THE RELIGIOUS QUESTION AND THE CHANGE ERA IN NIGERIA: GOING BEYOND ILLUSIONS

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Abstract
Umpteen scholarships have identified religion as one of the many factors responsible for instability in many countries of the world especially Nigeria. This assessment is a snapshot from the central role that religion plays in the lives of typical Nigerians, indeed Africans. In this era of *change*, it is pertinent to evaluate how religion could make the desired change a dream come true. This paper contends that a bold step towards achieving this desired change is curbing the challenge to development posed by religion in Nigeria. Religious values have a lot to offer towards establishing a balanced and stable society. All the major religions in Nigeria share these values even though crises among these religions have not allowed these values to bloom desirably. Findings show that once religious sanity is guaranteed and the rich values in the religions in Nigeria are allowed to play out in daily affairs, the desired change will go beyond mere illusions. The analytic as well as prescriptive approach is adopted by this paper.

Keywords: Change, Era, Illusion, Challenges, Religion

1.0 Introduction

The global community was at a standstill following the 2015 general elections in Nigeria. This did not come as a surprise given the happenings leading to the elections. It was clear from the drumbeats of the time that Nigeria was 'pregnant' for change. Citizens of the country seemed tired of the prevailing state of affairs and wanted a breath of fresh air. In fact, it was clear that it was no longer business as usual. So it was that there was galvanized and orchestrated support to establish a new dispensation for Nigeria. This was pitched on the gospel of change championed by the All Progressives Congress (APC). Indeed, the yearnings of many a Nigerian was satisfied with the government of 'change' being instituted. This change was to permeate every dimension of the Nigerian life as the top points of the APC manifesto show that attention will be paid to: the constitution; national security; conflict resolution, national unity, social harmony; job creation and the economy; agriculture and food security; industrialisation; infrastructure; oil and gas industry; education; healthcare; senior citizens, youth sports and culture; women empowerment; environment; and foreign policy (All Progressive Congress – Manifesto).[1]

But how possible can the perennial challenges to development make the change dream a reality? This question forms the crux of this write-up. As part of the response to this gigantic question, this work suggests the special role of religion, for as Danfulani notes,

religion "remains a potent cultural resource which acts as a vehicle of change...."[2] It is the task of this paper to establish pragmatic ways in which religion can contribute to making the change a reality in Nigeria.

2.0 Rationale for Change

Since after the early few years of Nigeria's Independence in 1960, it (Nigeria) has had a turbulent political atmosphere. The turbulent nature of Nigeria's politics has evolved vagaries of experiments in individuals and governments. At every point in time, the reason for every take over, especially the agony-stricken period of military dictatorship was corruption within the polity. The body language of each regime then was that of sanitizing the decayed system. This reason has survived to this day and Nigerians are eager to witness that special moment when a sanitized system will be synthesized.

Having suffered the pangs of military dictatorship beyond measure, there was a clamour for a democratic government following the popularity that has greeted democracy globally over and above other forms of government. This is not to say that democracy is a flawless. The attraction to it flows from the fact that it is lesser evil and holds more hopes for the masses compared with other forms of government. A 'stable' democratic run of governance was initiated in 1999 after many attempts had failed and has survived to this day. This is not to suppose that this 'smooth' democratic run has locked the doors to the possibility of other forms of government in the future; but at least this is the reality for now. In spite of that, the aspiration of Nigerians for country "flowing with milk and honey" has remained a mirage. Observers judged things to have become worse when the many years of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), a period described by some as "years eaten by the locust" had nothing satisfying enough to show to Nigerians. The only way people could react forcibly was to agitate for change.

Worthy of mention is the fact that the agitation for change could be taken to have meant two things: the change of the governing party and the change in the overall affairs of the country. For now, what has been achieved (though not completely) is the change of governing party; nothing much can plausibly be said about the other yet. There could be projections from present happenings, but this will only be predictive and maybe product of present expectations. The much that can be said is that the stage has been set to see how possible the second dimension of change can come; and this is what this work is contributing to.

