

He, Who Is Not Against Us, Is For Us” (Luke 9:50): A Biblical Framework for Christian Engagement with Muslims in Nigeria

OKHIFOH, Kenneth Otuonkpa^{1*}, IKHIDERO, Solomon Ijeweimen², ALLI, Peter Olufemi³.

^{1,2,3}Dept. of Religious Mgt. and Cultural Studies Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma, Edo State, Nigeria.



Article History

Received: 01.07.2026

Accepted: 22.08.2026

Published: 07.09.2026

Corresponding Author:

OKHIFOH, Kenneth
Otuonkpa^{*}

Abstract: In a country where its citizenry shares a multiplicity of religious beliefs, sincere dialogue and cooperation among its members are expected to meet its national goals. Unfortunately, the willingness to engage in this enterprise has remained a serious challenge in Nigeria. The paper examines Luke 9:50 as a biblical foundation for strengthening Christian engagement with Muslims in Nigeria. Against the backdrop of persistent interfaith tensions in the country, the study argues that Jesus' instruction, "He who is not against us is for us," provides an inclusive paradigm capable of reshaping Christian attitudes toward religious others. Using exegetical analysis, the paper situates Luke 9:50 within its literary and theological context and highlights its emphasis on openness, cooperation and recognition of shared moral commitments. The discussion further engages the socio-religious landscape of Nigeria, noting areas of conflict as well as existing efforts in interfaith collaboration. By applying the principles derived from the text to contemporary realities, the article proposes practical pathways for enhancing mutual acceptance, dialogue and peaceful coexistence between Christians and Muslims. The study concludes that Luke 9:50 offers a compelling model for promoting interfaith harmony and national cohesion in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Christian Engagement, Interfaith Relations, Luke 9:50, Muslims, Nigeria.*

Cite this Article

O. K. Otuonkpa¹, I. S. Ijeweimen, A. P. Olufemi, (2026) He, Who Is Not Against Us, Is For Us” (Luke 9:50): A Biblical Framework for Christian Engagement with Muslims in Nigeria *GRS Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Studies*, Vol-3 (Iss-8). 9-17

Introduction

Religious cooperation and cordial interactions are largely elusive among Nigerian Christians and Muslims of today. Mutual suspicion, ill-feeling, antagonism, and a lack of respect for other religions, fuelled by the complex problem of the monopolisation of religious truth, have become the order of the day (Ayantayo, 2014:5, Ikhidero and Ebhomienlen, 2019:1). Ongoing conflicts in regions such as the Middle Belt, Northwest, and Northeast continue to reinforce negative perceptions between both communities. (Jah and Mabas, 2022:1, Falola). Many Christians approach Muslims defensively, often influenced by selective biblical interpretations that stress separation or confrontation (Orobator, 2018, 63-65). As a result, biblical teachings that encourage tolerance, cooperation, and shared humanity are frequently overlooked in theological and pastoral discourse (Gifford, 2008, 102–104).

The Christians' holy book leaves no doubt about its stance in favour of interreligious cooperation among diverse religious groups. The statement of Jesus, "whoever is not against us is for us" (Luke 9:50), is one of such. This statement provides a paradigm for evaluating attitudes toward religious "outsiders." While often overlooked in interreligious dialogue, this text offers a profound insight into inclusive discipleship, hospitality, and the

ethical recognition of the religious "other." Examining Luke 9:50 within the Nigerian context opens possibilities for rethinking Christian engagement with Muslims in ways that promote peace, mutual respect, and collaborative social action. Scholars in contemporary academic discourse have thus emphasised the need for the application of biblical models in addressing contemporary societal problems, particularly those that resonate with Nigeria's quest for cooperation and coexistence between its Christian and Muslim adherents.

Luke 9:50, which explicitly discourages sectarian hostility, has not received adequate attention as a framework for interfaith ethics in Nigeria. Its potential to challenge deep prejudices and promote constructive engagement remains largely unexplored. Furthermore, many interfaith initiatives lack a strong biblical foundation that resonates with Christian communities, limiting their effectiveness (Kukah, 2019, 140–142). A clear gap therefore persists: That is, the absence of a sustained exegetical and contextual study of Luke 9:50 as a paradigm for Christian engagement with Muslims in Nigeria. This paper thus examines Luke 9:50 as a theological and ethical paradigm for enhancing constructive Christian engagement with Muslims in Nigeria. It seeks to provide a biblically grounded, context-sensitive framework that can promote mutual understanding, reduce interreligious suspicion, and strengthen peaceful coexistence between both faith communities in Nigeria.

Theoretical Context

This paper is theoretically underpinned by the theory of theological inclusivism. Theological inclusivism is a Christian approach to religious diversity. It affirms the uniqueness and normative role of Jesus Christ while acknowledging that God's grace and salvific activity may extend beyond the formal boundaries of Christianity. Inclusivism maintains that salvation is ultimately grounded in Christ, yet individuals outside the Christian faith may participate in this salvation without explicit knowledge of Christ (Knitter, 2005). Among the major proponents of theological inclusivism is Karl Rahner, whose concept of the "anonymous Christian" argues that persons who sincerely respond to divine grace, even within non-Christian religions, may be oriented toward Christ implicitly (Rahner, 1978). Other notable contributors include Jacques Dupuis and Clark Pinnock, who emphasize God's universal salvific will and the presence of divine truth in other religious traditions (Dupuis, 1997; Pinnock, 1992). These theologians resist strict exclusivism while stopping short of full religious pluralism.

