

French Revolution: A Theory for Revolution in Christianity and Islam in Nigeria

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Abstract

The paper deals with the origins of French revolution and its implication to the contemporary Nigerian religious spirituality. The issues attended to include corruption, religious intolerance and bigotry, political bickering or bigotry, ecclesiastical maladministration characterized by materialism leading to neo-secularization of Nigeria society. The method of approach is historical and analytical in nature.

Introduction

As the 21st Christian century begins almost every Christian is 'enlightened' in this sense: it is thought wrong for any state to force anyone to subscribe to a religious belief. It is taken for granted that a state has no business to interfere in an individual's freedom to believe or not to believe, to worship or not worship, and the 'freedom of religion' of course which the churches have learned to allow to their critics. It is commonly agreed that enforced belief is likely to be insincere and therefore worthless religiously, while the church which encourages the use of the law and the police for such a purpose is discredited. It is assumed that all religious beliefs, however precious or outrageous they may seem, ought to be left to stand or fall on their own merits (Edwards, 1998). It is hope by believers that if so left, the true beliefs will stand persuasively-although it is also often agreed that religious truth does not benefit by being defined in elaborate theological systems.

The statement of the problem is that there were much religious intolerance, corruption and discontentment in French religious beliefs and practices just as in Nigeria. These vices affected the lives of the French people negatively that in turn conditioned or engendered their crass spiritual barrenness and languid, political bickering, economic discontentment especially among the clergy, and invariably stultifying ecclesiastical life. The purpose of this research work is to investigate the factors responsible for French revolution that can equally give rise to religious revolution in Nigeria. The significance of this paper is that it will arouse both Christians and Muslims more especially renowned religious scholars and conscientious political office holders to look inward for proper religious reformation that will create religious tolerance, harmony and peaceful co-existence among Nigerian religionists. The method of approach is both historical and analytical.

Conceptual framework

Theory is a deductive concept that accommodates common properties belonging to more than one event or issue (Nnatu, 2007). It is concerned with the ideas and principles on which a particular subject is based, rather than with practice and experiment.

Gallicanism was used to mean religious nationalism in France, which was known to Romans as 'Gaul' (Latin: Gallia) (Thomson, 1995). The opposing view was ultramontanism, from a Latin phrase meaning 'beyond the mountains'. This refers to the Alps, which separate France from Italy, the land of the Pope. Ultramontanism is the belief that the Pope has supreme authority over the church throughout the world; that is his authority stretches 'beyond the mountains'. Gallicanism in other words is a protest against ultramontane despotism (Hunt, 2008).

Gallican articles depict the rights and privileges claimed by an assembly of the French clergy in 1682. The four articles stress:

- i. The denial that the Pope had dominion over things temporal and affirmed that kings are not subject to the church in civil matters;
- ii. They re-affirmed the authority of a General Council over the Pope;
- iii. They insisted that the ancient liberties of the French church were inviolable; and
- iv. They asserted that the judgement of the Pope was not irrefragable or the judgement of the Pope was final only if it was affirmed by a Council (Livingstone, 1980, Thomson, 1995).

Revolution is the act of revolting such as social, religious, industrial, political revolution among others. Some of the revolutions include revolution of French 1789, 1830 and 1848. There are two types of revolution within this context namely violent and non-violent revolution. Christianity denotes truth and the sign of God while Islam is derived from Arabic root "Salema" denoting peace, purity, submission and obedience (Nmah, 2013).

French revolution: its causes and effects

In 17th and 18th centuries France, churchgoing was beginning to be a habit which could be dropped without inviting punishment by public opinion or by the government. In that limited sense Europe was on the eve of 'secularization'. The damage inflicted on religion by the combination of religious intolerance as in Nigeria with state control may be seen in the history of the ancien regime in France, in the eighteenth century Europe's largest nation. The combined forces of church and state seemed irresistible in a largely church going society where no religious alternative to the officially defined Catholicism was permitted and in an

apparent stable society were no political alternative to monarchism seemed conceivable (Edwards, 1998).

