The Quest for Christian Unity in Nigeria: A Historical and Theological Perspective on Ecumenism

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Abstract

Nigeria's varied religious scene brands ecumenism as a dynamic means for promoting unity. However, the country has historically wriggled with interfaith tensions, leading to conflicts that threaten national peace. Despite several interfaith discussions and initiatives, evaluating their efficiency and promoting inclusivity remains challenging. This study examines the role of ecumenism in fostering Christian unity as a means of peaceful coexistence. It explores the historical and theological dimensions of Christian unity efforts in Nigeria, examining their potential to foster interfaith peacefulness. Against a backdrop of recurrent religious conflicts, particularly between Christians and Muslims, this research investigates the role of ecumenism in addressing Nigeria's pressing challenges to national cohesion. The study provides an in-depth analysis of how ecumenical cooperation can serve as a strategic framework to mitigate religious fanaticism and foster a more robust sense of national oneness within Nigeria's complex socio-religious landscape. The

researchers adopt a mixed-methods approach, combining primary interviews with religious leaders and secondary analyses of peace initiatives, which assess the effectiveness of ecumenical efforts in promoting peace building and unity. The findings highlight the implications of collective ecumenical movements that engage religious leaders and civil agencies, in resolving conflicts and fostering a more harmonious society. By examining the intersections of ecumenical history and theology, this research offers insights into the prospects and challenges of Christian unity in Nigeria, which will ensure broader interfaith dialogue and national peace.

Keywords: Christianity, Unity, Ecumenism, Theology and Nigeria

Introduction

The early Christian church, in its embryonic stage, was characterized by a simplicity and focus that belied its profound impact on the world. Rather than being preoccupied with doctrinal disputes, the early Christians were driven by a passion for spreading the gospel message of Jesus Christ. Their worship was straightforward, comprising prayer, hymns, psalms, and spiritual songs, as well as the reading of scripture and mutual exhortation. The structure of the church was informal, with no rigid liturgical or ecclesiastical framework, and no denominational affiliations to divide them. What united them was a shared dedication to evangelism, even in the face of persecution. According to Koopman (2013), unity that seeks unity in diversity, unity amidst diversity of doctrinal positions, ethical stances, nationalities, socio-economic backgrounds, genders, sexual orientations, ethnicities, culture, age groups, levels of physical, mental and other abilities and disabilities, expressions and species of natural life. Every effort was made to maintain harmony and avoid conflict in order to maximize the spread of the gospel. As the early church was predominantly Jewish, with its members drawn from a Jewish background, there was less emphasis on establishing a detailed guide for the growing Christian community, allowing them to focus on their primary mission of reaching the ends of the earth with the message of Jesus Christ.

The arrival of Paul, a scholarly and intellectually vibrant apostle, marked a significant turning point in the development of Christianity. His missionary endeavours, which took him beyond the Jewish community and into the Greco-Roman world, were met with remarkable success. As Christianity interacted with Greek intellectual culture, the need arose to articulate and defend core Christian beliefs, leading to theological debates and controversies. The nature of God, the incarnation of Christ, the person of the Holy Spirit and the doctrine of the Trinity became central issues of discussion, sparking disagreements that would shape the faith over the centuries. These controversies, which spanned several centuries, ultimately contributed to the development of diverse ecclesiastical forms and doctrinal practices, as Christianity navigated the tension between unity and diversity. By the seventh century, the Christian faith had emerged stronger, its various segments bound together by a shared commitment to scripture and tradition, even as they differed in their interpretations and expressions.

Nigeria, with over 40% of its population identifying as Christian, is home to a diverse array of denominations, each with its unique traditions and practices. Despite this rich religious heritage, the country's Christian landscape has been marked by fragmentation and division. However, in response to the global ecumenical movement that gained momentum in 1910, Nigerian Christians have increasingly recognized the imperative of unity, seeking to present a united front in the propagation of the gospel and the defence of core Christian tenets. This paper explores the historical and theological dimensions of ecumenism in Nigeria, examining the efforts of organizations such as the Christian Association of Nigeria and the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria to transcend denominational boundaries and foster a sense of shared purpose and cooperation. As Nigerian Christianity comes of age, it is shedding the vestiges of Western missionary-era denominationalism, embracing a new era of unity in diversity, and seeking to embody the prayer of Jesus that "they may be one" (John 17:21).

