

THE CONTRIBUTION OF OTHER RELIGIONS TO THE SURVIVAL OF ISLAM AT THE CRADLE: A MODEL FOR INTER-FAITH PEACEFUL CO-EXISTENCE IN NIGERIA.

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ABSTRACT

The outbreak of Islamic fundamentalism with its diverse attacks on other religions remains one ugly global phenomenon that truncates the quest for universal peace and interreligious harmonious co-existence even in Nigeria. The implication of such religious extremism is benumbing to almost every national and international peace effort. From a historical approach, this paper examined the cordial relationship with which Islamic faith grew up in its cradle amidst other existing religions, such as Judaism and Christianity. Findings in this work showed that the adherents of Christian faith, together with the pagans made huge positive contributions to the survival of Islam at infancy. Hence, the study recommends that the tremendous assistance rendered by other religions in the protection of Islam in its early days is a historical fact that must be promoted with the view to educating and dissuading Islamic fundamentalists and supporters of religious extremism. Bearing in mind that such historical fact is very didactic for extremists towards instilling a second thought in their dealings with other religions, as the appeal for peace in the world is the prerogative of all religions.

Keywords: Islam, Inter-faith, Other religions, Peaceful co-existence, Nigeria.

Introduction

Interreligious unrest is a daily phenomenon like a recurring decimal. The problem between Islamic extremists and other religions, especially Christians in Nigeria calls for attention. In late December 2019, "ISIS beheads 10 captives in Nigeria as retaliation for Baghdadi death (Barnini, 2019). President Buhari reacting to the horrible incident bemoaned how saddened and shocked he was by the death of innocent hostages at the hands of remorseless, godless, callous gangs of mass murderers that have given Islam a bad name through their atrocities (Ameh, 2019). The President thereby admonished Nigerians not to allow, under no circumstance, the terrorists to divide the nation by turning "Christians against Muslims because these barbaric killers don't represent Islam and millions of other law-abiding Muslims

around the world (Ameh, 2019). The activities of Boko Haram are also an issue that cannot be forgotten. Part of the efforts in bringing about religious tolerance is to refer back to history in order to see how Islam survived at cradle amidst other religions. The paper will start by looking into the environment (culture) that gave birth to Islam; the childhood of the prophet; the call to the prophetic office; the difficulties encountered in spreading the religion; and those that stood up to assist in establishing the religion.

An Overview of the Pre-Islamic Arabian land

The holy Prophet was born in Arabia. It is thus expedient to know about the prevailing conditions of Arabia before the advent of Islam. The period before Islam in Arabia is known as the Ayyam-i-Jahiliyah, the time of ignorance and anarchy; when the Barbarians crumbled the political, social and cultural life once developed by the ancient world; when there was disintegration of the social, and religious order built by Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism; when the people have forgotten the teachings of their faith resulting in low morality, intolerance, everyday corruption, and prevalence of wrangling of creeds and sects (Rahim, 2010). It is a difficult thing to belief that Arabs lived for generations without a government of any kind, apart from Yemen in the south-west. Tribal chiefs were recognised on moral than political in authority. This system led very frequently to acts of horrendous cruelty (Sayyid). Each tribe had the duty to protect her people from outside attack or molestation, because there was no such thing as police, courts or judges. "The tribe had an obligation to protect its members even if they had committed crimes. Tribalism or '*asabiyya*' (the clan spirit) took precedence over ethics. A tribe that failed to protect its members from their enemies exposed itself to ridicule, obloquy and contempt. Rahim (2010) maintains that the Jews were the economic leaders of Arabia. They owned the best arable lands in Hijaz, and were the best farmers in the country, and also the entrepreneurs of such industries as existed in Arabia in those days, and they enjoyed a monopoly of the armaments industry. Before Islam, the Arabs had varieties of religions. There were the idol-worshippers or polytheists. The Kaaba in Mecca housed 360 idols of stone and wood. The atheists who were materialist believed that the world was eternal. The Zindiqs believed in two gods struggling endlessly for supremacy, representing good and evil. The Sabines worship the stars. The Jewish tribes had been there since 722BC (Borge, 2004). Others, that left Jerusalem in AD. 70 joined later and converted many Arabs to Judaism with their strong centres' in Umm-ul-Qura, Fadak, Khayber and Yathrib. The Christian had their strong centre in Najran: those in the north were converted by the Romans, while those in the south by the Ethiopians. There was also a small group of monotheists present in Arabia on the eve of the rise of Islam.

