

RELIGION AS A BARRIER TO NATION-BUILDING IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Religious conflicts in Nigeria have affected our national economy negatively. Any interested observer of the Nigeria socio-political structure is all too easily aware of the multiplicity of voices and the diversity of cultures within the nation. In other words, Nigeria is one of the nations that have the highest ethnic nationalities to be found in one single country of the world. Religion which is one of the human engagements, has greatly influenced the life of many nations of the world, it has made recognizable impact on the spiritual, physical, social, moral and economic affairs of the modern world. Furthermore, colonial policies towards Christians and Muslims communities have imbedded racial and religious differences with far-reaching implications before and after independence. Religious violence among Christians and Muslims emerged in the 1980s in Nigeria. In other words, religious pluralism in Nigeria has been disrupted by religiously motivated conflicts which in turn have negative consequences on the process of Nation-Building. Hence, this paper posits that religious violence has impeded Nation-Building process in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Religion, Violence, Nation-Building, national economy, ethnic nationalities.*

Introduction

Religion, which Karl Marx described as “the opium of the masses” is a social phenomenon which plays a significant role in creating peaceful co-existence and also strengthens social relations among mankind¹. However, one doubts whether this is the case in modern societies, this is because in recent time, mankind’s existence is threatened more by religious motivated violence than any other human institutions. In view of the above this, the civilization that mankind has built over the years could be destroyed by religious instigated conflicts². It is unfortunate to state that violence has become one of the characteristics of religion.

In Nigeria, religion has been identified as one of the major causes of inter-ethnic and inter-religious conflicts. For instance, from the Nigeria

¹Boer, J. *Nigeria Decades of Blood: Studies of Christian and Muslim relations*. Jos: Stream Christian Publishers (2003). p.10

² Carke, P. And Hackett, R. *The Maitatsine Movement in Northern Nigeria: Historical and Current Perspectives*. Lewiston: Edwin Millen Publishers (1987) p.20.

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context, if religious conflicts are not based on the perception of the truth of particular religion, it is based on the historical origin of the religion, in some cases it is based on prophetic revelation, mystical experience or rational apprehension of the Ultimate Reality. Most world religion teach unity of mankind, but historical incidents cast doubt on the seriousness of those claims. Throughout history, religious intolerance and violence is the dominant motif, this is true because more religious wars have been fought and more persecutions has been initiated and executed from the point of view of religion³.

In the case of Nigeria, from the period of independence to this present time, various religious crises have occurred leading to the destruction of lives and properties on a large scale, all the religious conflicts in the country have no doubt affected nation-building process. It should be noted that the main religious persuasions in Nigeria includes Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion, However, this paper will examine religious violence in Nigeria within the context of Christian/Muslim relationship and how this has affected the project of nation-building.

Conceptual Clarification

Religion

Religion is one of the human engagements that have greatly influenced the life of many nations of the world. Religion is a force that encourages peaceful co-existence in any given society; it is also a major force for social and moral changes. Religion is a social institution concerned with beliefs, actions, and in actions of a society through which the values, norms, ethics and traditions are defined, embedded and expressed within the cosmology of the people⁴. It has made recognizable impact on the political, physical, social, cultural, moral, spiritual and economic affairs of the modern world, it is embraced by about two third of the world population which indicates the significant role it plays in the affairs of the world⁵.

For instance, there those who commune with their ancestors, those who approach the Supreme Being daily through had divine mediator, and those who assume specific postures and undertake some austere practices of self-disciplines as aids to mediation, reflection and enlightenment which represent different forms through which man has attempts to satisfy his religious desires.

³ Graham, S.F. *Government and mission Education in Northern Nigeria*. Ibadan: Upprintpress (1960) P.26.

⁴Holbron, M. *Sociology of Religion: Themes and Perspectives*. London: Harper Collins Press (2008)P.2.

⁵ Ibrahim, J. *The Politics of Religion in Nigeria: The Parameters of the 1987 Crisis in Kaduna State*. Ibadan: Informal World Press. (1989), p.26

However, religion also has negative effects on societies looking at it from the perspective of religious motivated conflicts.

Violence

Any comprehensive analysis of violence should begin by defining various forms of violence in such a way as to facilitate their scientific measurement. For instance, the World Health Organization defines violence as the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, mal development or deprivation⁶. This definition of violence by World Health Organization is suitable to this study because it associates intentionality with the committing of the act itself irrespective of the outcome it produces.

