

Religion as a catalyst of nation building in Nigeria

Okpe Nicholas Ojoajogwu

Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Kogi State University, Anyigba, P. M. B. 1008 Anyigba, Kogi State, Nigeria.

Accepted 4 June, 2014

ABSTRACT

Religion is one of the recognized factors that can enhance the nation at any given period of history. It has been practiced over time, which proves that religion is as old as man himself. But in recent times, religion has also been taken in a manner that people unleash attack on one another, which has created an image of incredibility for it. Actions that threaten peaceful co-existence, stability and development of nation have been exhibited by adherents of various religions in Nigeria. Thus, the place of religion in addressing national issues has become questionable. Be that as it may, this research aims at examining the contents of religion and its place in nation building towards sustainable development in Nigeria. Indeed it is often lamented that if Nigerians live by the ethics and doctrines of the three main religions, several societal problems would be taken care of. In order to achieve the objective of this research which is to unveil those potentials of religion towards integrating the diverse and heterogeneous configuration of Nigeria, two approaches will be adopted. These are the social analysis of the Nigerian nation in view of the fact that Nigeria is believed to be "a nation of many nations", and expository analysis of the values inherent in the three main religions in Nigeria (sociological and religious analysis). This implies an examination of the key concepts of this paper which are "religion" and "nation-building". The reality of religious crisis in Nigeria over time will be brought into focus as a justification and assertion that a proper integration of values common to all religions in Nigeria is capable and will ensure a formidable nationhood of Nigeria.

Keywords: History, peaceful co-existence, sustainable development, religious analysis, crises.

E-mail: okpenicks@yahoo.com.

INTRODUCTION

Like so many other modern African states, Nigeria is the creation of European imperialism. Its very name after the great Niger River, was suggested in the 1890s by Governor Frederick Lugard. It was initially known as "Niger area" before it was changed to what is now known as Nigeria (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/history_of_Nigeria).

The History of Nigeria has been characterized by series of religious crisis that have greatly impeded the nation building. Rather than exploiting the values in the three main religions in Nigeria towards sustainable nation building, the religious crisis have by no small measure promoted disunity and suspicions among Nigerians of diverse religious background. According to Umejesi (2011:91), the dimensions of these crisis especially between 1980 Maintatsine religious crisis through the 2000 Kaduna sharia religious crisis and the 2008/2010 Jos religious crisis into the present Boko Haram

insurgency show that much is left be desired from the potentials of religion. These crises have led to loss of human and material resources needed for a sustainable and viable nation building that would have been a model for developing nations such that it has become a regret on both national and international scenes. "The image of the country has been battered in the comity of nations, as a crisis ridden place, where the citizen, foreigners, investors and their investment are not safe. Indeed, the image of Nigeria is synonymous to religious crisis" (Umejesi, 2011:94). Thus, this paper sees religion as not accomplishing its purpose in the task of nation building of Nigeria. For Nigeria to be on the path of Nation building there must be a strong and conscious effort to obligate religious values in her system. There must be a promotion of ethical standard and value system which will put the nation on a sound footing for prosperity and good

life for the citizenry since religion is ipso facto a way of life. For this to be possible, according to Onimhawo (2011:19), the people (Nigerians of diverse religious backgrounds) must be well schooled in the process of social justice, peaceful coexistence etc which will contradict the anti-social religious values which have become the hallmark of the national politics.

In order to have a progressive discussion in this paper we would have to examine basic concepts underlining our objectives. These are the concept of "religion and nation building" which have been given various interpretations over time by different scholars. This creates some difficulty in coming to a consensus definition. Nevertheless, since our presentation goes beyond mere conceptual clarification, we shall assess the situation of Nigeria as a multi-religious society with numerous religious problems as well as the possible roles religion has played and can play towards our conclusion of the need for a peaceful, cohesive and united nation of Nigeria.

