INTER-RELIGIOUS CRISES IN THE NIGERIAN SOCIETY: A FOCUS ON AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION AS A VIA MEDIA

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Abstract

Nigeria is a multi-religious society comprising several religious traditions but the major ones are Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion. The first two are missionary religions and as such are bound to struggle for spheres of influence with mutual suspicion, rivalry and the eventual snowballing into the different inter-religious crises we have had over the past four decades in the Nigerian society. The paper observes that all the inter-religious crises witnessed in the country was ochestrated by the influences of Christianity and Islam. With this reality on ground, the paper is focusing renewed attention to African Traditional Religion which is not a missionary religion because people are born into the religion and persons live out their religion from craddle to death. This then means that, African Traditional Religion would likely not compete for spheres of influence which makes it a peaceful religion that can co-exist with other religious traditions in multi-faith society like ours. The beliefs and practices of the religion makes it a via media between the extremes of Christianity and Islam in the religious equation and the incessant inter-religious crises spilling out thereof. The study is purely analytical in nature based on secondary sources of data. Some of the recommendations of the paper includes the following amongst others: government at all levels should introduce African Traditional Religion into our education system to learn basic beliefs and practices of the religion in order to use same for living harmoniously for the growth and development of a multi-faith Nigerian society, policy makers in Nigeria at all levels should adopt the bottom to top approach including

the use of indigenous peace mechanisms inherent in African Traditional Religious Culture for the formulation of laws that will ensure peaceful co-existence of all and sundry.

Key Words: Inter-Religious Crises, Nigerian Society, Focus, Via Media and African Traditional Religion.

Introduction

Pluralism in all its ramifications is primordial. It is not limited to Nigeria as a political society of men and women who have come to live as a composite in keeping with their true nature as social beings. Man is not only a social being, he is also a political and religious being. That is why men and women put in governmental structures to regulate their activities within the society. And man knowing fully well that he is not the author of his life forms ideas and beliefs about a Supersensible Being responsible for his being, an unmoved Mover, the Ultimate Reality and the like. The awareness of this Ultimate Reality made man to form religious ideas and beliefs about Him, and each people have their own level of awareness situated within their own perculiar socio-political and cultural milieu. These different levels of awareness have led us to the paradox of the One and the Many; One God and many path ways to reach Him. This is the reality in the world today and indeed Nigeria. In the words of Gbenda cited in Oduma-Aboh and Adumbu (2015:155- 56):

> There is religious diversity in Nigeria. The message of Islam, Chrstianity and the Indigenous Religion relates to diversity or pluralism. The votaries of these religions should live by the message of inter-group relations enshrined in their sacred writings. Hence we live and labour in a multi-religious society and cannot help being pluralistic in nature. High degree of objectivity is needed on the part of government in coordinating the activities of the religious groups for the common good of all. It is when the mechanisms and structures are put in place where each group understands and tolerates each other that Nigerians will reap the benefits of religious pluralism.

It has been widely acknowledged that the twentieth century was an age of great violence, and there are threatening signs that the twenty-first century may evn be more violent and insecure. Countless civil wars and violent conflicts are continous threats that make the African continent an unsafe place for many, while sophisticated armaments supplied by western powers are used to devastate and kill innocent men, women and children along with political

opponents. In Nigeria, religion plays a major role in fuelling and perpetrating violence (Dyaji and Kajom, 2014: 15).

Theoretical Framework

The paper adopts the Marxist theory of religion. According to Omoregbe (1999: 9-10), Karl Marx attributed the origin and continuing existence of religion to econmomic exploitation of the masses by the capitalist exploiters in the capitalist system and that religion is man's own self alienation. Religion is the product of exploitation, oppression and suffering. It is the sigh of the exploited, the cry of the oppressed in the capitalist system. He cites Karl Marx further thus as:

> The religious misery is at the same time the expression of real misery, and the protest against the real misery. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the feeling of a heartless world just as it is the spirit of a spiritless condition (1999:10).

In addition, the rich exploiters encourage religion and use it as an opium with which they sedate the masses and prevent them from protesting or revolting against their exploitation. Thus, the rich exploiters see religion as a very good weapon with which to calm the nerves of the exploited masses and keep them perpetually under their exploitative condition. It is an effective weapon for preventing rebellion and revolution among the suffering masses. By telling the people that their reward is in heaven, that after suffering in this life they are going enjoy in heaven.