The Birth and Call of Prophet Mohammad

The holy Prophet was born at Makkah. The father Abdullah was the youngest of the sons of Abdul Muttalib, the then chief of the Quraysh. The mother's name was Amina, daughter of Wahhab of the Banu Zohra clan (Rahim, 2010). While the wife was pregnant, Abdullah went on a caravan trade to Syria but died on his way back at Medina. His asset was five camels, a flock of goats and Umm Aiman, a slave girl. The Prophet was born on Monday, 20th April 571 A.D. The mother named him Ahmad but the grandfather named him Muhammad. He was entrusted to the care of a foster-mother Halima till the age of six, according to the custom.

Amina decided to show Muhammad to his maternal relatives of his father in Medina and to visit his father's grave. She succeeded in her mission but did not return back to Makkah alive. She died on her way back, at al-Abwa. His father's slave girl, Umm Aiman brought him back to Makkah. The grandfather took over the care and nurture of Muhammad but only for two years. The grandfather died. Muhammad felt the desolation of the orphan state in his childhood (Rahim, 2010). The father died before he was born. The mother died while he was six years of age, and the grandfather died two years after. Abu Talib, his uncle took over.

A school of thought submitted that nothing was known of Muhammad between ages twenty-five and forty, while another school of thought was able to trace his meditative life in the cave of Hira, at the same period. Muhammad was not residing in the cave, rather visiting the cave and spending one month of every year in deep meditation. This in a way could explain the submission of the other school, accounting for one month in a year for fifteen years may not be enough to tell the history of a person. Another school of thought has it that, it was when Muhammad was about forty years of age that he developed the habit of going for a retreat known as tahannuf at the cave of Hira (Muhib,1996).In the year 610 C.E., at one of his solitary meditation, angel Jibril (Gabriel) came to him and said Muhammad should read. He replied the angel in truth, "I do not know how to read". The same was repeated three times. At last the angel commanded him thus: "Read in the name of your Lord the Creator, who created man of a clot of blood. Read, your Lord is most gracious. It is He who taught man by the pen that which he does not know (Muhib, 1996). That was the first revelation, and the beginning of the prophetic office. The experience was shocking to Muhammad. He was overpowered by fear. He ran home to Khadijah and requested he be covered with a mantle. He gave a narration of what transpired with the angel.

The Hospitable Abyssinian Experience as model for Religious Co-existence

The Christian king was moved by the presentation of Jaafer. The Muslims were granted to live peacefully in Abyssinia. Another accusation was leveled against the Muslims before the king the second day, by Amr bin Aas, that the Muslims rejected the divine nature of Christ, and claimed that he was a mortal like other men. Again, Jaafer was summoned, and he responded thus: "Our judgment of Jesus is the same as that of Allah and His Messenger, viz., Jesus is God's servant, His Prophet, His Spirit, and His command given unto Mary, the innocent virgin (Ibn Ishaq. 2004). The Christian king then declared unto the Muslims: "Go to your homes and live in peace. I shall never give you up to your enemies."The Christian king refused to extradite the Muslims. The Muslims lived happily without molestation and hindrance of any form to their religious practices from 615 AD till 7A.H. (AD 628) while they moved to Medina.

The Muslims emigrants to Abyssinia had a good time living together with the other religions in the land, especially with the Christians. There was no restriction to the practice of religion of Islam. In the days when the Muslims were in Abyssinia, the relationship between the Muslims and the Christians were cordial. It was not a sin to eat the food of the Christians, nor intermarry. Things were going on well between the two religions.

