

RELIGIOUS CONTESTATIONS WITHIN AND BETWEEN RELIGIONS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

People perform and live religion in multiple and specific contexts, with different sides to their experiences, especially in multi-faith societies. Given the reality of religious contestations in Nigeria, too often, contradictory or complicated religious narratives are given that are connected to the societal dysfunctional realities which in turn radicalise the thinking and approaches of many people towards different religious positions, which empowers many to toe the path of religious chauvinism, thereby resulting in avoidable 'fields of blood'. But on the other hand, positive religious contestations have also produced meaningful development in some sense. This work adopted the historical and comparative research methodologies in order to interrogate the lived experiences of people with respect to religious contestations in Nigeria, and their effects both on an individual and the Nigerian State at large. The study revealed that many religious contestations in Nigeria are often engineered by socio-political and economic realities of the country, while others (religious leaders in most cases) leverage on the quest for dominance which is often tied to resource control. This paper, therefore, proposed that, though contestation is important in the development of any society, such should be done with respect to human dignity, rule of law, and recognition of religious values that promote peaceful co-existence and sanctity of life. The conclusion of this work is that, religious contestation that produces unwholesome rivalry, mutual mistrust, suspicion and distrust, and doctrinal crises is injurious to humanity and anti-development which should not be encouraged.

Keywords: Contestation, Development, Nigeria, Religion, Rivalry

Introduction

Religion, as a system of faith, is based on belief in the existence of a particular God or gods, influences or contributes in developing and coordinating the expression of the capacities latent in human nature for the progress of the society. All the elements that made up the resources originating from human are expressed in their actions, behaviour and daily activities, either in positive and constructive ways, or in a negative and destructive ways, especially with respect to their inherent power to generate value by leveraging on other production variables for economic growth and development (Saheed, and Alofin, 2011). Religion is all pervading, inclusive and also permeates the entire fabric of human society. Hence, the position of Mbiti that, ‘Africans are notoriously religious’ (Mbiti 1969).

Fundamentally, religion plays a far-reaching role in social and economic transformation of society: economic activities are often driven by people who for the most parts are controlled by religious attitudes, beliefs, participations, practices, rituals, and behaviours (Agang 2018). But, one of the issues that require a deliberate interrogation is to unravel some of the motives behind the religious involvement of many people or the high tone of religiosity in Nigeria today. This is because, “Sub-Saharan African landscape has been transformed significantly by rabid proliferation of the religious sector. This inevitably has redefined the concept of deterioration of sacred space as ecclesiastical orders emplace themselves in the social, cultural and economic spaces leading to space contestation in various communities in Africa and Diaspora” (Adedibu 2019, 53).

More importantly, it becomes expedient to further interrogate in whose interest are these religious contestations of space within and between religions in Nigeria? And the work as well intends to understand whether or not the level of religious activities have been able to translate to the much-needed development in Nigeria. These and many more are major issues that this work intends to examine in order to objectively understand the level of religious engagements in Nigeria, the nature of religious competitions, the nature of religious space, and also to see what could be seen as some of the basic rationales behind the level of some religious activities; and to recommend some possible solutions towards meaningful religious engagements in a multi-faith Nigerian society.

Religion in Nigeria

It is needless to say that Nigeria is notoriously and incurably a religious nation. The evidences around us, both at the local and national levels depict unequivocally the high level of religious tones that pervade the Nigerian nation. Obviously, any discussion raised about the Nigerian nation might not be complete without the mentioning of religion. This is because, religion has assumed the central stage in virtually every matter that concerns the nation. In a sense, it is true that religion is the sole worldview within which events are explained and behaviour patterned in the Nigerian society. It permeates every facet of life of the people (Isiramen 2010, ix). This by implication means that, every issue and event around easily gained religious explanation among the people. This is in consonance with the position of Leonard about the Africans in which Nigeria as a nation belongs. To him, Africans “are in the strict and natural sense of the word, a firmly and deeply religious people of whom it can be said, as it has been said of the Hindus; they eat religiously, dress religiously and sin religiously. In a few words, the religion of these natives...is their existence and their existence is their religion” (Leonard 1968, 409).

This might have underscored the report given by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) some years ago in a survey conducted across the globe. In the report, Nigeria was the most religious nation in the world (Onaiyekan 2010, 2). Some might argue on the contrary, but the fact is an undisputable reality in the day-to-day experience of Nigerians. However, the position of Leonard as raised above might appear appealing to many, but if given a constructive engagement, one will observe that there is an element of exaggeration in his submission. That Africans are deeply religious does not presume them to also take delight in wrong doings. Africans frown at sin because; their worldview which is dual in nature – an inter-connection between the visible and the invisible worlds, forbids such owing to the danger it could pose to the communal life of the people. One thing that is real to the Africans is that, religion defines their existence and their existence (entirety) is rooted in it.