Thunderous rhetoric and the roar of the mob in Paris then translated the Enlightenment into the Revolution and lightning struck. In July the Bastille prison was opened; in August all feudal laws were repealed and the system of tithes which had financed the parish priests was abolished; in November all the lands of the church, amounting to perhaps a tenth of the soil and the buildings of France, were confiscated. Three months later laws were passed against the religious orders and in July 1790 a 'civil constitution' for the church was decreed without consultation with the pope or bishops. Parish priests were to be salaried instead of receiving tithes and churches would be maintained, the poor assisted and schools founded. But the clergy were not to hold public office, bishops were to be elected by the departments into which France was divided, parish priests were to be elected locally (the bishops being in effect their chairman), there were to be fewer dioceses and no cathedral canons, the papacy was to be honoured by powerless and Catholics were to have no political or legal privileges above others. When an oath of allegiance to the state under these arrangements was demanded the pope refused permission but about half of the clergy disobeyed him and hoped to rebuild. Then Pius VI went further to denounce the "liberty, equality, fraternity" of the Revolution as 'words empty of meaning' and made clear his sympathy with Austria, whose emperor postponed all thoughts of church return and declared war on republican France (Edwards, 1998).

The French revolution made a tremendous impact on the church. The position of the French church before the revolution was at first sight both solid and majestic. The clergy were the privileged class. They were highly placed in the society. The church has no rival since the revocation of an edict of Nantels; Catholics had the right of citizenship. Before the revocation of the edict, the Catholic was a state church. The Pope was automatically the head. The clergy had their courts and marriage was under ecclesiastical control. Bishops had the right to settle disputes between Christians in their own courts, and these ecclesiastical courts and their decisions were enforced by the law of the empire. Before the revolution the citizens were slaves to the church. Their property which was exempted from taxation. Behind the imposing exterior (external), there were great abuses and weaknesses. There was also an absence of spiritual vitality. The bishops were more occupied with politics than with spiritual care of their dioceses.

It was still in age of "Reason". The clergy themselves were naturally ambitious to secure their rights and not want to be slaves to the bishops any more than to the

Pope. Certainly, the French revolution was a great dividing line in the political history of Europe. The sign of the downfall of the ancien regime that oppressed human reason and freedom. It was a sort of atomic bomb of which the fall-out is still at work (the result is still at working). It was the beginning as well as the end. The beginning of a still continuing series of attempts to build new structures to take the place of the system that has collapsed. The church had been an integral if not always a vital element in the old system. Its establishments have been taken for granted.

The vast wealth of church was very unevenly distributed (e.g. bishops have many cars while ordinary priest have none). The bishops and other privileged priests lived in affluence and luxury, the inferior clergymen especially those in villages were poor and dependent on the precarious collection of tithes. This discontent among the clergy led to division and jealousy, and demanded for a reform in a radical way. The laity was divided, but many remained attached to the church. The church was languid, lukewarm and hopelessly corrupt that has to force the ordeal of the revolution. Rights of man were more canvassed than the rights of God. When in 1789 on account of financial crisis, King Louis XVI convened state-Generals which have not met since 1614. It was to help him solve the financial crisis which has beset the nation. Petitions for the correction of abuses ordinarily both in the church and state flowed in from all over the country. Nobody suggested the structure or the demolition of the monarch or the church between pillars of the ancien regime (both worked hand in hand). What many wanted was reform, a gradual process of change and correction and not a revolution which is bloody and destructive. The members of the constituent assembly were for the most part sincere Catholics. Even the disciples of Voltaire and Jean-Jacques Rousseau still consider that religion is good for the people. All were interested in the reform instead of the bloody and destructive revolution. It is insignificant that it occurred to no one to turn to the Pope for guidance and direction. So firm was the hold of Gallican tradition. It was assumed that the king who was now the chief executive of the will of the assembly was entirely qualified to authorize a new ecclesiastical settlement. So a committee of the assembly with a bishop as the president was appointed to work out a scheme of reform. When the state-Generals met, the clergy joined hands with the professionals, financial experts and commercial and business magnets in breaking the power of the nobility and indeed the absolute monarchy. The clergy renounced their privileges and in particular the tithes of which they depended for their sustenance.

The constituent assembly in 1790 produced 'A Civil Constitution' for the clergy. The July 1790 'Civil Constitution' for the church was decreed without consultation with the pope or the bishops. Parish priests were to be salaried instead of receiving tithes and churches would be maintained, the poor assisted and schools funded. The effect of the civil constitution was adverse on the church as it split the French Catholic church into two and for ten years it remained split. The constitutionals dominated the church (that is those who supported the constitution) and the non-jurores were many among the bishops. For fear of persecution they emigrated to other lands. A few remained behind. This was a beginning of a big crisis in the church and in the whole country.