Furthermore, the inclusion of the word “power”, in addition to the phrase “use of power”, broadens the nature of a violent act and expands the conventional understanding of violence to include those acts that result from a power relationship, including threats and intimidation from the authors’ perspective⁷.

Violence has always been part of the human experience. Its impact can be seen, in various forms in all part of the world and Nigeria is not an exception. Violence has also been employed by religious institutions in the course of religious differences among adherences⁸.

Nation-Building

To understand the concept of nation-building, the underlying word nation should be put into proper perspective. In other words, it is very important to know what a nation implies before constructing the idea of nation-building. The term nation as used contemporarily emerged about the end of the 18th century and was defined by France-Americans as “political nation” in terms of geographical consideration.

Elaigwu, believes that a nation refers to at least three categories of human groups. First, it may refer to “a stable historically developed community of people within a territory, sharing economic life, distinctive culture, and language in common”. Second, it may refer to “the people of a territory united under a single government, country, and state”. Third, a nation

⁶World Health Organization Global Consultation on Violence and Health, A Public Health Priority. Geneva WHO. (1996).

⁷ Houry, D. Et al. “Emergency Department Documentation in cases of intentional assault”. *Annals of Emergency Medicine*. vol.34, (1996). Pp.715-719.

⁸Elaigwu, J.J. *Topical Issues in Nigeria’s Political Development*. Jos: Ala Publishing House (2002), p.32.

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may refer to “a group of people who share common traditions, institutions, history, and ethnic identity”. For instance, the Igala, Ogoni, Igbo, Urhobo, Yoruba, Hausa nations⁹.

Ernest Renan, a French philosopher states that a nation is large scale solidarity, constituted by the feeling of sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future¹⁰.

Benedict posits that a nation comprises a group of people so large that its members cannot know each other personally but nonetheless have come to imagine that they share important characteristics that unify them as a nation and even national self-determination. To him, this mutual recognition of numerous persons on the basis of supposedly shared attributes that qualify them for membership of the same nation also serves, of course, to distinguish them from other persons who are thereby excluded from membership of the imagined national community¹¹.

However, for the purpose of this study, the notion of a nation from the perspective of a group of people that shares territory, united under a single government will be more appropriate, in respect of this we will be talking about Nigeria, Togo, Ethiopia, Senegal, Ghana nations among others. On the other hand, nation-building has also been given a plethora of definitions for instance, Ilo, posits that nation-building is a project involving the “the psycho-social reconstruction of individuals, as also a process of in fusing people who differ widely in language and shared identity¹².

Nzongola, conceived the concept of nation-building to mean “establishing a national identity to transcend ethnic regional and other particularistic ties, prompting national integration through exchange and cultural integration by all segment of the population and developing a national culture through educational and cultural activities¹³.

This position is also shared by Nwabughugu who states pungently that it is “a process of developing national consciousness among individuals and groups to cultivate a sense of love for a given nation and to accept this as a commitment to a nation-state. He further contends that nation-building involves the creation of favorable environment that will sustain the sense of love developed by the individual and group for the nation-state.¹⁴

⁹ Elaigwu, J.J. p.32.

¹⁰ Ernest, R. "What is a Nation, Paris. Sorbonne press, (1882) p.34

¹¹ Benedict, A. *Imagined Communities*. London, Verso Press 1991 P.46.

¹² Ilo, M.I. *Religious Fanaticism, Ethnicity and Nation-Building in Nigeria*. Lagos: Gabby printing Ltd (2011).

¹³ Nzongola, N.. *Revolution and Counter Revolution in Africa*. London: Zed Books Press Ltd. (1987)

¹⁴ Nwabughugu A. *Problems of Nation-Building in Africa*. Owerri: Fasmen. (2004) p.54

The Origin and Cases of Religious Violence in Nigeria

Nigeria which is the most populous nation in Africa with over 200 million people has witnessed numerous religious conflicts particularly between Christians and Muslims¹⁵. The origin of religious violence can be traced to the period of independence in 1960. Before this period, there were three major religions, namely Africa Traditional Religion, Islam and Christianity. However, religious crisis started after independence but were on tribal and regional basis, motivated by the desire to acquire political and economic control of the nation. However, as events were unfolding in different parts of the country, a religious consciousness developed, this consciousness became more acute in the Northern Nigeria, including the geographical area now called the "Middle Belt"¹⁶. Adherents of Christianity and Islam started talking of political control on religious affiliation. This religious consciousness expressed in daily interaction created a crack in the relationship between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria.