The siege lasted for three years as signed by the Quraysh. The two clans came back to their abode in Makkah. The boycott failed to achieve its purpose. Muhammad did not renounce his

religion and the two clans did not surrender their kinsman to the Quraysh. The three years of siege had a bad effect on the economy of Abu Talib, although he commanded respect in Mecca (Armstrong, 1992). The effect of the siege took its toll on Khadijah. She left her affluence to abide in poverty with her husband and the family during the siege. When they returned back to Makkah, there was no money left to live a good life. She died in 619 AD. One month after the death of Khadijah, Abu Talib also died. Those were the two pillars of support for Muhammad. Abu Talib was there when a monk declared that Muhammad will become a prophet like the Biblical prophets. He nurtured Muhammad from childhood to adulthood. He provided food, clothing and shelter for Muhammad. He agreed that Muhammad should be married to Khadijah, the first wife. Islam started with the first revelation received by Muhammad while he was forty years of age that made it thirty two years with the guidance of Abu Talib. In essence, Abu Talib took care of Muhammad for thirty two years before his call to be a prophet. It should be noted that Abu Talib in his own religion took care of Muhammad for thirty two years. Abu Talib risked the lives of the entire clan to protect Muhammad and Islam from the Quraysh. According to tradition, he was present when Muhammad was recognized as a prophet by the Christian monk Bahira. Though pagans of Mecca were against Muhammad and Islam, still one of them, Abu Talib, stood firm in support of Islam, "permitting survival of the early Muslim community. In a nutshell, Abu Talib was a man of other religion, a pagan, who contributed immensely to the survival of Islam at cradle.

The Contribution of Christianity to the Survival of Islam

The Christian religion did a lot in the establishment of Islam. Firstly, when the Holy Prophet Muhammad was young, accompanying his uncle, Abu Talib on caravan to Syria, the duo met a Christian monk by name Bahira who foretold the Prophethood of Muhammad. Allah made the future mission of Muhammad known through a Christian monk.

Secondly, when Muhammad had the first revelation and was uncertain of the encounter, his wife, Khadijah took Muhammad to a Christian convert by name Waraqa bin Naufal who used to read the Gospel in Arabic. Waraqa declared that Muhammad had an encounter with the same angel whom Allah sent to the prophet, Moses (Sahih al-Bukhari Narrated 'Aisha: Volume 4, Book 55). In the two instances, Christianity was a guide to the Holy Prophet in establishing the truth of what he was going through. Thirdly, when the persecution became severe and becoming unbearable, Muhammad ordered the Muslims to migrate to Abyssinia. The Holy Prophet Muhammad preferred Abyssinia for the safety of his people for these reasons: There had been trade relations between Mecca and Abyssinia for a long time, thus it was a known land to the people. Again, Najashi the Christian king of Abyssinia was renowned for his justice, therefore will not treat the oppressed group unfairly. Better still, the community of Abyssinia was predominantly Christian, the people of the book, which meant that, "their conduct and attitudes towards the Muslims would undoubtedly differ from that of the polytheist. The religious leaders protected the Muslims and refused to surrender them to their persecutors (Ibn Ishaq, 2004). While at Abyssinia, the Muslims saw good neighborliness and inviolability towards their religion (Ibn Ishaq, 2004). They lived happily without molestation and hindrance of any form to their religious practices from 615 AD till 7AH (AD 628) while they moved to Medina. Some of the exiles returned to Mecca and made the hijrah to Medina with Muhammad, while others remained in Abyssinia until they came to Medina in 628 (Montgomery, 1961).

The effect of the migration of the Muslims to Abyssinia was tremendous to the survival and growth of Islam. There was the likelihood that many would have reversed back to polytheism when the persecution became severe. It would have been a great setback for the religion that was at an infant stage. The acceptance of the Muslims at Abyssinia gave room for the growth of the religion. Christianity gave the enabling environment for Islam to survive at cradle.

