

RELIGION: HICK'S PHILOSOPHICAL PANACEA TO THE PLURALISTIC ETHNIC QUESTION IN NIGERIAN SOCIETY

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Abstract

Nigeria, a country characterized by a diverse nationality of over 250 ethnic groups and various religious affiliations, is obviously a pluralistic nation whose politics, economy and unity have been devastated by the destabilizing impact of ethnic divisions. What could be the role of religion in this situation? This research examines the concept of ethnicity with particular interest in Nigerian pluralistic challenges. It traces the history of ethnicity in Nigeria as an example of ethno-pluralistic society. By exploring the potentials of functionalistic religious theory in fostering ethnic reconciliation, the study contributes to the ongoing efforts to build a more united Nigeria. Employing Von Eckartsberg's existential phenomenological research method, this investigation uncovers instances of inter-ethnic dialogue, cooperation, and shared religious values that serve as building blocks for social cohesion. It identifies shared religious values that transcend ethnic differences and foster unity. The study highlights the pivotal role of religious institutions in conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts. This research aside contributing to the ethnic discourse, serves as veritable material for further inquiry into social, political and religious challenges in Africa and Nigeria in particular.

Keywords: Ethnicity, reconciliation, phenomenology, pluralism, tribalism

Introduction

One of the problems that have devastated Nigerian socio-economic and political sphere is the challenge of ethnicity. Historically, there have been cases of discrimination, segregation and ethnic cleansing around Nigeria caused by hatred for people of other ethnic backgrounds and cultures. Nigeria's diverse population has a history of inter-group conflict. Over the past half-century, the nation has endured numerous clashes rooted in ethnic, and political differences. These conflicts have often intersected, creating a volatile environment where tensions can quickly escalate into violence.

Ethnicity has been a pervasive and destructive force in Nigeria. It was the primary catalyst for the devastating civil war and continues to fuel numerous conflicts across the country. The emergence of ethnic militias, such as Boko Haram, Niger Delta militants, Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), and Oduduwa Peoples' Congress (OPC), underscores the potency of ethnic divisions. These tensions have infiltrated politics, religion, and everyday life, manifesting in discrimination, favoritism, and a general climate of mistrust. Regrettably, religious institutions have often remained silent or seemingly subsumed. Religion, both as institution and at the individual level, cannot avoid addressing the complexities of ethnicity in Nigeria. These issues resonate with Nigerians from all walks of life, from religious leaders to ordinary citizens.

This paper adopts Von Eckartsberg's existential phenomenological research method. This is a qualitative approach that aims to understand human experience as it is lived. It involves question formulation, data-generating situation, data analysis and presentation of findings. The research examines the intricate relationship between religion and ethnicity in Nigeria. By employing Von Eckartsberg's existential phenomenological research method, the study deepens the understanding of this complex interplay and explores the potentials of religion according to the functionalist theory as a force for social cohesion and national unity. This research addresses critical questions surrounding ethnicity in Nigeria. Specifically, it examines the nature of ethnicity, religious perspectives on ethnic-based actions, and the decline of traditional African communism. Furthermore, it explores the potential consequences of continued ethnic divisions for Nigeria's future and investigates appropriate responses for religious institutions and individuals facing oppression or injustice. Ultimately, this research aspires to contribute to a more peaceful and united Nigeria. These inquiries motivated the undertaking of this study.

Ethnicity or tribalism

To comprehend the complexities of ethnicity, it is essential to establish its clear definition. Ethnic group refers to a people who “share a persisting sense of common interest and identity that is based on some combination of shared historical experience and valued cultural traits.”¹ Melvin M. Tumin gives a more comprehensive definition when he argues that “the term denotes a social group which, within a larger cultural and social system, claims or is accorded a special status in terms of a complex of traits which exhibits or is believed to exhibit. Such traits are diverse, and there is much variety in them.”² On the other hand, Attahiru M. Jega, describes ethnicity as a situation in which the relationship between members of one ethnic group and another, or generally amongst ethnic groups, in a multicultural polity such as Nigeria, is characterized by a lack of cordiality, by heightened mutual suspicious and fears, by quarrelsomeness and by a tendency towards violent confrontations.³

Ethnicity used as “tribalism” is often characterized by a preferential treatment of one's own ethnic group at the expense of others. It is more than mere group affiliation; it involves actively promoting one's group's interests. As D.W. Waruta suggests, it is a mindset favoring in-group members over outsiders. The term “tribe” itself carries negative connotations in many African contexts, and even more negatively charged due to its associated moral implications.⁴ While ethnic affiliation is an ascribed status, tribalism is a chosen behavior. People cannot select their ethnicity, but they can choose to prioritize their ethnic group over others, leading to tribalistic actions. According to J. N. Mugambi and Nasimiyu-Wasike, tribalism is a harmful practice that prioritizes loyalty to one's ethnic group over merit and fairness. It manifests in various forms, such as nepotism in employment, education, and government positions.⁵ Essentially, tribalism undermines the principles of equality and competence by favoring individuals based on their ethnic affiliation rather than their qualifications.

