

# Religious Toleration as a key factor for Social Stability in Plural Ghana

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## Abstract

It is a known fact that Ghana is a plural country. The country has three religions that are publicly acceptable with numerous smaller groups that are known only upon close contact with their adherents. This is aside of the over 60 ethnic groups in the country. Ghana has had its fair share of religious persecution as has happened in other parts of the world following the advent of Christianity and Islam in the country. In 1914 for instance, a long cleavage between Christians and African indigenous religion adherents occurred in Anum in the Eastern Region. After giving the definitions and medieval and twentieth century arguments for religious toleration the paper goes further to give the Biblical and Islamic basis for religious tolerance, which all have provisions for religious tolerance the paper strongly argues it is imperative for the religious groups in Ghana to tolerate one another, which one alone can enhance social stability and national cohesion.

## Introduction

It is a known fact that Ghana is a plural country. The country has three religions that are publicly and constitutionally acceptable with numerous smaller groups that are known only upon close contact with their adherents. This is aside of the over 60 ethnic groups in the country. Ghana has had its fair share of religious persecution as has happened in other parts of the world following the advent of Christianity and Islam in the country. Up until the arrival of the two religions in the country African wars were never religious wars. They were wars of territorial dominance and expansion. They were wars to enhance greater security of one's people but never on religious grounds. African religious powers were pacific. They tolerated newer and greater powers. In fact African religious experience welcomed new additions and an indigenous religionist could add on to his present stock of religious power. The gods tolerated one another and welcomed others to their fold. It is this spirit of pacifism that enabled African indigenous religions to welcome and gladly hosted both Islam and Christianity and gave them home in Africa. Ironically the two guest religions, as time went on rather made life quite unbearable to the host religion. This paper defines the key words of the topic and distinguishes between tolerance and toleration. It also traces the history and call for religious tolerance from the medieval through the twentieth century. The paper further showed the Biblical and Islamic basis for religious tolerance. Finally the paper strongly argues that religious intolerance is a new phenomenon in Ghana stating it is imperative for the religious groups in Ghana to tolerate one another, which one alone can enhance social stability and national cohesion.

## Definition of key terms

The word tolerance was first used in the 15th century. The word is derived from *endurance* and *fortitude*, used in the 14th century. According to the *Online Etymology Dictionary*, the word was first used to describe having permission from authorities in the 1530s.

There is only one verb 'to tolerate' and one adjective 'tolerant', but the two nouns 'tolerance' and 'toleration' have evolved slightly different meanings. According to the Merriam Webster Online Dictionary and Thesaurus tolerance is an attitude of mind that implies non-judgmental acceptance of different lifestyles or beliefs, whereas toleration implies putting up with something that one disapproves of. In the context of this country and the spirit of this conference I should believe that toleration best suits our topic than tolerance, considering the definitions above. The religious situation is not about being judgmental of different lifestyles or beliefs but feeling uncomfortable with the other and wishing its non-presence around us.

## Tolerance and Toleration

According to Zagorin (2003:5-6) Toleration is "the practice of deliberately allowing or permitting a thing of which one disapproves. One can meaningfully speak of tolerating, that is of allowing or permitting, only if one is in a position to disallow". It has also been defined as "to bear or endure" or "to nourish, sustain or preserve". Toleration may signify "no more than forbearance and the permission given by the adherents of a dominant religion for other religions to exist, even though the latter are looked on with disapproval as inferior, mistaken or harmful".

Paulus Vladimiri (1370–1435) was a Polish scholar and rector who at the Council of Constance in 1414, presented a thesis, *Tractatus de potestate papae et imperatoris respectu infidelium* (Treatise on the Power of the Pope and the Emperor Respecting Infidels). In it he argued that pagan and Christian nations could coexist in peace and criticised the Teutonic Order for its wars of conquest of native non-Christian peoples. Vladimiri strongly supported the idea of conciliarism and pioneered the notion of peaceful coexistence among nations.

A French Catholic jurist and political philosopher, Jean Bodin (1530–1596) in *The Colloquium of the Seven* portrays a conversation about the nature of truth between seven cultivated men from diverse religious or philosophical backgrounds: a natural philosopher, a Calvinist, a Muslim, a Roman Catholic, a Lutheran, a Jew, and a skeptic. All of who agree to live in mutual respect and tolerance.

Desiderius Erasmus Roterodamus (1466–1536), was a Dutch Renaissance humanist and Catholic whose works laid a foundation for religious toleration. He noted that religious disputants should be temperate in their language, "because in this way the truth, which is often lost amidst too much wrangling, may be more surely perceived." Erasmus concludes that truth is furthered by a more harmonious relationship between interlocutors" (ibid). For him "It is better to cure a sick man than to kill him" (ibid).