The 1980 religious crises that started in Zaria involving members of two religions, resulting to the wanton destruction of lives and properties. The same year (2002) witnessed Maitatsine riots led by the Cameroonian Islamic cleric Kukah alias Maitatsine. The conflict led to loss of lives, torching of churches/mosque, business premises in Kano, Bulumkutu in Maiduguri in 1982, Rigassa-in 1984, and a march 1984, and a host of other places like Gombe and Jimeta-Yola in Adamawa State witnessed Muslim-Christian conflicts¹⁷.

Meanwhile, in 1986 Nigeria was rocked by the controversy over its alleged registration as a member of the organization of Islamic countries (O.I.C) by the General Ibrahim Babangida's regime¹⁸. This crisis generated a lot of controversies and cold blood between Muslims and Christians with the former arguing that governmental action in joining the O.I.C was justified hence the Nigerian government similarly had diplomatic ties with the Vatican. In 1987, Muslim and Christian students of the college of education, Kafanchan clashed. The conflict later engulfed the whole of Kaduna State. This conflicts later spread to other parts of Kaduna State¹⁹.

¹⁵ Alagbu, N. and Tanko, P.B, "The Role of Liberation Theology in the Sustenance of Democracy in Nigeria" *Journal of Christian Religion and Education*, Vol.5 ,No.1, (2007) p.69.

¹⁶Alagbu, N. and Tanko, P. B, p.70.

¹⁷ Alagbu, N. and Tanko, P. B, p.63.

¹⁸ Atanda, J.A, *Nigeria Since Independence, The First 25 Years*. Ibadan. Heinemann Books, (1989) p.37.

¹⁹ Atanda, J.A, p...41.

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This drama was marked by the Zangon-Kataf crises in 1992 which started as a dispute over a marked site between the “Atya and the Hausa’s” later spreads to Kaduna metropolis and its environs to take a religious face²⁰. rate of destruction in this single conflict made the military president Ibrahim Babangida to equate it to a civilian version of a coup d’etat. The April 22, 1990 coup attempt by Major Gideon Gwaza Orkar was given a religious undertone. This followed the exercising of five states namely, Kano, Borno, Katsina, Bauchi and Sokoto mainly populated by Muslims of Hausa-Fulani and Kamuri origin from the Nigerian Federation. In 2000, the move for the implementation of the Shariah Law led to a bloody clash between Christians and Muslims²¹. In 2002, the protest against the hosting of the world beauty contest in Nigeria led to another bloody clash between Muslims and Christians in Kaduna.

In 2004, there was another clash between Christians and Muslims in Makarfi Local Government over an alleged case of the desecration of the Qur’an. The bitter experiences we have to grapple concern the extension of religious conflicts to the institutions of learning. In 2002, the election of the student union president of the Federal College of Education (F.C.E) Zaria led to a clash between Christian and Muslim students. In the same year, a similar clash was averted in Ahmadu Bello University (A.B.U) Zaria. On 17th March 2006, there was another squabble between Muslim and Christian Girls by the water tank in the female hostel in A.B.U.²²

Religious violence in Nigeria goes as far back as 1953, and Though Christianity and Islamic religion have co-existed for many years in Nigeria, the mistrust between these religions is deep-rooted.

It is worthy of note that during the colonial era, in order to convince the Northern Emirs and the Sultan of the commitment of the colonial government towards maintaining the socio-religious and political status-quo in the Northern region, it became a matter of colonial policy not to interfere with the functioning of the existing institutions. In effect, the colonial government denied political participation to non-Muslim tribes. For instance, the non-Muslim tribes of Kagoro, Jaba and Moroa in the present day Kaduna state were not allowed to rule themselves rather they were imposed on them by alien Muslim

²⁰ Kaigama, I, "Dialogue of Life and Urgent Necessity for Nigeria Muslims and Christians. Jos, Fab. Books (2000) ,p.28.

