became a major event that brought all religious groups together, including through activities like *Jumu‘at* prayers.

A popular song among Yoruba Muslims and Christians also reflects this inclusive attitude:

Awa o soro ile wa o (2ce)

Igbagbo o pe ooye!

²⁷ Opeloye, Muibi O., “Islam and Inter-Religious Relations in Yorubaland,” in *Islam in Yorubaland*, 2018.

²⁸ *ibid*

²⁹ *ibid*

³⁰ Bello, Mufutau Olusola, “Islam and Inter-Religious Harmony in Ekiti State,” in *New Paradigm in Arabic and Islamic Studies in Nigeria*, 2018.

Igbagbo o pe ka wa ma soro

Awa o soro ile wa o.

Awa o soro ile wa o (2ce)

Imale o pe ooye!

Imale o pe ka wa ma soro

Awa o soro ile wa o

Meaning:

We shall observe our traditional festivals/rites (2ce)

Christianity does not prevent us from observing our traditional festivals/rites

We shall observe our traditional festivals/rites

We shall observe our traditional festivals/rites

Islam does not prevent us from observing our traditional festivals/rites

We shall observe our traditional festivals/rites³¹

One influential figure in promoting interfaith understanding was Professor Ismail Babatunde Balogun of the University of Ilorin. In 1975, due to his commitment to interfaith scholarship, he introduced Christian Studies into the Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies and later renamed it the Department of Religions—where Islam, Christianity, and Traditional Religion continue to be taught.³² However, despite these positive developments, there have also been episodes of hostility and strained relations. These were often fueled by exclusivist preaching, offensive religious songs, and doctrinal confrontations. Salisu documents some notable incidents:

- i. The 1970 Shaykh Dandawi–Ogun worshippers clash in Ado-Ekiti
- ii. The 1972 Shaykh Dandawi–Alafoyo conflict
- iii. The 1978 Ajagbemokeferi vs. Oloolu religious riot
- iv. The 1982 Osogbo Muslim–Osun devotees conflict
- v. The 1986 Ilorin Palm Sunday disturbances
- vi. The 2008 Gangaro Masquerade–Muslim conflict in Osogbo³³

More recently, tensions have been fueled by disputes such as the wearing of hijab by Muslim girls in public schools. In some cases, these disputes led to litigation and social unrest. Akintola notes that Muslim students—particularly females who wear hijab—are often vulnerable to discrimination. In 2013, six final-year students were denied

³¹ Salisu, Moshood Taiwo, “Custom and Customary Practices (Adah/’Uruf),” in *Religion, Peace and Development in Nigeria*, 2014.

³² Mujahid Hamza Shittu, “An Appraisal of ‘Dialogue of the Truth’ and Inter-Religious Dialogue in Nigeria: A Muslim View-Point” *African Journal of Religion, Philosophy and Culture (AJRPC)* 1(1) (2020):18. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/354858461>)

³³ Salisu, Moshood Taiwo, “Custom and Customary Practices (Adah/’Uruf),” in *Religion, Peace and Development in Nigeria*, 2014.

practical exposure at the SDA Hospital in Ile-Ife for refusing to remove their hijabs, thereby missing their examinations³⁴

Additionally, aggressive forms of da‘wah and Christian evangelism have contributed to interfaith strain. Misunderstanding and misinterpretation of religious doctrines such as *Sharī‘ah*, *jihād*, *Trinity*, *sonship of Christ*, and *crucifixion* have led to confrontations between Muslims and Christians. As Opeloye observes:

Our style of evangelism or religious propagation particularly creates negative effect on our inter-religious relation. This is due to the use of offensive and provocative language which engenders discord, hatred and animosity between the Muslims and the Christians. But this should not be so considering the fact that the two religions preach peaceful co-existence, religious tolerance and love of others in their basic tenets³⁵

Despite these challenges, harmonious interfaith relations can significantly enhance human development if guided by the values and ethics espoused by the respective religions. The next section explores how Islamic principles can foster such development in Southwest Nigeria.