CLARIFYING MAJOR CONCEPTS

Religion

This is one of the human engagements that have greatly influenced the life of many nations of the world. It has made recognizable impacts on the political, physical, social, moral, spiritual and economic affairs of the modern world. It is embraced by about two third of the world population which indicates the significant role it plays in the affairs of many nations. The high regards given to religion is portrayed by the diverse manner through which it is carried out in many societies. Those who face the east to pray five times daily, those who commune with their ancestors, those who approach the supreme daily through a divine mediator, and those who assume specific postures and undertake some austere practices of self discipline as aids to mediation, reflection and enlightenment represent different forms through which man has attempted to satisfy his religious desires. Religion has also come to include faith as well as rituals and ceremonies which are basically the means of communication and communion with the supreme deity or whatever man conceives as the transcendental reality.

Religion is a collection of cultural systems, belief systems and world view that establishes symbols that relate humanity to spirituality and sometimes to moral values. Many religions have narrative symbols, traditions and sacred histories to give meaning to life or to explain the origin of life or the universe. Most religions have organized behaviors, including clerical hierarchies, a definition of what constitutes adherence or membership. The development of religion has taken different forms in different cultures. Some religions place emphasis on belief while others emphasize practices. Some focus on

the subjective experience of the religious individual while others consider the activities of the religious community to be most important (Durkheim, 1915:14). In many places, religion has been associated with public institutions such as education, the family, government and political hierarchies.

Religion is a stabilizing force in the society which bound the community as a social force in the social glue. It is a major force for social and moral changes. Religion is a social institution concerned with beliefs, actions and in-actions of a society through which the values, norms, ethics and traditions are defined, embedded and expressed within the cosmology of the people. It is a major factor that influences the activities of human (Adebirigbe and Aiyegboyin, 1997: 23).

In all these, religion remains a broad concept generally difficult to define in a specific direction. Religion is perceived according to the individual or collective approach (Buroe, 1914:61). Thus it has come to occupy a centre stage in both our consciousness and even academic discourse. According to Kant, "religion is the recognition of all duties as divine commands". This can be interpreted to mean that religion is a form of behaviors, process or structure of which orientation is at least partially supernatural. At the Farm House Dialogue (1994) on religion and society in Ota- Ogun State, Nigeria, participants reasoned that there are no two persons with exactly the same concept of God and religion. As such, religion was seen as an expression of faith and belief; the conscious and sub conscious response to the ultimate source of existence (Echekwube, 1999:3).

Nation-building

To understand the concept of 'nation-building' the underling word "nation" must very properly be put in perspective. In order words, it is very important to know what a 'nation' implies before constructing the idea of 'nation-building'.

The word, "nation" derives its root from French "nation" which also goes back to the Latin term "nation". The term was used in the medieval universities to describe "the colleagues in a college of student....who were born within a "pays", spoke the same language and expected to be ruled by their own family law. However, the term as used contemporarily emerged about the end of the 18th century and was defined by Franco Americans as "political nation" in terms of geographical consideration. Thus, the Webster's New College Dictionary, defines nation as "a stable historically developed community of people with a territory, economic life, distinctive culture and a language in common". Furthermore, the Thesaurus Dictionary defines nation as "people in a land under a single government; a community or people living in a defined territory with organized authorities. In the modern period,

nations have replaced empires as the basic unit of human political organization.

From the above, we can say that "Nation building" is always a work-in progress; a dynamic process in constant need of nurturing and re-invention. Thus, it can be defined as the development of behaviors, values, language, institutions, and physical structures that elucidate history and culture, concretize and protect the present, and ensure the future identity and independence of the nation (Gambari Ibrahim at the anniversary of Mustapha Akanbi Foundation).

Krieger (1993:615) in his analogy would understand nation building as: "dealing with the societal and political aftermath of conflicts and establishment of new government and social compacts. And in Echekwube (1999:3), "is a notion that is very much associated with the goal of civilization. It has to do with the production of basic needs of the people, feeding, clothing, housing and happy life. Furthermore, nation building in Ilegu (1986:1) has been described as the attempt towards intelligent and well ordered society that is good to the point of perfection.