In consonance with the above premise on the high level of religiosity in Nigeria, Cardinal Onaiyekan further maintains that;

Any casual look at our country obviously shows the all-pervading presence of religion. We only need to note, for example, the number of places of worship, the volume of holy noises that are emitted everywhere, the array of religious leaders with various titles and robes and the fervor with which we not only practice our faith but at times violently confront one another. Some are wondering whether our reputation as a religious nation is something to be proud of... (Onaiyekan 2010, 3).

Reflecting on Onaiyekan's position will give one a sense of a nation that has religious clouts being experienced and expressed in different facets of her existence. The presence of religion and religious practices in Nigeria is quite overwhelming in such a way that no one can pretend about it. This is because, everyday experiences are connected in one way or the other to the religious worldview of the people. It can be seen in the religious activities constantly being organized, indiscriminate erection of places of worship, proliferation of denominations and sects among the communities of faith, the quest for dominance, contestation for space and unwholesome rivalry within and between religious communities, and the mode of religious proselytization among other issues. For instance, there are cases of siting of places of worship within a residential building and such has become a major recurring decimal in major cities in Nigeria today. Thereby affecting the peaceful co-existence among members of differing faiths, and in many cases resulting in avoidable accusations and counter-accusations of membership snatching (Rapheal 2019).

For a deeper understanding of the religious nature of the Nigerian nation, the position of Etiyibo is apposite here. According to him, religious tones noticed in Nigeria appear not to have corresponded with the level of expected development in the society. This is because, religious values as espoused by these religions, especially Islam and Christianity which are expected to bring about meaningful development and stability in the society, appeared not to become externalized by these religious adherents.

In his words, Etiyibo avers that;

In Northern Nigeria (as well as the South) it is not uncommon to see Muslims frequent the *masjid* (mosque). Muslims, young and old whether they are of the Sunni or Shiite fold flock to the mosques every day for prayer, for information, dispute settlement and for education. Mosques are busiest on Friday, where in addition to prayers (generally led by an imam), the Holy *Qur'an* is taught (Etieyibo, 8).

Here, Etieyibo was able to provide a balanced position by not only considering the activities of Muslims but also bringing to the fore what is obtainable in the Christian camp in Nigeria. Looking at the religious demography in Nigeria, it is correct to say that the Northern region is predominantly Muslim, while the Southern region is predominantly populated by Christians. This distribution is occasioned by the advent of these religions in the country. Islam came into Nigeria through the trans-Saharan route in the North, while Christianity came in through the trans-Atlantic route in the South. In discussing the Christian experience and religious activities in Nigeria, Etieyibo further maintains that;

In Southern Nigeria, churches ‘spanning the gamut from the mainstream Roman Catholic and Anglican to many Protestant organizations’ are a few of the fastest growing sectors in the society. The growth is quite exceptional, so phenomenal that in some neighborhoods it is not uncommon to see more than one church, all jostling for members. Sunday is generally a busy day for both churches and members, notwithstanding where the churches are located...they flock to church to give their devotion to the God, they have at least one thing in mind – salvation is tied to their worship of God (Etieyibo, 11).

In the same vein, Danfulani emphatically gave his view on the nature of religiosity in Nigeria. By way of applying market theories, he

maintains that religion is a commodity of choice. And like a secular market where commodities are being traded, selected and bought, different religions abound in the larger society. As a result of the government deregulation policy on religion, there exists an increase in population of religious organizations and unending cycle of the emergence of new religious formations (NRMs) that compete among themselves for members (Danfulani 2019, 23-25).

Nigeria is not only a religious nation but also a multi-faith nation. Though, argued by several scholars as a secular state due to the constitutional provision which states that; “the federal government or the State shall not adopt any religion as a state religion” (S.10 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria), yet the religious tone in the country suggests otherwise. As maintained by Dopamu, the secularity and religiosity nature of the Nigerian society is a twisted logic in its pragmatic sense. His argument is that “we support those who say that Nigeria is a secular state while recognising the multi-religiosity of the country. Being secular does not make Nigeria anti-religious. An anti-religious state is incompatible with the religious nature of Nigerians. Indeed, Nigerians are very religious” (Dopamu 2009, 23). Igboin as well avers that, “at national, state and local government levels, both at formal and informal fora, there have been several calls for prayers by the government for the survival of the country, and the unanimous response of the different adherents of the various religions speak eloquently of the multi-religious state of the country” (Igboin 2010, 142).

