

Nigeria at Hundred: The Importance of Religious Education for Strategic Peace Process in Northern Nigeria.

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Abstract

One hundred year on, Nigerians are still in search by asking questions and opining better means of how to confront, tackle and conquer their challenges that hamper better life, harmonious living and improvement in society like most parts of the world. This paper argues that the expedition does not however; exclude the subject of religion since humans are religious beings, tweaked towards the divine. Its approach takes cognizance of the multi-social and religiously diverse nature of Nigeria as a nation. The negligence of which causes conflict and misunderstanding driven by religious sentiments. The approach of this paper shall be analytical building up to state that religious and peace education is the most important measure to be taken for the aversion of the occurrence of religious conflicts in the Nigeria of the future.

1. Introduction

Education or learning can be described as a process through which knowledge is transmitted by means of teaching, learning, and training, and acquisition of skills and awareness, which may be formal or informal (Solahudee, 2011). It is a fact that learning both formal and informal have contributed immensely to the development of contemporary society and remains the catalyst for growth and expansion in the world. However, the approaches and goals of education differ from place to place as every society has its own system of training and imparting knowledge (Edevbaro, 1997:8-9).

Before the advent of missionary enterprise in Africa (Nigeria), African societies had a traditional-indigenous system of education by participation, apprenticeship and observation. This is a scheme whereby children and adults engaged in participatory education through ceremonies, rituals, initiations, recitations, folklore, stories, singing, proverbs and

demonstrations, to impart religious, moral, and societal values in the growing child (Edevaro, 1997). To achieve the above, the role of the family in traditional African societies has been paramount, as the family is considered the primary and indispensable cell of society and the necessary base to communicate values of life on the younger generation. Thus Parents and elders played significant roles in this process of native formation. Traditional African educational system, while generally informal, remains a process of induction into society and a preparation for adulthood with much emphasis on social responsibility, discipline, respect, honesty, collaboration, accountability, dialogue and peace in the community.

However, plurality in every aspect of contemporary society, mass migration, resulting from the two world wars, the end of the Cold War, and the sharp level of inequality in the distribution of labour and world resources, has led to a much greater level of encounter between people of different religious affiliations, presenting fresh challenges often leading to conflicts that seem to stem from the experience of multiplicity of religions (Werner, 2002:111). Northern Nigeria remains a perfect example of such brash. After a hundred years of living as a nation, violent conflicts that seem to be religiously motivated especially in the Northern region has remained the hallmark of its existence. Thus the task for scholars, religious/community leaders, politicians and policy makers is on how to evolve a system of religious education that addresses issues of conflicts consequent of religious diversity, stereotype, bias and prejudice. Can there be a proficient form of religious education that promotes respect, freedom and harmony between adherents of different religious beliefs for peace in society? In this paper, I am arguing that effective religious education is of great importance for a peace building process within a religiously diverse community, with focus on the need for strategic religious learning that weakens conflict for sustainable peace in society as we celebrate our Centenary.

2. Are Conflicts Innately Bad?

It can be argued that religiously motivated conflicts are common around the globe today, giving credence to the expression 'Religious Conflict' as used especially by analysts and the media in an attempt to describe conflicts that are religiously provoked. As an inevitable part of human existence, conflict continues to shape and affect the ways in which people and communities relate to each other, presenting both challenges and the prospect for growth. Defined as the pursuit of incompatible interests and goals by different

groups (Francis, 2005: 20). Conflict is however intrinsic to human development and is normal in human relationships. By way of a critical reflection on the one hundredth anniversary of Nigeria as a Nation, one can argue that conflicts have continued to shape and reshape our history with significant consequences. Generally, conflict can be triggered and exacerbated by numerous factors like poor religious education, ethnic rivalries/division, socio-political and economic inequality, marginalisation and perceived political and cultural domination (Francis, 2007: 64-65). However, understanding the causes, dynamics and complexities of any conflict is important, because it provides indications and strategies on how to respond to a particular situation and how to manage such conflict in peace building (Francis, 63). Conflict generally provides an opportunity for growth when properly analysed and handled in such a way that the issues are addressed and parties in the conflict can see a way forward to build harmony in society.

2.1 The Concept, Religious Conflict

Religiously motivated conflict can be delineated as dispute between two or more faith communities driven by religious sentiment, stereotypical views of the self and the 'other,' bias, prejudice, misconception, poor religious education/instruction and poor or extremist interpretation of religion (scripture) which can have dire political, social and violent consequence (Umaru, 2013:11,54-55). However, the complex nature of conflict generally makes it difficult at an instance to conclude that a particular conflict is religious, political, ethnic or socio-cultural; conflict can possess all of these characteristics, thus the need for conflict analysis.