Ethnicity is essentially the unfair dominance of one group over others. It is the practice of judging individuals based on their ethnic origin rather than their personal merits. This discriminatory mindset has been a persistent and destructive force in Nigeria, causing significant challenges across social, political, economic, and religious spheres.

Reconciliation

The word ‘reconciliation’ is derived from the word ‘reconcile’ or ‘reconciling’ which means ‘call back together’⁶ the estrange. In broader usage, reconciling is seen as the establishment of harmony with one’s word, one’s destiny or self. It is that which seeks to reestablish broken relationships with others, including God. No wonder Hartford Robert Paul argues that at the heart of the redemptive purpose,⁷ there is the intention of bringing about reconciliation that would reach out and embrace man in all of his relationships, to solve the estrangements between brother and brother⁸ between husband and wife,⁹ between nations and race, and indeed, between man and the whole cosmic order.¹⁰ This way, the essence of reconciliation is to bring an exchange of relationships.

Early Church and Ethnic Reconciliation

¹ J. Milburu Thompson, *Justice and Peace: A Christian Primer*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2006), 116.

² Melvin M. Tumin, “Tribe” in *Dictionary of the Social Science*, (California: Prentice-Hall, 1967), 34

³ Attahiru M. Jega, *Democracy, Good Governance and Development in Nigeria*, (Ibadan: Spectrum, 2007), 118.

⁴ J. N. Mugambi, and Nasimiyu-Wasike (eds.) *Moral and Ethical Issues in African Christianity*, (Kenya: Action, 2003), 120

⁵ Mugambi, and Nasimiyu-Wasike, *Moral and Ethical Issues*, 120-121.

⁶ Rodney J. Hunter, (ed.) *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counselling*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 1047.

⁷ Rodney J. Hunter, (ed.) *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counselling*, 1047.

⁸ Matthew 5:24

⁹ 1 Cor. 7:11

¹⁰ Col. 1:20

In the early years of the Christian era – 30-60 AD, a dispute arose that threatened to divide the Jerusalem Church. We might think of it as a ‘social class issue’ but it had a ‘tribal’ basis and real destructive potential. As Norman Shields points out, while concrete evidence of discrimination is lacking, it was undoubtedly perceived as such by the affected group. The conflict centered on the distribution of aid to widows, with Greek-speaking Jewish widows, many of whom were recent returnees, alleging unfair treatment compared to their Aramaic-speaking, native Palestinian counterparts.¹¹ To quell the growing unrest over the distribution of alms to widows, a committee of seven individuals, all of Greek origin, was established. This appeasement strategy, while seemingly a concession to the complaining party, unexpectedly satisfied everyone involved and contributed positively to ethnic harmony.¹²

Peter's mission to Cornelius, a Roman centurion, revealed God's impartial love, extending salvation to all nations regardless of ethnicity. However, a subsequent inconsistency emerged. Initially inclusive toward Gentile believers,¹³ Peter's stance shifted upon the arrival of conservative Jewish Christians. Fearful of their disapproval, he withdrew from fellowship with Gentiles, a decision that deeply troubled Paul.¹⁴ This marked a significant disagreement between two key figures in early Christianity over the inclusion of Gentiles. D. A. Carson pictures this in his statement:

The face-to-face encounter between Paul and Peter marked the initiation of a more general debate on the issue of the relation of Gentile convert to Judaism. Once gentiles came to faith in Christ, Jewish Christians with their Pharisaic background wanted them to become Jews. Salvation, they insisted, required not just faith in Christ but circumcision, which for a non-Jew was the way to enter Judaism. It meant that the person concerned was being asked to take the yoke of Pharisaic law on himself – in essence to be a Jew first and then a follower of Christ.¹⁵

This was the issue discussed at the conference held in Jerusalem between Paul's first and second missionary journeys.¹⁶ It is the major issue with which Paul deals in the Epistle to the Galatians and is also treated in Letter to the Ephesians.¹⁷ For Paul, the ethnic distinction between Jews and non-Jews was no longer significant, hence “there is neither Jew nor Greek ... for you are all one...”¹⁸ ‘He himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier and the wall of hostility.’¹⁹

Paul emphatically asserts that God created all humanity from a single ancestor, Adam. This establishes the fundamental equality of all people as God's offspring.²⁰ Consequently, God's call to repentance is extended universally, and His embrace of faith encompasses individuals from every background without discrimination.

God's impartial love serves as a model for believers. James explicitly condemns favoritism,²¹ primarily addressing the issue of socio-economic disparity. However, this prohibition aligns with the broader New Testament emphasis on equality, implicitly condemning ethnic favoritism as well.

Nigeria and Ethnic Plurality

¹¹ Acts 6:1

¹² John Hargreaves, *A Guide to Acts*, (Great Britain: ACTS, 2004), 169.

¹³ Acts 10:34-35.

