

RELIGIOUS PRACTICES IN NIGERIA: A MEANS FOR TRUE FEDERALISM AND NATION BUILDING

Ezulike, C.C. & Wanlor Stephen B.

Primary Education Studies Department, Federal College of Education, Pankshin.
ceciliaezulike@yahoo.com | 08069650577

Abstract

The concept of religion has been an arguable discuss in the academic field and other areas of the society. Embedded in it is the capacity to mar or enhance the development of any society. As a major instrument of socialisation, its role in shaping people's perception about certain phenomena of life cannot be over emphasised. This explains why individuals take decisions based on their religious beliefs. Despite its usefulness and effectiveness in organising individuals for a collective goal, it is sometimes used as a means to create strife amongst people in a society. The notion of collectivism in religious practices occasional divide on the lines of religion, thereby attaching negative attributes to societies where such is evident. However, religion over time has proven to be an effective tool for reaching out to people even at the grass-roots. Serving this function, it aids in determining the kinds of relationships between and amongst people of a given religious group thereby ensuing social order. This paper thus becomes a timely piece in unravelling the roles of religion in upholding true federalism and nation building in Nigeria. Findings for this paper are drawn from the review of relevant literatures: religion should not be a means of discord among members of the Nigerian society, but should be a unifying factor. Nigerians should also be patriotic and selfless for the development of the society.

Keywords: Religion, Religious practices, Nation building, Federalism.

Introduction

Religion is known to exist in all human societies; the earliest and most developed societies in the world indicate various elements of religious symbols, practices and ceremonies. Most legendary myths show that religion is as old as the creation of man. Since creation, man has always sought after a metaphysical element to which one can attribute feelings. Nigeria is a very religious country. To supporting this statement, a paraphrased assertion by Onaiyekan, a Cardinal in the Catholic Church gives a better view of the religious nature of Nigerians. In addition, a casual look at our country obviously shows the all-pervading presence of religion. One only need to note, for example, the number of places of worship, the volume of holy noises

emitted everywhere, the array of religious leaders with various titles and robes and the favour with which people not only practice our faith but at times violently confront one another. While some wonder whether our reputation as a religious nation is something to be proud of, others suspect that there is something dubious about this record (Onaiyekan, 2010).

Aside being a religious country, Nigeria is also one of the countries that operate a federal system of government. The framework of federalism in Nigeria has continually gained respect, recognition and concern since its introduction by the Lyttleton Constitution in 1954. The obvious reason for this is the pluralistic nature of the nation. While Suberu (2001) suggests it was adopted in response to the need for the accommodation of basic territorial, ethno-linguistic or religious diversity, Gana & Egwu, (2003) see it as a means to forestall secessionist attempt by any region or group, foster national unity and ensure a peaceful coexistence among its diverse people.

Since the inception of federalism in Nigeria, the country has experienced so many threats to its federal structure based on religious, ethnic and political fault-lines; the strongest force being the religious dimension. The country has experienced at least 700 incidents of communal violence in different states since its transition from military dictatorship to democratic rule in 1999 (Lewis, 2012). These conflicts according to Osaghae & Suberu (2005) usually involve adherents of the two main religions, Christians and Muslims. Because ethnic and religious identities overlap each other, such conflicts easily grow into ethno-religious confrontations.

For so long, the country has shown palpable symptoms of failure and dysfunction, yet, it has continued to dance on the brink without falling off the cliff (Campbell, 2012). Among so many indexes, Nigeria's records in the past few years are either stagnant or have fallen drastically to alarming levels of concern. It was ranked 3rd out of 162, after Iraq and Afghanistan on the Global Terrorist Index of 2015. Described as a less peaceful state, it was close to the bottom with a rank of 149th out of 163 on the Global Peace Index of 2016. It was also ranked 13th out of 178 countries on the Fragile State Index of 2016. Adesoji, (2010) and Onuoha, (2011) have lamented on the growing fear that the country's conflict carrying capacity is getting overwhelmed by a plethora of ethno-religious violence and the insurgency in the north. Conflict-carrying capacity is the ability of the state to regulate the intense internal conflict without losing system's integrity (Jenkins & Bond, 2001). In their view, Jenkins & Bond define system integrity

to include “the development of sustained insurgency, widespread human rights violations, the breakdown of basic political order and political revolutions that deprive segments of the population of basic political and economic rights.”

