RELIGIOUS IDENTITY AND SOCIAL INSTABILITY IN NIGERIA: INTEROGATING SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY

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Abstract

The importance of religion towards enhancing social stability cannot be over- emphasized. Emily Durkheim viewed religion as a unified system of beliefs and practices whose purpose is to maintain and foster social stability and cohesion by removing tension that can disrupt social order. He believed that a cohesive society is of fundamental importance and that religion is just one mechanism that helps to achieve this. However, the challenges emanating from religious sentiments seem to have contradicted this noble goal of religion. Instead, the destructive role of religion dominates most literature today. The experience is not something to write home about in Nigeria. One of the major factors threatening the unity and stability of Nigeria as a nation is traceable to religious sentiments. Past studies have associated the cause of religious tension to the activities of religious fanatics. Unfortunately the main factor that instigates fanaticism is yet to be unveiled and it is this gap

that the present study proposes to fill. Data for the study was sourced through the secondary method of data collection. The study traced the root cause of fanaticism to the psychological impulse of positive distinctiveness of religious groups. Impulse, which if not regulated is capable of inducing tension in the society, be it among religious, social or political groups. The theoretical framework in which the study is anchored upon is the Social Identity Theory. The study recommends that since the psychological impulse for positive distinctiveness is a natural phenomenon, the different groups should not only acknowledge but should also respect this reality. Unity -in -diversity should remain the ideal principle of unity.

Introduction

Religion exerts much influence on the world polity today. That religion plays both functional (Durkheim School) and dysfunctional (Marxist school) roles, especially, in a pluri - religious society is not disputable. Religion, the Buha'ri Scriptures (cited in Buhayi International Community- BIC) avers, is the source of illumination, the cause of development and the animating impulse of all human development and has been the basis of all civilization and progress in the history of mankind. It is, the scripture continued, inconceivable that a peaceful and prosperous global society; a society which nourishes a spectacular diversity of cultures and nations can be established and sustained without directly and substantively involving the world's great religions in its design and support. Religion also embodied destructive

elements. Religion can be integrative and as well disintegrative, it stabilizes and at the same time destabilizes, rouses hatred and strife in the society. That religion has a strong stake in the conflicts recorded world-wide is not an over statement too. We read and hear of religious conflicts between Jews and Muslims in Israel; between Sunni and Shite Muslims in Iraq; between Hindus and Muslims in India and Pakistan, between Hindus and Buddhists in India; between Buddhists and Chinese communists in Tibet; between Orthodox Christians and Muslims in Bosnia. We hear about the rise of Islamic and Hindus, Jewish and even Confucian forms of fundamentalism. And that religion is responsible for virtually many, if not all social tensions in Nigeria is not a fallacy either. One of the greatest problems confronting our country today, apart from the political malaise and economic depression, is the growing rise of the incidents of confrontational religious crises in the form of riots (Udoidem). Ethno-religious conflicts are creeping into the Nigerian polity unabated. Religious tensions have gradually become common features of the Nigerian polity. The resultant effects have been an increasing level of cases of blood shedding, killings, rooting, and destruction of properties and burning of worship centers in Nigeria.

The causes of religious tensions, according to previous research findings, are occasioned by activities of religious fanatics, fundamentalist and bigots across religions. Thus, elements such as fanaticism, fundamentalism and bigotry are viewed by these studies as catalysts to religious tensions. Unfortunately, the root cause of religious fanaticism,

discrimination and antagonism and other "isms" are yet to be unravel. This is indeed the concern of this paper. The study traced the root cause of religious tensions to religious identity; that is, identity framed by religion. The psychological impulse towards a positive distinctiveness among groups- be it religious, social or political, which often results in comparison between the in-group (the group one identifies with) with the out-group (the group one did not identify with) is seen by the present study as the main trigger of tension in the society. Thus, competition and hostility between groups is not only to be seen as a matter of competing over scarce resources, but also as the result of competing identities.