¹⁴ Gal. 2:12

¹⁵ D. A. Carson, (ed.) *New Bible Dictionary*, (England: Inter-Varsity 1994), 1088 on Acts 15:10-11.

¹⁶ See Acts 15.

¹⁷ See Ephesians 2:12-22

¹⁸ See Galatians 3:28.

¹⁹ Ephesians 2:14.

²⁰ Acts 17:26

²¹ James 2:1

Nigeria is a nation characterized by extraordinary ethnic diversity. According to Adetutu Audu, citing a study by K. Hansford and colleagues, there are over 500 languages spoken within its borders.²² This linguistic richness is a strong indicator of the country's extensive ethnic makeup.

While such a multicultural environment can be fertile ground for ethnocentrism — the belief in one's own ethnic group's superiority — it is crucial to distinguish this from simple ethnic plurality. Ethnocentrism manifests as discriminatory practices targeting specific ethnic groups based on exclusive criteria.²³ Thus, the mere existence of numerous ethnic groups does not automatically lead to conflict. Ethnic tensions arise when these groups engage in harmful competition, undermine each other for personal gain, or deny rights based solely on ethnic origin, as previously discussed.

The complex interplay of ethnicity and religion in Nigeria often makes it challenging to pinpoint the root cause of conflicts and crises. Some scholars argue that the nation's religious diversity further complicates its ethnic plurality. M. O. Adeniyi admits this difficulty in the remark “virtually all the religious crises that have taken place in the Northern Nigeria have occurred in the Middle Belt Region where political and economic polarization tend to follow the Christian/Muslim divide and where the emirate system was established over a people different from the traditional rulers.”²⁴

Nigeria's challenges are primarily rooted in ethnic divisions rather than religious differences. Individuals who allow their ethnic biases to influence their religious perspectives exacerbate these issues. Despite the multiplicity of religions in Nigeria, there is a lack of genuine interfaith cooperation. A closer examination of religious practices in the country reveals a strong correlation between ethnicity and religious affiliation. Emefie Ikenga-metuh aptly observes that many inter-religious conflicts are essentially ethnic disputes disguised as religious disagreements, and vice versa.²⁵ In other words, the boundary between ethnic and religious identities tends to collapse in times of conflicts thus it is difficult to differentiate the two conflicts in Nigeria. This is supported by Matthew Hassan Kukah when he argued that “the problem of Nigeria is not religion but people who have carried their background to their various religions.”²⁶ Steven B. Gofwan, seems to maintain this when he argued that “the major cause of the protracted conflicts in Jos has been the contention between the indigenous ethnic groups of Afizere, Anaguta and Berom on the one hand, and the Hausa on the other hand over the ownership of Jos and its traditional institutions.”²⁷ To prevent a recurrence of the civil war, Nigerians often attribute crises to religious differences rather than underlying ethnic tensions. No ethnic group is willing to passively endure elimination by another, thus creating a climate where religious divisions are used as a proxy for addressing deeper ethnic conflicts. While Christianity is generally a peaceful religion, its adherents may resort to prayer as a means of seeking divine intervention in these challenging situations.

However, there are times when it is too obvious that the root cause of a crisis is ethnic in nature without a mix feeling. Examples include, the Aguleri-Umuleri conflict in Anambra State, Ijaw-Ilaje crisis in Ondo State, the Ijaw-Itsekiri-Urhobo triangle in Delta State, the Ezza-Ezilo crisis in Ebonyi State, the conflict of Jukun-Kuteb-Tiv in Taraba and Benue States.²⁸ Tiv-Fulani in Nassarawa State and Eggon-Tiv in

²² Adetutu Audu, “Half a Thousand Tongues” in *The News*, 8 December 2003, 70.

²³ Samuel G. Egwu, *Ethnic Religious Violence in Nigeria*, (Abuja: African Centre for Democratic Governance, AFRIGOV), n.d., 10.

²⁴ M. O. Adeniyi, “The Relationship between Christians, Muslims and Afrelists in *History with particular reference to Nigeria: A Muslim View*” in *Studies in Religious Understanding in Nigeria*, 126-127.

²⁵ E. Ikenga-Metuh, “Two Decades of religious Conflicts in Nigeria: A Recipe for Peace” in *Bulletin of Ecumenical Theology*, Vol. 6. 1994. 1.

²⁶ Matthew Hassan Kukah, Catholic Bishop of Sokoto, interview with NTA during the post-election crises in April 2010.

²⁷ Steven B. Gofwan, “Causes of religious Intolerance in Plateau State and Way Forward,” an Inter-Disciplinary Seminar at TCNN, March 2012. 14

²⁸ Solomon Yarvini, MTh II student of TCNN, interview on 5th March 2012

Nassarawa State.²⁹ The case of Izii and Cross River, Izii and Ezza in Ebony State.³⁰ Jega maintains this when he observed that “the most destructive and violent of these conflicts occurred in cities such as Lagos, Kaduna, Kano, Ibadan and Jos as well as other places like Shagamu, and parts of Benue, Nassarawa, Taraba, Bayelsa and Delta States.”³¹

The Ijaw, Itskiri, and Urhobo peoples exemplify the potency of ethnic identity. Despite centuries of shared history, intermarriage, and a common religious faith, these communities have engaged in violent conflict due to ethnic divisions and competing interests. The irrationality of such violence is perplexing. The researcher hopes that religion can play a more active role in fostering peace and reconciliation to end this destructive cycle.

