

DEMOCRACY AND CIVIL LIBERTIES IN NIGERIA: FOSTERING PEACE THROUGH CHRISTIANITY

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Abstract

This study looks at the possibility of using religion especially Christianity to consolidate peace and liberty in a democratic setting. The study which focused on Nigeria's democracy examines how religion is used to consolidate democracy and promote peace and liberty. Using the qualitative method of data analysis where emphasis is placed on primary and secondary documents which involve library, non-library and online sources are used in generating data for the study. The findings of this study implies how particularly Christian religion plays a significant role in the consolidation of democracy and liberty given its important place in advocating some principles of democracy, which involves equity, farness, freedom, pluralism, respect for diversities, and defending minority rights amongst others. However, the study upholds that instead of using religion to pursue selfish political ends, there is every need for relevant actors to ensure that institutions in Nigeria state are strengthened to provide the dividends of democracy.

Keywords: Peace, Democracy, and Civil Liberties

Introduction

The need for conflict resolution in the modern day world is crucial. It is imperative because no two people perceive a particular thing exactly in the same way. Efforts to curb conflict crisis-situations have often times been unsuccessful; occasioned not only by the complex nature of humanity, but also by the methods and means employed by those on mediation (Nwandu 2010, Okoye 2015 and Nwankwo 2018). It is the position of this study that religion can harness the principles of democracy and civil liberties, a factor that has not received sufficient attention in Nigeria; in determining the understanding of conflicts, their causes and appropriate tools for reconciliation. This study has located and explored religious tools and frameworks on peace initiatives and conflict resolutions as the symbolical rites of procedure. It argued that all of them have to be taken seriously if we really have to move from rhetorics and good intentions to sustainable behavior change that leads to solid reconciliation and peace that will finally lead to decreased rates of conflict situations and socio-political rascalities in Nigeria today (Nduka 2018, Udogu 2014). Desmond Tutu of South Africa is reported to have commented from within the situation of social revolution in South Africa that without reconciliation, there is no future (Wustenberg, 1998). This assertion by the astute cleric underscores the desire of all nations for peace and conflict resolution. Christianity as a religion of peace plays a significant role in this regard. The church's initiatives in achieving reconciliation among the warring parties rests upon the conviction that aggrieved parties must be committed to achieving peace (Nduka, 2018). They should be ready to accept one mistake and make amends. They should be made to understand that wrongs and injustices have been committed. This study however underscores Christianity's quest for peace which is achieved by amending and establishing a harmonious and cordial relations other than revenge and separation.

Conceptual Clarifications

It will be necessary to begin by clarifying the basic concepts in the study which are: Peace, Civil Liberties and Democracy.

Peace

Mairi (1998) defines peace as freedom from absence of war, a treaty or agreement ending a war, or freedom from or absence of noise, disturbance or disorder, quietness or calm, freedom from mental agitation, serenity. Iwe (1991) asserts that peace is the resultant effect of balance and harmony among the constituent elements and forces of an organism for man as an individual moral being, it is the price of righteous and good will. In socio-political environment of man, peace building is understood as highest political good which tends to consist in the harmonious operation of the forces of his social life. Peace remains an empty word except it rests upon that order that is founded on truth, built upon justice, nurtured and given life by charity and brought into functional effect under the auspices of freedom and love. Freedom from sin and its enslaving burden on man. These social values of man are tools for peace building in the modern world (Diobu 2013, Okoye 2016). Peace precedes conflict and it is the natural state of being. The Webster's Dictionary (1991) says peace is a noun and defines it as: The condition that exists when nations or other groups are not fighting; the ending of a state of war, the treaty that marks the end of a war, friendly relations between individuals, untroubled by disputes, freedom from noise, worries, troubles, fears, public order and security. (p. 34).

Peace is not given to fighting or quarrelling but connotes calm, quite, untroubled, and undisturbed especially by noise, worry, fear, or anxieties. Other related terms with a peace builder include a peace maker who fosters or cements friendly disposition. The peace of God is above all other states of peace, hence pleasing to God. How would people for instance be motivated to ask for forgiveness when they believe that, according to the norms and values of their community, that what they did was not wrong? (Udezo, 2009). Shriver (1995) pointed out that alleged wrong doers are wary of being told that someone forgives them. Even in the home forgiveness is paramount in ensuring peace in the family.