²¹ Okoye, F. "The Sharia Crises and the Makarfi Formular", Daily Sun, Mar. 30 (2000) p.9

²² Nwabudike, K. and Osewe, A.E. "Ahmadu Bello University Boils Again", Zaria, Olive Branch, Vol.1, No.20, (2006) p.36.

rulers, this action institutionalized ethnic and religious difference with far-reaching consequences in the period before and after independence.²³

Causes of Religious Violence in Nigeria

Many factors can be adduced to be responsible for religious violence in Nigeria and some of them are: Religious intolerance, fundamentalism and extremism are deliberately chosen as the drives religious violence in Nigeria because they form the base (sub-structure) upon which other sources of religious violence (super-structure) rest.

Religious Intolerance

Religious intolerance has been defined as ‘hostility towards other religions, as well as the inability of religious adherents to harmonize between the theories and practical aspect of religion’²⁴. It encompasses bigotry, which is the obstinate and intolerant devotion to one’s opinions and prejudices, especially the exhibition of intolerance and animosity toward persons of differing beliefs²⁵. Religious crisis has been identified as one of the major source of religious violence in Nigeria with attendant destructive tendencies²⁶. Religious intolerance among adherents is responsible for some religious violence in Nigeria.

Religious Fundamentalism

Religious fundamentalism is indeed, manifestations of religious intolerance²⁷. Komonchak et al views Religious fundamentalism from three perspectives: from a cognitive understanding where the word is associated with a closed personality type that expresses exclusivity, particularity, literality and moral rigour, from a cultural theoretical viewpoint, where the word expresses opposition to religious and cultural liberalism in defence of orthodoxy and religious traditions; and from a social movement perspective, where it denotes organizational and ideological uniqueness from other types of religious movements.

²³ Elaigwu, J.J.p.28.

²⁴ Balogun, K. A. Religious Fanaticism in Nigeria: Problems and Solutions. In Balogun et.al (Ed's): The Place of Religion in the Development of Nigeria. Ilorin. University of Ilorin Press, (1988) p.4.

²⁵ Bard and Rosenbum, Hatred, Bigotry, and Prejudice: Definitions, Causes & Solutions. Baylor. Prometheus Books. (1999) P.48.

²⁶ Gofwen, R.I, Religious Conflicts in Northern Nigeria and Nation Building: The Throes of two Decades, Kaduna. Human Rights Monitor, 1980-2000, (2004), P.14.

²⁷ Joseph. A, Mary. C, et al, The New Dictionary of Theology. Wilmington, Gill and Machilian Ltd. (1987) P. 68.

Ultimately therefore, Religious fundamentalism is a religious movement that promotes the literal interpretation of, and strict adherence to religious doctrine, especially as a return to orthodox scriptural prescriptions and doctrinal originality. It seeks strict adherence to the orthodox principles of particular faiths- in the case of Nigeria, Christianity and Islam- and abhors modernism with its propensity to adulterating or diminishing original doctrinal principles. Religious fundamentalism, therefore, place great emphasis on right doctrine and the necessity of organized warfare against the forces of modernism.²⁸

Religious Extremism

Religious extremists take a position that if others do not follow their ways, they will be damned. They abhor the preaching of other faiths and resort to violence to stop it.

They also insist that their religious doctrines must be universally entrenched by brutal force, while the political, social and economic systems must conform to their religious tenets. Religious extremism does not admit of any compromise with social change, particularly that which contradicts religious orthodoxy. In terms of hierarchy, therefore, religious extremism is the farthest and most lethal form of religious intolerance.

Implications of Religious Violence on Nation-Building Process in Nigeria

The key to the success of nation-building is predicated on the extent to which people of various diversities are willing to accommodate others through underlined principles of give and take. However, religion has within this context, come to serve as a disintegrative force that undermines the entire process and structure of nation-building in Nigeria. The resultant implications and effects of religious conflicts in Nigeria on nation-building are complex and varied in diverse ramifications²⁹. A religious conflict which is a by-product of intolerance breeds mutual distrust, discrimination, perpetual sense of insecurity among communities. The Implications of Religious Violence in Nigeria for Nation Building. The catalogue of events of religious conflicts between 1980-2000 and beyond in Nigeria, can be best summarized as the quagmires which have threatened to destroy the fabric upon which the entire nation rested.

As evident from all the cases treated in this work, an accompanying fact about every crisis is the wanton destruction of live and properties. Arising

²⁸ Joseph .A, Mary .C, et al, p. 76.

