RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND INTER-RELIGIOUS ENCOUNTERS IN THE 21ST CENTURY NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: *Religion is one of the heritages that Nigeria shares with other African countries. In fact, Nigeria is blessed with three major religious traditions—African indigenous religion, Islam and Christianity—which actually afford her the opportunity to be a pluralistic religious country. These religions relate with the Nigerian society and they fulfil different roles which are deeply rooted in them. However, because of the inbuilt challenges of a pluralistic religious state, some manipulators use religion as their ready-made instrument of conflict and confusion, in the cities that are well-known for their peaceful co-existence over the years. Consequently, the scenario is having negative effects on the socio-political, educational and religious lives of Nigerians nationwide. This paper aims at discussing religious interactions among Nigerians during the pre-colonial era and comparing it with what is in operation in the current dispensation. It will also examine the various ways that manipulators have used religion and explore how interreligious dialogue and other means of peaceful co-existence can be used to enhance meaningful development in the country. The research employs a qualitative method of data collection and uses a phenomenological approach to analyse the data collected. Findings revealed that different religious adherents interacted freely in antiquity until the incursion of foreign religions with their attendant intolerance. Consequently, improper handling of interreligious encounters, lack of adequate interreligious understanding and abuse of religion have caused religious conflicts and insecurity of lives and properties in the country. These in turn have led to the setback experienced in the development of socio-economic and political sectors in Nigeria. It is the opinion of this study that if the relevance of religion is fully understood and it is allowed to perform its roles for the benefit of humanity, Nigerians in general would witness peaceful, harmonious existence and meaningful development in all dimensions.*

KEYWORDS: Religion, Pluralism, Religious life, Religious encounter, Development

INTRODUCTION

Religious pluralism is one of the features that Nigerians shares with other African countries. Nigeria is a pluralist religious state that does not adopt any religion as her official religion. This therefore makes her a secular state. According to Vissent Hoofit (2001, p. 156), religious pluralism is a situation in which various religions live side by side with each of them holding a privileged status. In this context, the Nigerian constitution guarantees religious freedom and consequently makes no provision for a favoured one (Egbunu, 2012, p. 266). Nigeria is blessed with multiple religious traditions among which are: African indigenous religion (AIR), Islam and Christianity. It would be of interest to note that before the advent of both Islam and Christianity in Nigeria, African indigenous religion was the only known religion and every Nigerian is an adherent of indigenous faith.

However, with the arrival of Colonial masters and adherents of foreign religions, Nigerians were divided into various religious groups. For instance, Islam is more dominant in the north, Christianity holds sway in the south and African indigenous religion is practiced nearly everywhere in the country at the lowest ebb. Apart from this, series of religious concubinage are taking place in the country and new religious movements proliferate everywhere (Idowu, 1973, p. 27). In both pre and post-colonial eras, Nigerians really witnessed true religious harmony and enjoyed the benefits of religious pluralism. However, in this 21st century, the reverse is the case. It is therefore the disruption of religious harmony in this 21st century Nigeria that prompted this research response.

Religious Pluralism in the Pre-colonial Nigeria

Before the arrival of foreign religions (Islam and Christianity), Nigerians were practising their indigenous faith. At that period, Nigerians witnessed a relative peace in spite of the various sects and denominations within the religion. For instance, among the Yoruba people of the western Nigeria, there were sects such as: Ifa worshipers, Ogun worshipers, Sango worshipers, Orunmila worshipers, etc. Among the Igbo of the eastern Nigeria, there were also sects such as: worshipers of Ala, Amadioha, Mmuo, etc. In the northern part, among the Hausa people, there were sects such as: bori cult and other traditional worshipers. As there was little or no internal rift to contend with, the adherents and the entire populace then, enjoyed religious harmony (Adiele, 1993, p. 193).

Dime, in his work, attests to the situation discussed above when he says there were innumerable numbers of sects or cults in pre-colonial Nigeria such as: Igodo, Bouabu, Sango, Ekpo, Olokun, etc. He added that, in spite of this multitude of cults, there was peace, religious understanding and cooperation among the various religious groups in the Country (Dime, 1993, p. 150). Having the character of being possessive, this indigenous faith is pluralistic in nature and at the same time, very hospitable to other forms of belief systems (Mwakabana, 2002, p. 11). The religion is practised on communal basis and this was why every Nigerian lived with it from childhood, grew up in it into adulthood and practised it daily at every stage of life (Alana, 1993, p. 207).