The rest of the paper proceeds by clarifying the key concepts in the work - identity and instability; exploring the dimensions of instability in Nigeria; presenting a review of the social identity theory (the theoretical framework in which the study is anchored on); examining the co-relationship between identity and social instability. It suggests ways in which problems arising from identify formation as a whole, especially, in a pluralistic society like Nigeria could be addressed and abated. It may be necessary to start by saying something on the key concepts.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

Identity

The concept of identity is defined as a sense of self that develops as the child differentiates from parents and family

and takes a place in society (Jary& Jary, cited in Jekins). It refers to the sense that people have of who they are, of what is most important about them. According to Jekins, Identity is something that is negotiable and which is created in the process of human interaction. It involves making comparisons between people and therefore establishing similarities and differences between them. Those who are believed by themselves and others to be similar share an identity, which is distinguishable from the identity of people who are believed to be different and who do not, therefore, share the same identity. Identity is about meanings; and these meanings are socially constructed rather than about essential differences between people. It is only by distinguishing the identities of different groups that people are able to relate to other people. An awareness of different identities provides some indication of what sort of person you might be dealing with, and therefore, how you can relate to them.

There are three main types of identity- personal identity, role identity and social identity. Personal identity is the individual sense of who he is. It is the self- image activated by an individual to express who he is. Role identity on the other hand, is that self-image taken-up primarily because of one's assigned responsibilities to a position. It is an identity placed on us because of the particular career we undertake. For example, a teacher by virtue of his teaching career activates an identity that tallies with teaching profession. When such identity is activated, she or he goes on to live and behaves like teachers. Social identity is that self-image activated by an individual as a result of his

participation in a particular social group. It is simply an identity activated as a result of our membership in a group. Identity is an integral part of social life. Important sources of identity include; religion, ethnicity, sexuality (homosexuality, heterosexuality, bisexuality), gender, class and even locality. Religion, ethnic identities, defined by language and locality form a basis for group solidarity, and the competition over resources. Partisan politics can be another source of identity, especially, during election cycles. Different groups mobilize around parties and notables. Social identity is thus the basis of social movements.

Instability

Instability is perceived as a pervasive phenomenon that has deep implications for virtually all complex social and technical system. It is, according to Jeol & Eric, a dynamic pattern of stimulus and response in which events became successively less predictable or controllable. Classically, they defined instability in the physical systems as a perturbation that because of structure and behavior of the system is amplified by feedback in a divergent process resulting in increased performance variability. Stability according to these authors, do not necessarily mean the absence of perturbations or new stimulus. It is just a state where system responses to perturbations do not induce unpredictability or uncontrollable outcomes. Thus, instability is not the same thing as variability. It involves both a degree of unpredictability and an increasing lack of control.

Instability is believed to occur when a system responds to external stimuli in a way that makes the system less controllable- with potential negative implications for economic, societal and technological outcomes. Defining instability in international relations, Frazier associated the cause of instability to the inability of a government to provide public good. He identified four types of instability- political instability, security instability, and economic instability, social instability. But for Lewis, the catalysts of instability arise from three areas- political contentions, social violence and economic shocks.

NIGERIA AND THE THREATS OF INSTABILITY

Nigeria is the most populous country in the African continent. Her cooperate existence was traced to 1914, with the amalgamation of the Northern and the Southern protectorate by the then British colonial master to Nigeria- Lord Fredrick Lugard. Nigeria has an estimated population of 150-155 million people (as at 2006 national population census), constituted by diverse ethnic nationalities of different languages, cultural identities and religious perceptions. However, scholars are yet to reach a consensus on the actual number of ethnic and linguistic groups that makes up Nigeria. Report presented on this varies between 395 language groups (Barbour), 250 distinct ethnic and linguistic groups (Lewis) to 56 ethnic nations (Biwaloye & Ibeanu). While some maintained that there are up to 240 ethnic nations, others have suggested that they are probably less than sixty (Adejuyigbe) without being specific.

The majority of Nigerian languages, observed Barbuor, belong to four groups- the Kwa, Benue-Congo family, and the Chadic Afro- Asiatic family. Six other major language groups are represented within the country, namely, the West-Atlantic, Mande, and Gur group of the Niger-Congo family, the Songhai, and Saharan groups of the Nilo Saharan family, and the Semitic group of the Afro-Asiantic family. The Kwa group occupies the forest zone of the Southern part of Nigeria, the Chadic group occupies the large part of the Sahel north, the Saharan and the Semitics groups are found around Chad Basin. The Benue- Congo, the Mande, the Adamawa, and the Kwa groups are distributed within the Guinea Savana middle Belt. The major ethnic groups in Nigeria are the Hausa-Fulani in the north, The Yoruba in the west, and the Igbo in the east. The more prominent among the minority ethnic groups are the Tiv, the Edo, the Efik, the Ibibio and the Ijaw.

