THE USE AND ABUSE OF RELIGION: IMPLICATIONS IN NIGERIAN SOCIETY

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Abstract
Religion is a way of life. Religious beliefs, practices and doctrines are for the most part useful for   human development and peaceful co-existence in society. People globally believe in the existence of God. Nigeria, on her part is full of intensely religious people who believe that a transcendent being is overlooking and overseeing human activities on earth. Nigerians in contemporary times are predominantly Christians and Muslims. There are minority adherents of African Traditional Religion (ATR) also in Nigeria who are the custodians of the native heritages. Religions in Nigeria play significant roles in the development of the nation before and after independence. This paper examines the use and abuse of religion and its implications for the Nigerian society. It adopted historical and descriptive methods in its discussion. The study discovered that the religions in Nigeria have been turned to commercial ventures, avenue for disunity and a tool for destruction of human lives and properties. It identified regional, political, religious and ethnic divisions and conflicts in Nigeria as mostly effects of abuse of religion, with particular reference to Islam and Christianity. The work is of the view that religion can be useful in society, depending on how it is handled by the adherents. The conclusion is that for religion to be useful in Nigeria or any other society, the adherents must live by the ethical teaching of their religions.

Keywords: African Traditional Religion Christianity, Islam, abuse of religion.

Introduction

History of religion is as old as the history of humanity. Religion is a way by which people try to reach their God or gods. All religions are supposedly good when they develop human beings and society in areas of education, health, economics, politics and peaceful co-existence. Religions sometimes play vital roles in promoting and sustaining peaceful and harmonious relationships among peoples and communities. It

sometimes engenders the spirit of hard work and honesty for the development of human society. In the words of Max Weber as quoted by Giddens:

> …each major religion of the world has developed its distinctive orientation towards all aspects of social life… these differences have had profound consequences for the development of human society. All religious groups are continuously shaping and molding the personalities of their adherents who then as private individuals affect the economic, political, educational and other institutional systems of society.[1]

Religion is expected to provide the moral, psychological, social and spiritual infrastructure on which human and societal development could be based. But all of that is impossible without spirit of selflessness and cooperation. Human, societal and material development cannot materialize in the absence of discipline and God-consciousness. Religion is expected to help cultivate positive virtues among its adherents.

Although religious leaders, adherents and politicians alike, regularly invoked religious dictums encouraging communities to actively develop inter-religious relationships for peace and action for social justice, religion, with particular reference to Christianity and Islam, is now used as engine for spreading violence, deceit and encouraging the destruction of lives and properties. It is widely blamed for much of exploitation in many parts of the world. People are destroying one another by suppression of truth, justice, equity and commercialization of religion. Religion is indeed being abused to perpetuate a cycle of division in Nigeria, and it is twisted to create a world where intolerance is placed above unity. Nigeria has been experiencing crises with religion: Islam and jihadist wars; Christianity and Islam picking quarrel with adherents of African Traditional Religion (ATR), inter-denominational quarrels, and the likes. It is based on the above that this paper examines the use and abuse of religion and its implications for Nigerian society.

Use of Religion in Nigeria

The first and the foremost use of religion in Nigeria is its use for Western education. Right from the colonial era, religious bodies, starting with Christians later joined by Muslims, have risen to the tasks of establishing schools for the purpose of educating the masses, through which they spread their religions by indoctrinating the pupils and students. Although the intention of establishing such schools was evangelization

and Islamization, respectively, the political consciousness of the people became raised to fight for independence from colonialism.

ATR, on its part, developed seven cardinal goals for its education. These are to develop the child's physical skills, character, respect for elders and those in positions of authority; to develop intellectual skills; acquire specific rational training, and develop healthy attitude towards honest labour; sense of belonging to participate actively in family and community affairs; and lastly to promote cultural heritage of the community at large.[2]

Islam came to Nigeria with Arabic education. Many written works were undertaken as documents to preserve history. Many manuscripts are now found in libraries, archives and in private collections of Islamic scholars. In northern Nigeria, there were widely spread Koranic schools, which derived from the emergence of Uthman Dan Fodio in the history of Northern Nigeria through his jihadist wars. When the protectorate of northern Nigeria was proclaimed by Britain in 1900, the Hausa word for learning, *karatu* (reading) still had a specifically religious connotation. Koranic schools, where the pupils learned to recite by heart and to copy passages of the Koran provided the first stage of learning.[3]Islam attaches great importance to education and the Koranic schools are usually found in or outside mosques themselves.[4]

