

Ecumenism of blood and interfaith solidarity in Nigeria: A theological and multicultural appraisal

**Author:**Ishaya Anthony¹ **Affiliation:**¹Department of Religious Studies, Faculty of Humanities, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa**Corresponding author:**Ishaya Anthony,
ishayaa@uj.ac.za**Dates:**

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This article explores the concept of 'ecumenism of blood', a phrase coined by Pope Francis. It refers to a form of Christian unity forged through persecution that transcends denominational affiliations. Within the Roman Catholic context, ecumenism of blood emphasises intra-Christian unity. However, with a focus on a multicultural context, particularly Kaduna State, Nigeria, this article employs the concepts of human dignity and Namsong Kang's theology of neighbour love to analyse three lived experiences namely, the 2002 Kaduna Peace Declaration, the 2023 abduction of worshippers at the Bege Baptist Church and the peacebuilding initiatives of Reverend James Wuye and Imam Muhammad Ashafa. The findings reveal that persecution not only unites Christians across denominations but also promotes interfaith solidarity rooted in shared human values, which affirms human dignity and social cohesion.

Contribution: The article contributes to practical theological discourses on ecumenism, religious freedom, religious dialogue, compassion, peaceful coexistence and national transformation in pluralistic societies.

Keywords: ecumenism of blood; religious solidarity; persecution; Kaduna State; Nigeria; human dignity; neighbour love.

Introduction

Religious coexistence in Nigeria remains a complex and often volatile reality, shaped by deep historical, political and socio-cultural dynamics. Despite the biological, cultural and social interconnectedness of religious communities, tensions between Christians and Muslims persist, frequently escalating into violence. These tensions are exacerbated by competing spiritual and political interests: the former rooted in eschatological aspirations and evangelism, the latter in territorial control, economic privilege and socio-political dominance. Historical precedents, such as the Uthman Dan Fodio jihad, reveal that religious expansion has often been intertwined with political and economic ambitions, reinforcing hierarchies and marginalising non-Muslim communities in northern Nigeria. Matthew Hassan Kukah (1993) posited that 'the Jihadists seem more preoccupied with slavery, economic, and political expansionism than the spread of the faith in the north-central area'. (p. 2). This conflation has fuelled mutual suspicion, ethnic conflict and recurrent religious persecution.

Christians in Nigeria, especially in the northern and central regions, experience persistent persecution in various ways and from different religious extremist groups, such as Maitatsine, Boko Haram, Herders, Bandits, the Islamic State-West Africa (ISWA) and Lakurawa (Amaefule 2022; Awotunde 2016; Gilbert 2021; Nwamaka 2024). It is difficult to accurately produce a credible statistic of Christians killed, tortured, kidnapped, detained and maimed for their faith in Jesus Christ. However, their persecution transcends denominational boundaries and church affiliations. For instance, the horrific and excruciating lynching of a beautiful, energetic, promising young Christian girl, Deborah Yakubu, a student burned alive for alleged blasphemy at the Shehu Shagari College of Education, Sokoto, Northern Nigeria. The killing of Deborah is a callous expression of impunity and jungle justice in the name of religion. In May 2024, Ansaru, an organisation affiliated with Al-Qaeda, purportedly abducted 160 children, predominantly of Christian faith, and resulted in the death of eight individuals in Niger State. Subsequently, the abducted children were released (USCIRF-Recommended for Countries of Particular Concern [CPC] – Nigeria 2025). Similarly, testimonies such as that of Idris Graba, former Chairman, Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), Yobe State, confirm that attackers often target individuals based on religious identity. After the 2011 Boko Haram attack in the state, Idris explained:

It was a direct attack against Christians. They [persecutors] asked, Are you a Christian or a Muslim? If you said you were a Christian, they killed you. They were selective. (Amaefule 2022:567)

Deborah's merciless killing and Garba's testimony resonate with the reality of Christian martyrdom – the willingness of the followers of Jesus Christ to die for their faith. It becomes a channel of inspiration, strength and unity for the church, capturing the phrase of an early church Father, Tertullian, 'The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church'. Furthermore, it echoes Pope Francis's contemporary concept of ecumenism of blood. An idea and reality that Christians of all denominations are united in martyrdom. In other words, persecutors do not distinguish between Catholics, Protestants or Orthodox – they perceive only Christians (Tornielli 2013). It is a testament to Christian persecution in Nigeria.

