



## **Religion, Politics and the Islamic Panacea for Peaceful Co-Existence in a Multi-Religious Society: Nigeria as a Case Study**

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### **Abstract**

Nigeria is, undoubtedly, the most populous black nation and it is credited for being pluralistic among comity of nations. To this extent, Islam, Christianity and African traditional religion are the major creeds with large number of adherents in the country. Against the backdrop that religion has taken a position of importance in her nationhood, Nigerian politics is believed to be enmeshed in religious persuasions and divides, especially between Muslims and Christians. Although, both Islam and Christianity preach against any discrimination based on clan, creed, race, or religion, the spate at which agitations, nay, confrontations between adherents of these two major religions are taking the central stage is worrisome most especially on the choice of candidates in elections. What is more disheartening in Nigeria today is the climate of suspicion and phobia over the perceived Islamization agenda as propagated by many non-Muslims especially as regards the issue of Muslim-Muslim ticket by one of the major political parties. Consequently, this paper aims at exploring the views of Islam on peaceful coexistence among different religions and religious groups. The paper contends that the Prophet of Islam, as the best politician ever lived on earth, has made practical demonstrations of how religion and politics can be intertwined without any form of hindrance or friction. Qualitative methodology was adopted in the course of this research. The paper therefore concludes that the issue of Muslim-Muslim ticket among other political issues should not be a bone of contention among the adherents of both popular religions in Nigeria and that there is no heavenly religion that permits killing, discrimination, and total ownership of power.

Keywords: Religion, politics, peaceful co-existence, Islam and Christianity

### **1. Introduction**

It is generally believed that Islam and politics seem inseparable. The extremists believe that a true Muslim cannot subscribe to any system of government other than Islamic law – the *Shariah*. If concept of politics is really according to Snell-Hornby *et al.* (1997), the definition of Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary which says: It is the activities involved in getting and using power in public life, and being able to influence decisions that affect a country or a society (or) matter concerned with getting or using power within a particular group or organization<sup>1</sup>. And if also we are to go by the definition of politics given by Muritala (2002). Also, Murtala (2002) opined that the first organization to which a child belongs is his immediate family and whatever people see in larger Societies like companies, tertiary institutions and ministries in area of politics is an extension of what we have experienced as family members. Politics is not only the language of those holding public offices, it is not only about campaigning during election period, but also consist of the use of power, influence or authority to manipulate decision making. According to Sanni (2015), every individual in the society, be it lawyer, medical Doctor, Engineer, Trader, Bricklayer, Carpenter, Civil Servant, Family members (father, mother or their child) is a political mammal and every statement or action made by each of them to achieve his aims and objectives is nothing but a political statement, which on the long-run can enhance the development of the society or destroy it. And this in line with the assertion of Adedimeji (2022) that Muslims cannot afford to be apathetic to political power just as



Jamaalu-din Al-Afghani once counseled, there is a need for political revival so that political leaders will be representing Islam and not their selfish interests.

Islam identifies diversity among human beings as a sign of God, beauty of creation, and rejects any discrimination among communities based on religious, racial, linguistic and national grounds. Man is destined to operate in a pluralistic society and environment; he himself is a complex being operating pluralistically in a pluralistic manner.

Nigeria being multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-religious is a very complex nation that has witnessed notable challenges in respect of peaceful co-existence amongst its diverse population for many years. This continues to have adverse impact on the situation of security unity, politics and socio-economic development in Nigeria, despite the country's national motto of "unity and faith, peace and progress.

Many theories have been propounded to ensure unity of human race despite its pluralism. Oladosu (2011) identifies some of these theories to have included the theory of racialism which Islam believes cannot achieve the expected result of binding the universe together. The Qur'an explicitly identifies the main reason of creating mankind in races and tribes when it reads:

*"O mankind! We have created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another. Verily, the most honourable of you with Allah is that (believer) who is most pious..."*  
(Q48:13).

Also, Quran 30:22 states that: "and part of His (God's) signs is the creation of the heavens and earth and the diversity of your tongues (Languages) and colours; surely there are signs in this for those who are knowledgeable". These Islamic precepts establish the powerful social norm that, despite ethnic or tribal differences, all human beings belong to a single human family as they are all created by one God and descended from the same root going back to Adam and Hawa. Also, Sovereignty belongs to the Almighty Allah, He bestows sovereignty and kingdom upon whomsoever He deems fit and takes away kingdom upon whomsoever He pleases.

