



Implications Of Pantaleon Iroegbu's Concept of God for Religious Tolerance in Nigeria

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Abstract

Religious intolerance continues to pose a significant challenge in Nigeria, contributing to social unrest, violence and divisions among adherents of different faiths. This study investigates the relevance of Pantaleon Iroegbu's concept of God to the promotion of religious tolerance in Nigeria. Grounded in his Uwa ontology, Iroegbu presents God as the ultimate source, foundation and sustaining principle of all existence. Using expository and hermeneutical methods, the study examines his understanding of God and evaluates its significance for interreligious relations within Nigeria's pluralistic religious environment. It also considers conceptions of God from dominant religions in Nigeria namely, Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion to identify points of similarity and difference. The study finds that Iroegbu's conception of God stresses the unity and interconnectedness of all beings, since all reality derives from the same Divine source. This perspective provides a philosophical basis for respect, dialogue and peaceful coexistence among followers of different religions. The research further reveals that religious intolerance is often fueled by exclusivist attitudes, misconceptions and a failure to recognize shared spiritual and moral values. By portraying God as the transcendent ground of all existence, Iroegbu's philosophy encourages greater understanding, acceptance and cooperation across religious boundaries. The study concludes that Iroegbu's concept of God offers a valuable framework for advancing religious tolerance in Nigeria. It recommends the promotion of Interfaith dialogue, philosophical reflection and common ethical values as practical strategies for fostering unity and peaceful coexistence.

Original Research Article

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Introduction

Nigeria is a religiously diverse society where differences in belief have sometimes led to intolerance and conflict. This study examines Pantaleon Iroegbu's concept of God and its implications for promoting religious tolerance in Nigeria. It presents God as the source of being and unity, grounding existence in relational participation oriented toward harmony and coexistence. This relational understanding is captured in the Igbo proverb "Egbe bere, Ugo bere", which emphasizes coexistence and mutual recognition. Within this framework, all beings share a common source of existence that affirms their interconnectedness. This interconnectedness provides a foundation for religious tolerance and harmonious coexistence in a plural society. In Nigeria, religious traditions often interact, but also experience conflicts and confrontations. Iroegbu's thought is a framework for

moving beyond passive tolerance toward active engagement, mutual respect and shared responsibility. By situating all within a unified, value-oriented divine order, his perspective promotes inclusion, enhancing interreligious dialogue and national unity.

This study also considers initiatives promoting religious tolerance in Nigeria, a culturally and religiously diverse country with its population largely made up of three major ethnic groups: Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo. Its social and cultural fabric reflects rich religious, ethnic, linguistic and historical plurality. As a deeply pluralistic society, it continues to experience recurring conflicts rooted in differences in beliefs and practices. These tensions have, over time, led to loss of lives and destruction of property, underscoring the impact of religious divisions on social

stability and national unity. They also highlight the central role of religion in human and societal life. Nigeria is a constitutionally secular state with legal structures that support the regulation and peaceful coexistence of its diverse religious traditions. This pluralistic environment provides opportunities for interreligious dialogue, while at the same time presenting challenges that require deliberate strategies and sustained efforts to promote tolerance and social harmony. In addition, we would examine how Nigeria's religious diversity has at times, become a source of intolerance, influenced by factors such as ignorance, extremism and political manipulation.

Religious pluralism in Nigeria, situates the discussion within the country's complex socio-religious context which is marked by significant diversity, historical tensions and occasional outbreaks of violence. It highlights the capacity of religious pluralism to promote mutual understanding, respect and peaceful coexistence among Nigeria's diverse religious communities. Additionally, the study explores the role of interreligious dialogue and organized initiatives for peaceful coexistence as key for sustainable national development.

In summary, this study seeks to construct a culturally grounded framework for religious tolerance, shaped by Nigeria's socio-cultural and historical context that promote peaceful coexistence, mutual respect and national integration.

Religious tolerance in Nigeria

Religion holds a pivotal place in conversations about religious tolerance, as it is the primary sphere where tolerance or intolerance is most clearly manifested. According to Mbiti observes, "Religion is the strongest element in traditional background, and exerts probably the greatest influence upon the thinking and living of the people concerned."¹ It can be defined as a structured system of beliefs in a Supreme Being or spiritual forces considered to shape human existence, expressed through formal rituals and practices that distinguish different religious traditions. In examining the etymological roots of tolerance, Okeregbe observes that,

Its Latin root *Tolerare*, brings to light meanings – 'to forebear' and 'to support'. When used as 'to bear with patience', (say for instance a religious untruth or a despicable and lewd lifestyle), it could depict a morally wrong act, and as such a vice. However, the most popular usage of the term has always been in connection with 'patient forbearance' of a lifestyle

which we disapprove of, or with 'indifference to' a belief.²

Tolerance is the capacity to live peacefully with others despite differences in opinions or beliefs. It is usually exercised toward something that one considers undesirable or morally questionable but wherein one chooses to endure rather than suppress and resist it. In other words, tolerance does not imply approval or acceptance of the thing tolerated, rather, it implies allowing the existence of something that one may judge to be wrong, flawed or disagreeable for the sake of peace, coexistence or a higher good. When applied to religion, tolerance assumes a deeper and more urgent importance. This is because religion is closely connected to questions of personal identity, to how individuals interpret life and its meaning, and to their convictions about the ultimate purpose of human existence. As a result, religious differences accompanied by hostility or exclusion results in religious intolerance sometimes referred to as religious violence. Religious intolerance is closely linked to religious extremism, as both often arise from rigid and uncompromising interpretations of religious beliefs. Such attitudes tend to reject other faiths and discourage openness to religious diversity, thereby fostering exclusion and hostility toward differing religious perspectives.

Religious tolerance, therefore, entails recognizing and respecting the right of individuals and communities to hold, practice and express their faith freely without coercion, discrimination or violence. Nigeria is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation, encompassing several distinct ethnic groups and a variety of religious beliefs. Significantly, Nigeria is predominantly home to major religions- Christianity, Islam and African traditional religion, within a population exceeding 200 million individuals. Although religious diversity is a vital asset for national cohesion, it has simultaneously been a source of numerous conflicts and tensions in some parts of the country. Nigeria has experienced persistent and recurring religious conflicts between its two major faiths, Christianity and Islam, resulting in significant loss of lives and extensive destruction of property.

