The Ambivalent Role of Religion: The Socio-Political Perspective

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Abstract

Religion can be the most powerful influence on the worldview, values, attitudes, motivations, decision, and behavior of individuals, groups and societies for better and worse. Religions are alternative ways of affording nature various cultural, moral, and spiritual meanings, and defining the place of humans in the nature including how they should act toward non-human beings and other phenomena. The literature on religious violence in Nigeria largely implicates socio-economic, political and governance deficits as the major causes of such violence. This article focuses on both positive and negative impacts of religion in Nigeria with a view to finding out its far-reaching effects on the Nigerian society and its politics. The theoretically identified possible destructive elements of religion on the individuals and by extension on the Nigerian society and the politics of the day thereby eroding the peace and harmony needed to forge ahead on national development. To achieve the laudable objectives of this paper the writers adopt the descriptive, historical and the narrative methodology. Possible remedies to surmount this monster against human and national peace are suggested and conclusion drawn on findings.

Keywords: Religion, religious violence, Nigerian politics, role of religion.

Introduction

Religion could serve, and has indeed served as an instrument of harmony in many civilizations. Paradoxically, however, it has also served as a motivation for violence, hence its indication in some literature as a 'double-edged sword' (Isaac-Terwase, 2012). From time immemorial, religious bigots have attempted to legitimatize violence in the name of the Supreme Being. Contemporary acts of extreme violence such as terrorist attacks are often justified as 'holy war'. In the past two or three decades, religion has been at the center of most violence conflicts around the world in general and Nigeria in particular, thereby gaining notoriety as one of the major security challenges confronting Nigeria. A study conducted in Spain has found that societies that are divided along religious lines are more prone to intense and prolonged conflicts than those divided by political, territorial and ethnic differences (Reynal-Querol, 2002). In fact, nothing in life has the magnetic force of religion for centuries and through phases of civilization across the globe. Religion brings so much fanaticism in the lives of people to the extent of making them begin to act like monsters. Perhaps this reality explains the critical role religion plays in the socio-political peace and harmony of the Nigerian society. There is nothing like religion that is capable of pushing its adherents in committing all kinds of atrocities against fellow human beings.

In the course of this work, a close attention will be paid to the common principles of religions that could be harmonized in the interest of the individuals and the nation and the supposed values of religion that could help to build the individuals and consequently foster national development. On the other hand, the destructive elements of religion and how these have brought about irreparable socio-political woes in the country in the recent times will also be duly considered. In this context, the religions of our focus are Islam and Christianity.

Ten Basic Principles common to Religions that must be utilized to ensure Peace and Harmony

According to David Kinsely in his book on *Spiritual Ecology*, there are ten basic principles that all religions have in common which will benefit mankind if only religious leaders will bury their differences and focus on them. They are:
1. Many religions consider all of reality, or some of its components, to be an organic whole or a Living;
2. There is an emphasis on cultivating rapport with the local environment through developing intimate knowledge about it and practicing reverence for its beauty, mystery, and power through ritual celebrations of recognition and appreciation;
3. The human and non-human realms are directly interrelated often in the sense of some kind of kinship and in certain cases, even to the extent of animals beings viewed as another form of humans or persons;
4. The appropriate relationship between humans and nature should be reciprocal: that is, humans do not merely recognise interdependence, but also promote mutually beneficial interactions with nature;

5.   Ultimately the dichotomy between humans and their environment is nonexistent: humans are embedded in nature as an integral part of the larger whole or cosmos;

6.   This non-dualistic view reflects the ultimate elemental unity of all existence : nature and Spirit are inseparable, there is only one reality, and this continuity can be sensed and Experience;

7.   This underlying unity is moral as well as physical: humans and non-humans participate in a Shared moral system wherein environmental issues are and foremost ethical concerns: and Nature has intrinsic as well as extrinsic values;

8.   Humans should act with restraint in nature by avoiding the anthropocentric arrogance of excessive, wasteful and destructive use of the land and other resources and in other ways they should exercise proper behaviour toward plants, animals and other aspects of nature as sacred;

9.   Harmony or balance between humans and the rest of nature must be maintained and promoted and if upset, then it should be restored; and

10. Frequently the motivation, commitment and intensity of ecological concerns are essentially religious or spiritual.

Functions of Religion

Anything that exists that is not useful to the individual, group of persons or the society at large need not exist at all. Religion as a living organism exists not in the abstract but has pragmatic effects in the lives of the individuals as well as in the society as a whole. Major functions of religion can be discussed under: supportive, preservative, protective and corrective.