Inter-faith Conflict in Nigeria: The Christians/Muslims Experience

Intensive inter-faith conflicts are caused by different factors, such as ideological, historical, and cultural influences. For example, the usages of land and water resources caused enormous pressure (Ningxin Li 2018). The quest and competition for land ownership is one of the essential vehicles of the perilous inter-faith conflict in Nigeria. Using the case of the Fulani Muslims and farmers' conflict, Clark (2018) argues that the Fulani Herdsmen see themselves as the owners of the land, thus rejecting the views of those who see them as trespassers on grazing lands. However, many farmers consider Fulani herders as strangers who are occupying the land of indigenous people (Clark, 2018). Practically, the Fulani pastoralists travel hundreds of miles with their cattle in search of grazing land as they often armed with weapons to protect their territory and livestock. The sustenance of the economic status of individuals or regions constitute a major problem in the explanation of the factors that endangers the peace and unity of Nigeria. Power relations between the two groups became more competitive when there is not enough access for people to grazing grounds and safe livestock routes. Any hierarchical socioeconomic structure can generate structural violence and fail to satisfy people's primary material and cultural needs (Rubenstein, 2017). According to Aliyu et al (2015), socio-religious and economic factors continue to provoke violent conflicts among the Fulani pastoralists and farmers. The intensity and variations of the conflicts largely depend on the nature and type of the user groups where the pastoralists graze. These conflicts have constituted serious threats to the means of survival and livelihoods of both the farmers and pastoralists and what both groups are tenaciously protecting (Abbas, 2012). An outbreak of deadly competition of who should preside over available yet scarce vegetation and water resource virtually increases the likelihood of the pastoral and agrarian acute conflict, as cattle herders' search for land and resources became one of the major causes of the fighting. Desert and droughts have swallowed up to 70% of grassland and droughts appear more frequently. Muhammed (2015), perceives religious elements regarding disagreements over the use and allocation of food and resources such as grazing areas between herders and local farmers are intense because of the interest of both party members. However, Coser in Aliyu (2015) notes that, the inevitability of conflict in the claim for scarce resource is considered here as the bane for struggles over the inestimable value for land and its resource, with the claim for ownership of lands and the claim for its position and of the question of the control of common resources therein. Furthermore, Moritz (2010) posits that occupational boundary makes understanding interreligious conflicts an urgent task, since most conflicts unfold as they seem to flourish with certain elements of religious, ethnic, and political conditions and undertones. One of the phenomena that worsen the trailing farmers and herdsmen conflict is the rapid shooting up of the demographic strength of Nigeria, hence leading to the challenges of over-population. Otunuga, (2016) this human population growth also leads to the growing population of Nigeria's cattle population to 25 million cows in Nigeria, and the number of cattle is expected to increase to 60 million by the year 2050 as speculated. The implication of this is that large

amount of food and water is required to satisfy massive numbers of animals when they are traveling over farmers' lands. Farmers accused the Fulani herdsmen of failing to control their cattle and allowing them to damage farmers' crops, in turn, the Fulani herdsmen accused farmers of stealing their livestock, (Otinuga, 2016) a confused state of conflict set in.

Conclusion

Cases of Christians / Muslims conflicts are widespread in recent times, as many citizens have lost their lives and properties that worth billions of naira while others have experienced displacement. In most of these encounters, citizens are regularly killed and the destruction or loss of property leaves an already endangered populace even poorer. Islam did not evolve in a vacuum. At the birth of Prophet Muhammad in Mecca, there were religions in Arabia. Christianity contributed immensely to the survival of Islam at cradle. It was a Christian monk that foretold the Prophethood of Prophet Muhammad. It was a Christian convert that explained the first revelation account of the Prophet. When the persecution of the infant converts into Islam became unbearable, Prophet Muhammad made the people to relocate to Abyssinia for safety. The Abyssinia king, a Christian gave a conducive environment to the Muslim refugees. They stayed safe until there was a peaceful land of Medina for the Muslims to occupy.

Recommendations

1. The fact Christianity and other religions contributed to the survival of Islam at the cradle should be promoted as a motivation for all. Hence the history of the Abyssinian Christian accommodation, protection and hospitality is an ever-green fact which Muslim leaders and scholars must teach their followers.
2. It is expected that every faith organization that was delivered from death at cradle should respect and reciprocate such loving gesture.
3. The call to religious peaceful coexistence as sounded by this paper is a memory lane, to educate the Islamic fanatics who understand jihad as violence against Christianity and other religions, bearing in mind the best word for the world that is found in Qur'an Surah Al-Kafirun (109:1-6), "to me is my religion, and to you is your religion".
4. The federal, state, and local governments should address the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, to reduce the proliferation, access to, and use of small arms and light weapons by unauthorized persons, with severe penalty made available for defaulters.
5. Let the federal government, in concert with the state and local governments and civil society, should design and implement a community-oriented programs on realistic disarmament that is focused on improving community security. The program of disarming should also be targeted at reaching the local manufacturers of arms with a view to ensuring that while they produce weapons that are allowable by law, their activities should not be a bye product to undermine the security of the country and its citizens.

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