Civil Liberties

Civil liberties according to Davies (2017) are fundamental rights and freedoms that governments are expected to protect and respect. These liberties are essential for ensuring individual autonomy, dignity, and equality before the law. Civil liberty represents freedom from arbitrary interference in one's pursuits by individuals or by government. The term is usually used in the plural. Civil liberties are protected explicitly in the constitutions of most democratic countries. (In authoritarian countries, civil liberties are often formally guaranteed in a constitution but ignored in practice.) In the U.S., civil liberties are guaranteed by the Bill of Rights and the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the Constitution of the United States (Start 2016, Holyday 2018 and Harris 2020). The Constitution's 13th Amendment prohibits slavery and involuntary servitude; the 14th bars the application of any law that would abridge the "privileges and immunities" of U.S. citizens or deprive any person of "life, liberty, or property...without due process of law" or deny any person equal protection under the law; and the 15th guarantees the right of all U.S. citizens to vote. The related term "civil right" is often used to refer to one or more of these liberties or indirectly to the obligation of government to protect certain classes of people from violations of one or more of their civil liberties (e.g., the obligation to protect racial minorities from discrimination on the basis of race).

In Nigeria as a democratic nation, has a constitutional obligation to protect the civil rights of citizens. Though, the country still grapples with numerous challenges in ensuring the protection and promotion of these rights. The Nigerian military and security agencies have been accused of human rights abuses, including extrajudicial killings, torture, and enforced disappearances (Nwangwu 2016, Okoli 2018). Nigeria's electoral process has been marred by irregularities, violence, and voter

suppression, undermining citizens' right to participate in free and fair elections (Okongwu 2012, Nwangwu 2016). Nigerian women face significant challenges, including discriminatory laws, cultural practices, and social norms that perpetuate inequality and violence against women (Okoh, 2021, Onyemachi 2023). These liberties are protected by various international human rights instruments, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and national constitutions, like the United States Constitutions of Human Rights. In many countries, civil liberties are safeguarded through a system of checks and balances, which ensures that power is distributed evenly among the legislative, executive and judicial branches of government. This helps prevent any one branch from abusing its authority and infringing on individual rights. In Nigeria, National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) is established to promote and protect human rights. Groups like the Nigerian Bar Association, Amnesty International Nigeria, and the Human Rights Writers Association of Nigeria (HURIWA) advocate for human rights and rule of law. Independent media outlets and journalists equally play a crucial role in exposing human rights abuses and holding those in power accountable. However, Nigeria's institutions, including the judiciary and law enforcement agencies, often lack the capacity and independence to effectively protect civil rights (Nduka 2018). It is noted by Nwokoye (2015) that widespread corruption and impunity undermine efforts to protect civil rights and hold perpetrators accountable. Apparently, civil liberties can be restricted or suspended during times of war, national emergency, or when public safety is at risk. It is essential to strike a balance between protecting individual rights and ensuring national security and public order. The effects of civil liberties in the modern age include an attitudinal change in habits, norms and values. Upholding civil liberties in the face of social injustice facing the country could be addressed through the cultural practices in Nigeria, and the way forward will promote the right to peace which will ensure respect for all other rights, encourage the building of true humanism in Nigeria.

Democracy

Democracy is a system of government where power is vested in the people, either directly or through elected representatives. The term comes from Greek words “demos” (people) and “kratos” (power). Through Democracy citizens have the right to participate in free and fair elections to choose their representatives. Democracies ensure the protection of individual rights and freedoms, such as freedom of speech, assembly, and the press through a set of rule of laws that apply equally to all citizens. Nigeria, a federal republic in West Africa, has a complex and evolving democratic system. Since gaining independence from British colonial rule in 1960, Nigeria has experienced various forms of government, including military rule, civilian rule, and a mix of both (Harris 2020). There is a direct democracy where citizens make decisions directly, either by voting on laws or participating in deliberative forums. Citizens elect representatives to make decisions on their behalf in representative democracy. In a constitutional democracy, a constitution outlines the powers and limits of government, protecting individual rights and ensuring accountability. Citizens are actively involved in decision-making process through mechanisms like town hall meetings and citizen juries under participatory democracy. Democracy promotes accountability, a situation where elected officials are accountable to the people (Nwokoye 2015, Nduka, 2018). This study therefore, will among other things, highlight the important place of the church in ensuring peace in the society. This is because; the Christian religion is the source of meaning in most human societies especially in notoriously religious oriented nations like Africa. Generally, it is religion that gives meaning to all the activities of mankind (Opoku, 1978). In African society for instance, religion colours all the human activities. It becomes impracticable to separate societal and religious matters (Mbiti, 1976). This study argues therefore, that for a more effective management of crises and peace building in Nigeria and in the modern world, Christianity should play some vital roles to that regard.

