Ethno-Religious Conflicts In Nigeria: Revisited

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the potentials of religion as an instrument of justice, development, harmony and peace. The theme will be approached from philosophical and theological perspectives. Given the nature of religion and beliefs and the attitudes share by the different religions what contribution could religion make to the cause of peace. Why, inspite of this, has religion sometimes served the cause of conflicts and wars rather than peace. Applying these general observations to the Nigerian situation, how could the major religions in Nigeria contribute toward minimizing the dangers of conflicts and promote the cause of peace. This revelation is very important in the general process of achieving sustainable development in the society. Hence religion should be seen as an instrument of promoting and regulating inter-ethnic or community relations if the stakeholders managing its operations work towards such goals-promoting peace and harmonious co-existence of communities in a given spatial location.

Key words: Religion, ethnic, conflicts, peace, development, Nigeria

Introduction

One of the commonest pronouncement and slogans adherents of religion today relates to peace. In fact the greeting expression al-salamu 'alaykum (peace be upon you), formerly a muslim practice has become a universal greeting usually heard among the adherents of diverse religions.

Yet many concerned people in Nigeria for instance are very skeptical concerning the genuineness of the expression of peace among Nigeria’s major religions- Islam and Christianity. The rationale for this approach is based upon several factors. First, any enquiry into issues relating to religious and inter-ethnic conflicts is sometimes based upon a particular religion before any general application of dialogical nature can be made. Secondly, both muslims and Christians possess written scriptures that have striking convergences providing very clear texts pointing the way to peace in a pluralistic society. Yet the religious and inter-ethnic conflicts have been characterizing the relationships between the two religious communities. In the light of all these reasons and obstacles affecting the co-existing of peace between the two religions the sustainable development cannot be achieved. The apparently cold and bitter relationship have been mounting and increasingly intensify in greater magnitude as the years in fold. The dimension of such ethno-religious conflicts have even created polarity, separate ideality, separate settlement and separate spatial location in major towns of Nigeria especially Zaria and Kaduna towns. Such trends that moved the writer to re-examine this cankerworms and disease that are eaten deep in the fabric of Nigerian society. The study would examine the ways that practical steps should be taken to promote peace, co-existence and tolerance in a pluralistic and multi-religious society in Nigeria. The focus is to see how ethnic communities and religious communities of a diverse, plural and multi-sectarian religious groups could live in peace, harmony and in unity despite their differences.

Religion, Ethnicity, Peace and Development:

The Oxford Dictionary defines Religion as “recognition on the part of man to some higher unseen power as having control on his destiny and as being entitled to obedience, reverence and worship. However, religion is relationship between time transcendent and man is perceived as an awesome but fascinating mystery to which main owes total submission and an absolute obedience”. Religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things. (Durchein cited in Shepard, 1981: 343). Similarly, the National Teachers’ Institute (1990:34) described religion as a cultural premise of belief system of the people, this belief system can lead individuals or groups into different forms of worship.

In Nigeria today there are two dominant types of religion namely Christianity and Islam. Christianity was founded by Jesus Christ in the 1st Century A.D. Both religions has spread all over the world. In Nigeria, Christianity has a large followership in the Southern and the Middle Belt region of Nigeria. While Islam on the
other hand was founded in Arabia by the Prophet Muhammad (S. A. W.) in the 7th Century A.D. It is the dominant religion in the Northern Nigeria particularly in term core north. However, Islam also has large followershing in the Southwest that is among the tribe called the Yoruba’s. The term “ethnicity” comes from time Greek word “ethnos” originally conceived on the basis of cultural and national identity. Today an ethnic group is socially identified and set apart by itself on the basis of its unique cultural or nationality characteristics (Shepard, 1981:209). Sociologists use the term “ethnic group” to refer to any kind of group which is socially identified as different and has developed its own sub-culture. In other words an ethnic group is one recognized by society and by itself as a distinct group (Horton and Hunt, 1980: 354). Its identified characteristics include language, culture or sub-cultures and particularly way of behavior of its people and in Nigeria there are 250 distinct ethnic groups (Iwuagwu, 2003:29). The word “peace” in its true meaning does not comprise solely the absence of physical security or absence of war and conflicts. This condition is only passive and limited though very important and essential aspect of the wider concept of peace. But rather peace means beneficent adjustment of harmony between the individual and his creator on one side and his fellow men on the other. This applies to the entirely of concentric relationships between individual and individual, individual and community, community and community, nation and nation and in short between the whole of humanity inter sea and between man and the universe. Thus correlated with peace are two other concepts without which peace or harmony would be impossible, these are justice and development. There can be no peace without justice. The relationship between individuals or groups cannot be said to be beneficently adjusted or in harmony when one of the parties is held in perpetual bondage or subjected to extreme exploitation and deprivation. In such a situation a person would and should fight for his right and peace is thereby threatened. It is of course a completely another question whether violence is a justifiable means of fighting such wrongs when there seems to be no other way for ending such violations. This doubt is all the more accentuated by the fact that violence whatever its justification often tends to create new and occasionally greater evils than those which they are supposed to abolish. However it should be realized that:

There is fundamental relationship between peace and human rights, which is grounded on justice. Any structure, which deprive persons of their human rights and dignity and prevent justice from being realized, force men to resort to violence or war (Homer Jack, 1996).