Islamic history evidently shows that Muslims and non-Muslims lived together peacefully in Medina, the first Islamic state and in its successive states in the early history of Islam. The charter of Medina declared by the Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) in 622A.D. aimed at governing a multi-religious pluralistic society that allow religious freedom for all and set the best ever example in history for the co-existence of different religious groups. Nigeria, being referred to as the most populous black nation in the world, with a population of more than 200 million is characterized with several ethnic groups and four major religions (Salawu and Hassan, 2011). To narrow the scope of this study, political disputes egged on ethnic divides can further be streamlined to be often evoked between two geographically divided regions, that is; between the Northern and Southern regions. This paper therefore critically pinpoints how Islamic principles can be utilized to enforce and perpetuate peaceful co-existence among the multi- religious/ethnic societies, most especially in Nigeria as practiced by the prophet of Islam during his life time.

## **2. Peaceful co-existence in Islam**

The word Islam originates from the Arabic root *salam* or *silm* which means peace and submission to the will of God. There are many verses of the Holy Quran where God refers to Himself as *as-salam* meaning "peace". A part from this, Muslim is urged to greet other Muslims counterpart with the words "*Assalamu Alaykum*" (peace be upon you". So, the spirit of peace and harmony is rooted in every norm and value of Islam.



Several verses of the Holy Quran and sayings of the Prophet (SAW) promote peaceful coexistence among diverse groups of people. Some of the rules put in place by Islam with which to operate with adherents of other religions are explained below:

## **2.1 Responsibilities of Neighbourhood**

Islam attaches paramount importance to the rights of the neighbour beyond religions, cultures or other differences. The duty towards the neighbour is only second in importance to the duties towards parents and near kindred<sup>6</sup>. The Holy Quran instructs;

*“...And serve Allah and do not associate anything with Him and be good to the parents and to the near of kin and the orphans and the needy and the neighbor of [your] kin and the alien neighbor, and the companion in a journey and the wayfarer and those whom your right hands possess, surely Allah does not love him who is proud, boastful” Q4:36.*

The Prophet (SAW) was reported to have said that: “the best friend in the sight of Allah is he who is the well-wisher of his companions, and the best neighbour is one who behaves best towards his neighbours (Jami Tirmidhi). Also, ‘He whoever passes his night satiated and restful in his home with his family, while he has poor neighbours passing their night hungry, has no true belief in the messenger of Allah and is denying him too. Had such a man been a true believer, he would have given food to his neighbours and not let them pass the night in hunger” (Sunan al-Kubra).

## **2.2 No Forceful Conversion**

Islam, does not allow using force as a means of conversion no historical evidence is found in support of forceful conversion during the time of the rapid expansion of Islam in its early history. All Muslim jurists unanimously hold the concept that forced conversion, under any circumstances, is null and void. Any such attempt is a grievous sin in Islam (Islam, 2018).

The Holy Qur’an says;

*“Had your Lord wanted, all the people on earth would have believed. Then (O Muhammad) will you force the people in order that they become believers” Q10:9.*

Jews, Christian and other non-Muslims living in the Muslim state and their right to worship according to their faith. The Qur’an stipulates that, places of worship of people of the Book be protected. This is confirmed by a verse of the Quran which says:

*“...If God had not driven some people back by means of others, Monasteries, churches, Synagogues and mosques, where God’s name is mentioned much, would have been pulled down and destroyed...” Q22:40.*

The above command was strictly adhered to by caliph ‘Umar b. al-khattab who rescue the Church of Jerusalem from the oppression and occupation of the Persian Empire. After the liberation, he did not turn the Church to Mosques. He indeed refused to yield to the request of his soldiers who cleared the Church for the Muslims to observe their *Salat* there. He rather ordered them to find another place for *Salat* and leave the Church for the Christian (Adebayo, 2010).

## **2.3 Consumption of Christian food for Muslims**

In order to foster social interactions between Muslims and Christians, the Qur’an legalises the consumption of Christian food for Muslims and vice versa. It should be mentioned that the types of meat



forbidden for Muslims to eat are mentioned in the Bible for the Christian not to consume as well (Adebayo 2020). The Bible says;

*“That ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood and from things strangled, and from fornication”* (The Holy Bible, Acts 15:29).

In the same vein, the Quran says:

*“Forbidden to you are the flesh of dead animals and blood and the flesh of Swine, and that which has been dedicated to any other than Allah, and that which has been killed by strangling”* Q5:3.

