

## The Challenges of Religion in National Integration in Nigeria

Chinyere Isaac Madukwe  
University of Nigeria

### Abstract

The history of political development in Nigeria since independence has remained chequered. Prior to the emergence of colonial rule and its Christian tradition, the people of Nigeria composed of a mixture of traditionalists and Islam adherents. This division to certain degree had a correlation to geography, ethnic and language differences. The British colonial rule in Nigeria exploited these differences. The political elite that emerged with the attainment of independence in 1960, did not stop at playing on these differences to gain political and economic power. This paper, which is an attempt in historical analysis surveys the negative roles which religious had been used in Nigeria and suggested that the tide could be turned, if the positive elements imbued in religion (generally) are harnessed to sustain the fragile political unity of Nigeria.

### Introduction

The various people that later came to be called Nigerians, from their earliest of history, were not irreligious. The various socio-cultural communities were indeed involved in the worship of various deities going by different names prior to the arrival of Islamic and Christian religions. Religion in most of the communities then, was the foundation of their political, economic and socio-cultural behaviours. The rulers (elders in some cases) and the priests or high priests, based on their positions as custodians of traditions, were deeply involved in religious activities. The communal aspect of the African culture is replicated in their religious worship, such that any infringement by an individual against the tradition was not just a personal thing, but a community affair (Madukwe, C. & Madukwe H, 2010:280). One other peculiar character about the religious behaviour of Nigerians in the period under discussion is its non-proselytizing nature. With the arrival of foreign religions, first Islam around the 10<sup>th</sup> century AD in Borno Kingdom and subsequently in Hausaland around the 14<sup>th</sup> century A.D, added to the coming of colonial government, with its Christian tradition, the whole scenario changed. Primarily owing to the proselytizing and competitive nature of the two religions, combined with the near delineation of the major groups on both ethnic and religious lines, the situation deteriorated.

With the attainment of independence on October 1 1960, the political and subsequently military elites have continued to manipulate the obvious differences, in both religion and ethnicity to the detriment of political stability in Nigeria. The havoc which religion has been put into use in Nigeria has therefore continued to agitate the minds of many scholars and leaders of thought. This paper therefore,

aims at suggesting to the contrary, that religion could become a means of sustaining our fragile polity unity.

### An Over-view of the Religious Characters of the People of Nigeria Prior to Colonial Rule

Historically, as earlier mentioned, the various groups that now make up the Nigerian nation, had manifested various religious beliefs and practices through the prism of culture, politics and economic activities. The Nigerian cultural groups, according to linguistic findings and 1952/53 census are more than 200 distinct ethno-lingual and cultural groups. (Udo, Reuben K. 1980:14) These people had their different indigenous African Traditional Religions that were peculiar to them. Historically, it is usually a near impossibility in attempting to ascertain the origin of various religious belief and practices. Generally, the religious milieu of the people centred primarily on the worship of deities, divinities, ancestral spirits and so on. The Igbo people, for example, believed that through these divinities they have access to the supreme God (Chukwu or Chineke) (Iwuagwu, A.O. N.d.: 28). Thus, to fully comprehend the worldview of reality as perceived by the people in relation to their social, political and economic behavioural pattern, understanding the religious matrix is essential. Emphasizing further on the permeability of religion to an African in an ontological order, Mbiti, (1990:2) opines,

Where the Africa is, there is his religion; he carries it to the fields where he is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop; he takes it with him to the beer party or to attend a funeral ceremony; and if he is educated, he takes religion with him to the examination room at school or in the university; if he is a politician he takes it to the house of parliament.

He implies that Africans are highly religious. Logically, it follows that for either Islam or Christianity to be fully accepted by the people and, at the same time, replace the position of indigenous religion in the life of the people; its influence must be pervasive enough. This may also probably explain why at the initial inception of both Islam and Christianity in Nigeria, there were elements of syncretic manifestations by the new adherents, which partly explains the need for consolidation either through jihads or through various Christian crusades.

