

## **ETHNICITY AND SOCIAL STABILITY IN NIGERIA: THE PLACE OF RELIGION**

**Kanayo Louis Nwadiolor**

**&**

**Amara Mary Uzoigwe**

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria

\*<http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ujah.v14i3.5>

### ***Abstract***

*Nigeria is a multi-ethnic nation with appreciable natural and human resources. Each of the ethnic groups has its peculiarities in terms of culture, language and belief system. These peculiarities and diversities unique as they may be, if properly appreciated and accommodated, provide a platform for mutual respect, peaceful co-existence and national stability. Observations have shown that Nigeria has witnessed series of upsurge in ethnic tension and unrest. Often times, these ethnic tensions translate into religious differences. There is a general notion that religion, especially Christianity and Islam, underpins the ethnic crises in the contemporary times. The consequences of the above observed situation amount to national instability. This paper has therefore investigated the place of religion in Nigeria's social stability amidst ethnic characters and ideologies. The work adopted literary critical approach and arrived at the conclusion that religion as religion is not responsible for the incessant ethnic crises in Nigeria, however, since it is religion that gives force to ethnicity, therefore, objectivity should take priority in the interpretation and application of religion so as to bring to the barest minimum ethnic conflicts that retard national stability and development.*

## **Introduction**

Nigeria has experienced waves of ethnic and communal violence in many parts of the country which have caused many lives to be lost and many others internally displaced with their corresponding destruction of properties. Ethnic and communal conflicts are contemporary realities which if not properly addressed at the appropriate time, could lead to the demise of any nation. Religion has, however, been employed into this very sensitive issue of ethnicity in recent years, in consequence of which the liberty, peace and national cohesion are seriously threatened. This employment of religion in furthering the parochial interest of ethnic groups have brought about insecurity that had engulfed the entire society due to injustice, poverty, and underdevelopment it created. This has culminated in political instability in our nascent democratic dispensation. For this, some scholars share the opinion that religion is much, if not more responsible for ethnic conflict as political forces themselves. But the fact of the theory is that religious influence, which appears as primary variable, is itself determined by economic and political forces. This is the thesis that the present researchers want to establish in these few pages.

This humble effort is not apologetic for religion. It is rather a dispassionate investigation into the extravagant presence of religion in ethnic considerations in Nigeria as a problem which filters into the various dimensions of the life of the peoples who constitute Nigerians carrying with it deadly potentials. The sad, recurring history of ethno-religious riots in Nigeria serves to underlie how explosive the deadly potentials

religious excesses can be when left unchecked. This indeed sharpens the urgency of our discourse.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Although much disagreement exist among scholars as to what defines ethnicity, most of them agree that ethnicity often involves assigning importance to perceived affinities among individuals and some sense of differences among groups. Sanda (cited by Onifade and Ogunlade, 2010) defines an ethnic group “as constituting interacting members who define themselves as belonging to a named labeled social group with whose interest they identify, and which manifests certain aspects of a unique culture while constituting a part of a wider society” (p. 84). Dunmoye (1990) sees an ethnic group as being united by a common name in which the members take a pride, a common language, and territory and by a feeling that all who do not share this name are enemies. This perhaps provides an explanation for the prevalence of ethnic aggressiveness in contemporary Nigeria. On the other hand, Otite (cited by Chinyere, 2010) defines ethnicity “as the contextual discrimination by members of one group against others on the basis of differentiated system of socio-cultural symbols” (p. 184). Nnoli (1998) defines ethnicity as a social phenomenon associated with identity of members of the largest possible competing communal group in a political system seeking to protect and advance their interest. Osaghae (1994) argues that ethnicity can disaggregate into politics, economics, socio-cultural and religious dimensions. This exactly is what makes ethnicity easily susceptible to conflict.

