

Religious Pluralism And National Development: A Historical Analysis

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Abstract

Religious beliefs and practices indeed have influenced the activities of the Globe with a particular reference to Nigeria. Apart from their diverse and extreme force, they have determined to a large extent and exerted much influence on other socio-cultural institutions of human society. The apparent differences in beliefs and practices are causing bloodshed, hatred, persecutions, discriminations, wars, suicide bombing, terrorism etc. Those who frown at religious activities of man such as the secularists and even theists have inquired whether religion is a blessing or cause to humanity. Their suspicion being that religious beliefs instead of maintaining claims as agents of peace rather have contributed to man's inhumanity to man. Be that as it may, intellectual solutions and ideas have been proffered to solve this problem. Historical analytical method was used and the finding was that some leaders in Nigeria use religion as their political base rather than religious bases. This to a large extent hinders development.

Introduction

Nigeria became a nation in 1914 when Sir Frederick Lord Lugard brought northern and southern protectorates together under a single administrative entity. Prior to this date, the political entity called Nigeria today was administered in separate smaller units, the northern protectorate, the colony of Lagos, and the southern protectorate (Ademoyega, 2010). Nigeria covers an area of about 924sqkm with three major ethnic groups – the Hausa/Fulani, the Igbos and Yoruba and about three hundred others (Bamgbose, 2007).

The British brought these groups together for administrative convenience not minding their differences in culture, religions and politics. Today, Nigeria's religious and political problems, argued by majority of Nigerians, "sprang from the carefree manner in which the British took over administered and abandoned the government and people of Nigeria (Ademoyega, 2010). The three major ethnic nationalities in Nigeria prior to colonial rule had distinct forms of government, the feudalistic Oligarchy in the north, the centralized monarchical democracy in the west among the Yoruba's and the decentralized democracy in the East among the Igbos. From the religious perspective, the Hausa were practiced other religions before they were conquered by the Fulanis who subsequently introduced Islam. The emir doubles as both political and religious head of his people. The Yorubas and the Igbos practised traditional religion before Christianity was introduced among them.

For the colonial masters to administer Nigeria to their own advantage, they introduced the indirect rule system of government, thereby rubber – stamping the political state of the ethnic nationalities of Nigeria. This according to Bamgbose (2007) was one evil that outlined British administration. The wake of early 20th century saw the birth and rise of pan-Africanism – a universal Negro Association with the aim of liberating Africa from alien rule. Nationalist leaders emerged from different nations of Africa including Nigeria. Prior to independence, three power blocks were established, Kaduna in the North where Sir Ahmadu Bello, the Sarkin Sokoto emerged as the leader, Ibadan in the West where Obafemi Awolowo, a renowned lawyer was the leader, Enugu in the East where Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, an accomplished journalist was the leader. This was the pattern that was prelude to the independence of Nigeria. That today there is still underdevelopment in Nigeria is as a result of the challenges posed by the indices of pluralism. This paper is an attempt to highlight both the negative and positive implications of religious pluralism as it affects national development in Nigeria and the way forward.

Religious Pluralism and its Effects on National Development

The definition of religion as a social phenomenon had been considered a difficult job in that no single definition really satisfies for one thing, religion in its almost unimaginable variety calls for description rather than definition (Elizabeth, 1990).

Another sociologist, Yinger in a book entitled (1970:7) defines religion as:

... a system of belief and practices by means of which a group of people struggles with these ultimate problems of human life. It expresses their refusal to capitulate to death, to give up in the face of frustration, to allow hostility to tear apart their human association ...

Yinger stated among other things that men need some absolute values to enable them live harmoniously in this problematic world of suffering. Karl Marx in Anyacho (2008), sees religion as “an opium of the Masses created and dominated by the ruling class of the society with the aim of providing moral pleasure and psychological outlet which preserve the class structure”. Marx traced the source of religion in any society as its essence as well. Smart (1973) posits:

A religion or the religions of people may be defined as “a set of institutionalized rituals identified with tradition and expressing and/or evoking social sentiments directed at a divine or trans-divine focus seen in the context of the human phenomenological environment and at least partially described by myth or myths and doctrine”

Smart makes it clear that there are religions and each is often peculiar to a people and each has “a set of institutionalized rituals with a purpose”. What have been referred to as rituals here can also be called practices which are peculiar to a particular religion.

Religious is an adjective that is derived from the word ‘religion’ literary means the belief in existence of a god or gods and the activities that are connected with the worship of them. Etymologically, the two root words ‘Leg’ and ‘Lig’. ‘Leg means to take up, gather or observe – to observe the signs of – divine communication, while, ‘lig’ means ‘to bind’. It is from this that a religion came to mean – “a relationship” or “a communion between the human and the supernatural” (Anyacho, 2008). Pluralism in other hand is the existence of many different groups of people in one society, for example, people of different races or of different political or religious beliefs.