Man's world is full of complexities and uncertainties coupled with several existential problems. In this respect, religion plays a very vital role by providing emotional aids and encouragement to the individual. Like manner, it provides consolation and reconciliation. Whenever the individuals are alienated from social goals, norms and values, religion provides direction and reconciliation between man and society. In times of defeat, distress, uncertainties and impossibilities, it is religion that provides the needed succor, emotional support for revival and survival. It also encourages and aids spiritual growth and maturation of the individuals in the society which fosters economic, social and peace and harmony.

Religion does not only sacralise the norms, values and traditions of a people but also helps to preserve them. The dos and don'ts in any giving society are usually guarded by the religion of the people, any religion at all. Whatever the religion of the people approves is automatically what that society approves and accepts and vice versa. Under the preservative function of religion, social control, order, right conduct/behaviours in the society are nourished, nurtured, respected and cherished.

Religion being an essential relationship between God and man, offers a transcendental relationship, thoughts and ceremonies of worship including rituals thereby providing the emotional ground for a new security and firmer identity. This ultimately offers man an escapes

route from his numerous life complexities. Religion offers every individual, male/female, rich/poor free and equal access to the creator. In an unfriendly society, religion is an equaliser.

Religion serves a medium to champion charity and good welfare for the poor, the needy and the weak members of the society; it is a medium of redistributing the financial resources in the country. Through the Church, Mosque and the Traditional religions, the rich members of the Nigerian society are expected to generously reach out to the poor and the less privileged.

It is also a useful tool character reformation in the society. Religion is meant to promote the peace, kindness, generosity, friendliness, calmness and good neighborliness. Under ideal situation religion helps individuals and groups to shun hostility, violence, selfishness, greed, and self-centeredness (Dangana, 2012).

Destructive Elements of Religion

The destructive elements of religion in this context are those features of religion that are in themselves are not bad, but because of their misuse by their adherents, they create unnecessary tensions capable of disrupting peace and harmony within and among the individuals as well as the society at large. In other words, they are those factors that directly connected with religion that are hijacked by Christians and Muslims in Nigeria to generate religious conflicts, crises and wars. These will be discussed under: religious intolerance, fundamentalism and extremism; obstructive and disruptive modes of worship; disparaging preaching and stereotyping; proselytizing; government patronage, religious preferentialism and marginalization; and the use of religious symbols.

Religious intolerance, fundamentalism and extremism are features in Christianity and Islam capable of marring the individual adherents, groups, national economy, social and political lives of the entire nation. Religious intolerance is defined as hostility toward other religions, as well as the inability of religious adherents to harmonise between the theories and the practical aspect of religion (Balogun, 1988). In the words of Baird and Rosebaum (1999), religious intolerance encompasses bigotry, which is the obstinate and intolerant devotion to one's opinions and prejudices, especially the exhibition of intolerance and animosity toward persons of differing beliefs. We see as that strong inner push in the adherents in connection with his belief that makes him restless and behaves irrationally.

Closely linked with religious intolerance is religious fundamentalism and extremism. Isaac-Terwase (2012) sees religious fundamentalism and extremism as a religious movement that promotes the literal interpretation of, and strict adherence to religious doctrine, especially as a return to orthodox scriptural prescriptions and doctrinal originality. In other words, it seeks to maintain the status quo of the original doctrine(s) without modification or alteration. Religious fundamentalists hate modernism with a passion for fear that it will adulterate or diminish original doctrinal principles. Regrettably attitudes or characters of this nature are detrimental to both personal and collective peace, harmony and development.

The farthest and most lethal form of religious intolerance is extremism (Isaac-Terwase, 2012). They have zero tolerance, so to speak for the preaching of other faiths. They are religious fundamentalists who take religious conservatism and intolerance to an unreasonable extent, by manifesting violence against those who hold contrary religious view (Terwase, 2012). They have no sympathy or soft spot differing views. They insist that their religious doctrines must be universally entrenched by brute force, while the political, social and economic systems must conform to religious tenets.