Christianity on the other hand introduced formal education to Nigeria through the early Christian missionaries who established the first schools, properly so called, with the main aim of using the schools for converting adherents of ATR and Muslims.[5]The first school in Nigeria is said to have been established by Mr. and Mrs. De Graft of the Methodist Mission in Badagry, Lagos state, and was named "Nursery of the Infant Church".[6] The first grammar school in Nigeria is said to have been established by the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in 1859 in Lagos, and St. Gregory College established by the Catholic Church in 1881. History has it that Hope Waddel Institute was opened at Calabar in 1895 by the Church of Scotland Mission (CSM). As late as 1942, according to historical records, Christian missions controlled 99% of Nigeria's schools, and over 97% of Nigerian students were attending mission schools.[7]

Politico-economically, education engendered the human resources to drive administrative machinery of government and industries at various levels. In recent times, the investment of religious organizations in higher education through establishment of universities has contributed immensely to extending university education to the ever increasing youth yearning for it. The history of Western education in Nigeria cannot

complete without mentioning the role of Christian missionaries in taking care of the physically handicapped. As far back as 1914, Rev. Brown of the Baptist Mission and Rev. Olubi of CMS Church founded the Iberekodo Leprosy Settlement in Abeokuta. In 1956, the first institution for the deaf - the Wesley school, was established in Surulere, Lagos by a group of humanitarians, though with little success. The intervention of the Anglican Mission, Ibadan Diocese helped in sustaining the school at Ijokodo Ibadan. The Pacelli school for the Blind was conceived by the then Catholic Archbishop of Lagos, Leo Taylor in the late 1950s with the assistance of the Irish Sisters of Charity and other experts in the education of the blind. Apart from the aforementioned, several orphanages have been opened by different religious bodies to take care of orphans and motherless children in the society. Thus, the various means of education adopted by various religions in Nigeria do not concentrate only on their religions alone but cover wide ranges of knowledge, moral, philosophical, artistic, and scientific.

In the health sector, religious organisations have equally played significant roles. Christian missionaries in particular established hospitals as means of expressing love in action and spreading the gospel to and through the sick. Muslim clerics (*Alufaa*) in many Yoruba towns promoted religious virtue of efficacious prayer and spiritual assistance rendered to the sick.

The first ever Mission hospital in Nigeria was a 60 beds hospital built by the Roman Catholic Mission (RCM) in Kingdom of Kororofa in 1905. The first Christian Missionary hospital in Igboland is the CMS hospital at Iyi-Enu near Onitsha was built in 1905.[8] Through these hospitals, many prevalent diseases like malaria, tuberculosis, measles, polio, small pox and leprosy were treated and controlled. Similarly, the attribution of small pox to a divinity ceased, as the disease was cured with pure medicine.

Religion is also considered to be a vehicle of economic progress, if only because, as Nwosu aptly puts it, religion is a big employer of labour, with particular reference to Christianity and Islam.[9] In Africa, generally, one readily thinks of traditional and Christian priests (Evangelists, Pastors, Prophets, Rev. Fathers, Sisters and Brothers, etc). There are also Muslim Mallams/Imams, as well as medical and educational institutions of Christian and Muslim missions, etc employing people in fairly large numbers.

The assertion of Ngugi Wa Thiongo (1978) that "in some places in Africa, political power was established at the request of and instigation of

the missionaries of the imperialist country" is particularly true of Nigeria during the colonial period when Christianity influenced several political issues. As soon as the country was formally handed over to the British government by the Para-missionary-commercial body called the Royal Niger Company in 1900, the flavor of religious influence started to be smelled on political decisions. Various missionary bodies were given free hand constitutionally to establish, manage and fund their own missionary schools and colleges. A sort of healthy rivalry was later observed in establishment of schools and colleges by Muslim bodies which felt that the Christian schools were established for the purpose of converting Muslim children to Christianity. The Nigerian Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) and some similar local initiatives must have resolved some socio-political, ethnic and religious conflicts.

Abuse of Religion in Nigeria

Whatever has its use can be misused or abused. Religion in Nigeria has been used negatively, severally. It is engulfed by quest for materialism. The quest for materialism has led to commercialization of religion. Commercialization of religion may not be peculiar to Nigeria, but now it is alarming. Rather than preaching the mind of God to people, some Christian and Islamic clerics are marketing their services and selling some religious objects that they claim to have miraculous effects. They reduce their religious teachings to only one thing: a means of making money. Some religious leaders have commercialized religion using the congregation as source of money and other financial benefits. Religiosity has been downplayed to materialism in Nigeria today to the extent that the General Overseer of a particular Church publicly declared that "true worship of the Lord is not complete if it has not touched our pockets." One wonders what the preacher was actually trying to preach to his followers; that a committed worship of God without offer of money is null and void; or that the main reason for worshipping God is to become rich; or what?

