

**RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS AND PRACTICES AMONG CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS:  
IMPLICATION FOR PEACE AND RECONCILIATION IN NORTHERN NIGERIA**

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**Abstract**

This paper examined the recent trend of escalating explosion of ethno-religious conflicts arising from the problem of religious symbols and practices among Christians and Muslims in Northern Nigeria with special focus on Jos North Local Government Area of Plateau State and Nassarawa Local Government Area of Kano State. In an attempt to discover the underlying factors that causes mistrust and conflicts among the two predominant religions in Northern Nigeria. The paper observes that the occurrence of conflicts in any in the study areas as a result of misunderstanding arising from the use of religious and cultural symbols could be more violent, leading to wanton destruction of lives and property. It notes that poor understanding and the improper use of religious symbols and practices in Northern Nigeria has hinder peaceful coexistence in some selected communities. This paper

observes that there is a negative relationship between Christian and Muslims with regards to the understanding and usage of religious symbols and practices in Northern Nigeria. This has great implications for peace and reconciliation; hence recommends that the religious and traditional leaders should take the business of addressing issues of religious and cultural symbols as priority one on the agenda to help their adherent towards achieving a peaceful society. Mixed methods (qualitative and quantitative), methodology has been used in the research with writer's observations and semi-structured interview as instrument of data collection.

**Keywords** Conflicts, Peace, Practices, Reconciliation, Religious, Symbols.

**Introduction**

The incidence of ethno-religious conflicts and other related violence have become a source of worry to governments, religious and community leaders and researchers across the globe. Ethno-religious conflict is a worldwide historical phenomenon that is as old as the Christian-Muslim relations. In many countries such as Syria, Afghanistan, Sudan, Central Africa, Rohingya in Myanmar and Republic of South Africa, cases of ethno-religious conflicts and political violence are reported every-day. Nigeria remains the largest multi-ethnic nation state in Africa with over 250 different ethnic groups belonging to several religious affiliations (Michael 212). Currently in Nigeria, the occurrences of ethno-religious have become rampant. In fact, the rise in cases in Nigeria today is scary and worrisome leading to poor mutual relations among Muslims and Christians. These have occurred in some instances as a result of the poor use of religious symbols and practices in many places by the different

religious groups in Northern Nigeria.

An incident occurred in Kano (specifically in Badawa, a community in Nassarawa Local Government Area of Kano state), a Muslim dominated state in the Northern part of Nigeria, on 15<sup>th</sup> November 2014 while the researcher was serving as a Pastor in the city. A group of young Muslims congregated together and were calling for support from other fellow Muslims to kill a young Christian woman, whom they believed had committed an abominable act. They all went out shouting *Allahu akbar* against the young Christian woman and were about to kill her, but a policeman nearby intervened and prevented the killing and rescued the young woman from their hands. When the policeman asked them the reason for the attempted killing, they accused her of wearing a T-shirt with a Qur'anic inscription even though she is not a Muslim but a Christian, which they believed was a detestable act to the Muslim faith. A Muslim cleric was called upon to interpret the inscription on her shirt, and it was discovered to be an Arabic word, ماجد دادي which translates in Hausa as *Maggi yana da dadi* or in English "Maggi cube is delicious." If not for the timely intervention of the policeman, the young woman would have been killed

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because of mere use of a symbol that looked religious, as the youths understood it, but had nothing to do with religion. This incident indicates that anything with Arabic, even ordinary Arabic alphabets, are regarded as symbols of Islam. On the other hand, anything with a cross, even ordinary jewelries for fashion, are regarded as symbols of Christianity. The perpetuation and prevalence these symbols in Northern Nigeria with disregard towards the religious sensitivity of the neighbor is contributing to the growing polarization and a feeling of “we” versus “them,” thereby not serving the interest of peace and reconciliation. There are many such incidences and symbols in Northern Nigeria which have triggered and perpetuated the ongoing ethno-religious conflicts.