The last scholar to consider in this call for toleration is Sebastian Castellio (1515–1563), a French Protestant theologian who in 1554 published under a pseudonym the pamphlet *Whether heretics should be persecuted (De haereticis, an sint persequendi)* criticizing John Calvin's execution of Michael Servetus: "When Servetus fought with reasons and writings, he should have been repulsed by reasons and writings." Castellio concluded: "We can live together peacefully only when we control our intolerance. Even though there will always be differences of opinion from time to time, we can at any rate come to general understandings, can love one another, and can enter the bonds of peace, pending the day when we shall attain unity of faith" (Zeig Stefan, 1951: 312). Castellio is remembered for the often quoted statement, "To kill a man is not to protect a doctrine, but it is to kill a man.

According to the United Nations General Assembly Commission of 1948 everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance (United Nations 1948). Even though not formally legally binding, the Declaration has been adopted in or influenced many national constitutions since 1948, including Ghana's Constitution. It also serves as the foundation for a growing number of international treaties and national laws.

One of the major landmark declarations of the Vatican II Council ending in 1965 was the Roman Catholic Church's decree of *Dignitatis Humane* (Religious Freedom, 1965) that states that all people must have the right to religious freedom. Just about the same period in 1979 the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches came out with the *Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies* with thirteen headings all aimed at dialogue with people of the different religious persuasions.

In 1986, the first World Day of Prayer for Peace was held in Assisi. Representatives of one hundred and twenty different religions came together for prayer to their God or gods. This programme has continued to be held in March every year jointly by people of different religious denominations. Let's face 'the other' is always considered threatening but the 'religious other' can be threatening indeed.

The main essence behind the works of these writers is the call of the people in power to tolerate the less powerful. The same call applies to all people in positions or better situations than the religious other. Second, was the preparedness of these people with diverse religious persuasions to live together and to tolerate one another.

## **Biblical basis for toleration**

The books of the Old Testament especially, Exodus to Deuteronomy make direct statements regarding the treatment of strangers. For example, Exodus 22:21 says: "Thou shalt neither vex a stranger, nor oppress him: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt". These texts are frequently used in sermons to plead for compassion and tolerance of those who are different from us and less powerful.

The New Testament Parable of the Tares, which speaks of the difficulty of distinguishing wheat from weeds before harvest time, has also been invoked in support of religious toleration. In his "Letter to Bishop Roger of Chalons", Bishop Wazo of Liege (985–1048 AD) relied on the parable to argue that "the church should let dissent grow with orthodoxy until the Lord comes to separate and judge them"(Landes 2000: 26-43). This was a period of severe persecution of heretics across Europe.

In the middle ages the Latin concept *tolerantia* was a highly developed political and judicial concept in medieval scholastic theology and canon law. *Tolerantia* was used to "denote the self-restraint of a civil power in the face of" outsiders, like infidels, Muslims or Jews, but also in the face of social groups like prostitutes and lepers (Walshman 2006:234).

The meanings and distinctions of tolerance and toleration made me to change the topic slightly to read religious toleration for social stability. We say this because the issue at stake has to do with the majority or the powerful allowing the weak to exist and operate even though the powerful can disallow the weak. In some instances across the country we see Indigenous religious authorities hiding behind political authorities to sanction religious injunctions. For instance, in the 1990s through 2000 it seemed obvious that the Ga Traditional Council appropriated the authority of the Accra Metropolitan Assembly in the enforcement of the council's annual ban on drumming and noise-making.

## **Islam and Religious tolerance**

After the prophet Muhammad and his Muslim migrants arrived in Yathrib (later Madina) in 622AD, the prophet drew the Constitution of Medina, which incorporated religious freedom for Christians and Jews. Even though under Islamic law, in later centuries Jews and Christians were considered *dhimmis*, a legal status inferior to that of a Muslim but superior to that of other non-Muslims yet they were free to practice their religion within Muslim caliphate and emirates from 637 AD to 1095 AD, when the Crusades changed the complexion of the relations between Christians and Muslims from that of free encounters to violent attacks across the world.

In spite of the generally unhealthy relations between Christians and Muslims in certain parts of the world certain verses of the Qur'an were interpreted to create a specially tolerated status for People of the Book. For example Surah (al-Baqara) 2:62 reads:

Verily! Those who believe and those who are Jews and Christians, and Sabians, whoever believes in God and the Last Day and do righteous good deeds shall have their reward with their Lord, on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve.

This *aya*(verse) is clear about the common destiny that awaits Jews, and Christians and Sabians and whoever believes in God and the last Day and does good deeds. In other words apart from the followers of Islam and three religions named above all who believe in God and the Last Day and do good deeds (the Indigenous African religionists included) shall have their reward with their Lord, and on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve.