Conceptualizing Ecumenism

The concept of ecumenism has become a prominent theme in modern religious discourse. The term "ecumenism" originates from the Greek word "oikoumene," meaning "the inhabited world" or "the whole earth." According to Hart Beverly

Beach, the word "ecumenism" was first employed by Herodotus, the ancient Greek historian, in the 5th century BC. Initially, "oikoumene" referred to a geographical area or jurisdiction, as used by Herodotus, Aristotle, and Demosthenes. In its original context, the term had a secular, rather than religious, connotation, often used to address rulers of vast empires as "kings of the universe." Over time, the word "oikoumene" or "ecumenism" expanded to encompass social functions, such as associations of actors and international sporting events, as evident in imperial inscriptions on coins and references to "holy ecumenical competitions." Obiefuna & Kanu (2016) asserted that ecumenism is a process by which Christian Churches that had been separated by doctrine, social, ethnic, political and institutional factors move towards cooperation and unity, by mutual understanding and respect through dialogue.

In theological contexts, the term "ecumenism" took on a new meaning, referring to the world dominated by Greco-Roman civilization, in contrast to the "Barbarian" territories beyond its borders. Origen, an early Church Father, was the first to envision the church as an "oikoumene," encompassing the entire world as a canvas for the gospel. The early church councils, convened by the emperor of the Roman Empire, were also labelled "ecumenical," reflecting their representation of the broader geographical world recognized by the universal church. It wasn't until the 20th-century ecumenical movement, however, that the term "ecumenism" shifted its focus from denoting universality to emphasizing denominational unity, seeking to unify Christian churches across the globe. The modern understanding of ecumenism, particularly since the 19th century, finds its roots in Jesus' prayer for the unity of his followers, "that they may be one" (John 17:20-22). This vision of unity has evolved into a movement, a theology, and a way of life, emphasizing the universal nature of God's people and shaping Christian thought and practice. Ecumenism recognizes that, while complete denominational convergence may be unattainable, unity in diversity is a viable and desirable goal, reflecting the rich tapestry of Christian traditions and expressions. This understanding of ecumenism celebrates the diversity of the global church, while striving for a deeper sense of fellowship, cooperation, and shared purpose among Christians worldwide.

The global antecedent of ecumenism

The global history of ecumenism is a response to the fragmentation of the Christian church, which has been divided along denominational lines for centuries. In the 19th century, Christian groups such as the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA, 1844), the Evangelical Alliance (EA, 1846), and the Student Christian Federation (SCM, 1880) recognized the need for a unified world-wide front to advance the gospel beyond denominational boundaries. As denominations continued to proliferate, the 20th century saw the emergence of ecumenical councils, driven by the spread of churches across national borders. Theological discussions played a pivotal role in this quest for unity, with the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910 serving as a catalyst.

This led to the establishment of the International Missionary Council, which in turn paved the way for the creation of the Universal Christian Conference on Life and Work in 1927. These two bodies eventually merged to form the World Council of Churches (WCC, 1961), a global fellowship of churches committed to promoting unity, cooperation and shared mission. The ecumenical movement gained significant momentum after the Roman Catholic Church joined, leading to a series of conferences hosted by the International Missionary Council. Between 1929 and 1957, five key conferences were held: Jerusalem (1929), Madras (1938), Whitby (1947), Willington (1952), and Ghana (1957). These gatherings brought Christian leaders together to celebrate their shared faith and commitment to the gospel, transcending denominational boundaries and fostering a sense of unity and cooperation.

The history of Nigeria's ecumenism

The history of ecumenism in Nigeria is closely tied to the country's missionary past, which introduced denominational divisions and doctrinal differences that fragmented the Christian community. Johnson (2012) posited that these protestant churches during the great awakening in Europe and America brought the gospel of Christ to African continent with their divisions and quarrelling. Africans inherited the disunity in the body of Christ. However, in 1911, a movement towards unity emerged when three major denominations, Presbyterian, Methodist and Anglican came together to form a united front, leading to the establishment of

Trinity Theological College in Umuahia, Abia State. This initiative marked the beginning of ecumenism in Nigeria; which gained further traction in 1923 with the formation of the Evangelical Union of Southern Nigeria, comprising churches and denominations committed to unity and cooperation.

This was followed by the establishment of the Christian Council of Nigeria in Lagos in 1930. Another significant milestone was the 1947 missionary conference in Onitsha, Anambra State, which brought together representatives from various denominations, including Qua Iboe, Sudan Interior Missions, Anglican, Methodist, and Presbyterian, to foster greater unity and collaboration. In contrast, the Fellowship of Churches in Nigeria, formed in 1955, brought together churches that had no missionary ties or control. In 1958, the first All African Christian Conference was held in Ibadan, Oyo State, bringing together Protestant Christian leaders from across the continent. The Nigerian Association of Aladura Churches, established in Western Nigeria in 1960, was another example of ecumenical cooperation. In 1965, the proposed United Church of Nigeria, launched but ultimately aborted due to factors such as lack of clear ideology, inadequate mobilization, personal interests, ethnic tensions and inter-denominational conflicts.