Despite its diversity, religion has exerted a profound influence on social and political conflicts within Nigeria. The southern region is largely Christian, while the northern region is predominately Muslim. Religious dichotomy has contributed to a divided national landscape in Nigeria, deepening existing social and religious tensions and represents only one of the factors that foster religious intolerance. Religious tolerance in Nigeria describes the

¹ J. Mbiti. *African Religions and Philosophy*, 1.

² A. Okeregbe. Phenomenology and the Ethics of Tolerance. In *The Nigerian Journal of Philosophy, The Department of*

Philosophy, University of Lagos, Lagos, Nigeria. Vol. 24, No. 1&2, 2010/2011,87.

willingness of people and communities from different faith backgrounds to live together peacefully, respecting each other's religious practices and to refrain from discrimination or hostility based on religious differences. Oyetoro and Talabi define religious tolerance as "the capacity of people to respect the faith and belief of another without any signs of prejudice and discrimination. It is the ability of people of different religions, beliefs, and cultures to coexist peacefully."³

Religious crises have increasingly become entrenched within Nigerian communities, undermining the social cohesion and stability required for sustainable development in the 21st century. The recurrence of such conflicts erodes confidence in governance and weakens the nation's path to development, thus making progress unattainable. However, fostering genuine religious tolerance offers a pathway out of this cycle of instability. By promoting dialogue, mutual respect and inclusive policies, Nigeria can transform its religious diversity into a source of strength, ensuring that the vision of a modern and prosperous nation is not a mirage but an attainable reality.

Religious crises in Nigeria

We shall now examine the history of Nigeria's religious crises, demonstrating the manner in which interreligious tensions has evolved, the central actors involved and implications for national unity. We shall start with the *Maitatsine* Riots of 1980. *Maitatsine* was a militant Islamic group that emerged in the northern part of Nigeria. The *Maitatsine* uprisings led by Mohammad Marwa, popularly known as *Maitatsine* represented one of the most severe expressions of religious intolerance in Nigeria's history. *Maitatsine* was of Cameroonian origin who settled in Kano and his radical sermons appealed to poor urban, particularly unemployed and socially excluded youths. This movement rejected modern technology and denounced Western education. In 1980, his followers engaged in violent confrontations with government authorities and other Muslim groups in Kano leading to the deaths of thousands. Commenting on *Maitatsine*, Isichei says:

In December 1980, [*Maitatsine*'s] followers in Kano revolted; the city was convulsed by what was virtually civil war, and 4177 died, among them *Maitatsine* himself. In October, 1982 a new rising broke out at Bulumkutu, 15 kilometers from Maiduguri, far to the east. 3,350 were killed. Fighting also broke out in Rigasa village, near Kaduna, which

spread into the city. In March, 1984 there was an outbreak of violence in Yola, the capital of Gongola State, which left between 500 and 1,000 dead. In April, 1985, there was yet another rising in Gombe, in Bauchi State, when over a hundred were killed. His followers are usually called "Maitatsine;" the movement is also known as Kalo Kato.⁴

Although *Maitatsine* himself was killed, the movement endured and extended its reach into other northern cities. Additional disturbances occurred in Maiduguri (1982), Yola (1984) and Gombe (1985), lasting through the mid-1980s. The *Maitatsine* uprisings had a lasting impact, exposing the fragility of Nigeria's religious tolerance and demonstrating how extremist beliefs can trigger widespread violence against the state and established religious communities. They also foreshadowed later insurgent movements, especially Boko Haram, which likewise took advantage of poverty, social exclusion and radical preaching to destabilize northern Nigeria. Another example of religious unrest took place in Kaduna. Situated in Nigeria's north-central region, Kaduna State has frequently reflected the country's persistent struggle with religious intolerance. Kaduna's religious identity is inseparable from its ethnic, political and socio-economic realities, a convergence that has consistently created a conducive environment favourable to violent crises.

The 1987 Kaduna crisis represented one of Nigeria's earliest large-scale confrontations between Christians and Muslims. The state's ethno-religious composition – Muslim Hausa/ Fulani in the north and Christian minorities in the south had long been strained and violence of 1987 exposed how fragile coexistence had become. On 5 March 1987, the College of Education in Kafanchan organized 'Mission '87', an evangelical event conducted by the Born-again Christian Student Movement. Alleged offensive comments about Islam by a preacher provoked anger among Muslim students, resulting into clashes which quickly escalated to violence that spread from the campus to surrounding areas of Kaduna State. This conflict spread beyond Kafanchan into Zaria and Kaduna city, plunging urban centers into days of rioting. Churches and Mosques were torched, homes devastated and hundreds killed. This outbreak revealed how religious disagreements could rapidly escalate into communal violence.

Another significant crisis unfolded in 1992 in Zango-Kataf, southern Kaduna, sparked by disagreements over market relocation and land rights between Christian Kataf

³ Oyetoro, T.R. & Talabi, J.M. Religious Tolerance: A Tool for National Development. In *Edumania- An International Multidisciplinary Journal*, 2023, Vol.01, Issue 02, 33-47, p.33-34.

⁴ E. Isichei. The *Maitatsine* Risings in Nigeria 1980-85: A Revolt of the Disinherited. *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol.17, No.3 (Oct., 1987), 194.

and Hausa/Fulani Muslim communities. What began as a local dispute soon escalated into widespread violence resulting in thousands of casualties. The incident illustrated how economic disputes filtered through religious and ethnic lenses to intensify communal hostility. In February 2000, Kaduna was engulfed in another severe crisis following the state government's declaration of Sharia law. The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) staged protests that quickly escalated into violent clashes with Muslim youths. Estimates of casualties ranged between 1,000 and 5,000 alongside widespread property destruction and mass displacement. The incident highlights the risks in politicizing religion within a multi-faith society. Throughout the 2000s and 2010s, Kaduna witnessed recurrent episodes of violence, frequently sparked by political rivalries, provocative religious activities or dispute over land. Each outbreak deepened mistrust and reinforced segregation, as communities increasingly withdrew into mono-religious communities.