## **Tolerating the intolerant**

Karl Popper (Vol. I 1962) and John Rawls (1971:216) have discussed the paradox of tolerating intolerance. Walzer (1997:80-81) asks "Should we tolerate the intolerant?" He notes that most minority religious groups who are the beneficiaries of tolerance are themselves intolerant, at least in some respects. Rawls argues that an

intolerant “sect” should be tolerated in a tolerant society unless the “sect” directly threatens the security of other members of the society. He links this principle to the stability of a tolerant society, in which members of an intolerant sect in a tolerant society will, over time, acquire the tolerance of the wider society.

It is possible, and history has shown that when the tolerated minority becomes the majority they easily become intolerant of minority groups. This has happened in Christianity when Christians were persecuted by the Romans and Jews in early centuries but when Christianity became the state religion under Constantine it severely persecuted all dissenting voices throughout the medieval era and referred to them as heretics.

## The Case of Ghana

Ghana has had its fair share of religious persecution as has happened in other parts of the world following the advent of Christianity and Islam in the country. In 1914 for instance a long cleavage between Christians and African indigenous religion adherents occurred in Anum in the Eastern Region. The narratives have it that the chief and elders ordered all the residents of the town to shave their heads and go bare-footed for six weeks in preparation for *ohum* the festival of the traditional area. Christians of the town protested, saying they had a different belief and religion for which reason they would not be able to obey the directives of the chief and elders. They went further to state that any directives regarding work or contribution toward the general development of the area would be obeyed but not in this particular instance. The matter eventually appeared before the colonial authorities who ruled that the Christians had the right to observe their religious beliefs and rituals and so should not be compelled to observe the traditional directives (Aboagye-Mensah, 2000).

Islam was introduced to the Northern parts of Ghana in the middle 1500s and to the southern Ghana in the 1700s. For over three centuries Muslims in Ghana were only identified by their ethnic groups such Dogomba Muslims, Gonja Muslims and Wangara Muslims but not by the religion’s orthodox or heterodox groupings. In the late 1880s the Tijaniyya *sufi tariqa* (Brotherhood) of Islam was introduced into Ghana. Since 1900 the country further welcomed the mahdi Musah activists (1904), the Ahmadiyya Movement (now Ahmadiyya Muslim Mission, 1921), the revivalists of the 1950s (now the Ahlus Sunnah wal-Jama’a) and the Shi’a in the early 1980s. The arrival of these groups ushered the religion’s orthodoxy and heterodoxy disagreements into the country. The arrival also introduced the different regional ideologies of the religion to the country. For instance, Tijaniyya originated from Morocco and so has adapted a lot of African traditional practices. Ahmadiyya originated from Pakistan while Ahlus Sunnah has roots in Saudi Arabi and Shi’a from Iran. In addition to the arrivals of these groups with varying and opposing doctrines the period also witnessed the strengthening of positions of Muslims politically by the British colonial administration without any scheme for Muslim educational and social development. These developments set the tone for the nature of relationships that would exist among Muslims and between Muslims and non-Muslims in Ghana. The Ghana Muslim Mission, comprising mainly of Southern Ghanaian converts to the religion emerged out of these groups in 1953 with an entirely different ethnocentric ideology to take the leadership of Ghana’s Islam from the hands of the dominant aliens and give it to native Ghanaians. Ghana Islam by 1950 was clearly divided on two main fronts, doctrinal (between Sunni/Tijaniyya and Ahmadiyya) and also ethnic, with indigenous southern Ghanaian Muslims forming their own independent Mission. All these developments in Ghana’s Islam brought with them a changing phase of the religion from a more tolerant to an intolerant but more vibrant one by the year 2000. Samwini (2003:11ff) refers to these developments as “resurgence” among Muslims. The desire to show which Muslim group held the truth and which one was wrong threw the groups into intra-Muslim conflicts and various degrees of violence across the country with the worst period ranging between the 1930s and 2000 in Wa and between the 1980s and 1999 in Wenchi. The conflicts and violence involved almost every Muslim group except the newly arrived Shi’a group. Lives and property were lost across the country. To date relationships between the Ahmadiyya and the Sunni Muslims in Wa, Tamale and some other parts of Ghana can only be described as superficial.

The situation between Muslims and in some isolated cases between them and Christians was assuming national concern such that by the 1990s everybody was calling on Muslims to cease fire (See *Daily Graphic*, Tuesday, January, 20, 1995 and “Editorial” the *Muslim Fountain*, November-December, 1999).

