

## Editorial

A historic event took place in Abuja in June 2003 when the World Conference of Religion for Peace (WCRP) convened a meeting to inaugurate an African Council of Religious Leaders. In his opening address on this occasion, the Most Rev. (Dr.) John Onaiyekan, Catholic Archbishop of Abuja, referred to the deep religious instincts of the Africans as an asset that could be channelled towards the attainment of peace and prosperity for the African peoples. Earlier in September 1999 another landmark action for inter-religious dialogue was undertaken by the Nigerian Church leaders with the formation of the Nigerian Inter-Religious Council whose objectives include, among other things, the promotion of dialogue between Christians and Moslems and a better understanding of the two religions.

These developments underscore the awareness not only in Africa, but in the world at large that the religions hold exceptional spiritual, moral and social trump cards for the alleviation of the problems facing the human family and for the accomplishment of the common good.

They are also a direct consequence of the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 and the impending “clash of civilizations.” The rising wave of religious intolerance and fundamentalism and the attendant violent religious uprisings all over the globe challenge all of us to sincerely and courageously reflect on the issues of religious freedom, minority rights, communal tensions, co-citizenship and religion and state.

In Nigeria, a country with the world’s largest Islamo-Christian population, there is simply no alternative to religious dialogue. Christians and Moslems must learn to live together in peace and harmony and the recent religious riots in Kaduna, Kano and Jos where churches and mosques were burnt down and hundreds of Christians and Moslems lost their lives show that religious violence brings no advantage to any religious group.

Religious freedom and tolerance did not fall from heaven: they are the results of an age-long struggle. Christians today may be

more disposed to religious tolerance, but the inquisition and the crusades of centuries ago tell a different story. The Islamic Jihads and the fact that Mohammed was the only military commander among the founders of the world's great religions, may point to the violent history of Islam. But, Islamic leaders and their followers have for long advocated the path of peaceful co-existence with non-Moslems.

In spite of their apparent differences, both Christians and Moslems have the same fundamental beliefs, the same spiritual and moral aspirations, preach the love of the neighbour and, above all, abhor violence. All it takes to achieve the desired peace is better understanding of the aspirations of the various religious groups and the appreciation of their fears and anxieties. On the one hand, the Moslems in Nigeria may be justified in their anger over the Christian tendency to embrace destructive liberal views and secular and modernist thinking, but on the other, they must convince the Christians that their vision of Islamic society offers a life of dignity and equality in responsible citizenship to non-Muslim minorities.

The volume of the Bulletin is devoted to the issue of religious dialogue as a contribution to the on-going discussion on the use of religion as an agent of peace and for the transformation of society. The contributors have presented their arguments from the perspective of lived experiences as victims of religions intolerance and violence and from the perspective of experts involved in religious discourse.

The special feature deals with the AIDS/HIV pandemic, arguably the greatest danger ravaging the African continent besides religious violence and civil wars. The author calls on University teachers and the lay public who exercise influence over the youth to wake up to the challenges of the pandemic in accordance with the guidelines laid down by the Church for the lay apostolate in the Christian communities.

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