Sequel to the religious understanding among the various religious groups in the country, harmonious interactions came into play. First and foremost was inter-faith marriage. In the pre-colonial Nigeria, religious difference was not a barrier to marriage. People from the family of *Sango* worshippers could marry from *Ogun* worshippers and vice versa. Apart from this, people

of different faiths from all walks of life would come to rejoice with the new couple and their extended family members.

Secondly, there was religious humanism. People came together to celebrate festivals; this may be an annual festival for the town as a whole or for one religious sect. In the case of the annual festival of a town, both sons and daughters of the town from all walks of life would come in their full attires to celebrate with the king, who was the chief celebrant. During the celebration, the king would pray for his subjects both at home and in diaspora, discuss with his people about how to move the town forward and other matters that could bring development to the town. In addition, disputes among the subjects were settled. After this, people would dine and wine together. This made people see themselves as one and at the same time, made the tie of brotherhood stronger.

Another area of interaction that manifested as a result of their religious understanding was religious tolerance. African indigenous religion possesses the characteristics of tolerance. This was manifested in its willingness to allow people to practise other religious beliefs and forms of worship without necessarily abandoning one's own. It is important to note that, towards the close of pre-colonial Nigeria, foreign religions such as Islam (in the northern part) and Christianity (in the southern part) had been established in the Country but little attention was paid to them by Africans, since religious antagonism was strange to them. One of the Yoruba sayings, which claims that tolerance is 'live and let live' states that;

> Let the hawk perch and let the eagle perch too. Whichever bird refuses the other a perching place, let its wing break (Ofurum, 1986, p. 14).

It is this religious tolerance that accounted for religious harmony in a typical African community where African indigenous religion predominated in the pre-colonial days.

Religious Pluralism: From the Colonial to the Post-Colonial Nigeria

The attitude of foreign religions (Islam and Christianity) during the post-colonial Nigeria introduced another era in the history of religious pluralism and religious life in Nigeria. At the beginning, the spread and conversion into these religions was peaceful as it was through their missionaries and commercial activities. The people in the country still maintained healthy religious interaction. The indigenous worshipers did not make any attempt to challenge Muslims or Christians for making converts out of them. They exhibited a high sense of accommodation and hospitality to other religions and their adherents (Alana, 1993, p. 209).

However, this type of religious tolerance could not be accommodated by both Muslims and Christians as they did not take kindly to any attempt to make converts out of their communities. 'The two invading religions', that were noted for their aggressive evangelism, had the singular aim of converting the whole country to their respective sides. The Nigerians that were formerly religiously united were now divided into various opposing religious groups. This period witnessed an atmosphere of suspicion and distrust between Muslims and Christians. This suspicion was based on the fear that their members could be converted by the opposing religious group. In their various attempts to woo their would-be converts, various derogatory terms were often used against other religions. For instance, terms such as: paganism, idolatry, fetish, ancestor worship, etc. were used to describe African indigenous religion by both Christians and Muslims. In the same vein, while the Christians described Muslims as

unbelievers, Muslims described Christians as *Kafir* (infidels). All these have negatively affected the religious life and mutual interaction of Nigerians in the recent time.

Another area where religious pluralism has negatively affected religious life in Nigeria is the area of religious freedom. Up till this very moment, it cannot be said that religious freedom exists in the country as Christians cannot preach openly in the northern part of the country. The burning issues of Boko Haram—an Islamic sect bent on Islamization of the northern states— is a case study. Also, the incessant killings in Maiduguri, Sokoto, Kano and in the Southern Kaduna, all in the name of religion, are manifestations of open hostility among the religious groups in Nigeria.

Furthermore, this open hostility among religious adherents has been carried into politics. Nigerian politicians often use religion to campaign and achieve their political ambitions. In fact, the northern political leaders openly declare that southern Christian politicians should not be voted for in elections (Alana, 1993, p. 210). It is even on record as observed by MAMSER and cited by Alana (1993, p. 210) that:

> Today, religion has become one of the important weapons which selfish leaders use in manipulating and dividing the people. Their misuse of religion has led to ugly riots and loss of lives and properties.