Though the indigenous religion or African Religion is also a popular religion in Nigeria with its adherents drawn from the two major foreign faiths, it is important to posit here that the religious worldview of the African Religion is such that promotes religious tolerance/respect, with no emphasis on Absolute Truth Claim, Aggressive Evangelism or proselytization of religious beliefs. To Africans, what is important is the practising of a religion that is capable of addressing the needs of humanity in a holistic manner. So, when it comes to the issue of contestation for religious identities among religious practitioners, the case of indigenous religion has proven on several occasions to be different when compared to other religious communities in Nigeria. This is because, the indigenous religion focuses on tolerance and accommodation through its principle of live-and-let-live (Akanmidu 1993, 283). This view was also extrapolated by Igboin when he

discussed the real identity of an African person. In his view, the ‘African community encompasses abiotic organisms. The sacrality of the community rests on the belief that if any part of it is injured, the whole is injured. Such injury diminishes vitality. Anything, or any act that does not generate or increase life, is in itself bad and condemnable’ (Igboin 2021, 669). This, therefore, reaffirms the fact that among Africans and situating things within their religious worldview, peaceful co-existence both with physical and spiritual/unseen worlds is important and nothing is done within the exclusivism or chauvinism standpoint of any sort. It is against the above premises that this work seeks to further to interrogate the implications of religious contestations on the Nigerian nation.

Nature of Religious Contestations in Nigeria

Obviously, competition is part of human existence, both in the primitive and modern eras. Humans from the cradle have been engaged in different forms of competition or contestations for many reasons. It is also a common view that where there is no competition, getting the best from different available alternatives might be quite difficult if not unrealistic. This, therefore, gives credence to the fact that competition, to an extent, is needed and could be helpful in making human society better and reducing the danger of monopoly of ideas or services/goods. However, when approached from a bitter angle, competition could be indeed dangerous to human society. Religious contestations in Nigeria can be viewed from dual standpoints. On one hand, it has to do with intra-religious contestations. This deals with a form of competition or contestation that exists within a religious community. It could be between different denominations, movements or sects within a particular religion. In Christianity, for instance in Nigeria, there is denominational struggles in which some are considered as orthodox, mainline, African Independent Churches (AICs), while some are known to be the Pentecostal movements, and are often code-named the *New Generational Churches*.

Again, the wave of events, operations, and religious experiences and expressions in the ‘new order’ to some extent a major source of worry and threat to both the liturgy and many aged-long cherished doctrinal teachings of most of the mainline or orthodox churches. The ‘new order’ movement in its settings attracts more of the younger generation who are full of vigour, zeal and zest. Very many youths are

often enthused to join the ‘reigning team’ or ‘moving train’ of the ‘new order’ due to their different strategies and packages that appeal to their spirits, souls and bodies. Many youths and in some cases, part of the older generation often find reasons to switch from their former denomination due to the prevailing religious atmosphere in other denominations. Considering the experience of the Anglican Church in Nigeria, and in relation to the loss of members to the ‘new order’, Adewole was of the opinion that; “it is incontestable that the Anglican Church lost a great number of members and a handful clergy to the Pentecostal reawakening in the Nigerian religious contestation for space and membership. This made the Anglican authority to tone down their rigidity, especially her liturgy” (Adewole 2018, 176). This is quite worrisome because, “one of the greatest challenges before the Church today is how to embark on aggressive evangelism and discipleship that will consolidate the gains of the Church in the competitive religiouscape” (Adewole, 182).

The ‘new order’ movement also has different denominations with different strategies deployed to get more members, and to also retain those members. Even within Islam where sects are known, similar style of competition to expand their base and to further solidify their gains also exists. Some of these religious practitioners either copy or modify what is obtainable in other camps so as to have strong holds on their members and to avoid the possibility of losing members to other groups. Ojo, while discussing the Charismatic Movement experience in Nigeria succinctly maintains that, “aside from the urgent desire to expand membership, through various advertorials through hand bills, newsletters, bill boards, newspaper adverts, radio, television, the internet and execution of programmes, among others; intense competition is going on in search of legitimacy, acceptance, relevance, and influence in the social, economic, and political lives of peoples and their government machineries” (Ojo 2006, 93-99).

In addition, in a work titled, *Church Proliferation in the Nigerian Society: An Effective Means for Evangelism?* Rapheal mentioned some of the factors that gave rise to the astronomical increase in church proliferations in Nigeria. The work focuses on Christian faith in Nigeria and adduces reasons for such experience in Nigeria. According to him, some of these factors include but not limited to: systemic failure and economic instability, unemployment, quest for

money, fame, materialism and avoidance of discipline (Rapheal 2013, 232-238). The thought here is that of negative factors that could be responsible for the uncontrolled proliferation of Churches in Nigeria, and this does not in any way mean that there are no positive or genuine reasons for the expansion of Churches in Nigeria.