Religious intolerance was also experienced in Jos, the capital of Plateau state, Nigeria. Jos has been known as a convergence zone for the northern Muslim and southern Christian. The city's diverse population, including Hausa/Fulani Muslims, Christian groups and ethnic minorities created a fragile balance. This pluralism frequently degenerated into contentions, as struggles over land, political power and indigene-settler distinction were interpreted through religious lenses. In September 2001, Jos experienced a major eruption of violence, triggered by disputes over political appointments and indigene rights. These clashes between Christian and Muslim communities raged for several days, resulting in more than 1,000 deaths and extensive destruction of homes, churches and mosques. This signaled the onset of a decade marked by recurrent crises in the city.

In November 2008, Jos witnessed renewed violence in the aftermath of local government elections. Claims of electoral malpractice ignited clashes between Christian and Muslim communities, leaving no fewer than 700 people dead and causing widespread destruction of property. The episode highlighted the deep entanglement of political disputes with religious and ethnic divisions in the city. Jos experienced some of its most destructive violence in January and March 2010, as clashes between Christian and Muslim groups quickly spread across the city and into nearby communities. Residential areas, churches, mosques and vehicles were set on fire and the death toll reached into the hundreds with some estimates exceeding 1,000. Religious intolerance in Jos, intertwined with ethnic identity and political exclusion, produced recurrent waves of violence. The city's prolonged instability during this decade highlights its significance as

a critical case study in Nigeria's confrontation with pluralism.

Another case of contemporary religious intolerance in Nigeria is the killing of Deborah Samuel in Sokoto. On 12 May 2022, Deborah Samuel, a Christian student at Shehu Shagari College of Education in Sokoto, was accused by fellow students of blasphemy against Prophet Muhammad, she reportedly shared in a WhatsApp group. The allegation rapidly provoked mob violence, leading to her killing and the burning of her remains. The killing of Deborah Samuel should not be viewed as an isolated incident, but as part of a wider pattern of religious intolerance in Nigeria. In contrast to Kaduna and Jos crises, which involved widespread communal conflicts, Deborah's case demonstrates how intolerance can manifest as directed violence against individuals, revealing deeper structural weaknesses in governance and the handling of religious plurality.

The last instance of religious intolerance examined in this study is the *Boko Haram* insurgency. The term "*Boko Haram*" is derived from the Hausa word for book "*Boko*" and the Arabic word for forbidden is "*Haram*". Literally, it translates as "Western education is forbidden" reflecting the belief that such education is considered sinful and prohibited.

The rise of *Boko Haram* constitutes one of the most significant socio-religious and security challenges in contemporary Nigeria. It illustrates another form of extremism in country, originating as a radical Islamic movement that advocated a strict interpretation of religious teachings which rejected Western education and cultural influences

Boko Haram was founded in 2002 by Mohammed Yusuf in Maiduguri, Borno State. Its radical ideology appealed to marginalized youths who were struggling with poverty, unemployment and failures of weak state institutions. The *Boko Haram* movement, initially founded as a religious sect, transformed into a full-scale insurgency after the death of its founder, Mohammed Yusuf in police custody in 2009. Under the leadership of Abubakar Shekau, the group embraced violent strategies such as suicide bombings, mass killings and kidnappings. These activities rapidly intensified, attracting attention from both national and international communities.

By 2014, it had seized large areas of Northeastern Nigeria, proclaimed a caliphate and formally aligned itself with the Islamic State. Since 2009, the *Boko Haram* insurgency has claimed tens of thousands of lives and displaced more than 2 million people, many of whom fled to neighbouring states. The conflict destroyed schools, interrupted agricultural activities and divided communities. The kidnapping of women and girls, mostly notably the Chibok

schoolgirls in 2014, highlighted the group's deliberate use of sexual violence as a weapon of war. Towards the end of the 2010s, Boko Haram fragmented into several factions, the most prominent being the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). This faction pursued more calculated strategies, focusing on assaults against military targets rather than indiscriminate attacks on civilians. The death of Abubakar Shekau in 2021 marked a decisive shift, enabling ISWAP to strengthen its foothold in parts of Borno State.

Boko Haram exploited religion as a tool of violence, presenting intolerance as justification for its actions. Socio-economic deprivation, unemployment, corruption and weak institutions facilitated recruitment into the movement. Its operations destabilized the Lake Chad Basin, extending Nigeria's internal fragility into the region. Beyond physical attacks, Boko Haram weakened educational systems, sources of livelihood and social unity, thus reinforcing cycles of insecurity and vulnerability. The Boko Haram insurgency represents one of the most extreme manifestations of religious intolerance in Nigeria. Unlike incidents in the Kaduna, Jos and the killing of Deborah Samuel, which exemplify communal or individual acts of violence, Boko Haram illustrates how intolerance can escalate into a large-scale insurgency. This situation exposes the weakness of Nigeria's pluralistic society and emphasizes the urgent need for broad strategies that integrate security measures with socio-economic development and meaningful governance reforms.

Taken together, these episodes demonstrate that religious intolerance in Nigeria extends far beyond isolated incidents and has become a deep seated security problem. This pattern is often linked with political struggles, ethnic fragmentation and persistent socio-economic challenges, all of which reinforce and sustain tensions. The consequences have been severe, leaving enduring scars on affected communities, weakening the fabric of national unity and sustaining cycles of suspicion and mistrust among diverse groups.

Religious Pluralism as a foundation of Tolerance in Nigeria

Religion refers to the belief in a Supreme Being and has been a constant feature of human existence, since the dawn of human history. Madu defines religion as "Man's recognition of the existence of a power or power beyond himself, who as it were, created the universe, sustains,

preserves and provides for this universe."⁵ Religion contributes substantially to both mental and physical well-being by offering direction and communal support. Despite differences in beliefs and practices, it functions as a key basis for moral values and promotes social cohesion as well as interpersonal relationships. Pluralism on the other hand, refers to the presence and acceptance of diverse groups, ideas or elements coexisting within the same place or society. Religious pluralism is when different religions exist together within the same society. Each religion is acknowledged and respected as a legitimate form of belief. As stated by Banchoff, "Religious pluralism often advocates convergence, harmony and compatibility between different religious traditions."⁶ Christianity is predominantly practiced in the southern region, Islam is more prevalent in the North, while African Traditional Religion found in both regions. Despite these differences in distribution, the core teachings of these faiths emphasize moral values such as love, honesty and peaceful coexistence. In principle, these shared ethical foundations are expected to guide adherents toward unity, mutual respect and collective efforts that foster community development. However, in reality, Nigeria's religious diversity has, at times, given rise to tensions that weaken interpersonal relationship and hinder socio-economic development particularly between the Muslims and Christians.