From what has been discussed above, it is clear that religious pluralism and religious life in the pre-colonial era was that of unity in diversity. Whereas, during the colonial era to date, the reverse is the case. This period is full of suspicion that is based on conversion, aggressive evangelism and scramble for converts out of the existing religions. It must be noted that as long as each religion is hell-bent on converting all Nigerians to their side, there will be continuous clashes of interests, tension, suspicion and abuse of religion.

Abuse of Interreligious Encounter in a Pluralistic Religious state

From all indications, abuse of religious pluralism has negatively affected the religious life of Nigerians. It has turned to an 'ill wind that blows no one any good'. (Ekpu, 1986, p. 10). First and foremost, among these effects is the unhealthy rivalry among the major religious groups in the country. The interaction among the religious adherents, especially between Christians and Muslims in the northern part has reached a dangerous dimension whereby each group of adherents desperately call on God to annihilate the other groups (Okoduwa, 1999, p. 198). The incessant clashes in Kaduna among the Christians and Muslims are gradually becoming a permanent feature of that community. On 26th February, 2018, there was a clash between the youths of both Christians and Muslims because a Christian lady was dating a Muslim man and was about to be converted to Islam. This unhealthy competition did not allow them to see any reason why Christian and Muslims should come together, especially in marriage. Consequently, many people were killed while several others were injured before the law enforcement agents intervened. (Umoru & Agande, 2018, p. 8).

Coupled with the above is religious intolerance. People of different faiths find it difficult to tolerate one another. Records have it that most of the religious crises we are witnessing today in the country are because of the unwillingness of religious adherents to tolerate one another. Consequently, divergent views or beliefs of other adherents are not accommodated (Onimhawo

and Ottuh, 2003, p. 114). The outcome of this menace has led to religious crises in which many lives and properties are lost.

Coming next is the end product of religious intolerance—particularism. This is an absolute claim to religious truth by a particular religion. Each of the three major religions in the country share the same characteristics of monotheism; however, they disagree in many ways. This disagreement manifests frequently between the Christians and Muslims. In situations like this, each religious adherent sees others as pseudo-religious groups and false religions (Smith, 1987, p. 130). It should be noted that no religion can claim to possess all religious truth or the claim that it is it alone that can 'offer the sole way to salvation' (Onimhawo and Ottuh, 2003, p. 113).

Fear of domination is another negative impact of religious pluralism in Nigeria. Through their aggressive evangelism, each religion is moving towards having dominion over others. The fear of extinction by non-Muslim in a densely populated Islamic community often generates conflict. In the same vein, non-Christians may find their survival at stake in a Christian community (Akanmidu, 1993, p. 80). A typical example was the religious crisis that broke out in southern Kaduna in the country, where a Muslim minority killed many Christians because they thought that Christians were multiplying in some Islamic states and that very soon, Christians would be dominating the entire state.

Last but not the least is fanaticism. This is a violent and unreasoning enthusiasm (Hornby, 1984). The menace has become a regular occurrence in Nigeria. As presented by Mala (1985, p. 111);

> The fanatics see other believers as those who have gone astray and who need some sermons preached to make them fall in line with their doctrine, which to them is always the best and most reliable basis for redemption of the judgement day... they believe, rather wrongly, that those who do not share their mode of worship or the doctrine of their religion, were better dead than alive.

Today, the fanatics implement their thought in action, unguarded and reckless utterances in a pluralist religious state like Nigeria. One expects that a preacher would preach his message and leave the audience to decide on what to do. Instead, they would dabble into the doctrine of other religions, distort facts and misrepresent their teachings so as to impress their audience. Sequel to this, many conflicts that could have been averted are experienced because of reckless publications and unguarded utterances. From what has been discussed above, it is clear that the inherent benefits of religious pluralism in Nigeria has been defeated. This therefore has prompted some countries to repress religion because they view it as a 'barrier to social and political development' (Hacket & Olupona, 1991, p. 265). Nevertheless, despite all these shortcomings, the benefits of multiple religions still remain sacrosanct. Thus, there is a need to seek for ways through which the country can benefit from the plurality of the religion it operates.

Benefits of Religious Plurality and how to Achieve them in Nigeria

There are numerous benefits that Nigerians can derive from the religious pluralism that their country operates. These include: unity in diversity, as there is strength in unity; promotion of interfaith congregation to confront common challenges in the country; interreligious marriage to strengthen the bond of brotherhood; multiple religious orientations, which could free

adherents from a parochial mind and fanaticism; and formation of a civil religion with its integrating power, just to mention a few. All these benefits will no doubt provide a degree of social, economic and political harmony in the country. However, because of the inbuilt weaknesses of religious pluralism in the country, all these benefits seem to be nothing but a mirage. Nevertheless, hope is not lost. To enjoy these benefits therefore, a number of factors must be put into consideration.