Though the theory has its own pitfalls, what we can not deny is the fact that, the elites across the different religious divides, especially that of Christianity and Islam have and are still using religion to achieve their inordinate and ulterior motives for their selfish gains and agenda; be they political, social, cultural, economic or otherwise. Nigeria is not the only country in the world that is religiously pluralistic, some of those countries have harnessed the strengths of their religious plurality to develop for the benefits of all and sundry. But the real problem lies in the fact that, religion has and is still been manipulated for achieving goals not evn related to religion.

The elites across the different religious divides are always in agreement when it comes to the collective plundering of our common wealth and the like, but when they feel shut out, they now appeal to and whip up religious sentiments among the gullible masses of the different religious spectrum as evidenced in the

different inter-religious crises Nigeria has experienced over the past four decades. Thereby threatening the peace and stability of the country, and adversely affecting our National Security with its attendant implications on development in all ramifications and a host of other spheres or endeavours. The Marxist theory of religion is very apt and relevant in understanding and analyzing the different inter-religious crises we have experienced over the past four decades in Nigeria.

The Religious Scenario in the Contemporary Nigerian Society

According to Imo cited in Oduma-Aboh and Adumbu (2015:160), in the precolonial period different Nigerian groups and their indigenous religions had certain common features. Societies were religiously fairly homogenous. Religion permeated the various spheres of society, whether it was the economic, familial, political or the recreational aspects of their lives. In effect, the peoples' world-view was mainly religious and to a considerable extent religion controlled their general behaviour. Frequently there was no formal distinction between theories of natural and supernatural causation. The indigenous religions, with a variety of manifestations, remained the only religions in Nigeria until the 11th century when some Muslims were reported to have lived in parts of what is today northern Nigeria, for example in Borno. However, it was not until the 14th century that there became a recorded history of Islam in Nigeria.

In addition, the most decisive impact of Islam came in the first decade of the 19th century, when Usman Dan Fodio, one of a group of Muslim scholars, mainly of Fulani origin, initiated a major Islamic reform in the north. The effects of this reform were far-reaching, politically, socially, culturally and intellectually, both to Muslims and non-Muslims in Nigeria and Africa at large. Consequently, the cultures of the areas that later came to be known as Nothern Nigerian were Islamized, and the people were shut out of early European influences and were given a Muslim vision of history and society. As a result of the jihad, Islam became the spatio-temporal framework within which people thought of their history and conducted their day-to-day affairs, a reference point, if not a code always honoured in the practice. This description is very important in understanding why religion has continued to be a naughty problem in attempting to build a united Nigeria. The Muslims with this type of

formation tend to become a community of their own, and try to view things in ways that are different from the interests and goals of other Nigerians.

Imo in Oduma-Aboh and Adumbu (161: 2015) illuminates further, that after the Islamic presence had been registered in the nothern part of Nigeria, Christianity was planted in the country through the southern coast of the Atlantic. Christianity also had an early history of contact with Nigeria. It came into the area around the 15th century. The explorers, who were principally Portuguese, landed at the Benin coast, in the south-western part of the country. But this group did not make any meaningful impact. A sustained Christian missionary effort on the part of Protestants and Roman Catholics ultimately occurred in the 19th century. This was the situation that was on ground coupled with our colonial history which culminated in the almagamation of the Southern and Northern Protectorates in 1914, thus the birth of the Nigerian Nation. This merger reached its heights in 1960 when Nigeria gained political independence from the colonialist. These historical events brought about the pluralism of Nigeria in all ramifications including religious pluralism which is the nexus of our study.

Currently, Imo (1995: 19-21) states that, Islam and Christianity are growing at a fast rate and the adherents of these two religions are found in varying proportions in the different parts of the country. Some areas that would have been designated Muslim or Christian domains in the past, today can no longer be described as such, as there has cropped up, even in these areas, most recently, some sizeable population of practitioners of the other religion. The present religious situation in Nigeria can be said to revolve around Muslim and Christian influences. Although members of both religions can relate and interact with each other at some personal levels there is a strong latent fear, prejudice and suspicion which is not expressed. However, at the slightest provocation these feelings can be manifested in a rather violent manner. This is a common mood among activists in both religions which has resulted in sporadic religious disturbances in the country.

