

## **Socio-Religious and Political Activism in Nigeria: A Comparative Analysis of Christians and Muslim Responses**

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### **Abstract**

Nigeria is multi-cultural and multi-religious country with two major religions, Christianity and Islam, each competing and claiming superiority and dominance over each other in number and in might. This claim of superiority as well as dominance has served as the foundation for religious intolerance and several socio-religious crises and violence that have bedevilled Nigeria since Independence in 1<sup>st</sup> October, 1960. Though sometimes concealed in political garment, it is usually motivated by religious bigotry. The objective of this paper is to first, provide a historical overview of the background that has influenced the socio-religious and political activism in Nigeria since independence and examine the passivism or activism of the two religions in seeking socio-political justice and control in the political activities of Nigeria and the aftermath of this power play in the affairs of governance. Lastly, the study will critique the effect of religious involvement in either promoting or reducing socio-religious crises and violence in contemporary Nigerian society. The paper adopted the historical and analytical research methods and has submitted that religious worldviews and beliefs are the major determinants of socio-religious and socio-political violence in Nigeria and therefore recommends a kind of integrative religious education at all levels which must include religious tolerance for peaceful co-existence in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Christianity, Islam, Social, Religious, Political, Activism, Violence, Nigeria

## **Introduction**

The paradoxical character of religious beliefs is in most cases puzzling and fascinating to scholars in humanities. The record of human history has shown that most noble acts of love; self-sacrificing and pious services to humanity are often associated with religion. Yet it is also evident that religion has generated more violence and killed more people than any other institutional force in human history. In the words of Lefebure:

Many of the violent conflicts in the world today involve religious animosities. Indeed, the history of the encounters among the world's religions is filled with distrust and hatred, violence and vengeance. The deepest tragedy of the history of religions is that the very movements that should bring human beings closer to each other and to their ultimate source and goal have time and time again become forces of division. In one conflict after another around the world, religious convictions and interpretations of revelation have been used and abused as justifications for violence [and war ] (7-8).

An inventory of the religious violence and insecurity in Nigeria for the past three or four decades leaves much to worry. One wonders what the founders of these religions would say to their adherents if they were to return today and see the mayhem done in their names. Why would one use "God" to kill or maim another? Why would religion be linked to violence and terrorism? Could it be ignorance on the part of their adherents or a lack of hermeneutical understanding of the Holy Books? In attempt to answer some of these questions, some scholars have alluded to ignorance, prejudice and stereotyping as major factors behind most of the religious violence we experience today in Nigeria. It is on this note that Okon calls for sensitivity in dealing with religious issues when he said:

In analysing religious practices, we must be sensitive to ideals that inspire profound conviction in believers, yet at the same time take a balance view of them. We must confront ideas that seek eternal, while recognising that religious groups also promote quite

mundane goals such as acquiring money or followers. We need to recognise the diversity of religious beliefs and modes of conduct, but also probe into the nature of religion as a general phenomenon (2).

Religion from the beginning has played an important role in shaping the socio-political thoughts of many nations. In fact, most nations of the world were patterned and influenced by the sacred nature of government. Religion supported and regulated the royalty that existed between the state and the people. The idea of Divine right of Kings which derived its origin from the theocratic concept of governance, vested absolute power and authority on the King or Monarch, who was seen as a direct representative of God. The Monarch was superior and answerable only to God. Ancient history is replete with examples of this idea. For example, in Christianity, the Pope was seen for centuries as the Vicar of Christ on earth and by virtue of his divine right had the ultimate authority over the Church, and indirectly, over the State.

Islam, on the other hand, believed in the concept of divine right of the Caliph (direct descendants and successors of Prophet Muhammad) as the supreme leaders of the Muslim community. Under the Prophet Muhammad, Islamic States were theocratic, with Shari 'a as the religious and moral principles of Islam, as well as the law of the land. The Caliphs were seen as both secular and religious leaders. They were not empowered to promulgate dogmas, because it was believed that the revelation of the faith had been completed by Muhammad (Dallal, Encarta). However, as representatives of Allah and direct successors of Muhammad, the Caliphs were to enforce Shari 'a as the religious and moral codes of the people. Their powers were not limited to secular issues but extended to divine issues since they were representing Allah. It was on this note that Muhammad advocated that the Muslim community should choose a successor or a Caliph by consensus to lead the theocratic process of leadership to exemplify the earthly kingdom under divine rule. It is also on this note that Islamic States now seek to apply in every detail the Islamic laws in any society they find themselves in order to create an Islamic culture, as it is evident throughout the Middle East.