²⁹Omenka,N.“ChurchandStateRelationsinEducation:TheCatholicExperienceinEasternNigeria”.AbiaJour. of Human and Social Sci.Vol.4, (2007), Pp.26-40.

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from these losses is the fact that the nation is deprived of much needed manpower; affected families have lost either breadwinners or economically-useful members, educational or vocational pursuits disrupted among others.

All these have negative consequences on the socio psychological and economic wellbeing of the nation in general. Apart from the loss of lives and properties, there were widespread disruptions of economic activities, accessioning lose of manpower, which have negative effects on productivity. A conservative estimate to these losses in addition to the cost of damaged properties and economic structures run into billions. The huge sum, which the nation is compelled to sink into replacing the damaged properties, paying compensations or supporting victims of religious violence, would have been profitably invested to develop the nation, build industries and create job opportunities for the youths.

Religious conflicts as identified also exert a sense of uncertainty and insecurity on both local and foreign investors, thereby discouraging investments in the growing economy. Cases abound were international and local business concerns have pulled out of certain areas considered unsafe for investment due to the fact that those areas are prone to religious violence. A manifest effect of this is the amount of time and resources spend by the leadership making overseas trips and placing adverts to win back the confidence of investors who have since left. This is further made manifest in the frequent appeals, by governments of effected states, to small scale investors who had fled as a result of the crises to return. These are indicative of the immediate negative effects of such disturbances on investment.

From Social perspective, the cordial relationship among religious groups often gets eroded, giving way to mistrust and discontent. A disturbing feature is the unhealthy patterns of community settlement and residence, which in the cities affected and prove to religious violence, have become clear-cut along religious lines. Thus, citizens are now becoming stranger to themselves, within the same nation, as certain areas and business are designated enemy enclaves. This widens the gap and undermines the cement requisite for national integration. A worrisome aspect is the fact that history shown that all democratic efforts in Nigeria have always been followed by demand on the state which among other things include religious demands. This is evidenced from our experiences, the 1993 transition programmes and projects had the religious question to grapple with. Also, all democratic experiments projects had the religious question to grapple or demand to content with. This has not only served as actual threat which has undermined cohesion of the nation state, but remain the major potential threat to democracy as manifested in all the demand for sharia and attending consequences of its implementation in Northern Nigeria. Most importantly within a country like

Nigeria that is diverse both in territory and compensation of groups and practice federalism, the threat from religion crises have always been accompanied by a massive return of people back to their state of origin as certain places become “no go areas”. This undermines the principles of federal character³⁰.

Conclusion

Man is fundamentally religious, but his religiosity should be aimed at promoting a sound spiritual relationship with his creator and fellow men. He can attain this goal by upholding values of justice, love, and fairness in his dealings with others. However, this paper submits that negative religious practice in Nigeria is one of the major problems bedevilling nation-building process. Rather than promoting peace, violence is a common occurrence in Nigeria, thereby making the project of nation-building a difficult task to achieve. The two world religious tradition in Nigeria can and should coexist because both preach love and peace. The Muslims contend that Islam is the way of peace; it is the community of peace which has surrendered to the will of Allah. The Christian witness invites all people into an experience of God's peace. True peace cannot be said to exist, unless there is the experience of a right and joyous relationship with God and man. When such atmosphere is created, development at all levels of national life can be ensured.

Again the two religious traditions emphasized the importance of love and compassion. These virtues flow from the very nature of God. Islam calls God the “compassionate, the Merciful”. The Quran calls on men to rely on the grace and mercy of God, for these are better than the worldly riches they amas” (Suranlo, 2005). God's infinite compassion towards humanity is also a central teaching of Christianity. In his miracles, parables and eventually in his death on the cross Jesus exemplifies in practical deeds Gods loving disposition towards man. (1 John 4: 7-12 demands from believers: “My dear friends, let us love one another, since love I from God and anyone who loves a child of God and knows God. Whoever fails to love does not know God, because God is love. According to John pope II, those who profess for peace should remove the element that could cause war”. Moreover, the 21st century has proved to all and sundry that reasonable way to achieve a global community of sustainable development is to enhance peace and harmony. However, this paper submits that negative religious intolerance and practices in Nigeria is one of the major problems bedeviling nation-building process.

³⁰ Omoregbe, J. *Comparative Religion: Christianity and other World Religions in Dialogue*. Ibadan: Joja Publishers (1999).