

Peace Building and Inter-Religious Dialogue in Nigeria

Tajudeen Olushola TOKI

School of Basic and Remedial Studies, Kwara State College of Education, Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria

Muhammad Aliyu GAMBARI

Department of Islamic Studies, Kwara State College of Education, Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria

Muhammad Ismail HADI

School of Basic and Remedial Studies, Kwara State College of Education, Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria

Abstract

The rising intra and inter-religious insurgency in Nigeria constitute menace to national unity and development. On the 20th of October, 2011, the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria; Dr. Goodluck Jonathan made a grand appeal to religious leaders in a meeting held with NIREC on the importance of peaceful co-existence in Nigeria. Therefore, the concepts of Peace building and inter-religious dialogue are vital and sensitive to national concern. This paper explores critical analytical method to discuss inter-religious dialogue and peace-building between Nigerian Muslims and Christians with a view to craving for mutual relations devoid of rancour and violence. The recommendations include an appeal to the Federal Government of Nigeria to tackle all forms of inter-religious challenges using relevant agencies such as NSCI, CAN and NIREC. Above all there should be ideal inter-religious moral orientation for the citizenry to resuscitate peaceful co-existence in Nigeria.

Introduction

Peace building research is concerned with veritable dialogue strategies to resolve misunderstanding and violence peacefully. It is also a technical inquiry system with expertise knowledge designed to study the causes of conflicts and provide necessary conditions for a harmonious resolution (David, 2006). This opinion is corroborated by Kolawole (2010). He views dialogue as the act of seeking ideal development through reasoning and discussing a problem with a view to correcting the parties involved.

It is an indisputable fact that there is a renewed horizon at global level to give inter-religious dialogue a significant consideration as an effective ecumenical strategy for peace building among diverse religious groups in a political community. It is against this backdrop that dialogue has attracted inter disciplinary intellectual discourse and even made a field of study in tertiary institutions in Nigeria.

Nigeria is a country of heterogeneous cultural and religious beliefs. The citizens indispensably relate together on socio-economic basis. The citizens who profess different religions share the same political boundary and must be collectively involved in the nation building process to enhance growth and development (Bidmos: 2006).

A critical assessment of the existing religious climate in Nigeria describes the pattern of Muslim-Christian relationship as artificially designed and contrary to the orthodox ideal teachings of inter-religious relations shared by Islam and Christianity. Although at interpersonal level, such as being members of the same political party, Muslims and Christians interact impressively in healthy atmosphere (Bidmos, 2006). However, the current catalogue of incessant insurgency such as eruption of violence by Boko Haram and religious intolerance threaten the corporate existence of Nigeria as a country. There has been hypocritical propagation of religious misunderstanding through political propaganda and tribal sentiments.

It is pathetic that religious education has been de-emphasized in secondary schools and tertiary institutions through its elective status (Umar, 2013). The profane attitude to religious education in educational institutions accounts for wide range of social violence. Religion has seemingly lost its credibility as a viable institution for ameliorating the disintegrated components in Nigeria.

Interaction between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria

Scriptural and historical records revealed the early cordial interactions between Muslims and Christians. This was practically demonstrated by the Abyssinian Christians through the good leadership and non-discriminatory qualities of Negus who gave warm reception to the Muslim refugees persecuted in Makkah (Hitti: 1970) The Holy Qur'an describes the early Christians as friends of Muslims:

You will find that the people most violently hostile towards those who believe are the Jews and those who associate (others with God); while you will find the most affectionate among them towards those who believe are those who say; we are Christian. That is because some of them are priests and monks, they do not behave proudly (Qur'an 5:82).

The religion of Islam emphasized good human relation on the concept of universal brotherhood regardless of geographical affinity or religions. Under the Abbasid government, the Muslim interacted with the Jews and Christians on ideal basis through the accommodation of rights to freedom of religion and security of life. They had right to practice their religion in synagogues and Monasteries in Baghdad (Hitti: 1970).

The amalgamation of the Southern and Northern protectorates of Nigeria in 1914 inadvertently brought together people of diverse backgrounds in terms of religious and ethnic differences under a unified geo-political entity. However, the advent of European administrators and missionaries was an infliction of social attack and surgery on the indigenous cultural beliefs of the Nigerian people. The Christian Missionary Society (CMS) under the influence of the expatriate missionaries and leadership of Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther was responsible for the conversion of the people on the Niger and Delta areas (Ewan, 1945).

Christian missionary activities did not have strong hold in the northern Nigeria. Emir Aliyu reacted negatively to the Christian evangelism as follows:

We do not want you here and you can go away. I have given you these days to prepare a hundred donkeys to carry your loads to Zaria; we never wish to see you here again (Ewan, 1945).