It is not as if the Federal Government of Nigeria is ignorant or silent about it. For example, the first official government deliberate effort at ethnic reconciliation was in 1970 following the end of Nigeria-Biafra war in January that year. It was embedded in General Yakubu Gowon’s three ‘R’s: Reconciliation, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction.³² After fifty-three years, it is obvious that only artificial reconciliation has been achieved. Consequently, Late Gen. Sani Abacha administration made an attempt at ethnic reconciliation through National Reconciliation Commission (NARECOM) which was headed by Chief A. Akinyele. The failure of previous attempts can be attributed primarily to two factors. Firstly, there was a conspicuous absence of a genuine commitment to reconciliation, particularly on the part of General Abacha. Secondly, and more significantly, the military regime lacked the capacity and perseverance necessary to achieve lasting peace.³³ This challenge has continued to call for true ethnic reconciliation.

Ethno-Religio-Political Crisis in Nigeria

Nigeria is a vast nation and home to over 200 million people. Religious diversity is prevalent with African Traditional Religion, Christianity, and Islam as the dominant faiths.³⁴ The country has a long history of ethno-religious-political tensions that predate its independence in 1960. Attahiru Jega highlights the intertwined roles of ethnicity, religion, and politics in shaping Nigeria's dysfunctional societal structure, thus:

Those who have profited from exploiting negative passions and igniting the members of ethno-religious conflagration in the past are at it again, evidently in full swing, mobilizing negative ethnicity, religious bigotry and intolerance, whipping up sentiments and pitching one ethno-religious group against another under the current democratic transition, competitive partisan political activities are being used as avenues through which groups are exploited, identities rigidly reinforced, often infused with excessive religiosity. Violent youth gangs and militias are formed and armed, and ethnic tensions and conflicts are thereby facilitated.³⁵

An examination of Nigeria's major crises consistently reveals ethnicity, religion, and politics as underlying causes. Tunde Lawuyi supports this view, asserting that the state often appears impartial in religious conflicts while in reality playing a biased role. Religious actors perceive the government as favoring one side over another in religious matters.³⁶ Victor E. Dike's assessment of the North Central crisis downplays the influence of politics by attributing the conflict primarily to ethnic and religious

²⁹ James Orugu Orvanya, TCNN MTh I student, interview 5th March 2012.

³⁰ Sunday Nkwuda, TCNN MTh II student, interview On the 25th March 2012.

³¹ Attahiru M. Jega, *Democracy, Good Governance and Development in Nigeria*, (Ibadan: Spectrum, 2007), 122.

³² Nkem Osuigwe, “An African Christian Theology of Reconciliation” in *BETFA Journal of the Ogbomosho*, Circle Issue Number 1, 2002 ISSN: 1596-213x, 2.

³³ Amos Francis Dike, *Church, Society and Globalization: Issues of Concern*, (Jos: Challenge, 2015), 53.

³⁴ See 2022 Report of National Population Commission.

³⁵ Jega, *Democracy, Good Governance and Development*, 117.

³⁶ Tunde Lawuyi, “Nigeria in the 1980s: Religion and National Integration,” in Jacob K. Olupona and Toyin Falola, *Religion and Society in Nigeria*, 238.

tensions, describing the region as a hotspot for such disputes.³⁷ Similarly, Onigu Otite and Isaac Olawale Albert highlight the recurring pattern of ethno-religious conflicts in the Middle Belt region, citing specific instances such as the crises in Kafanchan (1987), Kaduna (1982, 2000), Tafawa Balewa (1991, 1995, 2001), and Jos (2001, 2008).³⁸ Abejide Peter Odofin, among other scholars, asserts that ethnicity and politics are the primary drivers of the problem, thus:

The Nigeria Federation is no doubt an ethnically divided society where the struggle for survival has acquired the character of ethnic competition and groups have perceived their material progress, and even recently their spiritual progress in terms of the activities of the other groups. These have encouraged the politics of exclusivism (covertly or overtly the problem of “we versus them,” etc.) which have become the main features of Nigerian politics.³⁹

Nigeria's ethno-religious diversity would pose no challenges if mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence prevails. However, the nation has a history marked by significant ethno-religious-political crises. The devastating consequences of ethno-religious-political crises in Nigeria cannot be overemphasized. Since their inception, these conflicts have left enduring scars on the nation. Countless lives have been lost, property destroyed, and socio-economic progress hindered. Fear of violence has compelled many to flee their homes in search of safer havens. Moreover, bombings and widespread insecurity have become commonplace.

