

PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS OF RELIGION AS AN INSTRUMENT OF PROMOTING NATIONAL INTEGRATION IN NIGERIA IN THE 21ST CENTURY

By

Kareem Abdulrasaq

Postgraduate Student

Department Of History and International Studies

University Of Ilorin, Ilorin

Kareem21r@gmail.com

08130781449

Abstract

Nigeria has witnessed unprecedented problems associated with integrating the diverse interest groups and individuals since independence. While some believed on the secession other tends to remain indivisible and sustain the culture of “one Nigeria” despite the level of tribal, regional and religion crisis. This paper using both primary and secondary sources examines the problems and prospects of religion as an instrument for sustaining national integration in Nigeria in the 21st century. The paper observes that elites conspiracy, self interest, ignorance, regional and global politics, proliferation of religion organizations, poor priority on religion issues by the government, emergence of radical religion groups, top to bottom approach to addressing sensitive national integration issues among others have hindered the efficiency of the religion as a tool for promoting national integration in Nigeria. However, the paper also revealed that religion is vital tools for recreating sense of belonging, unity, understanding and respect necessary for effective relations among Nigerians irrespective of tribe, regional affinity and denomination. And that no effective national integration mechanism could

effectively achieve its purpose without a sense of religion tolerance and proper attention on the use of religion in nation's integration process. Hence, it is recommended that there is need to stop and avoid politicizing sensitive issues by religion leaders, instigate followers against their perceived enemy for personal interest, mend crisis on the social media, top to bottom approach in religion related issues and that religion institutions should not be seen as business-oriented centre.

Introduction

Since time immemorial religion has been a unified system of belief and practice as relate to sacred things. In the word of Chukwuma, it is an ontological and metaphysical phenomenon belonging to the innermost consciousness of life¹. True religion is said to be the relationship, in accordance with reason and knowledge, which man establishes with the infinite world around him, and which binds his life to that infinity and guides his actions². No matter how this relationship has varied, for different peoples and at different times, it has always defined man's destiny in the world, from which guidance for conduct followed naturally. Given its universality as applicable to all believers in their closeness to the Supreme Being or God, at different stage of human history while religion has been used for integrating diverse groups and promotes unity³, it has also been used to justify violence, disunity and intolerance in the society and Nigeria is not an exception.

In Nigeria today, religion has become a tool for power struggles, awards of contract, appointment of candidate into the elective and appointed positions, distribution of the national asset, justification of violence among others. The consideration on this basis may not be unconnected with its manipulation by the few individuals or groups as well as the religion leaders while trying to achieve their personal objective which is usually counterproductive⁴. The problem is not limited to religion groups, it has manifested in form and practice within the various religion sub-groups. Crisis such as ethnic division, war, land dispute, marginalization, etc have been given religion undertone. This has become culture being culture being imbibed by the younger generation in recent years is alarming, making the whole integrated effort meaningless, valueless and unrealistic. In this regard, this paper

examined the problems and prospects of religion as an instrument of promoting national integration in Nigeria in the 21st century with specific reference to Christianity and Islam.

Conceptual Clarification

The term religion means different things to different people. The word religion comes from a Latin word which means 'to tie' or 'bind together'⁵. In this regard, Adebirigbe and Aiyegboyin see religion, as a stabilizing force in the society which bound the community as a social force in the social glue⁶. It is observed that religion is a social institution concerned with beliefs, actions and inactions of a society through which the values, norms, ethics and traditions are defined, embedded and expressed within the cosmology of the people. Apart from the fact that it is a major factor that influences the activities of human, it is also a major force for social and moral changes⁷. This shows that religion is a form of practice and belief where people despite their differences (historical, racial, tribal, etc.) are connected for achieving common goal. Therefore, there are about majorly three religion groups in Nigeria Christianity, Islam and traditional religion. Both Christianity and Islam constitute about 90 percent of her total population⁸. Both of them shared some features; rituals, prayers, fasting, festival, belief in God, and prophet among others. Therefore, the worshippers of these two religions control the socio-economic and political activities of the country.

On the other hand, integration is bringing people of different racial or ethnic groups into unrestricted and equal association, as in society or an organization⁹. It is a process of creating a sense of national consciousness, uniqueness of identity and loyalty among group within the socio-cultural identity into a single territorial political society. Indeed it is a critical building-block for the harmonization of socio-political as well as the economic life of the heterogeneous society into one whole entity to enhance rapid and sustainable development¹⁰. On this note, national integration creates a sense of oneness, mutual understanding and cooperation among the composite people. The feeling of oneness comes from an atmosphere of integrated and harmonious co-existence of the diverse ethnic nationalities and culture. The rationale behind this is to change the existing traditional, inward looking attitudes of ethnic and tribal relation to the need of the larger society,¹¹ reduces socio-cultural and differences or inequalities and strengthens national unity and solidarity which is not imposed by any authority. With this, people share ideas, values and emotional bonds and thereby creates feeling of unity within diversity.

Nexus between Religion and National Integration

Accordingly, both Christianity and Islam depict that the origin of men is one, as they were created from the same entity, “O people, fear your Lord who created you from a single soul and created from it, its other half and reproduced from them many men and women and fear Allah from Whom you demand (your mutual rights)...” (Quran 4:1). Sheikh Saadi observed that this verse means a reminder to mankind that they are created out of one, encouraging them to be affectionate to each other, pity each other, and telling them that he created them from the same soul and spread them in the territories of earth, being from the same origin, so as that they would be sympathetic and compassionate to each other¹². The verse also denotes sense of historical bond which is a key element in integration. Supporting this view, Mathew (12:25) says “every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand”. This evolutionary theory is an indication that humanity is one mankind family of one human in which must prevail the principles of compassion, communication and non-enmity.