Religiously, there are three religious groups in Nigeria- Islam, Christianity and ATRs. Statistic put the population of the religious groups at 50% Islam, 40% Christianity and 10% ATRs. However, northern Nigeria is predominantly Muslim, though with many Christians in the cities and in minority communities throughout the region. Throughout much of the "Middle belt", Christians and Muslims communities are equivalent and are often contentious. The South East areas of the country are overwhelming Christian, whereas the Yoruba in the South West are religiously plural; marriage and conversion between different faiths is common occurrence.

From the foregoing, it is so glaring that Nigeria is a purely pluri- ethnic, pluri- cultural, pluri- religious and pluri-linguistic nation. Before the historic amalgamation in 1914, the various ethnic and cultural groups that now make up Nigeria existed as autonomous political entities, having their own political systems, social and religious values. Scholars have today associated the problem of Nigeria to the failure of the Colonial master to recognize and respect these diversities. The resultant effect of this negligent, they had maintained, is the loose and cosmetic merger of the ethnic and cultural groups in Nigeria, which shall remain the main source of the Nigerian headache.

Since gaining independent from British in 1960, Nigeria has reflected deep-seated divisions, pervasive instability, and recurring conflicts. The challenges to stability in Nigeria can be seen along political, social, economic and religious dimensions.

Politically, poor governance and regime instability have marked Nigeria's post colonial experience. Amid cycles of civilian and military rule, the country has had six successful military coups and a spate of failed coup attempts. Democratic regimes have twice been toppled, and a third political transition was abrogated by the military before the current fourth republic was established in 1999. Thus, leading triggers of political instability in Nigeria include elections, coup, large-scale social violence, particular elite rivalries and economic shocks (Lewis). For Okafor, "political crises and instability in Nigeria are deeply rooted in the conflicting values and predilections that are ethno-religious" (6).

In the economic sector, it is very glaring that Nigeria's economic conditions have also been problematic for national stability. During the first decade of independence, the distribution of revenues from agricultural and mineral exports created the basis for separate regional economics that fueled political contention. Since 1970 things have fallen apart. Nigeria's economy has been dominated by petroleum exports, which constitute a major (if not now the only viable) source of her revenue. Moreover, the era of oil led to a deterioration of economic management, which aggravated the inherent problems of revenue uncertainty. In consequence, Nigeria has regularly been affected by economic crisis and down-turns, prompted by declining revenue, rising debts, and fiscal shortfalls. The resulting problems of public services, unemployment and deindustrialization have sparked problems of violence and political instability. Oil prices crisis (the most recent being the January 2012 saga, believed to have resulted in one of the most dangerous strike actions ever recorded in Nigeria), revenue, debt levels, and fiscal conditions are key triggers of economic instability. Exploring the challenges of the concentration of Nigerian economy to petroleum resources on economic stability of the nation, Lewis noted:

> In the 1970s the economy was transformed by the growth of petroleum exports, revenues were centralized, state patronage and corruption proliferated, and the economy was increasingly vulnerable to global oil price changes and domestic

mismanagement. Rising inequality and deepening poverty in the face of plenty aggravated social tensions (7).

The third major category of tensions in Nigeria is socially oriented. Social instability arises principally from social violence induced by ethnic, regional, communal and religious. For example, ethnic and regional tensions (and even religious) were central to the collapse of the first republic, leading to the civil war of 1967-1970, in which an estimated million Nigerians died. Even though the scale and scope of subsequent violence have been more limited, chronic friction among ethnic, religions, and local groups has persisted over the decades. In the contemporary time, social tension and communal violence presents crucial challenges to stability in Nigeria. Since the transition to civilian rule in 1999, at least 18,000 Nigerians have been estimated to have died in more than 600 violent incidents- ranging from large urban conflicts as in Jos and Kaduna, in which hundreds or even thousands of fatalities have resulted from a single episode, to the low- intensity conflict in Niger Delta, where violence is chronic but causalities are intermittent, and extending to scores of local disputes over land, rights, or representation, which escalate to violence and occasional fatalities. Violence among groups and communities has regularly raised concerns over national stability during the past decades. Similarly, communal violence in Nigeria reflects difference of ethnicity, religion, language, region, locality, livelihood, and partisan allegiance (Lewis).