The next on our list of religious destructive elements are obstructive and disruptive modes of worship. This is a mode of worship employ by both the Christians and Muslims in public places to the annoyance of motorists and pedestrians (Daily Champion 2006, Ehigiator and Akinbaani, 2002). This according to popular view may not be a welcome sight to behold people of other faiths and even those of the same faith. Both Christians and Muslims are believed to be guilty of this offence which is seen as an affront to the individual legal rights to the use of public roads as well as an act of religious insensitivity and arrogance. Suffice it to say that attitude of this nature does not in any way promote respect, peace and harmony both on individual and national levels.

Disparaging preaching and proliferation by both the Christians and the Muslims are common sights that give rise to disrespect for other's faith and the legal rights of the common man. Often such public preaching is laden with messages signifying the monopoly of salvation and truth (Gofwen, 2004). Proliferation of Churches and Mosques in the country and the pervasive electronic media coverage of religious preaching have helped in no small way in reinforcing the disparaging sermons. With little or no censorship of the critical content of these sermons, some religious fundamentalists have capitalized on these media opportunities to further heighten the already tensed religious unfriendliness in the nation. Another source of provocation and disharmony with respect to religious elements is the use of audio and video preaching in public places. There is also another dimension to inter-faith ridiculing and provocation in Nigeria is manifested in the publication of critical literature by religious intellectuals. In his work, Omotosho (2003) listed the following hate-influenced. Insightful and provocative publications by both Christians and Muslims intellectuals namely: Adetoyo 1993; Mohammen 1990; Moshay 1994; Sanni and Amoo 1987; Suleiman 1997 and others.

Another element capable of disrupting personal and national peace and harmony is the method through which new members are won into the two religions in Nigeria. Although Islam and Christianity deprecate the use of threat and coercion as a means of proselytizing (Omotosho, 2003), their approaches to preaching have remained mentally and sometime physically coercive. Unfortunately, the most visible approach to Islamic conversion campaign especially in the northern part of the country is that of Jihad (holy war). This epitomized by the Boko Haram declaration that Western culture, as represented by Christianity, is polluting and worthy of spiritual purging (Isaac Terwase, 2012). This is because they see adherents of faiths as corrupted stock worthy of Islamic conversion. Similarly, the Christian's method of evangelizing which favours house to house preaching as well as preaching in public places such as hospitals, prisons,

transport avenues create offences to other faith adherents to the extent of arousing acts of violence. This is not an act of religious insensitivity, but a display of religious arrogance (Josef Boehle, 2012).

Religious preferentiality by government officials represents destructive element because it has the tendency to cause disaffection, hated, bitterness and jealousy among the adherents of different faiths. Depending on which part of the country, both at federal and state levels, public officials visibly manifest religious preferentialism by patronizing one religion at expense of others (www.academia.edu). For example, in many northern states in Nigeria, public funds are used in the purchase and distribution of food items and other valuables for Muslims faithful during the Ramadan fast; the gesture which is not extended to Christians during Christmas or traditional religious festivals. Yusuf (1995) neatly summaries it thus:

> Christians have been denied access to electronic media in 16 Northern States, while Islam monopolizes 24 hours for its broadcast in the sameArea…. Every hour the Muslims broadcast provocative statements about Christianity. It means nothing, they proclaim, that people attend church on Sunday only to dance and to listen to songs. Authorities merely wink…

Lastly, on the issue of destructive religious elements is the use of religious symbols. Over the years the use of religious symbols such as Hajab, Niqab and Burka (head scarves) on one hand, and the 'cross' of Jesus Christ in public places have been vehemently opposed by the religious adherents. The inscription of Arabic symbol on Nigeria currency denominations has been contested or questioned by the Nigerian Christians who associate it with Islam and the overarching Islamization agenda by northern Muslims. The various religious features or elements are not harmful in themselves. It is the individual's attitudes and interpretations particularly the opposing adherents that create problems that generate economic, social and political upheavals in the Nigerian nation.