Each religious group has its own distinct symbols and practices that set them unique in the eyes of all. There are symbols that are commonly used by all in the North which does not attract any tension, whereas there are symbols and practices that easily attract hates and trouble from the other side. This has created serious consciousness in that hearts of many to the extent that certain places with some symbols are not entered by people from the other faith. This consciousness has been accentuated by the systematic construction of religious minority and political identity in the “Middle Belt” based on the lived experience in the erstwhile Northern Nigerian and the general perception of the Nigerian state. It is a consciousness based on the perception that certain symbols and practices are meant for followers of a particular religion and where such symbols or practices are in use in more areas, is a reflection of the majority in such places.

In recent years, the dominant religious group in a given community tends to be on the forefront in fighting for political power or control through the use of certain religious symbols or practices to prove her dominance in such community or state. Some of these could be seen in the use of religious affiliated languages, symbols on school's identity, use of either Cross or the Crescent in strategic places or the use of the media. The situation has fomented anger, resentment, lust for revenge, and aggressive competitiveness that has overlooked the common good of the entire Northern Nigeria. Frustration among the minority in such communities or states has created a growing tendency to use violence as a viable means to correct the situation and cause religious conflict in order to

dominate (Falola 152). This is apparently a reference to the fact that the use of these symbols in certain places has always occupied a preeminent position in the social and economic life in the North owing to its early start. In view of the place religious symbols and certain practices occupied in the religious-polity of the country, some adherents of the faith tend to identify with their own symbols and practices and do everything possible to defend same than to identify with their country.

### **Statement of Purpose**

Christians and Muslims have experienced moments of both mutual interactive benefit, as well as of misunderstanding (Soares 647). However, this level of mutuality has since deteriorated further to the current level of uncertainty. This has become necessary giving the fact that symbolic and religious intolerance have generated a number of ethno-religious conflicts with serious implications on the country's economy. Ethnic and religious conflicts are common “currency” in the volatile Northern Nigeria. It is a known fact that ethno-religious conflicts have become common feature of the Northern Nigerian society. Peaceful relations between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria have been affected historically by mutual suspicion, hate and destruction of lives and property.

Nigeria, according to the 1999 Constitution classifies the country as a secular state, yet it's a multi-religious country. It has large numbers of Muslims and Christians. Conservative Muslims often think that Christians seek to convert them, and Christians worry that Muslims want to make Nigeria into an Islamic state. Each seeks for control and dominance of the country. Thus, the rise in the use of symbols and practices in Northern Nigeria to depict who are in the majority has caused so many ethno-religious conflicts in Northern Nigeria.

For over two decades now, Christian-Muslim relations in Northern Nigeria are at a low point not experienced since the Independence of the Country. Now any attack on any of the religious group (either Christians or Muslims) by the other religious body in any part of the country is usually welcomed with a reprisal attack on innocent citizens of the other faith in such places; thus heightening tensions in Christian-Muslim relations (Thomas 197). These conflicts have resulted in lost lives and property as some lost all they had. While some people sustained injuries of various

degrees, others were permanently displaced and psychologically depressed. This has further challenged the country's efforts towards national cohesion, democratic stability, economic transformation, peace and reconciliation.

The crises have created enormous tension and a general threat to security among Christians and Muslims in Northern Nigeria as well resulted to violation of the rights of citizens. Many people feel disgruntled or unjustly treated as a result of lack of justice or failure of the state to prosecute perpetrators and agitators of these Conflicts (Yau 148). This, as a result, deeply divides the most fragile states and makes them unstable; by all ramifications, there are fewer points of convergence and consensus among various groups than are required to effectively mitigate or contain the centrifugal forces that can tear the society apart (Eghosa 26). This has greatly widened the gap between the two major religions in the country.

Northern Nigeria is described as a conglomeration of nations and ethnic groups. As a pluralistic region, "it is diverse in culture, language, and ethnic background" (Adamolekun 68). There are three main religions in the region, thus making it a pluralistic and multi-religious society with most Nigerians being Muslim, Christian, or adherents of Traditional Religion (Oluponna 265). For both Islamic and Christian organisations, Northern Nigeria has become a centre point for proselytisation and it has proved to be a fertile ground for the establishment and development of new religious movements and ideas. This makes it attractive for Muslim reformers, who have been able to establish themselves more easily in Northern Nigeria than elsewhere (Fearon 129). The intensification of ethnic and religious politics coincided with growing socio-economic crisis in Nigeria, and as communal politics became more acute, social and political exclusion on the basis of ethnicity and religion increased. This does not explain why violence occurred on such a large scale, but discrimination and bias in government, and the narrow ethnic and religious politics among both Christians and Muslims increased tension and polarisation along communal and religious lines. The political exclusion on the basis of ethnicity and religion, on the Christian side, and fears of religious and cultural domination, among the Muslims has also added to the poor Christian-Muslim relations in Northern Nigeria.

