

MAINSTREAMING RELIGIOUS HARMONY IN EDUCATIONAL CURRICULUM TO ENGENDER NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

Solomon Mepaiyeda

*Department of Religious Studies,
University of Ibadan*

&

Olaoba Olaitan Oyedele

*Department of Religious Studies
Ajayi Crowther University*

Abstract

National development will continue to be a mirage in the absence of peaceful co-existence among the citizens. The faithful of the two dominant religions in Nigeria i.e. Christianity and Islam have witnessed violence of several degrees over the years which had resulted in maiming, arson, destruction of life and properties. Such situation has hampered the desired development because peace is sine-qua-non to nation building. Unfortunately, out of twenty key points rolled out by the Federal government for national development plan from 2021-2025, religious dialogue is not given any recognition. Variables such as job creation, tourism, reduced cost of production for oil sector, widening tax base, improved government revenue, investment in agricultural sector, and generation of more megawatts of power, strengthening of security and ensuring good governance are prioritized. This paper, therefore, brought to the fore the imperativeness of religious harmony through effective dialogue among adherents of religions which should be incorporated in the curriculum of different levels of education in Nigeria. More so that the current civil education as a subject has become controversial due to its lopsided and discriminatory contents that does not do the nation any good. This paper found out that necessary instruments of teaching religious harmony are yet to be deployed; making it difficult to free indoctrinated minds from fanaticism, extremism and bigotry. The situation has posed a threat to peaceful co-existence which lays the foundation for national development. Historical and phenomenological approaches were employed while primary and secondary modes of data collection were utilized.

Introduction

Volumes have been written on the concept of religion over the years, pertaining to its source(s)¹ and functionalities.² In recent times, there has been an engagement on the debate on different understandings of religion and its implication for societal development.³

Religion has been viewed as a dimension of culture and society. According to Biehl, in most secular societies typified by the Western world, religion is seen from the perspective of philosophy, sociology, law or even exorcism.⁴ In development discourse, according to Hans Kippenberg⁵, there has been some suspicion regarding the positive role of religion in the development of societies. Hence, he reiterates that some theories have identified Christianity as the explanatory variable which accounts for the reason why societies in Europe & Western world developed and why societies in other climes are yet to develop.

Corroborating Hans' view, Klaus highlights the essential and functional definitions of religion. Specifically, he addresses the functional essence by asserting that, it is not religious rituals per se that count but what they accomplish.⁶ Better put, religious rituals are meaningless if they fail to enhance the social cohesion of a given society. Africa (and indeed Nigeria) should not be converted to a "religious zoo"⁷ but a region where adherents of religions (especially Christians & Muslims) prevent conflict through tolerance and constructive engagement for harmonious inexistence. This becomes imperative because the unity of citizens in religious & cultural diversity is key in promoting the desired peace in the society. The diversity in religions, as a matter of fact cannot be regarded as an accidental phenomenon that took God by surprise, since both Christianity & Islam profess God as all-knowing (Omni-scent God). Islam even states it pointedly that if God had so wished, He would have made us one community of one religion. Hence in his translation of Qur'an 109:6, Abdullah articulates thus "to you your religion, to me, mine".⁸

¹ E. Dada Adelowo. 2001. *Methods & Theories of Religion*. Ado Ekiti: Olugbenga Press & Publishers, 2.

² E. Dada Adelowo, 77.

³ Michael Biehl. 2013. "Religion, Development & Mission". In *Religion: Help or Hindrance to Development*, Kenneth Mtata (ed). Germany: German National Library, 97.

⁴ Michael Biehl. 2013. "Religion, Development & Mission", 97.

⁵ Han G. Kippenberg. 1997. *Die Entdeckung der Religionsgeschichte. Religionswissenschaft und Modern*. Munich: C.H. Beck, 102.

⁶ Klaus Hock. 2002. *Einführung in die Religionswissenschaft*. Darmsfandt: Wissenschaft – licheBuchgesellschaft.

⁷ *Trinity Journal of Church & Theology*, Vol.1, No.1 (June 1991), 8.

