

ENCOURAGING DIALOGUE AND PEACEFUL CO-EXISTENCE AMONGST ADHERENTS OF CHRISTIANITY, ISLAM AND AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION IN NIGERIA: A PANACEA FOR NATIONAL INTEGRATION

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Abstract

A Pluralistic Society is one that does not have a state religion. Nigeria fits in this description hence it has different religions that are being practiced by her people. These include Christianity; Islam and African Traditional Religion. Nigeria as a pluralistic society is faced with a lot of religious conflicts and it is in line with this that this paper “Encouraging Dialogue and Peaceful Co-existence amongst Adherents of Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion in Nigeria: A Panacea for National Integration” is concerned. The paper employs the qualitative research design where data were sourced from books journals and periodicals. The descriptive method was used to situate scholars’ ideas on the subject matter; the expository method was employed to establish the thoughts of adherents of these religions as to whether or not dialogue and peaceful co-existence exist amongst them. The evaluative method was used to ascertain the strengths and weaknesses of the existence of the subject matter. The paper will be of value to religious leaders and their followers, students and academia’s as it brings out areas that the adherents of the above three religions can dialogue, tolerate and co-exist. The paper notes that dialogue is an inevitable instrument in any pluralistic society with diverse religions. It is a vital tool that brings two or more people to settle their misgivings. Thus, leaders of Christianity, Islam and African Religion should embrace and encourage dialogue and peaceful co-existence amongst their followers to enhance national integration.

Keywords: Dialogue, Peaceful Co-existence and National Integration

Introduction

Nigeria is a nation of diverse ethnicities with various religions. Most prominent amongst these religions are Christianity, Islam and African Religion. Adherents of these religions can be found living together in virtually every part of the country. It is worthy of note that, in a single

family, various members of the family can be found practicing different religions. However, these religions notably Islam and Christianity have polarized the country in their bid to observe their tenets. Peace and unity have thus eluded the country since independence as a consequence.

Alloy S. Ihuah is of the opinion that Nigeria struggles with a triple cultural inheritance including indigenous beliefs and practices, Islam, and Christianity. While members of various religious groups interact with one another, have a common bond as members of the same political society, and hold a common belief in a single supreme God, they also diverge greatly from one another ¹.

This divergence has led to many violent conflicts among the various religions. Over-zealous religious leaders have exploited the country's diversity by promoting violent conflicts such as Maitatsine and currently Boko Haram. This has threatened the nation's peace, unity and continued existence. And as such has necessitated the call to encourage dialogue and peaceful co-existence amongst adherents of Christianity, Islam and African Religion in order to promote national integration.

This paper has the following subheads: Introduction, Conceptual Clarification, Understanding the Core Tenets of Christianity, Islam and African Religion, An Overview of Religious Conflicts in Nigeria, Conceptualising Dialogue and Peaceful Co-existence Amongst Adherents of Christianity, Islam and African Religion, An Evaluation of Dialogue and Peaceful Co-existence Amongst Adherents of Christianity, Islam and African Religion, Encouraging Dialogue and Peaceful Co-existence Amongst the Various Religious Denominations and a Conclusion.

Conceptual Clarification

Religious Dialogue

Dialogue is typically a discussion between two or more people, especially one that is formal and used in a play or academic assignment. It is a formal conversation between two parties, especially when they are attempting to resolve a conflict or come to an agreement. Religious dialogue means talk between two or more religions which aims at creating congenial atmosphere for co-existence between or among the religions in dialogue ².

Peaceful co-existence

Co-existence is a state or fact of living or existing at the same time or in the same place. Peaceful which is an adjective means not involving a war, violence or argument. It could also mean undisturbed by strife or disagreement. Peaceful Co-existence is a policy or an attitude that enables mutual tolerance between states, groups, etc., having different beliefs, ideologies, or outlooks; mutual respect for each other's integrity and rights; equality and mutual benefit; the fact of living together at the same time or in the same place ³.

National integration

Nation and integration make up this term. A nation is a geographical area with a common socioeconomic and political system. It refers to a group of individuals who share a sense of unity and are based on the same history, society, culture, and values. National integration is mainly the process of bringing the various peoples of different cultural and social background together in a given social context or polity for their collective interest and good⁴.