The foregoing background brings to the limelight the expectation imbedded in the change era. The reign of corruption is to be put to a halt; injustice is to be supplanted by justice; due process is to overshadow half measures and obstruction of order; earnings are to correspond to one's efforts or work status; favouritism is to be crippled, immorality in all its forms is to be punished and so on. On the society generally, the standard of life is expected to improve; employment opportunities are to be made available; social equality is to be instituted; peace among the diverse peoples of Nigeria is to be concocted, and development in all its forms is to become the country's hallmark. All of these among others not mentioned here are the expectations associated with the change era. Obviously,

if all of this is the content of the change philosophy, then it is worth patronizing. But how can religion that is very phenomenal in Nigeria contribute to bring about change?

3.0 A Glance at the Nigerian Religious Atmosphere

Nigeria, like many other African countries, is immensely religious. Many scholarships ascribe to Nigeria the tag of the most religious nation in the world. For instance, Onaiyekan notes that "Nigeria was recently accorded the record of being the most religious nation in the world."[3] This fact is not difficult to grasp as religion colours every dimension of Nigerian life – social, economic, political, cultural and so on. Nigeria is made of predominantly three (3) major religions, namely, Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion. The National Open University of Nigeria categorizes them into "Christianity, Islam, Traditional/Oriental."[4] The African Traditional Religion (ATR) played host to the other two (2) foreign religions, that is, Christianity and Islam.

History has it that Islam came into Nigeria much earlier than Christianity. However, today, Islam and Christianity dominate with widespread presence all over the country, though with Islamic concentration in the Northern part and Christian concentration in the Southern part of the country. The relationship of these religions is nothing good to write home about especially that between Christianity and Islam. History is punctuated with incessant crises and conflicts between Christians and Muslims. These crises have led to wanton loss of lives and property. It is because of this that the observation of Ibekwe makes sense that "religion is an important institution that can be a source of joy and happiness on the one hand, and equally a source of misery and agony."[5]The statistics of challenges that have cost development most in Nigeria will identify religious crises as the topmost. Some of these crises include the Maitatsine riots (1980-1985), Kafanchan riot (1987), Bauchi (1990), Kano (15th October, 1991), Zangon Katab (1992), Kaduna (February 2000), Bauchi (June 2001), Jos (7th September 2001), Kaduna (November 2002), Yelwan-Shendam (February 2002), Kano reaction to Yelwan-Shendam (2004)[6] and the ongoing *Boko Haram* terrorism (2012 till date).Yet Christianity and Islam have been destined to remain together in the same country christened 'Nigeria.'

4.0 Contributions of Religion towards the Change Dream

The role of religion in national development cannot be overemphasized. History shows that early civilizations made remarkable strides from religious backgrounds. Writing on education in ancient civilizations, Klein notes: "Rhetoric was an advanced subject taught to the children of the wealthy families; this discipline trained men for political and public office by mastering the art of public speaking."[7] He continues that nobles within society maintained an immense faith in the system of instruction as formal education became a staple within society. Royalty and noble families hired brilliant preachers and slaves, regardless of class, to teach their children.[8] The experiences of the Greco-Roman world lend credence to this. As history shows, religious backgrounds were the grooming grounds for the specially designated personages that were to play phenomenal roles within the larger society. Most of those who left indelible marks in their societies were groomed within religious institutions and their leadership prowess was a reflection of

their religious upbringing. Even the so much deified scientific revolution came from a religious background.

Coming back home to Nigeria nay Africa, religion has contributed a lot in establishing the foundation on which our society today is building on today. The easiest way to make sense of this submission is to count the blessings that greeted the Nigerian society with its contact with either Christianity or Islam. Hence, Ilo will emphatically aver that "religion is the most vital means for changing African societies in a positive way."[9] For Udo, religion plays a significant role in "maintaining unity, peace, harmony and development in society."[10] Even though present experiences of crises and conflicts evoke mixed feelings as to the role of religion in the Nigerian society, one will be doing a lot of disservice to overrule the special contributions of religion to the development of the Nigerian society.