Kimuli observes that religious segregation

increases communal violence by decreasing inter-religious trust rather than by making it easier to organize attack against one community or religious group (253). It is observed that religious terrorists easily launch attack against communities or religious groups that are homogenous in nature and that do not share the same symbols or practices as that of their attackers. Religious segregation on the basis of symbols and religious practices decreases the possibility of positive contact across ethnic and religious lines. While integration and the resultant positive interfaith contact reduce prejudice by allowing individuals to correct false beliefs about members of other religious groups with regards to the use of religious symbols and certain practices, thus improving inter-religious group relations consequently. This widespread mistrust along religious symbols lines explains the severity of attacks against one religious group by another. This implies that when underlying mistrust is high, it is easier for extremists and elites to mobilize support for religious conflicts and that where attacks against members of other religious groups is supported by the public, perpetrators of such violence are less likely to face social sanctions.

### **Research Aim and Objectives**

This paper is aimed at investigating the use of religious symbols and practices among Christians and Muslims in Northern Nigeria and how these have affected Muslim-Christian relations in some selected communities in Northern Nigeria; in an attempt to suggesting effective strategies for prevention and management. The specific objectives of this research are:

1. To identified religious symbols and practices in Northern Nigeria.
2. To determine what religious worldviews govern the understanding of such religious symbols and practices among Christians and Muslims in Northern Nigeria.
3. To ascertain the negative effects of such religious symbols and practices on Christian-Muslim relations.
4. To offer are the culturally sensitive ways to promote alternative symbols or re-orient Christians and Muslims on the appropriate ways to engage religious symbols and practices that are "neighbor-sensitive," thereby promoting mutual

trust, peace, and reconciliation in Northern Nigeria.

### Research Questions

This paper is intended to answer the following questions:

1. What religious symbols and practices can be identified in Northern Nigeria?
2. What religious worldviews govern the understanding of such religious symbols and practices among Christians and Muslims in Northern Nigeria?
3. What are the negative effects of such religious symbols and practice on Christian-Muslim relations?
4. What are the culturally sensitive ways to promote alternative symbols or re-orient Christians and Muslims on the appropriate ways to engage religious and cultural symbols that are “neighbor-sensitive,” thereby promoting mutual trust, peace, and reconciliation in Northern Nigeria?

### Theoretical Framework of the Research

Several theories have emerged from different scholars to explain the problem of ethno-religious conflicts arising from poor understanding of symbols and practices of other faiths or the total abuse of their use. For the purpose of this paper, two theories were used in addressing the subject at hand.

#### Religion Perspective Theory

The proponents of this theory hold the view that though religion may not be the sole cause of conflicts, however, it can exacerbate the situation. Juergensmeyer postulates that:

Religion is often centered around themes that can be inherently polarizing- concepts of truth, notion of good, of absolutes and ultimate realities- can contribute to a culture of violence where violence becomes a “defining issue” in the identity of activist groups (324).

They believe that religious symbols are often centered around themes or practices that can be inherently polarizing- concepts of truth, notion of good, of absolutes and ultimate realities- can contribute to a culture of violence where violence becomes a “defining issue” in the identity of activist groups. The

debates on the connection between religious symbols and ethno-religious conflicts is on the increase as modern-day perpetrators of conflict continue to use religious scriptures to justify their action, to conceal or hide their ethnic and political views, to generate support for their actions, as well as to silence opposition.

