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# Beyond Conversational Dialogue: Constructing a Catholic Dialogical Ethical Model for Multi-Religious Nigeria

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**Abstract:** This article argues that the Catholic Church in Nigeria needs to move beyond interreligious dialogue that dwells more on Councils' interactions and discourses to develop a dialogical ethical framework that engages religious multiplicity in a more active capacity. Although Nigeria's religious diversity necessitates interreligious dialogue, that alone is insufficient for constructing concrete ethics of dialogue. The article thus argued for an ethical framework tagged *one family, many flavours*. The theological sense of the proposal is rooted in Catholic social teachings but open to engagement with other religious traditions for mutual respect and social justice. The religious scope of the article is on Roman Catholicism and the Nigeria Muslim *Ummah*. The article addressed related ethical challenges confronting Nigeria's interreligious landscape as a diverse religious community. Primary and secondary sources were used in gathering information for the article; thus, scriptural texts and traditions in Islam, as well as sources in Roman Catholicism, were theologically engaged. The suggested model acknowledges the importance of retaining one's religious identity while also recognising the importance of interreligious dialogue and the right of the religious other in ethical matters. The article is envisioned to promote conversations about translating dialogical frameworks into practice.

**Keywords:** Nigeria; Catholic Church; Islam; Muslims; interreligious dialogue; dialogical ethics; diversity

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**Citation:** Ajibola, Ilesanmi G. 2024. Beyond Conversational Dialogue: Constructing a Catholic Dialogical Ethical Model for Multi-Religious Nigeria. *Religions* 15: 823. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15070823

Academic Editor: SimonMary Asese A. Aihiokhai

Received: 26 April 2024
Revised: 25 June 2024
Accepted: 29 June 2024
Published: 8 July 2024

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## 1. Introduction

Nigeria, a vibrant tapestry of cultures and beliefs, finds itself at the crossroads of religious plurality. The country's varied and diverse population creates a complex and fascinating situation that arises from its "triple heritage" of indigenous religious traditions, Islam, and Christianity. It is the most populous nation in Africa (Worldometer 2024), with a complex interreligious landscape in which Christianity and Islam primarily dominate. Amidst the wide variety of cultures and religions, the Roman Catholic Church, the lone standing single Church among the five constituting associations of the Christian Association of Nigeria (Christian Association of Nigeria 1988), plays a significant role in shaping the lives of millions and engaging in interreligious dialogue across the country. However, navigating the diverse country's multi-religious terrain presents unique challenges and demands clear ethical principles to ensure respectful and fruitful interactions.

For the purpose of clarity and focus, the article concentrates on the interreligious dialogue between Catholics and Muslims in the country. While the interreligious dialogue is an ongoing and complex process, it is important to recognise that the Roman Catholic Church's engagement with the Muslim community (Muslim ummah) in Nigeria has had both successes and challenges. The experience is not unusual as interreligious dialogue that is held in an atmosphere of truth challenges preconceptions about traditions and urges participants to engage with such experiences as a vibrant and evolving practice across time and context (Tilley 2011). A continuous reassessment of the dialogical patterns will reassure the society of a robust understanding and cooperation between the dialoguing religious communities.

It is crucial to approach the low points of the Church's theology of interreligious relations, especially with Muslims in Nigeria, with its associated nuances and recognise the efforts made by individuals and organisations to foster understanding and cooperation between the two religious communities. The need for continuous revisiting of the traditions in light of recent interreligious experiences is what prompted this article. Occasion as a period of religious tensions and conflicts, particularly in the northern regions of the country, calls for a reassessment of the relational ethics between the Church and the Muslim community in the country. For instance, the rise of extremist groups, such as Boko Haram, has led to violence and persecution targeting both Christians and Muslims. In such situations, the Church's efforts to engage in dialogue and promote understanding face limitations due to the volatile nature of the conflict and the ideological motivations of the extremist groups involved.

While the Catholic Church may be promoting interreligious dialogue and respect for religious diversity, there have been instances where the actions of individual missionaries or religious groups within the Church and other Christian denominations have been perceived as undermining the Muslim community's beliefs or as seeking conversions. This perception has, at times, strained relationships and hindered effective dialogue between the two communities.

The instances cited above raise concern about the theology and ethics of interreligious relations between the Roman Catholic Church in Nigeria and the Muslim ummah in the country. This concern is made without prejudice to the numerous instances where the Roman Catholic Church in Nigeria has actively engaged in interreligious dialogue and worked towards promoting harmony and understanding between Christians and Muslims. A historical reassessment of the relationships does not threaten the truth or viability of doctrinal principles but may lead to their reformulation (Tilley 2011). Hence, profound operational ethics of interreligious relationships that speak to the common conscience of the religious adherent across the divide remain desirable. According to O'Collins (2008), verses such as these link the "words of judgment" to the history of suffering that marked the Israelites' numerous interactions with the surrounding countries. However, that isn't the complete story; "the Old Testament also acknowledges the gracious goodness of God towards the nations and foreigners" (O'Collins 2008). For instance, passages like Genesis 15:1, 31:42, and 49:24, which refer to "the Shield of Abraham", "the Fear of Isaac", and "the Mighty One of Jacob", suggest an appreciation for the different traditions, shrines, and even gods associated with diverse tribal groups. As Hobbs (1973) notes, the Yahwist tradition in the Old Testament "neither denounced all the other gods in the tradition as bogus or as alien, nor did it demand allegiance to Yahweh alone," but instead "arranged for another possibility of 'creating the unity of the Israelite society in terms of faith in Yahweh as Lord of history.'"