However, it is essential to acknowledge that Muslims are also persecuted in Nigeria (Rufai 2011). According to the 2022 report of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, an armed youth from a Christian-dominated area in Plateau State attacked a convoy of buses transporting Muslims from a religious gathering, resulting in approximately 22 fatalities and injuring 14 individuals. Similarly, an attack in a predominantly Christian community in the southeast killed a pregnant Muslim Hausa woman and her four children in May 2022. Similarly, in May 2025, bandits killed about 49 people in Zamfara State, including a Muslim Iman (Madeline Velluro 2022). These examples clearly illustrate the brutality of religious persecution perpetrated by both Christians and Muslims in Nigeria. Hence, the conversation on the ecumenism of blood becomes vital in this context.

The concept of ecumenism of blood has yet to attract much scholarly attention and criticism. In an article titled *Ecumenism of Blood and Christian Churches in Contemporary Nigeria*, Adolphus Ekedimma Amaefule, a Nigerian Roman Catholic Priest and scholar of religion, highlights some ecumenical implications of Christian persecution within the framework of ecumenism of blood in Nigeria. On this, Amaefule outlines the following: 'less emphasis on extreme denominationalism, an opportunity to learn more about other religious expressions in the country, the emergence of a Nigerian Christian martyrology, a more proper use of the media, corporation and collaboration of Christians in the mission fields, and impetus towards greatest spiritual ecumenism' (2022:567–571). Ahamefule's contribution is very significant in the conversation on ecumenism in Nigeria.

However, while the concept of ecumenism of blood emerged within Roman Catholic discourse as a call for greater Christian unity, its implications in Nigeria's pluralistic context remain underexplored. Moreover, the discourse often overlooks the fact that Muslims are also victims of religious violence – targeted by Boko Haram for

opposing extremism or caught in intercommunal conflicts (Amnesty International 2023; Anthony 2018; Rufai 2011). This reciprocal suffering challenges a unidirectional narrative of persecution and provides an approach for a nuanced theological reflection. In a nation where religious identities are deeply entangled with ethnic, political and economic dynamics, ecumenism of blood becomes a contextual theology of survival and resistance, one that inadvertently opens space for interfaith empathy and cooperation. Therefore, in a Christian and Muslim context where they share meaningful biological and social relationships, suffer violence on numerous occasions and are experiencing collective trauma, what form would the unity forged out of persecution take?

Human dignity and neighbour love

Human dignity is not a negotiable value but a foundational principle for human coexistence. Dignity is defined as 'that which has no price, which cannot be bought or sold' (Regina 2003:40). The dignity of every human being is established as a common ideal for all individuals and all nations, not only for moral or religious reasons but also for the peaceful and just development of the human community. Human dignity is a multidimensional concept that addresses several aspects of the human experience, such as politics, economics, justice and religion. Article One of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) of the United Nations commences with this eloquent and assertive statement: 'All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights ... They should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood'. This signifies that human dignity is not an attribute peculiar to individuals and their uniqueness; it manifests itself in the actions we engage with others, recognising them as human as we are, even if their appearance and demeanour suggest otherwise. Assohoto and Ngewa (2006) asserted:

Not only are we made in the image of God, but we are also made to live in a community. It is in a community that we manifest the image of God. (p. 15)

In addition, terms such as rights, freedom, equality and the spirit of brotherhood from the UDHR carry a religious connotation.

In Christianity, the foundation of human dignity derives from the theological concept of creation known as *imago dei*, which asserts that humans are created in the image of God. This principle is articulated, recognised and valued through interpersonal relationships, indicating that humanity is designed to coexist in harmony with God, within community, and alongside God's creation. Within a communal context, individuals embody the image of God, which compels us to oppose dehumanisation in all its forms. To affirm the dignity of individuals requires upholding the sanctity of life, advocating for justice, respecting religious diversity and fostering peaceful coexistence for the flourishing of God's creation. Everyone deserves respect, regardless of their religious convictions, ethnicity or past actions or inactions.

In Nigeria, however, this ideal is frequently violated. The killing of Deborah Yakubu mentioned earlier was not just a crime but a violation of human dignity. It exposed a culture where religious identity overrides humanity and where justice is sacrificed at the altar of zealotry. Therefore, this understanding of human dignity is a serious indictment of Nigeria at various levels based on the ongoing religious persecution.

