Religion And Its Attendant Conflicts In Nigerian: A Paradox

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Abstract

Religion, ideally, is not an arena of conflict. Rather it is man's attempt to find and maintain peaceful relations with the supernatural powers and his fellow human beings. Unfortunately, the management of religion and the organization of different bodies of believers and worshippers have given rise to conflicts in Nigeria. In particular, adherents of the universalistic religions, Islam and Christianity, together with their sects, have clashed over situational supremacy, access to prestige, power and privilege, information management, most especially, in relation to the political sphere in Nigeria. This research paper therefore examines the consequent effect of these disruptions in a secular State like Nigeria, especially on peaceful co-existence, life and property, including its social, economic and political environment, all of which could have been avoided.

Key Words: Christianity, Conflict, Islam, Religion, Secular State.

Introduction

The history of the human race is one of conflict interspersed with periods of peace. From time immemorial, conflicts have arisen

because one did not like or agree with what another was doing or planning to do. Each religion is based on the concept that it has the answer to the mystery of life and death. Invariably, all other religions have the wrong answer. Over emphasis on this difference, over a long period of time, will result in conflict with its ensuing tragic results.

Religion, ideally, is not an arena of conflict. Rather, it is man's attempt to find and maintain peaceful relations with the supernatural and his fellow human beings. Unfortunately, the management of religion and the organization of different bodies of believers and worshippers have given rise to conflicts in Nigeria. In particular, adherents of the universalistic religions, Islam and Christianity together with their sects, have clashed over situational supremacy, access to prestige, power and privilege, most especially in relation to the political sphere in Nigeria.

Nigeria, with an estimated population of 146,255,312 people (CIA, July 2008), is Africa's most populous country that is about half Muslim, and half Christian. Muslims are concentrated in the Northern part of the country; Christians form the majority in the south. Officially, Nigeria is a secular State with freedom of religion guaranteed in the 1999 constitution.

Religion as a Paradox

An attempt to address the paradox of Christian and Muslim relations in Nigeria is indeed very daunting. With its heterogeneous nature (ethnic, cultural and religious), there is often the tendency for members of each religion to maintain some parochial views on social, economic and political issues to the detriment of national unity and stability. In spite of the secular nature of Nigeria, where the constitution prescribes freedom of worship and association, issues are often interpreted from religious angle. This, in most cases, would spark off conflict, disorder and violence in society.

Such religious intolerance can be attributed to some misconceived favoritism and competition for scarce resources

amongst adherents of the two contending religions, Christianity and Islam. Unfortunately, these conflicts have often led to massive loss of life and property. With an estimated population of 146,255,312 people (CIA, 2008) comprising Christians and Muslims living side by side, Nigeria provides a good example for evaluating the relations between both religions. Christians and Muslims live next to each other and mingle freely in all aspects of life. They meet in the market place and on the streets, in schools and other institutions. Both Christians and Muslims are awakened every morning by the strident voice of the *muezzin* from the minaret of the Mosque, urging faithful believers to pray. On the other hand, Christians receive Christmas and Easter greeting Cards from their Muslim friends, neighbours and relatives.

Muslims are present in Churches for the baptism, wedding or burial of relatives, friends, colleagues and business associates. Christians also attend Muslim ceremonies to celebrate with them. Indeed, members of both religions share the same world view and operate within the same economic and political system. In government positions there is an inter-mix with some religious undertone using quota system, federal character and political delineations. For example, if the political President is from the North (Muslim) the Vice President is most likely to come from the South (Christian). Most of the religious festivals occur at similar times and are celebrated together including the New Year celebration. There is the general acceptance that both religions worship the same God. On National issues such as Independence celebration, prayers for the Nation, Sports, etc, adherents of both religions usually come together to celebrate.

The unfortunate situation therefore has been that certain ambitious individuals have often acted as demagogues, exploiting deep-seated prejudices for personal benefit especially in terms of the Nigerian body polity which invariably have destabilized the civil society and increased deepening antagonism between Christians and Muslims. The consequent

effect is that the citizens have failed to live peacefully with the challenges and realities of pluralism.