Initially the non-jurores were persecuted. Many were driven into exile while others were massacred. This followed a reign of terror and a campaign of secularization and anti-clericalism. During this time, there were waves of absolute assaults on the clergy. But when the worst was over, both the jurores and non-jurores were able occasionally and gradually to resume their ministry. It seemed that Catholicism though destabilized was still alive in the minds of the French people. Nevertheless when the church started to raise its head again, it was not only a subject to the threat of further attacks, but also found itself more divided. Those who opposed the church exalted human reason as having the key of all human problems. If a person can reason, there is no need of prayer. This stalemate continued till 1814.

In the reign of terror which began in September, 1792 king and queen, bishops and priests, were among the thousands killed as traitors. A year later de-Christianization began, first with altars of the fatherland and the cult of Reason and Liberty, then at Robespierre's initiative with the non-Christian worship of the Supreme Being, then with the new religion of Theophilanthropy. A new calendar was dated not from the birth of Christ but from 1792 and Sunday was no longer to be special. Clergy, instead of being salaried, had to forsake the priesthood or to be persecuted if they remained at their posts. Many fled into exile or joined the counter revolutionary peasants' revolt whose badge was the Sacred Heart of Jesus (Edwards, 1998).

The rise of Napoleon

Since the bishops were not in support of the emperor, and eventually he failed which gave birth to Napoleon revolution. The emergence of Napoleon transformed the scene, a genius and veteran military commander who arrogated to himself the title of emperor. He crowned himself emperor in Paris in 1804

although the Pope was in attendance. He showed also himself as an able statesman and administrator. As a statesman he sought to bring to an end to the schism in the French church. His primary concern was the function of religion in the society. His interest in maintaining unity and concord in the church was primarily to use the church to foster national unity and international diplomacy and relationship. He therefore sought to keep the Pope's reconciliation and friendship. He restored the church's property confiscated by the constitutionals during the period of revolution.

The attempts a church in France independent of the papacy had proved a total failure and Napoleon would not like to repeat the mistake. He therefore entered into negotiation with the Pope for a new religious settlement. It was he that laid the lines in which the new negotiation would be carried out. He insisted that the constitutionals and non-jurores should be wielded together and that both should have their bishops resign or vacate their seats or have their seats declared vacant. A new hierarchy would be nominated by him as the first Consul and that the former constitutional bishops were to have a fair share of the new appointments. This was a very bitter pill for the Pope in view of all the difficulties the non-jurores suffered during the revolution or in the hands of the revolutionaries. However a heavy price was worth paying for the restoration of the church in France and all that might follow from it. A concordat was concluded in July 1801 and it governed the relations of France with the Holy See for over a century. The confiscation of church's property during the revolution was not acceptable to the Pope and the worse of it the bishops and other clergy were to receive stipend from the state. This made them more dependent on the civil government than they have been before the revolution. And in the long run they were been inclined to turn more and more for the support of the Papacy against the state. By this, Napoleon unintentionally gave the French up to Papal authority. The Pope could demand for the resignation of French bishops which would never had been allowed by the Royal government of Louis XVI before the revolution.

Napoleon was more Papal before he saw no other way of healing the schism. But in reality he was set upon retaining the liberty and privileges which the Gallican had always claimed. He demonstrated this at once for as soon as the concordat had been agreed and published, he promulgated on his own authority, a set of organic articles. This led to restriction on the exercise of Papal authority in France and it became obnoxious in an extreme fashion to the papacy. Napoleon appeared to a point to majority of French Roman Catholics to be a Saviour and restorer of the church. He had hoped to find in Pope Pius VII a very faithful and

helpful friend who would help him govern France. He taught that by giving the support of Pope, he would rule well without difficulties. But Napoleon was disappointed to find a Pope uncompromisingly fanatical. The resistance of the Pope Pius VII was indeed one of the factors that led to the down fall of Napoleon. Nevertheless, as a result of the concordat, the church in France has given a new lease of life. By 1814, it was impossible to say whether the church in France has survived or not. Its external factors have been satisfactorily restored because of the concordat. But its spiritual life was still in shamble.

The concordat also turned out to be the death sentence for the Gallicanism which had previously united most French Catholics in excluding the papacy from any decisive say in their affairs (Edwards, 1998). The Pope did not escape the storm. In 1796-1797 General Napoleon Bonaparte expelled the Austrians from Italy and with the help of local risings took over most of the Papal States. Pius secured a temporary territory. In 1798, however, French troops entered Rome, where a French-style republic was proclaimed and, on the whole, accepted by the Romans. The pope was taken by force from the city and was followed by the cardinals.

