

LAW AND RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS: A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

BY

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LAW AND RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS IN NIGERIA**

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Distinguished participants, ladies and gentlemen, it is an honour and a privilege for me, on behalf of my Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Professor Justus Sokefun, to be here with you at this conference, to share knowledge, hopefully, to help us live peacefully, in spite of the diversity prevalent in the society.

I commend the organizers for the aptness of the choice of the theme of this conference, **Law and Religious Conflicts**, understanding fully well that there is a definite need for peace all the time and we hope to consider this phenomenon from a Christian perspective. In presenting this keynote speech, we want to ponder on what constitutes religious conflicts for the Christian, how the Christian contributes to these religious conflicts, what he/she can do to ameliorate the situation, and the role of the Law in ensuing peace and equity.

I sincerely hope this keynote speech will set the tone for an exciting, insightful, exhilarating, purposeful and fulfilling conference. However, to properly help us understand the essence of this conference, we deem it necessary to define, even though briefly, certain key terms.

Following the Conference theme, let us first look at the word **Law**. Law according to Wikipedia is “a system of rules that are created and enforced through social or governmental institutions to regulate behaviour.”ⁱ From whatever perspective you want to see it, Laws are to help us live in the society, following set societal acceptable rules. However, another lifestyle must affect man if he believes in God: and that is following God’s thought pattern, God’s

set rules for living, God's law. That is why we cite here, certain quotes, which could help us to properly define our thought. **Follow peace with all men and holiness, without which no man can see God.**ⁱⁱ

“If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone”ⁱⁱⁱ

These are texts quoted from the letters written to the Roman and Hebrew Christians. One key term that pops out in the above verses and many like them is **peaceful living**. Peaceful living for the individual is an obligation – Follow Peace, Pursue Peace. That should be one's desire. Also, whatever the challenge, you must be intentional in pursuing, living in and maintaining peace. It means it is my duty and your duty to ensure peaceful living in the society. It also means that your pursuit of peace extends to all men, irrespective of creed or situations around you. There must, therefore, be a conscious determination to make sure this drive is achieved; thus it means that you have an important role to play.

The desire to be at peace with all, connotes that there could be situations which could stop one from enjoying that peace and, **conflict** is one of such elements. It therefore is important for us to understand what conflict is. While conflicts could be found in so many areas of life, our discourse is basically limited to religious conflicts. Simply put, conflicts could be seen as situations which ‘rub one off’ the wrong way and cause one to react, because the situations do not agree or identify with what one believes. These reactions could be violent,

subtle, and verbal or could present in other forms. Hornsby (2006), defines religious conflict as a “situation in which religious adherents are involved in a serious disagreement or argument with one religious group or another”

Religious conflicts, which often culminate in crisis, are no longer a new phenomenon. Sadly, this is gradually becoming a regular aspect of our daily lives. Its persistent occurrence raises questions about the position of the State/Country’s Constitution on this, which has destroyed so many lives and much private/government/public property.

Nigeria is a country that has been deeply enmeshed in religious conflicts among other conflicts. Indeed, our definition of religious conflicts shows our thoughts of others, if not properly managed or directed correctly, could actually rub us on the wrong side. Nigeria is a multi-religious society where disaccords and disaffections exist and this situation defines the limit of this discourse. In this discourse, we will consider Christianity, Islam and Traditional religion as principle examples and the divides along which religion is considered.

Traditional religion will cover for other forms which might not necessarily be mentioned.

Most times, people take very important decisions following this divide, thus it is not a question of ethnic or religious preferences. We deem it necessary to explore some reasons that could cause religious conflicts.

Causes of Religious Conflicts

Regularly, it is thought that religious conflicts take place in a multi – religious society, which could be a possible deduction from this paper. However, sometimes it is possible to see conflicts even within one singular religion, especially, where supremacy of denomination is claimed. It is thus safe to say that religious conflicts are beyond Christian/Muslim divide and could be internally within a religion. Let us consider some elements that could provoke religious conflicts.

The diversity in which we find ourselves often times leads us to **religious intolerance**, making us forget the popular saying that there should be “Unity in diversity”. **Religious intolerance is lack of tolerance** of another's **religious** beliefs or practices. This exists also when an individual or a group refuses to tolerate practices, persons or beliefs of others on **religious** grounds.

The high rate of **poverty** is a common cause of religious crisis. Often times, we see a situation where, except poor people exert much effort born out of determination, they have little or no access to proper education. Thus, these people being mostly unemployed and/or poorly educated are taken advantage of by people who want to cause chaos in the country. They are poorly taught doctrines that are based on violence and murder, all in the name of religion. Since the poor might not really be enlightened, they accept such doctrines

wholeheartedly. They accept to carry out the negative actions as these actions might afford them with some financial or material rewards to which they have probably never had access, having been enticed with money for their families and having been assured of a heavenly reward.

Another cause of religious conflicts is **the authority of the religion**. There are often arguments on the superiority of one religion, for different reasons, over the other, thereby forcing or making efforts to convert adherents of another religion.

Other elements or causes of religious conflicts include fanaticism, poorly taught or poorly understood doctrines, corruption, among so many others. This list is endless, as so many underlying causes exist. Whatever the causes, we must accept that they have been major causes for disunity within the society. The effects /implication are many. They include: distrust within the populace, power struggle for domination, which ultimately leads to choice on the basis of religion, wanton destruction of lives and property, among others, thus giving preference to religion and not merit or ability.

In the face of all of the above, it is necessary for us to look at possible solutions, from the individual and also the society, through law. For the Christian, a binding principle includes the adherence to love; this is because “Love covers a multitude of sins”^{iv}. It is expected that individuals must show love at all times

and avoid vengeance. This implies that revenge is not an option. When asked what the greatest commandment in the law was, Jesus Christ replied that the second greatest command after loving God is “Love thy neighbour as thyself”^v. Using the parable of a Good Samaritan who was kind enough to come to the aid of a stranger who had been attacked by bandits, He showed us that our neighbour is everyone and anyone that we come across^{vi}. When asked in another discourse, how many times one must be provoked/offended, before being pushed to react. He answered, ‘seventy times seven’^{vii}! How possible is it for one to keep count of offences to that number? All this was to direct us to easily forgive other people’s trespasses, that God Himself will forgive our trespasses.

For the law, the Constitution promotes the principle of freedom of speech, of religion, and promotes human rights. This includes respect for a person’s rights and freedom, could be seen as a form of demonstration of love. That all important principle of love connotes that one would not consider attacking his/her neighbour, no matter the difference in creed, belief or philosophy. This principle of love should not encourage people to think of retaliation. I wish to kick start the conference, by posing these questions that I hope will form part of the discussions during this conference.

This is a keynote address and I would not like to delve into the lecture or possible topics in the conference papers. I however crave your indulgence to pose these questions I consider pertinent and which I hope would be treated in the course of the proceedings. What could be said to be the benefits of religious conflicts? Who are the beneficiaries and who could be the ultimate victims? It is my hope that this conference will be able to proffer plausible and possible solutions to religious conflicts. I wish you a happy and successful experience. Thank you for listening.

ⁱ wikipedia.com

ⁱⁱ Hebrews 12:14 (King James version)

ⁱⁱⁱ Romans 12:18 (King James version)

^{iv} 1 Peter 4:8 (New International Version)

^v Matthew 22:36-40 (King James version)

^{vi} Luke 10: 25-37

^{vii} Matthew 18:22 (King James version)