Religious pluralism therefore is an attitude or policy regarding the diversity of religious belief system co-existing in the society. First, pluralism is not diversity alone, but the energetic engagement with diversity.

Diversity can and has meant the creation of religious ghettos with little traffic or among them. Mere diversity without real encounter and relationship will yield increasing tensions on our societies. Secondly, pluralism is not just tolerance, but the active seeking of understanding across lines of differences. Tolerance is a necessary public virtue but it does not require Christians, Muslim, Hindu, Jews and ardent secularists to know anything about one another. Tolerance is a too thin- foundation for any nation of religious differences and proximity. It does nothing to remove our ignorance of one another and leave in place of the stereotype, the half-truth, the fears that underline old pattern of division and violence. Thirdly, pluralism is not relativism, but the encounter of commitments. It means holding our deepest differences, even our religious difference not in isolation but in relationship to one another.

Finally, pluralism is based on dialogue. The language of pluralism is that of dialogue and encounter, give and take, criticism and self-criticism. Dialogue means both speaking and listening and that process reveal common understanding and real differences (Gerald, 1997).

Development

Development is the act, process of developing. It is a factor or circumstance that brings about a new situation either through growth, evolution or expansion. The term development has been variously conceptualized from economic, political social and national perspective. All society do experience development although it has always been uneven and different from one place to another. Okwueze (2003), opined that development is not only thinking about growth, increase usually in infrastructure or on tangible material things which is misleading but that the word underdevelopment, underdeveloped, developing and developed should be carefully used because development is a steady improvement of people in their lives. In the words of Egbeke Aja, development is either material or non material and the two are very important. By material development, we mean infrastructure as roads, railways, airports, buildings, good transport/communication systems, improved health facilities, quality learning and educational personal etc.

All these and more are good indicator of improved living standards of a people. Non material development is concerned not with physical structures, but with the improvement of the individuals as a human being. To a large extent, it reflects both the individuals and collective values of a people. National development here means the Nigerian state moving higher or greater than where she is now to achieve the material and non material set goals with her national and human resources for the general well being of her citizenry.

Religious pluralism as a Tool for National Development

In approaching religion, there exists diversity in the characteristics and attitudes of adherents of particular religious sympathizers and critics. There are two major religions in Nigeria, Christianity and Islam. There is also the existence of our indigenous African traditional religion which is not so antagonistic with the other two above. Most world religion accepts the concept of supreme God that directs and oversees the affairs of the world. He punishes those that sin against Him except if they repent and seek

forgiveness from this most High Being. All the world religions preach peace with others and peace with God (Okwueze, 2003: p 22). Religious canvass for the acquisition of knowledge, justice, and fairness in the conduct of worldly affairs, including honesty, transparency and service to mankind. The implication is that if religion is allowed to direct the conduct of man, they shall have a peaceful and progressive nation where all will be equal. It therefore means that those who instigate crises are hypocritical who can do so not for religious interest but in pursuing self-agenda (Ahmadu, 2007).

Religion, especially Christianity plays a vital role for stability and development of the nation, for instance, during Nigeria/Biafra war of 1967 – 1970. The church embarked upon campaigns of mediation. She made several trips abroad to appeal to international humanitarian agencies to come to the rescue of the war-torn Biafrans. Consequently, food items, clothing and drugs were donated in large quantity by WCC, UNICEF, WHO, UNESCO and Red Cross Society. Nigeria is in deer need of developing materially and none materially for the general well being of her citizenry. There is need for Christians, Muslims and Traditional Religionist to respect one another for a peaceful, harmonious living.

“The quest for inter-religious dialogue in the world today, has in no little way attracted the attention of Christians in Nigeria, Africa and the world over. This is because, religious pluralism is reality of the world in which we live The experience of war, economic problem and religious need have taught people that they cannot remain closed for ever. People today are becoming more interested to know other peoples culture and then to dialogue with them. Inter-religious dialogue has become urgent and important nowadays, to the evangelizing mission of the church” (Oji, 2009: P. 36).

Religious Pluralism in Negative Development

The ethno-religious pluralism has not been for the best interests of Nigeria as it has been the basis for many conflicts. Nigeria as a nation-state has witnessed the most perturbing and unprecedented upsurge of ... religious disturbance ... (Anugwom and Oji, 2011: p. 38). Religious riot has remained a constant threat to peace in Nigeria and has continued co-existence and habitation of the different ethnic nationalities that make up the country. One of the major religious crises ever witnessed in Nigeria on a large disturbing scale is the maitasine religious riot in 1980 in Kano, Jumeta Yola in 1984, in Gombe in Bauchi State in 1985 (Okwueze, 2003: P. 40). These were followed by religious disturbances in Illorin in 1986, in Bauchi in 1991, Kano 1991, Zango-Kataf in 1992 and recently in 2000, the Sharia riots in the Northern states of Zamfara, in Kaduna, Kano and the reprisal attack in the East. Nigeria’s religious riots occurred in Aba, Umuhia, Owerri and Akwa Ibom State (Anugwom: 2006: P 42). Boko Haram is now the talk of the day in some states of the North like Borno, Adamawa, Gwombe, and even Abuja.