Therefore, one must not lose sight of the Islam and Christianity consideration of human as God image. Bible says “let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness.....” (Genesis 1:26). Quran also says “when I have completed him and have breathed into him my spirit.....” (Quran 15:29). This means that the soul of man implies life, power discretion etc and that the image bearers need to be treated with honour and dignity since human being is more than his/her body. In fact another verse made this clear when it says “whoever shed man’s blood, his blood shall be shed, for in the image of God, He made man” (Genesis 9:6). The emphasis on harmonious human relation is an indication of power of religion as a peace builder and unifying power in a society. This is because while the shedding of man’s blood could be borne out of disunity and further promote it, it could also affect social relations such as the family, ethnicity, or marriage institutions which are not the invention of human being (so that they may fashion them according to their wishes) but institutions made by God¹³. Therefore, given this religion position on social relation, one can rightly argue that sense of disunity and disintegration has no place in religion.

Note that, the basic Muslim testimony is *Sahada*, the first clause of which state that *Lahilaha Ila Allaha* (there is no god but God). This is certainly a statement that Christians would embrace despite the fundamental question about the doctrine of trinity which has been proved to have its origin not from the Jesus but the creation from his followers about three centuries after his death¹⁴. In this regard, what is known as the classical theism was embraced by the greatest thinkers of *Abrahimic* religion: St. Thomas Aquinas (Christian), Moses Mainmonites

(Jewish) and Abu Ali Sina - Avicenna (Muslim). According to the classical theist, there can only in principles be one God, Christians, Jews and Muslims who embrace classical theism must be worshipping the same GOD¹⁵. Evidently, the bible says, “There is body and one spirit-just as you were called to one hope when you were called, one Lord, one faith,one God and father of all, who is over all, through all and in all,(Ephesians 4:4-6). This unique attribute of the major two religions in Nigeria, attests to the unity of purpose as encouraged by their respective religion. Relating to the integrative effort, one can argue that no matter the perceived differences in religion, they should not be the justification for creating enmity. In fact God says, “And I have created the jinn and the men only that they should serve me (Quran 51:56).

It needs to be understood that diversity is God-ordain, in fact Allah noted that His making of the world a diverse place is intentional and that such action should not be questioned by any one, “And if your Lord has willed he could have made (all) mankind on community; but they will not cease to differ” (Quran 11:118). In another verse Allah says “O mankind indeed we have created you from male and female and made you into diverse nations and tribes so that you may know one another, indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of God is the most righteous of you” (Quran 49:13). It is obvious from this verse, that diversity is part of what keep the world moving. According to Mamoudu, the verse clearly stands against believers who proselytizes and holds Islam as the only true faith and sees other religions as null, or sees people of non faith as irrelevant¹⁶. This also shows that religion promotes unity in diversity. In fact differences in the tribe and religion stand better and help rapid growth and development given the competitiveness involve in trying to develop their respective area in a just and justifiable manner.

Therefore, it is believed that the idea of religion is not accidental; it emerged out of the need to promote societal value system (e.g life, tolerance, justice, forgiveness, dignity etc.) that shape peoples intellectual and spirituals journey to God¹⁷. It is noted that many people have lost in their spiritual belief. This has created gap in the value system, because people have turned away from the acceptable religion doctrine; sins are openly committed; they kill without just cause; and divided on ethnic and religion lines. Therefore the emergence of religion (Christianity and Islam in particular) is part of the effort to recreate the loss of those ethical and moral values through the worship of only one God. “For He himself is our peace for who has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility (Ephesians 2:14). Adherence to these values also enables the worshipper to be more tolerant as they themselves are

vicegerent to God. It is believed that sense of peace, dignity; tolerance and justice have been some of the major elements religion tends to promote in its integrative effort irrespective of the nature of the differences in the society¹⁸. There is no gain saying observing that in a society where religion tolerance persists, evidence of fair hearing will ensue. And where various group felt satisfactory about the outcome of a decision that affect their interest, unity is bound to exist.

There is no doubt, religion as practice in Nigeria does not often reflect the true doctrine that guides the practices and tenets revolving around the concept. The nature of religion differences in Nigeria and the attendant crisis connected there with would ordinarily make one to wonder and ask about the true objective of religion as a concept, ideology or practice. Did God want us to hate, kill, or talk ill of other whether or not they practice the same religion with us? The answer is capital No. “Allah did not forbid you from respecting those who have not made war with you on account of your homes that you should show them kindness and deal with them justly.....” (Quran, 60:8). Similarly, Coffin and Stacey observed that Prophet Muhammad (SAW) was divinely inspired and accepted Hebrew Bible and New Testament while proclaimed Quran as the ultimate sources of religion authority¹⁹. The point is that one can also be guided by them to live meaningful life. When Muslims were subjected to cruelty by Mecca pagan, he was said to have advised some of them to migrate to Ethiopia under King Negus - a Christian ruler who also received and secured them against oppression²⁰. Given this true teaching and faith in God one could conclude that religion and national integration are birds of the same feather aimed at promoting love, unity, and peace.

Religion as an Integrative Instrument in Nigeria

A number of instruments or mechanism has been put in place by the government for promoting national integration, ranging from the state creation, National Youth Service Scheme, the introduction of the naira and kobo as acceptable currency note in 1973, Federal Character Commission (aimed at promoting equal representation at national and sub-national level), establishment of the Federal Capital Territory serving as the centre of unity for all various groups, and the practice of Muslim-Christian ticket for top most elective and appointed position at the national, state and local governments levels²¹. Apart from all these, there are some other non integrated statutory activities that are also serving as integrating tools such as the idea of carnival celebration, sport, culture, dressing, language, music among

others. Despite all these, marginalization, minority question and unequal treatment still dominate the local, state and national discussions.