Today, with particular reference to Christianity and Islam, many religious leaders in Nigeria consciously or unconsciously measure their successes in terms of wealth, prestige and power. No wonder, in the churches and mosques, issues that concern the rich resound high, while those of the poor are many a time un-acknowledge or at the best handled lackadaisically. Every minister in the independent churches and Pentecostal charismatics (the self-proclaimed evangelists, self-ordained Bishops, Archbishops and General overseers), like many mallams, is a

seer, and a miracle worker, or pretend to be one. The so-called miracles, blessings, and sundry religious services, real or fake, are commercialized for materialism. A particular pastor is known to look straight in the face of some members and tell them their problems ranging from matters of contract, search for fruit of the womb or search for a husband, and he would ask for ₦200,000; ₦50,000, or a brand new car.[10] The proliferation of churches and mosques; the littering of roundabouts and every conspicuous place with posters, and signposts, as well as various religious advertisements on electronic and print media indicate the extent of commercialization of religion in Nigeria.

Apart from commercialization, there is also high rate of exploitation of the masses among Christian churches and Muslim faithful. Using exploitative words, ministers and clerics alike advertise for harvest of miracles, which turn out to be harvest of money for the advertisers. They employ both "evil and satanic powers to draw large crowds to their churches."[11] They persuade their followers to sow "quality seeds" (special financial contribution), and expect miracles that may never come. Followers are told that the more they sow the more blessings will come their way. The miracle merchants smile to the bank, while their clients go home in the euphoria of hope for imminent miraculous socio-economic break-through in life that will never arrive.

Street begging is common among some Muslim faithful using Islam as the basis for the enterprise. Such religious sayings as *fisabililah (*spend for the cause of Allah), *Du Allah Du Annabi* (for Allah's sake and for the Prophet's sake) and recitation of part of the Quran by street beggars clearly indicates that these beggars are hiding behind Islamic teaching of charity to commercialise Islam, losing sight of Shariah's injunction on who may beg for alms and when. It has been confirmed that some of the street beggars have bulky bank accounts.

In another perspective, Christianity and Islam drag people into division and conflict in Nigeria. The adherents, leaders and organizations do abuse their religions. They use religion to cause division and conflict in the society out of ignorance, fanaticism, or for selfish interests, instead of uniting people for peaceful co-existence. Although Nigeria is a religiously pluralistic society, the differing religions preach love and peace, and do not enjoin division and conflict.

The first and foremost cardinal role of religious leaders and organizations are expected to be preaching peace and molding character of people positively. But, they turn away from performing this cardinal responsibility by misinterpreting and twisting of the Holy Quran and

Bible. Some Muslim clerics are radicalizing and brainwashing their members to become extremists, fanatics and suicide bombers. They went to the extent of killing people and claimed they are doing it for God. The persistence division between two Abrahamic religions in Nigeria; Islam and Christianity is based on intolerance, doctrinal differences and scriptural misinterpretation by some of the leaders. Internal division and conflict exist within the same religious bodies. This can be seen between Shiites and Sunni and other sects within Islam in Nigeria over scriptural interpretations. Divisions also exist among Christians, such as between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, and other denominations within Christianity, based on doctrinal differences and competition for membership.

The divisions explained above further ignite ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria. The ethno-religious conflicts naturally amount to abuse of religion. There have been many cases of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria, such as between Aguleri and Amuleri communities in Anambra state[12], and between Chamba and Kuteb communities in Takum local government of Taraba state. Conflicts exist between Christian Berom and Hausa/Fulani Muslim communities in Jos, Plateau state; Hausa/Zango-Kataf in Kaduna state, Azara/Tiv in Nasarawa state, etc.[13]

There have been many cases of conflict between Christians and Muslims which claimed tolls of life. Starting from 1980 when the Maitatsine group unleashed terror on both their fellow Muslims and non-Muslims. The nation has been experiencing series of religious disturbance. Some other cases occurred in Yola, Kaduna, Katsina, Bauchi, Zangon Kataf, Kafanchan and some other towns in northern parts of the country. Jos has been turned into hot bed of incessant religious conflict.[14]

What has become known as the Boko Haram insurgency in northeast Nigeria has claimed many lives with thousands of residents already displaced. The group which was founded in 2002 in Maiduguri did not become militant until 2009 when its leader was captured and killed by the Nigerian army, extra-judicially. Since then, the group has engaged in counter gun battles, arson, bombing and stabbing, in what a writer terms "promoting their ideology".[15] The opponents of Boko Haram do not want to admit that the Islamic sect-community is entitled to its existence under the Constitution that guarantees religious liberty and freedom of association.

In 2013 conflict ensued between Christian and Moslem communities in Wukari, Taraba state (*Sunday Trust*, 20 May 2013). There are increasing conflicts between Muslim Fulani herdsmen and the

minority Christian indigenous farmers in most of the states in Nigeria, especially in the Middle belt states of Benue, Taraba, Kaduna, Nasarawa, Plateau, and Adamawa. These conflicts are said to have claimed 3,642 lives between January 2016 and October 2018.[16]Ethnic and religious conflicts in Nigeria continue to manifest, claiming and displacing thousands of lives, and property worth millions of naira are being destroyed because of negative use of religion by some leaders and adherents.