Religion, no doubt has always been used as one of the major tools for mayhem in Nigeria. This tends to make a religious fanatic (an extremist) shy away from the collective responsibility of maintaining a civil society under the umbrella of the various religious groups in the country. However, the potential of our religious practices putting the country in order has not been harnessed by the Nigerian polity. Much scholarly articles seem to concentrate on how these religions throw the nation into a state of chaos by their practices and a clash of differences in ideology. This paper hitherto has a central focus on how the two major religions in Nigeria (Christianity and Islam) can direct the nation towards her desired state of true federalism.

Conceptual Clarifications

Religion: Over time, it has been established that there can be no universally acceptable definition of religion owing to its nature (Raphael, 2014). This is because Religion has several segments from which people approach it (Ngele, 2008). The definitional literature of the concept of religion according to Swatos (N. d.) can be organized around four approaches: such as substantive, functional, *verstehende* and formal. For the purpose of this work, the functional approach will be adopted.

Functionally, religion is defined according to Emile Durkheim in George (2010) as beliefs and practices that unite into a single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them. Although this definition seems to concentrate mainly on Christianity, it is important to note that religion unites all those who adhere to it, into a single moral community. Three major elements in this definition according to George (2010) are rituals (practices required of a member of a religion, to honour the divine power, worship); belief (which refers to statements to which members of a particular religion adhere to) and experience (implies the feeling or perception of being in direct contact with the ultimate reality). George (2010) asserts that religion is a cultural universal found in one form or another in all known human societies across the world. Functionalists believe that various human phenomena are religious. It is believed to have supposed consequences or functions within the human psyche, society, or

culture in general. According to Ekiran (2003), religion has affected and continues to affect human behaviour, speech, mode of dressing and some other aspects of human life.

Religion is divided into three broad categories. They are world religion; indigenous religion and new religious movement. World religion refers to transcultural religion and international faith. Indigenous religion refers to smaller, culture-specific groups, while new religious movements refer to recently developed faith (Harvey, 2000). The New York Times (2008) in George (2010), revealed that there are six major religions currently in the world. Namely Christianity 33%, Islam 19%, and Atheism, Gothic, Mormon, Jewish, and other minor religions occupy the remaining 48% of the world's population.

Religious practices: This is the adherence to and the performance of the tenets and values of a given religion. In Nigeria, there are three major religious practices; Christianity, African Traditional Religion (ATR) and Islam. The landscape of Nigeria is divided along the religious path of the two main religions (Christianity and Islam).

Nation Building: Nation building is constructing or structuring a national identity using the power of the state. It aims at unification of the people within the state so that it remains politically stable and viable in the long run. Nation building is a process through which these majorities are constructed. A process whereby a society of people with diverse origins, (like Nigeria) histories, languages, cultures and religions come together within the boundaries of a sovereign state with a unified constitutional and legal dispensation.

(<https://en.m.wikipedia.org>).

Federalism: Federalism is the adjectival form of the word federal. Federalism according to Riker (1975) is a political organization in which the activities of government are divided between regional governments and a central government in such a way that each kind of government has some activities on which it makes final decisions. The word “federal” is a derivative of the Latin “foedus” which means covenant (Heuglin & Fenna, 2010). The history and origin of political federalism was traced by McCroy & Baker (1991) to its root in the covenantal thought in the religious and theological traditions, particularly to the Reformed and post-Reformed tradition of the Christian faith. They explained how the tradition of federal theology inspired federal political philosophy and its serving as the foundation of modern federalism. The

intellectual foundation of the federal movement was traced to Heinrich Bullinger's treatise *De testamentoseufoedere Dei unico et aeterno* (1534), which in English is translated as *The One and Eternal Testament or Covenant of God* (McCoy & Baker, 1991). They described Bullinger's treatise as the point of origin of federalism because it is the first attempt to organise the understanding of God, creation, humanity, human history, and society around the covenant. Hence they asserted that "A covenantal order is federal. A federal order is covenantal" (McCoy and Baker, 1991).