On the level of religion, particularly Christianity and Islam, it exposes the deficit in interpreting sacred scriptures that amplify the sacredness of life, human dignity, responsibility, solidarity and mutual accountability to one's neighbour and creation. It is crucial to strengthen religious teachings on the sacredness of life. For example, Al Amrani Moundir (2015:51) argued that in Islam, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) emphasises the sanctity of human life, stating 'Verily! Your blood, property and honour are sacred to one another'. The word blood here refers to life, which is forbidden to take without a rightful reason. On solidarity, the Sultan of Sokoto, after his coronation in 2006, stated:

When I became the Sultan of Sokoto last year (2006), one of the first groups to travel to Sokoto to congratulate me was the leadership of the Christian Association of Nigeria. I was highly gratified by this kind gesture. (Muhammad 2007:36)

Similarly, in Christianity, various scriptural texts affirm the sanctity of life and solidarity, such as Exodus 20:13, Ephesians 2:10, John 13:34 and many more.

On the level of government, its constitution and policy implementation on religious freedom, freedom of speech, freedom of association and right to life show that the ideal of human dignity and sanctity of life is not seriously respected, protected and promoted. It portrays the lack of a deep national orientation that deliberately and systematically teaches citizens to embrace the joy and navigate the challenges of living together in a multicultural, beautifully diverse country. On an educational school system level, it exposes the deficiency of a robust curriculum for religious literacy. On the individual level, it exposes our neglect of life-affirming values of relationships, holding ourselves, religious institutions and the government accountable for sustainable justice, stability and national flourishing. This calls us to embody and express a genuine love for God, which translates to love for one's neighbour, resonating with Namsoon Kang's concept of neighbour love.

Kang (2013) states that neighbour love emanates from Jesus' radical and almost impossible 'commandment to love one's neighbour and enemy as oneself' (p. 5). Jesus Christ embodied, exemplified and taught neighbour love through His life and ministry. For instance, applying the biblical story of the Last Judgement in Matthew 25:31-46, Kang argues that the standard by which the sheep are separated from the goats is not based on religious affiliation or doctrinal belief and confession. Instead, it is based on the practice of *neighbour-enemy-love*. Hence, Kang (2013)

posited, 'One of the significant theological tasks today is to foster the recognition and knowing of the existence of various neighbours' (p. 170). This recognition and knowing are predicated on the following reasons.

Firstly, the neighbours are often unwelcome and unlikable because their lifestyles, ideologies and circumstances do not align with ours. Secondly, recognising and understanding one's neighbour requires deep socio-political and religious sensitivity and awareness. For Christians, this comes through an intentional, mind-changing submission and embrace of God's love as epitomised and expressed in Jesus Christ. Thirdly, ignorance cannot be an excuse for not taking responsibility for the neighbour. Fourthly, loving neighbours is inseparable from loving God and Jesus Christ. It is an act of worship to God, regardless of differences or conflicts. Therefore, human dignity and neighbourly love remind humanity of its roots and responsibilities. Both concepts emphasise respect and solidarity, which are the core of social coexistence, religious freedom and ecumenism in a multi-religious and multicultural context. Significantly, through the concepts of human dignity and neighbour love, the act of shedding of blood – whether in martyrdom or violence – strips away religious labels, revealing our shared humanity. In that moment, we are not Christian or Muslim, but beings made in the image of God, whose dignity is violated. Thus, the 'blood of the martyrs' becomes a universal cry for justice and a call to neighbour love in Christianity and Islam.

Ecumenism of blood: An upshot of ecumenical theology

Pope Francis built on the Christian theology of martyrdom to introduce the term *ecumenism of blood*. The Pope described ecumenism of blood as the persecution and killings of Christians for their faith in Jesus Christ, regardless of their denominational affiliations and ecclesiastical differences, and they are united in their ultimate sacrifice. Their death provides a rallying point for Christian unity. Responding to a media interview in December 2013 on the priority of ecumenism, Pope Francis stated:

Ecumenism is a priority. Today, there is an ecumenism of blood. In some countries, they kill Christians for wearing a cross or having a Bible, and before they kill them, they do not ask them whether they are Anglican, Lutheran, Catholic, or Orthodox. Their blood is mixed. To those who killed, we are Christians ... they don't ask for your identity card to see which Church you were baptised in. We are united in blood, even though we have not managed to take the necessary steps towards unity between us and perhaps the time has come. (Tornielli 2013)