An important aspect of social tension, which has attracted much attention and worry today (and which is the main concern of the present study) is the religious induced tensions. One of the greatest problems confronting the country today observed Udoidem, apart from the political malaise and economic depression, is the growing rise of the incidents of confrontational religious crisis in the form of riots (152). The crisis, he maintained, has gradually become a common features of the Nigerian polity such that most religious analysts refer to it as a *coup d d'état* while others describe it as a *civilian coup*. Worried about the new threat posed by religion to good governance in Nigeria, Nwanaju lamented, "perhaps, a negative aspect of religion and its impact on good governance is the present situation in Nigeria, manifested mainly in the upsurge of fundamentalism and reckless radicalism or fanaticism, as exhibited by the Boko Haram Sect since 2009" (1). The resultant effects of the Boko Haram mayhem include massive bombing of churches and government offices, uncountable cases of killings recorded and loss of lives and properties of innocent Nigerians living in the Northern part of the country. Same concern was registered by Nwaigbo when he noted:

> The present democratic governance in Nigeria is witnessing a conflict of religious freedom. In actual fact, it is the question of tension between the different religions in the country. The religious tension in Nigeria posed a major

obstacle to the nascent democracy. At the moment, the problems of religious freedom are becoming more acute and more crucial in Nigerian society (17).

He regretted that ethno-religious conflicts are creeping into the Nigerian polity unabated which are encapsulated in the ethnic tensions and upheavals in the country, and they have claimed many lives and properties in various parts of the country in recent years.

Incidents of religious tensions in Nigeria have a very long history. Without maintaining chronological order, there were traces of religious tensions in the pre-independence period and between 1960 and 1966, although, at this time, it was still at the stage of cold war; generally characterized by external mutual respect but internal spite and disaffection remains. There was the civil war, which was rated as the bloodiest crises in Nigeria so far, even though argument on whether the civil war be categorized as political or religious crisis still lingers. Opinions are divided on this with some subscribing to the political undercurrent, while others went in for the religious element. Harmonizing the two ends, Kirk-Green (cited in Nwanaju) argued that "the situation that led to civil war was bedeviled by a set of oppositions, among which were the unending North v. South, Islam v. Christianity mindsets" (7). There were cases of religious tensions after the civil war (1970-1975), alleged to have been instigated by the government take -over of schools; policy which was believed by most Christians to be anti- Christian and pro- Muslim in

orientation. The Sharia crisis was followed in 1976, which raged fiercely during the drafting of the constitution in 1976; alleged to have been prompted by the attempt of some members of the drafting committees to have provisions of the Sharia written into the laws of the federal republic of Nigeria. The argument as Enwerem puts it is that "the application of the Sharia in *all* its aspects; in opposition to what they described as the man-made English law currently operating in Nigeria 'will go a long way in bringing discipline, morality and unity in [the] country"(68). The resistant resulted into riots, demonstration and threats by Muslims. Example was the organized demonstration launched by the Muslim Student's Society (MSS) ABU, Zaria in the streets of Zaria and Kaduna on April 1979 (Udoidem, 159). Cases of religious tensions were also recorded during the Buhari regime of 1983-1985; crisis which was believed to have been triggered off by the seemingly inequality exhibited over the Federal Government pilgrimage provisions. According to Udoidem, 20,000 Muslims were shortlisted at 800 BTA (basic transport allowance) as against less than 1300 Christians at 100 BTA (169).

Another heated religious crisis experienced by Nigerians was the OIC (Organization of Islamic Countries) saga of January 1986. The crisis was said to have been triggered by the attempt of some Muslims and the Federal Government to have Nigeria registered as member of Organization of Islamic countries (OIC); considered by non-Muslims as a move towards Islamizing the whole country. There were in addition, cases of religious tensions across

major universities and cities in Nigeria. These among others include the Usman Danfodio University religious crises of May, 1986, the University of Ibadan crisis of May 1986, the burning of churches in Kano of October 1982, and the Kaduna crisis of March 1987. Added to these lists, were lists of provocations of Muslims by Christians manifested mostly in offensive preaching at crusades by some Christian evangelists. Notable among these provocations was the 1991 Kano riot, which was blamed on the insensitivity of other religious right by these Christian evangelists.