Understanding the core tenets of Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion Christianity

Christianity is the religion founded by Jesus Christ who once lived in Palestine. Christians put their faith in Jesus. Christianity is essentially Living the Life of Christ and following the path he laid for the salvation of mankind⁵. Some of the basic Christian Doctrines as chronicled by Joseph I. Omoregbe includes: God, Jesus, Angels and Devil, Man, Sin, Redemption and Grace, Individual Ethics and Salvation⁶. Christianity is a monotheistic religion. The monotheism of Christianity is called a liberal one because it accommodates the idea of three persons in one God, and the idea of God having a divine Son. There are however, three divine persons in this one God, namely, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This God is the creator of all things, visible and invisible. Christian religion is Christo-centric because Jesus Christ is the focal point. He is believed to be more than a prophet and more than a messenger of God. He is God himself who became man. He is the second divine person of the trinity. Christianity also teaches about the spiritual beings, called the angels. These beings are created by God and they serve him as messengers. On the other hand, there are also Satan and the demons that are believed to roam about, doing havoc among God's creation, possessing some people and tempting others. Man is very dear to God, that he was created by God to his own image and likeness. Man as he is conceived in Christianity, is composed of both material and spiritual elements with the material element being his physical body while the spiritual being his soul.

The concept of sin, redemption and grace are central in Christianity. The effect of the Original Sin was enormous. It affected human nature which as a result became corrupt, weak and prone to evil. Man became incapable of doing any good by his own power, incapable of returning to God by himself, and incapable of restoring to himself the lost friendship and cordial relationship with God. He needed a saviour, a redeemer, to bring him back to God. And God so loves the world that he sent his only begotten Son into the world in the person of Jesus Christ to save mankind. On the issue of morality as explained by Omoregbe, which is the hardcore of Christian ethics is to be found in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Mt.5-7) in which Jesus improved on the ethics of Judaism. Salvation is another critical tenet of Christianity as already captured above. Jesus tells us that it is not all those who say; 'Lord, Lord' that will be saved, but only those who do the will of God that will be saved.

Islam

The early history of Islam revolves around one central figure: Muhammad. Although Islam is an interesting mixture of different religions, the origin of the faith is found in the one person of Muhammad ⁷. The teachings of Islam are comprised both of faith and practice or duty.

The six articles of faith are the fundamental doctrines of Islam, all Muslim are expected to believe in and submit to these tenets. These include: God, Angels, Scripture, Prophets, Last day and Belief in the Decrees of God. Besides the six major beliefs in Islam, there are also five Pillars of Faith that is: The Creed, Prayer, Almsgiving, Fasting and Pilgrimage ⁸. There is only one true God and his name is Allah. Allah is all knowing, all powerful and the sovereign judge. Yet Allah is not an interacting personal God, for he is so far above man in every way that he is not personally knowable. The existence of angels is important to Islamic teaching. Gabriel, the leading angel, appeared to Muhammad and was instrumental in delivering the revelation in the Qur'an to Muhammad. The scripture is equally the major tenet of Islam. There are four inspired books in the Islamic faith. They are the Torah of Moses, the Psalms (Zabur) of David, the Gospel of Jesus (Injil) and the Qur'an. Muslim believes that the former three books have been corrupted by Jews and Christians and little of the originals are extent today. In Islam God has spoken through numerous prophets down through the centuries the six greatest are: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad. To Islam, the last day will be the time of resurrection and judgment. Those who follow and obey Allah and Muhammad will go to the Islamic heaven, called Jannah (paradise), a place of pleasure. Those who opposed them will be tormented for a time in hell. And finally on the major beliefs or doctrines is the belief in the Decree of God. He decides the fate of men and angels and is responsible for good and evil ⁹.

Joseph Omoregbe equally submits that there are five principal duties which Islam imposes on its adherents. To him every Muslim is obliged to recite every day the short creed: "There is no God but Allah and Mohammed are his prophet". And that, every Muslim is obliged to pray five times a day (at day break, at noon, in the mid-afternoon, at sunset, and before going to bed at night) facing Mecca. Also, compassion is one of the virtues very dear to Islam. It is one of the attributes of God. Islam therefore imposes on its adherents a practical demonstration of this virtue through almsgiving. Muslims are obliged to fast from dawn to sunset everyday for a whole month (the month of Ramadan) once a year. No food or drink should be taken during this period of the day. And finally, Islam obliged every Muslim who can afford it to go on a pilgrimage (Hajj) to Mecca at least once in his life time. This is a religious exercise which goes a long way in uniting Muslims the world-over and creates them a sense of brotherhood ¹⁰.