One must be quick to note that while there was a strong nationalist identity in Israel, there was also an awareness of Yahweh as the God of the entire world. This is evident in the flood story in Genesis 5:32–10:1, where God's punitive and redemptive act is depicted as universal. An excellent example of God's relationship with non-Israelite religious icons are Melchizedek, the Canaanite priest (Genesis 18:14ff), Job (Job 1:8), and Balaam, the Midianite diviner (Numbers 23:3f); these personalities provide unmistakable proof that God's benevolent actions must not be restricted to any one faith or group of people.

The New Testament similarly towed the same path as the Old Testament on interreligious issues. Matthew 5:17 states that Jesus did not come to destroy the Law nor the Prophets, and that Jesus recognized the authority of the Jewish tradition. His teachings on love, which know no boundary, are exemplified in his positive responses to the faith of non-Jews, such as the Roman centurion (Luke 7:9), and the Syrophoenician woman (Matthew 15:28). Similarly, his prayer in John 17:9–11 implies an "inclusive recommendation of the oneness of all followers of God" (Iwuchukwu 2015, p. 277).

While the Bible depicts an openness to religious pluralism, Christian attitudes towards other religions have varied throughout history. Nevertheless, an in-depth study of the Old

and New Testaments reveals a biblical basis for affirming the validity of diverse religious expressions rather than religious exclusivism. This conclusion corroborates the views of scholars such as Gerald O'Collins (2008), who has written a book that "assemble[s] and assess[es] the biblical testimony about the salvation of God's other people or the 'others' [as he calls them]." According to O'Collins (2008), throughout the Bible, there are "testimonies that illuminate the universal scope of God's love and offer of salvation."

## 2. Nigerian Religious Landscape and the Need for Informed Dialogical Principle

It must be stated from the outset that the Nigerian religious landscape is diverse and complex, with a constitutional commitment to interreligious dialogue and religious freedom in Section 38(1) of the Constitution of the country (Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999). It is equally important to state that the country's religious landscape is also fertile ground for interreligious tensions (Akpanika 2017). While several instances of interreligious conflicts have occurred in the country, claiming a huge number of lives and properties (Van Gorder 2012), the people and government of Nigeria desire to live in peace (Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999). Thus, the role of the Catholic Church in ensuring the peaceful coexistence that the people sought is almost a given, considering its prominent status in the country, as well as its influence on the citizens and government of the country.

Nigeria has had religious disputes that endanger security in the country. Rising tensions along religious, regional, ethnic, and political fault lines, damaging interreligious relations, have characterised the chequered interreligious tapestry of the country. Since interreligious disputes mainly account for the majority of these conflicts, actions to reduce tensions are necessary. Thus, in recent years, there have been concerted efforts by Catholic leaders and theologians to address the challenges and promote interreligious dialogue. For example, Aihiokhai (2012), a systematic theologian in the Roman Catholic tradition, conducted in-depth ethnological research that proposed hospitality as a means to address religious violence and foster positive interactions among different religions in Nigeria. Another significant effort, as reported by Samasumo (2020), is by Archbishop Ignatius Kaigama, the former President of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria, who has been actively involved in interreligious initiatives and has worked towards building bridges between Christians and Muslims in the country. In a similar vein, Idoko (2022) proposed interreligious communication through one-on-one interactions, creating a dialogue culture and institutionalizing conversation programs. Idoko gave several instances, including the Muslim–Christian Agency for Rural Development, research on how religion is portrayed in the media, youth dialogue education, and monastery exchanges. In order to build mutual understanding between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria and reform society, Idoko contends that practical discussion centred on cooperative projects and addressing shared concerns is essential to proffering a solution (Idoko 2022).

Despite the various proposals, as related in the preceding paragraph, religious violence continues to be a significant issue, with millions facing hateful messages targeting culturally and religiously different individuals. While some solutions are based on shared values, a comprehensive model is needed to expand and integrate these solutions. To achieve this aim, there is a need to further interrogate the official role of the Church in interreligious relations with the Muslims in Nigeria's viz-a-viz related texts (sacred and secular) and traditions in the Church's interreligious direction and the Muslims' heritage of the same sources.

## 3. The Catholic Church's Relation with the Muslim *Ummah* in Nigeria

Nigeria's religio-political national story is entwined with the history of the Roman Catholic Church's experience in the country. The Church has been in Nigeria since the 15th century, and with 15% (31.6 m) of the country's population being Catholics (The Pillar 2023), the Catholic Church is now one of the major Christian denominations in the country. The Church is a foundation member of the largest and most influential umbrella of Christian denominations in the country, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN). CAN categorises

its members as those belonging to the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria (CSN), Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN), Christian Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (CPFN), Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN), Organization of African Instituted Churches (OAIC), and TEKAN/ECWA Fellowship, (Christian Association of Nigeria 1988). Significantly, the Catholic Church stands as a single Christian church among other church groups, which are associations of churches according to pedigree.

