`   RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND ITS EFFECTS ON NATIONAL INTEGRATION:
THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE.

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Abstract
Religious Pluralism has been perceived variously by different people. It is the standpoint of some that it has a lot of positive effects on the world while it breeds negative results on the contrary for others. Nigeria is one of the nations of the world that has religions in plural. These faiths are Christianity, African Traditional Religion and Islam. Each of them has devout adherents that are very devoted to their beliefs and observances. Religion has wielded great influences on Nigeria as a nation, some positively and others negatively. This work tries to X-ray what pluralism is in general, its positive and negative influences on the nation. The work discovered that pluralism can be of immense help if utilized very well for the good of Nigeria and therefore advises all citizens and inhabitants of the nation, starting from the leaders to the led to promote religious freedom which pluralism has to offer and eschew violence which has thrown the Nigerian nation into chaos and crises, irreplaceable losses and retrogression. Socio-historical approach was employed in the research.

Keywords: Religion, Religious Pluralism, National Integration, Religious Freedom, Nigeria.

Introduction
Pluralism describes the existence of diverse cultures within the same society. Like some other African States, Nigeria is religiously diversified with the people practicing three main religious: Christianity, Islam and Traditional Religion.

Madu J.E. (2018) explains pluralism as a fair treatment and a relationship between people of different religious groups regardless of their beliefs. No human or individual can exist on its own without a relationship and interaction with the other amidst the diversity that exists.

Religious pluralism refers to a situation where there exists a different religious persuasion within a given institutional frame. In effect, a religious pluralistic society is a multi-religious society, where different religious groups have different doctrines of salvation and world views which eventually condition the style of life, values and ultimate goal of each group.

Religious pluralism has always posed a challenge to national identity or integration in Nigeria judging the level of religious crises and violence over the year. This paper assesses its effects on national integration. It recommends among others that tolerance and accepting individual religious differences is a key to peace and harmony. Religious leaders should emphasize the integrative aspects of religion. Religious education should be made compulsory at both primary and secondary school to expose youths to the ideas of other religious. Finally, politicians should not use religious as a language of power but rather emphasize its role of fulfilling social needs that affect the well-being of the people.

Nigeria as a Pluralistic Society
National integration or unity in a pluralistic society like Nigeria has been a problematic issue since attainment of independent in 1960. It is the most populous nation in Africa with a population of over 160 million people. As a political entity, she came into formal existence in 1914 with the amalgamation of the northern and southern protectorates by the British government. However, one of the Chief characteristics of the Nigerian society is its pluralistic character. This has over the years made the task

of building a united nation out of the heterogeneous ethnic and religious groups one of the greatest challenges facing political leaders.

As a religious pluralistic society, the place of religion in analysing and addressing national issue appears evident. It is part of the fabric of people's lives and strongly tied to their cultural identities. This has made religious issues play roles in crisis generation and resolution. However, Imaehai, (2010) has observed that people's attitude about the role of religious is by no means uniform. To him, there are those who wish to put an official religious stamp on all political and social institutions, like the Muslims, Also, there are those who would want to see the role of religion as providing the conscience of the nation and the gadfly of its leadership. This is a view shared by many Christians.

The challenges of religious pluralism are manifested in various ways and varying degrees and in all parts of Nigeria. They are manifested in political instability, disunity, distribution and participation in the political process, as a result of these factors, Nigeria has never been an integrated nation. The country has demonstrated a high rate of religious conflicts in the past three decades. The ubiquity of religious conflicts is attested to by the dramatic rise in the incidents as well as volume of destruction of lives and property that have accompanied and, the tension that has generated in the relationship between religious groups in the country. This has continued to engender mutual suspicion and distrust among Nigerians. The incidents of hostilities in different part of the country have shaken the very foundation of peaceful disposition, and a threat to national integration.

According to Ntamu et al, (2014) stated that the North feels like power is their exclusive right and the south as conquered territories and paupers in the corridors of power, and any political formula leaving out the north in the equation is bound to fail. The current president, who is of the northern extraction, has openly displayed his religious and tribal bigotry, where political appointments have been positively stewed in favour of the North to the detriment of other segments of the country felt left out of key appointments, whereas some South-South people are of the view that he is a tribal president and a religious bigot, so he is busy patronizing his Hausa, Muslim and the Fulani brethren to the exclusion of the entire Southern geographical region.

Religious Pluralism: Pluralism describes the existence of diverse cultures within the same society. It is the harmonious and enriching co-existence within one political community of people of divergent, at times incompatible views, establishing and promoting their common good. It arises from the fact that while people differ from each other in many aspects, they interact with each other and have a unity as members of the same political community. It is this sense of shared identity involved in the interaction of peoples who are ethnically, politically and religiously diversified that makes for the pluralistic society. In the world of religions Idown-Fearon (2009) says religious pluralism is a situation where people of different religions and faith live together and interact at all levels without fear or prejudice, it is an attitude or policy regarding the diversity of religious belief systems co-existing in society. It therefore, enables a country made up of people of different faiths to exist without sectarian welfare or the persecution of religious minorities like other African states, Nigeria is one of the most religiously diversified with the people practicing three main religious: Christianity, Islam and Traditional Religion.

