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BOOK REVIEW

Towards a theology of conflict solution: Understanding religious conflict in contemporary Nigerian society

Akanji, I.A., (Abuja: Elis Associates, 2021), 595 pages, Price: 5000 Nigerian Naira, ISBN: 978-978-993-478-2 (paperback).

Nigeria as a “multi-ethnic, multicultural, multiregional and multi-religious” country is plagued with many religious conflicts (p. xv). This is against the backdrop that, although human beings are created in God’s image, they are capable of becoming “devil-incarnate” and can be at war with one another at times, as asserted by Prof. Yusufu Ameh Obaje, who wrote the foreword of the book (p. xi). In order to ensure peaceful co-existence among people in this multifaceted society with incessant conflicts, there have been many approaches towards transforming these conflicts. The author, Rev. Dr Israel Adelani Akanji states that the task of the book

is to contribute practical, theological reflections to the ongoing search for how Nigeria will end the undesired religious conflict between Muslims and Christian and build a peaceful and harmonious society (p. xvi).

The 595-page book consists of a foreword, a preface, lists of abbreviations and plates, seven chapters, a bibliography, appendices, the author’s curriculum vitae, and the index. The book is an



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adaptation of the author's doctoral dissertation. It is not surprising to note elements of a dissertation structure in the arrangement of the book. The author is a theologian, scholar, and leading practitioner of conflict transformation and interreligious peace building in Nigeria. Having served as a local church pastor in a number of churches of the Nigerian Baptist Convention for over three decades, he is now the new President and Chief Executive Officer of the Convention.

The foreword of the book is written by Rev. Prof. Yusufu Ameh Obaje, a professor of systematic theology who lectured and served as the President of the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomoso, and former President of the Nigerian Baptist Convention. He was also a chaplain to Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, once the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The writer of the foreword traces mankind to God who created them in His image, but man, at times, changes his nature from being good to being evil. In spite of his/her religiosity, the human being's evilness causes conflicts in the world. Nigeria shares in these inevitable conflicts, especially religious conflicts. The writer of the foreword is convinced that the book is

God's instrument for guarantee in more enduring solution for the
problem of religious crises in Nigeria and the world at large (p. xii).

Chapter 1 is a general introduction to the book. The author gives brief background information about Nigeria that is "the most populous country in Africa" (p. 1). As a product of British colonisation, brought together, in 1914, by the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates, Nigeria abounds in diversity. Culturally, there are approximately 374 ethnolinguistic groups. Geographically, the country is bounded in the north by Sahel regions; its middle belt is the guinea savannah area, while its southern part is a high forest region with the Atlantic Ocean as the boundary. From a religious point of view, many indigenous religions dominated the country prior to the advent of "guest-religions" – Islam and Christianity (in their various forms) – that swept over almost every part of the country. To date, there are no definite demographic data of adherents of the two prevailing religions, despite the many censuses. The political landscape of the country is not helping the matter, as people (influenced by religion) have diverse views of how the country should be governed. Many of these diversities, especially religious diversity, contribute to many religious conflicts that have ravaged the country. Many attempts have been made to resolve these conflicts and make the people live harmoniously. The book reflects on these attempts, especially the "theology of hospitality", in search of conflict transformation in the country. In this chapter, the author attempts to give a historical background to some of these conflicts. The author provides citations of some scholars' views about the history of the religious conflicts in Nigeria, in order to give some purpose and significance

of embarking on the study and writing the book. Specifically, the purpose includes to examine existing theories that seek to explain conflicts; to study the various approaches to resolving religious conflicts in Nigeria; to explore the roots of religious conflicts in Nigeria; to explore the lived experiences of Christians and Muslims involved in religious conflict in Jos and Maiduguri, and to suggest a practical theological approach for religious conflict transformation in Nigeria. The significance of the study is as follows: the study must deal with conflict, which is a global phenomenon; conflict being multidisciplinary with several people contributing to its transformation, the theological discipline also needs to join these people for the promotion of peace and stability in Nigeria. The author provides a conceptual framework on theology, religion, and conflict. He also gives some definitions of conflict and religious conflict and then attempts to explain the term “conflict transformation”, using the concepts of “conflict management” and “conflict resolution”. This chapter also reviews the approach of John Paul Lederach’s Conflict Transformation. The author concludes the chapter with the scope and limitation of the study, and how the book is organised.

Chapter 2 reviews the literature on discourses on conflict. This includes a brief historiography of conflict studies; the pre-1945 conflict studies; conflict studies between 1945 and 1965; conflict studies between 1965 and 1985; conflict studies between 1985 and 2005, and conflict studies that cut across several periods. The author also reviews some general conflict theories, including the inherency (micro) theories; the modern stimulus-response theory; the behaviourist theories; the decision-theoretic contribution; the contingency (macro) theories; the primordial conflict theory; the class theory; the protracted social conflict theory (PSC), and the eclectic (hybrid) theories. Furthermore, the author reviews what other scholars have written about conflicts in Nigeria and some approaches to handling conflict in Nigeria such as violent approaches, non-violent approaches, the traditional African approaches, government approaches, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) approaches, and interfaith approaches that include faith-based approaches. The author concludes the chapter by suggesting “a theological approach to conflict transformation which will complement current efforts” (p. 117).