Evolution Theories of War and Peace

Reflecting changes in the international system, theories of war have passed through several phases in the course of the past three centuries. After the ending of the wars of religion, about the middle of the 17th century, wars were fought for the interest of individual sovereigns and were limited both in their objectives and in their scope (Stuart, 2017). The art of maneuver became decisive, and analysis of war was couched accordingly in terms of strategies. The situation changed fundamentally with the outbreak of French revolution, which increased the size of forces from small professional to large conscript armies and broadened the objectives of war to the ideals of the revolution, ideals that appealed to the masses who were subject to conscription (Davies, 2017, Stuart 2017). In the relative order of post-Napoleonic Europe, the mainstream of theory returned to the idea of war as a rational, limited instrument of national policy. This approach was best articulated by the Prussian military theorist Carl Von Clausewitz in his famous classic *On War*(1832-1837).

World War I, which was “total” in character because it resulted in the mobilization of entire populations and economies for a prolonged period of time, did not fit into the Clausewitian pattern of limited conflict, and it led to a renewal of other theories. These no longer regarded war as a rational instrument of State policy. The theorists held that war, in its modern, total form, if still conceived as a national state, touching upon its very survival, are concerned. Otherwise, warfare serves broad ideologies and not the more narrowly defined interests of a sovereign or a nation. Like the religious wars of the 17th century, war becomes part of “grand designs”, such as the rising of the proletariat in communist eschatology or the Nazi doctrine of a master race. Some theoreticians have gone even further, denying war any rational character whatsoever. To them war is a calamity and a social disaster, whether it is afflicted by one nation upon another or conceived of as afflicting humanity as a whole. The idea is not new-in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars was articulated, for example, by Tolsoy (1978) in his concluding chapter of *War and Peace*, states that warfare with a strong normative element is aimed at Peace.

The Role of Christianity in Fostering Peace in the Modern World

The emergence of peaceful society is preconditioned or dependent on the willingness of the people to live side by side as a homogenous community. According to scripture, the homogeneity of humanity allows or makes room for lasting peace in the society. It helps to lessen the bitterness engendered by societal elements that cause conflict (Nabuhr, 2008). It is part of the church's missiological duty to educate the society and create awareness against elements of division and violence that cause great human suffering and hardship. It is important for the church to educate the society to break the yoke of violence in favour of positive relationships, mutual love and respect. This leads one to bear in mind that the inspiration of promoting and achieving peace as Christian comes from the Gospel. It points to the prophetic function of the church to the society it exists in and can be fulfilled by urging everyone to maintain law and order, peace and security. This will allow individual Christians to make the most of every opportunity to promote peace and unity. It is through the message and practice of peace that humanity is given a new vision of how order may be restored and other improvements made in their social conditions (Shenk, 2006). In more specific terms the church can play the role of promulgating peace in following ways.

Agent of Reconciliation

The church is a reconciled community of God, that is, it is the community of people who, through his grace, have been reconciled with him. The church has been reconciled to God through the blood of Jesus and has received his peace in his heart. To this effect, it has to preserve the bestowed ministry of reconciliation and serve humanity in a spirit of brotherly love and peace. This means that the church of God should be characterized by the spirit of reconciliation, peace and love. It can further

be explained that the church is simply forbidden by its doctrine to promote violence, condone it and justify the causes of conflict (Thirdway 1981). Douglas (1963) states thus:

Christ died to put away our sins. In this way He dealt with the enmity between man and God. He put it out of the way, He made the Way open for men to come back to God. It is this which is described by the term reconciliation (p.1077).