The core principles of inclusivism include the universality of God's grace, the centrality of Christ in salvation history, and the recognition of partial truth and moral value in other religions. Inclusivism stresses humility in theological claims and openness to dialogue, grounded in the belief that God's activity cannot be confined to ecclesial or doctrinal boundaries. Luke 9:50 provides an important biblical foundation for inclusivist theology. In this passage, Jesus declares, "Whoever is not against you is for you," in response to his disciples' attempt to exclude an outsider acting in his name. Theologically, this statement challenges restrictive boundary-making and affirms that participation in God's work may occur outside recognized group membership. Inclusivist interpretations view this text as affirming God's freedom to work through non-conventional agents while preserving Christ's authority.

Despite its appeal, theological inclusivism has faced criticism. Critics argue that it subtly reinforces Christian superiority by interpreting other religions through Christian categories, thereby limiting genuine mutuality (D'Costa, 2009). Others contend that inclusivism lacks sufficient biblical warrant or weakens evangelistic urgency. Nonetheless, proponents maintain that inclusivism offers a balanced framework for engaging religious diversity while remaining faithful to core Christian convictions.

Mutual Inclusivism in Christianity and Islam

The popular notion that one cannot be a Christian without being a Muslim and vice versa has continued to play out in everyday study and research in the field of Christian-Muslim relations. The meaning of this statement can be explained based on the context of this study. Firstly, to be a Christian, one must believe in Jesus Christ and follow his teachings and examples (Acts 11:26). Following this thought, therefore, it is safe to agree that the life of an average Muslim should not contradict this expression. The Quran clearly enjoins Muslims to accept and believe in all the Prophets of Allah, including Jesus Christ, and to make no distinction among them. (Q.3:84; 2:136). This is emphasised in the fourth pillar of faith – Belief in Allah's Messengers (Okhifoh, 2016:60). The implication of this is that one cannot be a complete Muslim without believing in Jesus Christ. Recall that the answer to the question, "Who is a Christian?" is "The one who believes in

Jesus Christ". Therefore, if the belief in Jesus connotes being a Christian, following this thought, one would agree that being a Muslim is somewhat synonymous with being a Christian.

Let us also examine it from the Islamic perspective. The word 'Islam' can literally mean 'peace', 'purity', 'obedience', or 'submission'. Its technical usage means, "Submission to the will of Allah and obedience to His laws." Therefore, a Muslim is one who has submitted to the will of Allah. (Okhifoh, 2016:3). This is emphasized in Quran 3:19 which refers to the submission to Allah's will as the true religion. Following the attempt to justify the possibility of a Muslim sharing Christian identity, we again observe that to be a Christian is nothing but to surrender or submit to the will of God. This is evident in the lives of all the holy prophets of God in the Christian scripture, as well as notable Christians of today's world. In John 4:23, Jesus emphatically declares that His food is to do the will of His Father, which is in heaven. At the Garden of Gethsemane, He again prays that not His will but the will of the Father be done (Matt. 26:36).

This same attitude resonates among the first Christians in Acts 4:9, where Peter and John, amidst heavy threats from the Sanhedrin, boldly declared that they must obey God rather than men. The action of Peter and John here attests to the fact that Christians are duty-bound to do God's will without recourse to any other consideration, whether of pleasure or of suffering. These are clear indications that to be a Christian is to submit to the will of God, and this agrees with the meaning of the term 'Islam'. In view of the above correlation, it becomes normal, therefore, to conclude that being a Christian or Muslim is, in some sense, mutually inclusive.

Despite the close affinity and correlation between Christianity and Islam, it is still impressively complex for many Christians to wholeheartedly accept Muslims as partners in the same direction and the Islamic religion as a complementary religion. The reason could be a result of the recent threats and insecurity that are witnessed all over the world. However, there is a need for religious cooperation between the Christians and the Muslims. Matthew Hassan Kukah (2007), after a careful survey of Christian-Muslim relations in Africa, applauds some countries that are living harmoniously with one another, while admonishing those who fail to learn to cooperate with one another. He, however, draws a conclusion that the relationship between Christians and Muslims in Africa is "to take more seriously and urgently the issues of the dialogue of life. We have made some strides, but in truth there is still a long way to go" (Kukah 2007:159). By implication, the cooperation of Christians and Muslims in Africa is in poor shape.

Christian-Muslim Relations: The Contemporary Nigerian Situation

Islam and Christianity have long histories in Nigeria, each entering the region through different channels and shaping society in distinct ways. Islam in the North through trade and political integration, and Christianity in the South through missionary enterprise and colonial influence. These divergent histories form a crucial backdrop for understanding contemporary interreligious dynamics in Nigeria (Goddard 200, Peel 2000).

Long-standing mutual tension, suspicion, and antagonism among Christians and Muslims in politics, business, institutions of learning, security outfits, civil service, etc. This has led to many severe and unnecessary religious and ethnic crises, which have claimed many lives and property (Kukah 2007:155) In Nigeria and

Cameroon in particular, the government continued to spend on building and rebuilding projects that had been wantonly destroyed by these religious upheavals, which have also rendered many homeless and continued to increase the number of IDPs in the country (NEMA Report of September 18, 2024). In most cases, these violent acts hinder academic and economic activities, thereby posing a serious threat to the country's development. In a release by the American government in 2019, Nigeria was placed on the Special Watch List owing to religious intolerance, while the DSS and other groups have continued to warn of an impending religious catastrophe. If this trend continues unabated, the possibility of birthing a situation where Nigerian Christians and Muslims would ultimately avoid any level of cooperation among themselves is projected, and that will be a serious disaster for the nation.