Conflict itself is by nature a constant phenomenon in any human organization. Conflict means contradictions arising from differences in interest, ideas, ideologies, orientations,

perceptions, phenomena and tendencies. Pruitt and Robin (cited by Chinyere, 2010) consider conflict “as a perceived divergence of interest, or a belief that parties’ current aspirations cannot be achieved simultaneously” (p. 184). Coser (1956) describes conflict as a struggle over values, claims to status, power and scarce resources in which the aims of the opposing parties are not only to gain the desired values but also to neutralize, injure or eliminate rivals. These descriptions of conflict indicate why the interplay of ethnicity and religion easily cause conflict in Nigeria. Based on these definitions, one can posit that when the symbols characterizing an ethnic group is stressed beyond the elastic limit required for healthy living in a society, it tends to bring about self-centeredness. This is the point where the concept of ethnicity comes into play. When other groups in the same territoriality behave in the like manner, it will lead to ethnic conflict.

Nnoli (1998) points out that ethnic conflict arises from contradiction of ethnicities. This is also one reason why ethnicity and religion are considered to be very sensitive issues in contemporary Nigeria. The point is that ethnicity does not occur in isolation or pure form. Ethnicity is always closely associated with political, religious and other social views. Therefore in most cases engenders religious conflict. Ethnicity as a concept connotes struggle. Olaifa (2010) states that “it implies either an overt or covert competition between two or more ethnic groups; the trigger of the competition might be political, economic, social or even cultural in nature” (p. 237). When two or more ethnic groups come together to form a nation, battle for supremacy, justice and equitable distribution of resources are inevitable.

Religion has to do with man’s relationship with the supernatural. Nabofa (1991) defines religion as:

A state of the mind, with a firm belief in an ever-living God, ruling the universe and holding with humankind moral relations which are involved in any form of worship; the two most essential elements of religion are the experience of religion and the overt expression of that experience. (p. 77).

Religion is an important cultural characteristic. How important the religious identity is varies from people to people. Of course different religious characteristics are given different relative values in each ethnic group. Religion is one of the critical factors that help define culture and thus ethnicity. There are ethnic groups in which religious identity is a primary defining factor although in many others it does not matter.

Religion is also primordial and easily used in the same manner with ethnicity to mobilize public opinion. Sometimes religious identity becomes part of an ethnic identity, and of course when coupled with the power of the ethnic groups' myth of common descent, it presents a volatile social mixture indeed. Ethno-religious conflict, therefore arise where ethnic identity and religious loyalty overlap. Many scholars and statesmen have argued that these two sources of identity are the main causes of Nigeria's under development and have been used by some political leaders for selfish ends.

### **Background to Ethno-Religions Conflicts in Nigeria**

As is well known, Nigeria is one of the creations of the colonial project in Africa, a structural heritage from the fall outs of the Berlin conference of 1884 and 1885 where European imperial powers, to save themselves undue embarrassment and wasteful wars in African continent over their historic scramble for what they regarded as "no man's land –full of treasures to be exploited", carved out to each

other spheres of influence and protectorates (Njoku, 2003). As a consequence, the numerous peoples and cultures who owned and peopled the lands so re-possessed, were brutally overcome, their own administrative structures were dismantled, enfeebled and they were forcefully re-organized and reigned into a jumbo territories for easier control, supervision and, of course, grand exploitation by the particular European power who held military sway over the territories. This process of structural re-organization of African continent culminated in the merging of various and often warring ethnic groups into an entity called Nigeria without consulting the ethnic groups and bring them to dialogue as to the terms of reference for the merger. This in turn denied the people their basic need of participation, equality and social well-being, and thus led to conflict.

Nnoli (1980) adds that “the introduction of indirect rule in Nigeria by Lord Fredrick Lugard, not only reinforced ethnic divisions, it also complicated the task of welding diverse elements into a Nigerian nation” (p. 113). This strategy of governance distanced ethnic groups from each other. This era of provincial development, though relatively peaceful, also fanned the embers of ethnicity.

The creation of separate settlements for non-indigenous citizens particularly in the north, and even limited rights for purchase of land outside one’s own region bred prejudice and hatred in the provinces as different ethnic groups started looking at one another suspiciously in all spheres of contact (Afigbo, 1989).