The cause of religious tension in all its ramifications has always been associated with elements such as fanaticism, fundamentalism, discrimination and antagonism exhibited among members of different religious groups. However, the psychological impulse that instigated these tensions have not received much attention and this is the gap the present study proposes to fill. The truth remains that religion exerts much power and influence on the Nigerian polity. There is today hardly any tension in Nigeria that does not in one way or the other have some religious sentiments beneath it. Politicians use religion to pursue their selfish aspirations and vision. In the same vein, religious leaders with high political ambition had resorted to using religion as a weapon to actualize their goals.

SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY REVIEWED.

Social identity theory introduced the concept of social identity as a way in which to explain intergroup behavior believed to have been formulated by Henri Tajfel and John

Turner in the 1970s and 80s, originally developed to understand the psychological basis of intergroup discrimination. It deals with intergroup relations. That is, how people come to see themselves as members of one group/ category (the in group) in comparison with another (the out-group), and the consequences of this categorization. Social identity is simply defined as people's sense of who they are based on their group membership (s). It is the portion of an individual's self- concept derived from perceived memberships in a relevant social group. A social group is seen as a set of individuals who hold a common social identification or view themselves as members of the same social category.

There are three mental processes according to Tajfel & Turner that are involved in identity formations as a whole. These are social categorization, social identification and social comparison. For Hogg & Abrams, these processes are only two- self categorization and social comparison with different consequences. The three mental processes are explored below.

Social Categorization:

According to Tajfel & Turner, we categorize objects in order to understand them and identify them. In a very similar way we categorize people (including ourselves) in order to understand the social environment. We use social categories like black, white, Christian, Muslim, student, teachers etc because they are useful (Saul). Assigning people to a category tells us things about those people. In the similar way, we find

out things about ourselves by knowing what categories we belong to. Appropriate behavior is defined by reference to the norms of groups we belong to, which can be possible only if we can tell who belong to our group. According to Tajfel, stereotyping (that is putting people into groups and categories) is based on a normal cognitive process; the tendency to group things together. However, in the process of doing this, he observed, we tend to exaggerate the differences between groups and the similarities of things in the same group. The result is that we categorize people in the same way. We see the group to which we belong as being different from others, and members of the same group as being more similar than they are.

Social categorization according to Saul is one explanation for prejudiced attitudes (that is, "them" and "us" mentality) which leads to in-group and out- group comparison. Through a social comparison process, persons who are similar to the self are categorized with the self and are labeled in-group; persons who differ from the self are categorized as the out-group. The consequences of self categorization according to Burke & Stet, is an accentuation of the perceived similarities between the self and other in-group members, and an accentuation of the perceived differences between the self and out-group members. This accentuation occurs for all the attitudes, beliefs, and values, affective realities, behavioral norms, styles of speech, and other properties that are believed to be correlated with the relevant inter-group categorization.

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Social Identification:

The second stage in identity formation is social identification. In this process, we adopt the identity of the group we have categorized ourselves as belonging to. If for example we have categorized ourselves as student, the chances are that we will adopt the identity of a student and begin to act in the ways we believe students behave (and conform to the norms of the group). There will be an emotional significance to our identification with a group, and our self- esteem will become bound up with group membership. When identity is activated, the process of depersonalization occurs. When depersonalization occurs, the person behaves in ways that are consistent with prototype; the person behaves to maintain her situationally manifest identity close to the expectation given in the prototype (Burke & Stets).

Social Comparison:

The third mental process in identity formation is social comparison that exists between the in-group and the out-group. Once we have categorized ourselves as part of a group and have identified with that group we tend to compare that group with other groups. According to Saul, if our self-esteem is to be maintained our group needs to compare favorably with other groups. This is critical to understanding prejudice, because once two groups identify themselves as rivals; they are forced to compete in order for the members to maintain their self- esteem. He further observed that competition and hostility between groups is thus not only a

matter of competing for resources, like jobs but also the result of competing identities. After being categorized of a group membership, individuals seek to achieve positive self- esteem by positively differentiating their in-group from a comparison out-group on some valued dimension. The quest for *positive distinctiveness* means that people's sense of who they are is defined in terms of "We" rather than "I". Under certain conditions individuals would endorse resource distribution that would maximize the positive distinctiveness of an in-group in contrast to an out-group. The consequence of the social comparison or competition process, observed Burke & Stet, is the selective application of the accentuation effect, primarily to those dimensions that will result in self-enhancing outcomes for the self. Specifically, one's self-esteem is enhanced by

be judged positively and the out-group to be judged negatively.