Africans were not left behind in this concept of divine right. In a typical African society, the rulers were also seen as gods or agents of the gods.

Traditionally, they were believed to possess both divine and secular powers to do and to undo anything as the gods please. They were traditional priests, custodians of customs and Supreme judges in all societal matters. In African cosmology, there is no clear distinction between the material and the spiritual things. Religion embraces the totality of human endeavours. The social, economic, political and spiritual lives of the people are all embodied in one holistic life. Man, though mortal, can only have meaning in this social order through divine legislation. It is religion that translates our socio-cultural or socio-political order into reality. According to Okon, religion sacralises the socio-political values to give it a divine sanction or meaning (33). It is this religious belief that binds people together, regulate their lifestyles, and give meaning to their values, whether social or political. Again, it is this mental picture of African worldview that enables Africans to understand, express, communicate and govern themselves.

Today, even though democracy has replaced the idea of divine right, religion still plays a major role in the socio-political affairs of most nations of the world. In Nigeria, for example, the introduction of democracy by the colonial administration did not go well with the Northern communities dominated by Muslims because of its attachment to Western civilization. This was because Western influence and education were speedily penetrating into the fabric of some Islamic values and systems and this did not go well with some Muslims. To counter this, some Islamic sects began to emerge with the aim of reforming their State along the Islamic laws and promote Islamic education. Their objective was to prevent Western secularization through education. According to Kofi Johnson in his article *“What Accounts for the Rise of Islam: A case Study of Nigeria and Senegal”* he pointed out that:

Between the 70s and 80s many Muslims became frustrated as a result of pressures coming from the secularized world. Many sought to reject the waves of western cultural imperialism and return to their Islamic roots. The situation became exacerbated due to constant confrontations between the West and the Arab world over the issues of Palestine and Arab nationalism. These crises reached their crescendo with the Iranian revolution in 1979 (1).

By implication, it is believed that by pushing the Western style of education, politics in the name of democracy and market economy, the West (indirectly associated with Christianity) is continuing their design of controlling the nations of the world which most nations are resisting. It is on this note that the Islamic fundamentalists are rejecting religious diversity and seeking to re-institute the original Islamic principles throughout the Muslim and non-Muslim world, regardless of the changing circumstances in the world. This is what differentiates the fundamentalist from the Liberal Muslims who desire a separation between Islam and politics

**Conceptual Clarification:**

The term socio-political activism is a technical term that is used to designate individuals, social, political, or religious groups that are determined to challenge or oppose some socio-political or socio-religious injustice or obnoxious policies that are inimical or exploitative to the group they are fighting for. It is a term synonymous with protest or dissent. It is a word that is associated with strikes, demonstrations, killing and destructions of various kinds but geared towards a social, political, religious or economic change. In most cases, it is usually direct, confrontational or militant.

Socio-political activism is by nature political but could equally be religious, because it involves the use of power whether through strike, demonstration, campaign or rally to press for a social, political or religious change. The purpose of an activist is to force government, industry and society to submit, agree or reverse a decision regarded as unjust, exploitative or against the public interest. If an individual or a group of persons are convinced about a cause and are willing to embark on a campaign, a debate or work towards that change, this could be considered as social, political or religious activism. However, our interest here is on the passiveness or activeness of the two dominant religions in matters of social-political or socio-religious activism.

For the purpose of this article Ndukwe's definition seems most appropriate. He defines social activism as an "action planned, taken with the intention of affecting the social norms, be them political, economic or

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religious, being an attitude of taking active part in events especially in social, political or religious context” (159).

By implication, it means that an activist is anyone who participates or is engaged in fighting for change in society. Such change could be social, political or religious. An activist can be a worker demanding for a salary increase. It could be students demonstrating or striking as a result of increase in tuition fee or for lack of basic amenities in school. It could be academic staff protesting against the age limit of professors in the university. It could equally be a religious group like Boko Haram crying against Western education and the leadership of non-Muslim as the Head of State. These and many others could be considered as socio-political or socio-religious activism depending on the area of change needed.

Socio-political activism is therefore, a doctrine that advocates for action rather than theory in the actualisation of certain goals and objectives for effective social, political and religious change. It is a policy of taking a direct militant action to achieve a social, political or religious end. It is an attitude of taking an active part in social, political or religious events with the hope of correcting or opposing an injustice. Vidler in his book *A Century of Social Catholicism 1820 – 1920* posits that socio-political activism:

...could either be revolutionary or reforming; theoretical or practical. It could enunciate doctrine or express itself in distinguishable kinds of action; it might stand either for an attempt to replace the existing social system by a different one or for the introduction of ameliorate measures into the existing system by legislation and by organising social pressures and social services to enforce it (xii).