### **3. Special treatment of the people of the Book (Christians and Jews)**

In ensuring the good spirit of tolerance, the people of the book enjoy a special treatment in Muslim community. In the Qur'an it is forbidding to argue with them, except in good manner, so that their hearts may be pure and free from the enmity that may arise from argument and dispute the Qur'an says:

*“Argue not with the people of the Book, except in a way better (than mere disputation)”* Q29:46.

To practicalize this, the Messenger of Allah (SAW) used to visit the ahl adh-Dhimmah (the people of the book) honour them and visit the sick one and treat them kindly. It was reported that:

“A young Jewish boy who use to serve the prophet (SAW) fell ill. The prophet visited him, and sat near his head. As he was about to pass away, the prophet asked him to embrace Islam. The boy looked at his father, who was also sitting there. The father nodded approvingly and to him to obey Abdul-Qasim, the boy embraced Islam after which he passed away (Abu Dawud).

It was also reported that Prophet Muhammed (SAW) hosted a delegation of sixty (60) Christian from Najrah in his mosque in Medina, they spent three days there. In line with this, “Ibn Ishaq said, Muhammad bin Ja'far bin Al-Zubair said that “the (Najran) delegation came to the Messenger of Allah in Medina, and entered his masjid (mosque) wearing robes and garments, after the prophet had prayed the Asr prayer. They accompanied a Caravans of camels led by Bani Al-Harith bin Ka'b. The companions of the messenger of Allah who saw them said that they never saw a delegation like them after that. When their worship time came, they stood up to perform their worship in the prophet's mosque. The Messenger of Allah said: “Let them (worship) and they prayed towards the East (al-Qayyim, 1964).

### **4. Fostering growth through mutual tolerance**

In a bid to protect the overall interests of an endangered group from perceived injustice suffered from an opposing group in the time past, some of the leaders of these allegedly victimised groups had been ostensibly firm as to their genuine purpose for agitation while really concealing some hidden agenda held along with the struggle. This has allowed sentiments to be nurtured and promoted amongst their followers. Ethnicity and religious bias are the key hinderances to solving most of the crises Nigeria is presently facing. Ethno-religious sentiments symbolize the procedures of business engagements, education, jobs and disbursement of administrative positions and even the democratic dispensations in the political sector of Nigeria (Chiamogu and Chiamogu, 2020). Even though the entertainment industry has been reckoned to bring a little form of cohesion amongst Nigerians of different extractions, there are still some religious groups that create aversions against some players based on the ideology they hold (Adeniyi, 2020). It is a



complex disorder because the consequent injustice suffered therefrom are either underreported or concealed from the public by the media who promotes the agenda of the disfavoured groups (Daramola, 2013; Omoera and Okhakhu, 2013; Tobeckukwu, 2007). Some of the recent events that have stirred intense emotions amongst Nigerians include; The Ikoyi Building Collapse where a young engineer was reported to have been denied of a placement based on his religious identity (Farouk, 2021); the appointment of administrators of a single faith into some of tertiary institutions for decades (Abati, 2021; Alabi, 2019). The most recent event that is currently generating waves of sensations in the political spaces is the controversial 'Muslim-Muslim' ticket declared by the ruling party in the build-up to the upcoming general election in February, 2023. This mix in politicization of ethnicity and religion especially among some groups that put out the claims of gross marginalization is causing tension which has stalled the growth of the country across all developmental areas. The government has become a thoroughfare that provides a platform for ethno-religious nationalism thereby drifting the focus of good governance towards issues that barely have significance to the growth and development of Nigeria.

As Karl Marx postulated, religion is deemed as the opium of the people that when analysed, it generates outrageous level of awareness and sentiments that see fanatics fighting without ascertaining the real cause of their action (Marx, 2002). Religion connotes cultural and socio-political phenomenon with overriding influence in individual and community life of most members of the Nigeria population, and has been often suspected and accused of causing a setback to the development of the nation (Chiamogu and Chiamogu, 2020). Hence, the potential implications from the uproar being generated by an apparently skewed fragmented groups based on the controversial same faith candidature of the All-Progressive Congress (APC) is purposively discussed herein;

Religious fanaticism should be distinctively separated from patriotism if we really desire true progress for our country. Even as it is quite hard not to rely on spiritual guidance that could be derived from the Holy Books for our mundane affairs, balanced perspective must be adequately sought therein to address contending issues with heart devoid of sentiments and ill-will. True nationalism naturally comes to the heart of a patriot citizen, however, what must be avoided is conditioning our mindset towards course of actions which may be ruinous to our nation. The zeal to hold national interests supreme defines the spirit of nationalism.