As the country's dominant faith, Islam and Christianity often stress strict adherence to doctrine and highly structured religious rites, whereas African Traditional Religion places greater emphasis on relational values and communal obligations. These differing orientations can sometimes result in misunderstanding and misinterpretation among adherents. As Nweke rightly pointed out, "A major challenge that has confronted the country over the years is that of religious violence between Christians and Muslims. The relationship between the two has been that of mistrust and suspicion. This has led to incessant religious crises."⁷ As a result, religious intolerance has become apparent among certain Christian and Muslim communities, fueling recurring social tensions in parts of the country. Religious differences are often intensified by underlying political, economic and social inequalities, which can lead to tensions and conflicts. In regions such as Jos and Kaduna, disputes over land ownership, political representation and access to resources are frequently framed in religious terms, showing that pluralism alone does not automatically produce tolerance.

⁵ J.E. Madu. *The paradox of the "One" and the "Many" in Religion*. (Nkpor: Globe, 2003),46.

⁶ T. Banchoff. *Religious Pluralism, Globalization, and World Politics*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008),4.

⁷ I. Nweke. *Religious Pluralism and its effects on National Integration: The Nigerian Experience*, 116.

This underscores the need for deliberate and sustained interventions, particularly through education, interreligious engagement and inclusive policy frameworks, in order to promote genuine mutual respect and peaceful coexistence across religious divides.

Over time, religious pluralism in Nigeria has developed through a combination of indigenous traditions and external influences, particularly the introduction and spread of Islam and Christianity. This historical process has contributed to the blending of religious beliefs and practices across different regions, making religion a deeply rooted aspect of Nigeria's socio-cultural life. As a result, religious pluralism is not merely a contemporary reality but the outcome of long-standing historical interactions that continue to shape the country's religious landscape.

For centuries, African Traditional Religion (ATR) has been practiced as the principal spiritual system guiding communities across the region, providing cosmologies, ethical codes and ritual practices that structured social life. With the passage of time, Abrahamic faiths were introduced, further diversifying the religious landscape. Islam arrived in northern Nigeria around the 11th century and Christianity followed several centuries later, around the 19th and early 20th centuries, particularly in the southern regions. As time progressed, Islam and Christianity began to coexist alongside African Traditional Religion, occasionally blending with it to form hybrid practices that demonstrate both continuity and adaptation.

Nigeria's religious pluralism reflects a historical development that is closely linked to the country's social, political and economic development rather than merely occurring by chance. Religious pluralism in the country is marked not only by the coexistence of multiple faiths but also by varying levels of interaction, cooperation and cultural enrichment. However, while this diversity contributes to cultural enrichment, it has also served as a source of tension, at times fueling conflicts that intersect with political and ethnic divisions. It is based on these that it becomes imperative that religious pluralism, provides a useful framework for transforming diversity into tolerance, thereby promoting peaceful coexistence and strengthening national unity. In this context, the concept of religious pluralism becomes particularly relevant.

In Nigeria, various faith communities live alongside one another within a shared socio-political environment, each preserving its distinct beliefs, practices and ethical values. In its positive form, religious pluralism allows religions to learn from one another and enrich mutual understanding. For instance, the celebration of Islamic festivals alongside Christian can promote greater awareness and appreciation of each other's faith traditions. However, religious

pluralism can take a negative form when adherents regard their own beliefs as superior to others, leading to intolerance and in many cases, social tension and violent conflict.

In general, religious communities often coexist peacefully, engage in interfaith dialogues and social cooperation that promote mutual understanding and harmony. In addition, political, economic and social factors can intensify religious differences, sometimes leading to tensions that escalate into conflict. This situation highlights the need for stronger frameworks that promote tolerance and mutual respect, given that religion plays a significant role in shaping Nigeria's social, cultural, political and educational life as well as interpersonal relationships. Within the framework of religious pluralism, exclusive and rigid claims are challenged, while coexistence and the legitimacy of diverse religious traditions are affirmed. It encourages a shift from dogmatic interpretations of truth toward more open, dialogical and inclusive approaches. In Nigeria, where religious identity frequently overlaps with ethnicity, regional ties and political loyalties, this perspective is especially significant. Thus religious pluralism provides a framework for constructive engagement with diversity, promoting tolerance and social harmony.

In practical terms, religious pluralism fosters meaningful interactions that ought to promote tolerance, as individuals from diverse faiths engage in shared spaces such as markets, schools, workplaces and public forums. Initiatives like interreligious programs, community projects and dialogue platforms further strengthen mutual understanding and trust, transforming religious diversity into a basis for social cohesion. Education and the media also hold a powerful influence in a religiously diverse society, either intensifying or reducing religious intolerance. The misrepresentation of religious groups in school curricula or media reporting can reinforce stereotypes, increase fear and deepen resentments. In contrast, educational approaches that promote ethical pluralism, critical thinking and a relational understanding of humanity can foster tolerance and strengthen social unity.

Another contributing factor to intolerance is economic inequality which is often linked to religious identity. Communities in economically marginalized regions may feel disadvantaged or discriminated against, while affluent ones tend to control greater access to resources and opportunities. These imbalances can intensify resentment and mistrust, eventually manifesting as conflicts framed in religious terms. Additionally, pluralism encourages the development of layered identities, enabling individuals to

balance religious, ethnic, regional and national affiliations in ways that support peaceful coexistence.

