

MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD
OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY OF STATE
WASHINGTON, D.C.
SEPTEMBER 27, 1957

**INAUGURATION OF
THE NIGERIA INTER-RELIGIOUS COUNCIL**

The Secretary of State is pleased to inform you that the inauguration of the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council took place on September 27, 1957, in Lagos, Nigeria. The Council was formed by representatives of the major religions in Nigeria, including the Christian, Muslim, and traditional African religions. The Council's primary objective is to promote understanding and cooperation between the different religious groups in Nigeria, and to work towards the peaceful resolution of any religious conflicts that may arise. The inauguration ceremony was attended by a large number of dignitaries, including the Nigerian Prime Minister, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, and the Nigerian Minister of Education, Sir Kenneth Robinson. The Council's formation is a significant step towards the achievement of national unity and stability in Nigeria.

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THE NIGERIA INTER-RELIGIOUS COUNCIL
INVESTIGATION OF

ADDRESS DELIVERED BY THE PRESIDENT
CHIEF OLUSEGUN OBASANJO, ON THE
INAUGURATION OF THE NIGERIA
INTER-RELIGIOUS COUNCIL
ON WEDNESDAY, 29TH SEPTEMBER, 1999

The Secretary to the Government of the Federation,
Honourable Ministers,
Esteemed Religious Leaders,
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today, we are proud witnesses of a very historic event in the life of our nation. We are gathered here under the auspices of the two major religious bodies in this country—Islam and Christianity—to inaugurate the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC). This is the first occasion at this high level that leaders of the two religions would on their own volition come together for the common good of the adherents and for the welfare of the nation.

I am personally delighted to welcome every one of you. I commend you for your tremendous courage and initiative as the founding fathers of this Council, the establishment of which has been long overdue. That you on your own agreed to establish a common forum to work for peace, justice, harmony and development reflects on your spiritual maturity and commitment to the progress of the nation. As revered and recognised leaders of the two main religious groups in Nigeria, your status as respectable members of the society cannot be questioned. You are the custodians of the fundamental tenets of these two principal religious faiths in our country, and this certainly is an enormous responsibility.

It is, therefore, my honour and privilege today, to be here to inaugurate a body that has a vital role to play in shaping the destiny of Nigeria. I have no doubt that the establishment of this Council will promote peaceful co-existence amongst followers of different faiths and denominations. In the same way, this Council provides a vehicle for mutual co-operation to promote the welfare of adherents of your respective religions while allowing for the peaceful resolution of any friction or misunderstandings that may arise from time to time.

It is my considered view that religion, to any individual within a society, is an instrument for improving the quality of life and consequently promotes the wholesomeness of the society. This is why I believe that a body like the NIREC is an imperative for a society like ours and particularly at such a time like this.

Indeed, a forum like yours can be a veritable instrument for promoting the values of the main religious faiths for the betterment of our beloved country.

The observation that I have just made derives from the essence and the goal of religion which has both temporal and eternal value in transforming both the individual and society. In comparative religious studies, it is universally established that all religions believe in the pre-existence of God, variously described as Supreme Being, the First Cause or The Creator of Heaven and the Earth. All religions also recognise man's depravity and the need to turn back to the path of truth, holiness and fear of the Supreme God. It is in recognition of these basic beliefs that we must continue to acknowledge our oneness and be accommodating to one another.

Distinguished Members of NIREC, only the Almighty is the best judge of those who truly serve Him, but it may not be difficult to discern who is a good citizen or a bad one. In this connection, what we discover if we are to be sincere to ourselves, is that many Nigerians are unfaithful to the demands of their religions. Yet, Nigerians may be regarded as one of the most religious people, the world over. At home and abroad, they hold religiously to their beliefs, they build mosques, they found churches, they travel on pilgrimages and they sacredly hold religious titles. On Sundays and Fridays, at Christmas and Eid-el-Fitr, the outings are most colourful and ostentatious.

It is regrettable that in spite of our religiosity, Nigerian society is highly prone to unacceptable behaviour of various shades and colouration. In other words, our religiosity is devoid of genuine spirituality.

Nigeria, indeed, is a country of diversity not only of religion but also of culture and even of natural resources. However, this diversity is not and should not be a disservice but one that can be judiciously explored and exploited to promote national harmony, progress and prosperity. Our religious diversity, in particular, is not a curse; rather, it is a blessing if we are determined to make it one. Neither Christianity nor Islam preaches anything other than belief in one God and love of fellow human beings. The mutual co-existence of these two principal faiths in Nigeria is, therefore, not only a theoretical but also a practical reality.

I believe that this body, the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC), has the great responsibility of fostering peace, tranquillity and harmony without which the great benefits of the rich diversities bestowed by God on Nigeria cannot be substantially achieved. In fact, there is a close relationship between the basic objectives of this

Council and those of our Administration—inclusiveness. The Council should provide moral, ethical, social and cultural pillars for the rebuilding of a greater Nigerian society.

I am happy that NIREC has been conceived to function as a non-governmental body. No one can be better informed on religious matters than all you distinguished spiritual leaders of our nation. As religious men and women, you are the undisputed leaders in this sphere of our national life. Government will be counting at all times on your wisdom and rich experience to provide positive leadership to the adherents of your respective religious faiths, a leadership which will enhance societal harmony and promote high standards of behaviour and civic responsibility among our people. Nigeria must not only be a haven of peace and progress but also a society of hardworking, honest, fair-minded and patriotic citizens. Let this country be a land of love, discipline, mutual respect, hope and fulfilment for all its citizens.

Let today go down in history, as we are at the threshold of the twenty-first century and the third millennium, that the adherents of Islam and Christianity in Nigeria as people of the Book resolve to work for peace, unity and harmony so as to faithfully serve their God and to advance the progress of their country. May God Almighty help us so to achieve.

Distinguished Members of NIREC, Ladies and Gentlemen, I once more congratulate you on this noble initiative. I urge Council members to work together for the unity, stability and progress of our dear country and its transformation into the Nigeria of our dream. Since peace is indivisible, lack of peace in any part of Nigeria is detrimental to peace in the rest of the country. Let our watch-word be peace now in our time and peace and progress forever in our land.

I wish you fruitful deliberations and pray that the Almighty God bless your efforts in promoting the well-being of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. It is with great pleasure, therefore, that I now formally inaugurate the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council for the glory of God and for the welfare and well-being of all Nigerians in brotherhood, love, unity and progress.

May Almighty God bless you all.