Some Misconceptions that Promote Friction in Christian-Muslim Engagement

Among the fuels that fan the embers of friction in Christian-Muslim interaction in Nigeria is the fact that most Christians see Islam as a violent religion and that all Muslims are terrorists (Ikhidero and Ebhomienlen 2019). Murk (2006:141) puts it succinctly that, "The Majority of Christians believe that all Muslims are terrorists and that the entire Islamic religion is a terrorist group. Such people often quote Genesis 6:12, which says, 'of Ishmael that his hand shall be against every man.' According to them, since Ishmael is the progenitor of the Arab race, this prophecy is fulfilled in Islam, which is the religion of the Arabs. Thus, such Christians tend to identify every form of violence perpetrated by any Muslim with Islam, forgetting the fact that, although religion has the power to regulate people's actions, individuals' will to take right or wrong actions, irrespective of religious instructions and beliefs, persists. Also, some Christians, to support their argument, often quote Quranic passages such as 2:193; 8:13 and 17; 9:5, 14, 41, 73, and 26; 48:29; 66:9, etc., which contain what they term incitement to violence. They conclude that since the Quran clearly directs the Muslims to take up arms in these passages, it therefore means that Islam is a violent religion.

This notion is not unconnected with the belief that Islam permits the use of jihad for the spread of its message. However, the meaning of the term jihad is often misinterpreted by Christians who believe that jihad is synonymous with the killing of non-Muslims by Muslims. Therefore, every form of violence involving Muslims and non-Muslims is interpreted as jihad. In most cases, political battles, economic issues, and even ethnic crises are all regarded as jihad. Farmer-Herders clashes, Traders-Miyetti Allah clashes, and Igbo-Fulani/Hausa crises have all been described as jihad in Nigeria. This is because many people who term these crises 'jihad' lack a proper understanding of what jihad is all about.

Jihad literally means struggle. Ali Mostfa (2021:966) explains that, "the word 'jihad' derived from the Arabic term 'jahada'" is based on the idea of 'effort', 'striving' of 'exerting oneself'". In other words, Jihad in the true sense of the word is a struggle of faith, both within and outside of the individual (Belgore and Ayinla-Edun 2024:532). Jihad is synonymous with the Christian word, crusade. It is not all about carrying a sword; rather, it is a struggle of faith against sin, the world, and Satan. Generally, Islam recognises four types of jihads, which include jihad of the heart, jihad of the tongue, jihad of the hand, and jihad of the sword (Rothman 2018:98). Jihad of the heart is the battle against one's

thoughts that try to make him do what is evil. Engaging in this type of jihad involves putting up a strong and thoughtful resistance against such thought with a view to prevailing over the inclination to do evil. Jihad of the tongue is to engage one's words for good purposes only. It is primarily the act of engaging one's words to propagate Allah's message in a peaceful manner, calling infidels to the path of Allah. It also involves a struggle to keep oneself from lying, slander, blackmail and other actions that could cause damages to other people. Jihad of the hand is all about action. It connotes engaging one's hand in a worthy manner for the propagation of Islam and the wellbeing of others. Jihad of the sword is the well-known type of jihad. It is the use of the sword for self-defence in the face of threat to one's faith or life. Its application is not arbitrary as many think or as the individual wishes. It is only permissible in the context of religious war, especially when one's life or faith is in danger.

The greatest of them is the jihad of the heart, or jihad against oneself, where one battles with one's heart to ensure purity of thought. It is a deliberate attempt to ensure that one keeps the heart from nurturing evil thoughts. This is because the mind is the seat of emotion, and whatever is not manufactured in it cannot be exhibited by the hands, mouth, legs, or any other part of the body. It is so important to note that jihad of the sword is the least of all and the last resort. Not many people are familiar with this understanding of jihad. Therefore, every form of confrontation involving Muslims is regarded as jihad.

One of the factors that orchestrates this misunderstanding is that even many Muslims do not have a proper understanding of the concept of jihad. So, such individuals christen all their issues against non-Muslims as jihad. Sometimes they deliberately do this to carry along the majority of the uninformed Muslims to further their selfish aims. When this happens, these Christians, who are not armed with an understanding of the situation, are forced to consider all Muslims as terrorists, thinking that such Muslims represent the interests of Islam. This is where proper theological education of religious adherents is important. This would help to clarify basic Islamic themes, which are often misinterpreted and foster mutual understanding.

Another misconception about the Islamic religion is that Muslims worship a different God from that of Christians. Interestingly, we have often asked my Christian audience, 'How many gods do we have?' and I have never received an answer of more than one. Therefore, it makes no sense to believe that Muslims worship another God where no one else exists. The Qur'an, in Surah 112:1, tells us that God is one. This is also emphasised in Deuteronomy 6:4. These passages are unambiguous and unequivocal declarations of the existence of one God, negating the concept of multiple gods. The idea of Muslims worshipping a different god was, in recent times, popularised by Moshay, who opines that Allah is the territorial god of Mecca and one of the gods in the Kaaba, which were worshipped by the pre-Islamic Meccans (2009:177). The effect of this postulation is the increased difficulty in trying to convince the majority of Christians that both Christians and Muslims worship the same God. Although this is not strictly a theological argument, let us clarify briefly here that the term 'Allah', which is the Muslim name for God, is a compound name derived from the two terms 'al-Ilah', which corresponds to the Jewish name 'Elohim' for God. Since the Christians agree that the Jewish God is the same as that of Christianity, it follows, therefore, that the God of the Jews, Arabs, and Christians is believed to be the same. This assertion is supported in the Qur'an, thus, "Say, and

dispute ye not with the people of the Book, but say, 'We believe in the revelation which hath come down to us, and that which came down to you, our God, and your God, is one, and to him we have surrendered'" (Qur'an 29:46).

Some of the factors, we presume, that encourage these erroneous beliefs are the discrepancies in the doctrines and practices of Christianity and Islam. For instance, because some Christians believe that Islam legitimises violence, they therefore conclude that the God who says, render no man evil for evil in Christianity, could not have been the same God who ordered Muslims to kill when provoked or when their religion or prophet is denigrated. This assertion is also shared by Moshay, who says that the God who says, "I hate divorce" in the Bible cannot be the same God who permits or legalises divorce in the Quran (Moshay, 2009: 122).