Federalism was introduced in Nigeria by the Lyttleton constitution of 1954. This was prompted by protests from returned ex-servicemen who had fought alongside the British in World War II. The constitution according to Religious literary Project, (2016) cemented a federal system with three self-governing states under a weak central control. This comprised of a large northern state and smaller eastern and western states, reflecting the three regional units managed separately and differently by the colonial administration. At its freedom from British colonialism and attainment of independence in 1960, mobilization for political support was based on regional identity, ethnicity, and religion. This was contrary to the shared vision of a unified Nigeria by the early nationalist. Competition for political power and access to economic resources made it impossible for the country to stand on that foundation of unity firmly held by the nationalists. (*Religious literary project (2016)*).

For about thirty three years, the country was under a stronghold of military dictatorship. The first instituted government after the colonial rule was ousted by a military coup which had an aftermath of severe bloodshed in the northern region as a reprisal attack on Christians for the death of northern leaders during the coup, since the coup was believed to be plotted on the lines of religion and ethnicity. The country continued to experience chaos in various parts including the Biafra war of 1967-1970 in which millions of people were killed. Even after the country's transition to civilian government in 1999 till date, it has continued to wallow in a state of ethno-religious turbulence. (*Religious literary project (2016)*).

Contemporary Religious Movements and Activities in Nigeria

The idea of contemporary activities implies the current state of people's actions in the religious dimension in Nigeria. This includes dynamism and the influence of several factors on

religion, ranging from cultural accumulation, information and technology, social media, and government policies among others. Religion in its entirety has some roles it plays to its immediate members and the general human race. These activities are geared towards service to humanity; taking care of the mortal nature of man in his search for a better living standard.

In Nigeria, some groups have come up with some activities having the same ideology of ensuing equity and fairness for all in the country. The ultimate goal of these organisations and their activities is uniting the entire nation thereby building peace, stability and upholding that covenant “federalism” in Nigeria. These activities are in tandem with Max Weber’s claims on the Sociology of Religion which states that religion can be a source of social change.

The activity of Christians and Muslims in Nigeria is noticed in several areas. Some ecumenical movements in the form of Faith Based Organisations (FBOs) have helped to contribute to the sustainable development of the country on the path of peace, security, education, healthcare delivery, social development and conflict resolution. The first and obvious manifestation of these efforts is in the educational dimension. According to Baiyeri (2013), virtually, all FBOs in Nigeria provide one form of education programme or the other. One of the FBOs which have a major goal of education in Islam is the Federation of Muslim Women Association of Nigeria (FOMWAN). Its mission is to educate Muslim women and make sure they live according to the tenets of Islam and as well make positive impact on national issues (Ngeri-Nwagha, 2002). Some religious institutions have further forestalled literacy by their assertive presence in the education sector. From the period of the British colonisation in Nigeria, the missionaries not only brought the Christian religion, but education also. Churches were erected alongside primary and secondary schools in order to enhance civilisation. In the words of Olusanya (1980), the missionaries vigorously fought to support “amongst their converts the idea of the creation of a modern state which would take its rightful place in the comity of nations.” These missionaries by their activities in the southern region of Nigeria according to Olusanya (1980) succeeded in breaking down ethnic prejudices and creating an overarching identity that transcended ethnic boundaries.

The path for peace was created during the colonisation era. The missionaries were able to dissolve the rivalry and suspicion among liberated African Christians and their fellow African

converts (Falks, 1997). Trying to maintain the path of peace and security, Religious Literary Project (2016), noted that at the Muslim foreign ministers' meeting held in Qatar in October 2001, the 56 member-countries of the Islamic Conference (OIC) agreed to condemn terrorism and also ignore the Taliban's call for jihad against Christians and Jews. Some FBOs help to ensure a mutual understanding among the adherents of Islam and Christianity in Nigeria. One of such organisations is the Nigerian Inter Religious Council (NIRC).

In research by Odumosu, Olaniyi & Alonge, (2009), some FBOs in Nigeria and their activities were noted.