This statement portrays the irrelevancy of denominational expressions in Christianity when it comes to the matter of life and death. Pope Francis affirms that 'to those who killed, we are Christians'. Their anger to inflict pain, their thirst for blood and their zeal to persecute and kill followers of Christ are based on a deep-seated religious ignorance, a toxic socio-political environment and the quest for domination and power. This acknowledges the contemporary hostility to the

Christian faith in various parts of the globe. Resulting in an ecumenism forced on the 'shoulders of Christians by non-Christian entities that persecute them' (Amaefule 2022:567).

Beyond the idea of Christian persecution, the concept of blood symbolises shared vulnerability and the sacredness of life, a universal human bond. This highlights the sanctity of life – blood as life – a principle that can unite Christian and Muslim ethics in situations of violence. In Christian theology, blood is described as covenant, the sealing of God's promise (Ex 24:8), as sacrifice, Christ's blood the ultimate sacrifice (Leviticus) and as redemption (Mt 26:28). Thus, ecumenism of blood is not merely about death, but about life-giving witness – a theology of resurrection through suffering.

Ecumenism of blood is an upshot of ecumenical theology. With the numerous Christian traditions and various methods of doing ecumenism, it becomes difficult to have a standardised definition of ecumenical theology. However, for Nicholas Lossky, ecumenical theology is a 'permanent re-discovery of the church as the heart of the world, of creation. It is a renewed awareness of the church's responsibility for all'. (Lossky 2002:1109). For Mary Tanner (2005), ecumenical theology:

[I]s 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. (p. 557)

For Obiefuna and Kanu (2016):

[E]cumenism 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. (p. 14)

Despite the variation in definition, scholars agree that creation, humankind, church, unity, responsibility, mutual respect and dialogue are major concepts enshrined in understanding ecumenical theology. Therefore, building on the above-stated descriptions of ecumenical theology, I conceptualised it as a divine-human activity by which the Christian community embodies, expresses and accounts for the care of God's world and works for unity within and beyond denominational affiliation, confessional expression and faith identification. It captures three cardinal ideas. Firstly, ecumenism is a living theology that focuses on the unity of reconciliation of humans to creation and God. It grapples with human complexities and contextual lived realities. This kind of theological reflection acknowledges human beings as created in God's image and sees the inhabited world beyond the church's walls (Anthony 2025). Secondly, ecumenism seeks unity in and outside the Christian community to care for the inhabited world, God's world. Nico Koopman (2013) describes it as a:

[U]nity 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. (p. 96)

Jerry Pillay (2015) phrases Koopman's submission as 'embracing ecumenism' (p. 638). An approach that is inclusive rather than exclusive. Thirdly, 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.

In Africa, ecumenical theology falls under African theology (theologies). Kaunda (2015) depicts African theology as:

[A]n 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. (p. 79)

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. John S. Pobe (2002), a renowned African ecumenist of Blessed memory, affirms and identifies three types of ecumenism in Africa. (pp. 8–12)

One is *the unstructured and natural ecumenism* in a multi-religious and cultural context of nuclear and extended family. In this sense, people are committed and participate in various family rites and shared festivals, including intermarriage, joint farming and rites of passage such as death and puberty. In such gatherings, religious affiliations and denominational expressions and divides become foreign and unnatural in the positions of the Africans. Nonetheless, in Nigeria, colonial policies and their legacy, such as indirect rule and Anglo-Fulani dominance, disrupted traditional cohesion and created hierarchies.

A second form is *enforced ecumenism*. It happens based on complex existential realities, such as political oppression, wars, natural disasters, persecution, among others. From the period of slavery to colonisation, apartheid and civil wars, the continent has continued to undergo the process of dehumanisation, oppression and exploitation. Ecumenical theology has been applied as a medium of justifying and confronting the tripartite evil of dehumanisation, oppression and exploitation. For instance, in South Africa, a church united in articulating a theological justification of the status quo during the apartheid era. On the other hand, various churches united to confront the apartheid regime. Put differently, enforced ecumenism is when African churches and religions unite to work for survival.