It is this assertion of activism being revolutionary or reforming; theoretical or practical that this article is set to examine the passivism or activism of the adherents of the two dominant religions in seeking socio-political justice and control in the political activities of Nigeria and the aftermath of these power play in the affairs of governance.

## **Historical Review of the Creation of Socio-Religious and Political Instability by Colonial Masters in Nigeria**

In every structure, whether physical, human or in nation building, foundations are very important. Some scholars argue that the foundation for socio-religious and political instability in Nigeria, was to a large extent, the work of the Colonial Masters. They argue that from the formative stage of Nigeria until independence, the various governments of Nigeria, at the Federal level, persistently and openly favoured the Northern part of the country dominated by Muslims in appointments, in employments, in education, in resource distribution and in promulgation of religious policies. Historically, the distortion of the true meaning of “secularism” as it has been defined in the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, is clearly reflected in successive further attempts by previous Military Heads of State, to consolidate the dominance of Muslim rule in Nigeria.

Emele Mba Uka in his article, *Perspective on Religion, Terrorism and Development*, alludes that the effect of such unfriendly and unfavourable socio-religious and political situation in Nigeria, was master minded by the British Colonial Masters. The amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates in 1914, was a ploy to deliberately encourage the South to serve the North. According to him, “Lugard gave the North the wrong impression that they were born to rule. He sternly warned the European Christian missionaries not to preach the gospel to the Hausa-Fulani, nor try to change their culture”(11). Harold Smith, a certain British Colonial administrator in Nigeria, regretting the atrocity and the part he played in the formative years of Nigeria is quoted as saying:

I am in my 80s now...but now I don't want to go to my grave without telling the truth about the atrocities perpetuated in Africa by the colonialists...Nigeria was my duty post, when we assessed Nigeria, this was what we found in the Southern region: strength, intelligence, determination to succeed, well established history, complex but focused lifestyle, great hope and aspirations...the East was good in business and technology, the West was good in administration and commerce, law and medicine but it

was a pity we planned our agenda to give power at all cost to the Northerners (Uka11).

To achieve the above assertion, population figures were blurred in favour of the North in order to perpetually keep them in power, knowing that politics is a game of number. According to Harold Smith:

Census results were announced before they were counted. Despite seeing the vast land with no human but cattle in the North, we still gave the North 55 million instead of 33 million. This was to be used in maintaining their majority votes and future power bid...the West without Lagos was the most populous in Nigeria at that time but we ignored that. The North was seriously encouraged to go into the military. Everything was to work against the South. We truncated their good plan for their future. We planned to destroy Awolowo and Azikwe, (the West and East) and sowed a seed of discord among them. We tricked Azikwe into accepting to be President (honourary), having known that Belewa will be the main man with power. Awolowo had to go to jail to cripple his genius plans for greater Nigeria (Uka 11-12).

This is the root of violence, militancy and insecurity in Nigeria. The gross inequality in the distribution of natural resources, the monopoly of power by the Northerners, the claim of majority number in the country's population are some of the socio-religious problems that are plaguing the Nigerian State. This claim of superiority and dominance is the foundation for religious intolerance and several other socio-religious and political crises and violence in Nigeria since Independence in 1<sup>st</sup> October, 1960.

**Christian Response to Socio-Political Activism:** Two schools of thought have emerged as a result of this phenomenon, one against and one in favour. Those against argue that there are no biblical examples to support Christian activism. For them, Christ "suffered for us, leaving us with an example that we should follow by following his steps" (1 Peter 2:21). For this group, even though Christ sternly and repeatedly rebuked Israel's false religious leaders, yet he never encouraged activism against the injustices of Romans civil authority. Nor did he advocate, organise, or



engage in public protest as a way of mounting pressure on Rome to change its corrupt system. He submitted himself even to unjust authorities. When he was reviled, he reviled not. When he suffered, he threatened not. Rather, he rejected worldly honour and power in favour of the Kingdom of God and would recant whenever the crowd wanted to make him a king (John 6:15).

