RELIGION: A VEHICLE FOR CRISIS, PEACEFUL CO-EXISTENCE AND STABILITY IN NIGERIA

Dr. Clifford Meesua Sibani
Department of Religions, University of Benin
sibaniforus@yahoo.com
08037948880

Abstract

Religion is a fundamental aspect of human existence. Religion is the belief in the super abundant reality who oversees the affairs of human beings and the cosmic environment. Obviously, religion has created serious problems in Nigerian nation via religious intolerance from religious fanatics which has led to the devastation of so many lives and property. However, irrespective of the problems caused by religion in Nigeria, the building of peace bridges for peaceful coexistence and stability and as well standing as a watch dog for good moral conduct in the polity of the nation. This research gives a historical exposition of religious crisis in Nigeria, the value of religion, how religion is maintaining peaceful co-existence and religious dialogue as a means for peace and stability in Nigeria. This research made use of historical method as books and journals were consulted.

Keywords: Vehicle, Religion, Crisis, Stability

Introduction

Nigeria is a country with so many ethnic groups and denominations. The stark reality as stated by Ekwunife[1] is that "Nigeria is composed of people with varied religious perceptions and practices. Three major religions that arerecognized in theory but not in practice with reference to national governance are Christianity Islam and African Traditional Religion (ATR)".It is within the above classification that the people of Nigeria are expected to fall in. One could also notice that some are neither Christian, Muslim nor traditional worshipper. They choose to stay on their own without a religion or with the 'religion of their heart' as they would say (atheist).The importance of inward transformation which is the major work of religion in the peaceful co-existence of a nation cannot be over emphasized. However, religion in Nigeria could be the reason for lack of peace and riot. This is so because the nation has not allowed religion to permeate her and transform her heart. From the early 1950s up till now Nigeria has recorded many crises and riots which are religious, most of the causes of these riots or crises are lack of understanding respect for one another and wrong doctrinal teachings from religion and religious leaders.It is not gain-saying that the Nigerian state cannot do without religion because during electoral campaign politicians use religious platform for sensitization, seeking for their votes and prayers. During swearing- in of newly appointed political leaders, religion is invoked as religious leaders offer prayers for their installation.

Definition of Religion

In defining the term religion, Adam[2] posits that "peoples belief in the life of the spirit and usually in one or more gods; a particular system of this belief and all the ways of this belief and all the ways of expressing our love for your god ceremoniesand duties that are connects with it".Karl[3] holds that "there can be no easy going approach to the subject of religion today, above all if one considers it the quintessence of one's relationship to God. The word religion seems to have fallen into discredit. But if one must analyzethe difficulties involved in term and then offer the philosophical and theological reason for containing to use it".

Religion as defined by Obiefuna[4]"is a property of humans. Man is a born religious, a religious man".Parrinder[5]opines that "religion enters into the life of every individual, and there are certain transitional rites through which everybody has to pass".Religion in the subjective and objective sense has been described by Madu[6] thus:

> Subjectively, religion is the very consciousness of dependence on a transcendent being and the very propensity or indicator or inclinators to exhibit cult of worship.Objectivelyreligion is a complex of truths, laws and rites by which man is subordinated to the transcendent being. In that case religion denotes man's moral relations with God, relations of creatures to the creator. In it, internally and freely acknowledges his dependence on God, as well as externallyexpresses acts of cult either individually or communally.

Religion according to Ekwunife[7] is:

> That God/man relationship organized and expressed in human society through beliefs, creed and worship, ethical and moral behaviors. The term God is to be understood as that supra-sensible ultimate reality-personalized as impersonalized whichgives ultimate meaning tohuman existence and activities, the locus for solving deep riddles of human existence.

Sibani[8] posits "religion is the quest for humanity to have an object of worship which directly or indirectly becomes their God or god and is the basis for their belief and driving force". Contextually, religion is a mechanism of adjusting and solving problems, not only overcoming anxiety but also of ordering one's relationship with the superabundant reality and in the process supporting social norms and integrating society and personalities.

Historical Expositions of Religious Crisis in Nigeria

In the face of numerous religious crises in Nigeria, one would be forced to ask questions. What is the value of religion in Nigeria? Is religion meant to cause violence and crisis? What is the contribution of religion towards national unity and peaceful co-existence among the different tribe in Nigeria? The crisis is not only found between the Christians and Muslims but also among the Christendom: among the different denominations in Christianity.In African Traditional Religion, ancestors are seen as a medium

orintermediary to approach the Supreme Diety. Obviously, all the three main religions in Nigeria above believe that there is only one God. In Christianity, Emesowum[9] holds:

> We all believed that there is only one God and one Christ as well as only one Christian faith. In the face of this uniform position, doctrinal differences and conflicting beliefs are still found lingering among Christians, and are devastating the Christian faith.These divergences are actually contrary to the position of Christianity as at the days of the Apostles. The gospel that could be heard from eachof the Apostles was always in conformity with what the others were teaching.There existed unity of purpose among them.