We must realise, however, that there are virtually no two religions whose belief systems and practices are completely identical. The diversity in beliefs and practices accounts for the distinctiveness of the different world religions, while the similarities tie them to a common source. Every religion has its code, which is derived from its sacred texts. The emphasis should be that such practices must be for the common good of all and the glorification of God. Attitudes that negate this pattern, therefore, must be put away, such that when we say that we worship one God, our actions must also lend credence to it. Although we may act differently, the ultimate goal of our actions must remain the same: to glorify God and benefit all people. In this way, it will truly be that, 'your God and our God is the same'.

The suspicion that Islam tends to establish itself as the sole world religion: This is one of the greatest apprehensions of many Christians. They claim that Muslims are inclined to uphold a one-world religion, and that is Islam. According to them, Muslims believe that Islam is the only religion of God, and that since God owns the entire earth, only His religion should be practised on earth. Such Christians opine that this claim of Muslims is the reason for the Islamic terrorism and implementation of the Sharia in every conquered area. They often reference people like Muammar Gaddafi, Saddam Hussein, Osama Bin Laden, etc., for their vocal stance on Islamic conquest of Europe and other parts of the world (Murk, 2006:27)

The above argument is a misrepresentation of the sincere goal of all the religions of the world, which is here misconstrued and attributed to only Islam. Every religion of the world, including Islam, has the hope and aspiration of becoming a global religion. No religion wishes to remain in its locality as a local religion. Many world religions, including Christianity, sponsor missionaries to areas where their presence is still lacking. For instance, our own African traditional religion, which used to be confined to its local communities, has now spread to other parts of the world, especially in Latin America. Today, there are Hindu temples in almost every country of the world, Buddhism is a fast-growing religion practised across various continents, and so on.

Islam has grown over the years to become the world's second-largest religion in terms of population, and it hopes, if possible, to become the largest. This is the vision of Islam, and it should be understood as part of the usual healthy competition in mission work among the world's religions, rather than an establishment of self as the world's sole religion. It is, however, cautioned that the attempt to achieve this aim through the use of force or intimidation by some overzealous and misguided Muslims must be checked or discouraged. This is why it was advised earlier that Muslim

authorities should utilise their influence to counteract this trend. Situations where terrorists abduct people and forcefully convert them to Islam or carry out deliberate attacks on non-Muslim communities so they can convert such areas to Islam leave no room to doubt the above apprehension. While we encourage government, community leaders, and non-members of a particular religion to allow every religion uninhibited access in their areas for mission work, we, however, caution that such work must be done with utmost civility and respect for others. Otherwise, misinterpretation becomes imperative.

Islamophobia: Islamophobia refers to the irrational fear or prejudice towards Islam or Muslims in general. A significant reason for this, as Christians claim, is the attitude of the majority of Muslims, especially in the area of Sharia implementation. The indiscriminate or arbitrary implementation of the Sharia in regions with a Muslim majority is a cause for worry among non-Muslims. Sharia is technically referred to as the broad way through which every Muslim must follow to get to paradise (Okhifoh, 2021:102). It differs from Tariqa, a sacred, narrow path intended for those willing and able to undertake it. The concept of Sharia demands that all Muslims must compulsorily take the path. Otherwise, admittance to Paradise would be denied.

Secondly, Sharia is not only about the individual. It encompasses the entire person, their environment, and their relationships with individuals within that environment (Okhifoh, 2021:102). This accounts for why we sometimes see Muslims trying to stop non-Muslims from taking alcohol, eating meat forbidden to Muslims, or publicly eating during Ramadan. These Muslims believe that such acts are not only banned by Muslims but that they also have the obligation to ensure they are not done in the presence of Muslims. This has often caused a lot of crises between Muslims and members of other religions in many parts of the country. It makes Christians view Muslims as people who are unnecessarily antagonistic or busybodies in other people's affairs, thus increasing the state of Islamophobia in the area.

A serious and judicious clarification, mutual understanding, and tolerance are required here if these misconceptions and Islamophobia are to be dealt with. Firstly, we must understand that Muslims need to obey and implement the Sharia in their everyday life as well as the society in which they live to guarantee their place in Paradise. Christians, on the other hand, have their rights and privileges infringed upon by the application of the Sharia on the society in which they live, and they need to protect these rights as a matter of justice and equity. If the above condition is left unregulated, there will always be trouble. Nigeria belongs to all Nigerians, and our constitution provides everyone with the freedom to live and conduct legitimate business in any area of their choice, without molestation or intimidation. Otherwise, the solution would have been to draw a geo-religious boundary, allowing members of varying faiths to live on their respective sides.

Since the above condition is not possible, it is therefore advised that where Christians and Muslims live in a common environment, especially where the Muslims are in the majority, they should show understanding by not forcing the Christians to obey the Sharia or apply the Sharia indiscriminately on the society jointly shared by members of different religions. At least, Muslim minorities enjoy freedom of worship and peaceful settlement in predominantly Christian environments. This is why we have various Hausa/Fulani quarters, markets, and settlements in the Southern part of the

country. It is advised that this gesture should be extended to Christians in the North by the Muslim brothers and Sisters. When terror and intimidation are removed from our interrelationship, it is hoped that Islamophobia will naturally disappear.

Theological Context of Luke 9:50

Luke 9:50 occurs within a tightly woven narrative unit (Luke 9:46–50) in which Jesus corrects his disciples' distorted understanding of greatness, authority, and belonging in the kingdom of God. Luke deliberately places the saying within a sequence of teachings that expose the disciples' inclination toward status, exclusivity, and boundary maintenance, thereby highlighting the theological significance of Jesus' response. The passage opens with a dispute among the disciples concerning which of them would be the greatest (Luke 9:46). This debate reveals their continued attachment to conventional hierarchies of honor and power, despite Jesus' prior predictions of suffering and rejection (Luke 9:22, 44). In response, Jesus places a child beside him and declares that welcoming the least is the true marker of greatness in God's kingdom (Luke 9:47–48).