This is traced to the acrimony between the two dominant religions - Islam and Christianity. Such wanton destruction of life and property retard the development of the nation. It is this same attitude that has made Nigerians live in perpetual fear of one religious riot or the other. Any religion that encourages mobilization of men’s energies for immediate action, denunciation of the enemy, reassurance of the armies of the faithful and brand others traitors, preaches disintegration of the society is not calling for development. Robinson (2009: 18) puts it, that religion which preaches supreme truth

concerning divinity, the world and man, the call of spiritual reform of the individual and the teaching history of divine intervention in the lives of men is more likely to create harmony and unity within the society. This is the only way religious pluralism can help in developing the nation.

According to the Nkokelonye (2005), “If there is lack of value consensus or conflict in ideology and there is an atmosphere of conflicting value orientation Overt conflict is triggered off, initiated and promulgation of conflict follow, cohesion of the society is interfered with, social institutions of the society will change leading to social change in the society, positive change (change for better), bring progress, national development and advancement” p. 258.

Religious pluralism: How to achieve National Development in Nigeria

- i. Nigerians must irrespective of religious affiliations have the peace, stability and development of Nigeria uppermost in its priorities. There is no other Nigeria except this one.
- ii. Nigerian should not be quick to forget how they lived in harmony in the time past before, other religious traditions, colonialism, modernity etc came to the land. Those values that bound them together such as love for one another, family and family name, “I live because we live” must be pursued.
- iii. Religious leaders irrespective of their affiliation must preach the true messages of their religions stressing on love for one’s neighbours, sanctity of human life.
- iv. Those who manipulate religion for their selfish goals must be condemned and be made to face the wrath of the law when necessary.
- v. Nigerians must bear in mind that, that person whose neighbour’s life, property, security and peace are not safe because of religious bigotry, intolerance, fanaticism, fundamentalism, is not a true Muslim, Christian or Traditionalist.
- vi. The leaders, religious and secular must shun corruption, immorality, election rigging etc and live by examples.
- vii. All must be ready in Nigeria to learn and allow their lessons from the Yoruba stock or tribe in Nigeria to guide their toleration of other tribes and religions in Nigeria.

Azuka Onwuka’s comparison of a typical Yoruba family is very instructive to all the Nigeria.

“A couple with six children could have a family like this: the man is a Muslim; the wife attends the celestial church of Christ; the first child started as a Muslim but converted to Christianity and is now a member of a Pentecostal church; the second child is a devout Muslim; the third and fifth children are members of the Methodist Baptist church; the fourth child attends no church or mosque but prefers the Yoruba gods whenever he has any spiritual needs, and the last child is an Anglican”. One would assume that with this seemingly cacophony of religions in this family, there would be constant religious tensions, hatred, quarrels and fights in it. No, in Yoruba lands, no one disturbs the other because of religion. Interestingly, during Islamic festivals, Christians join their relatives to celebrate. For example, the Governor of Lagos State, Mr. Babatunde Fashola, is a Muslim while his wife is a Christian.

Conclusion

There are variety of religions in the world and Nigeria in particular. All of them have peace, love for oneself and neighbours in their teachings. It is true the West America – precisely is calling for all religions to come together and respect each others beliefs system for harmonious living. There is also a discovery that most Christian believers do not approve religious pluralism due to its attendant denial of the exclusive salvation in Jesus Christ and its denial of the inerrancy of the scriptures.

It is a clarion call by this paper to urge those Christian believers against religious pluralism to remember what Jesus injunction was. That Nigerians should love their neighbours as themselves. Even Paul asked that if it were possible to live at peace with all men, they can relate with our Muslim brethren and still retain our individual belief in Jesus Christ as Christians, we can as well synergize those good qualities of Africa traditional religion for better Nigeria such as justice, truth, equity, love, honesty, hardwork, respect for elders, women, children, respect for human life, hospitality etc.

Nigeria is in need of the contributions of the church to maintain peace and stability especially now that Nigeria is passing through hard times orchestrated by the Islamic fundamentalists group Boko Haram. The Moslem brothers in Nigeria must also remember that Islam in its true sense is a religion of peace which preaches love for neighbours including people of the Book – Jews and Christians. The wanton destruction of lives and properties since the inception of President Goodluck Jonathan's government is retrogressive in all ramifications. There is need for perpetrators of this heinous act against fellow citizens to sheath their sword and return to dialoguing table. What is the use of this life if it is not to make this world a better place for those who will come after they have left?

Nigeria needs peace and stability to achieve their goals in unity, for they are brothers and sisters, and have lived together for years now. You can be you, I can be me, it doesn't matter. No religion preaches violence. Let us say no to violence now. No matter where you come from, no matter your religion Nigerians are one, let us live together, let us give peace a chance.

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