A Cursory Historical Look At Inter-Religious Crises in Nigeria

According to Ogbogo (2014:111), over the years the issue of the role of religion in national development has been in the headlines in Nigeria, as well as in the international scene. Regrettably, since the people of Nigeria have experienced long series of violent and bloody confrontations between religious groups,

especially between Christians ans Muslims, causing the death of thousands of innocent people, some scholars have argued that religion is the bane of Nigeria's drive to attain unity and cohension.

Inter-religious crises are all the violent confrontations Nigeria have experienced over the past four decades arising from the activities and influences between the votaries of the two dorminant religious traditions of Christianity and Islam resulting in the collosal loss of human lives and properties worth over billions of naira. Inter-religious crises threatens the peace and stability of the country and in the midst of these inter-religious crises, no meaningful development in all ramifications can take place.

Instances of inter-religious crises in the Nigerian polity abandoned. According to Ediba (2014: 116), other conflicts in Nigeria have come to be associated with religion are: the Kafanchan, Kaduna, Zaria and other parts of Kaduna in 1987; the conflicts in Tafawa Balewa and other parts of Bauchi State in 1999 and 2000-2001; the conflicts in Zango-Kataf and other parts of Kaduna State in February and May 1992, the conflicts in Kano State in 1999-2000; the conflicts in Jos metropolis and environs in 2001-2002 and a host others.

A Focus on African Traditional Religion As A Via Media in A Multi-Religious Nigerian Society

Shishima posits that, religion is a universal phenomenon. Regardless of where you live, you have no doubt seen how religion affects millions of people. Religion deals with man's relationship with the divine and concerns, especially in a cultic melieu, man's response in his worship of God and in his actions. Thus the teachings, precepts, moral standards and indeed ethical propositions of a religion should influence the personality and the daily conduct of individuals (2006: 252-253).

In corroborating this view, Asifatu cited in Shishima, postulates that religion and moral beliefs aim at the same goal in life of a man. They deal with the aspects of of man which prompt him to do various things and avoid vices. Man by his beliefs, has to render an account of his stewardship on the surface of the earth, and hence, the essence of religion is also extended to the way we conduct the business of governance and carry out political and economic activities. In this case, there is no doubt that religion has rendered great services to humanity on political, social and economic matters. It concerns itself also with public affairs

and the act of governance, but more so on the reversed and refined manner to induce the course of development (2006: 254).

Gbenda (2008: 62), adumbrates that of course, the cherished values embodied in the holy writings when they are sufficiently put into practice by adherents, Nigerian society would have meant a remarkable development in the economy and improved standard of living generally. Ironically, religious pluralism has generated challenges of mutual suspicion, rilvary and intermittent religious crises. It has caused great tensions, and conflicts and serious unhealthy consequences among men in such a way that this form of pluralism has often been seen as entirely negative. Iwe cited in Gbenda also observes that religion has been subjected to abuse, exploitation, and immoderation due largely to fanaticism or extremism. This is dangerous and an enemy of mutual living, peace, and development.

The elite in the Nigerian society have used the religious pluralistic nature that ought to be a blessing to us as individuals and as a collective in a manner that smacks of responsibilty and statemanship of their part. In other words, they have mismanaged or manipulated our religious pluralism for their selfish reasons be it political, economic, cultural and the like. When their selfish interest (s) is or are threatened, they appeal to the religious sentiments of votaries within their own faith convictions as a strategy of defending such interests. Most often than not, when they appeal to religous sentiments in matters that purely does not have any bearing to religion itself, they snowball into inter-religious crises with the attendant wantom destructions of human lives and properties of immesurable value. A classical example that is fresh in our minds, is the fallout of the 2011 general elections in Nigeria, where a particular Presidential Candidate perceived that he has been surchanged in the elections and instead of facing the issue at hand he appealed to religious sentiments orchestrating widespread religious violence with colossal loss of human lives and properties in a matter that is supposed to be a political affair.

The paper is optimistic that we have learnt our lessons in this and many other regards. History does repeat itself, as we yet go to the polls for the 2015 general elections, the same political gladiators are still on the political scene. To be fore-warned is to be fore-armed. Religious pluralism is therefore an asset for meaninful religious dialogues in Nigeria. This will usher in the virtues of goodwill of the citizens to all and sundry, a virtue which is the source of all peace, harmony, progress and development (Madu 1997: 97).

