

RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE AND PEACE: A PANACEA FOR DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria is a pluralized society, especially in terms of religion and tribe. When one considers the teachings and articulations of the various religions in Nigeria about moral and interpersonal relation, one would expect the presence of these religions in the country to be a blessing, however, the socio-political misfortune of Nigeria in the present time have been blamed on her religious plurality. For more than two decades now, Nigeria has experienced religiously precipitated security challenges apart from the daily kidnapping and the destruction of lives and properties of innocent Nigerians that have become a commonplace. Based on this backdrop, this study probed the place of religious relation on the socio-economic retrogression experienced in Nigeria in recent times. The paper explores the various factors of the poor interreligious, intra-denominational and sectarian problems experienced in Nigeria, including their implications on socio-economic development of the country. The paper made use of functionalism as the theoretical approach to appraise the role of religion in Nigeria in recent time. It employed the qualitative and descriptive research design and made use of the secondary method to elicit information. The paper suggests sincere/genuine secularization of Nigeria in order to give way for meaningful development in the country. Adherents of religions in Nigeria should eschew the proclivities of religious fanaticism in order to encourage good interpersonal relations among the people of different religious persuasions in the country.

Keywords: Religious Tolerance, Panacea, Development, Religious Relation, Nigeria.

Introduction

As a result of the growing insecurity in Nigeria, Nigeria has become one of the most dangerous places to live in across the globe. According to the 2020 Global Terrorism index, Nigeria ranked third most affected country by terrorism, with only Iraq and Afghanistan worse than Nigeria in terms of lack of peace and security (GTI 2020). This is against the 2015 ranking where Nigeria was in seventh position. The security problems of Nigeria are however partly as a result of the manifestation of intolerance among the three dominant religions in the country. So, in about past three or even four decades now, the Nigerian society has been marred by varying degrees of religiously induced violence and riots, which in turn also result in the killings of tens of thousands of innocent citizens, destruction of religious centers, wanton destruction of people's houses and properties worth trillions of naira. There is a sharp

increase in the activities of Boko Haram insurgents. Fulani Herdsmen and crop farmers' crises, to some extent also has religious undertone.

The direct implication of the security quagmire of Nigeria, however, is that socio-political cum economic situation of Nigeria deteriorate on daily basis. Development in Nigeria has been halted by violence/war and banditry occasioned by the activities of Boko Haram, Herdsmen, Kidnappers bandits and unknown gunmen, the worst being that of Boko Haram. The group is thought to have rejected Western Education because for them, Western education is a new form of western colonization and imperialism. The group is linked to an international terrorist organization known as ISIS. Aside being against western education, the group is also known as Brothers united in the pursuit of holy war. They are also reacting to the failure of the political leaders to carry the masses along in their region, all these lead to their total extremism.

According to Nigeria security Tracker, 2767 violent deaths were recorded between February 2020 and February 2021 in Borno State alone (Onajapo 2021). Similarly, kidnapping for ransoms by armed men has soared substantially in the past 10years with millions of dollars paid as ransom. Young women and children from schools are the target of these bandits lately especially in the North.

While insecurity is common in Nigeria, the Northern states are mostly affected. Unfortunately, the rise in banditry has added new and dangerous dimension to the attack on children since 2013. With the successful and globally publicized kidnap of about 276 Chibok girls in April 2014. A lot of school kidnapping and abduction are occurring almost on a monthly basis. In 2018, UNICEF reported that the group has kidnapped over 1000 children since 2013. Between 2015 & 2016 United Nation estimated that over 3909 children were killed (Gofwen 2004).

Some reasons could be adduced as to why these groups have turned to kidnapping of children in recent times. One such reason is that it has earned them international recognition, and then the girls are used for sexual satisfaction, as errand girls and also as suicide bombers and many more negative purposes. Just recently, a picture of three teenage girls who tied premium motor spirit inside nylon bags and covered them with clothes inside traveling bags were circulated in the social media as a new means of supplying petrol to the terrorist and bandits.