The child functions as a symbolic inversion of social norms, embodying vulnerability, marginality, and dependence (Green, 1997). Immediately following this redefinition of greatness, John introduces a related concern: "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he does not follow with us" (Luke 9:49, NRSV). Luke's narrative flow suggests that the disciples' attempt to prohibit the outsider's ministry is an extension of the same competitive impulse that fueled their argument over status. Both episodes reflect a desire to control access to authority and legitimacy within Jesus' movement.

The disciples' objection centres on group identity rather than theological deviation. The phrase *ouk akolouthei meth' hēmōn* ("he does not follow with us") emphasizes association with the inner circle rather than allegiance to Jesus himself. Their concern reflects an exclusivist understanding of authority, in which legitimate ministry is restricted to those who belong to the recognized group of disciples. The verb used to describe their action, *ekōlyomen* ("we were stopping/preventing"), comes from *kōlyō*, meaning to hinder, restrain, or forbid. The imperfect tense suggests repeated or ongoing action, indicating that the disciples persistently attempted to suppress the man's activity (Bock, 1994). Luke thus portrays their behaviour not as a momentary misunderstanding but as a settled posture of control. This posture reveals anxiety over spiritual authority and a mistaken assumption that divine power can be regulated by institutional boundaries.

Jesus' reply is both concise and theologically loaded: *Mē kōlyete* ("Do not stop [him]"), followed by the rationale, *hos gar ouk estin kath' hēmōn, hyper hēmōn estin* ("for whoever is not against you is for you," Luke 9:50). The imperative *mē kōlyete* directly counters the disciples' repeated attempts to hinder the outsider, signaling that their actions stand in opposition to God's purposes rather than in defense of them. The prepositional phrase *kath' hēmōn* ("against us") is crucial. The preposition *kata* with the genitive conveys active opposition or hostility. Jesus distinguishes between genuine opposition and mere difference in affiliation. The outsider's actions, casting out demons in Jesus' name, demonstrate functional alignment with Jesus' mission, even if he lacks formal association with the disciples. By contrast, opposition would entail resistance to or subversion of God's redemptive work.

Luke 9:50 and the Principle of Inclusivism in Christian-Muslim Relations

A careful review of Luke 9:50 reveals that Jesus' logic in his response to his disciples is strikingly inclusive yet carefully defined. Inclusivism affirms the centrality of Christ while acknowledging that God's grace and salvific activity may operate beyond the visible boundaries of the Christian faith. Within Christian theology, inclusivism occupies a mediating position between exclusivism and pluralism (Knitter, 2005). Luke 9:50 challenges rigid religious boundary-making by recognizing authentic participation in God's work outside an officially sanctioned group. Luke 9:50 records Jesus' response to his disciples' attempt to prevent an outsider from acting in his name: "Do not stop him, for whoever is not against you is for you" (NRSV). According to Green (1997), Jesus does not claim that all religious activity is equally valid, nor does he deny the existence of enemies of the kingdom. Rather, he challenges the disciples' tendency to equate difference with hostility. As Green (1997) notes, the issue is not boundary dissolution but boundary redefinition according to God's purposes rather than human groupings. Luke carefully grounds the outsider's legitimacy in his invocation of Jesus' name. The man does not act independently of Jesus but participates, however informally, in Jesus' mission. This Christological orientation prevents the passage from being read as an endorsement of religious relativism. Inclusivity is not based on generic goodwill but on demonstrable alignment with the liberating work associated with Jesus. This text has become a significant biblical resource for theological reflection on inclusivism, particularly within contexts of religious plurality.

Scholars agree that Luke 9:50 exemplifies an inclusivity that remains firmly Christ-centered (Green 1997, Volf 2011.). It is argued here that Jesus resists the disciples' attempt to monopolize divine authority while simultaneously affirming that genuine ministry is oriented toward his mission. The criterion for legitimacy is not institutional membership but participation in God's redemptive activity. This tension-openness without doctrinal compromise, is characteristic of Luke-Acts as a whole. Throughout Luke's narrative, God repeatedly acts through unexpected agents: Samaritans, Gentiles, women, and social outsiders. Yet these agents are consistently drawn into, rather than away from, the purposes of God revealed in Christ (Acts 10–11; 15). Luke 9:50 thus anticipates the later expansion of the Christian movement beyond its original boundaries. A central theological insight of Luke 9:50 lies in its distinction between being "against" Christ and being "different" from the disciples. The disciples conflate non-membership with opposition, while Jesus insists that true opposition is defined by resistance to God's saving work. This distinction functions as a critique of sectarianism, which seeks to secure identity by excluding others rather than by faithful obedience.

In the African Christian-Muslim context, inclusivism offers a theological framework for peaceful coexistence and dialogue. Christianity and Islam in Africa share historical experiences of colonialism, communal life, moral instruction, and social engagement. An inclusivist reading of Luke 9:50 encourages Christians to recognize shared ethical commitments, such as justice, compassion, prayer, and submission to God's will, as signs of God's universal activity (Rahner, 1978). This approach reframes

Muslims not as theological adversaries but as co-seekers of divine purpose within society. Furthermore, inclusivism grounded in Luke 9:50 has practical implications for addressing religious violence in Africa. In regions where Christian–Muslim tensions are politicized and mobilized for conflict, the text challenges narratives of exclusion and religious supremacy. It promotes cooperation in peacebuilding, social development, and conflict resolution, emphasizing common responsibility for the common good (Volf, 2011). Such a theological posture is vital in plural African states where religious harmony is essential for social stability.