The third category is *structured ecumenism*, consciously or unconsciously taking root from the 1910 Edinburgh conference and other ecumenical initiatives. Examples are the establishment of national, sub-regional and regional Christian councils. Similarly, structured ecumenism in Africa entails Bible societies, Christian medical associations and many more (Pobe 2002). One of the strengths of theological

reflection on ecumenism in Africa lies in the continued grappling with the colonial, historical and contemporary socio-cultural, economic and political lived realities across the continent. In the words of Tinyiko Maluleke (2005), 'African theologians must be good readers of books as well as good readers of their living context' (p. 485). Therefore, religious persecution, religious freedom and respect need more scholarly attention in northern Nigeria.

Ecumenism of blood in a multicultural context

In Nigeria, various conferences were organised, and institutions were established to promote Christian unity, engagement with other religions and the government. Among them are the first Calabar Interdenominational Missionary Conference, 1911, inspired by the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference of 1910. The Christian Council of Nigeria was established in 1929, and the CAN was established in 1976 (Konye 2024). In addition, persecution against the followers of Jesus Christ is contributing to uniting Christians. Beyond this, in the countries' multicultural and multi-religious contexts, persecution shows unity outside the boundaries of Christianity based on humans' shared values of love, justice, peace and respect. I will amplify three experiences from Kaduna state in northern Nigeria to illustrate the second point. My choice of Kaduna state is anchored on three reasons.

Firstly, Kaduna has historically been inhabited by numerous ethnic and religious groups, each possessing territorial integrity and defence mechanisms. However, during the colonial invasion, the British Empire consolidated these ethnic groups in Kaduna, designating it as the capital and administrative headquarters of the Northern Region. Yusufu Turaki argued that when the British incorporated the ruling elites of the emirates into the colonial administration and established an Anglo-Fulani dominance, which, after independence in 1960, evolved into Hausa-Fulani hegemony, the non-Muslim peoples, south of the emirates (southern Kaduna), were seen as inferior (Turaki 1982). Hence, Kaduna is described as the 'principal power base of the northern bureaucratic elite, connected to the emirate' (Gunilla & Beckaman 1998:87). Kaduna has continued to play a strategic role in advancing the socio-political and religious interests of Muslims in northern Nigeria, leading to ethnic, religious and political tensions and resistance from the people of southern Kaduna. For instance, in 1942, the Southern part of Kaduna, which Christians and Indigenous religions dominate, 'protested over perceived domination and discrimination by the Native Administration, predominantly the Fulani ruling class' (ZayyadAbubakar 2018:52).

Secondly, even after Nigerian independence in 1990 and Kaduna becoming a state in 1976, Kaduna has experienced political and ethno-religious violence such as the 1980 Kasuwa Magani crisis, 1984, 1992, 2001 Zangon Kataf crises, the 1987 Kafanchan crisis, 1999 Kafanchan- Kaduna crisis,

2000 Kaduna Saria riots, 2011 post-election violence in Kaduna and the 2002 Miss World crisis (Kperogi 2013, 2020; ZayyadAbubakar 2018). Almost all crises in Kaduna State have a religious undertone, because the state has been a centre for radical religious movements in the north (Angerbrandt 2015).

Thirdly, numerous governmental and interfaith initiatives have been established to promote and uphold peaceful coexistence and religious freedom within Kaduna State. A notable example is the Kaduna State Peace Commission, established in 2017 by the government of Kaduna State, alongside the Kaduna Centre for the Study of Christian-Muslim Relations, founded in 2004 by Bishop Josiah Atkins Idowu-Faeron, the former Secretary-General of the Anglican Communion Worldwide. From these contextual justifications, three scenarios are presented to illustrate the unity that transcends the boundaries of Christianity, stemming from the ecumenism of blood.