As a modern state, Nigeria still have the un-enviable duty of bringing to oneness, the numerous peoples, languages,

cultures and component ethnic groups that were amalgamated into the Nigerian state in 1914 and handed over as an independent state in 1960. Essien (2010) observes that unequal and differential treatment of ethnic groups by successive governments in Nigeria led to intense competition for scarce goods evident in the economic, social and political life of the people. This created disparity in educational achievements and widened the political and economic gaps between various ethnic groups in the country. These disparities in allocation of “national cake” always give elites the opportunity to mobilize groups for intense competitions, employing ethnicity to achieve their goals. Osaghea (1991) further notes that when, in 1947 a colonial constitution further divided Nigeria into three regions-East, West and North with three major ethnic groups (Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa) in dominance, the minority groups rebelled and Nigerians started fighting for ethnic dominance as the nation marched towards independence.

Since independence, the situation in Nigeria has been fraught with ethnic politics whereby the elite from different ethnic groups strives to attract as many federal resources to their regions as possible, neglecting issues that could have united the country. Ours is a situation of politicized ethnicity and competition for resources, which worsened the relationship between the ethnic groups.

This brief sketch gives some ideas of the social space and political context in which the two major world religions (Christianity and Islam) were introduced to compete for membership and spheres of influence. The imperial and explosive nature of either Islam or Christianity might not have been so apparent if one or the other is the sole religion in a given context or is overwhelmingly dominant that the practice

of the other is as good as negligible. The scenario is however different when both religions find adherents in the same geo-political context and space where the supremacy of one religion over the other cannot be said to be taken for granted as in Nigeria. In such instances the aggressive nature of a threatened imperial power seeking to assert supremacy is full blown and abroad filtering into the strategic corners of the life of people in a given context, who find themselves on the different sides of the religious divide (Njoku, 2003).

The relative balance in the percentage of adherents to both Christianity and Islam in Nigeria seems to underlie “the need” for self-assertiveness on the part of these two world religions in the territory (Barrett, 1982). The seemingly clear geographical line marking the spheres of influences of the two religions, with Islam holding sway in the northern part of the country and Christianity having a comfortable grip on populations in the south, further provides a polarizing factor in the religious demography of the country. When one adds to the picture, the ethnic composition of the different spheres of influence of the two religions in Nigeria, a different but charged socio-political recipe is clearly evident.

From the forgoing, it can be argued that religion is not necessarily the root cause of ethnic crises in Nigeria. The religious dimension of ethnic riots could be seen from the fact that the two world religions are located in different geographical regions already engulfed in an aged long competition for economic and political gains. Most often, religion is employed as the most effective rallying factor for this competition, and it for this that the next section of this paper shall be looking at the bitter harvest of religion in ethnic considerations in Nigeria.



## **The Bitter Harvest of Religion into Ethnic Considerations in Nigeria**

The sensitive nature of religion in the society and the increasing tendencies to polarize Nigeria along religious lines seems to suggest that religion is responsible for incessant ethnic crises in the country. However, The International Crisis Group working to prevent conflicts worldwide reported that the politicization of ethnicity and religion, and factional mobilization along these lines which are direct products of the monopolization of power and assets by ruling elites that continually frustrates open and fair competition has its direct consequence in the outburst of ethno-religious violence. Furthermore religion acquires violent attributes only when certain new elements enter into relationship. These include ethnicity and socio-economic and political competition along ethnic lines. Thus religion has largely been viewed as a negative force because it is usually in situations of conflict that its impacts are most obvious. However, Smock (cited by Bolarinwa, 2010) avers that religion as a way to find communion, consolation and integration into system of meaning and belonging is not an instrument for killing. He opines that “conflict identified as religious usually does not (always) stem from disagreements over theological issues; its impacts usually results from the association of religious identity with ethnic division and economic factors” (p. 70). Similarly, the character of the Nigerian state is such that permits to an extent, the interwoven of religion and ethnic issues especially at moments of crises. This is because of the different origins of the two predominant religions of Islam and Christianity coupled with their being rooted in separate geographical localities and thus created a situation whereby the

resulting ethnic competition closely follows religious lines. Little surprise therefore that some ethnic issues easily wear the gab of religion.