The debates on the connection between religion and conflicts is on the increase as modern-day perpetrators of conflict continue to use religious symbols and practices or scriptures to justify their action, to conceal or hide their ethnic and political views, to generate support for their actions, as well as to silence opposition (6). Perpetrators use these methods that are borrowed from religions since they are considered to be effective, inexpensive, and very easy to carry out, and they deliver the intended damage with minimal costs. Walter also observes that, fundamentalisms were not typical to only Islam but also to Christianity, Judaism and Hindus and a host of other religions (143). This clearly shows that fundamentalism is a common phenomenon in all religious beliefs and this could be easily channeled into the act of violence if not properly checked.

#### The Relational/Vengeance Theory

Relational/Vengeance theory attempts to provide explanation for violent conflicts between groups by exploring sociological, political, economic, (religious) and historical relationships between such groups. The belief is that cultural and value differences as well as group interests all influence relationships between individuals and groups in different ways. Thus, a number of violent attacks grow out of a past history of conflict between religious groups due to poor understanding of religious symbols and practices that have led to the development of negative stereotypes, religious intolerance and discrimination (Faleti 54). It is believed that the differences in the understanding and use of religious symbols and practices invariably create the “We” and “Others” dichotomy: The fact that “other religious groups” are perceived as different makes the “us” feel they are entitled to less or are inferior by reason of values (Faleti 55; Ter Haar 37). This disrupts the flow of communication between “us” and “them” and to that extent, twists perceptions that some religious groups have about others. Such deprivation and frustration may lead to people acting aggressively towards people of different religious

groups, thus affecting the peaceful coexistence.

Similarly, the relational/vengeance theory suggests that people feel dissatisfied and frustrated when they compare their religious symbols and practices with others. The discrepancies between the use of religious symbols and practices tend to frustrate adherents of the different religious groups to act violently. The theory therefore illuminates the behavioral effects of deprivation and the exploration of an individual's feelings of deprivation resulting from comparing their situation with a referent person or group.

### **Research Method/ Scope of the Study**

Mixed methods (qualitative and quantitative), was used, including purposive sampling, oral interviews and FGDs, which was conducted by researcher in Kano and Jos. Questionnaires were designed and simultaneously administered in these cities for 100 people; both Muslims and Christians; Men and women; the Aged and the Young; Religious and community leaders; the educated and the less educated; as well as those in rural and urban centres. Also data from NGOs working on ethno-religious conflicts and religious symbols and practices were collected and used, while descriptive statistics were also employed in data analysis.

To make this study meaningful and avoid any complexity, the research will cover two states in Northern Nigeria, Plateau and Kano States representing North-Central and North-west respectively. The choice of these States has become necessary due to the fact that they are often viewed as rainbows of vibrant diversity and the fact that they have also witnessed most perturbing and unprecedented upsurge of ethno-religious crises due to identity clash with great consequences on Christian-Muslim relations.

### **Review of Related Literature**

Through the years, the nation has experienced sectarian and religious violence of all kinds. Danfulani rightly opines that:

Religion in Nigeria has provided a tangible set of common identifications-language, dress, names, music, food, marriages, burial, etc. religion has become a powerful tool for claiming special place, recognition and

advantage in the competition for values in society to be politically realised. Settler communities thus cling to the religion of the places of their origin, thus conferring on itself a religious identity that is very distant from that of its host community-one of the factors opposed to and mitigating against social interaction and integration (19).

These conflicts have triggered an acute humanitarian and forced displacement crisis, with devastating social and economic impacts on the population, further deepening underdevelopment and regional inequalities, as well as creating a polarized society. The most affected groups are women, children, and youth. Most of the conflict's tactics have included multiple modes of attack, including seizure and destruction of entire villages, forced displacement, abductions, sexual violence targeting women, and forced recruitment of men (Fearon 213).

The use of religious symbols and certain practices in Northern Nigeria has widened the gap between the two main religions in Northern Nigeria and has deepened the dividing lines, creating more tension and unrest (Adamolekun 59). The intense competition arising from the use of symbols has thus led to violent confrontations and bloodletting today. Religious symbols are contested over the years in Nigeria political relation, religious and public spaces (Akolo 48). In use of certain symbols, some people have taken local factors that are supposed to promote peaceful coexistence into promoting the sense of enmity or hatred. Some of these religious symbols and practices could be seen in dress, buildings, greetings,