The present idolization of 'change' sweeping Nigeria like a hurricane calls for specific ways in which religion could rightly support the struggle for change. The best way to spot these areas is to lean on the rich values that religion s in Nigeria commonly share and show clear how these could be applied to the system that is in dire need of improvement. Gwamna acknowledges this important contribution of religion when he highlights a number of religious values that could be engrafted into Nigerian politics to make it better, namely, justice, holy living or righteousness, leadership, love for the poor, peace, reconciliation, forgiveness, service, compassion, love and prayer.[11] It is worthwhile to begin with the virtue of love. All religions preach love as the 'magic' that glues human beings in authentic brotherhood and sisterhood. In all religions, love is considered as the greatest law. This love puts the entire humanity into a family where differences melt. Such an interpretation of love transforms the differences that exist into those of inclusion rather than exclusion. Emerging from this idea of love also is the universal principle: "Do unto others what you will want done to you." Experience has shown that human beings are condemned to self-love; and if it were to be truly so that one is to love others as self, then the resultant experience is expected to be always a good feeling towards others. Love is a necessary ingredient for change. For the change dream to be realized, Nigerians, ranging from the leaders to the led, must imbibe the virtue of love and make it pragmatic in their day to day dealings. Indeed, this love will generate an inner spirit of patriotism for our country.

Honesty is another virtue that religion can contribute towards change in Nigeria. Like love, honesty features in all religions in Nigeria. But what does honesty entail in the struggle for change? Honesty connotes the habit of always siding with the truth and being transparent. This ingredient has been on 'exile' in the values exhibited by Nigerians. The problematic in this area is most evident in the manner leaders run the affairs of the country. Owing to the dishonest 'physique' of the system, there has always been miscarriage of justice, misappropriation of resources – financial and material, unprecedented violence and the like. There is no way a government can stand tall or score high marks on the score sheet when honesty is alien to it. The Nigerian system can make change a dream come true when honesty is played out by all Nigerians in their daily

affairs. This implies that the truth will no longer be trampled upon and transparency will become a virtue that is never compromised.

The struggle for change in Nigeria must give justice a central place in the affairs of the country. All religions see God as a just God who expects justice from His children. This justice is the basis on which a balanced and stable society is established. In frank terms, there is no society in human existence that has ever celebrated injustice. Where injustice is noticed, people have always had to fight back to ensure that justice reigned. There is a dire need to give each person his/her due. Experience shows that there is nothing as painful as being denied one's due. Justice is to guide the affairs of governance. In a diverse and multicultural setting like Nigeria, issues of justice are supposed to be considered with utmost concern. It is pertinent that the stipulations regarding rights and responsibilities of citizens be taken seriously to avoid any case of dissatisfaction from any quarters. Obviously, such rights and responsibilities exist to check any attempts that can possibly cause clashes within the polity. The uprising from all corners of the Nigerian polity has a bearing on the issue of justice. To ensure the stability and peaceful coexistence in Nigeria which are part of the desired change, justice must take a centre stage.

The religious virtue of peace must be imbibed by Nigerians. What is importance of religion if it does not guarantee peace? No wonder it is held that "there cannot be world peace without a religious peace."[12] Yahaya exposes the danger of absence of peace when he says that "obviously, the breach of peace in a community creates fear and sense of insecurity. Consequently, it scares away developers and interrupts development; progress is bound to elude such a community."[13] One of the authentic qualities of religion is its communitarian role. Scholars have identified the authentic qualities of religion on the acronym 'CCCC' meaning creed, code, cult and community. Swidler notes that "normally, all religions contain the four "C's": Creed, Code, Cult, Community-structure, and are based on a notion of the Transcendent."[14] Community as a quality of religion entails that religion should be capable of making people live together in the spirit of friendship. It is a fact that peace on thrives in an atmosphere of friendship. That all religions in Nigeria preach peace is not a debatable fact. Religious peace should shroud the entire gamut of the Nigerian system. The benefits of peace are unimaginable. Stability, friendly co-existence, progress, development, patriotism and so on are the blessings of peace. But the conditions that guarantee peace in the polity too must be provided. It is clear as happenings show that Nigeria is in dire need of peace. The dream of change in Nigeria will remain a mirage unless peace is guaranteed in the entire nation.