For Him, they argue, His kingdom was not of this world (John 18:36). He taught his disciples to give to Caesar the things that are of Caesar and to God the things that are of God's (Matt. 22:21). Again, it is argued that the reason for the death of Jesus on the cross was partly because of His rejection of worldly power (John 12:12-36). If Jesus, the apostles and the early church were not involved in Christian activism why should His followers do? Therefore, conservative Christian opponents who argued against social- political and socio-religious activism have argue that if "Christian activism" were really God's will, Paul would have been in the forefront of it. Yet according to them, rather involve in protest or other forms of activism, Paul advised that Christians should obey their rulers and pray for them (1 Timothy 2:1-4).

Contrary to this position has been the second group, the liberal Christians, who have argued in favour of Christian activism. For them, the argument against social activism may not totally be correct or to say that there were no biblical examples to support Christian activism is wrong. Drawing evidence from the Old Testament and New Testament, they argue that Judo-Christian religion played an important role in determining the direction of political leadership in Israel, especially, as it is typified in the clamour that led Samuel to yield to their demand of anointing Saul as the first king. In many respects, religion was a prerequisite for a significant socio-political change. While relying on some Old Testament examples, such as those of Joseph, Nehemiah, and Daniel to justify their reason for political activism, the liberal Christians argue that these men were all placed by God in prominent positions in civil government to fulfil God's purpose and, therefore, the laissez faire attitude of today's Christians will not help. Social activism is therefore, not a new phenomenon in Israel. Groups, individuals and Prophets acted as watchdogs for the people. Kings were judged by their loyalty to God and their strict adherence to the principles of justice as entrenched in the bible, while internal revolt

against ungodly kings were common as a tool to oust kings out of power whenever they neglected to act on biblical principles.

For instance, in Exodus Chapters Three and Four, Moses confronted Pharaoh demanding to lead the children of Israel out of the house of bondage to the Promised Land. In 2 Kings 12:1-24, Jeroboam and Judah revolted against Rehoboam's ungodly policy and secession from Israel. Elijah singlehandedly challenged King Ahab for leading Israel into idolatry and apostasy (1 Kings 18). It is further argued that Joseph, Daniel and Nehemiah were all political office-holders who used their positions to influence government policies in their own generation and that if they did, why would Christians be aloof. John the Baptist opposed and publicly spoke against the ungodly marriage of Herod to Herodias his brother's wife (Matt. 14:1-12). Even Jesus, towards the end of His ministry became an activist by publicly speaking against the activities of the Pharisee. He did this by entering the temple and driving those who were trading in the temple as well as by triumphantly riding into Jerusalem. It was this religious activism that led to his arrest, trial, judgement and crucifixion. With the above examples, the liberal Christians conclude that there is nothing wrong for any Christian to be a socio-political activist.

Bosch, understanding the inherent controversy in the subject, asserts that: Christianity, which loses its vertical dimension, has lost its salt. It is not only insipid in itself but also useless to the world. on the other hand, Christianity which uses the vertical preoccupation as a means to escape from reasonability for and in common life of human beings is in denial of the incarnation. The paradigm shift in theological mission enterprises must also emphasize on the mission as a quest for justice. In this sense, mission also grapples with the tension between justice and love as a way of embodying the conveyance of theological convictions as a hope or the moral ecology of Church and society (As quoted by Ndukwe 164).

John Stott towing the same line of argument posits that it is irrelevant and absurd for anyone to say that Jesus and his apostles were not interested in politics, neither did they require nor even commend political action, let alone engage in it themselves. Yes; this may be true; he argues, but equally to be noted is that the apostles did not build hospitals either or require them to be built, but today, Christian hospitals are legitimate extrapolations from Jesus' compassionate concern for the sick. Just so, political action which is love seeking justice for the oppressed is a

legitimate extrapolation from the teaching and ministry of Christ, for without appropriate political action some social needs simply cannot be met (58).

It is this quest for justice that led religious leaders like Martin Luther King, Reverend Jesse Jackson, Reverend Andrew Young, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and several others into being vocal activists against social ills like racial discrimination and apartheid which eventually brought the socio-political and religious changes to their countries and to the rest of the world. Today certain privileges are enjoyed because of their involvement in socio-political activism. In the recent past, Nigeria is witnessing an influx of religious leaders into the political arena with the hope of creating a social or political change in the country. The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) in its attempt to encourage Christian participation in politics has featured prominent characters such as Pastor Chris Okotie of the Household of God, Rev. Jolly Nyame of the United Methodist Church of Africa (U.M.C.A), a three-time governor of Taraba State, Professor Yusuf Obaje, former Chaplain of the Aso Rock Chapel, Reverend Father Moses Adasu a former governor of Benue State in Nigeria, being a Catholic Priest who became Governor of Benue State. Governor David Jonah Jang, who was ordained Pastor before his election in 2007 and Pastor Tunde Bakare.