From its colonial arrival to its contemporary presence, the Church has witnessed and participated in the evolving dynamics of Nigeria's religious diversity. While promoting dialogue and collaboration, it has also encountered tensions and conflicts fuelled by memories of historical baggage, socio-economic inequalities, and differing theological interpretations. From an in-depth study conducted by Nolte et al. (2009), the ties between the Nigerian state and other religious organisations are often interwoven, especially with Christianity and Islam. While both religions offer moral frameworks within which individuals and groups can express their demands and criticisms of the state, they also pose a threat to state-provided institutions. When the Roman Catholic institution, for example, demands the re-privatisation of missionary schools that are currently under state control, the Muslims contest the demand as potentially a disadvantage to their educational pursuit. Similarly, when the Muslims criticised the secular law in the country and emphasised the Shari'a criminal law in twelve states in the country, the move was to the distaste of the Christians (Taiye 2013). Expectedly, because of these and other related reasons, religious rivalry is entwined with other contingent reasons that shape local politics and disaffection in the country.

Notably, the religious rivalry between Muslims and Christians in the country remained constrained to a level of mere tolerance. The relationship embodies a quintessential calm and coexistence that breeds mistrust and suspicion. In particular, the story of the Catholic Church in relation to Muslims in the country is a tapestry of various hues. Although the Catholic Church in the country has had a significant influence on Muslims in the country, especially in formal education and health care services, their relationship has remained convoluted and strangely marked by both cooperation and conflict. The relationship, according to Ojo (2007), has led to a competition for public space between the Catholic Church and radical Islamic movements, especially in northern Nigeria.

## 4. The Roman Catholic Church's Theology of Interreligious Relations

The Catholic Church has continued to shape interreligious dialogue worldwide, particularly since the middle of the 20th century (Konigsburg 2023). However, the Church's advocacy for religious tolerance and participation in dialogue programmes intricately promote the framework of its theology and principles. Consequently, the focus is well guided by the substance of related church writings, such as *Nostra Aetate* ("Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions"), and others, such as *Lumen Gentium*, *Gaudium et Spes*, and *Ad Gentes.*

The documents pinpointed above spot respect, recognise the truth in other faiths, and promote cooperation and discourse for the benefit of humanity. Nevertheless, the extent to which this hitherto theology of the Church has actually departed from its well-known *extra ecclesia nulla salus,* "outside the church, there is no salvation", remains controvertible. While theologians such as Jacques Dupuis argued for a more sincere acceptance of others in an inclusive religious pluralistic theology (Dupuis 1997; Dupuis and Berryman 2002; Dupuis and Neuner 2001), it is commonly acknowledged that *Nostra Aetate* provided a fresh perspective on Catholicism's relationship with non-Christian religions on a new framework for interreligious discussion.

*Nostra Aetate* is founded on the experiences with interreligious relationships in the Old and New Testaments. The document indicates that religious openness is the ideal religious attitude in the Bible, despite many passages in the Bible that signify resistance to religious openness. The Catholic Church experience is not fundamentally different from that Biblical perspective. While an attitude of religious inclusivism apparently characterized

the relationship of Christians with other religious adherents in the formative years of the Christian Church, the first two centuries of its existence were generally marked by tension between continuity and discontinuity theology of religious encounter.

Early Christians like Saint Justin Martyr (2008) and Clement of Alexandria (n.d.) moved in line with Paul's inclusive religious disposition. They argued for a positive acceptance of whatever is good in other religions as a continuity of the Gospel's message. Justin had argued:

> since each person would be saved by his own virtue, I also stated that those who obeyed the Mosaic Law would likewise be saved. They who are obliged to obey the Law of Moses will find in it not only precepts, which were occasioned by the hardness of your people's heart, but also those, which in themselves are good, holy, and just. Since they who did those things which are universally, naturally, and eternally good are pleasing to God, they shall be saved in the resurrection, together with their righteous forefathers. . ., together with those who believe in Christ, the son of God. (Saint Justin Martyr 2008)

The position of Justin Martyr, which is similar to that of Clement of Alexandria, was, however, not so appealing to the kind of divine witnessing that Tertullian and Cyprian subscribed to. The latter sustained the discontinuity aspects of the Christian attitude towards other religions, stressing that only Christian teaching is salvific. In fact, the famous axiom of "no salvation outside the church" is associated with Cyprian. From the third century through the late 20th century of Christian history, the exclusive religious disposition gradually acquired dominance in the self-definition of the Church and general Christians' attitude towards religious others.

What is at stake in the question of the Church's acceptance of religious pluralism is the question of the salvific potency of other religions. If Jesus remains the Saviour of the world, and the Church is the sacrament of that salvation as claimed by the Commission of Cardinals and Bishops (2003) what role do other religions, Abrahamic and others, have to play in the salvific plan of God for humanity? The development of ways in which the Catholic Church has grappled with this question in documents and relationships with other religions is the history of what may be referred to as the Catholic Church's theology of interreligious relations.