Historical Background

Any discussion on religion in Nigeria must begin with some reference to the history of Christian – Muslim relations. The Nigerian political scene is not dominated by religion, but has been greatly influenced by it (Atanda, 1989; Ilesanmi, 1997). Nigeria, like many other African nation-states that have emerged from under the cloak of colonialism, has sought to negotiate equitably its extensive ethnic and religious pluralism, and channel such into national integration.

The much talked about imbalance in the country was as a result of the advantages gained by those who received western education (Ekoko, 1989; Igbo, 1997). It was in the South of the country that Christian missionaries were most active in establishing schools. Due to the British policy of non-intervention toward the Muslims in the North, the latter did not gain the benefits of western education. This resulted in a lasting and destabilizing dichotomy, and is firmly imprinted on the historical memory of Muslims.

Nigerian Christians on their part, still harbor fears of political domination by the Northern Muslim Hausa-Fulani peoples. They remember the Jihad movements of the nineteenth century that promoted a new exclusive, intolerant and militant Islamic orientation (An-Na'im, 1997; Isichei, 1983). Nor have they forgotten the Islamization policy of "One North, One Islam" of Northern Muslim leaders during the First Republic of the early 1960s (Ohadike, 1992). It is imperative to add that majority of the country's past Military and Political leaders have come from the North, often of the Muslim religion. In addition, such governments have employed various quota and federal character strategies as a way of bridging the purported imbalance between the North and the South. In such circumstances, most Nigerians have every reason to be doubtful of the concept of fair play, with nepotism and corruption rife at so many levels.

Looking back in retrospect, some crucial and sensitive matters of public interest have also in some ways generated conflict. A good example of this is the "OIC incident", as it is known, when the federal government secretly made a move to become a member of the Organization of Islamic Conference in 1986, and similarly, in January, 1997, when there were plans for Nigeria to join the Islamic economic group, the D-8.

Role of the Media in Religious Conflicts

There is abundant evidence to show that Nigeria's public sphere is increasingly competitive, perhaps due to the rapid growth of Christian and Muslim revivalist. Indeed, this resurgence of revivalism has been one of the key factors in explaining the stormier religious climate of Nigeria since the 1970s (Hackett, 1999; Ibrahim, 1989). Closely linked to this growth of revivalist activity is the appropriation of new media technologies by the Christian Charismatic and Pentecostal organizations to facilitate their evangelistic and expansionist goals.

One of the earliest African Pentecostal evangelists to establish links with American counterparts was the late Archbishop Benson Idahosa, known as the Apostle of Africa (Lyons, 1991). On the other hand, some Muslim leaders saw the need for and advantages of mass mediated religious communication. Sheik Abubakar Gumi, a radical, anti-Sufi Muslim leader, who rose to become the most influential Muslim in Northern Nigeria in the 1970s, was one of the first Nigerian Muslims to recognize the potency of the mass media. He founded the powerful "return to source" group known as Izala, which was active in proselytizing through the use of campaigns and recorded cassettes (Kukah, 1996)

It is significant to note that at the height of religious troubles, it is the electronic media which are subjected to regulation. State governments often respond by banning open-air preaching, religious broadcasting, and the playing of religious cassettes in public. But interestingly, they also use the electronic media to try to reassert control over the situation.

As the Kaduna State riots of 1987 escalated and spread, the Emir of Kano made radio appeals reminding people that Islam was a religion of peace. The Kano State Governor quoted passages from the Bible and the Qur'an claiming that neither religion advocates violence against those of other beliefs. The then President, Ibrahim Babangida used his nationwide television broadcast to downplay the religious aspects of the riots and give them a political spin (Hackett, 1997).