On the other hand, the determination of sensitive elective and appointed positions at the federal and sub-national levels on the basis of religion creates equity in the system. The composition of public offices (cabinet, National Assembly members as well as the judiciary) is a combination of both Christians and Muslims who had been appointed or selected in their various communities²². The idea of composition on the basis of religion is born out of the need for integrating different religion groups and subgroup in the system at the Local, State and Federal government levels as encouraged by Section 15 subsections 2 of 1999 Constitution of Federal Republic of the Nigeria. In recent years, the Nigeria governments at various levels have been very careful in the appointment of Special Assistant on religion matter which comprised of both Christian and Muslim. The effort is to ensure that both are evenly given says in matters that affect the interest of their people.

Therefore, the reason for this arrangement is because Nigeria plural nature. In fact section 10 of the Nigeria constitution prohibits the government from adopting any religion as state religion. However, section 38 of the same constitution provides that every person is entitled to the freedom of thought, conscience and religion. Although, the constitution also established the fact that no person should be forced to receive religion instruction or take part in the religion other than his own, the same constitution provided that “no religion community or denomination shall be prevented from providing religion instruction for pupils of that community or denomination in any place of education maintained wholly by that community or denomination”²³. Given these provisions, it could be argued that religion could serve as an integrative force in a community where majority practice the same religion. This is not to say that it would not work in other plural communities; indeed it worked in south western states of Nigeria where the population of both Muslims and Christians is believed to be in proportional in ratio²⁴. In this respect,, Insa Nolte et al, observe that,

“Without data suggesting otherwise, the assumption that the equal numerical presence of both religions contributed to the overall peaceful relations between Muslims and Christians has buttressed much of the reflection on Yoruba Muslim– Christian relations”²⁵.

Therefore, through interfaith cooperation and dialogue, religion has fostered unity. For instance the emergence of Nigeria Interreligious Council, Abuja Interfaith Peace Building

Forum, etc, comprising of both Muslims and Christians has resulted in many fruitful actions. In December 25, 2015, over 200 Muslims youths provided security for their Christians counterpart at Christ Evangelical Church, Sabon Tasha, Kaduna South²⁶. The love and care showcased by the worshippers is an evidence of religion capability in fostering harmony necessary for assimilation into such society dominated by Muslims. Also through this initiatives, a lot of actions have being performed ranging from intra and interfaith dispute resolution, advising government on religion related issue, joint religion programmes (in the community, radio and television) on issue of national interest, warning of community members on reprisal attack on other religion groups. Also, today Muslim scholars have been invited to churches on issues of national interest vice-versa²⁷. This has not only led to a sense of trust, belonging and respect, it has created strong bond and among otherwise distinct worshippers because they are able to understand one another's faith, feelings and needs.

Apart from the above role, it also enables people to see some meaning and purpose in their lives. By providing man with a worldview and describing man's place within the scheme of things, religion has enabled many Nigerians (who believe in it) to see human life as meaningful and purposeful, thus providing them with a sense of direction in life. It has also assisted greatly in wiping out mass illiteracy²⁸. This could be further justified with growing Islamic schools being established by the Christians to foster unity. In fact Most Rev. Josiah Atkins Idowu Fearon, at the height of Kaduna riot in 2000 established a centre for the study of Islam in his Kaduna Diocese²⁹. Nigerians today because of sense of direction and level of their education married from other faith and would not prevent their ward to do so. Indeed, the outstanding contributions of Christianity and Islam in the enlightenment and education of Nigerians cannot just be overlooked. Both religions have played significant roles in the evolvement of a literate culture in Nigeria. It is a known fact that religion whether it is Christianity, Islam or African Traditional Religion has been able to successfully unite the different ethnic groups together and make them to coexist peacefully along religious lines in Nigeria³⁰.

Problems faced by Religion as an Integrative Instrument in Nigeria

Given the state of religion in Nigeria today and ideological differences connected to it, one cannot separate religion being used as a means of identity and the failure of the state institution. The use of religion identity to determine the leadership position at the local, state and federal Ministries Departments and Agencies (MDAs) has been a standard practice

among Nigerians. For instance, a state where a religion group controls the larger percentage of the total population often made the minority group struggle for power that may not be bestowed on them. This practice is very serious in various communities in Nigeria. People are not being appointed on merit. In this regard, junior officers are appointed as leader over senior colleagues because of religion consideration³¹. The attendant impact is the feeling of uncertainty within the system and this is passed down to the emerging generation.

Today, it has become a belief and practice among Nigerians irrespective of status, religion, tribe, age or sex that whoever participates in party politics has secured key to public treasure³². But while trying to grasp the opportunity, a lot of efforts are often made. This includes sensitization and mobilization of the masses. Given the fact that in politics, mobilizing people is key to its sustainability and it is not an easy task because it goes with material inducement making money a key to mobilization. In this regard the religion leaders having been lured with money are used as agents of mobilization. This is done in different ways: manipulations of the provision of the Holy Books, one sided sermon especially to favour identified candidate and hate speeches against others. Money collected is shared with colleagues, and sometimes used in building religion institutions (usually churches and mosques). Based on the level of incentives obtained from the politicians, attacks on other groups whose agenda are perceived un-religious is inevitable. The case of Senator Gbemisola Saraki in the 2011 governorship election in Kwara State is a case in point³³. The implication is the feeling of hatred which in turn created division in the neighbourhood.