Islam, though a foreign religion, has been long in the northern part of Nigeria, such that the culture, politics and economic life of the people have been deeply Islamized (Adamu, M.A., n.d.). At its early inception, it was the religion of the nobles, kings and traders. Primarily owing to the dire need of literate scholars, interpreters, courtiers and the prestige of recognition and association with a foreign religion of repute, many Hausa rulers were converted. It later received the acceptance of the populace through the influence of these rulers. Generally, at its early inception before the Fulani-led jihad of 1804, it was a syncretic religion, with the mixture of indigenous religious practices. (Balogun, 1980:213-215)

Muslims basically believe that their religion has no separation between their secular and sacred life. It affects every area of their life. Islam is a

proselytizing religion that believes in its supremacy and, at the same time, the last revelation of God to mankind, through its prophet, Mohammed.

On the other hand, “the church” which symbolizes ‘the body’ of Christ – spiritually, has comparatively had a long history in Nigeria though ‘a foreign religion’. Its foot-hold in Nigeria has been on as far back as the 14<sup>th</sup> century through the Portuguese. But from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, through the activities of ex-slaves and the early European missionaries (through the facilitation of Trading Companies), its impact became more pervasive and visible in Nigeria. According to Nabofa, (1989:99) the indigenization of the church in Nigeria has been on as far as 1898, especially in the west (Yoruba land). Prior to this time, by 1842 Christianity was planted at Abeokuta in the west by European missionaries. Therefore, considering the duration of Christian activities in Nigeria, (the spiritual arm of colonialism) long before colonial rule started proper, it merits a comparative assessment with the review of Islam and A.T.R.

Basically, the Bible being the standard book for Christian rules and regulations is unequivocal about how the believer should live and relate with others in the society. According to Christ teachings (Mathew, 5:14) as expounded by Saint Paul in the epistle to the Romans 12:17-20, it admonished Christian faithful to,

Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men. If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men. Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. Therefore, if thine enemy hunger, feed him: if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. (KJV).

In these short verses, the Christian is expected to manifest the virtues of honesty, peace, non-retaliation to offences, goodness to perceived enemies, and making all necessary efforts to show deeds of kindness in all circumstances, to all men.

### **Colonial Policy towards Islam and Christianity in Nigeria and its Aftermath**

The British colonial rule in Nigeria had been described by scholars and historians alike in various idioms as exploitative, manipulative, vindictive and so on. With the piecemeal pacification of the Nigerian territories by the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, through their superior and advanced weaponry, the whole people of Nigeria capitulated to their rule and dominion. In ruling the vast territories they have conquered, the British employed various administrative strategies. In the North, based on their long familiarity with the Islamic religion, aligned with an already theocratic rule and with a functional administrative set-up of the caliphate; the British employed the policy of indirect rule. (Clarke, P.B. 1988:187). Moreover, because of the short-fall in the supply of colonial personnel to man the vast northern territory, the policy of indirect rule became necessary and convenient. By making use of the Emirs mainly in the new dispensation, it meant that the northern minority groups outside their influence would be forced into their rules as subjects, a situation that was non existence before the colonial rule. Under such condition,

Islam enjoyed an advantage which it never had before now in converting the subject people under its suzerain. (Crampton, E.P.T. 1975:53)

Again, the colonial policy towards Islamic religion can also be seen from the angle of undue protection of Islam from the influence of Christian faith, by refusing Christian missionaries access to Muslim territories in the North. (Crampton, E.P.T. 1975:51). This policy later created a lacuna in the level of educational attainment (western education) between the South and North; with the result that when eventually the need for independence attainment arose, the northern delegates in the National Assembly of 1953, based on the unequal relationship (in education and political development) with the south, rejected the motion by Anthony Enahoro. (Osadolor, 1998:42) In the opinions of their foremost leaders, Mallam Tafawa Belewa and Sir Ahmadu Bello, they said respectively among other things that,

...By virtue of their being geographically situated near the sea coast, the Western and Eastern Regions came under the British influence earlier than the Northern Religion ... The South with its many schools and colleges, is producing hundreds of academically and technically qualified people for the public services.. (Albert,1998:52) (FN 1957:728-741).

Sir Ahmadu Bello in his own case said that,

The north does not intend to accept invitation to commit suicide... if the Honourable members from the West and East speak to this motion unamended, for their people I must say here and now, Sir, that we from the North have been given no such mandate by our people ... we were late in assimilating western education... (Albert, 1998:54) (House of Representatives' Debates, March 31, 1953 p. 992 quoted in Nkemdirim 1975:68-9).