Since land ownership has been a major issue in Northern Nigeria, so there is this natural tension and concerted effort to assert ownership of a given community or land and presence. This to some extent are used to assert ownership or dominance in a given locality or community. Where Muslims erect a Mosque, they will want it to be in a strategic location with the crest of Islam on it so that whoever comes to the community will know that the Muslims have a place there. And where Christians build a Church with high sign of the cross on it in Kano, any Christian coming into Kano will be happy that there are Christians there. But to the Muslim, it is provocative. This is seen in the First Baptist Church at Sabon Gari in Kano and the Kano Pillar's Stadium in Kano. The

Kano Pillars' stadium was built besides the First Baptist Church in order not to allow the place look more of Christian's area along.

However, when the First Church decided to erect a very high sign of the Cross on the building, the State Government built another stadium in the heart of the town called the Sani Abacha stadium. They relocated the major matches of the Kano Pillars to the Sani Abacha stadium in order to avoid the impression that Christians are there whenever Muslims from other states come into Kano to either play or watch matches. This has made the Church a major target for destruction during any crises due to the high sign of the Cross that is visible. This symbol has widened the divide and bridge that is supposed to unite the different faiths; and has thus brought more tension among the two major religious groups there. While Christians are happy seeing the sign of the Cross on the Church building, the Muslims are infuriated by such sign.

Some of these symbols can also be seen in the style buildings that are erected either by Christians or Muslims. More also is seen in dress. Where a Muslim man dresses in a T-shirt on a Jean trouser, a fellow Muslim will wonder why he is dressed in a Christian way. Likewise when a Christian brother puts on a *Chafan* and a cap, he is seen as a Muslim. These have cost some people their lives during ethno-religious crises as they were mistaken to be people from the other faith just because of their dress and they were killed. Late Rev. Luther Cishak, a former President of the Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN) almost killed him by members of his denomination during the 20104 religious crises in Bukuru when they saw him putting on a dress that is symbol to Muslim. They thought he was a Muslim even when he told them his name and position several times, until someone identified him as the former leader of the Church.

More of these symbols that have widened the bridge and brought more religious tension than peaceful relations are writings on cars or signboards to proof a point. Christians are writing things with the sign of the Cross and the picture of Jesus Christ on their cars, while Muslims writes in Arabic with the image of some of their major clerics. Where such inscriptions or pictures are seen, someone from the other faith may not be willing to enter such car because the sign tells him it a car for the other faith. That widens the gap and increases the tension too. While these symbols are often used to assert each faith, either

Islam or Christianity, they are secondary in themselves as both religions can still exist without the provocative use of the symbols and even some of the practices. Some of these signs are not in themselves what the religions are, and if concerted effort will be put to deemphasizes the use of the symbols as means of a divide for a means of unity, peace and reconciliation and peaceful coexistence will be achieved.

### **Implications of the Abuse of Religious Symbols and Practices among Christians and Muslims**

In the overall analysis of mutual Christian-Muslim relations, some of these symbols do not aid evangelism, they rather create more and more divide. External forms of religion that are merely symbolic and are not core to the faith, should be deemphasized, while other forms of practices that aids the unity and peaceful coexistence such as a Muslim going to a Christian dominated area to render assistance to the needy or drill a borehole there for the use of the Christians in that community. Such symbolic form for mutual relations and practices should be looked at and practiced. If such provocative symbols can be deemphasised and more internal religious symbols that are not provocative are used, mutual Christian-Muslim relations, peace and reconciliation will be achieved.

The use of some of these religious symbols and practices has led to some of the major religious conflicts witnessed in Northern Nigeria, leading to loss of lives and property. Such conflicts have also created more tension, hatred and suspicion among Christians and Muslims; and have raised more enemies than friends, more enemies than neighbours. People who were once living peacefully and good friends and neighbours have suddenly turned to be enemies. Recounting the Jos crises of 2004 in Nasarawa Gwom where Muslim youths were well armed with guns, knives, machetes and other dangerous weapons, they all set out against Christian men and women; Ruth Beattie posits that, "While most of the Killings were carried out by people unknown to the victims, there were cases of people being slaughtered by their own neighbours" (18). Angered by the killings of their people during the 2004 crisis, Christians in Tudun Wada area of Jos North targeted the Muslims in that area during the 2008 crisis and killed them. Ruth further avers that, "Muslim individual and family identities were lost as they were

swallowed up in the corporate purging of Muslim minorities from the Christian community. Inevitably, innocent people suffered and the vulnerable became easy targets for the enraged youth who were also their neighbours" (18). Such acts and incidents have heap very deep hatred and un-forgiveness in the hearts of many, preventing mutual Christian-Muslim relations, peace and reconciliation.