Through politicization of religion, religious leaders, political elites and others manipulated and gave national issues religion colouration to achieve personal end. Issues that have nothing to do with religion are manipulated, given value and recognition and used as instrument of attack against their personal enemy. In fact building of religion institutions, erection of religion bill boards, educational system, sharing of national cake, appointment, election among others, have all been politicized and given religion meaning. These have made integration a mere futile exercise. Mazrui has observed that,

“In those African countries, where Islam is in serious competition with Christianity and both are politicized, the two creeds become divisive rather than unifying, destabilizing rather than legitimizing. Where religion reinforces ethnic differences on regional variation, government becomes less stable rather than more..... On the

whole, the two Semitic religion in Nigeria Christianity and Islam reinforce regional and ethnic differences, and make stability more difficult”³⁴.

The reality of the competition is evidence over the years. For instance when the former President Olusegun Obasanjo’s selected delegates for the 2005 National Conference across the country, there were vehement protests and counter-protests, over the lopsidedness favoured Christians in the composition of the conference - 309 out of the 497 delegates as against 184 Muslims. This provoked accusations and counter accusations from several religious organisations, notably the National Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) and the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN). According to NSCIA leadership “Christians, who by all acceptable records are not more than 40 per cent of the country’s population, constitute 62 per cent of the total delegates.”³⁵ In rapid response Dr. Musa Asake, the General Secretary of CAN, dismissed the claim as an “unprovoked defamation of Nigerian Christians”. In fact CAN leadership threatened the boycott of 2006 census if religion and ethnicity did not feature in its questionnaire³⁶. This issue was put to rest with the intervention of the former president Olusegun Obasanjo.

In the same vein, the 100 million Sukuk Bond taken from the Islamic Development Bank (ADB) by the Federal Government received a lot of attack from the leadership of the Christians community under the umbrella of Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) in September 2017, calling it an attempt to Islamize Nigeria³⁷. Given the infrastructural deficit in the country, the bond was obtained as part of the effort to improve the infrastructure and overcome difficulty encountered by Nigerians in their daily activities. While further justifying the bond, it is argued that unlike Breton Wood Institutions, it attracts no interest. And many developed and underdeveloped countries dominated by Christians have also benefited from the opportunity. Reacting to the issue, Salisu Sheu, Deputy Secretary General of Nigeria Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) argued that,

“.....several non Muslim countries across Africa, Europe and Asia have also instituted Islamic Financial System generally and Sukuk in particular. Worthy of mention here are Kenya, Tanzania, South Africa, United Kingdom, Luxemburg, Russia, China, Singapore and a number of firms in the United State”³⁸

Similarly, Femi Falana (SAN), a renowned Christian lawyer have this to say, “I am challenging CAN to Christianize us by setting up interest free bank.....”³⁹ According to him religious leaders must be careful in their handling of issues and that the bond is a legitimate

means. Because it is believed that war or crises could be the result of those actions. It is against this background; many people believe that politics and religion are distinct entities and should not in any way be merged to ensure peaceful coexistence and any contrary view makes war inevitable. This will not in any way go down well with the need for national unity instead could be agent of disintegration.

It could be deduced from the above that religion practitioners or worshippers and not God or the religion itself encourage hatred exhibited through their action and inaction. This is because their interest overshadowed the interest of the creator (God). St- Augustine observed that “all the evil that plague the world (religion inclusive) are thus the ultimate result of the innate human propensity to place our own desire ahead of God’s”⁴⁰. This clearly shows the inability of the worshippers to accept the will of God. Their public practices, actions and behaviors are complete denial of the transforming power of religion which can bring about holistic human flourishing in society. For example, personal happiness and self-centered pursuits become the goal of life rather than righteousness that results in love, justice, and peace with neighbours. The Nigerian situation is best described by Warren W. Wiersbe:

“Happiness, not holiness, is the chief pursuit of most people today, including many professed Christians. They want Jesus to solve their problems and carry their burdens, but they don’t want Him to control their lives and change their character”⁴¹.

There is problem associated with the feeling of marginalization on the basis of religious affinity coupled with religion identity as determinants for leadership position at the local, state or federal level. For instance state where a particular religious group controls the larger percentage of the total population, the minority often struggle for power they may not likely get. It is often claimed that Muslim would never become the governor or deputy in Benue state where population is overwhelmingly Christian⁴². The reverse is also true in some core Northern states such as Bauchi, Kano, Jigawa etc. Evidently, it was the appointment of a Christian as Local Council Chairman that led to the loss of about 160 lives during the mayhem that resulted in the Jos crisis in September 2001⁴³.

There is also the issue of conspiracy where dominant religion group in government attached terms and conditions (e.g religion) to political office for any interested individuals in which constitutionally they are entitled while advancing in their career or seeking for elective office. Some are asked to change their belief to be entitled to certain benefits. In fact Samuel S. Dabai became Sanni Sami in order to gain promotion acceptance; Tanko Ayuba - son a

pastor, converted to Islam to win favour; Musa Bamaïyi signed his conversion to Islam by going to Mecca because he wanted to contest the gubernatorial election in Kebbi state in 2003⁴⁴. In the word of Damjibo “those who refused conversion had to contend with marginalization and discrimination in schools (if they are students or in the place of work (if they are civil servants))”⁴⁵. The most devastating is when the junior officer is appointed as a superior officer over a senior colleague because of religion affinity. The attendant impact is the feeling of uncertainty within the system and this is passed down the emerging generation, creating set back to the integrative effort of the government.