Equally, most of the ethno- religious crises in Nigeria are politically motivated or induced but by the time it breaks out it wears religious undertone so that the majority of the people would be brought into the crisis even if they are not concerned. In other words, the political class often find in religion, a potent instrument that they use along with ethnicity to advance their self-serving political interests. To this extent it could be reasoned that the nature and character of political dynamics in the country usually results in a symbiotic relation between religion and ethnic considerations.

Therefore, it is important to mention from the outset that most conflicts that end up being classified as religious are fundamentally linked to causes other than religion. The tendency to identify some ethnic groups with a particular religion easily gives credence to the use of religion for the manipulation of other differences. As a consequence more than ever before individuals, groups, and even states are employing religion to achieve goals and objectives that influence socio-economic and political aspects of human existence.

From the foregoing discussion, the present researchers argue that what is to be blamed for ethnicity in Nigeria is not religion but utter disrespect for the rule of law by all those involved in the mistaken assumption that ethnicity or religious affiliation is immunity. Nigeria's religious divide is not the problem, rather Udezo and Nwadiolor (2012) argue that Nigerian political leaders Muslims and Christians, have invoked the name of God in politics, and sought to use religion freely in influencing the policy, decision and swaying of national, political and

economic policies and to that end ethnicity. Njoku (2003) adds that:

This natural slippery slope in the curve of religion is further made hazardous when a great majority of the adherents, or at least a segment, is not exposed to critical thinking, through, for example, formal and liberating education, are not equipped to take a critical distance and analytically wade through the emotional edges of religion. Such members become even more child like, more naïve and therefore more vulnerable to manipulation by some charismatic and megalomaniac leaders of thought in their given religion. We have here a recipe for religious fanaticism where ignorant and the naïve become even canon fodder, mere pawns in a religious chessboard. (p. 278).

It is therefore safe to argue that the precepts of religion have remained eternally valid, but the abusive patronage of it in Nigeria has joined ranks with other forces and factors to bludgeon our unity in diversity to death. Religion therefore, minus detrimental human elements, remains essentially what it meant to be, and it will continue to minister to the millions of people who still take solace under its umbrella.

### **Religion and Social Harmony in Nigeria**

The notion of religion itself suggests an assumption that human perceptions of things, whims and caprices require higher powers to help them respond adequately and effectively to all their concerns. God is the subject of the religious experience, and God is the summary of all good, the “*Summum Bonum*”, he is the epitome of goodness and every moral uprightness. And every religion teaches that the only way to the harbour of delights, which is the ultimate destination of all, is uprightness, love, justice, and mercy, which are all attributes

of God. This participation in the divine attributes is the ticket to heaven. Not only that, it is supposed to be the path to social equilibrium and thus ethnic harmony in Nigeria since all members of the various ethnic groups in Nigeria are adherents of one religion or the other.

It therefore means that belief in the Supreme Being extends to other aspects of human existence. It equally provides a guide to dos and don'ts to man in order to live a meaningful life and reverence the creator. Most of these guidelines, Udofia (2010) states are stipulated in the Holy Bible, the Holy Quran, and Traditional norms and values. The two holy books and traditional doctrinal pattern openly stipulates how man must live on earth with regard to protection of lives and property. To this extent, it could be argued that there is largely an interaction between religion and society within which it functions. Religion influences policies and general societal ordering and affects the behaviour of the individual and confers on the individual a form of identity in the society to the extent that it colours human relations. Consequently, because of its tendency to colour human relations, religion, if positively applied, can play significant roles in the entire societal process especially in multi-religious and multi-ethnic society such as Nigeria.