The greatest and most urgent need of any country or society is peace and security, without peace, there can never be any meaningful growth and development. No wonders the government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria has continued to invest billions of dollars of tax payers' money on the fight against insecurity, the money that could have been deployed for infrastructural and other developmental projects in the country. Meanwhile, despite the huge amount of money invested on security matters in the country, the security threat to progress in Nigeria persists. This paper, therefore, argues for the imperative of religious tolerance and peace as a means of restoring sanity and ensuring development in Nigeria.

Conceptual Definitions

The Concept of Peace

Peace is regarded as the absence or lack of conflicts such as war and freedom from fear of violence between individuals and groups (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English 2nd edition). Peace is a concept of social friendship and harmony in the absence of hostility and violence. According to Banks (2020), "Peace can mean harmony, order, justice or conflict management. It is the presence of non-violent behaviour, a means through which conflicting parties come to resolution or agreement on former or current causes of violence with the hope of finding new ways to live together in harmony". Peace is to live in harmony, to live without fear that someone will harm or kill you. Global peace is to live in cohesion across societies and to have freedom to fully be yourself without taking over the identity or freedom of anyone. It is to be noted that peace is more than the absence of war. It is the maintenance of an orderly and just society, orderly in being protected against the violence or extortion of aggressors and just in being defended against exploitation and abuse by the more powerful (Howard 1971).

In his speech, Gandhi spoke of non-violence rather than peace and emphasized the necessity of overcoming injustice (Gandhi 2020). Peace is used to describe the cessation of violent conflict; it can mean a state of quiet or tranquility - an absence of disturbance or agitation. Peace describes the relationship between any people characterized by respect, justice and good will. It is a state of calmness, severity and silence. There are basically four types of peace;

- a. Peace at home- A place where lots of children either learn peace or conflict, physical violence, mental violence that can turn a home into divine hell.
- b. Peace at work or study place- In real life we see co-workers harming each other or students bullying their mate, teachers or boss disturbing the ones they lead.
- c. Walking in the street free- In Nigeria today this is the most lacked type of peace. As it stands today nobody is safe in the market, on the roads even in one's home or farmlands. All the Nigerian roads have turned to death traps. Nobody knows where or when he/she will be kidnapped. It is in this regard that Yazdani (2020) noted that there is a difference between negative peace and positive peace. Peace can be slavery or it can be freedom, subjugation or liberation. Genuine peace means progress towards a freer and more just world.
- d. Peace with oneself- unless one is at peace with his or herself it will be difficult to be at peace with others around him.

Peace is very important to any society. It is the bedrock of every country's development. Peace goes along with unity, positive thinking and collaboration for the common good of all. A nation can only progress from under-developed status only in an environment where there is peace. Without sustainable peace, it is impossible for anyone to live in a safe space. Robertson Freeman (2020) quoting the 34th president of the United States of America said that "we seek peace knowing that peace is the climate of freedom". What this means is that there is no way we can have freedom without peace. Without peace, it will be near impossible, if not totally impossible to develop, where war tears apart, peace builds, strengthens and restores. There is need to maintain peace always, and for this to be possible, there must be fair treatment for all citizens so that everyone will have equal sense of belonging.

Recognizing the importance of peace in the society, the new internationalist gave us ten steps to achieve peace in the community or in the world. The ten steps are-

- a. By stamping out exclusion
- b. Bring about true equality between men and women
- c. Share our wealth fairly
- d. Tackle climate change
- e. Control Arms sales and arms purchase
- f. Displace less lubris make more policy change
- g. Build an integral peace movement
- h. Look within

Peace starts with oneself - the ordinary citizen, we must not look up to others to bring peace to us. In politics or any endeavour in life, think about who loses when you win. Say sorry when you are wrong, always try to hear people and respect them. Do not marginalize, ignore or leave some people out in the plan of events that concern them. When making decisions, we must care about what happens to others. Start a constructive conversation with someone you disagree with, by doing so, every one of us can choose to make the society more just and peaceful.