In the eastern territory, the policy of indirect rule was equally put to work among the people to make room for easy administration. The Easterners, unlike the Northerners, lacked similar indigenous political administration. This warranted the establishment of a novelty in the East known as "Warrant Chiefs". In most cases, majority of these chiefs were neither people of nobility nor of repute. The activities of these Chiefs did not help matters either, especially in the collection of more tax than they were mandated to. On the whole, the colonial policy in the Eastern part of Nigeria, with the activities of the Christian missionary societies, brought about fundamental changes, both on the level of educational attainment and religious practices. The general acceptance of the mission schools by the people brought about massive education of many Easterners, with the accompanying conversions to the Christian faith. There was no restriction either on the part of the colonial government or from the people subsequently. The effect of the activities of the Christian missionaries, in terms of penetration of the whole land, had led to the erroneous notion that the East is "a homogenous Christian community".

In the middle of what one may term as two extreme conditions, with respect to the response of the people to Christianity and indigenous religion, stands

the West. The West, just like the East and the North, has various groups that form the minorities, with the Yoruba people as the major cultural group. In their own peculiar case, the arrivals of Islam and Christianity subsequently had been on even before colonization started. Islam came into the territory as far back as 17<sup>th</sup> century through slaves, traders and missionaries from Nupe. (Balogun, S.A. 1980:218-219) At the initial inception, the adherents were few and dispersed. The indirect effect of the 1804 Jihad led to the carving out of Ilorin Emirate, as a result of the treachery of Afonja. The result of his action brought about suspicion and persecution of the few Moslem, among the people. With the abolition of slave trade by the British and other European nations, leading to the return of former slaves, some of whom were Muslims to Lagos and Abeokuta, the lot of Islam improved in Yorubaland (Gbadamosi & Ajayi, Ade 1980:348). With this scenario on the ground, when eventually the activities of Christian missionaries increased with colonial government from the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Yorubaland, competition for converts became fierce over who would dominate and control the religious life of the people. The usual missionary strategy of using education as a bait worked initially, but quickly the Muslims withdrew their wards/children from Christian schools. This led them to thinker with the possibility of establishing Islamic organizations like Ansar-Ud-Deen and others, with the sole aim of maximizing Western education, without any harm to their faith. The result of this move was tremendous in producing literate Muslims among the Yorubas early enough. (Gbadamosi & Ajayi, Ade 1980:355-356) The policy of excluding Christian missionaries, as was the case in the North, did not arise despite the protest of Muslims, over the attitude of the missionaries in Yorubaland. This goes to explain the fact that the colonial policy in Nigeria, with respect to either Islam or Christianity, was based on convenience and the interest of the colonialist.

### **Aspect of Religious Politics during the Post-Colonial Government**

Prior to the arrival of colonial government in Nigeria, as has been noted, the people of Nigeria were either adherents of African Traditional Religion or Islam. With the emergence of colonial rule from the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the scenario took a new turn. The coming of Christian religion with colonial rule became a threat to both Islam and A.T.R. This arose primarily because, unlike the indigenous religion, both Islam and Christianity are proselytizing faiths, seeking for converts and prominence in the land. Moreover, the history of Islam and Christianity, right from time remains that of suspicion and contention, as a result of some irreconcilable differences in their doctrines and teachings. (Ozigboh, Ikenga R.A. 1988:35)

Thus, with the arrival of the colonial government with its Christian tradition, the reaction of Northern Emirs was that of apprehension and suspicion over what would be the policies and activities of the colonialist. This made the colonial authorities not to do anything to substantiate their fears, by allowing the Emirs to continue in authority over their people, (though as figure-heads) and by refusing Christian missionaries access to the “core north” territories (Crampton, 1975:46). On the other hand, the missionaries were allowed to enter other Northern territories outside the control of Islam, like the lands of Tiv, Birom, southern

Kaduna people and the rest. The result was that from these groups, many became converted to the Christian religion. Some of these people, because of the long standing conflict they had with Moslems saw Christianity as a means to rebuff the activities of Islam in their midst. (Clarke, Peter B. 1982:219)