Failed Attempts for Ethnic Reconciliation and Peaceful Co-existence

Despite efforts to reconcile Nigeria's ethnic divisions, the role of religion in preventing ethnic strife remains unclear. Miroslav Volf questions religion's effectiveness as a peacemaker, highlighting its potential complicity in violence. While some attribute this to Nigeria's complex religious landscape, Volf suggests that the problem lies in the behaviour of religious adherents rather than their faith itself. A central issue is the frequent conflation of loyalty to God with loyalty to one's ethnic group.⁴⁰ During times of conflict, loyalty to one's ethnic or cultural group often takes precedence over religious principles. Even religious leaders, despite sincere intentions for peace, can be drawn into narrow-minded support for their own community, inadvertently fueling ethnic tensions.⁴¹

In times of crisis, religion often fails to fulfill its peacemaking role. This is largely due to a misunderstanding of reconciliation, which is primarily understood as a theological concept focused on the relationship between God and humanity. Consequently, there has been a neglect of reconciliation's social implications. To achieve comprehensive reconciliation, both the spiritual (vertical) and human (horizontal) dimensions must be addressed. This section explores various failed strategies in attempt to reconcile Nigeria's ethnic diversity.

Domination

Domination is a conflict management style characterized by a strong emphasis on self-interest at the expense of others. It involves one ethnic group asserting its supremacy over another, often through intimidation, coercion, or outright suppression.⁴² This approach is fundamentally incompatible with the principles of inclusivity and equality. By imposing its will on others, the dominant group creates

³⁷ Victor E. Dike, *Democracy and Political Life in Nigeria*, (Zaria: ABU, 2001), 87.

³⁸ Onigu Otite, and Issac Olawale Albert, (eds.) *Community Conflicts in Nigeria*, (Ibadan: Spectrum, 1999), 3

³⁹ Abejide Peter Odofin, “Federalism and the Challenges Citizenship in Nigeria's Multi-Ethnic State,” *Constitutional Reform Debate Series, Gender for Development*, Lagos: 2004, 16.

⁴⁰ Miroslav Volf, *Henry Martyn lectures: the social meaning of Reconciliation*, (London: Evangelical Missionary Alliance, 1997), 1

⁴¹ Volf, *Henry Martyn lectures*, 2

⁴² Ochinya Ojiji, “Conflict Handling Styles” in Shedrack Gaya Best, *Introduction to Peace and Conflict Studies in West Africa*, 121.

resentment and instability. Such behaviour often stems from a perceived power imbalance, whether real or imagined, and can quickly escalate into open conflict⁴³ as in the case of Nigeria. Ultimately, dominance is a counterproductive strategy that undermines the possibility of lasting peace and cooperation in a pluralistic society. This approach to ethnic Nigerian pluralistic question can hardly lead to inclusive society as projected by SDG 16.

Avoidance

Conflict avoidance occurs when ethnic groups in a pluralistic context deliberately ignore or downplay potential crises. This tactic is often employed as a short-term strategy to evade immediate confrontation. While it may temporarily create an illusion of peace, it ultimately exacerbates underlying tensions.⁴⁴ By neglecting to address the root causes of conflict, avoidance increases the likelihood of more severe problems emerging in the future. Many experts argue that Nigeria's diverse ethnic makeup makes it particularly vulnerable to such a scenario, as a history of avoiding conflict has created a volatile environment. Although avoidance might seem like a safe option in the moment, confronting challenges head-on is often more prudent in the long run.

Accommodation

This approach prioritizes cooperation over competition. Rather than asserting their own interests, ethnic groups adopt accommodating stance, prioritizing the needs of others over their own. While this self-sacrificial behaviour may be rooted in a desire for harmony or low self-esteem, it can have detrimental long-term consequences. By consistently yielding to the demands of others, a group may create an environment where their own needs are neglected and their influence diminished.⁴⁵ This can lead to resentment and potential aggression if expectations of continued accommodation are not met. Moreover, a failure to address underlying issues through constructive conflict resolution can intensify tensions and create opportunities for further instability.

Collaboration

This approach emphasizes both assertiveness and cooperation. Rather than avoiding the issue, ethnic groups engage in direct dialogue to find a mutually agreeable solution.⁴⁶ By actively listening and understanding each other's perspectives, they can develop an outcome that satisfies both parties' concerns. This win-win approach is socially beneficial as it fosters acceptance among the involved groups. Negotiating such a solution can be time-consuming, but the final agreement is typically binding on all parties due to their active involvement in the process. This shared control over the process and outcome is crucial for ensuring compliance with the agreement, as theorized by Thibaut and Walker.⁴⁷ When both groups feel invested in the solution, it is more likely to lead to lasting peace. As long as none of the parties is left with a grudge over the outcome of a given process, there will be a tendency for the resolution to lead to lasting peace.