Religious Tolerance

The word tolerance literally means "to bear". It means to respect or to accept someone or his ideas and or possibly his character without applying force to change the individual. Religious tolerance is people allowing other people to think or practice their religions. To be tolerant means that you accept other people's opinion and preference even when they live in a way that you don't agree with.

From the biblical point of view, tolerance means patience, it means to endure suffering without retaliation, tolerance is one of the most valued biblical/religious principles. It means treating others with tolerance by listening to them, respecting them and their opinion. It is the willingness to allow, endure or accommodate people. Even though the word tolerance is not used directly in the bible, it is one of the attributes of God that his creatures are called to emulate. God's tolerance is seen in his patient forbearance or long suffering. God is a God of justice but slow to anger (Exodus 34:6). For people, in power, like the government, tolerance is not infinite, it defines certain behaviour as intolerable. This explains why crimes are not tolerated but punished.

Tolerance goes beyond association for example church members, political associates or special clubs. As long as man lives in the society, there is bound to be diversity of belief, opinion and behaviour. Even people within the same religious belief like the church certain things are tolerated while others are not. There are behaviours that are tolerated in the church and those that are not. The New Testament in 1cor 5:9-13 makes a distinction between the level of tolerance with the church and the society.

"I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral men, not at all meaning the immoral of this world or the greed and robbers or idolaters since then you would need to go out of the world... for what have I to do with judging outsiders. It is not those

inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. Drive out the wicked person from among you (Holy Bible RSV).

Islam, as a religion has its own view of tolerance. Religious tolerance in Islam is expounded by the acceptance of religious pluralism which gives legitimacy to the existence of religious differences in the society. Islam rejects compelling anyone to adopt or leave a religion. It explicitly allows non-Muslims to express, practice and teach their religious beliefs. The Qur'an sees tolerance as an important starting point in establishing greater peace between various religious communities. It gave Muslims five guidelines for building tolerance and understanding among religions. Qur'an 17:70 clearly states that "Everyone's God-given human dignity must be respected regardless of his or her faith, race, ethnic origin, gender or social status because everyone is created by God Almighty.

Yazdani (2020), notes that Islam is a religion of tolerance, peace and reconciliation. According to him, the basic principle of Islam whether in relation with Muslims or non-Muslims is interaction, peace, tolerance and friendship. War is forbidden in Islam except for self-defense not for offensive one. However, the Qur'an places limits on the use of war stating that those who forgive injury and make reconciliation will be rewarded by God. There are many principles in Islam which are significant for creating the culture of peace. One of such is the acceptance of religious faith as optional. In Islamic teaching, people are free to accept the religious belief of their interest. Qur'an 2:256 states explicitly that "Let there be no compulsion in religion. Truth stands out clear, whoever rejects evil and believe in Allah has grasped the most trustworthy handhold that never breaks and God hears and know all things" To non-Muslims, Qur'an 109:6 says "For your religion is your religion and for mine is my religion. All these point to Islamic view/teaching on patience and tolerance. Just like Christians, Muslims believe that life is sacred and they have a duty to uphold the truth.

In limited cases, just like the Bible, the Qur'an recognizes the right to retribution of its adherents in ash-shura the retribution for a bad action is one equivalent to it, for example,

1. The occurrence of aggression- 'And fight in the cause of Allah those who fight you but do not commit aggression. Allah does not love the aggressor" (2:190)
2. The principle of proportion- Whosoever commits aggression against you retaliate against him in the same measure as he has committed against you and be conscious of Allah and know that Allah is with the righteous (2:194)
3. Observe the necessity- And fight then until there is non- oppression and worship devoid of Allah alone (2:193)

From the foregoing, it is obvious that both Christianity and Islam recognize the importance of religious tolerance in the society. They acknowledge that religious tolerance is important for human coexistence and for individuals in a community to get along. Religious tolerance is important for establishing peace between various religious groups. It helps people to live together peacefully and cooperate with one another in workplaces. Tolerance brings about diversity because it ensures that every person has a chance to perform or carry out his/her duties in a healthy environment. Tolerance leads to reduced crime. It encourages exchange of ideas.