Despite these efforts, national ecumenical unions faced challenges, leading to the eventual formation of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) on 27th August, 1976. Konye (2024) posited that it is the committee on ecumenism that is responsible for promoting Christian unity; organizing ecumenical meetings with other Christian churches in Nigeria; providing opportunities for all to study and understand each other's faith and religious worldview; and working together in identifying areas of agreement and resolving areas of disagreement. (Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria n.d.). Today, CAN is a nationally recognized body with an ecumenical center in Abuja and state-level centers across Nigeria. The association comprises five main blocs: the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria (CSN), Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN), Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN), Organization of African Instituted Churches (OAIC), and the TEKAN and ECWA Fellowship of Nigeria. This association fosters a sense of unity and fellowship, echoing the biblical ideal of believers dwelling together in harmony (Psalms 133). According to

Falk (2015) the activities have attempted to bring disunity to an end and replace hostility between denominations with good neighbour attitude.

Typology of Ecumenism

There various forms of ecumenism that promotes unity and cooperation among Christians. These typologies help clarify the complexities of ecumenical engagement, revealing diverse approaches to unity. Pobee (2002) identifies three types of ecumenism in Africa which includes structured ecumenism, unstructured and natural ecumenism and enforced ecumenism. The structured ecumenism has its roots in the 1910 Edinburgh conference and subsequent ecumenical initiatives. It involves the establishment of Christian councils at various levels, including national, sub-regional, and regional bodies. In Africa, examples of structured ecumenism include Bible societies and other organizations that facilitate cooperation and unity among Christian churches and denominations. Secondly, unstructured and natural ecumenism reflects the African family system, where shared rituals and responsibilities foster unity. Within Christianity, this approach creates a sense of family, encouraging collective responsibility and unity. For example, inter-denominational marriages can bring people together, breaking down historical divisions. In Eastern Nigeria, particularly Anambra State, ecumenism has helped bridge the gap between Anglicans and Catholics, formerly divided by missionary rivalries, allowing them to intermarry and promoting reconciliation. Kaunda (2015) depicts African theology as an inclusive discourse that aims to enable African Christians to reclaim African agency to subvert any imposed category of thinking by rationally taking control, understanding, describing, reshaping, defining, and renaming the world through a neo indigenous cultural lens.

Thirdly, enforced ecumenism arises in complex, existential situations where circumstances compel unity. During times of persecution, natural disasters, oppression, or war, Christians often put aside denominational differences to stand together. In Northern Nigeria, for example, Christians from various denominations unite in solidarity in the face of persecution. Similarly, in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, Christians find comfort and support together, transcending denominational lines. In these situations, governments often take responsibility for

protecting citizens, and ecumenical cooperation becomes a vital aspect of relief efforts. The approaches of ecumenism remain inclusive rather than exclusive in Christendom. According to Anthony (2025) ecumenism is God's mandate entrusted to humans – a mandate of stewardship, love, justice, righteousness, communal and symbiotic relationships in the inhabited world. The mandate of ecumenism demands and summons us to be humble, receptive, responsible and accountable in our quest for unity and care for God's world.

The theological perspective of ecumenism in Nigeria

The ecumenical vision of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) is grounded in the biblical passage of John 17:21, where Jesus prays for the unity of his followers. This scripture informs CAN's theological perspective on ecumenism, which aims to promote unity of faith among Christians in Nigeria. In the purview of Tanner (2005), ecumenical theology is the result of theological reflection oriented to the goal of the unity; the unity of the church, the unity of humankind, and the unity of creation, in the perspective of the kingdom of God.

The organization serves as a platform for dialogue with other religions and denominations, fostering cooperation, peaceful co-existence and understanding. CAN's ecumenical efforts are also geared towards promoting collective progress, peace and prosperity in Nigerian society. As a spiritual and moral watchdog, the organization seeks to provide guidance and oversight on issues related to governance, politics and national development in Nigeria.

A prominent Nigerian Christian leader had expressed optimism about the Christian Association of Nigeria's (CAN) potential to shape the global ecumenical landscape. As a national body, CAN is poised to foster robust interfaith and intra-faith dialogue, addressing theological and social issues. Its strategic position also enables it to serve as a hub for ecumenical initiatives in West Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa, amplifying its impact on the global stage and cementing its relevance in international ecumenical circles. Anthony (2025) posits that based on the communal nature of African society the concept of ecumenism is not an imposition from the outside. Africans were ecumenical before the arrival of Christianity. The ecumenical movement in Nigeria and Africa is deeply rooted in

the communal and ecumenical nature of African culture, where community and cooperation are highly valued. This cultural foundation has created a fertile ground for ecumenism to flourish, enabling Africans to come together across denominational lines and work towards a common purpose. The inherent sense of community and cooperation in African societies has been a driving force behind the growth and success of ecumenical initiatives in Nigeria and Africa.

