

Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. 29 January 2026, 10:30. Building Inter-Ethnic and Religious Harmony in Nigeria: Pathways to National Unity.

Protocols & Personal Introduction

Vice-Chancellor, Chancellor, Mr President, Madame Secretary General of the World Trade Organisation, Your Royal Highnesses and Highnesses, Honourable Professors, Your Excellencies, Distinguished Scholars and Students, Your Graces and My Lords, Distinguished Guests, all other protocols duly observed, Thank you for the invitation to bring this guest lecture on such an important and auspicious occasion. It is a remarkable privilege to be invited and I am both humbled and grateful.

I have a long and mixed relationship with this extraordinary country, the Federal Republic of Nigeria. I first came here when I worked in the oil and gas industry, in 1978, 47 years ago. Having visited numerous times during that period, I returned after a gap in 2002, when I was Canon for Reconciliation Ministry at Coventry Cathedral in the middle of England. I continued to visit very regularly all over the country, including the States of the Niger Delta, of the Middle Belt in the southern senatorial area of Plateau State and in Jos, in Kaduna, Zaria, Kano and Maiduguri, Lagos, Minna and of course Abuja.

This long history of visits and internal travel has taught me two things. First, that I love and respect this country immensely. Second, the more I come here, the less I understand. Any foreigner who claims to understand Nigeria is deceiving themselves. However complicated one makes it sound when talking about this Nation, the last sentence must always be “But Nigeria is not as simple as that”.

So when I express humility at speaking I am not being politely and obscurely British. I mean it.

In addition I speak as a Christian, unapologetically. I have served Christ by His grace and goodness for 50 years. Every fibre of my being is Christian. The bible, rightly interpreted, is my guide and my spiritual food. I have absorbed

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most clearly that it is in the person of Jesus Christ that I find the commands to love. I am to serve and follow the example of my master who washed his disciples' feet, even the feet of Judas.

The differences between Muslims and Christians are deep, but in the words of the Negus of Abyssinia to the Muslims fleeing the Quraysh, no wider than the edge of his sword.

In this lecture I shall address four areas. First, what are the foundations for interfaith and ethnic harmony, and for building national unity? Secondly, what is the global environment? Thirdly, what are the values needed? Fourthly, what is to be done, taking into account the interaction of social, economic and political conditions here and abroad, and the respective demands of our faiths?

History

History is the foundation of actions today for any nation.

The history of this part of Africa is even more complicated than Nigeria itself. Great Empires existed in what is now Nigeria for centuries before the British came. They were wealthy, artistic and sophisticated, as the Benin Bronzes demonstrate.

Islam and Christianity arrived through missionaries, with trade, by war and by imperial force. Both are geographically oversimplified by those overseas who say the north is Muslim and the south is Christian. As we all know any Yoruba person will point out that error, and so will many others from Christian churches in the north and Muslims in the south. Nigeria is not as simple as that. Both faiths came into areas of traditional beliefs. One of my most vivid memories is sitting in an open air theatre in Kano while the Jos Repertory players performed Chinua Achebe's "Things Fall Apart" and a crowd outside the walls of the theatre threw stones at each other.

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Nigeria is a nation of profound culture and artistic ability. The English language novels and plays it produces are masterpieces, art that will stand the test of the centuries. And Nigeria is not as simple as *that*.

The *diabolus ex machina*, the outside interference of the Congress of Berlin and the scramble for Africa came as a tidal wave of influences, counter-influences, wars and rivalries that were acted out in Nigeria and West Africa, but also had their own agenda.

Thus, Lord Lugard in 1914 merged two protectorates into one country, Nigeria, for colonial and economic reasons.

Nigeria is not as simple as that. Historians and ethicists argue about the relative roles of Arab and local slave trading, of Jihad from Sokoto with Ben Fodio, and missionary endeavour and sacrifice. Christians remember the bravery of Bishop Ajay Crowder and the cruelty of his treatment by white missionaries, and their own courage as well as cruelty.

In the last 40 years history has assumed a depressing pattern. For many years there has been a growing tendency to use religion as a hook to simplify complicated stories of economic marginalisation, poor government, and ethnic division. Religious identity is easily understood and is a useful tool. But the more often something is used as a political pretext the more easily it becomes the reality.

This introduction could last as long as the history of Nigeria and still leave out heroes and villains, social, economic, climate and agricultural influences. And I would still say, “Nigeria is not as simple as that” because Nigeria exists and has sovereignty, and education, government and business and 250 million people and will within the life time of my children and grandchildren become one of the largest populations on earth, bringing great political power and weight: it

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will also need to be stable and secure in itself, with religious harmony and without persecution or inter-religious war.

The foundations of the pathway to national unity must be built on ground in which many others have laboured and built their own pathways. Nigeria's recent history and politics provide dangerous foundations for peace and harmony. There needs to be a radical change from faith and political leaders to build afresh, and it will take many years.