Inter-Religious Relationship in Nigeria

Nigeria is a pluralized or multi-religious community, and as such, there is bound to be relation and interplay of ideas and relationships whether healthy or otherwise. Inter-religious relation means relationships involving people of different religious beliefs and practices. It is often called interfaith relations. Ogunbadajo (2020), opined that “Inter-faith relations is about understanding our significant differences and also recognizing our similarities and working together for peace justice and healing” Inter-religious relations in Nigeria refers to how the adherents of the different religions co-existing in Nigeria feel and behave towards one another.

The turn of events in the past three decades or more show that the pattern of relationships among the adherents of the major religions in the country has not been cordial. Though, the African traditional religion might not be totally exonerated from the ugly turn of events, it however can be adjudged to be more peaceful and accommodating towards the other two imported religions (Christianity and Islam). African traditional religion welcomed these two proselytizing religions, it gave them space and even allowed them to make converts from among its followers for the sake of peaceful co-existence. On the other hand, Islam and Christianity have not been that accommodating. Nigeria in the last three decades has been faced with an unprecedented wave of different crises and security challenges ranging from herdsmen wanton destruction of houses and farm lands to extremist Boko Haram insurgency in the North, as well as other forms of crises in every nook and cranny of the country. All these crises definitely have religious undertone. The wave of insecurity occasioned by religious intolerance has threatened the very existence of Nigeria as a nation. In every attack, lives are lost and properties are damaged. Nigerians have lost hope in democracy and the nation itself. When President Muhammadu Buhari assumed office in 2015, he promised to bring about change and protect the citizens from terrorists and crimes. Today he has less than one year of his eight years of rule and Nigeria is more unstable than he met it.

Many have linked these problems to the poverty level and youth restiveness arising from unemployment, economic meltdown and the insincerity and failure of the political class to deliver on their campaign promises. While believing those assertions, it must be noted that there are deep religious undertones. There are about three major issues that have been threatening the unity and peace of Nigeria

1. Boko Haram Jihadism: During his first year in office President Buhari claimed that the Islamist militant group, Boko Haram had been technically defeated but today the president has admitted that his government is failing to stop the insurgency. Boko Haram terrorists launch deadly raids in many communities in the North East and on a daily basis, they are advancing in their campaign into new areas, killing, maiming and destroying properties worth millions. In most cases, they hoist their flags and impose extremist rule on local communities. They even impose taxes on farms and agricultural products. This group started their attack on the Christian communities before extending to other communities. According to a United Nations report, Nigeria has recorded over 350,000 deaths and millions forced out of their homes, United Nations (2020). Almost all agricultural activities of the local people have been put to a halt. In recent years, a splinter faction allied to Islamic state group called the Islamic

States, West Africa Province has surpassed Boko Haram in size and capacity. Both groups have resisted the government military operations.

2. Farmer/Herder clashes: Though the rivalry between herders and farmers in Nigeria predates this present administration, it however became much more worrisome in this present regime of President Buhari. Thousands of people have been killed in Benue state being the state that has recorded the deadliest attacks. It is very easy to say that the cause of these attacks is the disagreement over the use of land and waterways but what of the churches that were attacked and worshipper murdered right in front of the altar. Were the priests killed on the altar farmers? Has the church premises turned to farmlands all of a sudden, this goes to prove that many of these attacks have religious coloration.
3. Banditry and Kidnapping- One of the deadliest and scariest threats to peace and security in Nigeria is banditry and kidnapping. It all started with the kidnap of oil workers in the Niger Delta, it later graduated to kidnapping of unsuspecting travelers on the main roads in the country. Nigerians walk in the streets and ply the highways in fear. The worst experience is that kidnapping has gradually moved to schools. Innocent and unsuspecting children are kidnapped from their hostels and classrooms, and are only released after heavy ransoms are paid. Between 2013 and the present time, many schools in Northern Nigeria have been raided. The first one that attracted global attention was the kidnap of 276 Chibok government school girls in April 2014. It is sad to mention here that Leah Sharibu, that was abducted during another school raid at Dapchi in Yobe state, who refused to renounce her Christian faith, has been with held and turned to their baby mama to this date. The Boko Haram terrorists/Jihadists always claimed responsibility for these kidnaps of school children, but today, their names have changed to Bandits. These criminal elements raid villages, kill the men and kidnap mostly women and children for their selfish purposes and burn down houses and properties. Many who flee away have been forced to live in internally displaced centers while some flee to neighboring countries for safety. In Zamfara state alone, over 3,000 have been killed since 2012 and the attack is still ongoing ¹⁴. Hundreds of schools have been closed down following the activities of these bandits. By every indication kidnapping for ransom has turned to lucrative industry in Nigeria and it is seemingly beyond the control of the Nigerian Army.