Similar cleavages have occurred in recent times in Accra when the Ga traditional council since the 1990s have revived, emphasised and strongly urged a general public obedience of a hitherto private observance of ban on drumming and noise-making during the annual *nmaadumɔ* ritual. Churches of the Pentecostal and neo-

Charismatic fraternity felt observing the ban amounted to obeying pagan laws and directives. Matters came to a head in March 2000 that the Christian Council of Ghana took it upon itself to organise the first ever interfaith programme between Christians and the Ga traditional council. The programme was replicated in April the same year by the Accra Metropolitan Assembly, the Ga Traditional Council and the Christian and Muslim bodies within Accra. At the end of five difficult days of paper presentations and exchanges the parties agreed in a communiqué for the churches to drum up to acceptable decibels (dB) in churches far away from the traditional shrines. Total silence was accepted for churches that were located close to shrines and priestly habitats. The provisions in the communiqué were enforced by a Task Force set up by the parties to oversee its observance. This communiqué was respected for over ten years until 2012 when pockets of violence arose again in the city following the failure of some newer churches to observe the letter of the communiqué.<sup>4</sup>

In a more recent case of religious cleavage the Hello FM, a local radio station in Kumasi on Thursday, October 3, 2013 carried a news item of religious violence between Christians and the traditional authorities of Beposo, near Nsuta. The chief had earlier written to the Police with copies to CHIRAJ and other related regional security operatives urging the observance of a ban on drumming and noise-making announced to start on September 29, 2013 in honour of *figyare*, the local god following its elevation to a higher titular status.

### Social Stability

Whereas formal dialogue consultations range from perspectives and attempts at answering questions to assumptions that finding bridges between religious differences will facilitate answers, religious toleration is 'the already negotiated answer' (Samwini 2011:7). Unlike inter-religious dialogue which seeks, among other things to build understanding on similarities between the different faiths, religious toleration does not necessarily look for similarities but seeks to bring peace even amidst acknowledged differences. The process thereby generates peaceful co-existence and enables people to promote spiritual and cultural values, which are found in the distinct outlooks of followers of the other religions. Peaceful co-existence leads to a growth in relationship through a process of mutuality that generates greater understanding and mutual enrichment. The end result is better relations between religions within the same community. Religious tolerance can be a form of "mission". It is not "evangelism" or *da' wa* (call to Islam). Evangelism and *da' wa* intend to bring outsiders to the faith of Christianity or Islam. Religious tolerance creates an atmosphere of peaceful co-existence. This is not because of any desire to do away with the Christian and Islamic responsibility to call outsiders to their faiths but for them to explore other ways to make plain the intentions of Christian and Muslim witness and service (ibid). These approaches have worked remarkably in the Gambia, and the results are that the country has not recorded any serious case of religious conflicts in history.

Given the definition of toleration and tolerance, it is clear that followers of powerful or majority religious traditions are exposed to the practical daily living of their minority or less powerful religious counterparts within the same community. They experience one another as real people and learn more about their neighbours. This humanisation fosters mutual respect. In fact, in a tolerant context, religious relations are not planned or formal; rather, they are a natural outgrowth of the daily encounter with the other. In the home, small village, or town communities where religious toleration is practised, people relate first as blood relatives and not as religious communities. Religion takes a less important position. Religious toleration does not necessitate dilution of beliefs into some vague, universal whole. Through toleration, religious people reflect on how they can be communities and witnesses of service to themselves, to one another, and to the wider community without compromising their commitments to God.

This situation obviously leads to social stability where every one is sure he can move about with a clear mind and free from persecution. A country guided by the principles of peace and mutual respect among its religious divide is possible and all religious denominations have a right to peace and to possession of their own religious ritual and practice. This is possible only when religious people are prepared to tolerate dissenting beliefs.

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<sup>4</sup> Refer to Communiqué signed after three day Seminar by Christian Council of Ghana on Christianity and Africa Traditional Religion Relations, National Theatre, 4-8<sup>th</sup> April, 2000



## Conclusion

Our position in this subject is simple. Religious toleration is the solution to social stability. Due to the powerful nature of religion in the lives of adherents people will go any length to protect their faith even if it calls for disrupting society's peace. As the paper sought to show religious intolerance and religion-based conflicts are a foreign phenomenon unknown to the primal religious tradition of Africa. Religious intolerance became a part of Ghana with the introduction of the guest religions of Islam and Christianity and neither of the two can escape blame for the religious intolerance the country faces at the moment. Yet it is not beyond solution. Religion has to free itself from leaning on political power. If that happens religious people are capable of tolerating one another, at least in this country. That alone can give the needed stability to the Ghanaian society. Religious intolerance affected Europe badly in the middle ages. It is still affecting the world today. We should let the wheat and tares grow together if for the sake of peace and peaceful coexistence.

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