While this reconciliatory approach is effective in addressing conflicts in other social and economic contexts, its application to religious differences is more complex. Unlike ethnic diversity, where compromise and collaboration are often feasible, religious groups may find it difficult to reconcile without compromising fundamental beliefs.⁴⁸ Therefore, focusing on reconciliation strategies within ethnically diverse communities might yield more promising results.

⁴³ Ojiji, "Conflict Handling Styles", 121.

⁴⁴ Ojiji, "Conflict Handling Styles", 121.

⁴⁵ Ojiji, "Conflict Handling Styles", 122

⁴⁶ Ojiji, "Conflict Handling Styles", 122.

⁴⁷ J. Thibaut, and L. Walker, "A Theory of Procedure." *California Law review*, 66, 54-56.

⁴⁸ Ojiji, "Conflict Handling Styles", 122.

Compromise

This involves finding an expedient mutually acceptable solution, which partly satisfies both parties. In other words, groups split their difference and make concessions in order to resolve the challenge. In this situation, a group is partially assertive and partially cooperative. Compromise becomes necessary in situations where the positions of the groups are so incompatible that the two cannot be reconciled without one of them losing something in the process.⁴⁹ This is different from collaboration where the groups can be reconciled without any of them losing. This is a win some, lose some situation.

Confrontation/fighting

Ethnic confrontations often escalate from disagreements into deliberate acts of aggression. These can range from verbal abuse and threats to physical violence,⁵⁰ as seen in numerous ethnic clashes across Nigeria. Mutual misunderstanding often fuels ethnic conflicts in Nigeria. Each group rigidly adheres to its perspective, rejecting the other's viewpoint. This entrenched opposition frequently erupts into violence, resulting in losses for all parties involved. While occasionally, one group might gain a temporary advantage through force, the overall outcome is typically detrimental to everyone. These confrontations rarely lead to lasting solutions, as resentment often lingers, making future clashes more likely. Such violence has significantly intensified animosity within Nigerian society.

Effects of Ethnicity on Nigerian Nation

Nigeria's long history of ethnic conflict are often overlooked or underreported. Despite numerous attempts to find solutions, violence persists, highlighting the nation's instability. Africa as a whole is plagued by ethnic strife, resource wars, and failed states. Nigeria is particularly tense due to ethnic divisions, which have eroded national unity and identity. Tribalism has fostered division and threatened the country's cohesion. While Nigerians have shown remarkable resilience, ethnic tensions remain high, with even minor disagreements escalating into violence. The seeds of ethnic discord, sown during military rule, have now borne bitter fruit. Essentially, this research describes the pervasive nature of ethnic conflict in Nigeria, its destructive impact on society, and the underlying causes of this persistent problem. Jega states that:

in the context of the little democratic space which has opened up since May 29, 1999. No less than forty violent ethnic and communal clashes have been reported since Obasanjo government came into power about three years ago. Many lives and property worth millions of naira have been lost as a result. Furthermore, Nigerians now spend much energy trying to redefine their 'national' identity as a consequence of the emotive feelings and perceptions, which these clashes have engendered.⁵¹

Yes, the "loss of lives was counted in thousands, while damage to property has been estimated in billions of naira."⁵² Even in areas where outright violence has decreased, underlying tensions persist, hindering economic, social, and political progress. Paradoxically, instead of fostering diversity, peace, and security, ethnicity has become a catalyst for conflict and violence in Nigeria.

The repercussions of persistent ethnic tensions and conflicts in Nigeria are far-reaching and devastating. Beyond the immediate loss of lives and property, these crises have eroded national unity, weakened public trust in government, and hindered the country's progress. The fundamental concepts of citizenship and *indigeneship* often clash, aggravating the longstanding and contentious "National Question." Therefore, to

⁴⁹ Ojiji, "Conflict Handling Styles", 123.

⁵⁰ Ojiji, "Conflict Handling Styles", 124.

⁵¹ Jega, *Democracy, Good Governance and Development*, 116-117.

⁵² Jega, *Democracy, Good Governance and Development*, 122

achieve economic and political development in the 21st century, Nigeria must urgently address the deep-seated ethnic divisions that continue to plague the nation.

Hick's Accident of Birth in Ethnic Reconciliation

Initially, John Hick focused on the Christian doctrine of exclusivism — the belief that salvation is restricted to Christians. However, he later rejected this idea, unable to reconcile it with the notion that good people of other faiths would be denied salvation. Hick found this concept deeply problematic. His quintessential perspective is exemplified by his "accident of birth" theory:

For it is evident that in some ninety-nine percent of cases, the religion which an individual professes and to which he or she adheres depends upon the accidents of birth. Someone born to Buddhist parents in Thailand is very likely to be a Buddhist, someone born to Muslim parents in Saudi Arabia to be a Muslim, someone born to Christian parents in Mexico to be a Christian and so on.⁵³