A general sense of morality that is fostered by religion must be allowed a place in Nigeria if change must come. There are a lot of interpretations regarding the relationship between religion and morality. While many scholars reject any such relationship between the two (religion and morality), this work aligns with those who find a necessary connection between them. Morality is very central in the teachings of world religions because religion concerns humans in their relations with God and one another. Every religion has its corpus of social morality which guides the relations of its adherents with one another. In view of the moral function of religion, Kesmen cites Kakaru as saying that "religion

serves as one of the agents of social change in Nigeria through character development of the citizens."[15]The common moral values that religions in Nigeria share should guide the affairs of the state. "Good habits," they say, "make success easier." The moral disposition of Nigerians should become right to make change a reality. It is a fact that the moral stamina of Nigeria has gone comatose. Moral decadence is common place. There is need to sanitize the social milieu of Nigeria with religious ethics, for this will go a long way to bring about transformation in the whole polity. The dream of change will not be realized unless Nigerians become morally upright.

The spirit of service must overwhelm the attitude of Nigerians in the struggle for change. Service to God and one another is a virtue in all religions within Nigeria. This is where the connection with leadership comes in prominently. Religious leadership is on service to God and the community which one leads or governs. In this connection, the leader is a go-between God and the people. Sometimes he/she has to sacrifice his/her life for the sake of the people. This service will require that the leader comes to the level of the people to truly understand their needs, gives the people being led a listening ear and also the opportunity for them to take part in solving most of their problems. Nigeria needs this type of leadership in order to witness the desired change. Unless the spirit of service engulfs the entire nation, bringing forth unimaginable patriotism, change will remain a mirage.

5.0 Curbing the Challenges facing Religion towards Change in Nigeria

In the preceding section, an attempt was made to sieve out particular areas religious values could contribute towards bringing about change in Nigeria. The assessment finds a lot of potentials in religion as far as change in Nigeria is concerned. It implies from the analysis that when such religious values are allowed to come to bear on the entire affairs of the nation, there is hope for positive change. However, experience shows that religion is yet to make the supposed difference it is associated with in Nigeria. This is because the unrest arising from the religious quarters alone has done more harm than any other that could be thought of. After all, the country has always been managed by men and women who belong to one religion or another. This is Ajani's observation when he writes with regard to religious schools that "many Nigerian political leaders were products of one religious mission school or another either at the primary, secondary or tertiary level; however, such backgrounds have not been reflected or made visible in the quality of their governance."[16]

Such a situation of failure from religious adherents only calls for look into the challenges that confront religion, deterring it from utilizing its potentials, and suggesting possible ways of uprooting them. It is a fact that these challenges have given religion a bad name. Some of these challenges cover religious intolerance, religious fanaticism and the politicization of religion. Gwamna gives a more expanded list of these challenges as follows: religious corruption, manipulation of religion, poverty, illiteracy, collapse of religious and societal values, government's partnership with religion, government's failure to address socio-political and economic problems in Nigeria, hypocrisy of followers and religious leaders.[17] These challenges have been responsible for the religious crises that have coloured the Nigerian history and the spirit of antagonism and

mistrust that looms within the polity. But how can these challenges be nailed in the drive for change?

As a step in the right direction, there is need for religious rights within the Nigerian constitution to be respected. The authors of the Nigerian constitution foresaw the likelihood of religious competition in Nigeria, and that informed their stipulations regarding religious freedom. This area of religious freedom should be made to work in order to avoid tussles among religions. Intolerance is the product of the lack of respect for the religious freedom of others. Thus, religious leaders should teach their adherents the need to apply tolerance to the exercise of their religions by exposing them to the areas of their Sacred Writings that encourage tolerance.[18] Abduganiy has said it all that "for any society to enjoy peaceful and harmonious relation, tolerance as a religious axiom has to be well-understood, preached and upheld by all members of the society."[19] Where there is violation of religious rights of others, appropriate government authorities should ensure that those who violate these rights are prosecuted according to the dictates of the constitution without bias.