The implication and futility of maintaining an exclusive attitude towards other religions was not totally lost on the Church, as many celebrated theologians regularly call attention to the need for a shift towards an unfolding cultural and religious pluralistic dimension in the world. Theologians such as Karl Rahner argued for an "Open Catholicism", that is, "a certain attitude towards the present-day pluralism of powers with different outlooks on the world" (Rahner and Kruger 1970). The call by theologians such as Rahner towards more openness to other religions eventually finds expression in John XXIII's pre-Vatican II Council's call for input towards clarifying the Church's relation with the Jews. His call eventually led to an unplanned declaration but, nonetheless, an official position of the Church on the relation with other religions, that is, the "Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions," or *Nostra Aetate* (Pope Paul VI 1965b). The declaration highlights the Church's new positive attitude towards other religions like Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. It affirms that the Church rejects nothing true and holy in these religions and, thus, encourages dialogue, collaboration, and promoting the good spiritual, moral, and socio-cultural values found in those religions (Nostra Aetate #2).

Other documents from the Second Vatican Council that also touch on the Church's official position on relations with other religions laid emphasis as follows: While *Lumen Gentium* recognises elements of sanctification and truth existing outside the visible structure of the Church (#8) and acknowledges that those who have not received the Gospel are related to the people of God in various ways (#13 and 16), *Ad Gentes* views non-Christian religions as "leading strings toward God" and a preparation for the Gospel (#3). The weight of the latter in recognising other non-Christian religions as "leading strings toward God" marks a shift from the previous "no salvation outside the Church" stance to a recognition

of God's salvific presence and the seeds of the Word in non-Christian religions (#18). To *Gaudium et Spes* (Pope Paul VI 1965a), the Church is a "leaven" in the world (#40) and calls for dialogue within the Church, with other Christians, other religious traditions, and humanity in general (#40–41,92). Similar to the call to dialogue in *Gaudium et Spes, Ecclesiam Suam* (Pope Paul VI 1964, 104f) encourages dialogue with the world, including atheists, communists, and followers of other religions, not excluding worshippers of the one God (Jews, Muslims, Afro-Asiatic religions). In Pope John Paul II's (1984) *Dialogue and Mission* and Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue and Proclamation (1991), other religions' moral and spiritual values and desire to collaborate in good works were recognised. All these are the practical approaches to implementing the Church's theology of dialogue and collaboration with other religions.

The documents outline the Catholic Church's stance on interreligious relations, as articulated in the Second Vatican Council documents. Summarily, the official position of the Catholic Church with other religions is one of limited religious openness, describable as inclusivistic. While welcomed in different theological and religious fora, Dupuis and Neuner (2001) have called for a more intense theological reflection on "other" religions. Iwuchukwu (2015) notes that for Jacques Dupuis and others who identified the shift in Vatican II documents, the Church's position translates to saying that people of all races, religions, cultures, genders, and nationality who lived in accord with the will of God (as known by Christianity) will be saved in Christ even if they willfully deny or reject Christ and that world religions like Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and others promote similar values and virtues as the church.

Iwuchukwu's view once again raises the question of the documents' meaning (as an official interreligious manual for the Church) in providing a roadmap for interreligious dialogue despite the "subtext of the document concerning how Christian exclusivism has justified coercion, oppression, and violence" (Schmalz 2013) and, therefore, needs to be reread and properly tagged within the Nigeria context.

## 5. An Islamic Perspective on Interreligious Dialogue

The utmost indicators of the Islamic perspective on interreligious dialogue are the Holy Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet (SAW). The Holy Qu'ān al-Hujurāt 49:13 states: "O mankind! We created You from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into Nations and tribes, that Ye may know each other (Not that ye may despise Each other)." The Qur'anic injunction to refrain from discrimination on the basis of accidents of birth like tribe and religion is corroborated by the Prophet's exemplary Charter of Medina in AD 662. According to Islam (2018), by the Charter of Medina, "different communities with different religions that had shown enmity towards one another for several decades became parties to this pact and started to live together peacefully." Islam (2018) stated that tribal structure based on "blood and kinship" as well as cultural, ethnic, and religious variations were positively recognised by their rightful status in the ensued muti-religious community of Medina.

A range of studies have also explored the Islamic perspective on interreligious dialogue, emphasising its importance in promoting peace, tolerance, and harmony (cf: Elius et al. 2019; Khan et al. 2020; Ramli and Awang 2016; Wagay 2022). A common denominator to most of these studies is the Qur'an's emphasis on unity in diversity and the Prophet's role as a model for mitigating interreligious conflicts. The studies underscore the ethical guidelines for dialogue, the need for mutual understanding, and the potential for interreligious dialogue to promote peaceful coexistence.