Hick's seminal work on religious discourse significantly advanced our understanding of pluralism. Widely regarded as a preeminent philosopher of religion, his intellectual contributions to theology and philosophy were profound and unaffected by personal religious inclinations.⁵⁴ Hick posits that individuals from different faiths can experience transcendence similarly to Christians, albeit with variations shaped by cultural, historical, and other contextual factors.⁵⁵ The main thesis of Hick according to Sumner B. Twiss, is an underlying unity to the obvious religious pluralism that is to be understood and explained as "a set of differential responses to a transcendent reality conceived and perceived in alternative ways by different cultural and religious traditions."⁵⁶ Hick's central contribution to the philosophy of religious pluralism stems from his Kantian-inspired pluralistic hypothesis. He proposes that all religions, and by extension, all ethnic groups, represent distinct paths to a single, ultimate reality he terms "the Real." Inconceivable and indescribable, this ultimate reality transcends all cultural and ethnic boundaries. Consequently, all ethnic groups possess equally valid perspectives on this reality, shaped by their unique cultural and emotional lenses.⁵⁷

This way, intolerance, implies superiority claim – socially claiming one's cultural heritage is the only true culture. Cultural supremacy, for him, can justify anything; that is, he strongly holds that to insist on the unique superiority of one's culture is to be part of the global crisis.⁵⁸ Consequently, he vehemently questions how peaceful co-existence can take place between "rival absolutes."⁵⁹

Achieving lasting peace and coexistence hinges on mutual recognition of the equal validity of diverse cultural heritages as expressions of a shared ultimate reality or divine presence.⁶⁰ Embracing a pluralistic perspective that acknowledges these differences is essential for fostering and sustaining harmonious relationships among various ethnic groups.⁶¹

⁵³ John Hick, *An Autobiography*, (Oxford: Oneworld, 2002), 160-2

⁵⁴ Hick, *An Autobiography*, 160

⁵⁵ Hick, *An Autobiography*, 162

⁵⁶ Sumner B. Twiss "The Philosophy of Religious Pluralism: A Critical Appraisal of Hick and His Critics," *The Journal of Religion* 70, no. 4 (1990): 533. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1204340>.

⁵⁷ David C. Cramer, John Hick (1922—2012), <https://iep.utm.edu/hick/#SH4c>, accessed on 08- 05-2023

⁵⁸ Muhammad Legenhausen, "Misgivings about the Religious Pluralisms", (n.d)

⁵⁹ John Hick, *Religious Pluralism and Islam*, See, David C. Cramer, John Hick (1922—2012), <https://iep.utm.edu/hick/#SH4c>, accessed on 08- 05-2023

⁶⁰ John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, (New Haven: Yale University, 2004), 300, 307, 337

⁶¹ Amos Francis Dike, "Hick's "Accident of Birth:" Philosophical Answer to Nigerian Religio-Ethnic Pluralistic Question" In *African Journal of Religion, Philosophy and Culture (AJRPC)*, ISSN 2534-7636 (Print) ISSN 2634-

Functionalist Theory

This school of thought argues that religion is a conservative force that has a positive function for the transformation of the society and individuals. Religion helps to create social order and maintains values.⁶² This theory summarizes the functions of religion in five points namely: giving meaning and purpose to life; reinforcing social unity and stability; serving as an agent of social control of behaviour; promoting physical and psychological well-being, and motivating people to work for positive social change.⁶³ According to this theory, religion is a platform which contributes to social solidarity and integration and adds values to people's lives. It helps people cope with life stress and gives them meaning.

Anything can easily be discarded once it is discovered to be of no value. Often, the value of something will also depend on its importance and usefulness. One may ask, from the fivefold roles of religion, can religion be waved aside as an insignificant aspect of human existence? Or, why is the religious dimension of human life so important? Emile Durkheim pointed out three⁶⁴ major functions of religion.

1 Social Cohesion

The shared symbols, value and norms of religion unite people. Religious doctrine and ritual establish rules of "fair play" that makes organized social life possible. Religion also involves love and commitment, which underscore both our moral and emotion ties to others.

2 Social Control

Every society uses religious imagery and rhetoric to promote conformity. Societies owe many of their cultural norms - especially those that deal with marriage and reproduction to religious justification and control. Religion even legitimizes the political system. In traditional African society, in fact kings claimed to rule by divine right. Today, many traditional and political leaders invoke religion to explicitly, and publicly ask for God's blessing, implying to audience that their efforts are just and right.

3 Providing Meaning and Purpose

Religious beliefs offer the comforting sense that the vulnerable human condition serves some greater purpose. Strengthened by such conviction, people are less likely to despair when confronted by life's calamities. For this reason, major life – course transitions – including birth, marriage, and death – are usually marked by religious observances that enhance our spiritual awareness.⁶⁵

Religion: Towards the Philosophy of Ethnic Reconciliation and Peaceful Co-existence in Nigeria

Tolerance is essential for peaceful coexistence in societies with diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. For nations with multiple ethnic groups, a tolerant attitude toward different ethnic and cultural groups is crucial for progress and development. Tolerance is a vital tool for managing diversity and fostering national growth. In such societies, it is important to recognize and accept existing differences as part of the social fabric. According to Ubrurhe, a pluralistic state involves:

The existence of more than one religion [ethnic group] and philosophy, which are conflicting in relation. Some degree of awareness by all the parties involved that a fundamental disagreement

7644 (Online) Indexed by SCOPUS, IBSS, EBSCO and SABINET Volume 5, Number, December 2024. 247-264. 251.