In Paris the 'Directory' which was still nominally in control of Bonaparte called Pius 'the last pope' and it seemed possible that he was indeed the last of the line when he died in French captivity, in August 1799. Next March the cardinals met in Venice, now part of Austria, to elect a successor. In their bewilderment they could not agree whether or not the next pope should be expected to recognize these sudden republics (Edwards, 1998). In the end they elected Pius VII, a Benedictine monk ready to accept the new reality which for him was to include five years as a prisoner. The Austrians refused to produce the money needed, so there was no coronation. Yet there were forces at work which would give the Christian Church a future longer than the Napoleonic Empire's.

Religious revolution in Nigeria: An acid test

The factors that were responsible for the French revolution are not different from that of Nigerian Christianity and Islam. As the 21st century begins almost every Christian is 'enlightened' and almost every Christian is characterized by Christianity without content or sacrifice. Church going is beginning to be a routine exercise which could be dropped without inviting punishment by public opinion or by the government. With the emergence of false prophets, apostasy, inter and intra religious rivalry, unemployment and other vices, Nigeria is on the eve of secularization.

The damage inflicted on religion by the combination of religious intolerance and corruption in Nigeria and especially among the ecclesiastical order may be likened to the history of the ancien régime in France. This is enough to cause revolution in Nigeria. The religious extremism such as religious intolerance in the north namely by the Mahdist and Maitatsine uprisings, and recently the Boko Haram have divided Nigeria along religious lines. The Tiv riot of 1965 provided an insight into the deepening ethno-religious crisis that ravaged the north in the early '60s (Nmah, 2010 and 2012). This preceded the advent of ethnic militias in Nigeria namely O'dua People's Congress (OPC), Ijaw Youth Congress, the Movement for the survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), the Movement for the Actualization of Biafran Republic (MASSOB), and so on (Nmah 2012). Ethnic and religious nationalism rather than patriotism has also led to the call for what some Nigerians called, "Sovereign national conference" or "National Conference" (Nmah, 2012, p.272).

When the colonialists created the Northern, Eastern and Western regions of Nigeria in 1946, each with its separated authority, ethnicity was further entrenched into the system especially, given the fact that the three regions were made up of the three major language groups (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba). This gave room for the struggle over power between the three regions. Political parties were formed along this line. The National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) was for the Eastern region and was headed by Nnamdi Azikiwe. Action Group (AG) is a splinter group of NCNC and was headed by Chief Obafemi Awolowo. And then Northern Peoples Congress (NPC) which belonged to the North and its leader was Sir Ahmadu Bello. Thus ethnic loyalty was reinforced and the ethnicization of politics introduced. On religious aspect, the Muslim for example, called non-Muslim "Kafir" (unbeliever). Since for the Muslim a "Kafir" is an unbeliever, the Christians use also the same word for the Muslims. The result is that the "Kafirization" of each other has only served to intensify and sustain the prejudices.

There are great abuses and weaknesses in the church. There is also an absence of spiritual vitality. The bishops and the privileged priests are occupied with politics than with spiritual care of their parishioners and dioceses. This is Nigerian paradigm of age of "Reason". The clergy themselves are naturally ambitious to be elevated or to secure their rights and not want to be slaves to the bishops anymore. This is a great dividing line in Nigerian Christian history. All this is the beginning as well as the end. The beginning of a still continuing series of attempts to build new structures to replace the system that has virtually collapsed. The bishops have many cars while the ordinary priests have none. The ecclesiastical

ranks and other privileged priests lived in affluence and luxury, the inferior clergy-men especially in villages were poor and dependent on the precarious collection of tithes, seed of faith, testimony offering, new month and birthday offerings among others in order to survive the teething economic situation.