However, the two most dominant religions are Islam and Christianity and with their arrival asserted themselves by dislodging the traditional religions of the various communities and also imposing their ways on the indigenous people. A major challenge that has confronted the country over the years is that of religious violence between Christians and Muslims. The relationship between the two has been that of mistrust and suspicion. This has led to incessant religious crises. This is as a result of their different perceptions of the ideal society and the conflicting strategies of power and posturing which has made the ideological gap impossible to cover. Between the 1980s to the present, there have been more than 50 religious crises recorded in the Northern part of Nigeria only which have left political, social, economic and psychological losses and pains on the affected people and area. Umejesi (2011).

A more challenging crisis is from Boko Haram religious sect, a group opposed to Western education and values in place of full implementation of the Sharia Law. The crises which started in Bauchi has spread to states like Kano, Adamawa, Yobe and Borno. Boko Haram unleashes havoc in the North-Eastern states, capturing large parts of them. They killed, maimed and kidnapped. The abduction of

over 200 school girls at Chibok remains an issue till today. The Boko Haram, which is an anti-western civilization sect, started killing Christians and burning down Churches but later graduated to killing Moslems and burning mosques. For Barnabas (2019), "in a spate of fresh attacks across Eastern Nigeria and Cameroon, Boko Haram is continuing its campaign of terror and seeking to expand the rule of its caliphate".

Currently, it is the Muslim Fulani herdsmen that are inflicting havoc and violence all over the Christian middle belt and Southern parts of the country. They have slaughtered human beings like animals, raped women and destroyed crops in Agatu, Benue state; Ukpabi –Nimbo, Enugu state and many other states in the South-East a South-West. When they went on rampage in the Northern parts, it was targeted against the minority Christians over there. All these violence is in a bid to subdue Christians and islamise them. Little wonder the Muslim fanatics (Gumi) who had used violence, is quoted in Barnabas (2019) thus, "if Christians do not accept Muslims as their leaders, we have to divide the country".

Since the regime of the present President, the Muslim Fulani Muhammadu Buhari, the Fulani herdsmen have been carrying sophisticated weapons like AK47 and others and killing with glee, unchallenged, in a country where it is a crime for Civilians to carry such guns.

A lot of factors are identified as sources of these religious conflicts. One of such is religious intolerance and fanaticism. Umejesi (2011) contended that in Nigeria, the most prevalent problem confronting relationship between the religious is the absolute claim to religious faith especially between Christians and Muslims. The attempts to interpret and impose the various doctrines by the various religious groups end up in religious riots. According to Imaekhai (2010), oral or million statements made by the adherents or leaders either to show the superiority or inferiority of other religions lead to conflicts. The Muslims in Nigeria have been demanding for the application of the Sharia Law. To follow this demand means the state support Islam which violates its secular status. Where it exists, its application affects both Muslims and Christians, like in the sale and consumption of alcohol, gambling, segregation of women in schools and in public transport. Christians staying in these affected states are fearful of misapplication of these laws. Minority groups or Christians are sometimes forced to change to Islam or they are tried in Sharia Courts, Imekhai (2010).

Religious intolerance is also found within the various denominations, for example, Muslim against Muslim brothers whom they call infidels. Similar attitudes are shown by other protestant churches against the Catholic Church and vice versa. Religious intolerance has become a very big obstacle to nation building in recent times. Blinded to the ideals of other religions, the Muslim sect like Boko Haram has ignored the provisions of the constitution[1] and taken up arms against the Federal Government with the aim of establishing a theocratic state.

Isiramen (2010) believes that poverty or deprivation of various dimensions provides empowerment for religious violence. A situation where there are wide spread social, economic and religious insecurity, endemic corruption, inequality, injustice, youth unemployment and absence of good governance among states in the North could serve as catalyst for religious violence. Unemployed youths, especially the Almayiris are used as war machines to carry out violence in the Northern part of the country. They receive their impetus from the promise of a ticket to heaven, should they die in the process. In Nigeria today, positive gains of Pluralism are being frustrated because of fanatical tendencies among the various religious groups.

National Integration
National integration is used here to describe a process of ensuring that the component parts (tribes and people) of a nation are brought together to achieve a higher sense of belonging, mutual understanding and nationalism. Okonkwo (2008) defines it as the process of opening up a group, community, place of organization, to all, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, gender or social class. Okonkwo (2008) expresses the view that 'at the heart of meaningful integration must lie a deep understanding of the relative importance of the value systems, customs, religion and behaviour of the various groupings'. According to him, it will imply the weakening of certain types of ethnocentric tendencies as well as

positive moves as well as positive moves to build new relationships or fortify existing ones. The essential task of national integration is that of building cohesion amongst the various ethnic and religious groups or it can be said to aim at fostering higher loyalties in the place of parochial loyalties to the ethnic or religious origin of the citizens.