As has earlier been noted, the disparity in the level of educational attainment, between the North and the South, the obvious gap in political development became worrisome. Following the motion for independence by Anthony Enahoro in 1953 and the reactions that followed by both supporters and opposers, it deepened the politics of Regionalism and religious sentiments. The Northern leaders in order to contain their fears of southern domination in the political chess that played out used Islamic religion and the monolithic north syndrome when it suited them (Albert, 1998:53). And as Appadorai (1968:4) opines, “a political society is clearly in an unsatisfactory condition when its members have no consciousness of any bond of unity among them, except obedience to a common government”. Furthermore, in the opinion of El Mahdi (2001:7), former Sudanese leader;

“The nation-states, along with the democratic system of government are both relatively newly acquired experience. They sit uncomfortably astride societies, which have not experienced fusion into nation for a long period. They continue to see religion, tribe, ethnicity, and other ascriptive factors, as the cement of common identity.”

Thus, with the “Triple Heritage” of Traditional African Religion, Islam and Christianity, according to Ali Mazrui, coupled with the politics of domination and fears that play out, it meant that local identities would continue to serve as a means of political relevance and competition. Nigeria’s case during the period under study was compounded based on the fact that with the exception of the Yoruba group that had both adherents of Islam and Christianity on almost equal basis, the two dominating groups in the East and the North (Igbo and Hausa) had a near delineation based on religion differences.

### **Religion As a vehicle for National Integration**

Religion as a social phenomenon is attributed to all human beings. Despite different religious beliefs, it is assumed that all religious practices have as their goal “the common good” of all. This implies that no religious body is antithetical to the socio-political good of the people. But the application of the essence of religion has remained a very sore point in the development of nations.

Historically, the impact of African Traditional Religion on the Nigerian people has manifested in the political, social and economic lives of the people as a veritable means of cohesion. The arrival of foreign religions and the activities they were put into, especially during the colonial period, helped to entrench primordial and religious politics in Nigeria. The politicians in their bid to secure political and economic relevance have continued to play on their common identity of religion, ethnicity and so on.

However, despite differences in religious affiliations, and the underlying politics, elements abound in the different religions which, if properly harnessed have the potential to support and sustain the building of a cohesive nation. Referring to the Qur'anic teachings on unity among all irrespective of religious inclination, (Alkhateeb, 1970:11-12) cited the chapter of Al-Hujurat:

'O mankind. Lo. We have created you male and female, and have made you nations and tribes that ye may know one another. Lo. The noblest of you in the sight of Allah, is the best in conduct. Lo. Allah is knower, aware'. (Qur'an, Surah 49, verse 13)

In the same Qur'an/Surah 60, verse 8 (Alkhateeb, 1970:12) quoted it as saying;

"Allah forbiddeth you not those who warred not against you on account of religion and have driven you out from your homes that you should show them kindness and deal justly with them. Lo. Allah loveth the just dealers.

From these two quoted chapters of the Qur'an, it becomes very clear that Islam as it were, has very strong elements which, if built upon, have the potential to encourage the stability and unity of Nigerians.

Furthermore, he claimed that Islam accepts religious plurality since by interpretation of Qur'an verse (2:19) "religion in the eyes of God is Islam", goes beyond the face interpretation to include other religions/prophets "who submitted their will to God". [El Mahdi, 2001:12]. He enthused that the application of the principle of Jihad is only subscribed to as a means of self-defense; and drew attention to some Islamic political principles, which tenets deals with "justice, consultative participation, freedom, equality..." and so on. The issues he raised are very fundamental, especially with respect to a multi-religious nation like Nigeria. Unfortunately, some of the religious leaders have failed to emphasize on these, which have the leverage to tame religious bigotry in Nigeria, when they are conscientized in the minds of the adherents of religion.

With respect to religious pluralism, the teachings of Qur'an recognize the existence of other world religions like Judaism and Christianity. It only claims that Islam is the last revelation of God to humanity. The argument follows that all the other religious leaders, like Abraham, Moses, and Christ are all recognized as Allah's Messengers in their own time. Thus such area of convergence could be built upon for unity and harmony.