The Importance and Need for Unity among Religions in Nigeria

Economic development and societal wellbeing can only be achieved in an environment where multi-culturalism and multi-religiosity are guaranteed. The significant growth in human development in the Middle-Eastern states of the United Arab Emirates and Qatar and in Malaysia, among others attest to this fact (Isaac Terwase, 2012). Religious diversity should not constitute a barrier to human relations and development; rather it should be a tool or resource for national development. Religion has been misused and abused in Nigeria to perpetrate so much evil that several people are beginning to question the value of religion. The two main religions in Nigeria-Christianity and Islam have so many social virtues that, if practiced, will make the lives of every Nigerian worthy. The fact that the two Religions that are loggerhead in Nigeria have peace as an essential slogan that is enough basis for coming together in a harmonious platform. Islam is from the Arabic word *Asalama* meaning peace while Christians greet "peace be unto you" furthermore, it is worth of note at this juncture that Christians and Muslims trace their origin to Abraham the man of peace. Abraham allowed lot to choose before him in order to give peace a

chance (Genesis 13: 8 -11). The reconciliation of Jacob and Esau has a great lesson to teach Christians and Muslims. Jacob had no peace until he reconciled with his brother Esau. (Genesis 33: 1- 4) Quran 2: 42 also recommend living in peace with others. It is high time both Religions manifest peace in the relationship with each other rather (shalom) than the way it shows in their greetings. Peace be into you; *asalama le ku* or else the Religions demonstrate a high level of hypocrisy.

Furthermore, Sakr (nd) reveals that; this is a message from Mohamad Ibn Abdullah as a covenant to those who adopt Christianity, near and far we are with them. Verily I, the servants, the helpers and my followers defend them, because Christians are my citizens; and by God! I hold out against nothing that displeases them. No compulsion to be on them. Neither their judges be removed from their jobs nor monks from their monasteries. No one is to destroy a house of their religion, to damage it, or to carry anything from it to the Muslims house should anyone take any of these, he would spoil God's covenant and disobey His Prophet. Verily they are my allies and have my secure charter against all that they hate. No one should force to travel or oblige them to fight. The Muslims are to fight for them. If a female Christian is married to a Muslim, it is not to take place without her approval. She is not prevented from visiting her church to pray. Their churches are declared to be protected. They are neither to be prevented from repairing them nor the sacredness or their covenants. No one of the nation (Muslim) is to disobey the covenant till the last Day (end of the world).
"….. There is no compulsion in religion ….." (Quran 2: 256).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The religious faithful in Nigeria should, therefore, realize the fact that religious tolerance and harmony are both legally sanctioned and socially inevitable, as the world can never be composed of one religion or culture. Accordingly, whereas, every religious group has the right to uninhibited religious practice, this must be done with commensurate or reciprocal respect for the rights of other faithful to practice their own religious traditions; provided that such does not constitute any derogation to the right of others to observe their own rituals.

The above desirable situation of religious harmony can be achieved in Nigeria only through the establishment and sustenance of a neo-religious educational system that would generate a culture and orientation of multi-religiosity in our children and youths, as well as a commensurate programme of re-orientation of the adult population. All this while, the dominant model of religious education in Nigeria has been faith –oriented and overwhelmed by religious indoctrination and dogma. Religious education is used to get people to embrace Christianity or Islam, rather than as a process or formation for religious tolerance and dialogue. Consequently, most children and youths are educated within this framework and are thus inclined to adopting a blind faith (Samson, 2012). This religious conservatism gives little for inter-faith understanding and harmony; hence religious intolerance is widespread even among school children. There is therefore, the need to reform the current curriculum on religious studies which before now restricted students to dogmatism.

Furthermore, all religious communities must educate their clergy on the need for religious harmony and the toleration of other faiths, while also educating their clergy and laity on the need to keep their sermons within the realm of moderation and modesty. There is need to strengthen inter-faith dialogue at the national, state and local levels in order to prevent future manifestations of religious disharmony. The Nigerian Inter-Religious Council (NIREC), together with relevant Faith-Base Organizations and Civil Society Organizations should constantly engage in dialogue with the various religious communities, while also serving as a platform for conflict analysis and early warning on religious uproars.

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