Islamic Perspectives on Interfaith Harmony and Human Development in Southwest Nigeria

The Southwestern region of Nigeria is a multi-religious society where the teaching, learning, and practice of religion thrive. For several decades, Islam, Christianity, and African Traditional Religion have coexisted in the Yoruba-speaking states. Unlike Islam and Christianity, Traditional Religion is considered conservative and non-missionary. It is deeply rooted in the cultural and social fabric of the people and is passed down through generations. Islam and Christianity, however, have enjoyed broader institutional growth and patronage.³⁶ Islam is a monotheistic religion that promotes peace, especially in a multi-religious society like Southwest Nigeria. Through the concept of *mu‘āmalāt* (worldly transactions), Islam encourages harmonious interaction with people of other faiths who are peaceful and respectful. Islam values human development and promotes it across all aspects of life. Education is one of the cardinal areas where Islam, Christianity, and Traditional Religion all emphasize the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom. Both the Qur’an and the Bible strongly advocate for the acquisition of useful knowledge. Verses such as Proverbs 9:9, 16:16, and 2 Timothy 2:15 in the Bible, as well as Qur’anic verses like Q2:282, Q58:11, and Q96:1–5, all emphasize the transformative power of education. Even the *Ifa corpus* in *Eji Ogbe* and *Ika Meji* calls for the development of good character through knowledge.³⁷

Islamic organizations such as Ansar-ud-Deen, Ahmadiyya, Nawair-ud-Deen, and Nasrul-Lahi-il-Fatih Society of Nigeria (NASFAT) have significantly contributed to educational development among the Yoruba. They have established schools, colleges,

³⁴ Akintola, Ishaq L., “Contemporary Challenges Facing Islam in Yorubaland,” in *Islam in Yorubaland*, 2018.

³⁵ Opeloye, Muibi O., *Building Bridges of Understanding Between Islam and Christianity in Nigeria*, Lagos State University Inaugural Lecture Series, 2001.

³⁶ Ibrahim, Rafiu Adebayo, “The Role of Muslims in Healthcare Service Delivery in Nigeria,” in *Religion and Development in Nigeria*, ed. Y.A. Quadri et al. (London: Adonis & Abbey, 2018), 104–116.

³⁷ *Ifa corpus*, retrieved from <https://www.afrikaiswoke.com/ifa>, 2022.

and universities where Muslims, Christians, and Traditional Religion adherents study and work together.³⁸ The Prophet Muhammad encouraged Muslims to seek beneficial knowledge from all sources, including non-Muslims. For instance, after the Battle of Badr in 624 CE, literate non-Muslim captives were asked to teach unlettered Muslims in exchange for their freedom. This initiative accelerated literacy and laid the foundation for future intellectual and social development.³⁹ Inspired by such principles, Yoruba Muslims and Christians can support interfaith educational initiatives, including scholarships for underprivileged but deserving students regardless of their religious background. In the area of healthcare, Islam places strong emphasis on the well-being of individuals. Islamic scholars and practitioners, especially in Yorubaland, have historically used *Ruqyah* (spiritual healing), black seed (*habbatus-sauda*), and Qur'anic inscriptions (*hantu*) for the treatment of various ailments, including infections and infertility.⁴⁰ Traditional Religion also contributes to healthcare through indigenous medicine, especially in areas such as obstetrics, orthopedics, and psychiatry.⁴¹

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said:

“Whoever wakes up secure in his home, healthy in his body, and with enough provisions for the day—it is as though he possesses the whole world.”⁴²

Similarly, another narration states:

“A strong believer is better and more beloved to Allah than a weak believer.”⁴³

Commenting on the importance of well-being, Ibn al-Qayyim notes that a believer can only attain excellence in this world and the next through certitude and good health.⁴⁴

Several Muslim organizations have established health centers in Yorubaland. For example, Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'ah has hospitals in Ifako-Ijaiye, Apapa, and Ijebu-Ode. NASFAT also organizes regular medical outreach programs. In 2017, over 800 people benefited from a health initiative by NASFAT Agency for Zakat and Sadaqat (NAZAS) in collaboration with the Islamic Medical Association of Nigeria (IMAN). Both Muslims and non-Muslims received treatment, screenings, education, and free medications from medical experts.⁴⁵ Christian groups have also played significant roles in healthcare, especially during the pre- and post-colonial periods. Their hospitals

³⁸ Ogunbado, Ahamad Faosiy, “Historical Development of Muslim Education in Yorubaland,” *Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies* 4, no. 8 (2016): 13–21.

³⁹ Gulen, Fethullah, *Muhammad, the Messenger of God* (USA: Tughra Books, 2014).

⁴⁰ Ibrahim, “Role of Muslims in Healthcare.”