In the teachings of Christ as the proclaimer of the Christian faith, his emphasis is always on love and forgiveness: to pray for your enemies and for those that despise and maltreat you: to do good to your enemies and as much as lies in you, to live peaceably with all men. He never advocated violence or retaliation to offences; rather he preached turning the other cheek when you are maltreated. He was and is still an epitome of peace, love and humility.

Thus, since religious belief, naturally, manifest itself by the actions of the leaders who are either Christians, Muslim or Traditionalist, it follows that the virtues of these teachings, if properly adhered to, will act as a cementing factor for the unity of this nation. According to [Ogwu, 2001:4],

By emphasizing the essence of all religions as peace and justice, religion in the hands of leaders can be used to integrate and harmonize diversities and differences. Through the promotion of the virtues of tolerance, truth, forgiveness and reconciliation, every society, I believe can transcend crippling dichotomies and creatively integrate its pluralities and diversities to deepen and greatly enrich the process of democracy, unity and nation-building.

The argument centered on turning the tide and building from the differences in religion with emphasis on the virtues inherent in all religious practices to sustain our political unity. Considering the diversities of Nigeria in term of ethnicity, language, culture, geography and so on, religion happens to be “the single factor that jolts the unfortunate boundaries of this nation cutting across distinctions of tribe, sex and class, to bind people together” (Edim, 1984:293).

In support of the teachings and life of Christ, which is rooted in “love for God and man” (Mark 12:28-31) and with the great potential of breaking sectional barriers in Nigeria, Edim, (1984:296) contends that “nothing can change a mind better than love”. In the same vein, one of the cardinal teachings of Islam is the complete submission to God’s will, which is enunciated in peace and justice, while opposing oppression, injustice of any sort. Therefore, both religions have the leverage and capacity to drive away the rottenness of injustice, corruption, ethnicity and so on, which have continued to clog the wheel of Nigerian unity.

Inter-faith, with the capacity of building trust, confidence, mutual understanding and respect for others beliefs and practices, has also been advocated as a way out. Moreover, it has the capacity to bring about a sense of tolerance among the adherents. On this note, Francis Cardinal Arinze in a lecture he delivered in 1999, as President of the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, Vatican City, at University of Nigeria, Nsukka, specifically mentioned four such dialogues.

The first deals with adherent of various religions cooperating “in the family, school, place of work, and places of social or cultural encounter, without expressly discussing their religions”. The second being “people of differing religions join to promote some social works such as helping the sick, the poor or people suffering from drought or effects of earthquakes”. This was followed by the next which is a “dialogues of discourse” “between culturally and theologically well – prepared people and is aimed of a more objective presentation of each religion with the consequent reduction or removal of prejudices and stereotypes, and the identification of areas of agreement and difference. ...” (CF. Secretariat for non-Christians: The Attitude of the Church towards the followers of other Religions, Rome 1984, nn. 29-35) (Akwanya A.N. & Onyeneke, A. 1999: 2-3). Such inter-faith dialogue, it is believed could go along way in achieving religious harmony in a multi-religious and ethnic nation like Nigeria.

However, the bottom line is that even where religious beliefs/doctrines have the capacity of sustaining peace and unity, it still falls back to the adherent of the different religion to consciously work towards achieving peace, through mutual tolerance and understanding. A reminiscence of the 2012 backlash of protests that

took place in most of the Muslim countries, which started in the Egyptian Capital, Cairo, over a video by an American-Jew (Sam Bacille) that portrayed Prophet Muhammad in the bad light, comes to mind. Such an unwarranted attack on Mohammed by the video is to say the least uncalled for. The incident widened disharmony and understanding between Christians and Muslims, and considering the volatile precarious religious situation in Nigeria, it had the potential of instigating riots then.