In another scenario where hatred and un-forgiveness have wrecked peaceful coexistence among Christians and Muslims, Beattie observes that during another crisis in Jos, a Muslim neighbour in an effort to save his good neighbours, took them into his house, but when the information got to his other Muslim neighbours of what he did, "The men came and told Usman that they wanted retribution for their friends and family members who had been injured or killed over the last few days" (33). These and many more stories abound of cases where deep seated hatred and un-forgiveness has created more tension, retribution, and destruction of more lives and property. These have happened because many still find it very difficult to forgive what was meted out to them. Collaborating on this with regards to then use of proverbs or myths as symbols that have caused more harm than good in regards Muslim-Christian relations, Akolo posits that, "The fact that alligator is an amphibious reptile related to Crocodile does not make them stay together all through in the water" (59). This means that no matter how long you stay together with a neighbour from the other faith; you can become his enemy when religious crisis occurs.

More of such proverbs as observes by Akolo includes: "Even if it were possible for cats to celebrate oil festival, rats would not go there to watch them dance" (59). "Many cockroaches are no more because they danced before the fowls" (59). Such acts have created the polarization of communities by religious or ethnic poles. In Jos for instance, communities like Angwan Rogo, Yan Shanu, Gangare, Bauchi road and Dutse Uku are dominated by Muslims; while Tudun Wada, Kabong, Rukuba road, Angwan rukuba, and Hwolshe are occupied by Christians. Moving into such communities by someone from the different faith is often avoided by all means except with a very high security cover. Akolo further captures it well when he avers thus:

We were, but no more, we used to be, but we

quit. You see, though we are still together, however, after off, we laugh only on the lips, but the heart is raging with hatred; we may still have the love languages, but are merely envelops of hatred. We claim to be neighbours, but we also live against one another. We profess brotherhood in theories that contradict our practices. We present a picture of brotherliness, but what lies behind the image is the opposite. We have *Aboki* in the South, and *Nyamiri* in the North for mockery. We are divided by Militants in the South, and Jihadists in the North (103).

Where there is hatred or conflict, an ethnic group may be targeted for the attack and possible cleansing. In Rwanda, the Hutus ethnic group targeted the Tutsi's ethnic group and worked to cleanse them from their communities. Such violence is not targeted at anything more than just ensuring to clear a particular ethnic group from the face of the earth. The Nazis' assault on the Jews' ethnic group is yet another example where the Jews were targeted and killed on the account of their ethnicity. They make use of ethnicity in establishing themselves perpetually in power and dealt decisively with perceived political opponents. Where symbols and practices become the means of identification and a sign of superiority, peaceful coexistence will not be achieved and religion will become a tool for conflicts and destruction.

All these seem to contradict the teachings of the two major religions where in Christianity, prayer for your enemy and love for your enemy is prominent (Luke 6:27-28 and Matthew 5: 44). The Bible instructs that when someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also (Matthew 5:39). The Bible also asserts that anyone who hates his brother is a murderer as seen in 1 John 3:15; 2:11. Forgiveness is a key to peaceful coexistence and the bedrock upon which a nation is build. Thus, "forgiving someone may be the start of God bringing the person to repentance" (Hill and Hill 111). Hill and Hill further opine that, "Until we forgive those who have offended us, our relationship with them will suffer. Forgiveness makes it possible for our relationship with them to be restored" (110). This position is held by Ephraim Kadala when he opines that, "Peaceful coexistence is a Christian obligation, as this is a clear injunction in the Bible" (29).

