

**CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF DIALOGUE AS A STRATEGY  
FOR RELIGIOUS  
CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN NIGERIA**

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**Abstract**

Nigeria has passed through incessant religious conflicts and its attendant consequences of loss of human lives and property. It is unfortunate that despite all the efforts made to resolve religious conflicts in Nigeria through religious dialogue yet peaceful resolution of religious conflicts have remained a mirage. This paper examined the factors that militate against dialogue as an instrument of resolving religious conflicts in Nigeria. The writer of this paper made use of phenomenological approach and the work is both descriptive and analytical. Religious conflict is a natural phenomenon. It is observed that Nigeria is a pluralistic country where there is a diversity of religious beliefs and practices. Religious conflicts abound in Nigeria due to these religions find it difficult to tolerate one another's differences and work toward enhancing areas of agreements. Dialogue cannot thrive in an environment where a religion seeks to dominate others, display superiority complex and exhibit unquenchable desire to convert adherents of other religions.

**Introduction**

Religious conflict emerged when a religious man first conceived the idea of the supernatural being. Therefore, religious conflict is as old as man. The coming together of the three major religions in Nigeria,

Christianity, Islam and African traditional religion ushered in religious conflicts in the religious landscape of the Nigerian Society. It cannot be contended that since the emergence of these religions in Nigeria, there have been incessant religious conflicts that have deprived this country the opportunity of having harmonious co-existence among the adherents of these religions. Religious conflict has become a household name in Nigeria. There is hardly a day that passes without hearing of religious disturbances in some parts of this country. It is not a gain saying that religious conflict has become a common occurrence in which many lives are lost, others are maimed and property worth of billions is destroyed almost on daily basis.

The incessant religious conflicts have hampered national development as well as encouraged suspicion, reprisal attacks, disunity, acrimony and rancour among the adherents of these religions. There is no doubt that religious conflicts have turned some parts of this country into 'war zones' where lives and property are not safe. Despite all the measures employed, particularly religious dialogue to arrest the perennial religious conflict in Nigeria, yet resolution of religious conflicts have remained a mirage. Therefore, the paper highlights some of the factors that militate against religious dialogue which is believed by some people as the last resort for conflict resolution among the three major religions in Nigeria.

### **Clarification of Terms**

#### **The concept of Religio**

Idowu (1973 : 75) opined that religion is man's spontaneous awareness and reaction to a living power who is greater than himself, yet the living power seeks to bring man into communion with himself. At the early stage of religious development, the supernatural being revealed himself to man spontaneously through the natural phenomena in which man responded to this divine self disclosure by depending on the supernatural powers. Anyacho

(2005:1) asserted that religion is “the coming together of a group which is bound by a common feeling of dependence on a particular objects or subjects believed to be more powerful than man”. Religion is a social phenomenon. It is not a private affair; rather religious sentiments must be shared and upheld by a group of people. Apart from religion being a social phenomenon, Omoregbe (1999:3) in his view maintained that religion is an encounter between man and a transcendental being conceived as a personal being, capable of communicating with man. For him, religion takes the form of dialogue between man and the Supernatural being. Ugwu (2002:2) stated that religion is concerned with faith and practices which involve the relationship between human beings and what is regarded as the sacred. Scharf (1970 : 32) quoted Durkheim as saying that “ Religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into a single moral community called a church all those who adhere to them” Durkheim did not realize that religion has brought calamity to the society instead of fostering solidarity among religious groups. Iwe (2003:3) insists that religion is an institution that is characterized by belief in the supernatural being, a body of doctrines, ethical code and a system of worship that must have a definite organizational structure. For religion to be what it should be, it must have a defined structure that is responsible for regulating the entire beliefs and practices of such religion. This is not to say that religion is limited to an organized structure, but it cuts across every aspect of social structures.