According to Seriki (1993), the provocative nature of some publications, especially those that try to malign or ridicule the Prophet Muhammad have caused the most trouble. For example, an article appeared in the Sunday Standard of February 28, 1988, where Prophet Muhammad is described as an "epileptic Prophet". The Katsina riots in March/April 1991 stemmed from the actions of some enraged Muslims in connection with a Newspaper report.

Yakubu Yahaya, follower of Ibrahim El-Zakzaky, the national Shi'ite religious leader, led thousands of supporters to burn down the Daily Times Office after an article appeared in Fun Times (a publication of the government – run Daily Times) in December 1990 suggesting that Prophet Muhammad had an "affair with a woman of easy virtue" and then married her. The Newspaper later apologized. This invariably shows that inaccurate media reports can have a catalytic function with regard to pre-existing tensions.

The media is often poised for action whenever a seemingly uncomplimentary statement is made, especially by religious leaders. For example, the personal opinion expressed by Sheik Abubakar Gumi, the controversial Moslem leader, who said that Muslims would never accept a Christian President in Nigeria (Gumi, 1992).

The now historic Kaduna State riots of 1987 began in the small town of Kafanchan, at the College of Education, after the purported derogatory remarks by a Christian Preacher about the Prophet Muhammad at a Campus crusade. This enraged Muslim Students, who then attacked Christians and their place of

worship. The Christians retaliated. Before long, the fighting between the students spread to the town, and thence to other parts of the State, as well as neighbouring States. Many hundreds of people were killed, in addition to extensive property damage.

It is easy to come across complaints leveled at the media for having played a negative role in this particular situation. Ibrahim (1989) has emphasized that the role played by the media in fuelling the crisis in Kaduna State cannot be overemphasized. The New Nigerian Newspaper and the Federal Radio Corporation (FRCN) of Kaduna, both known for their "pro-Northern establishment and pro-orthodox Islamic views, emphasized a reign of terror in Kafanchan and the need to defend Islam (Adamu, 1994). However, according to Umechukwu (1995), while between March 9-11, the FRCN made regular broadcast in both Hausa and English concerning the massacre of Muslims and burning of Mosques in Kafanchan, they failed to report details on the counter attack on Christians.

The pro-Southern and pro-Christian press were not innocent in this affair – aggravating the situation by writing about the "Mullahs of easy violence" in The Guardian of March 14. The Standard of March 13 and the Punch of March 14 reported damage to the Christian communities while ignoring that of the Muslims (Ibrahim, 1989).

The conflicts emanating from the issue of sharia cannot be easily ignored. It was widely reported how Muslims had undertaken several days of joyous celebration in favour of Sharia. At the same time, Christians had also protested at the Kaduna State government house on the imposition of Sharia. But when the Christians were returning home, they were stopped at a barricade installed by some Muslim youths. A fight broke out which escalated to a full scale riot. Churches, Mosques and commercial establishments were seriously affected.

It was reported that several persons lost their lives and property, and the Army and Police were called in to restore order. By February 28, 2000, it was reported by the Media that riots in Nigeria has spread to Onitsha, Aba and Owerri. Bishop

Mike Okonkwo, President of the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN), blamed the loss of life on "discredited military apologists operating under religious cover.

Religious killings have become very rampant in the Jos area of Plateau State. The crisis of November 28, 2008 was due to disagreement over a local election. Every little issue, some imaginary, can cause an attack in Jos. This has been made worse by the fact that access to land is often determined by whether one is a native (Indigene) of the historically Christian City, or a stranger (Settler) who are mostly Muslims from the North. This invariably shows that the social and political culture and the need to see one another as belonging to the same nation and having one destiny is still very weak.

Although figures disclosed may be misleading, between 1999 and 2004, no fewer than 100 conflicts were recorded in the country (Elaigwu, 2005; Abdulrahman, 2006). This resulted in the death of at least 10,000 people and the displacement of about 800,000 people (IDP Project, 2005; Nwabufo, 2005). In February 2006, as many as 50,000 people were internally displaced and about 150 killed in a wave of violence across the country, sparked off by protests against the caricatures of Prophet Muhammad by a Danish Newspaper, reproduced by one of Nigeria's leading daily Newspapers (NRCS, 2006, IDMC, 2006).