Christ prayed for the unity of his followers but today that prayer has been thrown away. Division, disunity, disagreement have wrecked the Christian denominations. They fight one another and bring a state of unrest in the country. Ekwunife[10]opinion holds that:

> It is also pertinent to remark that religious conflicts can be in-intra conflict involving parties with the same religious perceptional and objectives like various Christians denominations –Catholics versus protestants, feuds within the Catholic folds like Bishops and clergy, Bishop versus religious bodies, conflict within each religious institute, protestants among themselves; fundamentalist and orthodox Muslims and so on.

One would immediately wonder ifit is true for Christendom, what or how the relationship between Christianity and Islam and traditional religion is going to be like. Viewing the unhealthy situation in Nigeria, one sees insecurity, crisis, riots and wars.

According to Ibanga[11], the dawn of inter -conflicts in Nigeria surfaced with the amalgamation of the northern and the southern Nigeria in 1914 by Sir Fredrick Lugard. The Southern part of Nigeria was dominantly Christian and the Northern protectorate Muslim. The traditional religion which existed before the foreign religion was relegated to the background. The foreign religions were exclusive in their evangelization and subsequent mode of life. According to a reputable author, Ekwunife[12] avers that "the years 1950-1965 may be regarded as a kind of lull in religious conflicts, characterized by collective battle for self rule independence; and the task of finding an acceptable viable ideological practical frame work for governing the multifarious cultural societies that compose Nigeria at the state and federal levels".

The Nigerian civil war (1967-1970) brought to light religious conflict between the Christians and the Muslims. This is only not a religious war but also tribal war. Within the period 1980-2000 witnessed intermittent religious crisis with its peak during Buhari and Babangida era (1983-1997)[13]. Somecrisis precipitated the religious conflict and riots.Ekwunife[14] posits thus:

> Sharia issue (1976-1979) which is repeatedly revisited in the nations constitutional debate, membership of Nigeria in the organization of Islamic conference (1986), riots in the nation's tertiary institutions like

> University of Ibadan, College of Education in Kafanchan, Kaduna Polytechnic; and many other conflicts which were located outside the confines of Nigeria ivory towers like the Maitatsime Muslim religious up-rising of 1980 and 1984; Bauchi, Kano and Katsina riots of 1991, Akalukas case (1984) and so on. All these conflicts took place in the Northern and Southern part of the nation. The combatants were mainly Christians versus Muslims. African traditional religion is used as fodders for the fight since both sides castigates each others as infidels and unbelievers. It never occurred to the combatants to learn the lesson of tolerance from the traditional religion.

In the Southern part of Nigeria, the strife is between Christians and traditional worshippers. Akankpa's[15] opinion has it that the traditional worshippers are usually not pugnacious. They do not disturb the Christians in their mode of worship rather it is the Christians who have vowed that they will not have rest unless they are uprooted. This has shown itself in the many burning of shrines and cult object, the forbidden of certain traditional religious observance and more. On this there is a remark byEkwunife[16]

> From 1989-1991, the traditional masquerade institution generated conflicts in Northern Igbo especially in Aku town. In Nsukka and its environs it was Omaba, Akatakpa and Oliokpamasqurades that generated bad blood and conflicts even today. The years 1993 to 1996 witnessed the tumult around traditional burial rites and customs associated with them. Prominent among the crisis was the Nanka incident centered on a tradition forbidding a spouse from viewing the corpse of his husband at the funeral. In July 1999, Owerri the capital of Imo State was on the boil over the uprooting of Ikenga statue by Christian fanatics who replaced it with a white cross. In the year 2000, the town of Ogidi in Idemili Local Government Area of Anambra State was in tumult. Catholic Christian youths went on rampage and destroy many traditional shrines of their town with their valuable cultic sacred symbols and images.In February 2003, Neke community in Enugu state was in disarray over traditional worship and rites in shrine alleged by Christians to be consuming human victims as sacrifice.

Edora[17] avers that the Northern part of Nigeria is not left behind. A scholar discovered that the crisis in the North is not between Muslim and traditional worshippers but usually is between Muslims and Christians and some Muslims termed infidels. Nigeria has not been a religious crisis free nation. What about the issue of Boko Haram that has caused crisis in Nigeria in which several lives were lost, many rendered homeless and business shops of many were looted, Chibouk girls kidnapped and the Nigerian government is still contend with them till date.