⁸ Abdullah Yusuf Ali. 1975. *The Holy Qur'an: Text Translation and Commentary*. Leicester: Islamic Foundation, 127

From the foregoing therefore, religious pluralism with a number of challenging issues attached to it is not a problem that should be eradicated. Trying to do so would mean attempting to eradicate human beings' God-given freedom to choose their religion.⁹ But rather, people of different religious affiliations should strive to come up with strategies on how they can constructively relate with one another in mutual tolerance and peace in order to achieve moral, physical and environmental development. The concern of this paper is to argue that despite many diplomatic and political strategies put in place by the Nigerian government, religious harmony still remains a mirage in some regions of the country. These efforts would be highlighted later in this paper.

This is where education comes in, most especially among the children and youths of any given society. Education can serve as a factor for religious harmony if the curriculum lays emphasis on the importance of such subject rather than treating it insignificantly. In this situation, education will be seen as a bridge-builder, fostering unity among divided communities. This is a widely acknowledged principle. This understanding becomes particularly evident when considering religious disharmony, attributed to ignorance, intolerance, and poverty, which are seen as by-products of limited education. This premise is highly relevant in the context of Nigeria. Religion, often perceived as a unifying factor among adherents, has served to create harmony among individuals from diverse cultural and racial backgrounds. According to the Department of Religious Studies at the University of California (2015), religion has long held a significant influence in human lives. The escalation of global religious crises has ignited discussions and searches for sustainable solutions to religious intolerance. Many advocate for education as a solution, as it has the potential to illuminate minds, fostering an understanding of the value of diversity and the significance of contrasting worldviews.

Loreta¹⁰ emphasizes that only an education focused on peace and justice can effectively support interfaith dialogue and collaboration, bringing about transformative change. It is evident that societies grappling with social disharmony can employ education to rectify the situation by creating awareness, particularly among the youth. Sri¹¹ emphasizes

⁹ Johnson Mbillah. 2013. "Religion, Conflict & Development in a Multi-religious Context". In Kenneth Mtata (ed) Germany: German National Library, 160.

¹⁰Loreta N. Castro. 2006. *The Role of Education in Promoting Interfaith Cooperation*. Center for Peace Education, Miriam College, Philippine. Paper presented at the Dialogue on Regional Interfaith Cooperation for Peace and Human Dignity. Accessed on 22 January, 2024. huskiecommons.lib.niu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2063&context=allfaculty-peerpub

¹¹Sri Aurobindo. 1972. *Birth Centenary Volumes, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry*, Online, assessed on 27 Feb, 24 from <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327106342>

education's strength in cultivating a harmonious multi-racial, multi-religious society. Education is instrumental in instilling values like love, truth, faith, competency, and emotional resilience, which in turn, nurture international understanding, compassion, and mutual respect among people. Such values are imperative for social harmony in a diverse society.

In Nigeria, education's potential to foster social harmony hinges on its capacity to counter prejudices against other religions from an early age. The curriculum should incorporate essential qualities of each religion, encouraging an open-minded understanding of diverse beliefs. Modgil & Modgil, cited by Onimhawo & Ottuh¹², assert that knowledge of religious differences and the role of religion in the modern world can facilitate understanding and mitigate prejudice, essential for peace in a multi-faith society. Education-driven changes could redefine these relationships. Religious harmony thrives on tolerance, and education's presence is integral. As education imparts values and principles, many perceive it as a remedy for religious disharmony.

Religious Disharmony in the Nigerian Historical Context

According to Adelowo, "harmony in any sphere of life brings peaceful co-existence, progress and development, while disharmony brings apathy, hatred, acrimony, retrogression, disillusionment and disintegration."¹³ In his historical accounts of causes of disharmony in religious interaction in Nigeria, Adelowo identifies unhealthy competition between Christianity and Islam, modes of evangelization, envy as a result of progress made in the mission field, theologico- doctrinal issues among others as cog in the wheel and peace in the country.¹⁴ Reminiscing on the early conflict between Christians and Muslims in Yorubaland, around 1875, he hinged such on the expansion and influence of Islam which Christian missionaries strove hard to halt, through religious indoctrination.¹⁵

In addition, Christological arguments marred the relationship between the Muslims and Christians. The person of Christ, his status and relationship with God generated hot arguments, rancours, burning and even murder in some parts of Nigeria, even till date.

Furthermore, one cannot shy away from the socio-cultural issues that affect religious interactions in Nigeria. Matters such as religious festivals, marriage, education, divination, practice of magic and medicine have led to cleavages and resulted to disharmony in the country.

¹²S. Modgil & Modgil. 2007. *Spiritual and Religious Education: Education, Culture and Values Vol. 5*. London: Falmer Press, 65.