Public opinion is amazing. For some, the engagement of Men of God in politics for the purpose of bringing social change in the political system is a sign of the end time where Jesus predicted that the love of many will wax cold (Matt. 24:12). Yet for others like Pastor Bakare, it is only when they are in, that they can effect a change, therefore joining politics is for the purpose of creating the desired social change that Nigerians are crying for. Pastor Tunde Bakare, the Convener of the Save Nigeria Group (SNG); a coalition of pro-democracy group in a recent statement, has spoken on the state of the nation, saying, He does not have faith in the present government". According to him:

The present administration is not competent enough to make the changes Nigerians are looking for and as such citizens should take action for themselves. Nigerians should know how to take their destiny in their hands, we can no longer agree to be pushed, to expect development, to expect transformation, the

government is not competent enough to make that happen (Abbah, Theophilus. Sunday Trust 14<sup>th</sup> Feb. 2011 electronic copy).

For Pastor TundeBakare, his mandate was to:

Promote political knowledge and participation of the Nigerian citizens through strategic activities, after decades of speaking truth to power and standing on the side of the oppressed..... I have extended the frontiers of my political activism in a bid to Save Nigeria, to Change Nigeria and to Make Nigeria Great again” (Abbah, Theophilus. Sunday Trust 14<sup>th</sup> Feb. 2011 electronic copy).

From the Christian perspective, it is obvious that the laissez faire attitude that hitherto characterised Christianity is gradually changing as more and more Christians are getting involved and participating in the affairs of governance in different kinds of socio-political activism. Though the percentage is still very minimal, the fact that Christian activism has already taken root in Nigeria is a fact that cannot be disputed.

### **Islamic Response to Socio-Political Activism:**

From the Muslim point of view, Islam is regarded as the final revealed religion, fulfilling and superseding all earlier religions. For the Muslims, Judaism is one-sided, because of its preoccupation with this world. Christianity is one-sided, because of its emphasis on spiritual matters. Islam, in contrast, is the perfect, harmonious religion of the middle way (Qur’an 5:3) (Troll: 89). From the beginning, Islam was concerned about the total man and did not separate the earthly man from the spiritual man as the case with Christianity. Islam sees the body and soul, social, political and religious life as one, there is no dichotomy. It rejects the rejection of the spiritual and the worldly. Prosperity is in this world and hereafter. Troll confirms this assertion when he says that “the Qur’anic revelation during the 10 years in Medina (622 – 632) was concerned not only with the prescriptions of spiritual life (prayer, fasting, virtues and vices), but also with life in the society....the regulation of political life including instructions for the conduct of war and the division of booty...” (91).

Gabriel pointed out that power to govern in Islam is restricted in many ways, because according to him, "Allah is recognised as the one who ultimately holds all political authority. Religion and politics are bound together. ...Non-Muslims are not limited to have enough power in the government to affect the law "suitable to all human needs; those of the body and the soul; those of individual and society and of politics...Islam is both religion and the state" (91). According to Azumah: The presence of non-Muslim was only to be tolerated...they are not allowed to keep weapons, nor take part in war or jihad, because they cannot be trusted. Nor can they hold positions in which they have authority over Muslims. They may not preach to Muslims, let alone convert them and must not say anything that may seem disrespectful of Islam in general and of Muhammad in particular. Muslims man cannot marry non-Muslim women but a non-Muslim man cannot marry a Muslim woman. Marriage or sex between a Muslim women and a non-Muslim man is punishable by death. While a non-Muslim can be executed for merely raising a hand against a Muslim, a Muslim who kills a non-Muslim faces no more than a fine (92-93).

It should be noted that this traditional thought about the relationship between Muslim and non-Muslim was formulated in societies or environment where Muslims were politically dominant over non-Muslims. But surprisingly Azumah concludes that this "traditional and legal opinions formulated during this time have been canonised" (94). It is based on the legacy that some Muslim leaders in Nigeria have tried to enforce these rules in their State even though their actions have inspired some sporadic outburst of violence. Increase in violence, bombing and insecurity in the last two decades and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism is in line with mainstream Muslim teaching, that continue to use the term 'Kufr' (unbelief) to refer to everything that is non-Islamic. They regarded non-Muslims as 'infidels' of God (96). To this end, every Muslim is exhorted to 'fight the infidels nearest to him; we should become one hand against the enemies of Allah, our enemies – the enemies of our ancestors (Azumah 43).