The Storms of Our Times.

The social and political and economic structures of the nation, which rest on the foundations of history, must also be storm proof.

Last week, at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, the Prime Minister of Canada, Mark Carney, gave an exceptionally inspiring and insightful speech, a speech that defines our era. WTO General Secretary Ngozi was there and heard it, and I believe the speech is online; it is not long and well worth listening to.

Prime Minister Carney said that we are facing times of *rupture* of the old order that has prevailed since 1945, not transition - *rupture*, abrupt and chaotic not gradual and ordered. He described the effects of the rupture in the words of the Ancient Greek historian, Thucydides, who wrote of the Athenians, at the height of imperial power, telling the besieged city of Thebes, which sought mercy, "The strong do what they will and the weak suffer what they must".

He spoke of two hegemonic powers, the USA and China. He spoke of the middle powers and regional powers needing to recognise the new world order and pursues a variable geometry of alliances, partnerships and governments in order to be flexible for a world no longer with firm rules but where national interests of the strong are increasingly pursued without regard for the rights of

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the weak. He said memorably that middle powers must act together facing the hegemonies of today, for a nation that is “not seated at the table will be on the menu”.

The old, post 1945 international order was formed in the years of independence movements and in the shadow of the two global wars. It existed to protect the nations of the world from catastrophe and to bring at least some semblance of fragile justice in trade, in international relations, in help for the suffering and food for the hungry. It was based, however weakly, on God given ideas of human dignity. It wanted to reject the power based, ruthless world, and yet to be realistic about the hunger for power, the search for identity, the wish for influence, that exists in every nation. That order is gone.

Worse still, in addition to that rupture there are global externalities of war and the menace of climate change, expanding deserts, worsening floods, rising sea levels, reducing air quality, heat increasing, crops failing, storms increasing, biodiversity decreasing: everywhere there are threats to human life and stable societies, especially in warmer climates.

There is a new era of instant communication, the easy spread of fake news that is around the world before I finish this sentence. No government except the most tyrannical can control communication.

Economically, there is a new era of tariffs and mercantilism where no nation can expect mercy unless it can show power, where no transactions are seen as worth having unless they come from power. Partnerships and alliances are essential in such a world.

There is Artificial Intelligence which has immeasurable potential benefits and threats, but where the benefits threaten to be confined to the already powerful and rich, stable and secure.

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There is a new scientific and technical revolution which is forecast to make more change in the next 40 years than any 40 years ever. Who will gain from new treatments and medicines? Which groups, whether national or terrorist, will be supplied by evil forces with new weaponry, intelligent autonomous weapons, that know neither mercy nor limit? Who will acquire battlefield advantage with weapons far greater than the rifle and machine gun provided to the 19th century imperial powers? In Ukraine, recently 75% of casualties on both sides come from drones.

The context of the times is of externalities that feed internal division and are in turn fed by internal division. International terrorism flows to areas of least resistance to its evil. In 1968 the 5 Eyes group of major intelligence agencies recognised 11 terrorist groups, none with a principally religious basis. Today they recognise roughly 200, with 80-120 having a religious basis. Violent fringe groups are now part of every major world faith. To shorten Carney's metaphor, "eat or be eaten". It is essential that the main faiths of Nigeria stand courageously clearly based in theology and undermining the fuel of violence through action and word.

Finally, we have in the White House a President who acts very clearly in the US interest as he sees it, who is both intelligent and expert in the deployment of force. He is to be taken seriously *and* literally. He is not bluffing when he speaks of protecting Christians in Nigeria. Some people may argue that the analysis he has received is wrong but his perception is clear, and there is a high chance that he will act accordingly, unexpectedly and with power. Nigeria must change reality and perspective, acting decisively, taking account of its history, its values, and its current state.

Agree or disagree, President Trump is a most decisive, determined and direct US leader. Like him or dislike him, he is different. And like it or not, the USA is

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a military power of unmatched ability. Nigeria must not compromise its sovereignty, but faith and political leaders need to take the USA seriously. It has shattered the old order, and what will happen is as yet unclear. Faith leaders must make sure that they do not go along with the shipwreck of this country on the wreckage of the old international order.

Building Inter-Ethnic and Religious Harmony in Nigeria: and pathways to National Unity are vain dreams unless they are built on history, and reflect the political, economic and physical environments of our times, including internationally. Declarations alone will not work; it is time for truthful, realistic actions.

Crisis

Some think there is a crisis because President Trump has spoken of “Christian genocide” in Nigeria. Yes, that is true. The crisis is also that so many of the poor are unfed, uneducated, in poor housing and physical insecurity. It is a crisis of kidnapping, banditry, insurgency and the killing of the innocent. Yet, at the same time in some areas there is a genuine fear by Christians that they are targeted and that the objective is their removal.