In the same vein, religiously based disputes can be complicated and interesting. This is because religion confers identity and creates community, fostering a communal spirit with a sense of belonging that impinges on the sentiments of a people and their sensitivity to religious beliefs. This beckons the question, where and how do you distinguish between conflicts that are so-called religious or political? It can furthermore be said that religion in itself does not cause conflict. However, the conditions that lead to conflict are, of course, matters of ideological, socio-political or ethnic identities, to which sentiments of religion can add an eccentric, precarious and violent twist. And there is no doubt that under certain circumstances particular religious action or interpretation can initiate conflict which gives religion the unique propensity to exacerbate conflict even to the level of violence.

The conflict in Northern Nigeria for me is a conglomeration of all of the above and religion is only being used in the violent expression of the dissatisfaction, disappointment and suffering experienced in the land. Additionally, so-called religious conflicts are used to vent deep rooted ethnic, socio-cultural and political divide between communities for which unfortunately one ethnic group may be predominantly Christian or Muslim. Violent (religious) conflicts in Nigeria over the years are a testimony of conflicts driven by ideologies. For instance, the Maitatsine group in the 1980s who claimed their own brand of Islam was superior to every other religious tradition including Christianity can be analysed from different perspectives (Akaeze, 2009). The 2008 Jos crisis in effect was a dispute about local government elections and so political, which eventually, became a religious conflict with devastating consequences (Kaigama, 2012: 73-74). And in the last five years, northern Nigeria has suffered from the menace of Boko Haram; both Muslims and Christians have been killed. Boko Haram aims to build an Islamic Caliphate in Nigeria, a unified Islamic state ruled by Islamic shari'a law and thus western education, values and modernisation is a sin or forbidden (Walker, 2012). Evaluating the thrust of the group's activities (bombing, killing, destructions, abducting) one can conclude that it is ideological, political, economic and at the same time religious. However, the complex nature of conflict makes it difficult to identify and pin-point a single cause of a particular conflict since at what point would it be concluded that a conflict is entirely religious, political, socio-cultural, economic or a composite of all and or fuelled by a particular ideology?

3. Conflict as a Consequence of Poor Religious Education

Religious education and instruction plays a significant role in the formation of the spiritual, moral (conscience) and social life of the adherents of a particular religion. It is the means through which the faith of an individual is built, strengthened and sustained within a faith community. This is achieved through catechises, religious instruction, teaching, schooling and the interpretation of scripture and the religious tradition. This formation takes place in schools, churches, seminaries, mosques, madarasas, in the institutes of religious learning and through preaching. It can be argued that the way, the manner and the kind of education and instruction given have a momentous influence on shaping the world view and religious beliefs and actions of the individual or of a faith community. Hence, poor religious education/instruction can lead to ignorance, and can build and strengthen

stereotypes, feed-biases, build hate, and foster extremism which can lead to conflict, inhibiting social cohesion between different faith groups (Umaru, 2013, 126).

In contemporary Northern Nigeria, for example, the kind of religious instruction, preaching and formation most often given to Followers of both religious traditions (Christians and Muslims) often promote ignorance, stereotyping and an exclusive attitude towards the 'other.' Ignorance and lack of proper knowledge about the religious 'other' further intensifies negative perceptions about the 'other' in Nigeria. Sometimes during religious instruction, Facilitators/Teachers of both faith traditions have either not told the truth about the 'other', or have presented the other faith tradition negatively or have remained silent. That is why there some of them by the use of derogatory and inflammatory languages, have made provocative statements that have antagonised the other (ibid. 127). A classical instance is when Christians are referred to as Kafir (infidels) by the Muslims or Muslims are labelled as Unbelievers by Christians. Furthermore, the inability of government to provide equal opportunity for religious (instruction) knowledge in our public schools remains a challenge. Such that even where government approved syllabus are in use, what is taught and how it is taught depends very much on the teachers of both religious traditions.

The resulting consequence is the fact that, Nigeria's hundred years has been be-devilled by lack of proper knowledge of the religious 'other,' poor formation and perception, exclusivism which leads to religious discrimination, accusations and counter-accusations reinforced and sustained by stereotypes flowing from fundamentalist attitudes. The result of which are religiously based violent conflicts as witnessed in northern Nigeria, and a few skirmishes in other parts of the country, arising from intra-religious disputations on doctrinal or theological grounds. This too needs some of education. The question remains, how can Nigerians overcome such spiteful manner of religious formation for a more responsible, dignified and forthright system of religious education in Nigeria in the future?

4. The Significance of Proficient Religious Education in Peace Building

Religious education can be described as that unique form of learning that seeks to provide knowledge, erudition and understanding of the nature of religious experience, concepts, practices and complexities of a religious

tradition (Cf. Conroy and Robert, 2010). Religious education is essential in peace building because such learning aims to create better awareness about the plurality of religions in contemporary society as well as shed light on symbols, language and gestures within different faith traditions since, for example, Christianity and Islam claim to be religions of peace.