However, as the wave of colonialism and secularization began to recede in the sun-Saharan Africa in the 60s and 70s, a new phenomenon began to merge as Western influence began to penetrate the fabric of traditional Islamic society. The separation of state and religion was totally alien in

Islam and so it was regarded as Western and Christian idea to suppress Islam. To counteract this Western influence, Islamic sects began to emerge with the aim of reforming their society along Islamic line in order to prevent secularization through education. To such groups the only conceivable relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims is Jihad which is manifesting in different forms and shapes.

### **Inventory of Religious Violence in Nigeria:**

Soon after independence in 1960, the political trend in Nigeria was characterised by violence and bloodshed. The struggle for power among the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria led to several political violence and unrest that gradually degenerated into a civil war that lasted for three years. The struggle to occupy the number one position in the country's governance among the three ethnic groups (Hausa-Fulani, the Yorubas and the Igbos), has always generated serious problem from the inception. In this struggle, other smaller or minority groups were not left behind from the inception. In this struggle, other smaller or minority groups were not left behind, in attempt to also gain power, influence and control of the natural resources. These pockets of resistance and opposition gave birth to the emergence of illegal armed groups, ethnic militia, religious fanatics and fundamentalist, demanding for their inalienable fundamental human right. It is this mustard seed that was planted during and after independence that has eventually graduated into the current insurgence of violence and terrorism bedevilling Nigeria today. Lefebure writing on religion and violence observed that:

Many of the violent conflicts in the world today involve religious animosities. Indeed, the history of the encounters among the world's religions is filled with distrust and hatred, violence and vengeance. The deepest tragedy of the history of religions is that the very movements that should bring human beings closer to each other and to their ultimate source and goal have time again become forces of division. In one conflict after; another around the world, religious convictions and interpretations of revelation have been and abused as justification for violence (Azumah 1-2).

Chris Shu'aibu and Ayuba Jalaba Ulea decrying the level of intolerance and lack of understanding among religious groups and leaders took an inventory of the various religious riots in the country for the past three decades. He laments over the wonton destructions of human lives and properties in the name of religious riots. In the same vein, Jan H. Boer, a social theologian and a missionary who has worked in Nigeria for over thirty years in various capacities in the northern part of Nigeria, narrating the ordeal of religious riots in his book, *Nigeria's Decades of Blood* gives a chronological inventory of all the religious riots that has taken place in Nigeria from 1970 to date, narrating the remote and the immediate caused for each.(see appendix 1). According to him the emphasis will be on detailed facts and not to create sensationalism but in order to show the depth of hatred and anger these facts display (34). Although there had been series of religious tensions and skirmishes across the country, one of which was the cries witnessed in May 1980 in Zaria during which property belonging to Christians were destroyed by some Muslims, few people could have imagined the differences in religion could lead to such wanton destruction of lives and property as was witnessed in December 1980. From then on, the increasing rate of violence, killing, bombing and insecurity in Nigeria seems unstoppable.

### **Common Areas of Religious Conflicts and Favouritism in Nigeria:**

From 1980 to 2010 Nigeria has witnessed about 40 major religious crises, if not more and has claimed well over a million life and properties worth over a billion naira (Boer 91). Neutrality is expected in any multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious nation like Nigeria. But rather than government playing the role of an umpire, they had often time supported a particular religion depending on who is on seat. According to a publication of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) Zaria, Kaduna State, *And it Came to Pass*, government will turn blind eye to the blocking of public highways and roads during Jumat prayers but will demand that permission be obtained for same purpose for Christians especially in the Northern States.

It is this act of injustice and insensitivity on the part of government that presupposes the superiority of one religion to the other that sometimes trigger violence that leads to wanton destruction of lives and properties. Again, while Muslims are allowed to close early from work during the

Ramadan season, the Christian Lenten fasting of 40 days are treated by the same government as purely private affair of the Christians. In most cases the Government will see nothing wrong in Muslims erecting Mosques on the walkways of streets and well-laid out landscapes of government institutions, without the approval of the town planning authorities, yet government will refuse to give land or Certificate of Occupancy for Christians desiring to build a Church. The publication further report that each time there was an occurrence of riot perpetuated by some radical youths in the North, tribunals will be set up but government will directly or indirectly refuse to publish the out-come of the white paper. Rather than bring the perpetrators to book, for killing and destroying Christian Churches in the North, government will come out with a blanket statement banning all Muslims and Christian associations from meeting for a while. Knowing that Christians carry out evangelism, crusades and outside preaching more than Muslims, the government always ban outside preaching to the detriment of Christians.