### **Conceptualization of Conflict**

Uchendu (2010:11 - 12) averred that conflict occurs when there are fighting, struggle or quarrel. Conflict is a natural disagreement that results from differences in attitudes, beliefs, values, or needs of individuals or groups. There is a conflict when disagreement between parties degenerate to fighting, quarrels and struggle for selfish interests. Elom (2008:119) made this view clearer when he described conflict as armed fighting; a war, struggle that occurs between opposing groups over clash of feelings and interests. Elom

(2008:120) further said that conflict is “a struggle It is an instrument in the hands of a group to undo an opposing group and have dominion over them. Nmah (2009:28) said that conflict is a process that erupts when a group sees that another group has damaged or about to destroy something that is important to them. Abercrombie, Hill and Turner (2000:68) succinctly put it that conflict arises when there is competition over the control of scarce resources or advantages desired by other groups and it does not require physical violence. Conflict can take place in a society in various forms. There is conflict that requires physical violence and there is conflict that does not require physical violence between the groups. Okai (2008 : 46) postulated that conflict can take place whenever people have contact. The organization of people in groups is a potential factor that can lead to social conflict. Okai (2008:48) insists that conflict is prevalent within and between social relations constituted to pursue common goal. For instance, there is conflict in families, ethnic groups, social institutions and organizations, political parties and states. Conflict is a universal reality in almost all the societies of the world. There is no society that has not experienced one conflict or the other. It is a common belief among proponents of conflict that conflict is not destructive as people think; rather conflict is a vehicle for positive change. Nma (2009 : 28) argued that conflict can be dysfunctional when it becomes destructive but if it is properly managed it can become functional

Functional conflict can serve as a catalyst for development, tolerance, love and enduring peace. But dysfunctional conflict leads to violence, blood-letting, mayhem and tremendous destructions. Abercrombie, Hill and Turner (2000:69) share a similar view when they said that “conflict had positive functions for social stability and helped preserve groups and collectivities” Okai (2008:48) averred that if conflict is well managed it can result to consensus that will help to meet individual and society's needs. Conflict helps to strengthen relationship and enhance mutual benefits. Anyacho (2005: 69) said that the society employs formal procedures and institutionalized rules such as legislatures, courts, tribunals,

arbitration, committees for the resolution of conflicts.

### **Resolution of conflict**

Udezo (2009:146) opined that resolution is “a variety of approaches aimed at terminating conflicts through the constructive solving of problems, distinct from management or transformation of conflict”. Conflict is the amicable resolution of differences between parties. It seeks to address areas of conflict between parties in conflict. There is no way conflict can be said to be resolved if the root causes of conflict are not properly addressed. It then means that resolution is a thorough means of exterminating conflict so that it will not re-occur in the near future. Udezo (2009:146-147) asserted that “by conflict resolution, it is expected that the deep rooted sources of conflict are addressed and resolved, and behaviour is no longer violent, nor is attitude hostile any longer, while structure of the conflict has been changed. Resolution is a set of principles geared towards encouraging warring parties to seek peace. This aim of achieving peace can be realized if the basic needs of the parties are met (Elom 2008 : 122). On the other hand, conflict resolution is not the same with conflict management

Okai (2008:51) maintained that conflict management is the acceptance that conflict is inevitable and there is no effort that can resolve conflict. The only alternative is for the parties concerned to regulate and manage conflict so that it can be prevented from escalation. Resolution of conflict is a futile effort given the fact that conflict is inevitable in human relationship and not only that it is an essential part of the society. Conflict is endemic in personal, interpersonal and inter-group relations (Elom 2008:121). The proponents of this view have recommended mediation, dialogue, reconciliation, peacemaking as some of the mechanisms of managing conflict in every society.