¹³ E. Dada Adelowo. 2006. *Issues in Public Affairs. (Vol.1)* Ilorin: Majab Publishers, 1.

¹⁴ Adelowo, 2 & 3.

¹⁵ Adelowo, 4.

Moreover, politics has also marred smooth relationship between the adherents of the two major religions. By this, we mean the show of favoritism by some political leaders in the appointment of people to key positions in the country.

Lending credence to factors that caused disharmony in Nigeria, Gwamna¹⁶ highlights among others, intolerance, fanaticism, fundamentalism, Sharia crisis and external influence. Emphatically, he stresses that though the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970) seemed to have had ethnic and regional undertones, but religion played a covert role in the pattern of killings in the North and that the events of post war years especially the trials and execution of the coup plotters, majority of whom are Christians from the Middle Belt took on ethnic and religious coloration.¹⁷ In addition to this is the Sharia debate that marked the introduction of religion into politics and dominated the political programme of the Constituent Assembly of 1979¹⁸ and generated unfriendly dispositions from Christians till date. This event and the subsequent permanent membership of Nigeria in the Organization of Islamic Countries OIC under General Ibrahim Babangida forced Ebitu Ukiwe, the Vice President to lose his job for protesting and Christians began to see OIC as a strategy to Islamic Nigeria.¹⁹

Another event that adversely affected the harmonious living between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria was the failed coup of Major Gideon Orkar in 1990.²⁰ Christians (soldiers) from the South South and a few from the Middle Belt were killed.

Apart from these Federal events mentioned above, other state and local conflicts which are both intra-religious and interreligious in character have fuelled suspicion and mutual distrust in the country. While the intra-religious conflicts are exemplified by rancours among Christians in the Eastern region i.e. land disputes between the Catholics and Anglicans in Anambra State, the hijab issue has caused disaffection between Christians and Muslims in many southern states recently. The trending hijab issue resulted in the destruction of properties in Ilorin, diplomatic pronouncements from the Oyo State government is still nipping the conflict in the bud.

It is very disturbing to witness various recent cases of violence orchestrated by religious adherents against one another; especially when one remembers the harmony that existed

¹⁶Dogara J. Gwamna. 2010. *"The Turning Tides of Religious Intolerance in Nigeria: The External Connections"*. In David O. Ogungbile & Akintunde E. Akinade (Eds)*Creativity & Change in Nigerian Christianity*. Lagos: Malthouse Press Limited, 273ff

¹⁷ David O. Ogungbile & Akintunde E. Akinade (Eds), 276.

¹⁸ Philip Ostien, "An Opportunity Missed by Nigeria's Christians". Paper Presented at the Conference on "The Sharia Debate & the Shaping of Muslim and Christian Identities in Nigerian". University of Bayreuth Germany, 11-12, July 2003. See also Matthew Hassan Kukah, *Religion, Politics & Power in Northern Nigeria* Ibadan: Spectrum Books. Ltd, 193.

¹⁹ Gwamna 277.

²⁰ Gwamna

in past decades among members of the same family despite their different religious inclinations. This harmony is exemplified by the exchange of gifts and goodwill during religious festivals and inter-marriage between Christians and Muslims.

A glance at the Efforts of the Federal Government to Promote Religious Harmony in Nigeria

Despite the obvious culpability of government to an extent in fuelling religious conflicts in Nigeria, certain steps taken by the Federal Government to promote religious harmony among Christians and Muslims cannot be ignored but should be brought to the fore.

First and foremost, it is on record that the Federal and State Governments had set up the Ministry of Religious Affairs in the 1990s for the purpose of achieving co-fraternity and peaceful co-existence in the country. How far these bodies have gone in check-mating religious conflicts is another issue.

Secondly, both Christianity and Islam have their holy pilgrimages promoted by the government of all levels until recent years when the local government has become financially handicapped due to unwholesome policy of State Governors. It must be mentioned that as much as the government tries to maintain balance in this aspect, it has received some knocks from some citizens who argue that it has no business in promoting religious pilgrimages. Reasons adduced for such criticisms resulted from the huge expenses the exercise gulp and reducing of what ought to be a spiritual exercise to a mere jamboree by some politicians who sponsor their side chicks and political associates to holy lands despite the fact that they are not qualified.