In a process of peace building, religious and peace education must go together. Peace education aims to confront indirectly the forms of violence that dominate society by teaching about its causes and offering alternatives that seek to transform the changing social structures and thought patterns that seem to sustain conflicts (Harris and Morrison, 2003, 9). Besides, since most religious traditions claim to be religions of peace and harmony, religious and peace education can contribute significantly to peace and mutual cohesion in society.

The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) maintains that educating people about their shared rights and freedoms is the most effective means of preventing intolerance (UNESCO, 1995). Thus an effective system of religious and peace education has the proficiency to train people to think, become responsible, independent and open minded in identifying and addressing issues of deep-rooted socio-political, economic, ethno-cultural and religious divides that fuel intolerance in society. Good and qualitative (religious) education is important in the promotion of religious freedom, equality, peace and harmony (not only) in northern Nigeria. Moreover, the northern Nigerian culture and style is shaped and influenced by Islamic civilisation. The traditional practice of Islamic system of learning is common. The praxis of Qur'anic schools, Qur'anic recitation and the use of Arabic as the language for educating are customary. This however, is challenged in a contemporary age where the competence of science and technology moves the world, and people need such dexterity to effectively participate productively in society. Therefore, it is incisive to acquire both Qur'anic and modern learning for critical engagement; dialogue and positive contribution to development and growth in the present-day pluralistic society. Such cannot be overemphasised!

Accordingly, Christians and Muslims have the responsibility to educate their adherents to be respectful, polite, civil and in dialogue with people of other faith traditions for peaceful coexistence. Dialogue in daily life is helped by a system of religious and peace education that empowers people

to think for themselves, dispel ignorance and respect the right and freedom of the 'other' to be different. Moreover, learning in intercultural and religious dialogue can foster living together in civil love and coherence (cf. VIS News, 2013, no. 243). The need for peaceful coexistence between people of different religious affiliation in northern Nigeria is of paramount importance. It is therefore imperative that religious/community leaders, parents, policy makers and the Nigerian government) collaborate to put in place a dynamic system (policy) of religious and peace education by developing a curriculum for our public and private institutions/schools. Such a programme of study should include learning about plurality of religion, causes (theories) of conflict, dialogue and the need for peace while addressing questions of prejudice, stereotypes and biases that fuel conflict.

Furthermore, such a policy should have Islam included in all parts of the religious curriculum in Christian schools and catechetical education centres. Similarly, the teaching of Christianity should be part of the entire curriculum in Islamic schools and madrasa (Islamic learning centres). The approach should be a positive focus on understanding different faith traditions. This programme of religious/peace education should counter influences leading to fear and exclusion of others and helping especially young people develop independent critical judgement and reasonable ethical thinking (UNESCO, 1995). Such an educational model should be the prototype for schools and be evaluated constantly to assess the progress being made. In addition, religious/peace education should form part of the school curriculum from nursery school to the tertiary institutions and be the base for religious catechesis in churches and mosques. As Arabic and Islamic historian William Watt argues, "It is possible for one to be educated in either the Christian or Islamic traditions without losing one's own religious identity" (Watt, 1983, 172).

Achieving the above would include adequate funding, provision of resource materials (books and other equipment), training and re-training of teachers in the field of religious and peace education. This is vital for the development of peace and security in northern Nigeria. Religious education for peace building has to be both formal and informal. Formal education takes place in schools (Primary, Secondary and Tertiary). These institutions can become transformative establishments that guard against indoctrination to form free and independent minds, while taking responsibility for justice and peace in society. Additionally, religious and

peace education could be integrated in the history, culture and language curricula as a compulsory syllabus in general education. Children of different religious backgrounds can learn together, focusing on the diversity of religion. As educational psychologists David Johnson and Roger Johnson have argued, peace can be engendered when positive relations are established between members of disputing parties (David and Johnson, 2005, 284-285). I agree, and further argue, that integrating the teaching of religion and peace education gives students of diverse religious and cultural backgrounds the opportunity to learn and appreciate the values of tolerance, respect, dialogue and peace.