Various instances of advocacy for peaceful interreligious coexistence are found in the pages of the Qur'an. For example, the notable protection of the houses of worship of Jews, Christians, and other non-Muslims living in the Muslim state and their right to worship according to their faith (al-Hajj 22:40). Nevertheless, ambivalent and seemingly contradictory statements regarding other monotheistic religions like Christianity and Judaism (e.g., Al-Ma'idah 5:51, and 5:81) also abound. While the former (Al-Ma'idah 5:51) states:

O ye who believe! take not the Jews and the Christians for your friends and protectors: they are but friends and protectors to each other. And he amongst you that turns to them (for friendship) is of them. Verily God guideth not a people unjust," the latter (Al-Ma'idah 5:82) notes, "Strongest among men in enmity to the believers wilt thou find the Jews and Pagans; and nearest among them in love to the believers wilt thou find those who say: "We are Christians:" because amongst these are men devoted to learning and men who have renounced the world and they are not arrogant" (Ali 1946). These notwithstanding, the Qur'an abhors forceful conversion of non-Muslims to Islam (al-Baqarah 2:256; al-Kafiroon 109:1–6). In fact, Yunus 10:9 argued, "Had your Lord wanted, all the people on earth would have believed."

The significant role of context in rendering ambivalent passages like those cited in Al-Ma'idah 5:51 and 5:81 is important. This is especially so as the exemplary stance of the Prophet, especially in the Chater of Medina, reverberated in similar Charters of the four pious Caliphs (632–661 A.D.), the Umayyads, (661–750 A.D), the Abbasids (750–1258 A.D.), the Fatimids in Egypt (969–1171 A.D.), and the Muslims in Spain (711–1492 A.D.) at fostering peaceful coexistence in their multi-religious domains (Islam 2018). The emphasis was on Islam as a religion connoting peaceful coexistence through the rejection of discrimination, setting examples of religious tolerance, and emphasising the protection of rights for non-Muslims.

A very useful theological resource by Sejdini (2022) further interrogates interreligious dialogue from a Muslim perspective and highlights the importance of positive interreligious relations in promoting peaceful coexistence in multicultural societies. According to Sejdini, some verses in the Qur'an advocate an inclusivist stance, while others critique certain beliefs. For example, al-Baqara 2:136 exemplifies an inclusivist stance when it states that Muslims "make no distinction between any of them [the prophets]," referring to figures like Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. To Sejdini (2022), the claim indicates an acceptance of the religions as monotheistic traditions. Similarly, he cited al-Māida 5:69 as another inclusivist verse, stating that those who "have attained to faith" as well as "those who follow the Jewish faith, and the Christians" need not "fear nor shall they grieve" on the Last Day (Ali 1946).

What stands out in the work of the scholars examined above, as well as from the Holy Qur'an and Islamic traditions on interreligious dialogue, is the Islamic subscription to and promotion of peaceful coexistence and harmony among followers of different religions. The primary role of such dialogue is to remove misunderstanding and open-mindedly accept religious differences (Shafiq and Abu-Nimer 2011). However, the virtues of justice, diversity, and kindness, alongside recognising the common origin of humanity, must be considered key elements in encouraging Islamic dialogue and cooperation with people of other faiths (Elius et al. 2019; Khan et al. 2020).

If the Quranic teachings and the Prophetic approach are correctly understood and implemented following an Islamic principle for interreligious dialogue as captured by Al-Karboly (2023): "To you, your religion, and to me, mine," a more convincing interreligious harmony and peaceful coexistence can be established in Nigeria. Such a dialogical framework will transverse personal encounters to build trust and theological discussions on common themes and differences. It would showcase Nigerian oneness despite differences, a spirit of *one family*, *many flavours*, resulting from fruitful dialogue, empathy, critical self-reflection on one's truth claims, and a willingness to accommodate the religious other humanely.

## 6. The Question of Conversion and Interreligious Conversation

The mutual interreligious suspicion of religious conversations being a guise for converting the religious other in the Nigeria interreligious space necessitates a consideration of the question of conversion and interfaith dialogue. Of course, and expectedly so in a pluralistic society, the question of conversion and interreligious conversation is a sensitive and nuanced issue in Nigeria and, thus, requires careful consideration of various

perspectives. Often, two key positions may be considered in maintaining a balance or causing the opposite effect in an interreligious environment. The first is adherence to a top-down initiative where the religious leaders either agree on the terms of a trickled-down interreligious relationship or an alternative nuanced understanding of religious belonging. While scholars such as Markiewicz (2019) raise concerns about the effectiveness of the former approach, others, such as Fridlund (2014), challenge the perceived tension between dialogue and conversion in the latter, thereby proposing a more nuanced understanding of religious belonging.

In light of Ajogi (2019), it is important to remember that interreligious dialogue in Nigeria has to take into account the intricate interactions that exist between religion, ethnicity, and regional identities. Neglecting to acknowledge these contextual elements may unintentionally sustain misinterpretations and intensify pre-existing conflicts within the Nigerian social milieu. However, interreligious dialogue can strengthen interpersonal bonds, develop empathy, and provide a welcoming atmosphere for understanding when they are handled with tact and respect. The situation is perfectly captured by the *one family*, *many flavours* dialogical paradigm, which is recommended for a setting that fosters understanding. Participants in interreligious dialogue can lessen their susceptibility to cultural and religious disinformation, which is frequently used to uphold social bubbles and fuel a contentious process of religious conversion, by having polite and open discussions (Hulsman 2023).