Nation building refers to the process of constructing or structuring a national identity using the power of the state. This process aims at the unification of the people within the state so that it remains politically stable and viable in the long run. Nation-building can involve the use of propaganda or major infrastructural development to foster social harmony and economic growth (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nation-building>).

Nation-building includes the creation of national paraphernalia such as flags, anthems, national days, national stadiums, national airlines, national languages and national myths. At a deeper level, national identity needed to be deliberately constructed by molding different ethnic groups into a nation, especially since in many newly established states like Nigeria, colonial practices of divide and rule had resulted in ethnically heterogeneous populations (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nation-building>). However, many new states were plagued by tribalism and religious bigotry; that is, rivalry between ethnic groups and different religious adherents within the nation. This sometimes resulted in their near-disintegration of structures of nationhood as can be seen in the situation of Nigeria today.

Nation building as this paper would look at has to do with deliberate effort by people living in a geographical area Nigeria, to identify values that promote commonness and unity. Such values could be normative principles or cross cultural and religious matters that promote and enhance an ordered or organized society where good life is the objective for the members concerned. In this way, nation building can be compared with issues of development towards enhancement of better living condition for the citizenry (Gambari, 2008). A nation, this paper believes could be made up of people of diverse backgrounds resulting from language, cultural

practices but above all in this sense, religions. Thus, the potentiality of such diverse interests in religions being harnessed towards purposeful existence as a state or a geographical enclave of common political history of colonialism is the understanding of nation building as it being conceptualized in this paper.

From the above views on nation building, it can be drawn that nation building is a state of developing the nation as well as making the citizens of a nation comfortable, and religion provides a platform for such.

RELIGION: A POTENTIAL CATALYST OF NATION BUILDING IN NIGERIA

Nigeria is home to a variety of religions which tend to vary regionally. Several religions in Nigeria exist, helping to accentuate regional and ethnic distinctions. Nigeria is a religiously pluralistic state or multi religious society. The three basically practiced religions in Nigeria are Christianity, Islam and African Religion. The country could be seen as having a dominant Muslim north, a mixed Christian and Muslim South West and Middle Belt, a non-Muslim, primarily Christian South-East and South-South with each as a minority faith in the other region (Abogunrin, 1999:11).

Christianity and Islam constitute the major religious climate in Nigeria, because they enjoy large followership. The adherents of these major religions enjoy a great amount of national religious freedom, both in practices and propagation of their religious beliefs. It is worthy to state that Nigeria constitution has so far attempted to forge unity through the diversity of religions. Thus section 10 of the 1999 constitution states: "The government of the federation or of a state shall not adopt any religion as state religion". Section 38 of the same constitution declares that: "Every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion including freedom to change his Religion...to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance". This is to submit that Nigeria is a multi religious society; a state where one religion is not to be super imposed on the other.

It should be noted that the three major religions in Nigeria have many common values to make them serve the purpose of the nation. The major religions in Nigeria all believe in God as the source of being – creator, the preserver, the source of society and human community, and so of the nation. In the words of Balogun (1986:61), each of these religions have norms which are similar and which if sincerely observed, can nurture and strengthen the nation. Some of these norms include concept of reward and punishment, accountability before the source of being, including the idea of the hereafter and judgment which are meant to discourage deviants in the society and encourage good performances among fellows.