Government, religious leaders and other stakeholders in the Nigerian educational sector might consider developing a framework for religious education that guarantees every student the chance to learn about different religions other than their own. For example in northern Nigeria, Muslim and Christian students could be taught together by two teachers teaching Islamic and Christian religious knowledge. This will encourage students to develop basic and critical knowledge of both religious traditions, helping them to appreciate the diverse nature of contemporary Nigerian society, as well as learn to respect their differences. It would provide further opportunities for encounter and dialogue between students and a chance to confront stereotypes. Moreover, the educational system needed for peace in northern Nigeria should encourage students' interaction, through common projects, living together, group work, assignments and sharing of experiences. Negative stereotyping can be weakened further if educational programmes include mutual study exchange, regional cooperation among educators and students and the strengthening of the Nigerian National Youth Service Corps (NYSC), where, for example, student graduates from the south are sent to the north for service and vice-versa. The objective of the above project is to support mutual exchange and build bridges of peace, dialogue and understanding. The success of the above scheme demands knowledge and skills on how to deal with religious and human diversity, hence the need for teacher training in religious and human differences and interreligious dialogue.

Undoubtedly, some Muslim and Christian parents may resist the counsel that their children learn about other faiths for the fear of conversion, this would be significant. It is a genuine fear, but considering the high price northern Nigerians are paying for ignorance of the religious 'other,' it is worth the risk.

I support whole-heartedly the practice of public preaching, religious instruction and education in churches and mosques. However, I want to suggest that this be done with the utmost respect for the religious 'other'. Hence religious preachers and teachers in Qur'anic schools and Sunday schools ought to be properly trained and licensed by the leadership of their religious traditions. The training of clerics should include proper formation, for instance, in the basics of Islamic and Christian traditions, and the techniques of interreligious dialogue. With the provision, for example, that a trained Muslim teaches Islam in a Christian seminary and a trained Christian teaches Christianity in an Islamic madrasa. Furthermore, in the parish or in the mosque community, when religious lessons are taught a Muslim could be invited to share about the Qur'an and Islamic faith to the Christian faithful; a Christian could be invited to talk about the Bible and Christian faith to the Muslim faithful. The emphasis here is on sharing and getting to know about the other faith; it is not about conversion, arguments or debate. The focus is on increasing knowledge of the 'other' faith tradition.

Additionally, for our Centenary celebration (and for the future), a day, for example the 16th of November, the annual International Day for Tolerance (UNESCO, 1995), could be an open day in all mosques and churches. Such a day provides the opportunity for people to visit a mosque or church within their local area. It offers the Christian and Muslim faithful a unique experience of the 'other.' This further weakens stereotypes and builds friendship and trust that leads to a better understanding. In Germany, for instance, the 3rd of October every year is an Open Day for Mosques (Herrmann, 2011), and people are encouraged to make visits; religious leaders in northern Nigeria might wish to consider same.

The hope here is that learning and sharing in community religious/peace education will foster the values of respect, love and togetherness that both Islam and Christianity share, and motivate adherents to increase their knowledge of the other's faith; such sharing would engender love and friendship and help discern the values that lead to peace and harmony in society (McGrath, 2011).

5. Conclusion

As part of our Centenary celebration and for the future of our Country, proficient religious/peace education is pivotal in our search for sustainable peace in contemporary (northern) Nigeria and is a necessary condition for

harmony. Christians and Muslims can create a civilisation based on religious dialogue of learning about each other, to which both formal and informal methods of education provide a unique space, in which viable traditional community values are transmitted in a process of building a peaceful human future. As such, those particularly charged with the responsibility of giving religious education or educating others must commit themselves to forming people who will be open to respect the religious choices of others, obey legitimate authority and have love for genuine freedom. That is, a people who will use their judgement to make decisions guided by moral justice and truth, and freely combine their efforts with others to achieve all that is just and true in society (Tanner, 2005, 311). This, however, challenges faith communities and especially religious leaders, government and all stakeholders to collaborate in providing education (religious/peace) which enhances critical thinking, weakens stereotypes and encourages the development of mature moral values that guarantee freedom, peace and security in the region (Cf. Francis, 2013, no. 64). A style of learning that enhances living together in harmony with the 'other' because despite our differences, we all belong to each other. Thus adept religious erudition must seek to reinforce communal bounds built on the value of mutual communication and dialogue. Moreover, qualitative religious/peace education should enable ethnic nationalities and people of different religious affiliation get to know one another and promote reconciliation since tension and violent conflicts continue to affect the relationship between faith communities. Furthermore, crucial factors of insecurity, insincerity and impunity, and the use of religious sentiments for political exploits and advantage can be critically addressed through effective learning and collective responsibility (Oyeyipo, 2014).

It is worth noting that the educational system in Nigeria needs proper attention if the Nigerian society is to remain on the path of sustainable peace and development. Violent conflict, whatever its cause destroys any progress that has been made. Thus, a strategic peace process can be enhanced through constant negotiation and renegotiation, to which effective religious and peace education creates an opportunity. In our new Century, Christians and Muslims have become stakeholders in building a future of peace and the development of their immediate environs. Religious institutions and faith communities provide the prospects for such positive growth in the region, and proficient religious/peace education is key to achieving peace and security in northern Nigeria,

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