The introduction of Western education and Christianity by the Europeans nurtured religious crisis and intolerance. The basic requirement for enrolment into European formal education school was based on conversion into Christianity. Among such personalities included Chief Obafemi Awolowo and Nnamidi Azikwe who changed their names to Jeremiah Awolowo and Johnson Azikwe prospectively. (Ovwasa, 1993).

Nigerian nationalists who fought for the liberation of the country from imperialism did not emphasize the religious discord nurtured by the European missionaries but worked relentlessly on common grounds to unite the country in the atmosphere of stability, love, peace, accommodation, harmony and good neighborliness.

The interaction between the Muslims and Christians at interpersonal level in some regions in Nigeria is harmonious and pleasant. For instance Muslim and Christians belong to the same political party with common aspiration to win election (Bidmos: 2006).

In the South - West region of Nigeria, maturity, tolerance, love and group solidarity are evidently displayed by members of the same family who are Muslims and Christians. They are co-workers and business associates. They meet in banks and markets. There is always sense of mutual trust and respect through exchange of pleasantries and gifts during festivals (Bidmos: 2006).

However, the attitudinal disposition of Muslims and Christians at formal interactive level often resort to religious intolerance and disturbances. These have been inimical to nation building in Nigeria. At formal level, the members of the same religion see themselves as corporate body and over zealously protect the interest of their group members (Bidmos:2006).

Religious Crises in Nigeria and Effects on National Integration

The interactions between Muslims and Christians at socio-political level in the recent time have been influenced by mutual suspicion and competition. These often lead to unabated religious conflicts such as sporadic religious crises which continue to engulf the Northern part of Nigeria in the recent time.

However, the first religious crisis experienced in Nigeria was the revolutionary activities (*Jihad*) of Uthman Dan Fodio in 1804 in the old Hausa Fulani Empire (Adekunle and Adegbaike, 2010) The revolution was launched to fight against syncretism rampant during the time. The *Jihad* was aimed to restore the pristine Islam.

The scenario of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria has left indelible psychological trauma and mistrust among the Nigerian citizenry. Carnage, arson and physical assaults were recorded in the past crises and these continue to threaten the corporate existence of the Federal polity. The

first military coup in Nigeria was 1966. The coup was mutinous and calamitous because it had ethno-religious undertone. It was led by young Igbo revolutionist military officers. The coup was masterminded by Major Chukwuma Nzeogwu and the bloody coup led to the murder of Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa (the first Prime Minister of Nigeria) and Sir Ahmadu Bello; the Sadauna of Sokoto. A counter coup was staged by Hausa young military officers and this led to the assassination of Major J.T.U Aguiyi Ironzi (Ovwasa, 1993). The coup can be defined as an attribute of religio-ethnic conflict due to the revenge of Hausa people which also led to the carnage of Igbo tribe unleashed in the Northern part of Nigeria.

The Maitatsene religious crisis of February 1980 was the first sectarian crisis that led the country into confusion. The religious mayhem extended to Yola in 1984, Bauchi and Borno in 1985 respectively while the infiltration of the sectarian militancy engulfed Kaduna in 1986. The casualties recorded were more than ten thousand people who were Muslims and Christians (Adekunle, 2010).

The following summary of religious conflicts as recorded by Tell Newspaper (August 10, 2009) and corroborated by Adegbai and Adegbaibe (2010) had negative effects on nation building in Nigeria:

- December 1980: Maintaseini riot in Kano.
- 1982: Bulumkutu's religious violence.
- February 1984: Religious crises in Jimeta in Gongola state
- December 1998: Protest and violence over imposition of Christian religious Studies in schools in Maiduguri.
- February 2000: Riot over Shari'ah issue in Kaduna.
- April 2000: Saki Oyo State and Iwo had religious violence as a result of the preaching of one Alfa Mofoye (an Islamic scholar) against Christianity.
- November 2000: The people of Offa in Kwara State witnessed religious riot following the demolition of the ancient Moremi shrine.

The second religious mayhem was recorded between 26th and 30th October 1982. The religious uprising was championed by Maitatsine disciples at Bulumkutu on the outskirts of Maiduguri, Borno State and Kaduna. Kaduna State experienced another inter-religious violence at Kafachan in 1984 during the preaching session of a Muslim convert; Pastor Bako whose

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preaching infuriated Muslims due to his sacrilegious utterance to Islam. The mayhem further widened the animosity between Muslims and Christians in Northern Nigeria.