### **Dialogue a Means of Conflict Resolution**

Gbenda (2006:129) asserted that dialogue showcases in talking together, a talk between people or groups with the intention of

exchanging ideas for better appreciation and understanding of each other amidst diverse religious view points. Dialogue is not a mere conversation that takes place between persons, but it means an exchange of ideas or views or opinions between groups. Certainly, dialogue is never a one way traffic, it must involve two parties who are desirous of listening to each other with the view of ironing out their differences through inter-personal communication. Elom (2008:124) sees dialogue as an opportunity of bringing warring parties together at conference table so that the peculiar problems of the parties are discussed and decision can be reached in favour of each party. In this case, either of the parties may lose or gain. Dialogue is not judgmental and it does not apportion blames to either of the parties. Omonokhua (2012)

Said thus:

Dialogue is not about judging, weighing, or making decisions, but about understanding and learning. Dialogue dispels stereotype, builds trust, and enables people to be open to perspectives that are very different from their own. Dialogue is one sure way to heal memories and wounded hearts. In dialogue, education, formation, awareness and understanding are key words. (p. 67).

Uche (2011:146) said that dialogue means an inter-personal relationship that occurs between persons. Dialogue can take place between two or more persons or groups who share different views. In dialogue, there is a communication between groups that is aimed at explaining and enlightening each other so that both parties can have mutual understanding. It is essential for parties to make sincere effort to listen so that they can arrive to meaningful understanding of truth and life of each other in openness and mutual trust.

### **Religious Crisis in Nigeria**

Unfortunately, this country has witnessed incessant religious crisis since the advent of Christianity and Islamic religion in Nigeria. These religious disturbances have cost this country a lot of socio economic and psychological trauma. There was an outbreak of religious crisis in Kano in 1980. This religious crisis is popularly

known as maitasine religious crisis because it was caused by Maitasine Islamic sect who condemned modernism given its negative influence on pure Islamic religion (Gukas 2009:17). The maitasine posed a great terror to some parts of Northern Nigeria in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was the maitasine that caused religious crisis in Bulunkutu, Maiduguri in 1982, Jimeta in the former Gongola state in 1984 and Gombe in 1985. There was a religious riot in Ilorin in 1986 as a result of Christian procession across Muslim dominated area on palm Sunday (Ugorie 2009:123-125).

Religious riot ensued in Kano for the laying of foundation of a christian church in October 1982. The Kaduna riot of 6<sup>th</sup> March, 1987 took place because Christian students of college of Education Kafanchan organized their annual fellowship celebration where a convert from Islam compared the Bible with Quran. In June 1988, there was a religious riot at Ahmadu Bello University when Muslims suspected that a Christian will win the students' union president. Religious riots took place in Usman Dan Fodio University and university of Ibadan in 1986 for beauty contest and destruction of statue of a risen Christ by an unknown arsonist respectively. In 1991, religious riot broke out in Kano where Muslims attacked Christians for inviting Reverend Reinhard Bonke. A religious riot took place in 1990 when Christians carried placards and demonstrated in some Northern parts of this country over marginalization. There was a religious riot in Funtua which took place between 9<sup>th</sup> – 23<sup>rd</sup> January, 1993 over the misunderstanding between two almajiris. The religious riots that took place in Jos in 1994 and 2001 also resulted from religious conflict (Mgbemere 2001:4-32)

Zango –Kataf crisis took place in 1992 which was caused by power tussle between Mr. Ayoke (Christian) the chairman of the Local Government and Mato an Hausa- Fulani Moslem over the relocation of market. The religious riot that took place in Kaduna in 2002 was caused by miss world beauty contest. There was another crisis in Kaduna in 2000 given the introduction of Sharia in some

Northern States of the federation (Nwanaju 2008:63). Apart from these religious riots, there is Boko haram insurgence that has caused a lot of religious crisis in the country. According to Gukas (2009:17), Boko haram means Boko (western culture) is haram that is evil. The Boko haram sect insists that western culture is an abomination; hence the incessant attacks on schools and Churches which are regarded as agents of western culture and civilization.