There is substance in appreciating that man needs to be reconciled with his neighbor and God. This is because man's sin has caused the enmity within, between himself and God. It should be dealt with in order to promote social justice. The genuine desire to put an end to the chaotic life between chaotic parties is through reconciliation. Nigeria has witnessed according to Nonyelu (2007) deep rooted grievances which can only be sorted out through reconciliation. Unless reconciliation is achieved, it is difficult if not impossible to achieve a sustainable development in Nigeria; the need to do away with enmity and bring about good relations, sustainable peace and genuine repentance. Hostility, vigorous opposition, and crises are negative ethical symbols which do not portray fruits of repentance. The way to reconciliation lies through an effective grappling with the root cause of the enmity that exists among and with God. People who have defaulted may apologize for their misconduct, pay the stipulated fine, and make reparation or restitution. Reconciliation remains an index for promoting and measuring peace in man and society. The consensus among patriotic Nigerians is that it is an ideal requirement for the pursuance and sustenance of peace. It promotes joy, love, patience, freedom, fairness, and social justice. Reconciliation demands a fruit of repentance. It negates the abuse of fundamental human rights, social injustice and oppression. There is need to provide in man and his society a fertile heart, conducive environment devoid of social vices and pursue other noble goals, or moral values.

Through the Legitimacy of Church Doctrine of Love

The church's call for peace and unity is built on the legitimacy of its doctrine as a social institution with transcendental powers to promote social change. (Clifton, 2009). The spiral of violence in the world calls for the church to face and tackle the fundamental source of the violence by emphasizing its doctrine of love over one another. This is something that should be seen by the church leaders as key part of the church's role. As reflected in the Bible, the task of ensuring peace amongst people is by preaching love across barriers.

The Church Should Provide Moral Guidance

The church is being looked up to in the midst of crisis for moral guidance. It has the responsibility to take these circumstances seriously and, at times, confront the root causes of conflict (Rogers, 2008). In order to provide this, the church must challenge the political leadership of the world to uphold justice and rule of law. It should preach the message of truth that inspires and motivates people for a sound moral life, the truth which it can also use to challenge abusive regimes. It must use its message of hope to challenge the citizens to wake up and stand against oppression. (Cone, 1997). It should advocate the rule of law and accountability. One of the great advantages of the rule of law and accountability is that it makes it easier and possible to effect changes without violent upheaval. The changing of King Saul did not only affect the structure of his office and its public administration. True democracy cannot survive by merely perpetuating a ritual of voting, but needs a set of precedence that holds leadership accountable for their actions. In ecumenical circles, there is a general agreement that the church cannot align itself with any political party. However, it has the responsibility and duty to stand for the norms and rules that mitigate politically-induced violence or ferocity. This responsibility is manifested in the word of God that says that no one is above the law. The church is at the centre of promoting sound moral principles. They cannot transform the ills of the society or be truly be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, if they are not found wanting

in moral authority. The preaching on holiness and purity of life should be intensified. The church is expected to show itself in positive active involvement in the world around us. Jesus calls his disciples to be a light in darkness, salt of the earth and a leaven of goodness in our corrupt society.

In Nigeria for example, we have in many states a neo-dictatorship entrenched by the civilian government. Most of them have failed the country in many aspects of leadership. The brand of their leadership is extortion and siphoning of the government treasury for their private pockets and for their few friends and relations in the name of contracts. The life they live while in office is a contradiction of their manifestos during election campaigns. There are stories of institutionalized violence and thuggery. As a way to sanitize this unfortunate situation, the church should intensify the preaching on morality and good personal conduct.

The Church should Maintain Transparency

The church in order to check the power of officials, the church shall maintain a transparent life in its dealing with the people. The church shall live by example by ensuring transparency and fairness to all. This ethical teaching of transparency is aligned with the Christian norms of truth elaborated in the Bible. (Wilcock, 2013). In this God given role, the church will tackle social vices that could kindle conflict and breed corruption. The usage of transparency in this regard means rendering account of the resources entrusted in ones care. When transparency is maintained, it helps curtail mismanagement and changes the spirit of self of self-enrichment into the spirit of solidarity and commitment. Transparency enhances the relationship between citizens within the country and facilitates discussions on burning issues as a way of finding a long-lasting solution. The essence of distinctive leadership within a community, society or country is to guide and lead the people towards a common goal. (Philips, 2008). The Old and New Testaments profile some personality traits that people should observe in selecting their leaders. Interestingly, the scriptures make a clear distinction between the inability to lead and the outward appearance of a person. Leaders in the Bible are selected from all works of life, family pedigree, educational backgrounds and job descriptions ranging from warriors to farmers and doctors. The biblical leaders are responsible, reliable, committed and unified with their followers. They work towards a common interest, serve the people and rarely abuse their position or authority (Blackbaby, 2004). These leadership traits arguably keep the people together in peace and unity. This argument is not that the leaders are infallible, but that their flaws do not affect the fundamental living conditions of the people and do not plunge the community into self-destructive war.