Critics argue that inclusivism risks subordinating other religions to Christian categories (D’Costa, 2009). Nonetheless, when articulated with humility and contextual sensitivity, inclusivism can serve as a constructive theological resource. Luke 9:50 invites African Christians to affirm their faith commitments while acknowledging God’s freedom to act beyond ecclesial and confessional boundaries. Luke 9:50 provides a compelling biblical basis for inclusivism in African Christian–Muslim relations. By fostering openness, cooperation, and mutual respect, it supports a theology capable of addressing religious diversity, reducing conflict, and promoting peaceful coexistence in Africa’s plural religious landscape.

Luke 9:50: A Biblical Paradigm for Christian-Muslim Engagement in Nigeria

The theological vision articulated in Luke 9:50 offers a constructive biblical paradigm for Christian engagement with Muslims in Nigeria’s religiously plural and often conflict-prone context. By distinguishing between genuine opposition to Christ and difference in affiliation, Jesus challenges exclusivist assumptions that frequently underlie interreligious hostility. This distinction is particularly significant in Nigeria, where Christian–Muslim relations are shaped by historical grievances, political competition, and episodic violence (Kukah, 1993; Marshall, 2018). Luke 9:50 does not erase theological boundaries between Christianity and Islam. Muslims do not confess Jesus as the Son of God or participate explicitly in the Christ-centered mission described in Luke’s Gospel. Nevertheless, Jesus’ refusal to equate non-membership with hostility provides an important hermeneutical lens for discerning relationships across religious difference. In the Nigerian context, Christians often face the temptation to interpret Muslim presence or influence as inherently antagonistic. Luke 9:50 cautions against such a totalizing judgment by calling for discernment rooted in observable actions rather than assumed intentions.

Jesus’ statement, “whoever is not against you is for you,” foregrounds practical alignment over group identity. Applied to Christian–Muslim relations, this principle encourages Nigerian Christians to recognize areas of shared concern, such as peacebuilding, social justice, education, and care for the poor, without collapsing doctrinal distinctions. Studies of interfaith cooperation in Nigeria demonstrate that collaborative efforts at the grassroots level have reduced violence and strengthened communal resilience, especially in regions affected by ethno-religious conflict (Abu-Nimer, 2001; Marshall, 2018). Luke 9:50 provides a theological warrant for such cooperation by affirming that participation in life-preserving and peace-promoting activities is not, in itself, opposition to Christ.

At the same time, Luke 9:50 guards against theological relativism. The outsider in the Lukan narrative acts explicitly “in Jesus’ name,” indicating that inclusivity is oriented toward God’s redemptive purposes rather than detached from them. For Nigerian Christians, this underscores the importance of maintaining a clear Christian identity while engaging respectfully with Muslims. Engagement shaped by Luke 9:50 is neither syncretistic nor defensive; it is confident in Christ while open to God’s work beyond ecclesial boundaries. Furthermore, Jesus’ rejection of sectarian control speaks directly to the politicization of religion in Nigeria. Religious identities are frequently mobilized to consolidate power, marginalize others, and justify violence (Kukah, 1993). The disciples’ attempt to “stop” the outsider mirrors contemporary impulses to suppress or delegitimize the religious “other” to secure dominance. Jesus’ command, *mē kōlyete* (“do not stop him”), functions as a theological critique of such coercive strategies. It calls Nigerian Christians to resist narratives that sacralize exclusion or violence in the name of religious loyalty.

Luke 9:50 also contributes to a Christian ethic of humility in interfaith relations. By affirming that God’s work may occur outside the disciples’ immediate control, Jesus relativizes human claims to religious monopoly. This humility is essential in Nigeria’s multireligious society, where mutual suspicion often escalates minor disputes into large-scale conflict. A posture shaped by Luke 9:50 encourages listening, restraint, and openness to dialogue, even amid deep disagreement. It reframes Christian witness in Nigeria not primarily as confrontation but as faithful presence. The church’s credibility is enhanced when it is seen as a partner in peace rather than a competitor for dominance. Luke 9:50 thus supports an understanding of mission that integrates proclamation with peacemaking, rooted in confidence that God’s kingdom advances not through exclusionary control but through humble participation in God’s reconciling work.

Some Common Grounds for Christians-Muslims Engagement in Nigeria

Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria are shaped by deep religious diversity, shared history, and common socio-political challenges. Despite doctrinal differences, several overlapping values and concerns provide viable foundations for constructive engagement, dialogue, and peaceful coexistence.

First is the idea of a **Common Patriarch**. Monotheism (belief in one God) is a common feature shared by all the religions referred to as Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), as opposed to some religions with multiplicity of gods. This standard feature is traceable to Abraham or Ibrahim (in Arabic), who is generally acclaimed as the father of these religions, being the progenitor of the race from which all the religions derive their origins. Historically, Abraham had two sons: Ishmael and Isaac. By genealogy, Ishmael is the ancestor of the Arab race from which Islam originated, while Isaac is the father of the Jewish race that gave birth to Christianity. Hence, the two major world religions of today are traceable to a common ancestor.

This means that if Abraham had forbidden his generation from practising any other religion, these two groups today would have remained in one religion. In Christian–Muslim discussion today, arguments abound as to who actually owns Abraham between Christianity and Islam, or to put it in another way, which religion did Abraham practice? While Muslims argue that Abraham

practised Islam, Christians hold the view that he is the direct ancestor of Jesus Christ, upon whom the Christian religion was founded, which was, of course, the blend and modification of Judaism, Abraham's original religion. All arguments, claims, and counter-claims notwithstanding, one fact is apparent – that Abraham is the ancestor and Patriarch of the two religions. This, then, should serve as a rallying point for both faiths.

Also, both Christians and Muslims are bound by many acts of worship, such as preaching, praise, prayer, sacrifice, and communion. It is worth noting that the places of worship of both religions bear so much similarity. Both religions believe in Jesus as both the prophet and the Messiah. The Muslims believe that Jesus is the sign “We made her [Mary] and her son a sign for all peoples” (21:91). This belief places and elevates Jesus' roles among the Muslims (Larson, 2008:365-366).