The Prophet S.A.W. encouraged a duty-conscious society, not a rights conscious one. Rebellious activities that may be executed in different forms of agitations; from mild to violet is seriously discouraged in Islam. In the face of perceived oppression, we are meant to maintain our patriotism over personal interests. It was narrated on the authority of Alqama b. Wa'il al-Hadrami who learnt the tradition from his father. The latter said: Salama b. Yazid al-ju'afi asked the Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him): Prophet of Allah, what rule over us and demand that we discharge our obligations towards them, but they (themselves) do not discharge their own responsibilities towards us? What do you order us to do? The Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him) avoided giving any answer. Salama asked him again. He (again) avoided giving any answer. Then he asked again; it was the second time or the third time; when Ash'ath b. Qais (finding that the Holy Prophet was unnecessarily being pressed for answer) pulled him aside and said: "Listen to them and obey them, for on them shall be their burden and on you shall be your burden" (Muslim)

The political rights and association of every Nigerian is covered under the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended), which gives every person the right to vote and be voted for during an election, and also entitles a person the right to freely associate with other persons, and in particular, he may form or belong to any political party for the protection of his interests (Constitution, 1999). Thus, the resistance against same faith ticket is inimical to the decree of the Constitution that allows a person to freely contest or associate with a political party of his choice, and may be deemed as a form of



injustice if such rights of a fellow individual is unjustly withdrawn. Allah admonishes us to cooperate in acts of virtue and piety and not to cooperate in acts of sins and injustices (Q. 16:90). Performing one's duty rather than demanding for an inexistent right is the strongest foundation for building a prosperous country. Therefore, Islam emphasizes on unity, love, and cooperation amongst one another. Contrarily, what should be demanded for is political inclusion that will discharge equity and fairness.

In one of the compilations of the Hadith- the Book of Virtue, Good Manners and Joining of the Ties of Relationship, the Prophet (S.A.W.) was reported to have said: "Do not think evil of each other, nor probe into each other's affairs, nor excite one against the other. Keep yourself away from mutual hatred and jealousy. Do not unnecessarily oppose each other. Always remain the slaves and subject of Almighty Allah and live like brothers among yourselves (Muslim).

Respect for the views and beliefs of others that may be contrasting to the views held by an individual is important for the peaceful coexistence within a society. Tolerance brings about diversification that ultimately fosters growth (Yazdani, 2020). Making reference to a recent instance where a Nigerian Muslim professor contested for the deanship of a faculty in a university overseas- an institution dominated by Christians and was handed the job based on his clear competence without any discrimination that may disqualify him based on religious identity or ethnic extraction. By doing so, he will be allowed to concentrate fully to deliver on the mandate given to him. Therefore, what should be agitated for instead is a call for fair treatment, effective governance that would guarantee peaceful co-existence devoid of rancour and acrimony.

## **5. Conclusion**

The multi-religious nature of any society is a divine design of the Creator, to test whether mankind would be able to harmonize its differences or not, failure to do this, man's purpose of creation is defeated and his vicegerency becomes useless, hence the serious need to concretise the interfaith relationship to achieve the purpose for which religion is institutionalised.

It is therefore our submission that despite the noticeable differences in ethnic, cultural and religious affiliations in Nigeria, the country can be moved forward and achieve the dividends of democracy. It is however pathetic to observe that rather than using our differences and diversity for the benefit of the country, personal hatred of some people for the religion they do not profess do not allow them to see things in their right perspectives. Once a leader whose religion is different from theirs assumes office, he is suspected of either Islamizing or Christianizing the nation, as the case may be. Rather than addressing the numerous challenges facing the country.

From the above discussion, it becomes very clear that the teachings of Islam very much promote the principles of peaceful coexistence. It does not only allow non-Muslims to perform their religious practices in their religious houses, but also provides complete security to their lives, properties and dignities. The prophet (SAW) himself set the best ever examples of communal coexistence and religious tolerance during his life time through different treaties, declarations, covenants and practices. This paper therefore concluded that the issue of Muslim-Muslim ticket should not be a bone of contention if the adherents of both popular religions in Nigeria (Islam and Christianity) to adhere strictly to their religious tenets of peaceful coexistence

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