It is important to note that the failure of the Nigerian leaders to establish good governance, forge national integration and promote religious tolerance through policies capable of coordinating religion activities has been a major impediment to the unity of Nigeria in the 21st century. Nigeria leaders have failed in managing the diverse people⁴⁶. Apart from the poor priority given to religion related issue by the government, there is also top to bottom approach toward national integrative issue. These often make influential religion leaders to act with impunity in their respective domain. Sometimes, some of them dictate to the government. Today, consideration on the basis of religion dominates activities of some state governments making its exploitation inevitable. In fact the introduction of Sharia law in some northern states Zamfara, Kanu, Kaduna, etc. between 1999 and 2001, did not create peace in the area but war characterized by riots, killing, arson and migration. This level of impunity and inefficiency in managing religion related issues has made religion to be an instrument of disorder rather than integration.

There is also lack of religion teachers and viable comparative religion curriculum. Some of the religion teachers are always one sided while teaching certain topics⁴⁷. They discredit other belief while claiming Superiority on the issue of general concern. Many children have been nurtured towards this path and it has been very difficult to change their mindset. This often weakens integrative instrument. Having made children to grow with such ill will, there ensued cold reaction on issues that affect the interest of other religious groups or individuals at the national and sub-national level based on predetermined knowledge. This idea is coupled with lack of identifiable comparative religion studies in the primary and secondary education. The comparative studies would have provided an avenue for appreciating the similarity and differences in religion practices in Nigeria.

Also the role of ignorance can be set aside. The society is full of people who lack awareness, knowledge, and education on the basic principles and teachings of their religion. Although, some of them do not understand the verses in the holy book, others do not take time to study it. On this note, they developed their mind set. When being proved wrong, they do not admit it and are not ready for correction. However, due to their inadequate knowledge on their acclaimed religion; they are easily convinced by their leaders who often acted intentionally or out of ignorance on certain religion issues (by condemning others) in achieving certain goals⁴⁸. They took these teachings of their priests dogmatically without necessarily examining its contents and implications. While some of them are charmed by their teachings, others act out of ignorance. As a result; they often see their religious practice as the ultimate without understanding the doctrines of other religion in its entirety; they believe and rely much on their leaders to communicate to God, seek for his blessing, guidance and protection, even if the former is illusory. In this way the onus of belief is shifted from God to their pastors and imams out of ignorance; thereby making them relate with their neighbours (practicing different religion with them or not belonging to their denomination or movement) with hostility which often lead to crisis.

Another problem associated with religion in promoting national integration is the division of loyalty on the basis of nationality, region, tribal or religion affinity. The act of patriotism today is not directed toward loyalty to the country as a whole but section or group formation. Therefore in a society where the love for group has overwhelmed the love for the country, lack of willingness to add value to the course of national progress surfaces. In the word of Machiavelli, patriotism is the rise of leader in a country to a status of sanctity as the pivot of national unity in a state⁴⁹. Dutch revolution also observed that patriotism is showing love to the country through willingness for reform⁵⁰. The definitions of the term explain the fact that where there is unwillingness among citizen to promote national integration, the idea of love is nonexistent.

More so in a society where there is evidence of lack of respect for the rule of law because of religious ideology such society is bound to experience difficulty in her integrative effort. Since society is guided by the certain rules and principles, they are driving to regulate her socio-economic and political activities. Note that constitution emphasized the Nigeria's unity and certain rights considered important (freedom of association, acquisition of property, residence etc) as it relate to integrative effort of the government⁵¹. Many people have been denied this right without meaningful reason. In some part of the country property acquisition

especially land is based on religion affinity. There are communities in the northern Nigeria where acquisition of land for the purpose of building church is prohibited by their customary law. Babura local government in Jigawa state is a good example, in fact the Christians in this community worship in the police building situated in the local government⁵². This is also the case in the south-east and south-south geopolitical zone in Nigeria where land is not given for the purpose of building mosque in most of the community.

However, the issue of poverty has taken the center stage among the religious groups in Nigeria. According to National Bureau of Statistic (NBS) 2016 report, about 112 million of Nigeria representing 67.1 percent of the country's total population of about 167 million lives below poverty level⁵³. Although poverty increase in Nigeria was attributed to long military rule, fiscal indiscipline, mismanagement and overreliance on mono economy, the level of poverty in Nigeria has not only led to increase in the criminal activities, lack of trust, illegal activities but has also turned most Nigerians regardless of wealth popularity, personality, religion or ethnic affiliation to beggar. People who often participated in the crisis did so out of poverty and lack of employment. As was earlier discussed, religion in its true nature does not encourage unemployment, laziness talk less of poverty. This is evidence in Quran (62:10) which says,

“Then when the prayer is ended you may disperse through the land and seek the bounty of Allah by working) and remember Allah much that you may be successful”.

Since it is clearly understood that an idle hand is a devil's workshop, if a man cannot satisfy his basic need, he is bound to be an agent of violence. It is part of the reasons why Nigeria is experiencing growing religious organizations preaching violence, hatred with the hope of increasing their wealth. Many leaders of extremist religious groups and organizations became so due to poverty. Emergence of the Book Haram extremist and their growing influence, may not unconnected with huge amount of money they use to attract their recruiters.

Holy Scriptures as Justification for Violence

Over the decades Bible and Quran have been used to justify violence act relating to killing, bombing and arson in Nigeria. The point is that those who use religion to cause violence especially killing did not do that in vacuum, they justify their act on certain teachings and verses from the holy books. This is not to say that many of them did often act with ignorance

but the fact is that the scriptures have many verses relating to killing and violence against human lives as could be seen below.