A reflection on three lived experiences from Kaduna State, Nigeria

The first is the Kaduna Peace Declaration of Religious Leaders. This document was signed by 11 prominent religious leaders representing both the Muslim and Christian communities in 2002, the year Boko Haram became increasingly brutal in northern Nigeria. Directly or indirectly, that year, the presence of Boko Haram caused significant sociological, psychological and religious confusion and suspicion in the state. Similarly, in 2002, the state experienced what is commonly called the 'Miss World Riots' (Angerbrandt 2015; Anthony 2023; Human Right Watch 2003; Issa 2016). A media publication in *This Day* newspaper sparked the riots. The article was written by Isioma Daniel on 16 November 2002. Prior to the publication, Nigeria's plan to host the Miss World pageant had sparked controversy and faced opposition, particularly from predominantly Muslim communities in the northern part of the country. Both conservative Muslims and some Christians criticised the event on moral grounds, objecting to what they viewed as immodest or revealing clothing worn by the contestants. In the article, Isioma claimed that the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) might have approved of the Miss World beauty pageant. She amplified this point with a question: 'What would Muhammed [PBUH] think? In all honesty, he would probably have chosen a wife from among them' (Human Right Watch 2003:15:7). This statement was seen by Islamic extremists and conservative groups as offensive, blasphemous and heretical, and was interpreted as an attack on Islam – especially since Daniel and the owners of the *This Day* newspaper were widely believed to be Christians. This perception fuelled religious tensions and led to violent conflict between Muslim and Christian communities (Anthony 2023). In this context, the Kaduna State Peace Declaration was signed, becoming a significant factor in restoring peace to the State.

Following are some words from the Peace Declaration:

We who have gathered as Muslim and Christian religious leaders from Kaduna State to pray for peace in our state and declare our commitment to ending the violence and bloodshed, which has marred our recent history ... According to our faith, killing innocent lives in the name of God is desecration of His Holy Name, and defames religions in the world ... Religious violence is an evil that all people of good faith must oppose ... We seek to live together as neighbours, respecting the integrity of each other's historical and religious heritage ... all tribes must respect the divinely ordained purpose of the creator by whose Grace we live together, such ordained purpose includes freedom of worship, access to and sanctity of places of worship and justices among others. (The Kaduna Peace Declaration of Religious Leaders 2002)

This quotation demonstrates that the Kaduna Peace Declaration profoundly enshrines principles of unity, solidarity, respect, freedom of worship and peaceful coexistence. For instance, the decision for Christians and Muslims to *unite in prayer for peace and declare their commitment to ending the violence and bloodshed* in the state acknowledges their shared humanity and responsibility to each other. It resonates with an African belief that shedding of human blood is the greatest evil on earth, against God, the earth and humanity (Obiefuna & Kanu 2016).

Also, boldly declaring religious violence as 'evil that all people must oppose' resonates with Joseph Cardinal Cardijn's Liberation Theology framework of 'See-Judge-Act' (Sands 2018). In this sense, the Kaduna Peace Declaration sees the catastrophe of religious violence and dares to name and judge it as *evil* and calls on religious communities and the state to act by *opposing* it. Furthermore, the assertion that religious communities strive to coexist as neighbours resonates with Namsoon Kang's concept of neighbourly love, which emphasises respect, peace and solidarity that transcend religious and ethnic affiliations. For Christians, even amid persecution, the readiness to coexist as neighbours represents a deliberate affirmation and commitment that loving one's neighbours is intrinsically linked to loving God and Jesus. This commitment is considered an act of worship to God.

The second example is the abduction of 40 worshippers at the Bege Baptist Church in Chikun, Kaduna State. This incident occurred during a worship service on Sunday, 07 May 2023. While others escaped, 16 were abducted and subsequently released after a ransom was paid, which included a motorbike. Speaking to journalists on their release, the then CAN, Chairman of the state, Reverend Joseph Hayab, announced:

I confirm and give thanks that all sixteen are now back home. We are grateful to the Muslim community, which contributed money and bought a motorcycle as part of the ransom required for the release of their Christian brothers and sisters in captivity. This shows good, caring and sincere neighbours who practically showed concern for the plight of their abducted brothers and sisters and their heartfelt wish that they return home to live together in peace and harmony. (Ibrahim 2023)

From the above-stated scenario, it is important to recognise that the Muslim contributions were presented not as Christian ecumenism but as Islamic charity [*zakat* and *sadaqah*] and community solidarity beyond the Islamic community [*umma*]. However, Hayap's statement exemplifies a profound sense of unity and solidarity rooted in human interconnectedness and communal cohesion. It aligns with African concepts of natural and enforced ecumenism, wherein religious and ethnic differences become unfamiliar and unnatural. In the statement, Hayap used the collective pronoun 'we' to represent the Christian community and express their gratitude for the presence and gracious generosity of the Muslim community in the state, which united and contributed to paying the ransom for the freedom of 'their Christian brothers and sisters'. Significantly, some members of the Muslim community accompanied the Christian delegation from Kaduna to Lagos for the purchase of the motorcycle demanded by the kidnapers. The journey took about 17 to 18 h by road. This vividly demonstrates a sacrificial act of unity and neighbour love. Hayap described it as 'good, caring, and sincere neighbours'. This act facilitated the release of the 16 kidnapped victims from the abductors and enabled them to return 'home to live together in peace and harmony'. In this context, the concept of home embodies a community and a space accessible to all individuals. As neighbours, love entails acknowledging and respecting differences, fostering harmonious coexistence and actively protecting the home and its inhabitants. Accordingly, peace and harmony within the community should be founded upon principles of human dignity, justice, respect and socio-economic development and transformation.