The Value of Religion in Nigerian Nation

A look at the religious ideals and teachings of the major religions reveal the importance of love, mutual coexistence and peace. The Muslims preach peace and love; the Christian also preach the same, just as the adherents of African Traditional Religious do. However it is not known whether the peace they preach is on the peripheral level, a lip confession, and a lip service and never to put into practice. The Bible in Matthew 5:9 says "blessed are the peace makers for they shall be called the sons of God". Working for and promoting peace is an intrinsic content of Christianity. Jesus Christ has shown us how to go about this and he invites us to be peace makers. Thus all Christians are expected to create an enabling environment for peace, work for it, preach it, live it, toil for it and always fight for it with all their might.The designed goal is to curb or at least reduce religious conflicts to its minimum. Given the foregoing, religion, with specific reference to African Traditional Religion, Christianity, and Islam should also have in view the possible proximate and remote causes of the religious crisesfound among them and offer adequate solution for them or at worst manage them properly so that they will not lead the nation into trouble. Within this exposition one would be forced to ask what the value of religion in Nigeria is. A critical look at the daily lives of the people of Nigeria will reveal the following about religion:

1. Many people find religion as a necessary part of life.
2. Many sacrifice the best they have because of religion.
3. Many are ready to fight for their religion.
4. Many are ever prepared to die because of their religion.
5. Many people carryout their religious duties freely.

The Role of Religion in Maintaining Peaceful Coexistence in Nigeria

To give a valid answer to the questions in this subheading, Mbiti[18] proffered answers and the activities towards having peaceful coexistence in Nigeria are carefully analyzed below:

Religion Builds up the Human Person

People apply their religion to their social, emotional, economic, intellectual and spiritual life. They believe that religion is relevant in all these area of their lives.In the case of Africa Traditional Religion (ATR) which enters all aspect of lives, it has been responsible for traditional Africa life for cultivating whole person.This act makes the human to avoid crisis which grows into affecting the society positively.

The Provision of Moral Values for Human Existence

Part of any religious system is its moral value which regulates and harmonizes human life. Sibani has it thatit is religion which tells us what is right or what is wrong, what is good or what is evil, what is just or what is unjust, what is virtue and what is vice. No society can exist without morals. Religion enriches people with morals for the welfare of the individual and society at large. It is moral which build relationships between people and the world around them. Good morals are based on the principles of obedience of rules and regulations which are set in motion by social conventions, customs, historical

legacies and orientations.The principle of "live and let's live" is prevalent and fosters peace amongst them.

Provides Food for Spiritual Hunger

It is recognized that people have both physical and spiritual partsof man. True religion is concerned with both the physical and spiritual welfare of man. To feed the spiritual life of man, religion provides insight, prayers, rituals, ceremonies, sacrifices, offerings, dedications, devotion, trust in God and other religious exercises.The spiritual part of man hungers for peace, joy, comfort, security, hope, love and so on. This can only be satisfied by religion.

Great Ideas Inspired by Religion

Religion has not only provided people with answers to their problems of life but also inspired great ideas concerning moral life (courage, love, endurance, helpfulness, sense of kinship, and so on); cultural achievements (music, arts, carving, dance and architecture); social organization and institutions (such as the family, marriage, kingship, clans and age sets); political systems (such as the idea of divine rulers) and the building of the past civilizations of our people. Religion inspires people to produce the best, the greatest and the noblest that is in them.

Provision of Good Communication Environment

Religion helps people to communicate in two directions. First, there is social communication. People meet together for a common purpose, for example to pray together, to perform rituals together, to sacrifice together, and so on.They also meet indirectly through having common myths, legends values, traditions, morals and views of the world. Religion gathers people together both in action and in religious commitment.Secondly, there is a vertical communicate between man and God, as well as between man and the spirit beings. The African people (Nigeria inclusive) are very much aware of the invisible world, which is an essential dimension of their view of the universe. Those two worlds are close to each others. It is religion which turns the people's life in that direction so that they can communicate with God, with the spirit and particularly with the living dead who form part of their family. They are also able to penetrate the forces and the powers of nature which often they imagine to be personal forces.

Religion Reveals People's Limitations

Probably, the greatest value of religion is to teach people to be humble because of their great limitations. It tells men that they are created and that however much they may celebrate this life, it is short, temporal and flowing like a river. Augustus[19] says that religion teaches men to be dependent on their creator.Religion clearly shows people that they have limitations. This is what drives them to rituals, prayers, ceremonies and even trust in God. Even the greatest achievement of man is limited and does not last forever. Man is a being with so many potentials but with a lot of limitations. In directing people to

puttheir trust in God, religion is doing the best it can for men, by showing them both their origin and their destination. Having x-rayed these points succinctly, one would immediately see the usefulness of religion. The enlightened religious practitioners to a great extent are not extremists but live to accommodate others. It is the religious fanatics and uneducated that act violently.