Social Identification

Social identification in its entirety projects many outcomes which are cognitive and resulted from the depersonalization process that occurs when an identity is salience (activated).

RELIGIOUS IDENTITY AS A THREAT TO SOCIAL STABILITY: AN INSIGHT BASED ON THE SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY

Religion remains one of the sources of social identification. Religion is never found in a vacuum. A religion is best seen in its social context. Every religion comprises the beliefs of a given community or a number of communities. Bringing out the social composition of religion, Akum viewed religion as a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggle with ultimate problems of human life. Thus, people's dominant beliefs, Ejizu asserted, are important factors in evaluating the impact of change on the socio- cultural and religious life of a people. It is on this note that Durkheim (in Jekins) had earlier maintained that the totality of beliefs and sentiments common to average citizens of the same society forms a determinate system which has its life; one may call it collective or common conscience.

In Nigeria for example, religion being a potent source of identity is not disputable. Northern Nigeria is predominantly Muslim, though with many Christians in the cities and in minority communities in the region. In much of the "Middle Belt", Christian and Muslim communities are more equivalent. The south east areas of the country are overwhelmingly Christian, whereas the Yoruba in the south west are religiously plural. Thus, it is not difficult to isolate a Christian from Muslim or a traditionalist since their dominant beliefs betray them openly in many spheres of life. Studies have shown that in Nigeria, ethnic and religious

differences form sentiments which override perception of Nationalism. Leaders are distracted from national thinking and focus on religious interest, hence, religion frames people's identity.

Haven established that religion is a major source of identity in the society, how does this religious framed identity threatens social stability? Put in another way, what is the co-relationship between religious identity and social instability? Reference to social identity theory will be of immense importance here.

One implication in identifying with a group is that it creates in- group/ self- categorization and enhancement in ways that favor the in-group at the expense of the out-group. Thus, in order to increase our self-image we enhance the status of the in-group to which we belong. Another way to increase our self –image is by discriminating and holding prejudiced views against the out-group. Therefore, we divided the world into "them" and "us" based through a process of social categorization (that is, putting people into social groups). The second implication or challenges of group identification is that we tend to exaggerate the differences between groups and the similarities of things in the same group. This results into categorizing people in the same way. We see the group to which we belong as being different from the others, and members of the same group as being more similar than they are. Another outcome of social identification is the impulse towards positive distinctiveness. It was found out that for our self- esteem to be maintained, our group needs to compare favorably with other groups.

This is indeed, critical to understanding prejudice, because once two groups identify themselves as rivals they are forced to compete in order for the members to maintain their self-esteem. Competition and hostility between groups is not only a matter of competing for resources but also the result of competing identities. Specifically, one's self-esteem is enhanced by evaluating the in-group and the out- group on dimensions that lead the in-group to be judged positively and the out-group to be judged negatively. This results in in-group favoritism also known as "in group bias"; where people give preferential treatments to others when they perceived to be in the same in-group.

Of what import is this analysis towards understanding the dynamics of religious tensions in our society? Religious tension simply arose as a result of a psychological impulse towards positive distinctiveness among different religious groups. In order to enhance the self-image of our religious group, members of the in-group resort to exaggeration of the differences that exist between their group and the out- group. The result being unhealthy competition and comparison between the religious groups one belongs to with the out-group. Having viewed the other religious groups as rivals, members of the in-group work to discredit the members of the out group and these results into prejudice and discrimination of other religious groups. The outcome of the impulse is the division of the society into "we" and "them"; "us" and them"; "Muslim" and Christian" mindsets.
It is this mental process that the present study views as the root cause of religious fanaticism, fundamentalism, bigotry,

antagonism and other "isms" that have bedeviled our religious groups and our dear nation today.