The third instance is a story of profound unity, resilience and peacebuilding by Reverend Dr James Movel Wuye and Imam Dr Muhammad Nurayn Ashafa, popularly known as the Imam and the Pastor, founders of the Interfaith Mediation Centre, recipients of numerous awards, including the inaugural Commonwealth Peace Prize. These leaders were once religious extremists and fierce enemies, even seeking to kill each other. In 1992, James's wrist was amputated during a religious clash involving him and the Imam's fundamental followers. James also indoctrinates his followers with deep resentment towards Islam, which leads to the deaths of the Imam's teacher and two of his cousins. This enmity stems from their religious beliefs and passion to defend and propagate them. Their leaders negatively influenced both of them to believe and express their religion as superior to the other, leading to their zeal and pursuit of unhealthy religious rivalry, dominance, destruction and hatred. On this, the Imam and the Pastor in a talk¹ at TEDxBerlinSalon, 10 May 2016, narrated:

We were guided and mentored by incapable and mischievous religious leaders. Incapable because they possess only half-baked knowledge, yet they operate under the guise of being ideal and knowledgeable leaders. With this limited understanding, they persist in preaching and passing judgement on religious issues, manipulating and misleading their follower. Mischievous because they exploit religious texts and materials

1. For the full video see: TEDxBerlinSalon (2016).

for their own selfish, political, economic, and social interests, ultimately harming humanity and hindering community flourishing by promoting hate, division, and demonisation of the other. They taught us to hate instead of love. (TEDxBerlinSalon 2016)

In the same TEDx Talk, according to the Imam, seeking religious insights beyond his usual scope led him to discover an ideal religious leader who taught him that:

You cannot practice and promote any religion, especially Islam, with hatred in your heart. Religion serves as a social instrument for positive engagement and transformation within a society. It elevates the dignity of the human family. You cannot be religious and full of hatred in your heart; you have to find a way to change. (TEDxBerlinSalon 2016)

The Imam responded, 'How do I change?' The teacher answered, 'Identify your worst enemy, go and do everything possible to make him your friend. When you do this, you are a living model of Islam'.

This marked a turning point in the Imam's life and ministry, emphasising a respect for the humanity of Christians within the state and beyond. Their positive journey began during a meeting of religious leaders in Kaduna, where they aimed to raise awareness and mobilise their communities for the polio vaccination. At this meeting, the Imam says:

A mutual friend took both of us [*the Pastor and the Imam*] by the hand and said: The two of you can pull this nation together, or you can destroy it. Do something. (Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding n.d.)

According to the Pastor, when the Imam approached him, he was very suspicious. It took about:

[T]hree years to go through the process of healing from pain and anger, leading to forgiveness, reconciliation, and accepting his humanity and friendship, as well as our choice to work together. (TEDxBerlinSalon 2016)

In 1995, they established the Interfaith Mediation Centre, a grassroots religious organisation that has effectively mediated between Christians and Muslims across Nigeria. Now with over 10000 members, their organisation reaches into militias and trains the country's youth – as well as women, religious leaders and tribal elders – to become civic peace activists. Under their guidance, Muslim and Christian youth collaboratively rebuild mosques and churches they once destroyed because of religious prejudice and violence. Their stories highlight a theological conviction rooted in Sufi Islamic reform and a Christian theology of reconciliation. Affirming the work and ministry of the Imam and the Pastor, the Khalili Foundation and the Commonwealth Secretariat state, 'Their work has been recognised internationally as an inspiring showcase of the power of forgiveness and collaboration in conflict resolution'.