First and foremost, there is a need for the Nigerian citizens to come to a better and deeper understanding that a multi-ethnic society such as Nigeria, cannot practise only one religion, especially when the country's constitution does not have any officially recognised religion. With reference to the *Nigerian Constitution* (1979), the country does not stamp any religion as the official religion. Religion, as a matter of choice, has to do with the conviction in the heart of the adherents and that the sky is wide enough for all kinds of birds to fly (Aderibigbe, 2001, p. 151). Everybody should be therefore allowed to practise their own religion at any location of their choice in the country, without fear of intimidation.

Second is the interaction through inter-religious dialogue. From the perspective of Dzurgba (2008, p. 5), inter-religious dialogue is a platform where religious leaders discuss and orientate people about the essence of religion and its efficacy in the society. A successful interreligious dialogue will witness a situation whereby adherents of one faith will uphold their religious certainty, without trying to eliminate the other competing truth claims (Kripal, 2014, p. 318). Through this interaction and exchange of ideas, ignorance and complexities surrounding religions will be resolved. Once this is done, the positive aspects of religious pluralism can then be harnessed for the sustenance of peace and religious harmony in the country. Besides, through interreligious dialogue, every party is regarded as being as important as the other. Individual views and opinions are respected and given adequate consideration, as the ultimate goal of the delegates is to achieve peace and harmonious co-existence (Onimhawo and Ottuh, 2003, p. 114).

Also, interreligious marriage must be encouraged. Being a pluralistic religious country, it is believed that interreligious marriage will be a powerful weapon that can hasten peaceful co-existence among the rank and file of the religious adherents. Marriages contracted between two different religious traditions and ethnics will surely promote peace and harmony in the society. From the observations of Onimhawo and Ottuh (2003, p. 115), this type of marriage, otherwise known as 'mixed marriage', has been in practice among the members of the Roman Catholic Church. They therefore advise other religious adherents to follow suit.

Furthermore, the principle of African 'humanity and brotherhood' among the Nigerians in pre-colonial era, should not be forgotten as a result of modernity. The value that Africans place on humanity cannot be over-emphasised. This sense of brotherhood makes indigenous Nigerians believe that all human beings, irrespective of their ethnic groups, belong to one universal family (Gyekye, 2002, p. 26). Within the framework of African understanding of humanity and brotherhood, the issue of religious differences should not be a barrier and should not lead to conflicts of any kind.

In addition, seeking for a 'common religious soul' will enhance the benefits inherent in the plurality of religion. This common soul according to Alade (2015, p. 25), will create a united religious ground for the determination of issues of national interest. This idea, if religiously pursued, will also serve as a unifying factor for all the living faiths in the country. Although

this may be a herculean task, yet, it is not impossible. It can be achieved through various enlightenment programmes to create awareness in citizens on the need for such a common religious soul. All religions should de-emphasise doctrinal differences and establish common areas of cooperation, for peace and tranquillity to reign. Consequently, various religious crises that are militating against development in the country will be eradicated or reduced to the barest minimum.

CONCLUSION

Religious pluralism in the 21st century Nigeria is generating unhealthy rivalries, suspicion, and inflammatory outburst. This, no doubt, has defeated the traditional role of religions in recent years, unlike in the pre-colonial days, when various religious sects interacted with mutual co-existence and their mode of operation was that of unity in diversity. Today, religious life among the different adherents in the country is that of 'cat and dog'. However, in spite of all these challenges, hope is not lost. We can still enjoy the gains and benefits of religious plurality if we bear it in mind that all of us cannot practise only one religion. Also, we must seek for a 'religious soul' that cuts across all religions by de-emphasising areas of differences, being actively involved in inter-religious marriage and engaging in inter-religious dialogues. This paper therefore concludes on the note that Nigerians should tap from the benefits inherent in the plurality of religion, rather than focusing on the differences and particularism peculiar to one's religion. Through this, an enabling environment would be created for religions to perform their important roles of building peace and shaping moral standards that would prompt people to do good things and shun vices. It is the opinion of this paper that if the positive contributions of various religions in the country are harnessed, then there will be peace, security and development in all dimensions.

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