According to H. Deegan, "... the notion of consultation is an important feature of Islam embraced within the institution of Shura (consultation)". In supporting this approach in arresting the embers of enmity and retaliation between the Christians and Muslims, in Jos Plateau-State, cycle of religious-cum-political crises, Akbar Ahmed, agrees. Referring to the Muslims attack on Christians on Christmas Day, 2011, he said:

The Fulani as well as the Kanuri could have responded to attacks upon them by means of traditional tribal justice using dialogue through councils of elders or through the religious leadership. They, however, took a route which negated both their tribal and religious traditions .... (2012:64)

He concluded by saying that "with the cycle of revenge going on, leadership that underlines compassion and non-violence from both their respective faiths, Christianity and Islam, is desperately needed ..." (2012:64)

However, it has been suggested by some keen observers that in tackling the religious crises of the Jos-type, (which seem to have subsided) that efforts should be made to go beyond "the current rapport among religious leaders and government". Beyond the actions taken (then) by both the Governor of Plateau state and Christian leaders in the state, in visiting and commiserating with the victims of flood in 2012, in Jos North Local Government (which is in order), Tajudeen Suleiman opines that the solution should go with how to re-orientate the youths in the state (who are prone to violence) to come together as one" (2012:32).

### **Summary and Conclusion**

The achievement of national integration depends upon a just government for all citizens. There must be 'equilibrium between a powerful and prosperous modern state and concern for the liberty of multifarious cultural elements'. Developing national consciousness is a conscious decision. It requires deliberate policy and efforts. 'The nation is not a given. It can only arise as a result of conscious effort, an existential choice which enables man to escape form (from) natural determinants'. (Okonkwo, 2009: 35)

It has been established in this work that Nigerians are religious people, either as adherents of African Traditional Religion or Islam or as Christians. Moreover, their religious beliefs go beyond their personal affairs. The implication of this is that, religion has become part and parcel of their cultural existence. And as current developmental theorists have agreed upon, any enduring development strategy or concept must always take cognizance of the cultural behavioural pattern

of the people for it to work. Therefore, religion, generally, would continue to remain a cornerstone in the development of Nigeria. The challenge, therefore, rests squarely on both the leaders and the masses to galvanize elements imbued in the various religious practices for the good and sustenance of our land. The problem, as we have noted, is not just that of diverse religious doctrines, but generally wrong and selfish application of numerous religious doctrines by our people. The tide can be turned when our leaders realize the essence of our unity and oneness as a nation. Besides, religious bigotry or politics will not augur well for the good and well being of this nation, since whatever affects the whole; will eventually affect the parts that make up the whole.

In agreement with El Madhi's submission, this essay posits that:

The challenge before our communities is to recognize religious worth in its own right..., and harness the considerable religious energy in nation building and national development (El Mahdi, 2001:19).

In conclusion, the governments, the religious bodies and the family units and all stakeholders of the Nigerian project, have important roles to play in curbing the excesses of religious bigotry in the country. Governments as the custodian of the instrument of power and authority and, the defender of the Constitution; which it's duty on fundamental human rights allows religious freedom and tolerance needs to put more efforts to substantiate its roles in this regard. Synergizing the plans and actions of the three tiers of governments in this regard, with the various security agencies in proactive measures are also paramount.

The problem of Boko Haram phenomenon in Nigeria, currently causing great human and material losses, in Borno, Adamawa and Yobe states and other states, needs to be addressed holistically. Provision of jobs to the teeming unemployed youths, with plans to de-radicalize them among others, should constitute part of the strategy. The current support of the western countries in terms of military equipments and logistics, in addition to the efforts of the United States government to establish a television station within the zone, aimed at redirecting/reforming the minds of the members and populace, from violence, and from being anti-west, is a step in the right direction.

Moreover, the family role in building healthy trust and inculcating mutual love and understanding in the minds of their wards concerning people of different religious beliefs, will go along way in addressing the problem of stereotypes, which had build mutual suspicion and disdain for others. The peculiar nature of the Islamic culture of begging for alms synonymous with the Almajiri's (hordes of destitute youths) mainly boys, with no means of livelihood, without parental cares and control is also a key factor, in addressing this problem. These, are usually the reservoir of 'indoctrinated army' of pliable and willing tools in the hands of religious bigots. The current actions of President Goodluck Jonathan administration in providing free education for the Almajiri's in north, is therefore, an effort in the right direction. (Uzodimma, H. 2004:7)

On the whole, the need to synergize strategies and goals among the various arms of government and all stakeholders, including the religious leaders and

politicians in removing sentiments and “religious politicking” in governance will go along way in building a Nigeria of our dream.

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