To say the least, religion is a real factor in human

societies that it cannot be ignored if they have to be purposeful coexistence and holistic development. Thus, according to Igboin (2011:223) "Religion and development have continued to be affected either positively or negatively. But it is pertinent to state categorically that religion in itself does not provoke negative consequences to development. It is some of the operators that skew it to meet their narcissistic end... when viewed from the positive side; it is incontrovertible that religion is a *sine qua non* for development. The challenge therefore is that the positive contributions of religion can be got only from those who are colonized by its precepts and values". He further stated that, "religion is about the human mind in relation to himself, others and God, while development is about the human person" (Igboin, 2011:223). Ogundowole in a paper, *Philosophy and Nation Building or Societal Development*, also points out that: "A true standard of measuring development must take the real material and spiritual needs of the people and the actual material and spiritual possession attainable to the people (Ogundowole, 2004:6). This implies that for development to be possible, the spiritual needs of the people must be met. It is a fact that traditional religious rulers have contributed immensely to the development of Nigeria as a nation especially in the pre-colonial era and even in our modern society. This is to say that religion has also contributed meaningfully to the development of moral values in Nigeria. Idowu (1982:79) puts it that "Africans, Nigeria see morality to be the fruit of religion".

RELIGIOUS VALUES EXPLOITABLE FOR NATION BUILDING

What constitute the essence of religion are its values in human existence. The history of mankind has shown the pervasive influences of religion so that the study of religion which involves the attempt to understand its significance, its origins and its myriad forms has become increasingly important in modern times. Man's attempt to extricate himself from religious belief in one form or another has also proved elusive. Religious values can be considered to be the high moral and ethical values that all faiths aspire to achieve. In this way, religions can serve as spring board for the inculcation and improvement of ethical values which are fundamental to achieving correct human behaviours particularly as it relates to productivity and nation building. It has been observed that the three major religions in Nigeria have similarities in their ethical codes and this can be taken to be an encouragement and a possible impetus for the quest towards inter religious harmony in Nigeria. The utilization of religious values by different religious adherents of their respective ethical norms can result into the development of the physical, mental, psychological and spiritual potentials of man in order to facilitate effective nation building in all

ramifications. According to Ademola in the Nations Newspaper (2011), Nigerian religions have a lot to contribute to the development of ethical values which are greatly needed in the decadent contemporary society. These religions (African traditional religions, Christianity and Islam) have a divine responsibility to achieve a better and more fully integrated life for their people. Nigerians cannot expect to have self respect based on self reliance if these religions do not co-operate with the other. Actualization of religious spirits will go a long way to promote good actions on the part of the citizens of Nigeria towards the fulfillment of national development.

According to Onimhawa (2011:24), religious values are founded on religious traditions, texts and beliefs. These values are usually considered to be the values that people of faith aspire to achieve. In contrast to human or personal values, religious-based values are based on the scriptures and or a religion's established norms. For example while Judaism has the Ten Commandments, Christianity has both the Ten Commandments and the teachings of Jesus Christ. Islam on its part provides spiritual guidance through the Koran and hadith.

Lucky enough, there are not too many religions in Nigeria apart from the major three (African Traditional Religion, Christianity and Islam) as they may be in some other countries of the world especially in Asia. While Islam is predominantly practiced in the northern part of Nigeria, Christianity is common in the southern region of Nigeria (Kukah, 1993:11). The indigenous traditional religion constitutes about 10% of the population. Each of these three religions has their various values and these values serve as a guide to human behaviour, dictating right from wrong and this is the most important aspect of religion, that is its capacity to shape honorable human personality and values and being in good accord with the human society (Imaekhai, 2010:173). Some of religious values include Justice, Peace, Love and Tolerance, respect for human life, obedience to laws of transcendent Being, whose representatives are those in authorities and by extension obedience to the laws of the land. Let us therefore inquire into a few religious values which this paper considers relevant to the building of Nigerian nation.

Justice

Justice is a concept of moral rightness based on ethics, rationality, law, natural law, religion or equity along with the punishment of the breach of said ethics; justice is the act of being just or fair. Rawls (1999:3) opines that: "Justice is the first virtue of social institutions, as truth is of systems of thought". For Okpe (2006:11), justice is said to be "those principles which arise when the constraints of having a morality are imposed upon parties or people with various interests". This means that justice is thought of as a pact between rational human beings

whose peaceful interaction amongst themselves is dependent on the balance of power mainly in the distribution of available good both empirical and otherwise. This implies that justice exists among rational beings (human persons), and their ability to determine an actions properly in order to produce balance of power within which individuals pursue their ends while respecting the right of others.