Animalu (2001:42) stresses that the missionaries described African Traditional Religion as superstitious. Nyamiti (1997:58) defined superstition as “belief or practice for which there is no real basis in either science or true religion”. Based on this misconception, the missionaries attacked the indigenous religion by destroying shrines, artefacts, customs, tradition, values, *Ozo* title, polygamy, burial rites and belief in reincarnation. This act of desecrating religious elements by the missionaries attracted the hostility of the traditional religionists who were bent on restoring their cherished values as well as exterminating Christianity in Igboland. Ekechi (1971:16) opined that religious conflict between Christianity and African Traditional religion began among the Igbo people when the missionaries who evangelized Igboland encouraged their converts to reject all the symbols of their former religion. Ekechi (1971:23) said that the Traditionalists frowned against the social changes brought by Christianity which had adversely affected their indigenous religion. To fight against social changes, a movement was initiated in 1864 to restore the purity of Indigenous religion. In order to achieve the purpose of restoring indigenous religion from negative influences, messengers of one *Odesoruelu* (“restorer of primitive style”) were in major towns like *Obosi, Nkwerre, Nsube, Ogbunike, Ogidi* and *Inan* from which they sent messages across Igboland warning people to refrain from abandoning their traditional way of life. The Traditionalists accused Christians that they were responsible for the outbreak of small pox epidemic that occurred in 1864 which caused high mortality rate among the Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria. It was commonly believed among the Igbo people that the non-observance of taboos by Christians had



attracted the anger of the ancestors who punished them with small pox epidemic.

### **Religions and Dialogue**

It is on record that Christianity had come into dialogue with African Traditional religion at Ibadan consultation in which enculturation, acculturation, and indigenization were extensively discussed. This interaction among scholars of religion on how to make the gospel relevant to Africans through African experiences and ideas has strengthened the relationship between Christians and African Traditionalists (Adegbola 1976:67). The word dialogue is not alien in African Traditional religion, especially during conflict where fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, elders of the parties are invited to intervene in the conflict (Anyacho 2005:69). Besides, the option of dialogue has a basis on the similarities among the three major religions in Nigeria. The three religions (Islam, Christianity and African Traditional religion) share things in common such as the existence of a spiritual world, God, Satan, angels, Jinn or spirits, final judgment and the hereafter. It is discovered that African Traditional religious ideas and practices have been mixed with Islamic belief, so that the practitioners can derive the best out of these religions. Also, there is a similarity between Christianity and African Traditional religion in the area of cultic family that incorporates both the living and the dead into one family. This is evidenced in the Christian practice of recognizing saints as members of the church (One family) (Mbiti 1975:188-190). All the major religions in Nigeria are yet to implement these common features for peace to reign in Nigeria. Okwueze (2003:117) Opined that there was a five day conference of world religions held in Jordan in November 1999. This conference of world religions provided a platform for dialogue among the religions of the world. The world conference on “Religion and Peace is non-governmental organization that was formed by Christians, Buddhists, Muslims and others in 1970 with headquarters in New York. It was established to promote peace in the world. Adiele (2001:3-5) opined that Islamic Council of Nigeria and Christian Association of Nigeria

(CAN) were formed in 1973 and 1980 respectively. These religious organizations were formed to provide a forum for dialogue, for instance the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) created the directorate of inter-faith and Ecumenism that is saddled with the responsibility of promoting ecumenical and inter-faith dialogue. The Catholic Church has created department of mission and Dialogue of the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria (CSN) that has provided an opportunity for dialogue between Catholic and Muslim women/youths. Fortunately, the department of Mission and Dialogue in the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria was created to respond to the mandate of the second Vatican council for the promotion of mission, ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue. The Federal Government is not silent on the necessity of dialogue among the religions in Nigeria. This led to the formation of Inter-religious Council (NIREC) by the Federal Government for the promotion of dialogue and peaceful co-existence in the country (Omonokhua, 2012:67). Despite all these efforts made by the religions and government of Nigeria to resolve religious conflicts in Nigeria yet the resolution of religious conflicts in Nigeria has become futile.