Religious pluralism in Nigeria is not only a social reality but also a vital resource for promoting tolerance, peaceful coexistence and national cohesion. Its effectiveness, however, extends beyond just diversity and depends largely on how differences are managed within society. In this regard, the roles of key societal actors, particularly religious leaders and state, becomes crucial. Religious leaders and faith-based institutions occupy a strategic position in shaping how individuals and communities understand and respond to religious pluralism. Koko puts it thus,

Religious pluralism is an important phenomenon that requires special treatment at the public domain of any given nation considering its fragile nature. This special treatment means that its basic principles of neutrality, equal recognition, respect for individual human right and value for all religions, should be strictly adhered to when dealing with matters of religious practices at the public domain.⁸

By consistently promoting peace, moral values and mutual respect, religious leaders encourage dialogue rather than division, enabling communities to address religious differences in constructive and non-violent ways. In the same vein, the state plays a critical and complementary role by safeguarding religious freedom, ensuring that all citizens are treated equally regardless of their beliefs and upholding a neutral stance in governance. This impartiality is essential to prevent the marginalization of minority groups or the undue privileging of any particular religion. When these efforts are effectively aligned, they reinforce the capacity of religious pluralism to serve as a solid foundation for tolerance, social stability and sustainable development. Essentially, an examination of religious pluralism in Nigeria highlights both benefits and the challenges that come with the coexistence of multiple faiths. It shows that although religious diversity contributes significantly to cultural richness, it also demands conscious ethical awareness and sustained social engagement in order to reduce conflicts and foster harmonious relations.

Ultimately, when religious diversity is grounded in tolerance, equity and mutual recognition, it has the capacity to function as a stabilizing force within society

rather than a trigger for conflict. In this context, strengthening interfaith relations becomes essential for deepening social cohesion, reinforcing national unity and securing long-term peace and stability. Religious pluralism remains an important basis for encouraging tolerance and building a more united Nigerian society.

The secular nature of the Nigerian state and religious tolerance

The legal foundation of religious rights in Nigeria is grounded in three fundamental principles: the secular nature of the state, the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion and the right to freedom from discrimination. These three principles derive their authority from the Constitution, which serves as the supreme law of Nigeria and which is binding on all authorities and individuals throughout the country. The Constitution of Nigeria states in Section 1, “This Constitution is supreme and its provisions shall have binding force on all authorities and persons throughout the Federal Republic of Nigeria.”⁹ The Constitution also proclaims its supremacy over all other laws, such that any law that conflicts with it is invalid to the extent of the inconsistency. For this reason, any individual may contest the constitutionality of any law, actions of any government authority or individual. Section 10 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria provides that the government must not adopt or promote any religion as a state religion. The Constitution states, “The Government of the Federation or of a State shall not adopt any religion as State Religion.”¹⁰ Although the Constitution does not explicitly employ the term “secular”, its provisions clearly prohibits the establishment or endorsement of a state religion. This clause forms the constitutional foundation for Nigeria’s secular character and is widely interpreted as affirming the principle of non-establishment of religion in governance. It is designed to ensure equal standing for all religious traditions while safeguarding freedom of thought, conscience and worship.

Section 10 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria provides that the government must not adopt or promote any religion as a state religion. The Constitution states, “The Government of the Federation or of a State shall not adopt any religion as State Religion.”¹¹ Complementing provision 10, Section 38 guarantees every individual the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including the liberty to change their religion or

⁸ J. C. Koko. Religious pluralism in Nigeria’s Public Domain: Problems and Prospects. In *AMAIHE: Journal of Applied Philosophy*, ISSN:1597-0779, Vol. 18, No. 4, 2020. 9.

⁹ Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.1999 (As Amended) & FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS (Enforcement Procedure) Rules. 2009. Section 1, 18.

¹⁰ Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (As Amended) Section 10, 28.

¹¹ Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (As Amended) Section 10,28.

belief and to express it through worship, teaching, practice and observance. The Constitution states, “Every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom (either alone or in community with others, and in public or in private) to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance.”¹²

In addition, Section 42, which forbids discrimination on grounds such as religion, further reinforces the Constitution’s commitment to ensuring equal citizenship regardless of religious affiliation.¹³ Collectively, these provisions create a legal basis for religious pluralism while reinforcing the state’s obligation to remain neutral in matters of faith.

Nigeria’s constitutional framework provides a legal basis for managing religious diversity and accommodating the coexistence of multiple faiths within the state. In this context, religious pluralism functions as a guiding principle for promoting and sustaining tolerance within Nigeria’s multi-religious society, although its effectiveness is sometimes constrained by social, political and economic tensions. This orientation is further strengthened by the Constitution, which affirms the state’s religious neutrality.

In principle, the constitutional framework supporting Nigeria’s secular character aligns with the ideals of religious pluralism by promoting an environment in which diverse faith traditions can coexist without official preference or bias. It requires the state to maintain neutrality in religious matters, thereby promoting fairness, inclusivity and equal respect for all religious beliefs. In this sense, the provisions of Sections 10, 38 and 42 of the 1999 Constitution (As Amended), collectively establish a legal foundation intended to protect freedom of religion, prohibit discrimination and prevent the adoption of any state religion. However, the practical realization of this constitutional ideal remains complex. Religious identity continues to overlap with political, educational and wider public life, sometimes creating perceptions of bias or exclusion. Such perceptions can undermine public confidence in state institutions and intensify interreligious tensions, especially when political decisions or policies are viewed, rightly or wrongly as influencing religious affiliations. These dynamics makes it more difficult to achieve constitutional neutrality in everyday governance.

Despite these difficulties, Nigeria’s constitutional recognition of its secular status remains an essential foundation for managing religious diversity. It establishes

the legal and normative basis for interreligious tolerance and supports efforts to promote peaceful coexistence in a religiously plural society.

Interreligious dialogue as a means of promoting religious harmony in Nigeria

Religious intolerance continues to pose a serious and persistent challenge to social unity, political stability and sustainable development in Nigeria. As a country marked by religious diversity comprising of Christianity, Islam and indigenous faith traditions, Nigeria has long struggled with balancing this plurality alongside its ethnic, political and regional differences. Competition for social space, political influence and economic resources in Nigeria is often interpreted through a religious lens, which transforms doctrinal differences into sources of suspicion, communal unrest and occasional outbreaks of violence. Beyond organized insurgent activities, religious intolerance in Nigeria also manifests in local community clashes, provocative speech, hate speech, discriminatory behaviour and sudden outbreaks of violence triggered by sensitive religious disagreement. The widespread use of social media and other informal communication platforms has further heightened religious sensitivity, sometimes speeding up the spread of provocative narratives that intensify tensions between faith communities.