On interreligious level, the reality in Nigeria is largely premised on religious particularity, or absolute truth claim by a particular religion as against upholding the concept of religious pluralism. Stating the obvious, the two major foreign religions in Nigeria – Christianity and Islam that are at the fore front of this struggle with each other holding very strongly the doctrine of religious exclusivism. Adherents from different religious camps often adopt religious polemics to woo members to their side of the divide. And since numerical strength is very significant in every society for different benefits, each camp in this case often devise different means to ensure that their camp is not depopulated by other religious group(s). The understanding among these religious adherents is that of the need to outnumber or depopulate the seemingly opposing camp due to their lack of ‘the Truth’ or ‘path’ to eternal life. Both religious leaders and followers are often seen deploying different methods for the purpose of expansionism drive and in most cases, these different strategies deployed are not being gauged in order to know its impact on members of the other faiths, and the society at large. And where religious contestation is not properly managed by adherents, it often invokes mutual mistrust, distrust and suspicion (Igboin 2010, 143); and thereby resulting in religious confrontation in such society.

Hence, many adherents become intolerant and religious bigots who will stop at nothing to water down the religious beliefs of others. As a result of this experience in Nigeria, Danfulani laments that;

In Nigeria, Muslims and Christians (not adherents of African Traditional Religions or Traditionalists) think that there is a great struggle between Islam and Christianity over the soul of Nigeria. This concept has led to fool-hardy and baseless write up on both sides in the form of books, articles in magazines, journals, newspapers and pamphlets, aside from many senseless but expensive wars, riots, and conflicts that have led

to the destruction of millions of human lives and property worth billions of Naira (Danfulani 2009, 6).

In this case, even the literate adherents are also part of the religious bigotry who through their ‘pens’ deepened the already fractured relationship within and between religious communities. In most cases, “these individuals do not take upon themselves the necessary steps to understand a different religious perception and why a person believes the way he/she believes because they are preoccupied with reading anti-material that is produced and promoted to expose a specified religious belief system” (Audu 2008, 102). It is therefore obvious to state here that, “for more than two centuries, Islam and Christianity – in what we may refer to as mirror-image-dialectical tensions – consistently have confronted, strategically contested, occasionally accommodated, and referentially shadowed each other as they have transformed Nigeria’s social and political landscape” (Vaughan 2016, 231). And this is a known fact in Nigeria because, “religious intolerance is one of the causes of religious crises in Nigeria, with devastating effects of loss of lives and property, destruction and burning of people’s houses thereby rendering them homeless, creating widows and orphans” (Umejesi 2010, 237). Most of these were made possible through either direct or indirect religious contestations among and within religious camps.

In Islam, there exists different sects in Nigeria with varying, and at times competing and conflicting religious ideologies. For instance, the Shi’ite movement members in Nigeria are not in total support of what the Sunni sect believes when it comes to doctrinal teachings. At different instances, and especially in northern Nigeria, due to ideological differences among different sects, these sects are in stern confrontations with each other. Hence, the high level of religious crises in the region. And in their quest to ‘reform’ Islam, and to enforce what some perceived to be the ‘original Islam’, different sects often go to any length possible to enforce such belief. In most cases, the level of competition among these sects are quite strong and often results in the use of force, thereby resulting in violence. For instance, the first known Islamic sect in Nigeria that can be linked to acts of violence is the *Maitatsine* sect in the 1980s. The December 1980 riot in Kano is a good,

or rather, evil example. The *Maitatsine* sect unleashed a three-day riot in which almost 4,200 people were killed, mostly Muslims. The purpose of such act apparently was to reform Muslim worship and to cleanse Islam from its many non-Muslim accretions. Some Christians were also killed and many church buildings were attacked (Boer 2003, 39).

Again, there are several of such confrontations in the Northern part of Nigeria which are mostly and largely led by some Islamic clerics. Though in most cases, there are many dissenting voices against attributing such violent acts to Islam, and that such people like *Maitatsine* are not Muslim nor represent Islamic interest due to their acts of violence in the society. As good as such position might appear, it should be noted here that, it cannot be denied that they have their roots in Islam. At best, they could be understood within the context of probably a new religion or religious movement spawned by Islam, not unlike the relationship of Jehovah's Witness to Christianity.

Fundamentally, it is obvious that ambivalence nature of religious contestations in Nigeria is real. A cursory look at the Nigerian nation reveals that there are some positive impacts occasioned through religious contestations. As a matter of fact, it has brought about some noticeable development in Nigeria, especially in areas like the provision of infrastructural facilities and contribution to the nation's capacity building. Christianity and Islam in Nigeria have greatly contributed to social, economic and political development in Nigeria despite some other side distractions (some negative implications) that could be traced to their interactions, and this in most cases could be linked with manipulation of religion by some actors. Their contributions towards complementing governments' efforts in areas like health, education, economic and political sectors among others cannot be underestimated.