Religions in Nigeria also conform to the idea of justice. For instance, the Muslims set up Sharia courts, while Christians swear with the Bible in the court of law. They also have biblical injunctions that emphasize justice while the traditional religions also have their own judicial systems or ways of administering justice which is chiefly done by swearing by the deities responsible for justice.

Peace

The Latin word 'Pax', means "freedom from civil disorder". This is the basis upon which the English word peace came into use. Peace is a state of harmony characterized by the lack of violent conflict. Commonly understood as the absence of hostility, peace also suggests the existence of healthy or newly healed inter personal or national relationships. It reflects a calm, serene and meditative approach to societal relationships that avoids quarreling and seeks tranquility. It is an absence of disturbance or agitation. Okpe (2006:13f) opines that peace, a key social value is based on the belief that to promote life is to promote positive relation with others by consensus decision making. It implies negotiations, mediation, and reconciliation in order to enhance the right and original state of nature by which man is in harmony with himself, his neighbor and indeed the environment in which he lives. Peace goes hand in hand with justice. Religiously viewed, all people share a common humanity and therefore have a right to equitable treatment, support for their human rights and a fair allocation of community resources.

In our context today, peace is being churlishly relegated through various machinations within Nigeria. It is believed that the colonizers had apparently succeeded in entrenching a very bad and humiliating hatred among the believers of Islam and Christianity in Nigeria thereby dislodging them from their ability to understand one another to live in harmony and use peace as the bedrock of establishing prestigious socio-political and moral institutions which are the guiding beacons of the Nigerian society. The road to Nigerian peace can be reached if the Nigerian religions and society realize that they are bound by common destinies and interests and are also able to retain their dignity and sovereignty at an aggregated level of justice and fair play to both sides of religious belief. Paradoxically, Nigeria with all its divisive tendencies and negative forces, maintain a fragile unity in religious diversity against all odds. Therefore it can be summarized

that "peace is a gift and value necessary for creation to be at unity within itself" (Okpe, 2006:15). Without peace, no meaningful development can take place.

Love and tolerance

Love is a strong positive emotion of regard and affection. Tolerance is willingness to recognize and respect the beliefs or practices of others. It is a disposition to allow freedom of choice and behavior. Love is active while tolerance is passive. Love is accompanied by feelings of great affection while tolerance can be a feeling of apathy. Tolerance keeps people at arm's length in hopes of not offending themselves while love embraces people where they are. The both terms are mutually related and are values that cut across all the religions particularly, the ones practiced in Nigeria.

Love and tolerance are needed to build a stable nation. The punch newspaper of February 6th 2012 reports on the need for tolerance and love where Governor Abiola Ajimobi of Oyo State called on Nigerians to imbibe the spirit of peaceful co-existence. He urged forgiveness and love among the citizens and added that if Nigerians did not harbour grievances against one another, it would be easier for the leadership to paddle a national boat which could contribute to nation building. Similarly, the Tribune Newspaper of Friday, 13th April 2012 carries reports on Oyo Deputy Governor, Chief Moses Adeyemo enjoying the people of the state and Nigeria in particular to imbibe the spirit of love and tolerance. The need for love and tolerance is a necessary factor for a multi religious society like Nigeria.

CONCLUSION

We have seen the dynamism in religion as replicated in the history of Nigeria over time. While we submit that religion has created a lot of ill feelings among Nigerians especially when it has been manipulated, it has also been asserted that there are a lot religion has to offer to the nationhood of Nigeria. In other words, the continuous uneasy relationship among Nigerians based on religious inclinations has created a lot of setback for the nationhood of Nigeria as can be seen presently in the activities of the Islamic sect, the Boko Haram. Nevertheless, there are sterling qualities and capacities in religion which should be harnessed towards a purposeful nation building of Nigeria. This paper asserts that it is wise and realistic for the multi religious society of Nigeria to look into the common values inherent in the various religions towards a viable and peaceful coexistence capable of enhancing holistic development of the nation. The capacity and force of religion, if properly reckoned with can facilitate unprecedented nation building that can eliminate the vices and tendencies that

affect development and can sponsor disintegration.