Interreligious engagement represents one of the most effective mechanisms for promoting religious tolerance in Nigeria’s diverse and often divided society. Within a historical context shaped by Christian –Muslim rivalries, sectarian suspicion and recurring outbreaks of violence, deliberate and institutionalized interaction among religious communities provides a normative foundation and a practical pathway for peaceful coexistence. A central premise of interreligious dialogue is the recognition that religious diversity is a fundamental feature of human society rather than an automatic source of conflict. In this regard, interreligious dialogue, understood as a structured and purposeful form of engagement among adherents of different faiths serves as a vital instrument for fostering mutual understanding, deepening respect and addressing misconceptions. Grounded in principles of ethical interaction, it enables communities to express their beliefs, clarify misunderstandings and develop compassionate appreciation for differing perspectives. By promoting direct engagement rather than reliance on rumours or biased interpretations, it reduces fear and mistrust, functions as both a preventive and corrective mechanism and ultimately strengthens social cohesion and peaceful coexistence in Nigeria.

¹² Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999. (As Amended) Section 38, 46.

¹³ Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999. (As Amended) Section 42,48.

One important function of interreligious dialogue is its ability to break down stereotypes and prejudices. In Nigeria, the misrepresentation of religious groups in media, political rhetoric and educational narratives often generates suspicion and fear which can lead to intolerance and conflict. Through sustained engagement, dialogue initiatives create opportunities for communities to present accurate and balanced accounts of their beliefs and practices, correct misinformation and reduce the psychological distance that often fuels hostility. In this way, interreligious dialogue establishes moral and intellectual spaces where empathy and mutual understanding can develop, directly addressing the attitudinal roots of religious tension.

At the same time, continuous engagement promotes attitudes of tolerance and respect, as participants come to understand that diversity in belief does not necessarily imply enmity. This is particularly significant in Nigeria's pluralistic society, where Christianity and Islam are widely practiced and often coexist within the same communities and even families. Ultimately, dialogue reinforces the understanding that peaceful coexistence is possible without requiring individuals to compromise their faith commitments.

Interreligious dialogue also promotes ethical responsibility by emphasizing common moral values shared across diverse religious traditions. These common ethical principles promote collaboration in advancing moral discipline within society. Although doctrinal differences exist, adherents are encouraged to recognize common ethical principles such as justice, compassion, human dignity and sanctity of life. In doing so, dialogue helps build a moral foundation for cooperation and peaceful coexistence. When religious communities speak collectively on ethical issues which include corruption, violence and drug abuse, their impact becomes powerful and constructive.

In the Nigerian context, where the various regions have experienced religiously linked tensions, interreligious dialogue also functions as an important preventive tool. It creates early platforms for engagement where grievances can be addressed before they escalate into violence. Given the influential role of religious leaders in shaping public opinion, their participation in dialogue enables them to jointly condemn violence and promote peaceful responses. This collective stance strengthens broader peaceful efforts at both community and national levels. As observed by Ifeanchio, "Religious crisis and violence pose a serious threat to the peace and unity of Nigeria. The upsurge in religious prejudice, suspicion, distrust and intolerance has

resulted in a staggering loss of life and property in Nigeria. Some religious leaders engage in wrong orientations of their members, which adversely affect peaceful coexistence between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria."¹⁴

By bringing together diverse religious communities, interreligious dialogue strengthens social cohesion and promotes a sense of collective belonging. It has been observed that the adherents of the various faiths work together on shared societal concerns such as poverty alleviation, education, healthcare and disaster response, thereby shifting attention from doctrinal differences to common human needs. In this way, dialogue could be used to promote national integration by reinforcing a shared sense of citizenship that goes beyond religious identity. In Nigeria, practical expressions of interreligious dialogue often involve religious leaders, civil society organizations and community stakeholders jointly creating platforms for discussion, cooperative initiatives and public awareness. These efforts demonstrate that dialogue is not just theoretical but a concrete practice capable of shaping attitudes, reducing prejudice and cultivating mutual respect among different faith communities.

Another dimension of interreligious dialogue is its promotion of participatory and inclusive decision-making, where stakeholders are actively involved in problem-solving, policy development and community initiatives rather than being subjected to top-down prescriptions. This inclusive approach contributes to national development by promoting religious harmony and reducing the social and economic costs of sectarian conflicts including displacements, loss of productivity and infrastructural damage. It further creates an enabling environment for cooperation, social innovation and sustainable community development. In effect, when religious communities collaborate rather than compete, they enhance societal fortitude and advance both peace building and developmental objectives.

Despite its acknowledged benefits, interreligious dialogue in Nigeria is constrained by several persistent challenges. These include deep-rooted prejudices, political manipulation of religious identities, limited trust among faith groups and occasional extremist interpretations that fuel division. In addition, dialogue initiatives are frequently limited to the involvement of the elite religious leaders with limited reach at the grassroots level, which reduces their wider social influence. Socio-economic inequalities further complicate these efforts; as disadvantaged groups may be more prone to radical messages. On the overall, issues such as political

¹⁴ E. Ifeanchio. Interfaith Dialogue as a tool for peacebuilding in Nigeria. In *International Journal of*

interference, inadequate resources and deep-rooted biases continue to undermine effective cooperation and sustainable engagement among religious communities.

Interreligious dialogue invariably remains a vital instrument for promoting religious harmony in Nigeria, as it fosters mutual understanding, encourages tolerance, prevents conflicts and strengthens social cohesion within a religiously diverse society. It helps to transform diversity into a source of unity and peaceful coexistence. However, for it to be fully effective, it must be all inclusive, sustained and supported by all religious institutions and government structures, while also addressing the underlying social and economic tensions that fuel mistrust.

In conclusion, interreligious dialogue functions as a pre-emptive strategy for promoting religious tolerance in Nigeria, by how it shifts engagement from reactive conflict management to proactive peace building. It ultimately enables religious diversity to support national cohesion rather than division, while encouraging collaboration, inclusive participation and addressing the structural and sustainable peace. Ultimately, it remains both a strategic and ethical approach to strengthening social harmony and national development in Nigeria.

Pantaleon Iroegbu's concept of God and its implication for religious tolerance.