Obviously, they are strongly involved in like establishment of schools (from elementary to tertiary levels), hospitals, clinics, event centres, establishment of business outfits where many unemployed persons have been gainfully employed. They also engage in capacity building through series of organized programmes like workshops, seminars, conferences, conventions, retreats, entrepreneurship development cum skills acquisition programmes, and other commitments to Corporate Social Responsibilities (CSR) activities at different corners. All these are meant to make life more meaningful to their followers which in turn have overreaching effects on the entire

country. One peculiar trait among these religions is that, each of them seems to be influenced by what is obtainable (positively) in the other religious camps, denominations or sects; thereby adopting such innovation, and in some cases with slight modification so as to continue to remain relevant in the society. In most cases, such adoption can be modified in such a way that their religious adherents will not consider migrating to another religion as an option to be considered at all.

Understanding some of the factors Responsible for Religious Contestation in Nigeria

Given the discussion so far and the nature of religious contestations in Nigeria, it therefore becomes important to take a look at some of the prevailing factors that are responsible for the nature of religious contestations in Nigeria. Below are some of these factors:

Firstly, there is an overwhelming quest for dominance in each of the religious camps. This is largely due to some of the attached advantages to numerical strength of any setting. Numerical strength comes with advantages like financial benefits, overriding voice especially with respect to issues of resource control and sharing of available resources in the country, among others. In this wise, every religious group jostle for sufficient representation which often comes with its numerous benefits in the society. such situation is often laden with the “we” versus “us” dichotomies, and such demarcation often leads division, differentiation, and sometimes, alienation, in the Nigerian religious space (Ayantayo 2018, 15).

Secondly, the economic reality of the Nigerian society has allowed for contestations for any available space. As earlier mentioned, part of the benefits of strong numerical strength in many cases is connected to financial advantages. The economic reality in Nigeria today is such that makes the standard of living of an average individual lower than the international standard. This state of the nation, especially in the Sub-Saharan nations was captured Mokiwa when he posited that:

despite the rhetoric of economic growth by our respective governments and the Bretton Wood Institutions, the people of Sub-Saharan Africa continue sinking deeper into the poverty trap by the day ... In the midst of unprecedented

arithmetic progression of wealth (of nations and individuals), absolute poverty has taken on a geometrical progression for many Africa ... In 2009, 22 out of the 24 nations identified as having Low Human Development of the United Nations Human Development Index were located in Sub-Saharan Africa. This is disheartening, it is painful, it is shameful and it is unbecoming (Mokiwa 2015, 27-29).

Given this ugly reality within the region, many people, including religious leaders go the extra mile in order to make ends meet. And some acclaimed religious leaders often stop at nothing to get more followers by every means possible not minding whether spiritual standard is maintained or not. To them, their ultimate goal is on how to become financially fortified. And that further explains the position of Attanasi and Yong that, “it is possible to use economic parameters to determine how religious competitions are enacted to attract members into churches ostensibly to enhance their quality of life” (Attanasi and Yong 2019, 53).

Thirdly, political patronage has resonated as part of the contending factors that are connected to religious contestations in Nigeria. These religious communities have also been fingered to have adopted different strategies in their bid to get the needed political recognition at different levels. In the Nigerian experience today, it is obvious that religion has been ‘politicized’, and politics ‘religionized’. There is no doubt that in Nigeria, manipulation of religion is on the increase, and many actors appear to be feeding fat on such for selfish interests. Since in it has become a common knowledge that very many people often benefit politically through the instrumentality of religion at different levels, consequently, religious leaders and followers often leverage on such to project their religious community above others at every given opportunity in order to gain the attention of government or politicians at the political space. This, being said, religion, politics and ethnicity have always been used in Nigeria during electioneering campaigns, but in “2003, it was very glaring that religion was used openly as a tool for political gains” (Nghea 2017, 223). With this, it is believed that any religious camp that is close to the politicians or ruling

class stands to enjoy fringe benefits which include financial benefit from such relationship. Consequent upon this reality, religious affiliation in Nigeria has become a major factor in determining who occupies a political space (Ayantayo 2018, 15).

The quest to establishment of a religious empire is also connected to some of the inter and intra-religious contestations witnessed in Nigeria. In this case, the family of the founder of a particular denomination or sect becomes the ‘Comptroller General’ of every activity that goes on in such setting and as well the ‘sole administrator’. In this case, the bigger the empire, the better it is for the founder’s family from different ramifications. In some cases, there is a constant and relentless efforts being put in place by some of these religious leaders/founders to ensure the proper footing of their religious centres not only by finding a means of carving a niche for themselves, but for their children and their posterity. This again could be further amplified through the voice of Okogie where he lamented about many religious leaders and by extension, some church founders in particular by saying; “in fact, many of them have nothing to do with God, holiness and salvation. They are simply what I will describe as socially accepted manner of fraud, robbery and deceit perpetrated by their lying founders” (Okogie 2015, 22).