This functional perspective of religion which reflects in the writings of scholars such as Emile Durkheim among others sees religion as performing the functional role of reinforcing the collective conscience of the society requisite for social order and national stability. Religion, after all, is a powerful instrument for mobilizing public opinion and a constituent of cultural norms and values, and because it addresses the most profound existential issues of human life, religion is deeply

implicated in individual and social conceptions of peace. To transform the conflicts besetting our country, we need to uncover the conceptions of peace within our diverse religious and cultural traditions, while seeking the common ground among them. This includes opening doors of interaction between Muslims and Christians living in the country.

The task of establishing peace and the machinery for the perpetuation of peace is an established challenge to organized religion. Not only because peace is essentially a supreme ethical problem, decidedly within the social programme of religious institutions, but also because every great religion avers that it has come into the world to effect peace among men.

With special reference to traditional religion, most of the social checks and balances in traditional social structures have the tinge of religion. Many of the conceptual schemes that sustains the socio-economic and political cohesion and life of these societies have a deep religious taproot, which checkmates any tendency to patronize unwarranted and socially unapproved behaviours. Without these religious safeguards in a multi-ethnic society like Nigeria, the concourse of social interaction would be fraught (as it presently is in Nigeria) with danger, violence, ethnic chauvinism, which would lead to disintegration. Hence religion is deployed to ensure the survival of the common weal.

Christianity advocates one being his brother's keeper and love of one's neighbour, even his enemies. The Holy Bible in Exodus 20: 13-17 itemized the laws. Verse 13 specifically state "you shall not murder". Verse 15 says "you shall not steal.

Islam has, as the foundation of its belief system, peace and its quranic peace passages are overwhelming (Omeire, 2003). Allah Almighty says a lot on living together with other people who practice other religions than Islam. The prophet Muhammed put into practice, the quranic injunctions in dealing with non-Muslim. Quran 60: 8 says: “Allah does not forbid you with regards to those who do not fight you in your religion, nor drive you out of your homes forcefully, to deal kindly and justly with them; Allah loves those who are just”. Allah has emphasized oneness of humankind. In Quran 49: 13, Allah says: “O mankind, we created you from a single (pair) of male and female, and made you into nations and tribes that you may understand each other (Muhammad, 2010).

Suffice it to say that the scriptural passages so far examined together remind us of our common membership in the human family and of our cultural diversity. Differences of religion, culture and ethnic groups are normal phenomena of life because we are not all the same now and never were. These passages challenge Muslims and Christians with the obvious facts of religious and ethnic pluralism as evidence that demands acceptance and compliance. The concept of justice derived from God in various religions is a right of individual citizens, regardless of one’s ethnic affiliation. It is, therefore, one of the fundamental bases for peace and peaceful coexistence among people of various religions and diverse ethnic groups. It should be given and received as an act of submission to the will of God.

However, due to unbridled passion for wealth and power in contemporary Nigerian political and economic system, individuals and groups have circumvented the laws of religion and invented new ones to suit their selfish interests and this has

generally been the case in the experience of life in Nigeria today. This shows that religion has often times been employed as a means of oppression and tragic intolerance among ethno-religious groups in Nigeria. As this trend continues, national development and social security are compromised as poverty bites harder, conscripting more and more citizens of this country into the unfortunate wretched class. This therefore poses questions with regard to religious principles of peace and harmony, and above all, people wonder if religion can ever promote peace in the society and thus contribute to national stability and development.

There are critics, social, political and related areas, who feel very strongly that religion should be discarded in order to make for peace and progress in this country. We do not need to 'crucify' them because of their position. When religion that preaches peace and harmony, that talks of God of love, that encourages brotherhood of man, now is employed to perpetrate violence, bloodshed and destruction of fellowmen, we are definitely on the brink of suicidal ruin. This again, seems that religion contradicts itself.