Dialogue as a Veritable Instrument for Resolving Crisis in Nigeria

In the face of religious crises in Nigeria and its resulting evil consequences one would ask for a way out. One of the ways out is through effective dialogue. A reflection on some of the consequences of violence in Nigeria as opined by Oyeshola[20] has this to say:

> Unfortunately, violence in all forms (personal, structural, gender, ethnic, political, economical, environmental and others) is part of our experience in the country. That means we are not yet what we are called to be sons and daughters of our God....Within the frame work of nation, states and society in general, lack of structural stability result in violence and when political landscape of a nation is violent and unstable, there is bound to be adverse economic consequences. Most common of these consequences can be classified into two categories of short and long consequences. Robberies (armed and non-armed extortion, fraud, kidnapping, extortion by revolutionary tax on business and property owners, protection payments from shops and small firms are short term consequences.

Oyeshola did not only enumerate the short term consequences but also the long term consequences which may be more brutal.The most obvious effects of a political violence are the death and injuries resulting from it. Invariably, in all countries young males make up a disproportionate number of those killed. This implies the fact that police, soldiers, terrorist and rioters are usually young males. Terrorist attack may disrupt production and raise operating costs declining profits the difficulties of operating in a violent and threats to their executives may lead to business close down or reduce investments. Reflecting on the positive effect of dialogue in resolving religious conflicts, Ubaka[21]say that "through dialogue properly organized and carried out, we get to know more about other religions, understand them better and love and respect them. Similarly walls of bias andprejudices erected in the past would be broken down and we in turn will be respected and loved by those of other faith".

African Traditional Religion (ATR), Christianity and Islam build in its adherents, deep faith in the creator, respect and value for human life and properties via teachings which is doctrinal. Most of the so called religious wars have some political and economic undertone. Christianreligion for example builds the morality of the individuals and aids them toward living a peaceful life in the society through love and forgiving those who offend them. It is from the internal that rivalry, envy and malice grow.Christianityappeals to the inner heart of the individuals and makes him to love God and his fellow men Matthew 5:43-48. The African Traditional Religion (ATR), Christianity and Islamic

faithful appreciate human beings, love life, celebrate and value life by caring for one another. Many church fathers and religious leaders need to come together to salvage the terrifying state of the nation. They can proffer hope for the insecurity in the nation. The youths who are jobless, the government who do not know what to do anymore to coordinate the country peacefully need the help and the attention of religion with respect to dialogue for peace and harmony. It is imperative that the insecurity in Nigerian nation is politically motivated. Christianity, African Traditional Religion (ATR) and Islam all preach peace and love and its being practiced. All the elites in the country belong to one of these religions or the other. The crisis challenges in Nigeria should be viewed from the perspective that the unenlightened and the fanatics who misinterpretreligious teachings and who are also aggrieved over the injustice done to them take laws into their hands to gain attention.

Consistent Prayer for Leadership: A Panacea for Peace and Stability in Nigeria

Prayers should be taken seriously as a means of arresting the crisis in Nigeria via unceasing intercession. God posits in 2 Chronicles 7:15 thus " If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray and seek my face, and turn from their evil ways, then I will hear from heaven, forgive their sins and heal their land". The nation Nigeria need to come into total repentance over the maladministration, political, economical, social, educational and cultural unfaithfulness done in the land. Obviously, Ojiakor[22]states that "so many religious gatherings do not give more attention to interceding for the country, so it calls for more prayers". On the other hand, the Government has failed to address the remote cause of the unrest in the country. Job opportunity should be created for the millions of youths in the country. The educational system in Nigeria is so expensive for the children of the poor yet most of the rich and the elites' children do not school in Nigeria rather they school in abroad. The rate of fraud and criminality in all sectors of the nation is alarming. This has made the government of President Mohammadu Buharito divert the attention of his government to hunting for the looted funds of Nigeria by the privileged leaders of this country. However, he is yet to probe some criminals who embezzled public funds holding key positions in his administration. The Niger Delta Avengers has almost crippled the oil sector which is the hope of the nation's economy through vandalizing and bombing of the oil pipelines. The present administration recently met with the leaders in the Niger Delta region and consented to their plights.

Conclusion

The important message of the three main religions in Nigeria toward peace, settlements of disputes, showing of love and caring for the afflicted cannot be over emphasized. The core tenets of the above mentioned religions in Nigeria are not only centered on love and peace seeking which portrays great values but prayer and intercession for leaders which has not being taken seriously. It is clear that religious fanatics at one point or the other have caused crisis in Nigeria, but the nation need peace which is preached by religion. The three main religions in Nigeria under consideration remarkably have contributed in developing of the human person, inculcating good moral values in humans, care for the

hungry souls, help in refocusing the confused and increasing better ideas in people, a platform for communication, reveals to people their limitations, stand as a watch dog to the nation especially to correct the ills in government.

Endnotes

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13 *ibid,* p.21

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