One of the greatest development challenges facing Nigeria is the threat of national unity. According to Abel (2014) agitations for recognition by various ethnic groups, resource control, ethno-religious politics and other primordial cleavages have crept into national consciousness of many Nigerians. This development motivated various past administrations or regimes to establish national integration programmes like National Youth Service Scheme (NYSC), Unity Schools, National Orientation Agency, National Sports and Cultural Festivals amongst others. These efforts have not yielded the desired result. Part of the challenge in this direction is the manipulation of religion by the political elites. Adamu(2015) stated that in Nigeria, the entire gamut of social, political and economic relations revolve around Islam and Christianity and this have been the basis of legitimacy for the political class. In their quest for power and to enhance their prospects of capturing and retaining it for their environment used religion. Notable politicians have used or known to sponsor misguided extremists in causing disturbance which has led to conflicts between Christians and Muslims resulting in death (Adamu, 2015). It is for this reason that many have come to believe that the Boko Haram insurgency is a political tool to score political points. During the 2015 general elections, Adamu (2015) asserted that it does appear the Northern elites have agreed to put the Presidency under siege, believing that by doing so, they would put at a political advantage by instigating religious and ethnic sentiments in a multi-religious and ethnic country like Nigeria in order to capture power by all means.

Religious Pluralism and its Effects on National Integration

Religious pluralism and its attendant conflicts have continued to create social divide between people making their coming together difficult. Christians and Muslims have not been able to coexist and work harmoniously for decades. This is to say that it leads to the polarisation of Nigerian Christians and Muslims as most of the Christians live in the South and Muslims in the North. Religious crises which have claimed many lives in the North have left questions as to whether Nigeria is truly one nation.

According to Oguche (2009), many find it difficult to imagine why the Southern Muslim or Christian should be killed in the name of religion in his or her own country. This has led to reprisal killings in the Southern part of Nigeria in some cases. The result is that national integration consciousness which is a major ingredient in the process of national integration has been negatively affected.

Frequent religious conflicts or crises have effect on the country's survival. According to Oguche (2009) conflict or war is one of the most serious threats to national integration because it has a bearing on the country's socio-cultural, political, science and technological development. Crises resulting from religious pluralism have continued to compromise national development. This is because hundreds of human lives are lost while properties running to billions of Naira are damaged. For example, the activities of the Boko Haran insurgents has left millions of Nigerians homeless in the country with others living as destitute without good shelter and adequate healthcare.

Again, the situation has continued to tarnish the country's international image as a bastion of religious pluralism. This affect foreign investments as most multinational corporations wanting to do business will not find the environment receptive. There was the abduction of French nationals by Boko Haram and the demand for 9(nine) million Dollars before they could be released (Adadu, 2015). Where these threats attain alarming dimensions, they tend to undermine not only the legitimate functions of government to the generality of the people but also the existence of the government itself.

The meddling of religion with politics as experienced in Nigeria has not really helped the cause of democracy or its sustainability. Religion which should have been a unifying factor has been manipulated to cause division and hatred. Evidences abound in pages of Newspapers and Magazines, of irresponsible and inflammatory remarks made at one time or the other by prominent Nigerian Muslim or Christian Politicians (Akama, 2000). In most cases, democratic values such as dialogue, national unity, patriotism, self reliance, territorial integrity and political consciousness are not practiced or promoted. Political leaders have continued to exploit the country's religious and regional diversity to create and consolidate political base of support. In doing so, integration among people became a

problem. The consequence is that Nigeria today is a deeply divided society in terms of religion. Countries like Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia that faced the challenges of diversity since their independence, have been able to integrate the diverse groups and have forged national identities.

Recommendations

In order that there may be greater religious freedom and national integration in Nigeria, the following recommendations are made:

All religious leaders should preach tolerance in order to promote peaceful co-existence and unity in Nigeria. Religion has integrative functions. Where religious tenets are similar or related, it is easier for adherents to co-exist harmoniously. Muslim and Christian preachers, therefore, need to demonstrate better understanding and sympathy for each other. They must uphold the sacred nature of human conscience and accord individuals the freedom to search for truth of their choice.

For good understanding of each other's religion by the citizenry, the Federal Government should make religious education compulsory at the primary and secondary level of our educational system. Religious tolerance should be inculcated in school curriculum and discourage religious indoctrination. This will expose youths to the ideas of other religions, reduce religious fanaticism and foster religious virtues that promote national unity or integration.

A regulatory body should be constituted by the Federal Government with the responsibility to monitor and maintain peace. This body should discourage religious rivalry from exhibiting destructive tendencies.

Politicians in Nigeria should learn to stop using religion as a 'language of power'. Its role should be on fulfilling social needs that directly affect the well-being of the community.

Conclusion:

To enhance national integration in Nigeria today, peaceful practice of religion with respect for other peoples' religion is a pre-requisite. Muslim and Christian adherents should henceforth emphasize their area of similarity and de-emphasize divergent aspects of their religion. This is to say, they must seek beyond each other, a basis of unity that brings them together without destroying their differences as far as religious affiliation is concerned. It is imperative that religion should always play its spiritual role as a source of ethical and moral inspiration in Nigeria.

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