There were more successive inter religious riots between the Muslims and Christians which further broadened the socio-religious cleavages among the citizens of Nigeria and even geo-political zones of Nigeria. Such inter-religious conflicts included the March 10, 1987 Kafachan religious riot which ensued from the preaching of Bello Abubakar, a Muslim convert. There were other subsequent religious violence in 1991 in Bauchi, in 1992 Zango Kafaf episode had a colossal destruction of human life and property on April 28th 2000. (Tell, August 10, 2009: 37).

An article titled: “The World at their Feet” on Miss World Beauty 2002 Pageant erupted national violence. The article was written by Isioma Daniel and published in “This Day”, a Nigerian Newspaper on the 26th November, 2002 some parts of the article were considered denigrating to Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) because of the following statement:

The Muslims thought it was immoral to bring ninety-two women to Nigeria and ask them to revel in vanity. What would Muhammad think? In all honesty, he would probably have chosen a wife from among them (This Day, 2002).

However, “This Day” management tendered an unreserved apology to the Muslims in the subsequent editorial series of the newspaper.

The major sectarian upheaval in the country as at the time of this research is Boko Haram syndrome. The insurgency of the sect has paled the proceeding religious crises and destructions enumerated above into insignificance because of its unprecedented intermittent suicide bombings and ruinous attacks on Nigeria police headquarters in Abuja and many other important targets. It is a protracted insurgency which has wasted enormous government resources and remained unabated.

Book Haram came into existence in the 1960s but visibly became a threat in Nigeria in the year 2002. The name of the sect was derived from “Book” (Western education). The sect is critical of western civilization and its philosophy. Therefore members of the sect decide to

pursue their anglo-phobic philosophy to re-shape the socio-political thoughts of Nigeria (Abimbola, 2011).

Some social analysts have observed that the evolution of Boko Haram can be attributed to the social malaise and absence of involvement of youths in the civil service employments and other important social realms in Nigeria. The holders of this opinion believe Boko Haram is dominated by educated and unemployed youths (The Guardian, 2011). Nigeria records death toll on weekly basis on account of the attacks of Boko Haram especially in Bauchi, Kano, Yobe, Maiduguri and Borno (Abimbola, 2011).

Apart from the perennial unhealthy religious interactions between the Nigerian Muslims and Christians, there have also been series of hot conflicts between Muslims and adherents of traditional religion in the South-West Nigeria in the colonial and post-colonial periods. According to Doi (1969), Islamic missionary activities at embryonic stage were met with stiff opposition by the adherents of traditional religion in Yorubaland. There were attacks on Muslims as they were practising Islam openly and establishing a new social order. The new social drive was conceived by the Afrelists as a threat to their cherished conservative cultural heritage.

The spread of Islam in Yoruba land was largely based on voluntary efforts of some scholars and societies “*Egbe*”. Because of the circumstances surrounding the acceptance of Islam by some Yoruba people, there were syncretic practices in their religious disposition. This inevitably gave rise to another form of religious wrangle which led to the evolution of some Islamic reformers in Yoruba land. (Adelowo, 1986)

In the 1980s, such reformers included AbdulAzeez Ajagbemokeferi, a versatile Islamic preacher from Esa-Odo in Osun State. He was critical of cult activities and idolatry practices. He had terrific encounters with cultists and Oloolu masquerades in Ibadan (Adelowo, 1986:70). His persuasive preaching sessions converted many Ogboni cultists and other Afrelists.

Offa, an Ibolo community of Yoruba land in Kwara States which fosters an ideal hitch-free Muslim-Christian interactive community also experienced religious violence in November 2000 when the young Muslim youth revolutionists pulled down the ancient Moremi shrine in

Offa. The crisis was justified by the concerned Muslim youth revolutionists on the basis of the proximity of the shrine to Offa *Jumat* Mosque and involvement of some Muslims in the Moremi annual festivity (Tell August 10, 2009).

Religious Concepts of Dialogue and their Relevance to Conflict Resolution in Nigeria

Dialogue is contextually defined as an ecumenical attempt to bring people of different faiths together on the platform of peaceful co-existence, co-operation and tolerance (Daniji, 2007:31). Umaru, (1999) defines dialogue as “Unity in diversity”. The Holy Qur’an unequivocally supports a hitch-free inter-religious interaction and dialogue in the following verse:

Say o people of the Book! Come to common terms as between us and you: that we worship none but Allah: that we associate no partners with Him that we erect not, from among ourselves lords and patrons other than Allah (Qur’an 3:64)

Dialogue must take place in a conducive atmosphere of trust and readiness for harmony. Islam encourages dialogue as a peace building approach capable of resolving differences and disagreement between followers of divergent faiths (Al-Mubaligh, 2013). However, this must be in line with the Islamic regulative guidelines as contained in the Qur’an:

Invite all to the way of your Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching, and argue with them in the ways that are best (Qur’an 16:125).