Chapter 3 “focuses on ‘methodologies’ and ‘methods’ from the perspectives of Swinton and Mowat” (p. 119). The chapter explains the qualitative research methodology used in the study. This methodology includes semi-structured interviews; research design; research sampling; analysis of data, and narrative analysis. The author also narrates how he “dealt with himself” in the process of the study and the problems he encountered during the fieldwork. Against the backdrop that the “specific theological discipline to which this research is

contributing is practical theology” (p. 157), the author elucidates the nexus between practical theology and qualitative research methods in this chapter. He also mentions the relationship of contextual theology, African theology, and comparative theology with his study.

Chapter 4 narrates events of religious conflicts in northern Nigeria, especially in Jos and Maiduguri, capital cities of the Plateau and Borno States, as respondents in the study revealed. These narrations include the immediate and remote causes of the Jos conflict of 7-12 September 2001, and the Maiduguri conflict of 18 February 2006. The consequences of these conflicts are also highlighted. The author endeavours to compare and contrast the two conflicts, thereby giving prospects for peace in the affected areas, in particular, and the entire country, in general.

Chapter 5 discusses the persistent roots of religious conflicts in Nigeria, namely religious pluralism in Nigeria, starting from the indigenous religions (that are pre-colonial in existence), the advent of Islam (especially through the Jihad of Usman Dan Fodio [1804-1808]), and Christianity (that came through the southern part of the country). This chapter also explains the following roots of conflicts: the imposition of colonialism; ethnicity and citizenship in Nigeria; Islam and politics in northern Nigeria; Sharia in Muslim life and politics; the secret registration of Nigeria as a member state of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC); Christianity and politics in northern Nigeria; the rise of Pentecostalism in northern Nigeria; economic recession in Nigeria, as well as global religious issues and international politics.

Understanding a theology of conflict transformation is the thrust of Chapter 6, where the author attempts to explain the interplay between religion and conflict transformation. Having explained the kind of theology that “will influence the reconciliation of our divided societies and encourage peaceful coexistence in Nigeria” (p. 399), the author recommends a theology of hospitality. He provides a biblical basis for this kind of theology within the Nigerian context. He then enumerates the roles of ecumenical bodies such as, among others, Vatican II (1962-1965), the World Council of Churches (WCC), and the All-African Council of Churches (AACC) in this kind of theology. The author also traces the sources of the theology of hospitality to the Bible, the Christian tradition, the Nigerian indigenous cultural systems, and Islam. The chapter ends with the nature of the theology of hospitality.

Chapter 7 is a practical and strategic application of the theology of hospitality in the Nigerian setting, as suggested by the author. This application includes relief for victims; healing of traumas and forgiveness; the pursuit of justice, and long-term strategies for the transformation of religious conflict. As a religious leader, the author recommends that other religious leaders have

roles to play in transforming conflict-affected areas into places where people live together peacefully. In conclusion, the author opines:

The theology of hospitality is therefore suggested as a gradual, practical and, in my view, effective method of transforming relationships between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria since it operates as spirituality and strategy and can lead to conflict solution (pp. 497-498).

Among the strengths of the book is that, being an adaptation of a doctoral dissertation, the book is well researched, and has a robust bibliography that includes brief information of people interviewed during the study. This historical book chronicles in detail the causes and aftermaths of the religious conflicts in some parts of northern Nigeria and some reprisal attacks from other regions of the country. Furthermore, the book would be a good textbook for students of Peace and Conflict Studies, especially for those who have a special interest in conflict transformation. The book would also be a great tool for theologians and religious practitioners, as it gives a theological reflection on conflict transformation. The book would also be useful for policymakers to have knowledge of the causes of religious conflicts, how to prevent re-occurrences of such conflicts, and how to transform the present situation into a sustainable peaceful coexistence among the people.

The only weakness of the book is that it may be boring for a layman to read. The scholastic nature of the book, which is a plus for it, especially among scholars, will be a minus for an ordinary man who simply wants to know more about the religious conflicts in contemporary Nigerian society.

Nevertheless, the book is well-bounded with a colourful flipped cover. The printing is reader friendly. The index at the end of the book will help the reader navigate through the book. The many pictures as illustrations on the cover, inside the cover, and at the end of the book will attract readers to the book. Therefore, I recommend the book to theologians, religious practitioners, scholars in Peace and Conflict Studies, especially those who have a special interest in conflict transformation, and policymakers in governments.