In the Nigerian context, religious identity occupies a core place in the formation of social relations, political participation and conceptions of the divine. Its widespread influence conditions patterns of coexistence, recognition and tolerance among diverse communities. Despite the plurality that characterize Nigeria's religious landscape comprising Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion, the country's historical experience continues to reflect recurring episodes of religious tension, intolerance and conflict. Importantly, these conflicts rarely originate solely from theological differences as stated earlier. Rather, they are sustained by a complex interplay of religious affiliation with ethnic divisions, political interests and socio-economic disparities. The convergence of these multiple factors renders such conflicts multidimensional, thereby complicating efforts and making the pursuit of sustainable peace and tolerance increasingly difficult. A particularly critical dimension is the perceived rivalry between Christianity and Islam for socio-political influence. In the view of Ihua,

The implication of these varied understanding of the nature of the Supreme Being is what comes down to us today in form of religious intolerance. While Christianity and Islam do not find in these senses of

belief in God itself any ground of unbelief in Him, they are all the same dramatically opposed to each other, in social, economic, political and religious values. Torn between their jealousies though, there is no fundamental opposition in their dogmas as to dialogue, neither is there any question as to the fact that the two groups acknowledge the divine essence and worship the only true, and one God...¹⁵

Against this backdrop, the persistent challenge of religious intolerance in Nigeria continues to pose a serious threat to national cohesion, social stability and sustainable development. Despite constitutional guarantees of religious freedom and the country's long-standing history of pluralism, relations among religious traditions remain marked by suspicion, competition and periodic conflict. This reality reveals the limitations of purely legalistic or policy-driven approaches to religious harmony, as such these measures often fail to address the deeper underlying assumptions shaping religious worldviews. Consequently, there is a need for a conceptually sound and philosophically strong framework that can reinterpret the idea of God in a way that upholds diversity without compromising unity. It is in this context that Pantaleon Iroegbu becomes especially significant. Accordingly, this study is driven by the need to explore how Iroegbu's concept of God can serve as a philosophical resource for tackling religious intolerance in Nigeria and for promoting a more inclusive and interactive model of interreligious coexistence.

Pantaleon Iroegbu's concept of God is grounded in a distinctly African perspective that understands reality as fundamentally relational and participatory. Iroegbu's thought emphasizes relationality as the central feature of existence embedded within the framework of his *Uwa* ontology. His *Uwa* ontology, rooted in Igbo metaphysics, is a dynamic network of interconnected existence in which all beings, visible and invisible, are fundamentally interrelated. His concept of *Uwa*, a multi-dimensional concept, encompasses several interrelated connotations such as Life (existence), Cosmos and the world as a relational totality, each expressing a distinct but interconnected dimension of being. These connotations do not operate in isolation, instead, they mutually inform one another, thereby expressing reality as a unified yet diversified structure of interdependence. In his view, human beings are not isolated or self-sufficient entities but participants in a comprehensive network of being that includes God, humanity and the wider cosmos. He states:

The entirety of existence, from God the highest Being to inanimate beings of our cosmos, can be

¹⁵ A.S. Ihua. The God narrative in Nigerian Politics: An existential conversation for religious tolerance. In

Philosophy and Praxis. Journal of the Nigerian Philosophical Association. 182.

summarized in the englobing concept of the Igbo term *Uwa*. *Uwa* is all-inclusive. It mirrors being, existence, entity, all reality. It englobes all that is animate and inanimate, visible and invisible. It is comprehensive, universal and global. It is transcendent and immanent scope as well as explicative and prospective elasticity.¹⁶

At the core of his thought is the understanding of God as the ultimate source of being, the necessary foundation upon which all finite realities depend. He states “That Ultimately Ultimate Being therefore really exists, His name is God”.¹⁷ Within this ontological structure, God is the highest being among others and the source of both existence and moral order, thereby establishing an inherent link between ontology and ethics. Human actions, including religious expressions are therefore located within a unified structure of being that entails ethical obligations. His conception of God as the foundational ground of being, together with his ontology of relationality and participation, provides a metaphysical framework for rethinking religious coexistence. By grounding existence in unity-in-diversity and emphasizing belonging as the structure of reality, Iroegbu’s thought transforms religious differences from a source of hostility into a space of mutual recognition and dialogue.

Within this framework, God is conceived not just as a distant Supreme Being but as the foundational ground of being, one that sustains and unifies all forms of existence in a network of ethical and relational interdependence. This conception transcends rigid and exclusivist understandings of the divine, while remaining in constructive dialogue with Christian theological traditions. By integrating elements of African traditional worldviews with aspects of Christian doctrine, Iroegbu develops a unified philosophical system that affirms indigenous identity while simultaneously promoting openness and unity across religious boundaries.

Within Iroegbu’s *Uwa* ontology, morality is embedded in the very structure of being, which is relational, purposive and value-laden. The good consists in actions that promote the fullness and harmony of being, while the bad undermines this order. Since *Uwa* itself is grounded in God, moral values are ultimately grounded in God, moral values derive from the divine foundation of reality and situates all beings within a morally charged network of responsibilities that bind individuals and communities to one another and to the wider cosmic order. Importantly,

this metaphysical vision is directly linked to practical human conduct.

Iroegbu connects the relational and ethical dimensions of God to lived experience, such that interreligious tolerance is not just theoretical but is realized through dialogue, mutual recognition, cooperation and pursuit of justice. Religious communities are therefore encouraged to view coexistence as an ethical responsibility rather than a mere legal obligation, thereby aligning social practice with the underlying structure of reality. In this way, his framework promotes interreligious cooperation by urging communities to remain attentive to the ethical implications of their actions and their broader impact on social stability and development. From this perspective, religious intolerance, prejudice and sectarian violence constitute not only social and political failures but also ethical violations against both the divine foundation of reality and relational order of *Uwa* itself.

Iroegbu’s framework on conflict resolution is understood as the restoration of disrupted moral and relational harmony rather than the administration of punishment. Intolerance is understood as a breakdown in relationships and its remedy lies in dialogue, ethical negotiation and mutual accommodation. This approach emphasizes rebuilding trust and balance as essential to both social and spiritual life. In the Nigerian context, where interreligious conflicts often persist due to cycles of retaliation and unresolved grievances, this restorative perspective offers a pathway toward lasting peace and cohesion.