⁶² Christopher I. Ejizu, "Between religion and morality: Their Inter-connection and Significance in Public Life" An Inaugural Lecture Series, No. 59, University of Port Harcourt; n.p. 2008

⁶³ R. T. Schaefer, *Sociology: A Brief Introduction*, 8th Edition, (Columbus: McGraw Hill, 2008), 189

⁶⁴ Ron McGivern, *Introduction to Sociology*, 1st Canadian edition, (Minnesota: Minnesota University, 1980), 48 <https://opentextbc.ca>

⁶⁵ J. J. Mascionis, *Sociology*, 7th edition (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1999), 483

between them exists; Some degree of awareness that these incompatibilities have positive values not only to the community but also to each of the group themselves.⁶⁶

In the light of the foregoing, it could be said that what we are experiencing in Nigeria today is the lack of the philosophy of tolerance,⁶⁷ which ought to be the life wire of a pluralistic society. If such philosophy had been given its rightful place in Nigeria,⁶⁸ adherents of the different ethnic group would have understood and learn to tolerate the fundamental differences that exist between their cultures.

Race and Tribe must be irrelevant in religious life

Religious followers should embrace unity, transcending racial and tribal boundaries as exemplified by the Christian principle of being "one in Christ." This does not imply disregarding or suppressing cultural, linguistic, or ethnic differences. Rather, it means respecting each individual's unique heritage, including their nationality, ethnicity, language, and culture. Fostering strong relationships with believers from diverse backgrounds is crucial, and no group should be considered superior to another. Favoritism towards one ethnic group inevitably marginalizes others. True neighborliness requires active care and concern, not mere tolerance. Acknowledging and apologizing for past wrongs is essential. Ethnic and cultural differences should be embraced, not used as a basis for dominance.

Conscious Efforts at Ethnic Reconciliation

For religion to effectively address Nigeria's ethnic divisions and contribute meaningfully to national life, it must actively demonstrate how people from different ethnic backgrounds can coexist peacefully. Religion positions itself as a promoter of reconciliation and answer to conflicts. However, this message will be ineffective unless religious institutions exemplify unity within their own structures. As long as leadership roles in religious organizations are primarily based on ethnicity rather than merit, and not on fostering inclusivity, religion will struggle to be a positive force for the nation.

This way, religion in Nigeria rejects the "homogeneous unit principle"⁶⁹ proposed by Donald MacGavran. This theory suggests that people prefer to join religious groups that share their race, language, or social class. It advocates for establishing religious communities based on cultural and class lines to facilitate conversions. If adopted in Nigeria, this principle would intensify existing ethnic tensions. Creating religious groups along tribal or racial lines would only worsen the already volatile ethnic situation in the country.

Religion should demonstrate its ability to unite people, both spiritually and socially. To be effective in addressing Nigeria's challenges, religious groups must exemplify unity within their own communities and across different faiths, both domestically and globally. In essence, religion needs to prove its capacity for reconciliation and unity through practical actions.

In a way of summary, Nigeria's diverse ethnic and religious landscape has created a complex interplay between these two factors. While religion can serve as a unifying force and promote social cohesion, it can also contribute to divisions. To foster peace and stability, Nigeria must address the relationship between religion and ethnicity. This involves promoting interfaith dialogue, education, and other strategies to manage ethnic tensions while considering underlying socio-economic and political issues.

Conclusion

⁶⁶ Joyce Onatere-Ubrurhe, "The Integrative and Disintegrative Functions of Religion: The Nigerian Experience." *Contemporary Essays in the Study of Religions*, (Nigeria: Spectrum, 2020), 239.

⁶⁷ E. N. Atoi, "Effects of Truth-claims in Christianity and Islam on Democratic Governance in Nigeria". PhD. Thesis. Dept. of Religious Studies. University of Ibadan, 2016.

⁶⁸ O. B. Igboin, "Theory and Praxis of Religious Tolerance." *Ogirisi: A new journal of African studies* 12: 2016. 318.

⁶⁹ Donald MacGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1970), 198.

The paper argues that religion can be a solution to Nigeria's ethnic divisions. It posits that while Nigeria's ethnic diversity could be a source of conflict, it can also be a strength. The author believes that religion is uniquely positioned to harness this diversity for national unity and progress. The text suggests that by emphasizing religious influence in politics, society, and identity, Nigeria can overcome its ethnic challenges and achieve stability. Essentially, the argument is that religion can be a unifying force in a multi-ethnic Nigeria, transforming diversity from a hindrance to a catalyst for national greatness.

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