The major examples of violent ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria have included the Kafanchan-Kaduna crises in 1987 and 1999, Zangon-Kataf riots of 1992, Tafawa Balewa clashes in 1991, 1995 and 2000, the Kaduna Sharia riots of 2000, and the Jos riots of 2001. Although no exact figures of casualties are available, the Kaduna riots of 2000 and the Jos riots of 2001, each claimed several hundreds of lives and generated violent ripple effects beyond Kaduna and Jos, respectively (Osaghae, & Suberu, 2005).

On Thursday, 27 November 2008, elections were held in all seventeen local government areas (LGAs) of Plateau State, Nigeria, to the LGA governing councils and their chairmanships. Early the next morning, in one of the LGAs, Jos North, which is

know as the city of Jos, an orgy of killings and destruction broke out, that, before it was quelled two days later, left between 400 and 600 people dead (some estimates are higher) and some parts of the city devastated. This was not the first such episode in Jos: in early September 2001 a similar outbreak left up to 1,000 dead, and there have been lesser clashes at other times (Ostien, 2009)

The shocking murder of a female high school teacher in an all-female secondary school in Nigeria bears eloquent testimonies to the degenerated state of a religious Nigerian society. The woman was a teacher at a Government day secondary school in Gombe State (a State in the North-central Nigeria), before she met her untimely death in the hands of those she had impacted knowledge. She was said to have rightly seized a set of books a student smuggled in, with the intent of cheating during the course of writing examination on Islamic religious knowledge. Unfortunately for her, a copy of the holy Quaran was discreetly hidden among the confiscated books which she angrily threw away. Soon after the end of the said examination, the affected student played the victim and cried foul. A mob attack swooped on the hapless and unsuspecting woman and killed her for desecrating the holy book (Adelakun, 2009).

Theoretical Orientation
There are two broad theoretical perspectives that have been employed here to examine religious conflicts in Nigeria. These include the functionalist and conflict theories.

The Functionalist Perspective
The functionalist perspective examines religion in terms of society's needs. Emphasis is placed on the contribution of religion towards the attainment of some degree of social solidarity, value consensus, harmony and integration between its parts. Durkheim (1961) in "The Elementary Forms of Religious Life" believed that social life is impossible without the shared values and moral beliefs that form the collective conscience. In their absence, there would be no social order, social control,

social solidarity or cooperation and the unity of the group would be threatened.

Durkheim emphasized the importance of collective worship. The social group comes together in religious rituals full of drama and reverence. Together, its members express their faith in common values and beliefs. Consequently, members of society are able to communicate and understand the moral bonds which unite them.

On his part, Malinowski (1954) emphasized on the importance of religion in situations of emotional stress that threaten social solidarity. Anxiety and tension tend to disrupt social life. Situations that produce these emotions include crises of life, such as birth, puberty, marriage and death. In all societies, these life crises are surrounded with religious ritual which helps to comfort and give hope to those concerned.

Parsons (1965) argued that human action is directed and controlled by norms provided by the social system. The norms which direct action are not merely isolated standards for behaviour. Rather, they are integrated and patterned by the values and beliefs provided by the cultural system. Religious beliefs provide guidelines for human action and standards against which people's conduct can be evaluated.

In a Christian society, the Ten Commandments operate in this way. They demonstrate how many of the norms of the social system can be integrated by religious beliefs. For example, the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill' helps to control issues such as anger, murder, manslaughter and other acts that may cause man's inhumanity to man in society.

In this way, religion provides general guidelines for conduct which are expressed in a variety of norms. By establishing general principles and moral beliefs, religion helps to provide the consensus which Parsons believes is necessary for order and stability in society.