Since 2009 more Muslims have been murdered than Christians. *But that is not the point either.* If my house is raided it is neither relevant nor helpful to me that two other houses in the street have also been raided.

President Trump’s words are to be taken seriously. His actions follow his words. He points to a perception of Nigeria, and when he says he will do something the answer must not be denial, but dealing with the reality, not just the perception.

Both the sacred scriptures of Islam and Christianity make it clear that murder is wrong. It is clear that to murder people in a place of worship is especially wrong. The Quran is clear that there is no compulsion in religion (2:256). To persecute a minority is wrong, grievous sin.

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So we will be judged if we do not exert our full strength, not mere words, to prevent any and all violence.

Let me be clear. Nothing matters more than truth. The differences between Christians and Muslims matter enormously. They are about eternal life and the nature of God. Nothing is more important. But HOW a difference is dealt with tells us about God as well. In Europe, after the religious wars of the 16th and 17th centuries the response was to secularise. How wrong that was.

This country can be an African Continental power, a hemispheric power and a global power. And it can do so as a good power, an ethical power, a harmonious power. How Nigeria acts between its vast religious communities will settle the future of a successful or a failed state.

Or - like every other country, it can become a failing or failed power. It can do that despite the genius of its people and it can do so in a world that may well be draining its reserves of compassion.

In the Ancient Greek from which the word crisis comes a crisis is not a problem, it is a moment of decision. A crisis requires decisions. Neutrality is itself a decision. Not to decide is a decision. To delay and prevaricate is a decision. To deny reality is a decision.

In a world of instant communication, secrecy within a country is not an option. Decisions will be leaked, hacked or discerned. Prevarication and denial will be identified and commented on widely, affecting the economy, trade, employment, political stability and the future. Living a lie, living in denial of reality is not a viable way forward. How then does any country respond?

With Values.

Actions always have values, good or bad. What are some of the good values that will give effect to action? Forgive me if my suggestions are naive, for as an

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English politician said in the past, “politics is the art of the possible”. But it is better, I believe, to say something solid than to utter vague exhortation.

I suggest the first value is sovereignty. *The future of this nation must be **decided** by Nigerians, **without** surrendering sovereignty.* That means those in political, economic, spiritual, social, legal, traditional and other leadership must be willing, among many other demands, to take responsibility for guarding the sovereignty of Nigeria. It is not a matter for government alone.

The second value is honesty. In no country can corruption be wiped out, but like weeds in a field it must be fought fiercely if there is to be a good crop. Honesty values truth about a problem. Honesty means saying what we mean, clearly and plainly. It means being honest about the faults of our own faith community and nation, recognising its weaknesses and standing with the oppressed. To act in deceit, without the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth is to sow the seeds of terror.

The third value is transparency. The state of any nation is well known around the world by anyone who inquires. Hiding the truth of the state of the nation is always foolish, now it is impossible. Transparency requires public accountability. So any action (obviously with the exception of security actions which cannot be revealed in advance) must be explained transparently. In all places of violence and conflict suspicion grows so fast that the truth is easily strangled.

This is a basic principle. We do not trust those whose real thinking we realise we will never know. It is why I began by saying that I was a Christian and what that means.

The fourth value in a crisis is decisive action. Of the making of declarations there is no end - but action is often missing. It requires firm leadership and a willingness to act, top down, middle out, bottom up.

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The fifth value must be seeking the common good. That means no favouring of one group over another in appointment, in revenues, in revealing information. The common good means that everyone is treated equally, without fear or favour and every action is judged by the value that it will lift up all people, and especially the most needy

Lastly, and most importantly, is the value of theology. We each claim to be inspired by God, and to live in the light of God. Jesus said “I am the way, the truth and the life”. Islam is a calling to live in obedience to God. God’s will, action and nature infuse every part of our political, social, commercial lives, and every part of creation. Every action of Christian or Muslim leaders must be the outcome of theological reflection, and educated faithfulness.

There must be real theological dialogue, not ‘tea and cake’ meetings where nothing of the essence of faith is considered, but all agree that the tea is nice and the cake is good - and then issue a statement saying we agreed on everything we discussed. In times of conflict we fear disagreement, and shy away from saying what we think theologically about the Other.

True dialogue takes the risk of honest and passionate disagreement, and holds that risk in mutual respect, affection and love. Theology, the understanding of God, matters more than anything else. To know that all sides are speaking out of a reverent and seriously considered understanding of God provides a sure channel for dialogue. The biggest challenge is not to find agreement, but to build good disagreement, which is true reconciliation. Such dialogue happens, but needs re-energising and not separating into armed and hostile groups. That course of action will lead to catastrophe.