WAY FORWARD/ RECOMMENDATIONS

Having known where we are, the next question to ask at this point is where can we go from here? where can we be? What are the ways forward? One major confrontation associated with identity formation (be it social, political, religious or cultural identifications) as seen in our analysis so far is the temptation of exaggeration of both the differences that exist between the in-group from those of the out-group and the similarities within the in-group. Projecting a positive self- image of an in-group is a normal cognitive experience. Each group ordinarily would want to project a positive image that will make them look palatable and unique before the out-group. This is very normal. But the danger therein is when this normal impulse is misconstrued; when it is negatively expressed; when it instead leads to discrimination, antagonism etc. The study therefore recommends that in as much as the in-group would want to project a positive image of the self, they should not lose sight of the fact that the out-group has an image to project too. Therefore, there is serious need for each group to appreciate and respect the needs and aspirations of the other group; be it social, political or cultural groups. Each has an image to project and protect. This later mindset will go a long way in ushering an atmosphere of piece in our society.

Secondly, from our study so far, it is very clear that Nigeria is a purely pluralistic society. Nigeria is a pluri-

religious, pluri- cultural and pluri- ethnic society. Therefore, the right culture to be adopted in such pluralistic society should be one that recognizes and respect these diversities. Unity- in- diversity should be the appropriate model of the unity to be sought. The universe as a whole is one fashioned along plurality. In Nigerian for example, a reasonable percentage of people who are Christians or Muslims inherited these religions as hegemony of cultures, traditions and accident of history and birth. This reality must be accepted. Taking cognizance of this plurality, Madu has few words for Nigerians:

> Since Nigeria's plural state is a reality, her survival will depend very much on the level of awareness by the different ethnic and religious segments that these differences must be there. Is it not an accident of history that Chukwuma Njoku is an Igbo man while Sani Ibrahim is a Hausa man? Is it not also to a very high extent that a particular tribe is predominantly Muslim while the other is predominantly Christian? It is my contention to say that all these differences must be there for it is in those differences that we shall manifest our level of awareness to share our assets and liabilities and therefore, be ready to resolve seaming contradictions to our own advantage, growth and development (96).

Pluralism recognizes heterogeneity of peoples with the underlying features of mutual awareness or sharing. For a religious pluralism to be a force to be reckoned with in the society it implies that the individual religious groups lay claim to some kind of truth; none of the religious traditions in such a society depend on each other for the interpretation of her own truth (Imo, 90). Plurality is a step to an authentic inculturation and dialogue. Dialogue facilitates constant interaction, conversation and communication between severed groups. It opens the way for mutual understanding, tolerance and respect of the view point of each group. In the context of inter- religious dialogue, however, for any successful dialogues between Muslim and Christians in Nigeria, certain principles are required. This is because the sides involved cannot make any meaningful progress, if each holds tenaciously or rather fanatically to its own point of view. Both groups observed Nwanaju, "must endeavor to *listen* to one another, *understand* each other in sincerity and honesty. Above all, any inter-religious dialogue worthy of the name, must be *free*, and *tolerate* a certain degree of disagreement" (59).

Conclusion

The group which people identifies with- be it social, religious or ethnic groups is the major source of their identity. Religion is a major source of people's identity. Thus, people's dominant beliefs are important factors in evaluating the impact of change on the socio-cultural and religious life of a people. People, who identified themselves with a particular

group, naturally feel the impulse of positive distinctiveness of the in-group. They would ordinarily like to project a positive self-image of the group in which they belong at the expense of the out-group. Such impulse if not regulated results into favoritism; a situation whereby members of the in-group received more preferential treatments than the members of the out-group does. The direct consequences of this unhealthy comparison are discrimination and prejudice attitudes towards the out-group. These elements are sufficient to trigger off conflicts- be it social, political, religious or otherwise, especially, in a pluralistic society like ours. It is basically the clash of identities that instigates most tensions in the society. The paper therefore concludes that since the universe is one fashioned along plurality, the appropriate culture in such a plural society should be one anchored on the model of unity – in – diversity. Genuine religion in a plural society like Nigeria entails a relationship with the other religions. In fact to be religious is to be interreligious. National integration can only be achieved if we accept our differences and be ready to accommodate our neighbors not minding whatever is it that have divided us, knowing that life is full of opposing contradictions which must be resolved to form a united and stable Nigeria.

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