Again, there are some external influences that have constituted major challenges to a successful religious interaction in Nigeria. This has to do with conflicting interests of the World Super Powers where these two major religions originated from. For instance, Christianity is affiliated with the Western world, while Islam connected with the Arab world. These two world’s super powers often maintain some forms of cultural distinction and the quest for ideological supremacy. Their nature of interactions at the global level which in most cases is laden with mutual suspicion, mistrust and distrust has also found its way down the ladder by affecting the interactions between members of these religions wherever they are found co-existing together in any given society. This undying quest for the need to establish one’s religious beliefs above others continue to resonate, with Nigeria inclusive.

The undying quest for material acquisition has again become part of the problem in Nigeria. That has gradually led to the waning of the real spiritual footing of many religious claims. The religious ideals and values in the contemporary Nigerian society have been watered down in

so many quarters. Today, what is being celebrated in some religious centres in the contemporary Nigerian society is nothing but a residual power of some form of religious experience and an undying quest for material acquisition. Some religious leaders who were genuinely ‘called’ or ordained, appeared to have lost focus from their original assignment due to high rate of unemployment, systemic failure, economic woes of the country, among others, and in their bid to make ends meet and still remain relevant within the societal reality. As a result, some religious leaders therefore become more materialistic in their pursuit than being spiritually stabilized. This reality has further deepened the quest to get rich at all cost by all and sundry. Thus, resulting in “proliferation of fake churches, mismanagement and misappropriation of public funds, poor political system and materialism” (Itiola 2018, 113). And by extension, this confirms the view of Benyah where he maintained that, “the emphasis on prosperity gospel is to become more modern in outlook, sophisticated and powerful as a symbolising feature of one’s right standing with God in terms of payment of tithes and offerings, (seed sowing, prophetic gifts and other transactional rituals in Pentecostal religious discourse” (Benyah 2018). And in the light of this, it becomes explicitly clear that, rather than placing high premium on the state of morality of a person, the attention is now shifted to the wealth or material possession of individuals (Ayantayo, 20). Thus, affecting the very essence of their religious truth.

In most of the pluralistic societies like Nigeria, there is always a ravaging problem of absolute truth claim, especially where there is more than one monotheistic religion co-existing together within the same geographical space. This absolute truth claim phenomenon within and between religions is another major challenge that produces unwholesome rivalry among religious leaders/founders. The problem of *identity crafting* which often come in form of ‘believers’ versus ‘unbelievers’, ‘we’ versus ‘they’, ‘us’ versus ‘them’, ‘saints’ versus ‘infidels’, ‘insiders’ versus ‘outsiders’ e.t.c. is really another setback to meaningful religious interaction especially in a pluralistic society like Nigeria. In most cases, some members of other faiths often see others with the lense of rivalry or of people holding unto religious beliefs that are not true, but often see themselves as the ‘only way’. That being said, for some reasons, which may not be obvious, Muslims and Christians view themselves with suspicion (Ahioghae 2011, 355) on the basis of

seemingly conflicting religious truths or beliefs. Consequently, this group of religious practitioners is ready to defend their faith including using arms and ammunitions and eliminating the lives and destroying properties of people belonging to faiths different from theirs (Ayantayo, 9).

Going by the above factors in relation to religious contestations in Nigeria, below observations have become evident in the Nigerian society which require urgent intervention for the common good of all in Nigeria.

To start with, Christians and Muslims in Nigeria are in constant struggle for the soul of the Nigerian nation in the sense that, depending on the camp one belongs to, there is the earnest desire to convert (if possible) everyone into the religious divide one belongs to and that, to large extent, often create tension among members of these major religious camps in Nigeria.

Also, the pilgrimage recognition (and sponsorship either partially or fully by government) by the two religions are subject to further interrogation. As established through researches, some pilgrims do not really participate in the exercise exclusively for spiritual development given the struggles that surround selections of pilgrims and a whole lot of politicking around the whole processes. As a matter of fact, 'different generations of the nation's political elite have accordingly seen the pilgrimages as government's business' (Chukwudi and Imaga 2020, 9). In some sense, pilgrimage attendance is often done for social and financial benefits a pilgrim could enjoy from the scheme, and not necessarily because of how it can bring about moral and spiritual rejuvenation for an individual and the society at large. And given the religious cum spiritual atmosphere that are expected to be enjoyed at the various pilgrimage sites, and the large number of pilgrims from Nigeria; it is hoped that the exercise should have transformed the system of governance in Nigeria since in most times, members of the ruling class/government officials are always part of the yearly exercise;

More so, the Shari'a versus secularism agitations in Nigeria have suggested beyond the face value interpretation that it has assumed over the years. It reflects deep seated mutual suspicion, mistrust and distrust on the part of the two foreign world religions in Nigeria. The quest of some individuals, especially the elite class, who are pro-Shari'a full implementations, and the way they go about it do not suggest that they

are in the actual sense proposing for something that can bring about spiritual benefits through the full implementation of the law in the Nigerian society. To be factual, some individuals are more political in their push than being spiritually mindful. This is because, reports on Shari'a implementation have often noted that while promises to investigate and prosecute elite corruption through Shari'a institutions have been plentiful, harsh Shari'a punishments have unfortunately fallen disproportionately on poor men and women (Kendhammer 2013, .305-306). And as William Miles observed, "Shari'a regulations prohibiting drinking, ostentations marriage ceremonies, and praise singing hardly prevents elites from indulging in the privacy of their homes, or in upscale hotels" (Miles 2003, 67-68).