- **Quran 2:191-191** says *“And kill them wherever you find them, and turn them out where they have turned you out...”*
- **Quran 4:104** *“And be not weak hearted in pursuit of the enemy, if you suffer pain, then surely they (too) suffer pain, as you suffer pain.....”*
- **Quran 5:33** *“The punishment of those who wage war against Allah and his messenger and strive to make mischief in the land is only this, that they should be murdered or crucified or their hands and their feet should be imprisoned; this shall be a disgrace for them in this world, and in the hereafter they shall have a grievous chastisement”.*
- **Quran 8:65** *“O prophet exhort the believer to fight,*
- **Quran 9:5** *“So when the sacred month have passed away. Then slay the idolaters wherever you find them, and lie in wait for them in every ambush, then if they repent and keep up prayer and pay the poor-rate, leave their way free of them”.*

Similarly some of the related verse in the Bible includes the following,

- **Deuteronomy 17:12** *“Anyone arrogantly enough to reject the verdict of the judge or of the priest who represents the lord, your God shall be put to death. Such evil must be purged from Israel”.*
- **Exodus 22:19** *“Whoever sacrifices to any god except the lord alone, shall be doomed”*
- **Chronicle 15:12-13** *“But that whoever would not seek the Lord, the God of Israel, should be put to death, whether small or great, whether man or woman”.*
- **Deuteronomy 13; 6-10:** *“If your very own brother, or your son or daughter, or the wife you love, or your closest friend secretly entices you, saying, “Let us go and worship other gods” (gods that neither you nor your ancestors have known; gods of the peoples around you, whether near or far, from one end of the land to the other); do not yield to them or listen to them. Show them no pity. Do not spare them or shield them; You must certainly put them to death; to the Lord your God. That town is to remain a ruin forever, never to be rebuilt”.*

Although many of these verses exist in the scriptures, their meaning is subject to effective interpretations. This brings us to the issue of interpretation of the Holy books. To some scholars, scripture are not interpreted ordinarily as they appear. It has to follow certain guiding principles such as understanding the root of the verse, the place where it was revealed, the event during the period, and the purpose it was meant to serve at the period. Tremper argued that each biblical passage has a set meaning intended by its author⁵⁴. The interpreter's task is to discover that meaning because when the reader's interpretation conflicts with the author's, then the reader is wrong. This shows that the interpretation of Scripture goes beyond the text immediate meaning.

Similarly some Islamic scholars argued for understanding the ethico-legal content in the light of the political, social, historical, cultural and economic contexts in which those content was revealed, interpreted and applied. Others considered the meaning of the Quran to be fixed and universal in its application⁵⁵. For instance, if the Quran says that non-Muslim should be killed, they believed that this should apply forever, without any need to consider the socio-historical context in which this text was 'revealed. Opposing this stand, Palwasha Bibi, commenting on Quran 2 Verse 191 noted that,

“This verse refers to the non Muslim of Makkah who had violated a treaty of peace and persecuted Muslims living in peace without provocation. Still with clear limits upon the physical act of war and where it should be fought”.⁵⁶

Islamically, interpreting the scripture using personal opinion is not spiritually allowed because it is prone to be distorted, altered and misinterpreted. The fear of not allowing anybody to interpret the scriptures is not unconnected with the fear of losing their real purpose and act within the framework of the religion principles. However, there are many other verses emphasizing unity, peace and togetherness. But subjectivity in their interpretation created problem, thereby making the religion seems to encourage violence and disunity. In fact both the Christianity and Islam are the religions of peace emphasizing love and care, given the following provision from the bible.

- **Exodus 20:13**, “You shall not murder”
- **Luke 6:35**, “Christians are to love their enemies”
- **Roman 13:8**, “Put your sword back in its place, Jesus said to him, for all who draw the sword will die by sword”

- **Proverb 6:16-17**, “There are six things the lord hates, seven that are detestable, haughty eyes, a lying tongue hands that shed blood....”

In the same vein Qur’an rightly assert the following,

- **Quran 17:33**, “Do not kill any one whom Allah as forbidden...”
- **Quran 10:25**, “And Allah invites to the abode of peace and guides to whom he pleases into the right path.”
- **Quran 5:32**, “.....We prescribe to the children of Israel that whoever, slays a soul, unless it be for manslaughter or for mischief in the land, it is as though he slew all men: and who ever keeps it alive, it is as though he kept alive all them.”

Given the above analysis, people are being identified on their perception and position on certain verses in the scripture. They are divided along this line. In fact some Christians believed that those who still acted upon strict verses on the Old Testament are not true Christians⁵⁷. It is observed that the Old Testament was very harsh in its judicial judgment. According to them God instituted the law as difficult as they were, that was consistent to the culture of the time, to ensure the survival of the Jewish nation and helped maintain the structure because many nations wage war against Israel to invalidate “The Prophecy” and the coming of the messiah (Jesus)⁵⁸. They argued, “his arrival signified the end of terror and harsh punishment”. It was against this background he emphasized peace, love and unity. And this is evident in various bible verses, “be at peace with one another, (Mark 9:50), “live in peace with everyone” (Roman. 12:18). “God has called us to live in peace” (1 cor. 7:15). In the same vein, most of the killing related verses in the Quran are perceived to be defensive, *responding* to unprovoked aggression of almost a decade and a half-long persecution of Muhammad and his early followers in Mecca, which *preceded* their Flight (*Hijra*) to Medina⁵⁹. Although, many people still act on them today, worshippers identified with them today are being referred to as radical Islamic extremist.