Many biblical passages also encourage good neighborliness devoid of hostility with non-Christians as elucidated in John 14:16, Matt: 5:17 and Matt: 22:40. In 1st Thesalonians 5:21, the Bible gives methodological guideline on Dialogue:

Prove all things and hold fast to that which is the truth

Islam entrusts the safety of one another on his fellow human being. According to Sayyid Qutb (1977), he portrayed an ideal interactive community as the one devoid of acrimonies; guided by Islamic precepts, and where solidarity reigns among the citizens for the purpose of mutual security and peace. The Holy Qur’an stresses the unity of mankind in the following verse:

O mankind! Fear your Guardian Lord, Who created you from a single person, created, out of it, his mate and from them twain scatted (like seeds) countless men and women; fear Allah, through Whom ye demand your mutual (right) and

*be heedful of the wombs (that bore you); for Allah ever watches over you
(Qur'an 4:1)*

Kind treatment that fosters harmonious relationship among people of different socio-cultural backgrounds is further emphasized in the Qur'an chapter 107 verses 1 to 3:

*Seest thou one who denies the judgment to come? Then such is the one who
repulses the orphan. And encourages not the feeding of the indigent*

The verses do not specifically limit benevolent treatment to the Muslims only. As commanded by Allah, Muslims have been warned to shun aggression and should not condone aggression from any side. Islam maintains balance between war and peace.

During the life of Prophet Muhammad, war was only resorted to when other measures failed. The peaceful dialogue of Islam teaches Muslims harmonial methods for the propagation of Islam (Abdullati, 1997).

Adukwu (2010:390) observes the indispensability of dialogue and its advantages as follow:

1. Dialogue encourages people of different religious backgrounds to share knowledge of other people's religions on the platform of peace and unity.
2. Inter-religious dialogue enhances knowledge of the differences and similarities between different religions and sects. The knowledge enriches the people how to crave for accommodation and mutual trust among themselves.
3. Friendliness is better enhanced through dialogue. As such, violence and threat are eliminated.

The impact of intra and inter-religious associations cannot be overemphasized in the mediatory and dialogue strategies between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria. Such associations include; Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA), Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC), Muslims of South-West of Nigeria (MUSWEN) etc.

The Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) was established in September 29, 1999 by the representatives of Christianity and Islam in Nigeria to foster inter-religious peace and dialogue. The association comprises of 50 members based on equal ratio for Muslim and

Christian membership. NIREC is co-chaired by Alhaji Muhammad Sa'ad Abubakar (Sultan of Sokoto and the President-General of Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs: NSCIA) and Pastor Ayo Oritsejafor (President of the Christian Association of Nigeria: CAN). Professor Is-haq Oloyede is the National coordinator and executive secretary of the association (Vanguard, 2015).

Recommendations

The escalating religious violence ravaging the country on a daily basis has been attributed to misconception of beliefs and doctrines of the other religion, the unemployment syndrome among Nigerian youths and antagonistic open air preaching session or evangelism. In view of this the following recommendations are vital to keep Nigeria a united country;

1. Government should legislate a code of ethics for religious evangelism (Opeloye, 2001). This should also contain punitive measures against any religious preacher whose preaching ignites religious violence.
2. Government should by principle maintain neutrality in inter- religious affairs because Nigeria is a multi-religious society. Religious violence is escalated because some religious affairs are believed by some people to be favoured by government at the expense of other. A good example is the involvement of government in the Muslim and Christian pilgrimage activities.
3. There is need for regular organized conferences and seminars on religious dialogue to enhance participants the required skills to quench religious intolerance. Conferences on inter-religious dialogue should be organized periodically in the Nigerian Universities.
4. The Press has an important role to play in fostering peaceful inter-religious co-existence in Nigeria. They should maintain mediatory and reconciliatory reportage.
5. Religious education is fundamental to Nigeria peaceful co-existence. To this end, fanatical tendencies on the part of youths can be rid off when ideal religious education such as Islamic Studies and Christian Religious Studies are made compulsory at all levels of Education in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Nigeria is a religio-political society which has featured several turbulent waves of religious intolerance. Sustainable development cannot be achieved in an atmosphere of sporadic religious violence.

Nigeria Inter-Religious Council and other inter-religious peace bodies should be strengthened to promote religious tolerance in Nigeria. The bodies include National Association for Religious Tolerance (NARETO) established by C.S. Momoh and Islamic Studies Group of Nigeria (ISGON) founded by Abdulkareem Hussain.

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