REFERENCES

- Abogunrin, O. (1999). Religion and Politics in a pluralistic society: the Nigerian experience. *Journal of Ethics*, 2(1):11-21.
- Adebirigbe, I. S., and Aiyegboyin, D. (1997). Religion, Study and Practice. Ijebu-ode: Alamsek Press.
- Ademu, S. (2011). Religion as a tool for Nation Building. *The Nation Newspapers*. September edition.
- Balogun, K. (1986). Secularity or Multi-religiousity of Nigerian State. *Journal of the Nigeria Association for the Study of Religion*, 10(11):63-65.
- Buroe, R. (1914). *The Phenomenon of Religion*. New York: Allen and Co.
- Dictionary: Thesaurus. Translation <http://Encarta-msn.com/dictionary/nation>.
- Durkheim, E. (1915). *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. New York: Macmillan.
- Echekwube, A. (1999). The historical philosophical background of African traditional religion. *Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies*, 23(1):3-10.
- Gambari, I. (2008). The Challenges of Nation Building: The Case of Nigerian. First Year Anniversary Lecture, Mustapha Akanbi Foundation, 7 February.
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/history_of_Nigeria
- <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nation-building>
- <http://wikipedia.org/wiki/jutice>
- <http://wikipedia.org/wiki/religion>
- <http://wikipedia.org/wiki/tolerance/love>
- http://wikipedia.org/wiki/religions_in_nigeria
- Idowu, B. (1982). *Oladumare; God in Yoruba Belief*. Ikeja: Longman; Nigeria.
- Igboin, B. (2011). A Symbiosis between Religion and Development in Nigeria. In *Human and Religious Development in Nigeria: Theoretical and Methodological Issues*. Edited by Onimhawo A. Ibadan: Safmos Publishers, pp: 206-227.
- Ilegu, D. (1986). Religion: The key to National Survival in Nigeria. *Journal of the Nigeria Association for the Study of Religions* (137149201)1-11.
- Imaekhai, F. (2010). Religion and Human Values. In *Religion and the Nigerian Nation: some topical issues*. Edited by Isiramen, c (eds). Ibadan: Enjoy Press and Books, 169-179.
- Krieger, J. (ed), (1993). *The Oxford Companion to Politics of the World*. Oxford: University Press.
- Kukah, M. (1993). *Religion, Politics and Power in the Northern Nigeria*. Ibadan: Spectrum.
- Ogundowole, E. (2004). Philosophy and Nation Building or Societal Development. A paper delivered at the Department of Philosophy, Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba - Akoko, Ondo state, 8 September, 6-7.
- Okpe, N. (2006). In *My Father's House Vol. 2: Towards a Culture of 'Justice Development and Peace' (JDP)*. Enugu: Snap Press.
- Onimhawo, J. (2011). *Human and Religious Development in Nigeria: Theoretical and Methodological Issues*. Edited by Onimhawo A. Ibadan: Safmos Publishers.
- Rawls, J. (1999). *A Theory of Justice* (revised edition). Oxford: University Press.
- Religion and Society Farm House Dialogue. 11.13 March. 1994.
- The Encyclopedia of Religion*. Eliade, Mireia (Ed) 10, New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987.
- The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*. Oxford: University Press, 2000.
- Umejesi, I. O. (2011). Hermeneutics of Religious Crisis in Contemporary Nigeria. In: *Human and Religious Development in Nigeria: Theoretical and Methodological Issues*. Edited by Onimhawo A. Ibadan: Safmos Publishers.