African Traditional Religion

African Religion according to Moses Adasu is a religion which is being practiced by men and women today as the religion of their forbears. It is therefore not only a heritage from the past but also a living reality today ¹¹. Joseph Gbenda also asserts that African Traditional Religion

is the religious tradition of the African peoples that is based purely on their culture. The religion was initiated by the ancestors of the present generation thousands of years ago and is still being practiced today ¹².

Some of the basic tenets of African Traditional Religion as summarized by Joseph Omoregbe include the following: that the religion has no founder; for it grew out of the culture of the African people. The religion believes that there is only one God who is the absolute creator, owner and ruler of all things, and the father of all mankind. Two, that there are two worlds namely, the physical world of mortal men and the world of the spirits. There is an interaction between these two worlds, for those in the physical world (mortal men) pray to those in the world of the spirits for help and protection while those in the world of spirits help and protect those in the physical world. The world of the spirits is inhabited by God, the gods (deities or divinities), the ancestors, and the spirits in a hierarchical order. Three, that each god is assigned a duty and an area of influence with delegated powers. Four, that there are supernatural forces which can be tapped and use for good or evil. Five, that as regards the problem of evil, it is believed in African Traditional Religion that God wants all human beings to only do good and avoid evil. He does not condone evil for He punishes every evil, sooner or later, whether done in public or in private. Six that the concept of causality is central in African Traditional thought hence any evil or misfortune that afflicts man must also have a cause ¹³.

An overview of Religious Conflicts in Nigeria

Pluralism of Nigeria embodied a co-existence of perspectives of conflicts which require different approaches to their management ¹⁴. Over the years, Nigeria has been a pathetic victim of religious fanaticism. With the maiden Maitatsine killings in the old Gongola, Borno and Kano states in 1980, a new vista was opened in the history of religious conflict in Nigeria. And since then, no year has gone by without at least one major devastating religious riot ¹⁵. For instance, before April 2006, Borno, Yobe and Kano states were on the boil where killings, maiming and looting caricature of Prophet Muhammad published in September, 2005 in Denmark were reprinted in Norwegian newspaper. Federal Government College, Damaturu in Yobe state was torched in March, 2006 while lives and private properties were destroyed on the allegation that an immodest reference was made of Prophet Muhammad by a student of the college. Collaborating with the views of Zaato, Fatima Nuzhat chronicled the towns that have experienced some of the notable religious conflicts in the post-independence era as follows: Maitatsine riots in Bulumkutu (1982); Maitatsine riots in Jimeta (1984); Kano Maitatsine-(1980,1982, 1987, 1990, 1995) Maitatsine riots in Gombe (1985,1991); Illorin religious conflict(1986); Jalingo (1992, 2009); Shagamu (1999); Kafanchan (1987); Tafawa Balewa (1991, 1995,2001); Zangon-Kataf (1992); Tiv-Jukun and Tiv-Kuteb (1992-93); Potiskum (1994, 2009) Kuteb-Chamba (1997-1998); Igbirra-Bassa (1986-2000); MoonEclipse crisis in Borno (1996); Kaduna Maitatsine riots in Rigassa (1982, 1992, 2000) Tiv and Others in Nassarawa (2001); Jos (1994,2000, 2001-2003,2008, 2009,2010); Ikulu-Bajju (2001); Yelwa-Shandam (2002,2004); Mangu-Bokkos (1992-1995); Bukuru-Gyero (1997);

Maiduguri (2006,2009) Iggah-Oyikwa (2002); Kano(2004); Numan (2004); Azare (2001); Bauchi (2010); Ibadan(2010), Wukari (2010) ¹⁶. Expanding the conversation further, Damian Anyam did not just give the number of the conflicts within the period but presented a vivid account of the dates, places/location, parties involved in the conflicts and the manner/quantum of destruction; mentioning those that led some of the conflicts, stating the number of deaths, number of injuries and quantum of destruction beginning from Thursday May 01, 1980 in Zaria Kaduna State to August 25, 2015 in Damaturu Yobe State ¹⁷. These examples and several others not stated here have impacted negatively on the unity of the country.

The longest of these conflicts is that of the Boko Haram: Islamic fundamentalist group which maintain that the western education is forbidden and must be avoided. They have been unleashing mayhem on people particularly Christians, killing them in hundreds in Churches. The Police institutions, United Nations Building, This Day Newspaper and several other institutions including the Nigerian Armed Forces, have all been victims of their activities. The Boko Haram activities in conjunction with Islamic State of West Africa (ISWA) call for internal cleansing of religion whereby the religious leaders should see it as an obligation to call to order, their followers who preach and promote violence.