While conversion remains a contentious issue in interreligious space, scholars like Fridlund (2014), argue that genuine dialogue can coexist with the possibility of conversion as individuals navigate their spiritual journeys authentically; nevertheless, Krebs (2015), highlights the transformative potential of interreligious dialogue, particularly in creating a supportive environment and fostering individual relationships. This perspective challenges the notion of conversion as an inherently adversarial act and encourages a more open-minded approach to interreligious encounters. What is thus needed in the Nigeria interreligious context is a nuanced and context-specific approach that acknowledges the complexities of religions, ethnic, and regional identities in the manner of *one family*, *many flavours* model where religious views and convictions are openly and freely expressed.

## 7. Need for a Focused Ethical Principle for Dialogical Engagement

The Roman Catholic Church in Nigeria and the Muslim *Ummah* have obligations from their respective religious texts and traditions to promote a peaceful, pluralistic society. The encouragement from the texts and traditions of the faiths must, however, be moved beyond committee reports, associations, and declarations to visible recognition of unity in spite of differences, a principle captured in this article as *one family*, *many flavours*.

While it has been demonstrated in the section on Islamic Perspective on Interreligious Dialogue in this paper that Islam, as Christianity, is open to interreligious dialogue, it must be said that interreligious dialogue in Nigeria faces certain challenges due to textual literalism, exclusivist tendencies, textual misinterpretation, lack of contextualisation, and a lack of emphasis on pluralism among Muslims. Strict adherence to literal interpretations of Islamic texts, especially without due consideration for contextualisation, can limit the scope for dialogue and openness to other perspectives. The same goes for emphasis on some Islamic texts and traditions, which can create a sense of exclusivity and hinder efforts to foster understanding and respect among different religious communities. Similar to Voas and Fleischmann's (2012) views, failure to consider the local cultural and social context in contextualising religious doctrines can lead to miscommunication and misunderstanding between different religious groups. Such misplaced efforts will lead to misinterpretation of certain religious verses or teachings, leading to misconceptions and stereotypes about other religions and hindering meaningful dialogue.

The identified weaknesses in the effective witnessing of Islam to interreligious dialogue as specified above do not necessarily represent the entire Islamic tradition; they only highlight areas that can hinder interreligious dialogue in certain contexts. Similarly, below

are identified areas of weakness in the official Declaration of the Roman Catholic Church regarding its relationship with other non-Christian religions.

It is reckoned that *Nostra Aetate* is a watershed in the Roman Catholic renewed openness to dialogue with many world religions. Nevertheless, the document's global relevance is significantly limited in its lack of explicit acknowledgement or engagement with the beliefs, practices, and concerns of indigenous or traditional religious communities. Similarly, the document, which is the Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions, emphasises commonalities and respect but lacks substantial theological dialogue or exploration of differences.

It is curious that the official Declaration of the Church does not seem to have fully grasped the theological nuances of one of the religions it specifically mentioned, that is, Islam. Understanding and appreciating the distinct theological teachings and practices of Islam is vital for fostering meaningful dialogue and mutual understanding. There is a need for further theological engagement and dialogue between Catholic theologians and Islamic scholars, and such must be done with a deliberate consciousness of openness to the oneness of family in spite of uniqueness.

Once again, the points marshalled above do not becloud the significant steps that the global Catholic Church has taken to improve its relationship with Islam and Muslims over the years. For instance, Pope Francis has made efforts to engage with Islamic leaders, promote dialogue, and condemn religious violence (Pope Francis 2020). While these efforts are commendable, there is still room for growth and improvement in certain aspects of the Church's theology of interreligious dialogue concerning its relationship with Islam and Muslims. The ethics of *one family*, *many flavours* could guide such relationships, especially in Nigeria.

## 8. Constructing a Nigerian Catholic Church Dialogical Model for Interreligious Dialogue: The *One Family*, *Many Flavours* Model

The process of ethical construction has been an issue of importance in many religious traditions. In Christianity, moral theology is dedicated to the study of how we, as Christians, should live. However, in a country like Nigeria, where several religions exist and provide different and sometimes conflicting sources of ethical guidance, it becomes inevitable to construct an ethical standard that not only accommodates the views of others but is also sufficiently inclusive for such a multi-religious society. In Nigeria, Islam and Muslims are at the centre of the population, having the majority of the nation's population in the northern part of the country. The Christian population holds sway in the eastern and western parts of the country. For that reason and considering the fact that the nature of religious ethics in both Christianity and Islam is inherently dialogical in the sense that both religions believe that God reveals His will to humanity through words and that man can respond when and to the extent that God has spoken, Islam and Christianity in Nigeria always have a place for talking and listening in engaging moral thought and action.

However, for so long, Christians and Muslims in Nigeria have seen religious dialogues as the discussion, the sharing, and the mutual learning that the word "dialogue" implies, but the three principles of mutual respect, justice, and fairness, which the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) holds sacred, have ironically remained the clogs to the realisation of the ethical goal. So, if a constructive principle is an attempt to offer a reasonable response to the ethical problem, an objective that requires the inclusion and consideration of conflicting views from different approaches, the importance of constructing a principled ethical standard that reflects a genuine moral ethics of inclusion, accommodation, reasonableness, and commands cross-thread legitimacy cannot be overemphasised.