The same could be said of development, underdevelopment breeds deprivation, poverty, hunger and diseases. “An hungry man is an angry man”. This is true because for us to know whether his hunger is caused by other men or by underdevelopment or by natural disasters. Thus development by removing strains and deprivations from human life and making it possible for men to live a life worthy of their human dignity brings about harmony and peace. For the essence of peace is that:

The individual must be at peace with himself and with mankind through an inconsequence of putting himself at peace with his maker. (Kahn Zafnullu, 1985: 5).

It must be remarked that development must not be pursued for its own sake or worse still as a means of dominating other human beings, rather development should be in the service of man and indeed of the whole of man, his material needs and the demands of his intellectual, moral, spiritual and religious life.

Religious and Ethnic Conflicts:

The recurring incidences of violence in religious and Inter-ethnic conflicts in some part of the country have become a major national problem in contemporary Nigeria society. Both religious conflicts and Inter-ethnic crises are frequent and devastating in the country that they are threatening the existence of individuals and the nation at large. Ukpabi (1989:106), observed that in Nigeria the political circumstances out of which conflicts might arise have never been lacking since the end of British colonial rule in 1960 respectively. He noted that problems been encountered by the various groups in the country in their efforts to fashion a workable interaction between power and concert, freedom and obligation as well as between the nationalities themselves and the nation state to which they belong. In such situations Ukpabi observed there would always be interest to defend, project or violate during which violent conflicts may not be avoided.

Besides the increasing religious and Inter-ethnic intolerance which has been fueled by the growth of religious fundamentalism and fanaticism have all represented potential threat to peace and stability Okwuze (1995:165), observed that Nigeria is one of the countries where religion and Inter-ethnic conflicts has wreaked much havoc on the advancement unity and prosperity of her citizens and the development of the nation as a whole. He noted that between 1980 to 1995 no less than fourteen convulsive religious and Inter-ethnic conflicts had occurred in the country. Again since 1995 till today more than twenty-five religious and Inter-ethnic riots had taken place in the country. Thus there are religious and Inter-ethnic conflicts in Nigeria he asserted. Although peace has been restored and the relationship between the various religions in Nigeria today can be described as good but is far from being amicable.

Causes of Religious Conflicts:
The following are the major causes of religious and Inter-ethnic conflicts in Nigeria:

Impact of Colonial Rule:

The British colonial rule and the administrative policy of Sir Frederick Lugard and his successors laid a foundation for Inter-religious and Inter-ethnic hostility in the country. After the conquest of Northern Nigeria and the imposition of indirect rule system by the British in the first decade of the 20th Century the colonial administrators deliberately restricted the activities of the Christian missions in the north, this was to ensure political stability in the north and to sustain the co-operation of the northern emirs. (Okwueze, 1995:121).

However, the attempt to extend the influence of Christianity and Western education in the areas that were predominantly muslims gave rise to Inter-tribal hostility and subsequently resulted to bloody religious and Inter-tribal roots in some parts of northern Nigeria. (Okwueze, 1995:125).

Increasing Rates of Religious and Inter-Ethnic Conflicts:

This is one of the major causes of religious conflicts in the country. Religious intolerance means the inability of some people be they individuals or groups to tolerate the weakness or deviant behavior of other member (National Teachers’ Institute, 1990:34). In Nigeria context, religious intolerance is vividly manifested in the inability of member of one religious group to bear one another. Such intolerance often leads to tension, discord, hostility and possibly result to violence and confrontation. However in 1994 at Jos-North, Jos plateau state of Nigeria inter-ethnic conflict broke between the Hausa-Fulani settler community and the Berom tribe, Afizere tribe and Anaguta tribe over the appointment a Chairman of Jos-North Local Government Area. Also in 1997 another Inter-ethnic conflict between a tribe called Igbirra and the tribe called Bassa, and between Gade tribe and Gbagyi tribe over the control of a town called Toto and Umaisha districts of Toto Local Government Area of Nasarawa State of Nigeria and the host of others. (Ibrahim James, 2000:117).

The Upsurge of Religious Fanaticism:

The increasing incidences of violence or religious conflicts in this country can be linked to the growing number of both fanatical Christians and Islamic groups in some parts of the country. This religious fanatics carry their dogma, beliefs and sectarian religious view to the extreme they are often prepared to wage war against those who have contrary beliefs and maintain different mode of worship or religious principles and practice that are not acceptable to them. The fanatics therefore have no regard for the fundamental human rights which guarantee freedom of worship for the citizens. More so, religious fanaticism engender religious bigotry, hostility and possibly violence reaction against opposing or differing religious groups. This widespread religious disturbances in some states was widely believed to be the hand work of some religious extremist. (Ashaka, 2001:1).