Under the false pretence of having full control of institutions for which financial aids are sometimes given, the governments have taken over the Christian schools, hospitals and institutions; changing the names of such institutions, wiping out all traces of Christianity in such institutions and erecting Muslim Mosques in schools that were once Christian schools such as St. John's now Rimi College, Kaduna and replacement of Christian principals of schools with Muslims ones.

### **Critical Appraisal of Christians and Muslims Responses:**

Azumah quoting late AyatullahMortezaMutahhari of Iran notes that:

...there is a gulf between Islam and Christianity. If we look closely, we see that in Christianity there is no Jihad because it has nothing at all. By which I mean that there is no Christian structure of society, no Christian legal system, and no Christian rules as to how a society is to be formed... There is no substance in Christianity; it contains no more than a few moral teachings...Islam however is a religion that sees its duty and commitment to form an Islamic state. Islam came to reform society, form nations and governments. Its mandate is to reform the whole world. Such religion cannot be indifferent (42).



From the historical and doctrinal point of view, it is obvious that Islamic response to socio-religious and socio-political issues are inherently embedded in Islamic religion while Christianity is one-sided and preoccupied with spiritual matters. Again, while Christianity deals more with the hereafter, relegating the material world and emphasizing the spiritual, Islam is quite at home with the duality of power and spirit.

Again, it is obvious that the spiritual worldview of a person determine his action and behaviour and generally affects is not so much interested about wealth and poverty in terms of people's physical condition of accumulation of material possession or the lack of it, rather, God is concerned about the relationship between the rich and the poor. God is interested about the attitude of the rich to the poor. God condemns the rich oppressing the poor or maltreating the poor because wealth is a gift from God.

The Old Testament saints like Abraham, David, Solomon and Job, were men of great wealth and influence but they were not to set their minds on it. Job's attitude to the totality of life portrays the mind-set and the attitude he had about wealth. "Naked I came from my mother's womb and naked I shall return; the Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21). The Psalmist on the other hand, wisely advised, "If riches increase, set not your heart on them" (Ps. 62:10). This advice became pertinent because wealth often times became a source of temptation for oppression and injustice. Even though the prosperity preachers may differ from the mainline Churches, Jesus summarised the issue by saying, "you cannot serve God and mammon, for where your treasure is, there your heart will also be" (Luke12:34, Matt. 6:24).

This worldview tends to place a lower value on the material aspect of life than in Islam and feel uncomfortable when non-Muslim is in power. It is this basic concept that naturally shapes the political activity of the Muslims. For a Muslim, Islam is both religion and the state. It is on this note, that Islam is described as a religion of "militant individuals who are committed to truth and justice. ...religion of those who desire freedom and political independence.....the school of those who struggle against imperialism" (Hoffman, "Terrorism"). Historically, Christianity and Islam

are similar in some ways. Initially, they both proclaimed a spiritual message which raised questions about unjust political and social structures. In both cases, the very success of the religious message they proclaimed gave them dominating positions in society and led to both becoming a state religion. But gradually this dominating position began to be challenged around the seventeenth century. The instrument used in dismantling this notion of sacral government was the Western notions of democracy. Democracy discredited the idea of the traditional sacred governance and legitimised the representative governance that exposed the masses to different types of social activism in pressing home their socio-political or socio-religious demands. Democracy brought a new way of taking decisions in contrast to the one patterned and influenced by the sacred nature of government which religion supported and regulated the royalty that existed between the state and the people. The idea of Divine right of Kings which derived its origin from the theocratic concept of governance; vesting absolute power and authority on King or Monarch who was seen as direct representative of God was now challenged by democracy. The Monarch was superior and answerable only to God. The Pope as the Vicar of Christ on earth and by virtue of his divine right had the ultimate authority over the Church, and indirectly over the State.