The Church Should Ensure that Justice is Prevailed at all times

Social justice should at the centre of the church's interventions in ensuring peace across the globe. The word justice provokes a wide response of interest by scholars. A wide range of definitions, their modifications by scholars and the controversies they generate explain the varieties of opinions. As a catalyst of peace and reconciliation, social justice is approached by looking at social justice exclusively. Social relates to human society, living in communities enjoyed or taken in company, relating to or designed for social activities and relating to rank in the community. Ademola (2007) maintains that "social relations are basically sets of expectations which define rights and obligations, as well as status and roles"(p.40). According to Nzomiwu (1999) justice applies to whatever tends to produce and preserve the happiness of the community. Justice explains quality of any human society. Rawls (1971) explains justice as fairness. This means fair opportunities for all citizens, directing that inequalities in wealth and social positions should be maximized to benefit the least disadvantaged. The insight from the points above indicates that social justice will go a long way in entrenching peace and controlling war in the society.

Gender Discrimination Shall be Discouraged by the Church

Discrimination based on gender has denied the rights of many in the society. Gender discrimination has made it difficult to achieve the rights of women in Africa. Their spiritual life seems denied, ridiculed and other long history of social injustice. Discrimination is associated with a history of cultural ignorance, misunderstanding over the value and practice of traditions and customs, foul play in the interpretation of cultural norms and values. Uche (2009) says discrimination is relational to harmful cultural practices such as widowhood that calls for equity and fairness. The call for equity and fairness should target racist assumption of an ingrained sense of superiority by unbridled capitalists who exploit the minorities and women. Environmental despoliation, a justifiable reliance on private property rights, lack of charity for the poor, the weak and the less privileged also call for social justice in Nigeria and the world at large. This handicapping conditions calls for urgent concern for the church to serve as watchdogs in preserving the rights of women and the vulnerable members of the society. Above all, the promotion of academic freedom, university autonomy, the right to pursue knowledge with an open mind, work to abolish traditional slavery, promote mutual interdependency, win voting rights for women and champion the needs of the poor and the needy. To create continent in which each nation have the opportunity to flourish on the basis of equality of the human persons.

The Masses Should be Encouraged to Rise to their Responsibility of Choosing their Leaders

In our present dispensation, the church should admonish the masses to be always conscious of the fact that sovereignty lies with the people. It is their right to choose or change their leaders in a free and fair election, which is the hallmark of a true democracy. The church needs to stress that Christians cannot afford to be indifferent to their civic responsibility in voting at political elections in a responsible manner. To do otherwise would mean giving approval to the prevailing political situation, no matter how bad or allowing corrupt, incompetent or inept politicians to be elected into power. Following the dictates of conscience, Christians are to vote for their right persons without being swayed by corrupt politicians through intimidation, bribes or promises of gratification. The masses should not allow unscrupulous politicians to use them as political thugs to intimidate their opponents or serve as corrupt agent who buy off ballot papers from the poor and the ignorant. There is no sitting at the fence or allowing oneself to be locked up in conspiracy of silence. All hands should be on deck.

Conclusion

In a globalized emerging scientific and technological advancement, the church should not relent in ensuring that peace prevails at all times. They should create awareness and enlighten the people in accepting that peace will restore broken relationship by ushering harmony which inspires hope for a better or progressive society. This will mitigate strength with wisdom which fox the tide of pervasion of justice, denial of inalienable human rights and oppression of the poor. The political leadership of the world should be encouraged to provide top security which will discourage poverty, unemployment and hunger across the globe, particularly in Nigeria. There is every need to institutionalize measures to reward excellence, hard work, filial piety, patriotism and new social order amplified in open government, respect the rule of law, human rights, equity in revenue formulation and investment in human resources. It is hoped that these measures will give strength to peace and reconciliation as hallmark of social justice in the world. Prayer for the nations of the world should also be intensified in churches as motive force for genuine peace in the world. It is hoped that the fervent prayers will make the world leaders rule or lead in the basis of legitimacy of a government and for political stability in the world especially in Nigeria.

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