This discontent among the clergy and laity leads to spiritual barrenness, envy, hatred, rivalry, jealousy and division and demanded for a reform in a radical way. This might have informed the action of Pope Francis 1 on 23 October, 2013 in suspending a German-luxury bishop who might have missed his spiritual vision by building his palace that worth 31 million euros. The increase in bloodshed, violence, corruption, religious intolerance, inter- and intra-rivalry among religious faiths and brutality in our time has become so alarming that Christians must urgently re-think their position on this issue. Injustices committed by ecclesiastical class, clergy-men, evil politicians and governments against their own citizens; the preservation of extreme differences of incomes between the rich and the poor; suppression of legitimate attempts of reforms by brutal force- as it happened in Ogoni where the military government of Nigeria slaughtered the 9 Ogoni activists, the massacre of Igbo race in the north in 1967, and recently of 2010-2012 killings; the killings in Odi and Zakibiam; vis-à-vis that of 1968 in Prague where Russian tank silenced the protest of the people of Czechoslovakia (Nmah, 2012, Haselbarth, 1977). All this has made some wonder whether there may not be a legitimate place for “power from below”. Our arguments in favour of pacifism must be tested here: if the concept of the just war has become obsolete today, what about just revolution? Should it be a simple refusal to comply with orders, a public protest, strike, passive resistance, non-violent action or even an armed revolution?

Religious revolution in the Bible can be likened to that of Jehu. Jehu had been designated by God as the instrument upon the nation Israel (1kg.19.15-17). God's command to Elijah was entrusted to his successor Elisha and was implemented during the reign of Ahab's son Jehoram (Douglas, 1980). Jehu who was Jehoram's army commanding officer wasted no time in carrying out his commission. Jezebel, at his command, was thrown down into the Courtyard of the palace, the circumstances of her death exactly corresponding to Elijah's prophecy (2kg.19:36-37). The massacre of all seventy of Ahab's male descendants living in Samaria was actually carried out by the leading citizens of the kingdom as evidence of their loyalty to Jehu and in an endeavour to escape a similar fate (2kgs.10:1-10). The slaughter of the forty two relatives of Ahaziah whom Jehu met on their visit to Samaria and his wholesale destruction of the worshippers in the temple of Baal went beyond the terms of his mandate and are

difficult to justify (2kings 10:12-28; cf. Ho. 1:4). Jehu's religious revolution was violent. For when blood-bath was over and the foreign cult of Baal had been extirpated, Jehu's true character showed itself in his tolerance of corrupt worship of Yahweh linked with the bull images of Dan and Bethel (2 kings 10:29-31).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research work examines the relevance of religious revolution in the midst of corrupt society. The work attended to some causes of French revolution which are similar to Nigerian experience. Any action must be weighed, however, against the possible consequences and the chances of success. For the achievement of social justice, non-violent action is always preferable. Properly directed, it can be a full substitute for an armed uprising.

The efficiency of modern weapons misleads men to use them indiscriminately. Emotions are released and terror becomes an end in itself. Fear breeds fear; force leads to counter-force. Piles of arms strongly suggest that they be actually used. Instead of overcoming violence there is an escalation of it. Revolutionaries get used to it and tend to see in violence a normal way of solving religious, cultural' economic, social and political problems. All this is not in line with the ministry of reconciliation. I am suggesting that the non-violent approach with steady action is the way of Christians to overcome evil. This may not be too popular stand for the Christians may have to suffer.

But such suffering can also become a convincing manner of witness to the new order. The way of non-violence, in any case, is the more revolutionary and more progressive method of overcoming oppression. Some of the disadvantages of the relationship between the church and state were that state politics entered the church and the church entered into the politics of the state s in Nigeria today. Discipline became lax and church membership was for many a wholly outward matter. The needs of the church were no longer met primarily by the sacrifices of its own members, but were received from the state. Clergy became influential in the larger and smaller communities and received even higher honours than officials of the state received (Boer, 1976 cf. 1Cor. 1:26-29).

In 1969, Black Theology however strengthened the liberation movement in Southern Africa. The impulses have become from the USA where voices of James H. Cone (Black Theology and Black Power, New York, 1969; and A Black Theology of Liberation, Philadelphia, New York, 1970) and of his friends have put forth the case within the American content. Somehow transferable despite the different situations, Black Theology is a spiritual weapon in the hands of the

oppressed who try to regain their identity (Haselbarth, 1977). A theological justification of violence does not belong to their programme. Other literature in Africa that tried to interpret revolution within the context of black consciousness include B.S. Biko, "Black Viewpoint", Durban, 1972; D. Bosch, "The Case for Black Theory"; Basil Moor, "Essays on Black Theology," Johannesburg, 1972; G. Setiloante, "Black Theology"; D. Tutu, "God-Black or White?" and A. Zulu, "Whiter Black Theology?" among others.

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