However, viewed objectively, it is crystal clear that religion qua religion, has not at any time deviated from its principles. The essential nature of religion remains the same and it will continue to be. The absurd faces of religion that we see are the manifestations of human beings that practice the religions. Human beings have deviated from the tenets of religion and have allowed human nature to dominate religious actions. Nevertheless religion has been a vital stabilizer of human life in a world of conflicting opposites like the multi-ethnic society of Nigeria. And it is centered deeply in the human genetic and ontological blueprint. Any attempt therefore, to remove it from human experience is an exercise in futility. The present

researchers are therefore, disposed to agree with Ekwunife (1992) that the root of the absurd faces of religion that has characterized Nigeria is the failure to recognize, internalize and practicalize the positive enforcements of religion in Nigerian. Religion has not been harnessed and employed for the maintenance of peace and harmonious co-existence in Nigeria. Rather it is being misconstrued and misapplied for unholy practices and violent ethnicity. We suggest therefore, that a little practical religiosity would change Nigeria from a soup pot of chameleonic vacillation into a purposeful, sane nation free from all the debilitating ethno-religious burdens bedeviling her peaceful coexistence.

### **Concluding Recommendations**

It has been observed that ethno-religious conflicts have deep rooted implications for economic growth and national development. This is because conflicts not only stagnate the economy but also stultifies its growth much as it scares away foreign investors. Even local entrepreneurs are at the risk of loosing their investments, thus, reducing the pace of economic activities. Apart from this, the increasing number of internally displaced persons as a result of conflicts aggravates poverty while resources, which could have been channeled to other developmental projects, are diverted by the government to resettle victims of conflicts (Bolarinwa, 2010). It is for the above observations that this paper is calling for social and religious reorientation. This reorientation programme should include: restoring civility and orderliness, calling to imbibe the spirit of religious accommodation, political awareness and tolerance, enhancing good neighbourliness with different ethnic groups in the country. Muhammad (2010) advocates that “Ulama and other religious leaders should be encouraged to mount rigorous campaign in order to educate and enlighten



the generality of the groups to appreciate and conduct themselves devoid of ethnic or religious factors in their daily affairs” (p. 174).

Nigerians should be concerned with harnessing the peace-making components and values of their various religious groups than emphasizing what differentiates one religion from the others or which religion commands more ethnic groups than the others. There is no denying the fact that each religion teaches peace and discourages war and conflicts. Therefore, religious leaders from different religious affiliations can help to promote the peace teaching values of their religions. It is a call for us to rediscover the richest spiritual roots of both Christianity and Islam, namely, the centrality of love, the priceless value placed on the human person, the sacredness of life and so on. In doing so we will hopefully discover that the religious other is first and foremost our brother and it will make us suspicious of those who are ever ready to exploit our religious belongingness for their selfish ends, in the name of God.

However, religion will assume leadership in the course of peace only when it will transcend the state. Ilori (1993) avers that:

In many African countries religion is either an outright state institution or it receives subventions from the state. Even in countries where religion is no longer receiving financial support from the state, religion has so completely yielded itself up to the political philosophy of the state that it content to underwrite all of its policies and programmes. In this way religion lost to a great extent its spiritual authority in the society. (p. 83).

As long as religion does not rise above the state- not in the sense of endeavouring to master it or to control its political fortunes but in the sense of freeing itself from an alignment which carries with it the endorsement of its political purposes and programmes, so long will peace, the traditional and avowed ideal of religion, remain an abstraction. Religion must be the guide, the critic and the censor of the state, never its tool. This is not an easy programme. It is an extremely difficult one. It may, at times, place religion in direct opposition to the government; it may bring down upon religion the wrath of powerful interests. Religion may come to be shunned, hated, and persecuted by those in government. Religion, however must realize that the very espousal of peace in the midst of risk and danger is its cross and crown and immortality (Ilori, 1993). It is only by such intrepidity of spirit that religion can vindicate its prophetic mission in the society. If its historic role is that of a prophet, then it must accept the tribulations which fall to the lot of the prophet. The redemptive ministry of organized religion in multi-ethnic Nigeria today lies in its readiness to give to this difficult and exacting task, its unswerving devotion and its sacrificial loyalty.

Above all, religion must be the refuge and sanctuary of absolute integrity. It must be the home of uncompromising loyalty to social ideas. It must rise above the prevalent ethnic struggle in Nigeria so that it can be feared and revered for its dauntless proclamation of truth.

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