They both have designated holy places, a lectern or pulpit for preaching, a demarcation between the altar and the nave, and many others. Commenting on this affinity, Adekoya (2011) notes that during the early period of Prophet Muhammad, Christians saw him as doing the same thing in a different dimension, and the Prophet also saw the Christians as such, hence he agrees that Christians worship the true God (Adekoya, 2011:1069). He thus reveals that this attitude of both the Prophet and Christians is what led to the asylum granted to the Muslims by the Abyssinian king. Osasona (2003:181) adds that it was also the event that orchestrated Muhammad's release of his personal Mosque for Christian worship. In fact, many elements of worship, such as the ringing of bells as a call to prayer, worship on the Sabbath day, and directions for prayer, were standard practices for both Christians and Muslims in the early period of Islam (Adekoya, 2011:1070).

The perception of salvation in both religions is another common ground for engagement. Salvation has been previously defined by various scholars in many different ways. The central point of these definitions is that salvation refers to the saving of the soul (Akhiomen, 1998:84). The issue of salvation, as Ogedegbe notes, is the goal and ultimate concern of all religions (Ogedegbe, 1998:25). Oftentimes, separatists have harped on the different means of attainment of salvation in Christianity and Islam to introduce a differentiation into the conceptual meaning of the term. Rebuffing this idea, Umejiesi asserts that even though religions may differ in their teachings and beliefs about one God, many gods, or no God at all, they all agree on the reality and necessity of salvation, thus eradicating any form of multiplicity in the enterprise (Umejiesi, 1998:98). A notable similarity between the pursuit of salvation in Christianity and Islam is that both have two approaches: faith and works. Christianity believes that salvation comes from God through Jesus Christ, and man is left with the option of accessing it through faith. This idea resonates in the various epistles of Paul. The second approach is that, having been saved, man has to confirm and authenticate his salvation through good works. Corroborating this view, James concludes that faith without works is dead (James 2:26).

Similarly, Islam upholds both of these approaches to salvation. According to Islamic belief, man has no power to work for his salvation. Salvation is simply from Allah, and man's responsibility is to claim it by faith. This is done by heartily reciting the statement of faith known as ‘Kalimatu shahadah’. Like Christianity, this is also followed by good works (Arkan), which are contained in what is known as the pillars of Islam. Considering the foregoing discussion, we can thus agree that salvation in

Christianity and Islam is not mutually exclusive, but rather an effort in the same direction.

Festivals are essential aspects of both Christianity and Islam. Some of the significant festivals in Christianity are Christmas and Easter, while Islam has Eid al-Adha, Eid al-Fitr, and Eid al-Malud, among others. A comparative examination of these festivals in the two religions reveals close similarities in their meanings and celebrations. For instance, Christmas and Eid al-Malud are meant to commemorate the birth of the Founders of Christianity and Islam, respectively, while Easter and Eid al-Adha commemorate the sacrificial lives of Jesus Christ and Ibrahim, respectively. During the celebrations, a primary feature marking the events is the gathering in the worship centres to hear sermons on the life and times of the founders and the subject of the celebrations. Adherents are encouraged to learn from and emulate the ideals of these personalities in their daily interactions with their neighbours. It has become a common feature in Nigeria, being a multi-religious nation, that political leaders, as well as sister religious groups, send goodwill messages to the celebrants as a way of felicitating with them. In either case, the messages carry the same tone

The emphasis on Charitable works is notable in both religions. 'Love your neighbour as yourself' is a cardinal principle shared by all major religions. In Christianity and Islam, one's salvation cannot be said to be complete if one does not show love to one's neighbour. The term 'neighbour', as the story of the Good Samaritan shows, transcends religious, ethnic, geographical, and racial boundaries. It encompasses any human being we come across. Their holy books enjoin Christians and Muslims to show love to their neighbours.

Charitable work occupies a high premium position in Islam, being one of the pillars of Islam, known as Zakat (obligatory charity). Muslims are mandated to give 2.5% of their possessions to the poor. It is also known as the poor rate because it is the portion of the poor in a wealthier man's income that must be given without consideration. As a part of the regulations of Zakat, the giver must not feel proud or assume the position of a 'saviour'. It is believed that when someone gives zakat, he has only fulfilled the injunction of Allah. Apart from zakat, which is a structured pattern of giving, there is also the concept of sadaqah. Sadaqah is not regulated, and it is not limited to any particular item. It cuts across everything at one's disposal. In Islamic belief, wealth is from Allah, and since Allah Abhors the hoarding of it, He has therefore commanded that whoever has must, as a matter of obligation, give out to someone in need.

On the part of Christianity, it is a categorical statement that one cannot be said to love God if he doesn't love his neighbour (1 John 4:20). In Paul's view, one may claim a high level of religiosity but if such person does not have the quality of love, he is described as a mere sounding gong or clanging cymbal'. He adds that even if one surrenders himself to be burnt, if he has no love, such an act is effort in futility (1 Cor. 13:1-3). Showing love and giving freely to those in need were essential features of Jesus' earthly ministry.

Conclusion

Having navigated through the typical path of Christians and Muslims, we found no substantial theological divergences that warrant hostility or mutual exclusion. The tensions that often arise appear less rooted in essential doctrinal contradictions than in the attitudes and actions of certain misguided or insufficiently informed adherents. We also observed that both the Muslims and

Christians have a common belief in the person of Jesus, and both faiths hold Jesus in high esteem. Accordingly, Christians are called to heed the injunction of Jesus in Gospel of Luke 9:50 by regarding Muslims not as adversaries but as potential collaborators in faith-inspired moral and social advancement. The shared ethical commitments and aspirations of both traditions provide a viable foundation for constructive engagement. In parallel, Muslim leaders and scholars are encouraged to examine critically those elements within certain interpretations or practices that may inadvertently alienate their Christian counterparts, thereby fostering a more inclusive and dialogical religious environment.