Conceptualising Dialogue and Peaceful Co-existence amongst Adherents of Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion

As earlier stated, Dialogue is seen to be a conversation between two or more persons; particularly, a formal conversation in theatrical performance or scholastic exercise. It is a formal discussion between two groups or countries, especially when they are trying to solve a problem or end disagreement. Religious dialogue means discussion between two or more religions which aims at creating congenial atmosphere for co-existence between or among the religions ¹⁸. This type of dialogue has been used in Nigeria to help people resolve longstanding conflicts and to build deeper understanding of contentious issues. Dialogue is not about judging, weighing, or making decisions, but about understanding and learning. Considering the fact that there are many places in Nigeria where Christians, Muslims and Traditionalists still live in peace and harmony, we may be right to say that everybody needs dialogue in Nigeria but not everybody wants dialogue in some parts of Nigeria. This may depend on inherited attitude and religious heritage.

In dialogue, understanding is the key word. Nigerian has gone through many faces of violence to the extent that the value of trust has been replaced with prejudices, preconception and mutual suspicions. These, call for education, debriefing, healing of memory, mental reconstruction, reconciliation and compassion. No one should really claim the right to reject another person or attempt to kill a person for holding a different opinion. Everybody has the right to think differently ¹⁹. In dialogue, we can identify the need for intra- personal dialogue (self examination), inter-personal dialogue, intra-community dialogue; inter-community dialogue, intra- religious dialogue and inter-religious dialogue. For a meaningful religious dialogue to

take place amongst Christians, Moslems and African Religionists there must be some sort of tolerance.

The willingness to accept somebody's opinion that you may not agree with, or who is not like you is sacrosanct. The importance of religious tolerance in a society with many different religious groups cannot be overstated; it is a necessary component in the spread of any religion theory, belief, or philosophy²⁰. The need for religious tolerance in Nigeria has been discussed by several authors but most of these discussions are focused on the relationship between Islam and Christianity. Very little has been said about African Traditional Religion. The nature of tolerance in African Traditional Religion and its relationship with other religious groups has not been adequately explored. Thus, a significant aspect of the discussions towards religious tolerance among the various religious groups in Nigeria is often ignored.

It is commonly known that most acts of religious intolerance arise due to differences in religious views and sometimes due to the desire to make converts through aggressive proclamation of religious views or doctrines. Matthew Hasan Kukah posited that the tolerance displayed by adherents of traditional religion in part accounts for the spread of Islam and Christianity in Nigeria²¹. According to John Mbiti, lack of scriptures in ATR has enabled the religion to move with the times without producing any religious controversies. No one is in danger of being accused of falsehood or heresy for holding different religious views²². Moreover, even though, the indigenous religious practices of the African people are determined by their different societies, they share some common features in their conception of God and the supernatural. These commonly shared religious beliefs tend to discourage proselytization among and across the various African peoples, thus providing an atmosphere of peaceful co-existence.

An Evaluation of Dialogue and Peaceful Co-existence amongst Adherents of Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion

In spite of challenges in Nigeria, it is still possible to identify the forms of dialogue amongst adherents of Christianity, Islam and African Religion. In other words, there are areas where dialogue has worked. In the aspect of dialogue of life, Cornelius Omonokhua maintained that, many Muslims, Christians and Traditional Worshipers in Nigeria live in the same family, attend the same school and work together in the same office and other places of work. These are avenue for some Nigerians to share life together in love and peaceful coexistence²³. In the dialogue of social engagements, some people of different religions in Nigeria often meet in different life situations, like ceremonies, trade and even join together to fight injustice and diseases. This collaboration between Christians and the people of other religions has promoted the integral development and liberation of some people in some parts of the country. In Nigeria some Muslims and Christians have issued joint statements to condemn terrorism and other forms of social ills. In the dialogue of theological exchange, scholars of different religions in the country organize seminars and workshops to discuss theological issues. This has led some

scholars to go beyond the study of their theology to the study of the theology of other religions. In the dialogue of religious experience, people of different religions in Nigeria use any given opportunity to share their religious experiences and dreams. This sharing of testimonies and narration of what God has done in their individual life has led others to be converted interiorly²⁴.