In addition, political portfolios and allotment of positions in the political arena often time do not reflect an attempt to promote the principles of morality, legality, equity, and good moral values among the citizenries. At times, there are some forms of religious undertone in such allocations and that makes such religious contestations more tensed. And such situation has been severally but avoidably exploited by some religious bigots to foment trouble in the Nigerian society under the guise of low or absence of religious representations in such political 'benefit'.

On another ground, it has also been asked at different fora, the rationale behind some of these religious contestations in the Nigerian religious space. The issue here is that, in whose interest are these contestations meant to serve? God, religious leaders/founders, or their followers? There is no doubt that, some of the prevailing activities common within many of these religious communities have raised very germane ethical and exegetical queries about the essence of some of these religious engagements. For instance, among some African Neo-Pentecostal leaders, there is exploitation of members or abuse of opportunities through the sale of ritual materials ranging from handkerchiefs, anointing oil or clothing, ... of which such materials are believed to facilitate the anointing of the man of God or God's anointing to attract miraculous encounter by such adherents (Adedibu 2019, 60). But in all, the economic benefit of such acts goes to the religious leader who is seen as God's representative.

One needs to further ask, what becomes of our many agitations all in the name of God? The reality in Nigeria today shows clearly that

most of them are more of physical/mundane (political, economic, social and financial) benefits than being spiritual in nature.

Effects of Religious Contestations in Nigeria

The question of religious contestations in Nigeria, first, between members of the two major world religions – Islam and Christianity, and secondly, within these religious communities themselves is such that have attracted and still attracting several debates and discourses especially as to understand who benefits principally from it. Stating the obvious, one wonders who benefits from all of this? Is it God, the pew or the religious leaders/founders? In our bid to know in whose interest are such contestations, one will need to understanding the possible effects of some of these religious contestations in the society.

Judging by the experiences so far in Nigeria, and what has become of intra and inter-religious interactions for some decades now in Nigeria, it is obvious that there have been series of intra and inter-religious violence experienced in Nigeria as a result of some uncontrolled sense of religious engagements and contestations. Thus, given rise to religious intolerance. According to Apenda, it is true that,

... these conflicts have been generated by some groups either trying to impose their religious beliefs on others or attempting to denigrate the validity of other people's religious beliefs. All such practices and attitudes are based on the perceived superiority of one's faith over all other faiths. Unfortunately, some people are ignorant of what their religion teaches. This points out the level of religious intolerance and the destruction that blazes its trail (Apenda 2011, 333).

There exist boundaries that appeared too difficult to be crossed, especially in Christianity and Islam. These boundaries identify liminal stages, but they can cut in different ways. History has it that, Nigerian faith traditions in the 1960s added colour to our humanness, defined our truly plural society, and made us one another's keepers. But unfortunately, today, Nigeria's religious actors (leaders and adherents in some cases) erect boundaries that divide communities and that set up

stumbling blocks to the kinds of religious interaction that bound us as a people and a nation. Understandably, the nature of religious society in Nigeria today suggests clear boundaries and demarcations between denominations/sects and faith traditions. The consequence is fierce competition, both within and between traditions. This competition is inimical to nation building, because it makes the public sphere more volatile, and at times, results in the tragic deaths of civilians. When these issues overlay national affairs, they take a devastating toll on governance, creating civil boundaries and compromising impartiality in the democratic process (Olupona 2014).

What becomes the major focus among some conservative Christians is that of an aggressive evangelism or expansionism drive. While on the other hand, the Muslims will not want to stop at anything in consolidating upon their religious gains and for the expansion of Islam. This religious contestation in this case often results in mutual suspicion, mistrust and distrust, thereby, resulting in religious intolerance which often times becomes the bane of sustainable development in any given pluralistic society.

Furthermore, it produces conflicting or heretical doctrinal ideologies and teachings, which in turn affect people's thinking. This is part of the experience both at intra and inter religious levels. These teachings and doctrines in most cases are either deliberately or unconsciously designed for the purpose of feeding the interest(s) of the peddlers of such teachings so as to possibly defraud, confuse or exploit some of the unsuspecting followers or clients. And given the possibility of manipulating religion, even many of the defrauded followers seem not to see anything significantly wrong with their experience rather, they consider such as part of their religious obligation towards obeying divine order or instruction.