In addition to the aforementioned is the recognition of public holidays to satisfy the interest of Christians and Muslims in the country. Government tries to recognize these special days so that it should not be seen as showing favoritism to a particular religion. Even some traditional religious festivals have been accorded such recognition by a few states in recent times.

The Essence of Teaching Religious Harmony in Nigerian Educational Institutions

Any plan towards national development will only become a reality in the atmosphere of peace; more so that relatedness of politics and religion cannot be overemphasized because both variables deal with human beings. Adelowo puts it succinctly that:

There is not much to reap in an atmosphere of rancor, suspicion, pandemoniumviolence, arson and murder.²¹

²¹ E. Dada Adelowo, 30-31.

Therefore, religious harmony which is achievable through interreligious dialogue and ecumenical engagements has the capacity of achieving the following goals.

One, as an integral part of culture and society²², if necessary, instruments of teaching are deployed, religious harmony will engender peaceful co-existence needed for both human and capital development of any society. In his study of the works of John Courtney Murray, Michael Perry & Robin W. Lovin, Ilesanmi posits that they offer models, motives and paradigms for thinking about the basic features of religion and civil life in any religiously pluralistic society.²³ Hence, the argument that “it is possible to be faithful to one’s private or communal religious vision and still see purpose and value in other religious inclinations of people who share different vision”.

Secondly, teaching religious harmony is imperative in order to uphold the sanctity of human life. The massive killing of humans as a result of conflicts among religious adherents makes one to wonder if the perpetrators still believe that humans are created in the image of God. In her emphasis on the four essential principles governing the foundation of American republic, Murray argues that the ultimate root of US constitution is “the ideal of the sacredness of man, *res sacrahomo*”.²⁴ No wonder the first principle was the belief that the nation in all its activities, looks to the sovereignty of God²⁵.

As a matter of fact, the Nigerian constitution also frowns as shedding of the blood of innocent citizens. Unfortunately, through the unguarded & ignorant activities of many religious adherents, Nigeria has recorded wanton killings over the years. It is believed that when the citizens are taught from the primary school, the sanctity of life as enshrined in the sacred texts of religions in the country, it will go a long way to enhance religious harmony. Hence the paper shares the view of Adegbite who affirms that, when citizens have background in religious education, they value life with its purpose and goal; and have respect for morality and character training.²⁶

Another reason for incorporating religious harmony in the curricula of educational institutions even at the lower level is to encourage liberation of mind. Such a subject will not only free students from religious indoctrination but also assist to break racial discrimination and cultural tribalism. Such religious education geared towards

²² G.O. Abe. 1985. *Religion & National Unity: Exilic & Post-Exilic Judea in Context*. Ibadan: 9th Religion Studies Conference, 1.

²³ Simeon. O. Ilesanmi. 1997. *Religious Pluralism and the Nigerian State*. Ohio: Centre for International Studies. 55.

²⁴ John C. Murray. 1966. “The Declaration on Religious Freedom: A Moment in its Legislative History”. In *Religious Liberty: An End & A beginning* New York: Macmillan, 15-44.

²⁵ John C. Murray. 1966. “The Declaration on Religious Freedom: A moment in its Legislative History”. In *Religious Liberty*

²⁶ Adegbite. “The Islamic Way of Nation- Building”. *Orita* viii/2 Ibadan: University Press, 1974, 113.

harmonious living helps to liberate all that restrict human development such as fanaticism, dogmatism and confrontational clashes.

Furthermore, teaching religious harmony from primary education in Nigeria will facilitate in practical terms the understanding of dialogue and ecumenism. These two concepts are often being handled hypothetically by some religious leaders whose minds do not accommodate respect for other religious ideals.

Recommendations and Conclusion

First and foremost, Nigerian government should be honest in its involvement in religious issues in the country. Needless to reiterate how people at the helm of affairs used (and are still using) religion to divide the citizens. The politicians should be wary of using the phenomenon as a tool to achieve their political and selfish ambition.

Be that as it may, this paper agrees with the expression of Adelowo that Nigerian government could tap and integrate some moral values and ethics of religions in the country in order to bring about peace and harmony²⁷.

From records, it is evident that societies grappling with social disharmony can employ education to rectify the situation by creating awareness, particularly among the youth. Examples from countries like Northern Ireland, France, Britain, Indonesia, Ghana, Liberia, Rwanda, and Senegal demonstrate how education has been utilized to foster peace and harmony.²⁸ In the same vein, rich educational curriculum with vital information on religious harmony will ameliorate the menace of religious violence and usher in peaceful environment needed for nation's development.