In light of the above, the realisation of dialogical ethics capable of offering such profound help to the moral development of individuals in Nigeria would only be a Catholic one. This is because Catholic ethics has shown throughout the history of the Church that it possesses a particular species of religious, ethical thought that is action-guiding and able to offer a reasonable account of the human lived experiences and people of different faiths

(cf: Ajibola 2015; Aubert and Boileau 2003; Curran 2002; Donahue et al. 2004; United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 2005).

Also, interreligious dialogue has been an important aspect of Catholic ministry in the modern era, informed mostly by *Nostra Aetate* (Pope Paul VI 1965b). Accordingly, Nigeria, which Pope Benedict XVI declared "a beacon of Africa" and praised for her efforts in promoting peace and stability in Africa (Vatican News 2005), is a favourable catalytic force to spread the good news of the renewed Roman Catholic Church openness to dialogue with Muslims. From an ethical perspective, the central advantage of a clear interreligious model is that adherents of different religions could have a common basis developed from similar values and could, therefore, jointly benefit from such values. Hence, a consideration of the position of the Roman Catholic Church and the Muslim perception of interreligious dialogue points to some openness to enhance peaceable consensus through dialogue for understanding and cooperation among Christians and Muslims in the country.

Catholics, and indeed Christians, as well as Muslims, do not have exclusively designated markets, hospitals, or conveniences explicitly assigned to them in the Nigerian public space. Signposts of religions, such as prayer and care for the poor and oppressed, are expected from both Christians and Muslims. The call to dialogue should focus on the common attainment of these signposts rather than the old-fashioned roundtable conferencing that breeds communiques that are never read nor applied. In fact, according to Basuki (2018), the dialogue that has been implemented to foster tolerance is no longer needed; humanity needs a dialogue that requires a joint movement of all religions to solve various humanitarian problems. Such disposition goes beyond the limits of individual religious identification without blurring the same. Rather than being colour-blind to religious differences, a religious behavioural ethics that recognises a consciousness of the same family of God with varied expressions towards the common good (*one family, many flavours*) should be the target. Such a model emphasises the injunction that the more sincere and open adherents are to the tenets of their religion, the more religious they become and the more humanely disposed toward others (Nurdin 2019).

A sense of the *one family*, *many flavours* model of interreligious ethics is evident in experiences that bring Nigerians together when Christians and Muslims aspire to promote a common cause without recourse to the Constitution. For instance, despite the mild and non-uniform ethical control over mutual obligations within the Nigerian religious communities, there is a strong condemnation of homosexuality by various religious groups (Gov.UK 2022a). A global stance for objective consideration of homosexuals' claims did not deter the religious groups from opposing the practice as against moral and religious beliefs, as well as cultural norms. This article is not about the morality of homosexuality; therefore, it neither sides nor counters the positions for or against the validity of the practice.

However, engaging the same example, Gov.UK (2022b) reported that "religious figures, both Muslim and Christian, play a significant role in perpetuating the stigmatisation of same-sex relations and openly condemning homosexuality in Nigeria." One may, however, ask, to what extent should a deviant family member be disparaged for misconduct? That notwithstanding, interreligious collaboration in action speaks louder than voices and communiques. This position does not pretend to gloss over doctrine and environment as significant factors in understanding how religion affects ethics. What is rather more important to note is that, often, human interpretation—hermeneutics—and other external factors underlie the question of truth and falsity in defining those indicators (Voas and Fleischmann 2012).

When the influence of doctrine and environment is skewed toward warped religious hermeneutics that does not consider the common good of humanity, a dangerous self-abstraction from the use of religious texts and teachings emerges. If such hermeneutics is applied as a *de iure* religious model for securing ideas about truth, justice, and evil, the emergent dogmatic dictate would be suffused with an enthusiasm that projects an arrogant disparagement of others' beliefs within the religion. It would be an understatement to say that such a mindset does not encourage building good relationships with other individuals

belonging to different religious communities. The associated behavioural outcome becomes fiery, anger is triggered, and disputes arise.

It is expected that a good hermeneutical engagement with texts and traditions of both Islam and Roman Catholicism, as hinted in relevant sections of this article, would advance the choice of the *one family*, *many flavours* approach to interreligious dialogue in Nigeria. Each faith's nuances, which adhere to aspects of their distinctive teaching and ideology in the process, are legitimateIn the Nigeria Roman Catholic/Muslim context, it would require the Catholic Church to transform dialogue into engaging the Muslims on principles that are mutually shared and valued, hence dialogical. In this regard, Weisse and Meir (2022), suggestion offers valuable guidance on navigating interpersonal relationships amidst increasing religious pluralization in Nigeria. The concepts of "Dialogical Theology" and "Dialogical Practice" as proposed by Wolfram and Ephraim, wherein the former advocates for a methodology that embraces and fosters communication between individuals of diverse faiths and perspectives, while the latter discusses the practices and beliefs of interreligious dialogue in urban environments, the significance of social factors, the value of mutual trust and cooperation, and the conflicting role of religion, can enhance and inform one another in the pursuit of comprehending and advancing interreligious dialogue in a pluralistic world. Balancing the normative, theological dimension (Dialogical Theology) with the empirical, contextual dimension (Dialogical Practice) can help the Catholic Church craft a dialogical ethical model that is both principled and practically effective in Nigeria's multi-religious society.