(A Publication of Tansian University, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies)

African Traditional Religion has no founder nor written documents and as such it is primordial and written in the hearts and minds of its votaries. It is a living religion that is why wherever they go, one would find the religion as expressed in various beliefs and practices even outside the shores of Africa as captured by Gbenda:

> African (Traditional) Religion is found in the Americas, especially, the Carribean Islands, Jamaica, Haiti, Trinidad, Cuba, and Brazil among others. In the above areas African deities or gods are worshipped and ancestors venerated. Priests, priestesses and sorcerers are found. African conception of life as a pragmatic reality finds expression in folklore and proverbs. Beliefs in ancestral cults, witchcraft, spirit possession, sacred music and dancing, sacrifices, rituals, traditional medicines are common and most of the beliefs and practices are infused into Christian practices. All these are a conglomeration of beliefs and rites of African origin that are found and embraced by Africans and non-Africans alike (2010: 45).

Since the religion is a living religion, and despite the incursion of Christianity and Islam to the collective consciousness of the Nigerian society alot of good beliefs and practices have survived to the present day. The exercise here is to appeal to such consciousness and use them to halt and reverse the trend of the negation of social justice, mutual respect and peaceful co-existence and the like by votaries of the two dominant religious culture of Christianity and Islam that have being responsible for the various inter-religious crises with their attendant colossal lost of human lives and properties that have become a bane to all our developmental aspirations in all ramifications as individuals and as a collective. It is not an attempt at syncretism but the use of the good elements from African Traditional Religion as a via media in solving the quagmire between these seemingly two extremes of the Nigerian religious situation that has relegated social justice, mutual respect and peaceful co-existence and the like in principle and practice to the background. For the purpose of this paper, the definition of African Traditional Religion by Ekwenife (1990: 1) has been adopted. He defines African Traditional Religion as:

> … living institutionalized religious beliefs and practices, which are rooted in the past … religious culture, a religion that was transmitted to the present overt and covert votaries by successive … forebears mainly through oral tradition (myths and folktales, songs and dances, liturgies, rituals, proverbs, dances, pithy sayings and names sacred institutions like

sacred specialists and persons, initiation rites, festivals, sacred spaces and objects and religious works of art, a religion which is slowly but constantly updated by each generation in the light of new religious experiences through the dialectical process of continuities and discontinuities.

The concept of via media is clarified by the Encarta Microsoft Dictionary as a middle course or choice between extreme possibilities (2009). In this case the extreme posibilities is that of Christian and Muslim influences that have brouhgt about violent conflict situations in the Nigerian society. The paper calls for the use of African Traditional Religion as a via media between these two exremes in ensuring a just, peaceful and egalitarian Nigerian society where social justice and all its underpinnings reign supreme in order to entrench sustainable and lasting peace, progress, growth and development in all ramifications for all and sundry. This is because no country can grow and develop to enviable heights where there is no peace and tranquility as in the ochestrated by the various inter-religious crises in Nigeria revolving around the influences of Christianity and Islam, especially within but not limited to the Northern part of Nigeria.

A study of the beliefs and practices of the (Nigerian) African peoples, leads to the theological understanding that African Traditional Religion is a religion of salvation and wholeness. There is always a careful anaysis on both worldly and spiritual salvation. The indigenous consciousness or mind believe that life is a complex web of relationships that may either enhance and preserve life or diminish and destroy it. The goal of religion for them is, therefore, to maintain those relationships that protect and preserve life. For it is the harmony and stability provided by these relationships, both spiritual material that create the conditons for well-being and wholeness (Gaiya, 2004:33).

In traditional African religious culture, there is nothing seperate which could be called African Traditional Religion. For traditional religion was part of the whole of life, all of life was religious and related to the spiritual. African Traditional Religion is a way of life and is part of all of life experiences. The religion centres on man and the whole emphasis is upon man gaining power needed to live a good life. Life centres on man and his interests and needs (Gehman, 2001:29). Mbiti once commented on the religion, that Africans are notoriously religious and their religion permeates all sphere of their lives. The predominant worldview is a religious worldview in that, phenomena in the world is

interpreted and seen through the prism of (African Traditional) religion. Social justice in the context in which the traditional Nigerian mind experienced and practiced his religion and culture could offer a via media in ushering genuine social justice in the Nigerian society. Some of these beliefs and practices are discussed below.