Religious Intolerance in Nigeria

Religious fanaticism of Nigerian religious practitioners has caused feelings of hatred and lack of friendly interaction among adherents of the different religions in Nigeria, especially between Christians and Muslim. This attitude constantly put them at loggerhead with people of other faith. For instance, Muslims are at loggerhead especially with Christians, corroborating this view, Ogunbadejo (2020), quoting Ogundepo and Okedigba (2006), noted that some adherents of religions are so emotionally and dogmatically attached to their religion that they can hardly tolerate the views and opinions of others. Quite often, they take seemingly harmless expressions by others about their religion as offensive. A reference was made to the case of Isioma Damiel, a staff of This Day Newspaper, who published an article with a comment involving Prophet Muhammed (pbh). This caused major religious riots, about 200 people lost their lives and thousands were injured while over 11,600 were rendered homeless. The office of This Day in Kaduna was also burnt down despite the fact that the

newspaper apologized and retracted their front page. After all these, the deputy Governor of Zamfara State then, Alahji Mamuda Aliyu Shinkaffi made a broadcast where he issued a death sentence on Isioma Daniel. Because of this, the girl had no choice than to resign from work and ran out of the country for her dear life. All these are happening in this age of technological advancement, people are still ready and are willing to kill because someone said something bad against prophet Mohammed (pbh). A lot of religious conflicts have taken place in Nigeria, in the past, and also in the present time, things are only getting worse on a daily basis. During the reign of General Ibrahim Babangida, it was rumored that he registered Nigeria as a member of the Organization of Islamic Conference OIC. Under normal circumstances, Nigeria is a secular state, and no person has the right to impose any particular religion on the people. The after effect of this is the international sponsorship of Boko Haram in Nigeria and the worsening condition of insecurity in the country.

The Place of Religious Tolerance and Peace in Development

The term development is complex, ambiguous and elusive. Development has a multitude of meanings and it involves various areas; development can be political, economic, social or environmental. In its simplest term, development means bringing about social change that allows people to achieve their human potential. Development is a process that creates growth and positive change. Development is dynamic, involving change from one low/poor state to another higher/better state. It is a move of a process rather than an outcome. The sole aim of development is to create an enabling environment for people to enjoy long healthy and creative lives. Real development is the well-being of the people who are the wealth of the nation. Sometimes, a country's development is measured by its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita income and other social processes like infrastructural growth, economic well-being and quality of life of a nation, region, local community or an individual.

The purpose of development is a rise in the level and quality of life of the population and the employment opportunities without damaging the resources of the environment. Development is visible and useful, though not necessarily immediately. Lately, the international agenda began to focus on development beginning in the second half of the twentieth century and many professional researchers developed a number of definitions of development, for example, Amartya Sen defined development as a tool enabling people to reach the highest level of their ability, through granting freedom of action that is freedom of economic, social and family actions