It must be acknowledged that no two religious traditions can be identical in doctrine or practice. Observed differences should therefore be approached with interpretive charity, mutual respect, and theological humility. In a religiously plural context such as Nigeria, the imperative of cooperation and reciprocal acceptance cannot be overstated. Sustainable economic growth, socio-political stability, and the collective struggle against corruption and insecurity will require deliberate and sustained collaboration between the country's substantial Christian and Muslim populations. Only through such cooperative engagement can national cohesion and development be meaningfully advanced.

References

1. Adejo, A.M. (2012). Indigeneity and Belonging in Nigeria from Pre-Colonial Times to 1960: Citizenship and Indigeneity Conflicts in Nigeria. Abuja: Centre for Democracy and Development.
2. Adekoya, J.S. (2009). Dhimmitude: The Status of Christians in Classical Islamic Tradition and Its Implications for Global Peace Initiatives. *International Journal of Applied Psychology and Human Performance*.
3. Adepegba, A. Religious Intolerance: US places Nigeria, Six other Countries on Special Watch List <https://www.punchng.com>, 21/12/2019, retrieved 23/08/2025.
4. Akhilomen, D.O. (1998). Salvation According to the Grail Message, *Ekpoma Journal of Religious Studies*. Benin: Ambik Press.
5. Ayantayo, J.K. (2018). *Rescuing God from His Abductors*, Ibadan: Ibadan University Press Publishing House.
6. Belgore, U.K and Ayinla-Edun M.J. (2024). *Concept of Jihad in Islam and Terrorism; Correcting the Misconceptions*. Fountain University Law Journal 1(2), 532. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53704/fulaj.v1i2.532>.
7. D'Costa, G. (2009). *Christianity and world religions: Disputed questions in the theology of religions*. Wiley-Blackwell.
8. Dupuis, J. (1997). *Toward a Christian theology of religious pluralism*. Orbis Books.
9. Falola, T. (2020). *Violence in Nigeria: The crisis of religious politics and secular ideologies*. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press.
10. Harold, N. (2001). *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith and Mission*, Nottingham: Intervarsity Press.
11. Ijeh Monday. DSS warns against plans to cause ethno-religious violence. <https://www.nannews.ng> 03/02/21, Retrieved 23/08/2025.
12. Ikhidero, S.I and Ebhomienlen T.O (2019). Traditional humano-communal ethics in inter-faith relations the Etsako (Edo) experience. *Journal of Emerging Trends in Educational Research and Policy Studies* 10(4), 1.
13. Ikhidero S.I and Ogedegbe B.G. (2025). Jethro's Counsel in Exod.18:13-27: A Biblical Model for Good and Sustainable Governance in Nigeria. *Ghana Journal of Religion and Theology* 15(4), 27-57.
14. Knitter, P. F. (2005). *Introducing theologies of religions*. Orbis Books.
15. Kukah, M.H. (2007). Christian-Muslim Relations in Sub-Saharan Africa: Problems and Prospects. *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 18(2), 155–164. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410701214019>. Retrieved 20/11/2025.
16. Larson, W. (2008). Jesus in Islam and Christianity: Discussing the Similarities and the Differences. *Missiology*, 36(3), pp 327–341. doi:10.1177/009182960803600305. Retrieved 1/12/2025.
17. Magaji, T. (2024). Internally Displaced Person (IDPs) in Nigeria: The Roles of International Actors, *Wukari International Studies Journal*, Vol. 8 (5) August, 2024, Retrieved 07/10/2025 from <https://www.wissjournals.com.ng>.
18. Moshay, G.J.O. (2002). *Who is this Allah?* Houston: Bishara Publishers.
19. Murk, J.I.M. (2006). *Islam Rising (Book One): The Never-Ending Jihad against Christianity*, Kaduna: Evangel Publishers Ltd.
20. Mostfa A. (2021). *Violence and Jihad: from the War of Words to the Clashes of Definition*. Religions 12(11), 966- <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12110966>.
21. Nigeria Church bombed in Bauchi, Boko Haram flashpoint <https://www.bbcnews.com/news/world-africa>.
22. Okhifoh, K. O. (2016). *Fundamentals of Islam*, Ibadan: Samprints & Graphics Co.
23. Okhifoh, K.O. (2021). Sharia and the Plight of Non-Muslims in the Multireligious Nigeria, in Idoko, B.O. (Ed) *Trinitarian International Journal of Arts and Humanities*, Awka: Design Mix Prints.
24. Osasona, J.O. (2002). Christian-Muslim relations in the early days of Islam: its significance to Nigeria today. In EPHA, *Ekpoma Journal of Religious Studies* 4/1&2. June.
25. .Obi, C.A. (1998). *All Israel will be saved in Ekpoma Journal of Religious Studies*. Benin: Ambik Press.
26. Ogedegbe, B.G. (1998). Salvation: the central theme of the Old Testament. In *Ekpoma Journal of Religious Studies*. Benin: Ambik Press.
27. Orobator, A. E. (2018). *Religion and faith in Africa: Confessions of an animist*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
28. Pinnock, C. H. (1992). *A widening mercy: The finality of Jesus Christ in a world of religions*. Zondervan.
29. Rahner, K. (1978). *Foundations of Christian faith: An introduction to the idea of Christianity*. Seabury Press.
30. Rothman, Norman C. (2018) "Jihad: Peaceful Applications for Society and the Individual," *Comparative Civilizations Review*: 79 (79), 97-108.

Available at:

<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol79/iss79/7>.

31. The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version. (1989). National Council of Churches.
32. Volf, M. (2011). Allah: A Christian response. HarperOne.