Table 1: Faith-Based Organisations in Nigeria and their activities.

Type	Definition/comment	Most common activities	Major examples
Interfaith	These are groups of different congregations, denominations or religions that join together for a common cause or to provide large-scale services that are beyond the scope of a single congregation.	Promote mutual understanding among the adherents of various religions.	Nigerian inter-religious council
		Bring the two major religious groups (Christian and Muslims) together to present a common front in the fight against HIV/AIDS	Interfaith HIV/AIDS Council of Nigeria
Apex body	Apex bodies rule on doctrinal matters, govern the faithful and represent them through engagement with the state and other actors	Spread the Muslim faith across the nation, bring different Muslim groups together to work for the common good of Islam and speak to the government with one voice on Muslim matters	Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic affairs Jama'tu Nasril Islam
		Promote understanding peace and unity of the churches and speak to	Christian Association of Nigeria

		the government with one voice on Christian matters	Christian Council of Nigeria
			Nigerian Catholic Bishops' Conference
			Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria
Development organizations	Development organizations mobilize the faithful in support of the poor and other social groups, and fund or manage programmes that tackle poverty and social exclusion	Service delivery, especially in health and education, an economic (e.g. micro-finance) as well as a community development dimension.	Federation of Muslim Women Association of Nigeria.
			Nasrul-Lahil-Fathi society of Nigeria
			Justice Development and Peace Commission
			Christian Health Association of Nigeria
			Christian Rural and Urban Development Association of Nigeria
			People Oriented Development
			Urban Ministry
Socio-political organizations	These are organizations that interpret and deploy faith as a political construct, organizing and mobilizing social groups on the basis of their faith identity but in pursuit of broader political objectives.	Respond to human rights violations monitor political processes and governance.	Jama'atu Nasril Islam
			Justice Development and peace Commission
Missionary organizations	These are organizations that spread key faith messages beyond the faithful, by	Proselytizing and providing religious instruction for members	Ansarudeen Society
			Islamic Foundation of Nigeria

	actively promoting the faith and seeking converts to it.	of their own religion, sometimes providing social services on the basis of key faith principles.	Council of Ulama
			Muslim Students Society
			Muslim Sisters' Organization
			Anwar-Islam Movement
			BEGE Ministries Int.
			Serving in Mission
			Young Men's Christian Association

Source: Odumosu, et al, (2009).

The religious movements in their little ways try to ensure peace and tranquillity in the country. Since they help encourage inter-faith relations, manage crisis, negotiate and mediate in conflict situations, serve as a communication link between opposing parties, and provide training in peace making schemes (Sulaiman & Ojo, 2012), they can function as a powerful warrant for social tolerance, for democratic pluralism, and for conflict management (Ilo, 2014). The importance of religion and by extension, these faith-based organisations in ensuring a peaceful coexistence amongst Nigerians cannot be overemphasised.

Religion in Nigeria: On A Path to Federalism

This section attempts to explore and examine those forces that undermine the federal framework of Nigeria and categorically state the imperatives on how religious practices direct the country to true federalism. To solve a given problem, the root cause of such has to be identified. On the dwindling nature of federalism in Nigeria, the truth has to be expressed. It is not enough to know the activities of these FBOs. There are certainly some activities and beliefs people exhibit that is catastrophic to federalism in the country. The important question here is: How can the two main religions in Nigeria practically direct the nation towards federalism? That is, what are those salient imperatives that on a continuum ensure this covenantal federal framework in Nigeria? This then means that there are so many things that are not done right in the two major religious practices in Nigeria.

The actual issue that must be addressed is in the area of people's psychological orientation. It is believed that the best way to manipulate religion is to manipulate the minds of religious adherents. The human mind has that tendency of polarising or bifurcating realities. If we come to the understanding that our religions are a means of connection to a supreme being, that idea of "religious superiority" will be cast out of our psyche into oblivion. The fault here would be attributed to our various religious leaders who in their sermons create this impression that anyone from an opposite religion is practicing a bad or inferior religion.