Therefore, identifying on the basis of religious teachings provides a perspective from which to; view the world opportunities, socialize with spectrum of individuals and set basic principle to live out. The identity is not only manifested between two or more religious groups but sub religion groups who often claim identity to old practices while discovering fault from the existing practice and belief. For instance, among the Muslims, there are a lot of movements ranging from Shiah, Sunni, Kharijite, etc. While they agreed on certain practices

especially on the purview of Five Pillars of Islam, they are distinct in other religion related practices. Each movement has its ideology, networking, methodology of jurisprudence, operational and conversion strategies⁶⁰. These movements also have numerous subset. For instance the Hambali, *Maliki* etc are of Sunni; *Ismaili*, *Fatimids*, *JAFARI*, etc are of *Shaihi*; while *Najdat*, *Ibadi* are of *Kharijite*⁶¹. Today some Islamic theologians and observers have compared the belief and action of *Maitatsine*, *Izala* movement Islamic state (IS), Boko Haram and like minded groups as Kharijites. Because the groups shared *Kharijite* radical approach whereby self described Muslim are declared unbeliever, rejecting lawful obedience to the leaders and other scriptures, justifying violence against Muslim and all innocent people and thereby deem them worthy of death and their disinterest in Quranic call from moderation, in fact they considered themselves as true Muslims and others as *Kafir*⁶².

These groups of people give literal interpretation to the Quran to establish their actions and inactions over event. Their levels of understanding are meager and are not necessarily concern about its true meaning. Indeed this was predicted during time of the Prophet Muhammed (SAW). He was reported to have said;

“There will come people from the east who recites the Quran but it will not go beyond their throats. They will pass through the religion just as an arrow pierces its target and they will not return to it as the arrow does not return to the bow (Sahih Bukhari 7123)”,⁶³

In other word, global politics has not helped the situation. The instability caused in most countries (Arab world in particular) has influenced the domestic value system relating to religion practices in most African countries and Nigeria is no exception. This may not be unconnected with divergence of interest, power struggle, and doctrine, thereby leading to the increase and rapid growth in both Islamic movements and organizations, most of which have established themselves in Nigeria especially those with radical philosophy. The radical Islamic extremism like Boko Haram has strong foreign backing with financial, technical, intelligent and humanitarian assistance⁶⁴. While they strongly justify their actions with certain verse in the scripture, verse not conformed to their horrific actions are ignored. With this they promote the interest of their sponsor and give less regard to dialogue and peaceful coexistence. While this has increased the level of ill will, allegation and counter allegations, it has also led to dwindling moral virtue, mutual trust and development.

Prospects of Religion as an Instrument of promoting National Integration in Nigeria

Although religion has been blamed for wars and discrimination, yet it could also be embraced as a resolution and integration instrument. Blaming religion as the cause of conflict is an easy generalisation to make⁶⁵. Many crises considered as having religious causes are connected with some more fundamental driving forces such as land, wealth creation, self ego, security, power or nationalism. Richard Flory observes that religion provides spiritual, social, psychological and other material support for individuals and families. Since religion deals in “ultimate” matters, it helps people make sense of their lives, as well as their role in their families, communities and the country at large.

Although this cannot be achieved in vacuum, the religion institutions (churches, mosques, etc.) should not be seen as business-oriented centres but Godly institutions aimed at promoting unity and love. A lot of churches, central mosques, religion organizations of different names and ideologies are being established in Nigeria servicing the interest of their sponsor. The profit associated with the institution often result in fight over its leadership and enthusiastic to create new ones. In fact we have seen a case of the churches owned by Muslims and run by a pastor (here profit is shared based on contract) and others emerged in the name of expansion and accessibility syndrome⁶⁶. In recent month, Pastors Enock Adeboye the General Overseer, Redeemed Christian Church of GOD announced his decision to build churches everywhere. Reacting to this, the Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Oyo, Most Reverend (Dr) Emmanuel Adetoyese Badejo observed “that is useless statement. How can you say you build churches everywhere?..... Such churches in most cases are more like business houses”⁶⁷. He insists that there was indeed no Godliness in planting churches in close proximity. Putting an end to this will be an alternative for promoting the Godly interests needed to promote good faith, sincerity and love.

Given many problems associated with religion as an integrative mechanism, people have been unfairly treated in the name of religion. Therefore for religion to reclaim its place as a unifying force, there is need for justice and fairness where those who act against the rule of law would be brought to justice and those who deserve the opportunity should not be denied. In support of this view Ibrahim Kali noted,

“Religion can act as a source of social cohesion and stability only when issues of justice are addressed and a degree of human decency is maintained in politics. Otherwise, fake religious justifications are useless and even harmful to cover up real oppression and real injustice”.⁶⁸

Therefore, when justice is done and what belong to others is given to them, there will be love and where there is love peace and unity is inevitable. As one observe opines this has nothing to do with how one prays or which holy book one believes in before the world can be enjoyed with all the afforded inalienable rights. Indeed it is a means for encouraging confidence on the otherwise complicated socio-political system.

In fact we should learn from Ottoman Empire where Jews exiled by the Catholic Kingdom of Spain under the Alahanbra Decree of 1492 were welcomed and received into the empire⁶⁹. There was no discrimination on the basis of the appointment in the political offices which was indeed based strongly on the skill and capability rather than religion or ethnic affiliation. They were regarded as people of book and enjoyed peaceful coexistence with Muslims. Some of them controlled commerce, attained high status and position without any feeling of hatred, intolerance and distrust⁷⁰. Apart from the fact that it helped the Empire last many centuries until First World War, it is an indication of the ability of religion to unite various diverse groups. The action of Ottoman Empire ascertained God's indication on the need for man to love one another. "And those who restrain (their) anger and pardon men; and Allah loves the doers of good (to other), (Quran 3:141).