In addition, Iroegbu’s concept of God advances a relational ethic, a moral framework rooted in human interconnectedness within *Uwa*, which extends beyond mere acceptance of differences. Within this framework, religious tolerance transcends the mere endurance of differences, it becomes a dynamic and value-oriented practice grounded in moral commitment, responsible ethical decisions and intentional cooperation among individuals and communities. This perspective is rooted in Iroegbu’s broader ontological understanding of reality as relational and purposeful, in which all beings are interconnected and directed toward the fullness of existence founded in God. Consequently, tolerance emerges as a moral responsibility that demands actions promoting harmony, justice and mutual well-being within the human community.

This active and relational understanding of tolerance aligns deeply with the Igbo proverb “*Egbe bere, Ugo bere*”¹⁸ which in Igbo language means “let the kite perch,

¹⁶ P. Iroegbu. *METAPHYSICS: The Kpim of Philosophy*. (Owerri: International Universities Press Ltd., 1995),339.

¹⁷ P. O. Iroegbu. *KPIM OF THEODICY: Proving the Existence of God via Hermeholiontica*. (Ibadan: Hope Publications,2002), 103.

¹⁸ P. Iroegbu. *METAPHYSICS: The Kpim of Philosophy*, 351.

let the eagle perch". This proverb expresses a profound philosophy of coexistence, stressing that diverse groups, despite their differences, have equal rights to exist, thrive and share the same social space. In Iroegbu's philosophical framework, this proverb reinforces the view that no single religious tradition can claim exclusive possession of truth or dominance within a pluralistic society. Instead, each tradition is expected to coexist with others in an attitude of mutual respect and acknowledgement.

Furthermore, this ethic has important implications for a religiously diverse society like Nigeria, where conflicts frequently stem from claims of superiority, exclusivist attitudes and struggles for social and political influence. By rooting tolerance in a relational conception of God, Iroegbu offers a framework that not only rejects hostility but also promotes dialogue, solidarity and cooperative engagement across religious divides. Thus, tolerance is understood as an active and dynamic practice directed toward promoting peaceful coexistence and the shared flourishing of all, in keeping with the spirit of "*Egbe bere, Ugo bere*".

In summary, Iroegbu's conception of God, when considered alongside his dictum "to be is to belong"¹⁹ provides a rich interpretive framework for understanding both the structure of reality and the requirements of interreligious tolerance in Nigeria. At the core, his thought affirms that existence is fundamentally relational, entailing that identity, meaning and purpose emerge through participation in the communal web of life (*Uwa*), rather than in isolation. Thus, the individual finds fulfilment within a supportive and sustaining community that enables both personal and collective flourishing. This view aligns with African communal thought, as expressed by Mbiti's assertion "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am."²⁰ and reinforced by Okere, who states that,

Man is not just an individual, an island, left to himself and sufficient to himself, on his own. Man is essentially community. No one ever came to being as a bolt from the blues, like an oil bean seed falling from the sky, as our proverb says, 'I am always we'. We in the nuclear family, we in the extended family, we in the village and town, etc.²¹

Okere maintains that within the African context, particularly in Igbo land, human existence is always embedded in communal belonging.

Within this wider ontological perspective, Iroegbu's conception of God portrays divine reality as intrinsically relational, inclusive and sustaining. Consequently, when applied to interreligious tolerance, this framework

produces several interconnected insights. First, tolerance is understood as both a moral duty and a metaphysical requirement grounded in the relational nature of *Uwa*. Second, recognition, dialogue and cooperation are essential for maintaining both spiritual and social harmony. Third, the inclusive and universal nature of God's relational engagement serves a bridge between different religious traditions, promoting mutual respect while discouraging exclusivism. Moreover, in this understanding, tolerance is not passive, it calls for active moral engagement, openness to reconciliation and a sustained commitment to justice. Within Iroegbu's philosophical framework, it is therefore a dynamic, value-oriented practice that expresses the fundamental interconnectedness of all existence.

On this basis, his concept of God provides both a philosophical foundation and practical direction for engaging the challenges of religious diversity in Nigeria. It demonstrates that tolerance is a deep ethical and spiritual duty that links human conduct to the divine and to the cosmic order. By embracing this relational vision as espoused by Iroegbu, Nigeria can cultivate a culture of understanding, mutual respect and cooperative coexistence among its diverse religious communities.

Conclusion

Iroegbu's concept of God provides a persuasive basis for rethinking religious tolerance in Nigeria. By rooting existence in a metaphysics of belonging, he portrays God not as a distant concept but as the very principle of interconnectedness that upholds all reality. Within this relational vision, tolerance is no longer reduced to a matter of political settlement or social convenience, instead, it emerges as an ethical demand and a requirement of existence, woven into the fabric of being itself. The Igbo proverb "*Egbe bere, Ugo bere*" aptly captures this worldview, weaving the fabric of mutual co-existence in an atmosphere of give and take. It functions as both a cultural symbol, and as a philosophical assertion that coexistence is the natural state of life. In Nigeria's religiously diverse society, which is frequently divided by the strictness of religious exclusivism, Iroegbu's thought provides a culturally rooted alternative perspective. His philosophy rejects the extremes of fervent bias, and in its place presents a balanced framework for coexistence. When carefully applied, it offers a workable path toward peaceful interreligious harmony rooted in African metaphysical consciousness.

It calls on Nigerians to adopt tolerance not as a form of compromise, but as a lived reality, a way of existence that respects differences while upholding shared sense of existence. In this way, religious harmony is presented as both achievable and necessary, and as something already rooted in

¹⁹ P. Iroegbu. *METAPHYSICS: The Kpim of Philosophy*, 374.

²⁰ J. Mbiti. *African Religions and Philosophy*, 94.

²¹ T. Okere. *Philosophy, Culture and Society in Africa*. (Nsukka: Afro-Orbis, 2005), 3.

the very structure of reality as Iroegbu conceives it. Thus, his relational metaphysics ultimately reframes religious coexistence as both possible and necessary. It envisions a Nigeria where diverse religious traditions live side by side without domination or suppression, but in mutual recognition and respect. In this perspective, tolerance goes beyond social policy and becomes a fundamental condition for human flourishing and societal stability, pointing toward a future of authentic and sustained interreligious coexistence.

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