I remember a dialogue with a remote Muslim community way out in the middle of the bush. After many hours, and with much kindness, the Imam - surrounded by people carrying weapons, but not threatening - said “we are going to pray

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now, please leave us to pray, and when you come back I would like you to agree to become a Muslim”. I went out, and prayed myself and when I came back, I said I could not do that, for I knew that Christ had saved me. He was genuinely sad, and said, “then I am sorry that you will most certainly go to hell. And please tell the same to the Queen.” I am afraid that as a Canon at the time, not an Archbishop, it was not possible for me to tell her late majesty - and probably not acceptable.

There are many other values, but I have taken these for the challenge of a crisis that requires choice and action, integrity and trust, dialogue and relationship. Inter-ethnic and religious harmony requires that the sovereign nation of the Federal Republic of Nigeria is committed to face its own weaknesses, to seek support when it needs it, and to reform where that is necessary.

Only in God are there the means and the depth to act on this crisis. Without God we shall be blown by the winds of our emotions and the storms of our times, steering we know not where except that our destination will be appalling.

Actions

Thus I come to my last and very simple section, some practical ideas for action. The ideas are based on three all encompassing commands: love God in obedience, love one another in sacrifice, serve one another in humility, for we are all made in the image of God.

I am clear about how difficult that is. The nature of groups and peoples, even nations, is that in times of crisis they want scapegoats to blame, rather than face the need to reform fundamentally. It is easier to sack a leader than to reform a nation, or a church or any faith community. We see that in Europe with the current crises over rearmament, over divisions, immigration, the rise of national xenophobia and many other problems.

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Crisis handling has numerous phases. Among them are recognition of the crisis, acceptance of the need for decision, initial actions, culture change and longer term development. I will not unpack those for it is a whole science of change management.

So the task for each religious leader is not to make themselves famous, but to glorify God. More than that it is to do everything possible to have a stable, peaceful and law abiding society, and to work with secular rulers to that end. In Christian and Muslim theology the purpose of Government is good order in society. The very nature of God is order, for He created the world out of chaos. Faith leaders must show the paths of harmony amidst difference, especially where history and our current times make harmony so rare.

When a society sees the poor suffering and the rich in the greatest luxury and does nothing, does it please God? But when injustice is judged, corruption is challenged, and the rich care for the poor then God rejoices.

So I suggest very simply two things:

Do not create more permanent interfaith bodies, but reform, renew and reenergise those that exist through a temporary, trusted group of faith leaders, lasting no more than two or three years, which is small enough to work well on answering the question: “In the light of our history and of the current situation nationally and internationally, how do we demonstrate clear action for peace?”

Such a body must be politically balanced, geographically diverse, determined and courageous. It will meet and confront the challenges, and not just make declarations but respectfully and courageously point to action. It would show neither fear nor favour and be earthed in the lived experience of the majority of Nigerians. Its co-chairs would have the courage to speak truth to power and to galvanise their communities to act in that truth. I should say that an equivalent national politician body would also be transformative, but that is beyond my

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brief today. A national political effort is called for, here and in many other countries, as Mark Carney showed.

There will be no political peace in Nigeria without religious peace, no justice in society without religious teaching and justice, no care for the poor unless it is led by those who serve the common good and who fear God.

It is religious leaders who can demonstrate national unity. I do not mean unanimity. No nation has national total agreement. Unity is the quality of learning to disagree agreeably, to care for the man who is hungry, for the girl or boy child who is uneducated, for the woman who is ignored and whose skills are not valued. They must be cared for not because they are Muslim or Christian, but because they are human.

It can be done. Secular methods will not bring prosperity, we know that in Europe. Forgiveness, hope and mercy come from God, not Marx. This energising group must be committed to the sovereignty and good of the nation. It must be co-chaired by a Muslim and a Christian, both Nigerian. It must be able to speak truthfully to secular powers, and work with them to steer them in the ways of peace, justice and unity. It must rebuke error and wrong action and call out those who say one thing and do another. It must not just declare but act in the provision of mutual education for leaders.

It must engage especially vigorously against violence, seeking to draw together Government and civil society, through existing leadership.

Such a group must have one aim especially in view, the end of the instrumentalisation of religion. As long as I can remember here, religion has been instrumentalised. As I have said, if you use the hook for too long it ceases to be a pretext and becomes the reality. The biggest challenge for religious harmony is to put an end to that grievous sin. The author of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Edward Gibbon, in the 18th century wrote “the

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religions of the Empire were to peoples all equally true, to the philosophers all equally false and to the leaders all equally useful”. Faith leaders are not merely useful tools for ambitious people, they must speak from God and act accordingly: on their action as well as words, God will judge.

In summary, recognise honestly, act decisively in the strength and service of God, build trust through transparency, establish the means of accountable action in a way that brings this nation together, build on the foundations of history and with the strength for today.

In human affairs nothing is ever 100% successful; I have set out ideas but do so with deep humility for above all “Nigeria is not as simple as that”