### **Obstacles to Religious Dialogue**

1. **Syncretism** – syncretism means mixing one's religious belief with the beliefs of other religions. Every religion holds its belief and practices dearly and no religion will like to be syncretic. Nwanaju (2005:531) argues that dialogue affords religions the opportunity of practising syncretism. For fear of syncretism, no religion wants to enter into dialogue with other religions so that it can avoid any form of influence by other religions.
2. **Compromise** – Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defined compromise as “an agreement made between two people or groups in which each side gives up some of the things they want so that both sides finally reached a compromise”. Each of the major religions in Nigeria holds

absolute opinion about itself as the only true religion and others are mere appendages that do not count. So, it is difficult for each of the religions to give up some of its religious beliefs and adopt some of the beliefs of other religions. To do this may lead to compromise of one's faith which is forbidden by the religions. In this case, dialogue will not thrive in an environment where there is arrogance among the adherents of these religions.

3. **Evangelism** – it is an act of spreading the gospel to other people with the intention of converting people from one religion to another religion. Muck (1993:54) described Christianity and Islam as missionary religions because the founders of these religions told their followers to preach the Gospel and Quran respectively. It is on this ground that these religions are seeking ways of converting people from other religions. Netland (1999:121) aptly said that the Evangelicals are not in support of inter-religious dialogue because of the world council of church's stand that dialogue forbids an attempt to persuade members of other religions to accept one's religion. For that reason, many religions are against dialogue because it is anti Evangelism.
4. **Bigotry** – Onah (1996:60) argues that bigotry occurs when a religious group is not willing to accept modern or contemporary argument. The religions in Nigeria are not open to one another and there is no willingness in them to understand the good aspects of other religions. Religious bigotry has caused religious conservatism and fanaticism which are road blocks to fruitful dialogue.
5. **Fire brigade Approach** – In most cases, religious dialogue is hastily executed with fire brigade approach in which the religious groups do not have enough time at their disposal to really understand the structures of conflict with the aim of resolving the religious conflict once and for all. It has been discovered that inter-religious dialogue usually takes place

after religious riots instead of making it an ongoing exercise among the religions.

6. **Retaliation** – Omonokhua (2012:67) emphasized that dialogue is an impossible task given the checkered history of Nigeria in which Nigerians had experienced religious conflicts, religious crisis and insurgency which had inflicted wounds in the minds of people. There is agitation for retaliation by the aggrieved religious groups against their opponents whom they regard as enemies of their faiths. In that situation, dialogue is misunderstood by the aggrieved parties as a means of depriving them an opportunity to retaliate against their perceived enemies. Until this erroneous mindset is changed among the parties who come for dialogue, it will be so difficult for meaningful dialogue to take place between the parties.

#### **Recommendations**

- 1 The religious leaders of different religions in Nigeria should educate their members on the need for peace and co-existence, before initiating dialogue so that parties involved in the dialogue will be ready to fore-go their grievances in the interest of peaceful co existence.
- 2 The religious Leaders should make dialogue a regular affair
- 3 Conversion should not be made out of compunction rather there should be freedom whether to be converted or not.
- 4 The parties in dialogue should not be rigid rather they should be flexible matters of faith, so that they can accommodate one another.
- 5 The adherents of these religions should understand that there are similarities among the religions and dialogue can never lead to syncretism.
- 6 Religions should borrow good aspects of other religions in order to enrich it's religious heritage and at the same time maintain its identity.

- 7 The parties should respect beliefs and practices of other religions and avoid the temptation of laughing or mocking the weaknesses of other religions.
- 8 Above all, parties in dialogue should nip potential causes of religious conflicts at the bud to avoid its re-occurrence.

### **Conclusion**

The resolution of religious conflicts in Nigeria has been a major concern for the well meaning Nigerians. There are efforts made so far to bring the incessant religious conflicts in Nigeria to an end yet all to no avail. It is worrisome to note that a lot of lives and property have been lost as a result of religious conflicts in Nigeria. Religious dialogue is not a good option for the resolution of religious conflicts in Nigeria considering the peculiar nature of Nigeria but it can be used after appropriate orientation is done among the religions in Nigeria.

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