Other areas of dialogue among the three religions under review as identified by Joseph Omoregbe are: concept of God, genealogies and moralities. He posited that Christianity and Islam are both monotheistic religions. They both teach that there is only one God and that he alone should be worshipped. This one God, according to both religions, is the creator and ruler of the universe. These two religions emphasize the compassion, mercy and forgiveness of God²⁵. Also, both Jesus and Mohammed trace their ancestry back to the same ancestral father, namely, Abraham, Isaac and Ismail. Jesus and Mohammed were brothers who had Abraham as their common ancestral father. Christians and Muslims should therefore see each other as brothers and sisters²⁶. In area of morality, both religions based their morality on God consciousness which should be reflected in one's relationship with one's neighbour. The three religions: Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion share a common ethics for they believe that God hates evil and will punish all evil doers, while he will reward good people. They teach that people should love their neighbours and help them in times of need. None of them teaches violence, hatred, killing one's fellow neighbour, as the right way to serve God. Nobody can claim to be doing such things in the name of God or in line with the teaching of any of these religions²⁷.

Politically, the adherents of the three religions not only dialogue together in one political party, they tolerate each other and above all co-exist in one umbrella. They resolve their differences together when they arise and forge ahead with a popular adage that there is no permanent enemy in politics.

Peaceful co-existence is possible among the adherents of Christianity, Islam and African Religion. Nigerian leadership from independence has been coexisting till date. If a president is a Christian, the Vice President is always a Moslem and vice versa. This is not a constitutional matter but the practice is conventionally done from 1960 till date.

Encouraging Dialogue and Peaceful Co-existence amongst the various Religious Denominations

As rightly observed above, incessant conflict between adherents of the three religions under discourse and the emergence of Boko Haram and Islamic State of West Africa (ISWA) whose attacks sometimes did not discriminate between a Christian or Moslem became a major concern for all well-meaning Nigerians both the Government and Religious leaders. Nigerians' leaders are passionate about this and it is in line with the aforementioned concern that former president Goodluck Jonathan instituted an Inter- religious dialogue summit inviting leaders of the three religions to call their followers to order following conflicts that

emanates among them. It is with this concern that the Federal government on the 20th October, 2011 under the leadership of Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan called an extra ordinary meeting of the Nigeria Inter-religious Council (NIREC) at Abuja to appeal to religious leaders to seek ways of using religion to restore peace and promote peaceful co-existence in Nigeria. This meeting reveals that the Nigeria government is passionate about dialogue. Thus, the promotion of dialogue and peaceful co-existence is a major role of NIREC.

In a follow up to what President Goodluck Jonathan did in 2011 was the visit of the President of the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, Rome Jean Louis Cardinal Tauran in Nigeria from March 22-30, 2012. He visited Lagos, Jos, Kafanchan, Sokoto, Abuja and Onitsha. He had an encounter with many religious leaders, and dignitaries including the Vice President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, the Sultan of Sokoto, Emirs, the Chief of Staff to the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and the Governor of Sokoto State ²⁸. Cardinal Tauran's visit to the National Mosque in Abuja was very significant. The Cardinal expressed optimism and hope for Nigeria. He appreciated the hospitality of Nigerians and acknowledges that in spite of the negative reports by international media, Nigeria remain great and full of surprises especially in the relationships that exists between the different religions in the country ²⁹. In view of these it may be true to say that everybody needs dialogue to move Nigeria forward.

In addition to the above efforts, religious leaders can promote dialogue and peaceful coexistence through peace messaging. Religious leaders can advocate for peaceful co-existence through non-violent and inclusive discourse. These messages can be articulated through leaflets, the media, or more commonly, religious sermons. In all the states of the Federation including Abuja which is the Federal Capital Territory, one finds adherents of these three religions-Christianity, Islam and African Religion. However, the level of peaceful coexistence varies from state to state. That notwithstanding, no member of any religion has the right to refuse the other to operate hence Nigeria is a pluralistic society where people with different backgrounds, origins, belief systems, opinions, likes, and dislikes co-exist.

Recommendations

Leaders of Christianity, Islam and African Religion should continue to embrace and encourage dialogue and peaceful co-existence amongst their followers to enhance national integration. Religious leaders should promote dialogue and peaceful co-existence in their messages in the media, sermons and leaflets.

Conclusion

Dialogue is an inevitable instrument in any pluralistic society with diverse religions. It is a viable tool that brings two or more people to settle disputes and it is what has kept Christians, Moslems and African Religionists together in Nigeria even when crises emanate amongst

them. To achieve a peaceful dialogue, the adherents of Christianity, Islam and African Religion must tolerate each other. They must allow some freedom to move within limits. Through mutual tolerance, Nigerian Christians, Moslems and African Religionists have been able to Co-exist from independence till date without breakage. The efforts of Nigeria's political and religious leaders from independence to date must be commended for it is not easy to manage even a nuclear family.

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