The same notion also challenged the Islamic status quo, the concept of divine right of Caliph (direct descendants and successors of Prophet Muhammad) as supreme leaders of the Muslim community was under threat. Under Muhammad the Muslim States were theocratic, with Shari 'a as the religious and moral principles of the land. The Caliphs were seen as secular and religious leaders who as representatives of Allah and direct successors of Muhammad were to enforce Shari 'a as the religious and moral principles of the land. Forcing democracy on every nations of the world by the West is seen by the Islamic Communities as a threat and aberration to their religious beliefs hence the resistance to western education, western culture, globalization including Christianity. For an observer, Islam is a complex religion. This is so because of its paradoxical nature. For the Muslims religion and politics are inseparable; they go together, and it is almost impossible to talk about religion without talking about politics particularly in Muslim Communities. Islam is a reflection of the spiritual dimension of social life. The interwoven and inseparable nature of politics and Islam is what averagely makes a Muslim more active and involved in socio-political debate and discourse than an average Christians.

Christianity on the other hand is deeply concern about their heavenly race that they are socio-politically barren. More so, the recurrent world view that politics is a dirty game and that no true Christian can remain so if he is an activist or a politician makes most Christians stay out of social activism or partisan politics. “Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar”, “love not the world, nor the things that are in the world, for if any man loves the world, the love of the father is not in him”. These are some recurrent verses of the Bible that scare Christians from participating or getting involved in social activism or partisan politics. Other passages like “vengeance is mine, says the Lord” and “if your enemy slaps you on one cheek, turn the other side for him too” is making Christians apolitical and non-activist, preferring the non-violent method as exemplified by Jesus Christ to the post modern method of social activism where activism is employed to achieve various goals as a result of the insensitivity and injustice from some government quarters and religious leaders.

### **Conclusion**

In the words of Mother Theresa, “peace is not something you wish for it, it is something you make, something you do, something you are, something you give away” (Azumah 2). Also quoting a prominent Swiss theologian Hans Kung, Azumah states: “No world peace without peace among religions; and no dialogue between the religions; without accurate knowledge of one another” (2). Every religious belief has a social responsibility to its adherent. There is therefore an urgent need for accurate knowledge of the teaching and beliefs of religions other than our own. Ignorance accounts for much of the fear, suspicion and hatred that leads to violence and opened confrontation between Christians and Muslims. Knowledge will therefore dispel this fear and clear the misunderstanding that tends to divide us rather than strengthen us.

Socio-politically, Islam poses a challenge to Christian doctrine and values. This is so because according to Azumah, while:

Christians regard religion as a matter of personal faith and view the Church’s past involvement in and use of temporal power as a serious aberration. Muslims, reject any attempt to relegate religion to private

sphere as a violation of Islam principle. For Muslims, Islam is a complete way of life and there can be no separation between private and public, they make every effort to lay claim of the public space while Christians tend to retreat. Hence, while very few Christians in leadership positions will unashamedly exploit their position to advance their religion, very few Muslims would hesitate to do so (7).

It is this perception of the spiritual and the physical that determines the political behaviour of the Muslims. Political participation and involvement is based on religious worldview. For example, Christianity tends to place a lower emphasis on the material aspect of life than any other religion. Christianity sees poverty as a conducive condition for the realization of spiritual values in life and the idea of living peaceably with all men without which no man shall see the Lord or the idea of loving your enemy, even if he compels you to go one mile, go with him two are some of the major recurrent themes that reduces the zeal and vigour of socio-political or socio-religious activism among Christians.

For Muslims, religion and politics are bound together. It is on this note, that Muslims feel uncomfortable when non-Muslims are in power or authority. Islam sees the body and soul, social, political and religious life as one; there is no dichotomy. It rejects the separation of the spiritual and the worldly; prosperity is in this world and hereafter. This religious worldview is what regulates the political life of an average Muslim and makes them politically and socially more active than their Christians counterparts are. While Christians regard religion as a personal faith and view the Church's involvement in or use of social activism as a serious aberration, Muslims reject any attempt to relegate religion to private sphere as a violation of Islam principle. For Muslims, Islam is a complete way of life and there can be no separation between private and public, spiritual and temporal, religion and politics. For this reason they make every effort whether through peace or violence to lay claim of the public space from which Christians tend to retreat. The conclusion of this paper is that, religious worldviews and beliefs are major players in the participation and involvement of people in the socio-religious and socio-political activism in Nigeria. While most Christians shy away from partisan politics as a result of their religious beliefs, Muslims are fully abreast with politics. Hence, the slow non-partisan of Christians in socio-political

activism compared to their Muslim counterpart. It is the recommendation of this paper that a thorough religious education at all levels and the inculcation of religious tolerance for peaceful co-existence in Nigerian pluralistic society will reduce the rate of violence caused by religious bigotry.

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