Amadi (2005:6), butresses the above by saying that, the Angas believe that after death the great god Nan receives the souls of all good men, while those of bad men become *kapwans*, lingering near their old homes and harrasing the living. The Nupe believe that evil men never attain heaven but are turned into beasts and the like. The overall effect of all this is to enforce a moral standard acceptable to a particular society. A secular interpretation leads to the conclusion that moral precepts have always had their origin in the mind of man. Even where deities are said to have laid them down, they have had to do so through the mind of man. It would appear, then, that while man formulates the moral code, he enlists the influence of religion for it enforcement. In other words, in ethics man proposes, God enforces. The imported religions, namely Christianity and Islam, do not have the same powerful hold on the people as the traditional religion, so their use as ethical instruments is not as effective. In this regard, Idowu observes in *Olodumare*:

> Christianity, by a miscarriage of purpose, makes its own contribution to the detrimental changes in moral values. Somehow it has replaced the old fear of the divinities with the relieving but harmful notion of God who is ready to forgive perhaps even more than man is prone to sin, the God in whom 'goodness and severity' have been put asunder. So also does Islam unwittingly create the erroneous impression that the fulfilment of the obligatory duties and act of penance by good works are sufficient for the purpose of winning heaven. The result of all these is that our 'enlightened' products of the two 'fashionable'religions can now steal without any twinge of moral compunction those articles of food placed for sale at cross roads and by roads sides, which used to be quite safe; they can now cheerfully appropriate other persons'property; they can break covenants, or promises made on oath, with brazen indifference (qtd in Amadi, 2005:6).

This is a call to acknowledge the beauty, wisdom and power of our own religion in bringing about social justice in the contemporary Nigerian society. In the indigenous culture of the African (Nigeria), justice especially social justice, is one of the things needed for communalism, peaceful co-existence and fair play to

enable them move forward as well as for development. Social justice among the traditional Africans is tied with the religion of the people. The Supreme Being, the divinities or deities, the living-dead spirits and so on are concerned with ethical life including social justice. It features prominently in laws, commands, customs and conventions and prohibitions. Man is limited in a way to ensure absolute social justice, the gods in African thought system provide the missing link, hence they act as agents of moral sanction by meting out punishment to acts of injustices especially social justice (Gbenda, 2006:114).

Concluding Remarks

One of the greatest hurdles Nigeria and Nigerians faced over the past four decades is that of inter-religious   crises   that   have   threatened   the   very existence of the country including her bid to be counted among the comity of developed countries of the world. What is today known as Nigeria was predominantly homogenous in terms of religious culture, that is African Traditional Religion with its variants spread all over. But around the 11th century Islam was noticed around Kanem-Bornu Empire through the Trans-Saharan trade route and in 18th century Christianity was planted in Warri and Benin. Coupled with our colonial history and consequent amalgation of the Northern Protectorate and the Southern Protectorate in 1914, a country called Nigeria was birthed. These events have led to the multi-religious nature of Nigeria. Thus, the three dominant religious convictions are Christianity, Islam, African Traditional Religion amongst others. But it is interesting to note that the various inter-religious crises have revolved around the influences of Christianity and Islam engaged in unhealthy rivalry and at the slighest provocation snowballs into the various inter-religious crises we have experienced over the past four decades, with their attendant lost of human lives and properties that cannot be estimated.

With this reality on ground, it has become imperative to look at the good tenents, values and the like embodied in African Traditional Religion, as to used same as via media in mitigating the extremes of Christianity and Islam in achieving a tranquil and peaceful atmosphere for the growth and development of the country in all ramifications for the benefit of all and sundry. One of the high points of African Traditional Religion is that, it is not a missionary religion unlike the other two which makes it a peaceful religion because it will not come in contact with other religious convictions in the course of propagation like the other two. By and large, the paper is a call for a focus on African Traditional

Religion as a via media in the religious scheme of affairs in Nigeria, so as to mitigate the extremes of Christianity and Islam for the much needed tranquility and peace for the over all growth and development of the country, as individuals and as a collective.

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