There is need for religious education that will expose adherents to the values of others' religions. Many of the problems arising from the religious quarters show a high level of ignorance among religious adherents of first of all the uniting values of their religions and then those of others. Such ignorant people consider all others who are not part of them as their enemies and so strike them at the slightest provocation. There is need to educate the Nigerian people about the common values that the religions in Nigeria share. These values should form the core of religious education curriculum in Nigeria. It is not out of place if scholars of the religions in Nigeria put their heads together and engage in 'exchange education.' By exchange education here is meant that the scholars of Islam could be allowed to teach Christians what their religion holds about them, likewise Christian scholars to Muslims. Their teaching should be guided by the spirit of common good. When this is done, the problems associated with fanaticism and intolerance could be reduced to a minimum.

Efforts at religious dialogue should be sustained and strengthened even the more. Dialogue exists in different forms such as dialogue of life, dialogue of theological exchange, dialogue of social engagement, and dialogue of religious experience. All of these forms of dialogue should be explored to the forms that even the non-educated people can understand. Experience shows that most times issues of dialogue are made academic and abstract with any practical bearing on the people's daily life. It is worthwhile to employ simple and practical ways of making this dialogue something that should be desired fruits. Seminars, community meetings and other non-formal ways should be used to teach people about violence where vernacular can be used. These should be organized on frequent basis to ensure that the teaching/learning exercise is sustained.

Political officers must stop using religion as an instrument to achieve their selfish aims. The government should respect limits to religious involvement in politics. Appropriate measures should be taken to ensure that political issues are not given a religious colouration. This has been the bane of Nigeria. Inasmuch as a lot can be tapped from

religion to make Nigeria better, care should be taken to ensure that it does not become a weapon that serves the individual good instead of the common good.

All of the above suggestions seem to fit into Abashiya and Ulea's three levels of facing challenges of religion, namely, individual adherents, leaders of religious organizations and government. At the level of individual adherents, they suggest that individual adherents should know the tenets of their religion rather than rely solely on their leaders who may sometimes mislead them; they should accept the fact that there are religions other than theirs; they should show interest in others religions; they should know that religions belong to God and not a property belonging to any group or individual. Regarding religious leaders, they are to be conscious of their utterances and actions; they should teach adherents basic tenets of their religion and those of others; they should make sure that preaching engagements are not inciting and insulting; they should create and sustain for a for communication, dialogue and interaction with other religions; they should refrain from manipulating their adherents for selfish ends; and they should avoid being manipulated by the government. Finally, at the government level, it should ensure that the constitution of the land not only guarantees religious freedom, but is seen to do so; no undue favour should be given to one religion at the expense of the other; there should be no membership of any religious organization whether within or outside the country.[20]

6.0 Summary

This paper set out to establish the role religion can play in actualizing the set dream in Nigeria. Arguing from the rich religious heritage of Nigeria, the paper identified the potentials laden in religion towards making the much trumpeted change in Nigeria a dream come true. Leaning on the role religion has played in human societies throughout history, it was established that it can still continue to bring many goods in Nigeria especially now that change is being pursued vigorously. While looking at change from a positive angle, the paper surged that the religious values of love, honesty, justice, peace, morality and service can be integrated into governance to make the desired change in Nigeria to be realized. But frantic efforts must be made to ensure that the many challenges that obstruct religion in its special role within society are checked. This is the role of individuals, groups or organisations and government.

7.0 Conclusion

Religion remains a valuable instrument for development in the 21st Century. Countries that a yet to incorporate religion into their development plans are making a costly mistake. Stories of religious crises are not enough to make one remove religion from the scheme of things. A surreptitious glance at the history of nations that have attempted it will prove this point further. There is need to establish a distinction between what a religion stands for and what its adherents practice. This is where the truth about where the problem lies will show forth. It is, indeed, a blessing to Nigeria that it has a powerful religious heritage. But this rich heritage has to be used positively. This is what the change so much clamoured for demands. When then the values highlighted in this work and

others not identified here are practised in the day to day affairs of Nigerians, change becomes a realized dream.

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