Likewise, Islam is believed to be a religion of peace. Kesley posits that, "Muslims generally believe that Islam is the religion of peace, and that its meaning is peaceful surrender to the will and commands of God" (119). He further observes that, for the Muslim the peace of the world cannot be fully secured until people come under the protection of Islam. This could be attained through *dawah* (mission) or through *Jihad*" (120). This means that for Kadala and Kelsay, Islam is the religion of peace. Its meaning is peace and peaceful surrender to the will and commands of God. To this end, Muslims are enjoined to be peaceful and loving. John Azumah observes that, in the Quran, Jews and Christians are referred to as *ahl al-Kitab* (the people of the Book). And in the Quran, Christians are commended as Muslim's best friends and the "nearest in affection" to them (88).

This also means that it is the duty of all Muslims to strive to bring and maintain peace in the world. This is seen in the Quran that says, "There is no compulsion in religion. The right direction is henceforth distinct from error" (Quran 2:256). Therefore, Muslims are called upon to "Proclaim the message of Islam peacefully to all people of the world and to invite all humankind into the *Dar al Islam* (region of peace) which is the *Umma*" (78). However, this does not in any way denies the call for Jihad from the Quran. Thus, Kadala posits that, "A careful perusal of the Quran and the Hadith leads us to conclude that people who dared to question Mohammed's Prophethood, character and credibility of his teachings are considered as enemies" (37). This connotes that anyone who becomes a threat to Islam is an enemy include converts from Islam or people who abuse the Quran. Mr. Okaluka, an Igbo businessman in Kano was beheaded and his paraded by Muslim faithful around the city of Kano for allegedly defiling the Quran. Similar situation happened in Gombe when Mrs. Christiana Oluwatoyin, a teacher was set ablaze by her students for allegedly defiling the Quran too.

Fearon posits that, the salience of communal identities and the abuse of religious symbols is now more prominent and appears to have increased as a result of the violence over the past decade, which has generated greater spatial polarisation of people in Jos along religious lines and accentuated social and political divisions between Muslims and Christians (142). Consequently, more people are directly affected by and conscious of social divisions now and articulate

their religious and ethnic allegiances more categorically than they did previously. The cumulative reality of these events appears to mirror the classical model of a religious clash involving Muslims and Christians in Northern Nigeria. Agreeing with his submission, Salihu also avers that as a result of the above, the region is faced with the worst security challenges which have spread across the region like a wild fire since independence (120).

The call for peace and reconciliation in Northern Nigeria is a necessity for the mutual and peaceful coexistence in the country. This is because the situation in the North has become hostile as the entire social order in the North has transited from its humane and friendly character of the past into a hostile seedbed of violence and uncontrollable destruction of lives and property in recent times (Salihu 25). These conflicts in Northern States of Nigeria are traceable to the politicization of symbols and practices. The politicization of symbols and practices has created a separate identity for Nigeria politics and religion or ethnicity. In Northern States of Nigeria, matters regarding symbols and practices have become susceptible to violence such as killings and maiming along ethnic and religious lines; destruction of religious centers and communal clash.

### Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations

Having established the occurrence ethno-religious conflicts in some selected communities in Northern Nigeria due to the poor understanding and usage of religious symbols and practices among Christians and Muslims, it is imperative for religious leaders and the Nigerian state authorities to rise up to the challenge, apprehend all the perpetrators of such accordingly and take other legal measures to stop the act. The use of religious symbols and practices among the Nigerian citizens, particularly the adherent of the two predominant religious groups should be strictly regulated and effectively monitored. The operation of different groups (ethnic, religious, militia among others) and harassment of innocent Nigerian citizens due to the misused or misunderstanding of religious symbols and practices by people of the other religious group should be stopped. Religious and social organisations should be enlightened to and preach peace, harmony, brotherhood. The Federal Government of Nigeria (through appropriate avenues) should rise up to the challenge of enactment of

discriminatory, controversial and selective legislations which threaten the peaceful co-existence among Christians and Muslims in Northern Nigeria. The rule of law should also be fully enforced on all Nigerians irrespective of whatever status, origin, religion or ethnicity. This paper is limited to the general abuses of religious symbols and practices among religious groups in Nigeria. Further studies can investigate and reveal each of the issues raised in this study and conduct an in-depth investigation of the extent of such abuses, which have heightened the tension among Christians and Muslims in Northern Nigeria.

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