The questions arising bother on whether Islam and Christianity in their official doctrines and teachings encourage and support violence and bloodletting being perpetrated by some of the adherents? Are the doctrinal teachings of the two religions based on love or hatred and intolerance? Did Jesus Christ and Prophet Mohammed instruct their followers to kill other religionists or the so-called infidels? Sadly, owing to nuances or differences in the teachings of the Muslim sects of Shia and Sunni, the Muslims in some countries and Nigeria are killing non-Muslims in the name of God. And some Christian pastors in Nigeria would seem to have misinterpreted and twisted the teachings of Jesus Christ to achieve selfish interests. Some Christians and Muslims are united in hostility; opposing and attacking adherents of ATR in southern parts of Nigeria, and wherever the adherents still exist in northern parts of the country.

Implications of Abusing Religion in Nigerian Society

Abuse of religions in Nigerian society, with particular reference to Christianity and Islam, is fraught with a lot of complexity. This is because there are interplays of religion, region, politics, and ethnicity in the abuse. To start with, there is the north-south divide of the country, which is commonly seen as demarcation of Muslim-north, especially the far north while the north-central is a mixture of Christians, Muslims, and adherents of ATR; and Christian-south, especially the southeast and some sections of the south-south, while the southwest and the rest are mixed populations of Christians, Muslims, and ATR adherents.

On the ground of religion and ethnicity, the Hausa-Fulani are categorized as the Muslim-north, at the expense of northern minority ethnic groups, and the Christian-south is composed mainly of the Igbo in the southeast and allied ethnic minorities, such as the Ijaw and the Urhobo in the south-south, while the third ethnic majority, the Yoruba and allied ethnic minorities, such as the Edo, Itsekiri, and other south-south ethnic groups are of mixed populations, religion-wise. Both Islam and

Christianity compete for converts, influence and politico-economic domination, and they seek to outdo each other in the various spheres of human endeavour.[17]

From the much debated 1978 Sharia inclusion in the Constitution controversy, to the Organisation of Islamic Conference/Countries (OIC) membership crisis, and subsequent ones, including government attacks on Boko Haram and counter-attacks, to the post-election violence of April 2011 that rekindled the Boko Haram crisis, coupled with the Fulani herdsmen onslaught on farmers that ensued as from 2015 till date (2020), Nigerians have been experiencing terrible socio-political and economic upheavals resulting in increased bitter politics, increased religio-political intolerance, unprecedented mass abject poverty and insecurities.

The situation is engendering forced migrations and internal displacements, economic losses, increased social injustice, increased tension in politics and greater danger to the peaceful and corporate existence of Nigeria. All of the foregoing are, of course not due to the use but abuse of religion to achieve personal and sectarian ends.

Recommendations

From the findings of this paper, the following recommendations are made; directed at individual religionists, religious leaders and political leaders who are perceived as the principal facilitators of abuse of religion in Nigeria:

i. Religious leaders should mind and weigh their utterances and actions, stop radicalizing and brainwashing their members to become extremists, fanatics and suicide bombers.

ii. African traditionalists, Christians and Muslims in Nigeria should put regional, religious, ethnic and political differences aside, to unite and identify what they need, that is, peaceful co-existence and industrial development, to join forces to get it, for the good of the nation.

iii. It is desirable that every religious adherent should know the ethics of his or her religion, and be watchful of the teachings of their religious and political leaders, because, it was observed that ambitious self-seeking leaders often capitalize on the ignorance and gullibility of their followers to manipulate them financially or to lead them to foment trouble with people of other religions, for personal, religious or political ends.

Conclusion

The focuses of this study is on the use and abuse of religion and its implications for Nigerian society. It was found that in Nigeria nowadays, no issue is as important as how to find lasting solution to increasing abuse of religion. The abuse of religion in Nigeria expresses itself in commercialization of religious objects and activities, exploitation, disunity and conflicts, which have in turn increased bitter politics, religious and political intolerance, increased economic losses, increased social injustice, and greater danger to the peaceful corporate existence of the country.

It is an indisputable fact that religion has been put to bad use in Nigeria. Yet, it is arguable that no religion is bad, but the practitioners of diverse religions would seem to have distorted and twisted the teachings of their religions to achieve selfish interests. The current security challenges and economic retrogression in Nigeria are partly caused by the failure of religious and political leaders to lead by good examples and effect moral regeneration in Nigerian society. For religion to be useful in Nigerian society, religious adherents must live by the ethical teachings of their religions.

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