Conflict Perspective

The functionalist perspective emphasizes the positive contributions of religion to society and tends to ignore its dysfunctional aspects. With its preoccupation with harmony, integration and solidarity, functionalism neglects the many instances where religion can be seen as a divisive and disruptive force. It bypasses the frequent examples of internal divisions within a community over questions of religious dogma and worship – divisions that can lead to open conflict. It gives little consideration to hostility between different religious groups within the same society such as interdenominational conflicts or between Christians and Moslems.

So the conflict perspective on religion is hinged on Marxism. To Marx (1964), religion is an illusion which eases the pain produced by exploitation and oppression. It is a series of myths that justify and legitimize subordination of the subject class and the domination and privilege of the ruling class. It is a distortion of reality which provides many of the deceptions that form the basis of ruling class ideology and false class consciousness.

In Marx's words, 'Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people'. Religion acts as an opiate to dull the pain produced by oppression. It is both 'an expression of real suffering and a protest against suffering' but it does little to solve the problem because it helps to make life more bearable and therefore dilutes demands for change in people's conditions. As such, religion merely stupefies its adherents rather than bringing them true happiness and fulfillment. In other words, it keeps people in their place. Also, by making unsatisfactory lives bearable, religion tends to discourage people from attempting to change their situation and to have faith that all will be well.

It is imperative to add that, in spite of the controversies and conflicts surrounding religion, it has, to some degree, helped to relieve the tension and frustration suffered mostly by the

masses in society. This is because it gives meaning to life; it tries to answer man's questions about himself and the world he lives in.

Religious Dynamics in Nigeria

Nigeria is among the most, if not the most, religious country in the world. According to the Pew Research Center, Nigeria is at the top of the charts in terms of intense religiosity. Both Christianity and Islam have experienced very dramatic growth over the last 50 years. They have not just experienced quantitative growth, but they have experienced very important qualitative changes – changes in denominational affiliation, changes in theology, changes in attitudes towards one another (Kukah, 2007).

It is important to state that as the numbers of Christians have increased, so have been their articulation and their ability and willingness to contest for power in the political affairs of Nigeria. In both Christianity and Islam, there has been increasing market competition within each of them, greater pluralization and intense competition between competing brands.

In Christianity, in the last 10-15 years in Nigeria, there has been greater emphasis on Pentecostal Christianity which borrowed substantially from American Pentecostalism with emphasis on speaking in tongues, being born again, miracles and prosperity (Kukah, 2007). This has invariably led to a very high level of followership in the country. One reason that can be adduced for this is the collapse of State Structures, with the resultant effect that people have had to find all kinds of coping mechanisms.

In a country of over 20 years of Military rule and persistent poverty, this brand of Christianity has managed to answer certain questions which the traditional Churches like Catholic and Anglican could not effectively address. So, Pentecostal Christianity has given Christianity a very high level of visibility in Nigeria which over time has generated a counter hostility from the Moslem religion, especially as they began to

come, more into Muslim territory, trying to convert as many as they could.

Conclusion

The expectation here is that in the spirit of secularization, Muslims and Christians must learn to tolerate one another's view points as it relates to social, economic, legal and political issues. In addition, issues of revenue allocation and equitable distribution of resources should be addressed by the government as this has dominated religious programming.

In the interest of public safety and peace, the media must be careful in terms of how crisis events are reported so as to reduce elements of escalation. It is not proper to use religion to destroy one another. Love and peace must be allowed to reign in the lives of the people). It is necessary to always remember that there is the law of retributive justice, because what a person sows, that he would surely reap.

There is hope however, for a better Nigeria where peace and stability would reign. This was attested to by President Umaru Yar'Adua through the Vice President, Goodluck Jonathan, during an interdenominational church service held at the National Christian Centre, Abuja, to mark Nigeria's 47th anniversary on October 1, 2007. According to him, the Federal Government of Nigeria will soon address the lingering religious conflicts in the country, especially the ongoing conflicts between the Muslim and Christian faithfuls in Kano and other parts of Nigeria. To what extent the government has succeeded in this regard leaves much to be desired.

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