More so, given the place of sport, culture, music and dress in sustaining Nigerian unity, there is no doubt that religion through interfaith dialogue and cooperation amongst individuals, religion groups and subgroups can promote national integration in the 21st century. These require a genuine readiness which in turn could bring about mutual trust, understanding of one another's behaviour, attitude, practices, teaching and mission. Through cooperation, one can fully and genuinely respect another's identity while simultaneously holding one own differing religious identity. One can be evangelical Christian, can appreciate, and even be inspired, by the dedication of Muslim neighbour to pray five times a day, while at the same time wanting them to know the philosophy of Christianity without force. The same could also be applicable to Muslims, Allah says "there is no compulsion in religion", (Quran 2:256). Indeed this will help to manage conflict, build moral, loyalty and develop positive relation between interfaith groups. This cooperation is vital to live in peace with one another.

In other words to recreate the identity of religion as an instrument of promoting national integration, there is need for religion reorientation in the public places, social and traditional media, family community, friends, and among colleagues. People need to be re-orientated on the proper religion practices. This cannot be done without proper education and

enlightenment, shedding more light on those controversial verses in the Scripture and how they are to be put into use. The religion leaders should answer the questions relating to place of controversial scriptural verses in the 21st century. This should be addressed by religion leaders instead of devoting much of their time manipulating scripture to their advantage. In fact the first priority of a religious leader is to ensure frequent public gathering, organizing programmes where misconception are corrected.

There is need for fear of God. No matter the level of reorientation, or tolerance if there is no evidence of respect for the words of God, the ability of religion to coordinate various groups may be difficult. This is because government activities do not reflect evidence of God's guidance. The elites act as if they are being controlled by evil spirit. There is no justification for being sworn in with holy books given their mismanagement, corruption, nepotism, favouritism which characterize their actions and opposes the teaching of religion they claim to practice. In this regard Quran says "And O my people! Give full measure and weight fairly and defraud not men their things, and do not act corruptly in the land, making mischief, (Quran 11:85). In the same vein, the bible says "for the lord your God is the God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God mighty and awesome shows no partiality and accept no bribe", (Deuteronomy 10:17). Despite the existence of these verses, the Nigerian elites are mired in the corruption related acts. Many of them are pastors, Alfas and are well versed in their various religion practices. Fear of God is not in them and until they fear God and obey His commands, the ability of religion so vital for promoting national integration in Nigeria may not realized.

In the same vain the religious leaders should rededicate their sermon toward the need for protection and care of every person irrespective of the perceived differences. Because doing this is the real remedy that can prevent envy and vendetta from prevailing among the people. And when the emerging generations grow with it, it is capable of building everlasting peace in the society. Although, this has been clearly stated under Section 38 of 1999 CFRN earlier noted but without religion playing its role, the effort of the statute law may not be realized.

Therefore, religion promotes trust, in fact it is clearly stated in the Bible that one should not think of evil against the fellow being. Evil thought is believed to be the instrument of evil and not God. Nonetheless Christianity teaches that darkness always attempt to overtake light and Satan always attempt to distort the truth (John, 8:44). As one observer noted, a true worshipper of God battles should not be against the liberal Christians or Muslims but against

the Satan, principality and forces of darkness who oppose what God stand for. In other word Quran (2:208) says, “O you who believe, you shall embrace total submission; do not follow the steps of Satan, for he is your most ardent enemy”. The point is that the hatred and fight should not be against fellow human being because given their unique origin, their relationship is important for the stability of the society and every soul has a fundamental responsibility to serve humanity.

Lastly, proximity between the worshippers and the Supreme Being (God) is critical for any viable means to recreate lost value system within individuals and group in Nigeria. In fact the vice president of Nigeria Professor Yemi Osinbajo noted that unity is not a man’s idea, it is God’s idea and this can only be achieved when worshipers remain close to God⁷¹. According to him, everything that God created to please man is always in opposite direction of what men want for himself; God emphasized peace people are emphasizing war; God emphasized justice people are promoting injustice; God emphasized morality ad virtue people are sunk in corrupt act; and that man find peace with death but nobody want to die. This shows that a lot of people are following devil’s path. They are closer to devil than God, making them vulnerable to disintegrative vices (assault, ego, violence, etc.). Therefore, through closeness to God, man would be able to have faith in God and accept every condition as an act of God. This will promote act of peace and harmony in the society.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has examined the problems and prospects of religion as an instrument of promoting national integration in Nigeria in the 21st century. Given various verses in the Quran and Bible, it has been established that religion in its true sense promote tolerance, love, peace and unity regardless of group; tribe, race, and region to which one belongs. It is noted that human diversity is not accidental it was God intention to make so. On this note the paper shows that favouritism, selfishness, power struggle, poverty, ignorance, lack of respect for rule of law, proliferation of fake religious leaders, division of loyalty, etc. are part of the problems that hindered religion role in its integrative effort in Nigeria. It has not only proved that scriptures are used to justify violence, they contain series of information on the need for peace, unity and love. However, the paper revealed that capability of religion to promote national integration in Nigeria in the 21st century depend on the close proximity between the worshipper and the God, fear of God, justice and fairness, religion reorientation, cooperation, and interfaith dialogue. While it is also important to avoid mending crisis on the social media,

and stop top to bottom approach in resolving religion related issues, the religion institutions should not be seen as business-oriented centre.

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