For development to thrive, certain conditions must be met, there is need for a peaceful atmosphere that will also give room for freedom of association. People cannot associate freely unless they agree, understand and tolerate one another. Another important condition is availability of human resources, this entails the supply of quality labour. In Nigeria, the constant violence, as well as incessant killings cannot encourage availability of quality human resources. In the North, schools are closed because of insecurity. Many children have never been to school for the past five to six years, so how do we develop quality human resources? Other challenges that emanated from the incessant killings and the wanton destruction of developmental assets occasioned by religious intolerance and insecurity, include lack of capital, infrastructural deficit, poor technological knowhow among other challenges. All the machineries that help to bring about meaningful development in a society are far from reality

in Nigeria. Our roads are death traps, highly not motorable. The money that could be used for development is pumped into the purchase of arms and ammunition to fight insurgency and to crown it all, the money will not finally get to where it is meant to go. The money will eventually be swallowed up by “snakes in the country where snakes swallow billions of Naira all in the name of corruption”.

Finally the following must be present for development to take place

- Democracy
- Autonomy
- Fairness
- Maintenance of Biological diversity
- Conservation of Natural resources
- Independence Responsibility and accountability
- Environmental and Economic integration

Effect of Religious Intolerance and Violence on Development

Violence and war occasioned by religious intolerance in Nigeria impact negatively on development. Violence serves as an obstacle to development. Buvini Mayra (1999), speaking from economic point of view, noted that violence reduces foreign and domestic investment, as well as saving this hindering prospects for long term growth. One of the effects of violence is to dissuade individuals from investing time and money in education as well as other sectors of economy. It is a well known fact that many foreign companies have relocated from Nigeria to other West African countries because of continuous bombing, kidnapping and banditry in the country.

On human resources, many people have refused embarking on useful journey that would otherwise better their lives because of fear of becoming victims of violent crime like kidnapping. Domestic violence against women and children is a stumbling block to economic development. Violence of any type causes further damage and reduction to the available scarce resources for use in the society. Violence brings about increased incidence of depression anxiety, stress, disorder, suicide, it increases heart diseases and premature death. The health consequences of violence vary with the age and sex of victim as well as the form of violence. Violence has a serious negative effect on the life of children in society. Violence against children has a lifelong impact on the health and wellbeing of children, families, communities and nations. Children exposed to violence are more likely to indulge in alcohol, smoking and abuse of drugs as well as engage in high risk sexual behaviour. According to WHO, violence against children can

1. Result in death especially homicide which often involve the use of weapons like knives, firearms or poison
2. Leads to severe injuries
3. Impair brain and nervous system development
4. Result in negative coping and health risk behaviours
5. Lead to unintended pregnancies
6. Contributes to a wide range of non-communicable diseases
7. Impact opportunities and future generations

It is important that we show more concern about the effects of violence on children because they are the worst hit in Nigeria today. Many of them have stopped school for the past five years, many have watched their parents killed in their very eyes. Many are hungry because their farm lands were being destroyed. Many are abusively used as sex toys and many raped and many are used as suicide bombers. Definitely, these crimes against children have a serious negative impact on our country's future existence and future development.

Conclusion

Peace is an indispensable ingredient required to bring about progress in the society. Peace brings about unity of purpose and development. For any nation to live in peace and ensure development, there must be tolerance among the citizens. Citizens must tolerate one another irrespective of religious and tribal differences. Religion has always been a vehicle of peace and tolerance. Every religion is meant to preach peace love and peaceful co-existence. The nation Nigeria faces various security challenges occasioned by the activities of Boko Haram, Islamic State of West African Province (ISWAP) Herders/Farmers crises as well as the activities of the so called bandits. Tens of thousands have been killed, millions have been displaced, leading to the loss of human and material capital, as well as wanton destruction of life and properties worth trillions of Naira. All these activities coincide with ethno-religious cleavages between Christian and Muslim communities. This in turn has greatly slowed down the pace of development in the country.

For Nigeria to join the league of developed nations, the leaders must be sincere in their fight against insecurity by being sincere in the fight against Boko Haram, Bandits and in dealing with herdsmen and farmers clashes.

Finally, all religious bodies are to go back to their drawing board to find out where they got it all wrong. Religious bodies need to preach love, peace and tolerance to ensure peaceful co-existence.

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