The *one family, many flavours* model, which potentially ventilates the cultural and individual relevance in the common good index of a religiously polarised society as Nigeria, also finds expression in Wolfram Weisse and Ephraim Meir's concept of Dialogical Theology (Weisse and Meir 2022).The concept, Dialogical Theology, is relevant for handling relationships in religiously pluralistic environments, such as Nigeria, because it fosters discussion between individuals of different faiths and accepts others with differing religious perspectives. Similarly, since entering into conversations with curiosity and uncertainty rather than with predetermined solutions or outcomes, that is, Dialogical Practice (Weisse and Meir 2022), complements Dialogical Theology, combining the approaches can help the Catholic Church in Nigeria develop a principled and effective dialogical ethical model for Nigeria's multi-religious society, balancing theological principles with practical realities. As with the proposal of *one family, many flavours*, Weisse and Meir's model aligns with the concept of interfaith dialogue that promotes cooperative and positive interactions between people of different religious traditions.

Plausibly, instead of searching for a common basis in each others' religions and tagging same as anonymously belonging to the other (cf. Rahner and Kruger 1970), adapting religious rituals, festivals, and images, translating selected dialogical values into Catholic moral teaching, and adapting to the individual beliefs without deviating from the moral education of the source faith could lead to a reconstruction/construction of an ethical framework that is dialogical (*one family, many flavours*) and applicable to a multi-religious Nigeria's society.

The *one family, many flavours* interreligious model akin to a dialogical approach in interreligious dialogue encourages and ennobles reason when both are guided by humility and reverence in pursuit of truth and understanding (John Paul II 1998, p. 60). The model acknowledges that every individual and culture is a bearer of gifts essential to the common good and is enriched by other individuals and cultures who reciprocate.

The significant feature of respect for the individually differentiated culture and religious otherness as a component of the *one family, many flavours* necessarily invites the question of human rights. The notion of individual and culture being a bearer of enriching gifts essential to the common good presupposes respect for individual rights. The conversation between Hans Joas and Samuel Moyn (Joas and Moyn 2015), about the history of human rights buttresses this notion. While the context of the conversation borders on the History of Human Rights, the importance of diverse perspectives in understanding

human rights, as evidenced by their different disciplinary backgrounds, gained prominence. Succinctly, Joas argues for a "sacralization of the person" as a way to understand the emergence of human rights, tracing this process through historical examples like the abolition of slavery and torture. According to Joas, the "sacralization of the person" is a broader cultural transformation, not just a legal or intellectual history. On the other hand, Moyn is more skeptical of the usefulness of the "sacralization" concept for understanding the post-1945 history of human rights. Accordingly, Moyn emphasizes the importance of considering the "cultural salience" and "political scale" of human rights norms over time. Significantly, it is important to note that both luminaries agree that a full history of human rights needs to incorporate continuity and discontinuity and that their approaches are complementary in examining different phases of history.

As Rachik and Tamer (2023) opined, the universality of human rights reflects the tension between universal values and cultural diversity; the opinion acknowledges that different cultures may contribute unique insights to the development of human rights in religious expressions. Issues such as human dignity, different religions, and philosophical traditions, which imply recognizing the inherent value of every individual, are encouraged by such a disposition. The debate on the universality of human rights (Joas and Moyn 2015) reflects the tension between universal values and cultural diversity, suggesting that various cultures can enrich the common understanding across disciplines, perspectives, and religious differences.

In accord with *Fratelli Tutti* (Pope Francis 2020), which reflects the Catholic Church's commitment to promoting interreligious dialogue, fostering understanding, and building bridges of friendship and cooperation with different religious communities, the *one family, many flavours* interreligious model calls for a spirit of openness, respect, and collaboration in addressing the challenges that humanity faces, transcending religious differences for the greater good of all, especially in Nigeria.

## 9. Conclusions

In conclusion, the idea of dialogical ethics, grounded in the principle of *one family, many flavours*, presents a promising framework for promoting interreligious cooperation among Christians and Muslims in Nigeria. By embracing this ethical principle, individuals can work towards building a more harmonious and inclusive society where religious diversity is seen as a strength rather than a source of conflict.

The idea of *one family, many flavours* as an interreligious ethical principle is crucial to the promotion of interreligious cooperation among Christians and Muslims in Nigeria. The principle emphasises the shared humanity and familial bond between individuals of different religious backgrounds, highlighting the diversity within the religious landscape while emphasising unity and mutual respect. This principle can foster a sense of solidarity and understanding by recognising the commonalities and celebrating the differences between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria, ultimately leading to peaceful coexistence and cooperation.

**Funding:** This research was supported by TETFund Institution Based Research.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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