The problem of ecumenism in Nigeria

Ecumenism has facilitated unity and cooperation among Christians worldwide, yet it faces challenges. Despite these, it has provided opportunities for Christians to engage in meaningful dialogue that transcends denominational boundaries, and ensures together worship. Christian leaders now collaborate, promoting national solidarity and extending support without prejudice to each other which demonstrates the power of unity in faith. The following problems below plague the effectiveness of ecumenism in Nigeria.

1. Denominational Allegiance: This poses a challenge to ecumenism in Nigeria, as individual churches and pastors prioritize their own denominational interests over the broader Christian community. Despite involvement with the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), many maintain stronger ties to their own denomination, rendering their commitment to ecumenism somewhat superficial.
2. Source of Funding: The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) relies on monthly dues, donations, offerings, and sponsorships for funding. However, inconsistent payments from member churches lead to financial struggles, forcing CAN to seek government support, which risks compromising its core values and independence. The government's involvement in ecumenical activities raises concerns about undue influence. By sponsoring pilgrimages and funding events, the government exert control over the ecumenical body's agenda. Christian leaders' participation in government organized events, such as carol services at the Aso Rock and state houses during festive season, may blur the lines between church and state. The close ties with the government have led to criticism that it prioritizes maintaining relationships over prophetic witness. Many Christians accuse the body of failing to speak truth to power, particularly

regarding the Nigerian state's issues, such as insurgence and genocide. This perceived silence has eroded trust in the ecumenical body's ability to advocate for justice and human rights.

3. Denominational Supremacy: This fuels division in Nigerian Christianity, with some churches claiming superiority over others. This mentality leads to a "church-based" identity, where Nigerians prioritize their denomination over unity in Christ. The resulting conflicts have broken relationships, damaged homes, and hindered goodwill. For instance, the Catholic Church's claim to be the "true church" can lead to perceptions of exclusivity, while Protestant denominations fragment into competing groups like Pentecostals, Charismatics and Orthodox, fostering an atmosphere of competition rather than unity. In the purview of Falk (2015) inasmuch as the Catholic church maintains that is the true church and since it only invites reconciliation with other Christian communions, most of what has been done is in the nature of a pre-ecumenism phase rather than a real expression of ecumenism.
4. Foreign missions: Ecumenical participation is often hindered by churches with overseas funding and control because they require approval from their foreign leaders to engage with local ecumenical bodies. This can create tension between their global affiliations and local commitments, undermining the spirit of unity and cooperation that ecumenism seeks to foster.
5. Proliferation and sheep stealing: The proliferation of churches in Nigeria has led to unregulated growth, with unqualified individuals claiming divine calls. This has resulted in "sheep stealing," where members are poached from established churches, often through aggressive recruitment tactics. Dual leadership and administrative conflicts have arisen, while pastors are reluctant to join ecumenical bodies, fearing loss of members to larger churches. The prioritization of wealth and influence ("money bag Christianity") enables undisciplined behaviour, with some pastors celebrating wealthy or influential individuals despite misconduct, further fragmenting the Christian community and undermining ecumenical cooperation.

Conclusion

The ecumenical movement in Christianity has faced challenges, including internal conflicts and denominationalism, yet continues to progress. The Nigerian ecumenical body has been a voice for protection and peaceful coexistence amidst persecution. The Christian Association of Nigeria has promoted unity among Christians by emphasizing shared core beliefs: one faith, one creed and one scripture. This common foundation has helped bridge denominational divides, fostering a sense of unity and cooperation among diverse Christian groups in Nigeria. However, internal biases and denominationalism have hindered its effectiveness. This discussion highlights the history, theology, and challenges of ecumenism, offering insights and recommendations for strengthening Christian unity and Nigeria's progress.

Recommendations

The following are some recommendations of this research.

1. The Christian Association of Nigeria should speak truth to power, holding politicians accountable.
2. They need to stay true to their vision of a united Christian community.
3. They should regulate those exploiting faith for personal gain.
4. Ecumenical activities need a boost.
5. Church proliferation needs checking.
6. They should push for Christians' interests with the government.
7. Christian pilgrimage, like the Hajj should be revived and promoted.
8. They should encourage Christians to engage in politics and national issues.
9. They should condemn Christian genocide outright.
10. They should foster brotherly love between Nigerian Christians across regions.

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