Globally, they are recognised for addressing their audience as brothers and sisters. Their innovative and thoughtful approach to peacebuilding fosters mutual respect and

understanding between Christians and Muslims, encouraging them to go beyond mere tolerance to truly see, accept and respect each other as brothers and sisters. The concept of brothers and sisters encompasses neighbourly love and calls for a courageous stance that affirms our religious identity and traditions should not obstruct God's plan for our inclusion and acceptance in the universal human family that mirrors God. A family that consistently resists stereotyping and hasty generalisation, practises patience and makes room for the humanity of others. Such an approach to family in a multi-religious context will promote unity that transcends religious and ethnic boundaries, shifting from vengeance and enmity to forgiveness and friendship.

The above-stated examples from Kaduna State demonstrate that the concept of ecumenism of blood in Nigeria is not merely passive unity in suffering but an active catalyst for interfaith solidarity grounded in human dignity and neighbour love. Unlike in global Catholic discourse, which emphasises internal Christian unity, the Nigerian context shows that the 'blood' of martyrs also inspires Muslim-Christian collaboration, as demonstrated through ransom contributions and peacebuilding efforts, thereby broadening ecumenism beyond Christian boundaries. Furthermore, these examples confirm that blood, as a symbol, resonates profoundly in both Christian and Islamic traditions – not only as martyrdom but also as covenant (Gn 9:4; Lv 17:11), sacrifice and sacred life. In Islam, the Qur'an states, 'Whoever kills a soul ... it is as if he has slain mankind entirely' (Qur'an 5:32), while the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) taught that 'Your blood, property, and honour are sacred to one another' (Al Amrani 2015:51). These shared ethical commitments establish a theological bridge for solidarity. Therefore, although ecumenism of blood is a Christian theological concept, its effects in Nigeria are reciprocated through Islamic principles of justice, compassion and the safeguarding of life. This indicates that while the terminology may be Christian, the moral response is interfaith, rooted in shared ethical commitments.

Conclusion and recommendations

This article affirms that ecumenism of blood – when interpreted through the lens of human dignity and neighbour love – can evolve from a theology of suffering into a praxis of hope. In a nation marked by division, such solidarity offers a divine-human mandate for unity, justice and the flourishing of God's creation. The three lived experiences from Kaduna State, as narrated in this article, embody the dual nature of religion, serving either as a force to incite division and violence or as a powerful agent for healing and reconciliation. The 2002 Kaduna Peace Declaration shows how religious communities can collectively and theologically identify violence as a desecration of God's holy name and pledge to coexist peacefully and respectfully as neighbours. This pledge creates a theological link for solidarity. The ransom contribution by Muslims for the release of kidnapped Christians at Bege Baptist Church demonstrates compassion as a tangible act of solidarity. The journey of Wuye and

Ashafa – from enemies to co-founders of the Interfaith Mediation Centre – embodies the transformative power of forgiveness and the possibility of reimagining religious identity not as a source of division but as a foundation for peace. These narratives illustrate how religious communities can transcend hatred and explore avenues for forgiveness, reconciliation, healing, respectful coexistence, transformation and human flourishing.

The article demonstrates that ecumenism of blood in a multicultural and multi-religious context reveals unity in two ways. The first is unity among Christians regardless of denominational affiliations. The second is unity that extends beyond the boundaries of Christianity, grounded in shared human values such as love, justice, peace and respect for human dignity, as well as an appreciation for human diversity, embracing religious freedom and fostering the flourishing of God's creation. Therefore, building on the conclusion, here are some recommendations.

Religious leaders should strengthen and promote joint scriptural study programmes that explore themes of human dignity, respect, peace and neighbour love in both the Bible and the Qur'an.

Religious institutions should design and teach a counter-extremist curriculum, particularly on scriptural interpretations and preaching. They should also emphasise a decolonial approach to ecumenism and interfaith dialogue, one that is grounded in indigenous knowledge systems and communal values and wisdoms.

A short residential academic exchange between Christian and Muslim theological institutions in Nigeria should be introduced and supported.

Policymakers should establish and strengthen the legal mandate of national and international peace institutions and initiatives. It should also integrate religious literacy and interfaith peace education into national curricula. Ensure accountability, justice and prosecution for religious violence, regardless of perpetrator identity.

Communities should support grassroots initiatives like the Interfaith Mediation Centre. Establish interfaith youth clubs, trauma healing circles and community dialogues that foster mutual recognition and shared responsibility. They should build and foster relationships across divides, only then can Nigeria move from a culture of bloodshed to a culture of flourishing community.

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