In furtherance to the above effects of religious contestations in Nigeria, there is another dangerous dimension that such has resulted to. This is so because, the contestation has also led to the desecration of the public space as evident in indiscriminate siting of churches and mosques on every Nigerian streets and residential areas. This, as argued by scholars, has ultimately violates town planning protocols and destroys the aesthetics of the environment through littering of public spaces like banks, post offices and motor parks with religious bill boards and posters (Ayantayo, 16). This obvious and high religious profile in the

public spaces in Nigeria has added to the indices that actually projected the Nigerian nation as a highly religious nation in the world today.

As a result of the above discussions, it therefore becomes expedient to raise a poser here with respect to some of these religious contestations in the Nigerian experience and thereby suggest some of the possible solutions to this challenge. Stating the obvious, it is necessary to ask that, how many people or religious adherents/leaders/founders engaged in such religious contestation for the purpose of who becomes the most holy, upright or peaceful religion in the society? The answer will be in the affirmative, none! And if the answer to the above poser is none, then what should have been the quest of every religion/denomination/sect is not on how to outnumbered or outweighed another religion numerically or financially, but how to re-position the society into a safe haven, and become a tool for societal transformation and development.

These effects, combined together, have affected the needed development in Nigeria in different spheres which include; economic, politics, education, social and even human dignity and the overall quality of life in Nigeria. This is because, in cases of strained relationship between these religions; such have frequently resulted in wanton destruction of invaluable lives and property.

Charting the Way Forward

The task before us therefore is such that is very important which requires urgent solution towards finding a lasting solution to the constant contestations within and between religions in Nigeria. It is important to note that there is a need for a meaningful sensitisation and education of everyone on the need for a meaningful and quality interaction in a country that is religiously diverse. The point here is that, instead of allowing oneself to be blinded with religious differences, and engaging in a war of attrition against one another, one should realize that the reality of life and its challenges often cut across religious affiliation, race, gender, denominations, sects, and languages among others. What one should remember is that, as a people, one often faces a common enemy in the nation which include, economic depression, militancy, insurgency, corruption, bad governance, to mention but a few. And such require a collective effort that cuts across a structured religious boundary to address these problems. Without such approach, as

provided through dialogue of action, where by members of differing religious communities come together for the purpose of addressing a common societal need for the benefit of all, the society will continue to remain in a state of arrested development.

Religious texts should be re-read for proper understanding, religious phenomena re-interpreted, and 'identity boundaries' must be challenged away from the age-long unwholesome struggles. This re-reading and possible re-interpretation of religious texts should be done within the context of the contemporary realities in Nigeria. This is important because many religious leaders/founders often misinterpret the contextual meaning of these scriptures for personal gain or for self-aggrandisement. Thereby, resulting in unwholesome rivalry and avoidable religious tension or contestations.

More so, instead of religious struggle on the need for dominance, the earnest and constant efforts of everyone should be geared towards making one's society and the human race a safe haven; and a centre for sustainable development through meaningful and positive religious engagements. In this case, it will not be out of place to encourage those positive sides of religious contestations that border on the provision of social amenities, economic empowerments, among others to be further encouraged for sustainable development.

The work further suggested that government should be more committed to the well-being of the masses and the provision of the basic amenities for her citizens should be prioritized so as not to further fall victim of these religious manipulators who could stop at nothing in exploiting unsuspecting ones for selfish interests under the guise of religious clouts.

Conclusion

The work so far has been able to interrogate the issue of religious contestations between and within religions in Nigeria. A discussion of whose interest such contestations are carried out was also undertaken. From the findings, though competition is known to be able to produce dual outcomes – positive and negative, but looking at the religious space in the Nigerian society and the nature of religious contestations within and across religious boundaries, it is obviously clear that the negative effects of such contestations are more than that of the positive ones.

Although there is the possibility of promoting some facilities like building of school, hospitals and possibly other amenities through the instrumentality of competition. But it has as well produced unwholesome rivalry, mutual suspicion and distrust, proliferation of denominations and sects, and doctrinal crises among others. On the whole, considering some of the factors discussed earlier, the quest for fame, financial benefits, dominance and building of family empire among others are pointers to the fact that, most of these religious contestations are not efforts towards becoming more spiritual or devoted but for personal interest and for self-seeking glory.

The work concludes therefore that, meaningful development in the Nigerian society can be realized when religious adherents and institutions sincerely jettison their aged-long misconstrued theologies of ‘unbelievers’, ‘spiritual struggles, or warfare’ for the benefit of humanity. As much as contestation is good and a necessary tool to drive home meaningful development in every human society, it should also be noted that when manipulated or misconstrued, it can always become a cog in the wheel of progress of a meaningful development as have been discovered through our discussion so far. Hence, the need to promote an atmosphere where building of human dignity through objective and positive contestations can be achieved, instead of creating a tensed society devoid of progress and sustainable development through religion.

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