Again, it is high time that religious negativities such as fanaticism, extremism and particularity that have resulted in violence, murder and disharmony be legislated against. Strict law should be promulgated to discourage conflicts and those who err should be brought to book to serve as deterrent for other citizens.

Furthermore, governments of all tiers in the country as well as religious leaders could explore areas of joint projects in the communities that will benefit the citizens. For example, the provision of basic needs or joint floating of sporting games will enhance religious interaction among people of different faith traditions.

In conclusion, the development of any nation depends on "peace and unity" that must exist not only among the ethnic nationalities, but also among the religious adherents,

²⁷ E. Dada Adelowo, 29.

²⁸ J. Wedge. 2008. *Where Peace Begins: Education's Role in Conflict Prevention and Peace-building. Save the Children. London: UK, International save the Children Alliance.*

notably those of the monotheistic strand. It is only by divesting themselves of any sense of particularity and fanaticism that Christians and Muslims can be referred to as being civilized-citizens.

References

- Abdullah Yusuf Ali. 1975. *The Holy Qur'an: Text Translation and Commentary*. Leicester: Islamic Foundation.
- Abe G.O. 1985. *Religion & National Unity: Exilic & Post-Exilic Judea in Context*. Ibadan: 9th Religious Studies Conference.
- Adegbite. "The Islamic Way of Nation – Building". *Orita* viii/2 Ibadan: University Press, 1974.
- Adelowo E. Dada. 2001. *Methods & Theories of Religion*. Ado Ekiti: Olugbenga Press & Publishers.
- Adelowo E. Dada. 2006. *Issues in Public Affairs. (Vol.1)* Ilorin: Majab Publishers.
- Biehl Michael 2013. "Religion, Development & Mission". In *Religion: Help or Hindrance to Development*, Kenneth Mtata (ed). Germany: German National Library.
- Castro Lorreta N. 2006. *The Role of Education in Promoting Interfaith Cooperation*. Center for Peace Education, Miriam College, Philippine. Paper presented at the Dialogue on Regional Interfaith Cooperation for Peace and Human Dignity, Cebu: 1416. Accessed on 22 January, 2024. huskiecommons.lib.niu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2063&context=allfaculty-peerpub.
- Gwamna Dogara J. 2010. "The Turning Tides of Religious Intolerance in Nigeria: The External Connections". In David O. Ogungbile & Akintunde E. Akinade (Eds) *Creativity & Change in Nigerian Christianity*. Lagos: Malthouse Press Limited.
- Ilesanmi. Simeon O.1997. *Religious Pluralism and the Nigerian State*. Ohio: Centre for International Studies.
- Klaus Hock. 2002. *Einführung in die Religionswissenschaft*. Darmsfandt: Wissenschaft – licheBuchgesellschaft.
- Kippenberg Han G. 1997. *Die Entdeckung der Religionsgeschichte. Religionswissenschaft und Modern*. Munich: C.H. Beck.
- Mbillah Johnson 2013. "Religion, Conflict & Development in a Multi-religious Context". In *Religion: Help or Hindrance to Development*, Kenneth Mtata (ed) Germany: German National Library.
- Murray John C.1966. "The Declaration on Religious Freedom: A moment in its Legislative History". In *Religious Liberty: An End & A beginning*. New York: Macmillan.
- Modgil & Modgil, S. 2007. *Spiritual and Religious Education: Education, Culture and Values* Vol. 5. London: Falmer Press.
- Ostien Philip "An Opportunity Missed by Nigeria's Christians". Paper Presented at the Conference on "The Sharia Debate & the Shaping of Muslim and Christian Identities in Nigerian". University of Bayreuth Germany, 11-12, July 2003. See also Matthew Hassan Kukah, *Religion, Politics & Power in Northern Nigeria* Ibadan: Spectrum Books. Ltd.
- Sri Aurobindo. 1972. *Birth Centenary Volumes, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry*, Online, assessed on 27 Feb, 24 from <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327106342>
- Trinity Journal of Church & Theology, Vol.1, No.1 (June 1991), 8.
- Wedge J.2008. *Where Peace Begins: Education's Role in Conflict Prevention and Peace-building. Save the Children*. London: UK, International save the Children Alliance.