The resulting action of religious superiority is adherents of a particular religion trying to convert adherents of the opposite religion into their own religion. If one is not a Christian, he is seen as an unbeliever who is yet to embrace salvation. Also, if one is not a Muslim, is regarded as an infidel, practicing a false religion. Discussing this issue Ogbonnaya & Ugoha (n. d.) lament that "Christian's regard both Muslims and African Traditionalists as those who have no salvation in their religions and are doom for all eternity. Therefore, they need to be converted into the Christian faith in order to gain salvation. And in most cases, those who refused are forced into doing so. This is also the case with Islam in Northern Nigeria, where their adherents are so fanatical. These religious adherents see all non-Muslims as infidels that should be made by violence or any other means to become a member of their religion or be exterminated. It is this kind of mind-set that has informed and engineered the activities of the Islamic set called boko haram".

If Nigerians jettison that arrogant belief of the superiority of one religion over the other are sure to arrive at that state of federalism so desire. In most cases, people identify with their religious groups first, before identifying themselves as Nigerians. Hence, personal interests are first considered before the national interest. Consequently, religious adherents become self-opinionated not minding the views of the opposite religion. This makes them blind to the recognition of the good in other religions. Ogbonnaya & Ugoha (n.d.) describe this as reductionist and absolutist mind-set. In their opinion, "It is reductionist in that it reduces all religion to just one – the religion of the fanatic. It is absolutist in that it sees the religion of the fanatic as the only authentic religion that should exist and none else"

Assuredly, there are areas in Christianity and Islam where the tenets are closely related. There is need for a mutual understanding of the tenets of the two main religions. These areas should be identified and adhered to by all religious faithful in the country. Instead of fighting to Islamise or Christianise Nigeria which in turn causes violence and bloodshed, those closely related practices in both religions should be publicised and imbibed by all. The point here is that Nigeria as a nation is multi-religious and that there is the need for Nigerians who are adherents to these diverse religions to integrate as one. This is the path to true federalism in spite of religious differences that exist within the nation.

It must be noted that there are some similarities that cannot be denied or neglected. These similarities should be the meeting point of adherents of these religions. Also, their dissimilarities should be the reason for them to learn from each other in order to bring themselves to the level of mutual dependence and service. This could lead to federalism that the nation seeks to achieve. Hence, religious adherents in Nigeria should build on their similarities, learn, imbibe and synthesize their differences and promote their common unity [federalism]. This is possible when Nigerians are made to overcome religious arrogance and ignorance brought about by long time education, indoctrination and socialization. All these are wrong education of the religious minds. But when they are properly educated religious divisiveness will be a thing of the past while federalism will be enthroned or given a pride of place in the country.

Conclusion

As noted by Raphael (2014), religion has a lot of potential in transforming Nigeria into an enviable nation among other countries of the world if it is properly used. The earnest desire and dream for a true state of federalism in Nigeria will never come into reality if stake holders like a perfect phlegmatic just fold their arms and watch things unfold as life gives out what it has to offer.

The incumbent All Progressive Congress (APC) is known with the slogan “change”. Indeed, this change is necessary inasmuch as it is positive in nature and not to the detriment of members of the society. There has to be a change of attitude on the part of every individual. Christians and Muslims must ensue true federalism by encouraging and holding in high esteem

those activities and movements that make life easy and bearable for everyone. It is not the sole duty of the government, religious leaders, a particular religious organisation, a sect of the society or a non-governmental organisation.

In singing the national anthem, we say that the labours of our hero's past shall never be in vain. It is not enough to sing it; we ought to act in ways that would make it a reality. It is a collective duty; it's all about being patriotic; it's all about being willing; it's all about being selfless. One must hereto arise and face this challenge through the instrumentality of our religious groups. Thus, the cry and desire of Nigerians should reflect a line of our powerful and inspiring old national anthem, which reads: "though tribe and tongue may differ, in brotherhood we stand". This can be paraphrased thus: 'though religion and creed might differ in one Nigeria we stand'. This slogan should guide Nigerians while seeking for unity of this nation. Let us use our religion to promote the federalism of Nigeria since this is the only nation of ours. Therefore, we should promote and preserve the unity of this country.

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