Increasing Emphasis on the Religious Fundamentalism:

The increasing emphasis on religious fundamentalism in contemporary Nigerian society pose a serious threat to peaceful co-existence of various Nigeria ethno-religious groups in view of this worrisome development, the religious leaders are being challenged to rise against religious fundamentalism which they said was undermining peaceful co-existence among the people. They observed that religious fundamentalism had become a source of disaffection in Nigerian society and should be checked since it is at variance with the lesson of love, tolerance and peaceful co-existence which various religions preach. (Vanguard, 2005:11).

Negative Influence of Some Religious Leaders on Their Followers:

Some militant religious leaders tend to inculcate that attitude on their followers, such leaders are often very dogmatic, narrow-minded, intolerant and advocate social exclusion for their followers. Any religious leader who have these personality traits are more often than not, pre-disposed to use their followers to achieve narrow religious objectives or inordinate personal ambition. This may lead to out-break of religious riot. (Omotunde, 1991). The governor of Yobe State Alhaji Bukar Abba Ibrahim admonished religious leaders to concentrate on propagating the tenets of their religion rather than making provocative statements against other religions. (Akowe, 2004:1).
The International Dimension of Religious Conflicts in Nigeria:

There is no doubt that sensitive international issues together with problems bordering on politic and religions have had grave implications for Nigeria. Some of these issues have contributed immensely in heightening religious conflicts in the country. For example the fratricidal Arab-Israeli conflicts over the Palestinian national question which became more volatile since 1967 have had profound effects not only in Nigeria diplomatic decisions and actions but in the relationship between the muslims and Christians in the country. (Onu and Darambah, 2004:1).

The Causes of Inter-Ethnic Conflicts:

As the case of religious conflicts there are obvious causes of ethnic and communal clashes in some part of the country. These includes the following:

Heterogeneous Nature of the Country:

This is one of the major causes of frequent inter-ethnic conflicts in the country. Although this is noticeable in situations that give rise to completion for scarce political and economic resources. Nnoh (1978:8) observed that conflicts is an important aspect ethnicity, he noted that this is inevitable under conditions of inter-ethnic competition for scarce valuable resources particularly in societies where inequalities are accepted as natural and wealth is greatly very esteemed.

The Problems of Un-Employment:

The worsening problem of un-employment in the country has greatly contributed significantly in frequent outbreak of ethno-religious crises in some part of the country. Ochegbu (1992:22) has stated that the members of ethno-religious wars in the country have been teeming un-employment, situation which provide ready soldiers for such wars.

Consequences of Ethnic and Religious Conflicts:

1. Ethnic and religious conflicts tend to destabilize the country and brings everything to a stand-still.
2. It resulted in loss of lives and properties.
3. The frequent occurrence of ethnic and religious conflicts in the country creates the impression that Nigeria is politically unstable.
4. It leads to the displacement of a large number of people from their homes and communities.
5. The ethnic and religious conflicts tend to create a situation of permanent distrust and suspicious among various ethnics and religious groups.
6. It constitute an impediment to the national development.
7. The ethnic and religious conflicts pose a serious threat to the country democracy and national stability.
8. The ethno-religious conflicts do encourage proliferation of arms and ammunition and their acquisition by un-authorized persons and groups, and all these engenders or resulted to social tension and general insecurity in the country.

Conclusion and Recommendations:

The following measures are necessary for controlling frequent out-break of inter-ethnics and ethno-religious conflicts in the country.

1. There is need for the adherent of various religions in the country to exhibit the attitude of religious tolerance in dealing with people of other religion, this is very necessary for achieving religious peace and harmony in the country.
2. The government should endeavor to nip inter-ethnic and ethno-religious conflicts in the bud, and this would be done through obtaining or getting security information that would enable it take the necessary steps to avert out-break of violence in the society.
3. There is need for the government to involve necessary legal and constitutional provisions to ensure social security and stability reign supreme in the country.
4. There is the need for various ethnic groups to respect the rights of one another and to make use of the time- honored strategies employed in the past by various ethnic groups and communities for achieving conflict resolution or settlement of disputes.
5. There is need for continued dialogue among the various ethnic groups and religious bodies for the purpose of ensuring peace and stability in the country. Arinze (1999:2) has explained that inter-religious dialogue is a meeting of hearts and minds across religious frontiers. He noted that inter-religious group dialogue can promote mutual enrichment from the religious point of view and also enhance peaceful co-existence among the people of different religion.

6. There is urgent need from the government to alleviate poverty the Nigerian populace, this is very necessary to reduce tension and ensure violence free behavior among the citizens.

7. There is also the need to create employment opportunity for the teeming number of school leavers and graduates of tertiary institutions. This will go a long way in reducing frustration and disillusionment which tend to breed tension and social instability among the citizens in the country.

References