⁴¹ Babalola, E.O., “The Impact of African Magic and Medicine,” in *Religion, Governance and Development*, ed. Raji et al. (Ago-Iwoye: NASR, 2006).

⁴² Al-Jibālī, Muhammad, *The Inevitable Journey Part 1: Sickness*, (Al-Kitab & As-Sunnah Publishing, 2003), 33.

⁴³ Ibid., 35.

⁴⁴ Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, *Zād al-Ma'ād fī Hady Khayr al-'Ibād* (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Rayyan, 1998).

⁴⁵ Salawu, Saheed, “Zakat and Sadaqat Foundation Distributes N39m to Widows, Others in Lagos,” *Nigerian Tribune*, July 1, 2022.

continue to serve the general population across religious lines. During the HIV/AIDS and COVID-19 pandemics, faith-based organizations like NASFAT and Ansar-ud-Deen were actively involved in public health campaigns and the distribution of medical resources.⁴⁶ It would be beneficial to establish interfaith health alliances across the region to improve access to care for all Yoruba people, regardless of faith.

Islam also encourages lawful economic activity. The Qur'an allows trade and commerce (Q2:275) and promotes systems such as *Mushārah* (joint ownership) and *Muḍārah* (profit-sharing partnerships). These have led to the rise of Islamic banks, microfinance institutions, and cooperative societies, which empower Yoruba Muslims through non-interest loans.⁴⁷ Organizations like the Zakat and Sadaqat Foundation (ZSF) and Al-Hayat Relief Organization in Ijebu-Ode offer both Muslims and non-Muslims business startup capital, vocational equipment, and financial support. In 2022, ZSF disbursed ₦39 million to 104 beneficiaries in Lagos, including widows and persons with health challenges.⁴⁸ This aligns with the Prophet's teaching:

“Whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day should take care of his neighbor.”⁴⁹

Ultimately, Islam promotes a model of interfaith relations grounded in peace, justice, mutual respect, and shared development goals (Q2:190; Q5:2; Q60:8). Such harmony is necessary for advancing human development in Southwest Nigeria.

Conclusion

This study has established that Southwest Nigeria is a multi-religious society in which interfaith relations exist among adherents of Islam, Christianity, and African Traditional Religion. Although Islam and Christianity initially faced resistance from Traditional Religion practitioners in the 19th century, both religions eventually gained acceptance and widespread following across Yoruba communities in the 20th century and beyond. The study also shows that Islamic scripture, supported by historical evidence, affirms that Muslims may engage and interact with people of other faiths, specially Jews and Christians, so long as such interfaith relations foster peace, justice, and social development. Qur'anic guidance and the practices of the Prophet Muhammad endorse coexistence, mutual respect, and collaboration in worldly affairs such as education, healthcare, and economic development.

In both the colonial and early post-colonial periods, Southwest Nigeria witnessed varying degrees of both strained and harmonious interfaith relations. However, periods of harmony—particularly among Muslims, Christians, and Traditional Religion practitioners—have yielded significant human development across the region. These include the establishment of schools, hospitals, vocational programs, and poverty alleviation projects by faith-based organizations such as Ansar-ud-Deen, Nawair-ud-Deen, NASFAT, and the Zakat and Sadaqat Foundation (ZSF). The findings of this study suggest that adherents of the three major religious traditions in the region can still

⁴⁶ Ibrahim, “Role of Muslims in Healthcare.”

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ Salawu, “Zakat and Sadaqat Foundation Distributes.”

⁴⁹ Khan, Muhammad Muhsin, trans., *The Translation of the Meanings of Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, vol. 8 (Saudi Arabia: Darussalam, 1997).

work together under a peaceful framework to promote human development. Interreligious coalitions can be formed to advocate for education, healthcare access, economic empowerment, good governance, and peaceful coexistence. Every Yoruba individual, regardless of faith, should be allowed to practice their religion without fear, discrimination, or marginalization. In terms of regional security and development, the three religious communities can collectively offer prayers and mobilize resources to support peace and stability across the six Yoruba-speaking states. Moreover, fair and equitable opportunities in public employment and leadership positions should be guaranteed to all, regardless of religious affiliation. Ultimately, Islam and the other faiths in Southwest Nigeria share moral and ethical teachings that, when harnessed through interfaith engagement, can lead to greater social harmony and sustainable human development. It is therefore essential that Yoruba Muslims and members of other faiths commit themselves to establishing justice, peace, and collaborative development across the region, and by extension, throughout Nigeria.

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