

How religious conflicts undermine national integration and under-develop Nigeria

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Abstract

Conflicts are a threat to peaceful coexistence and development in any human society. The persistent incidents of conflicts among religious groups in Nigeria particularly Christianity and Islam affect national integration and underdevelopment in the country. Through these conflicts, thousands of lives are lost, hundreds of thousands are internally displaced and properties worth millions of naira are destroyed. This paper examines the general concept of religious conflicts, national integration, major causes of religious conflict and how these conflicts undermine national integration and underdeveloped Nigeria. The study uses social exclusion theory to explain why religious conflicts occur in Nigeria and undermine national integration and development. It adopts historical and descriptive methods in its analysis. The paper recommends among other things that government and adherents of Christianity and Islam should address the issue of religious intolerance that undermines national integration and development in Nigeria.

Key words: Religious conflicts, national integration, underdeveloped

Introduction

There is a plethora of religions practiced by many nations across the globe with religious differences. These differences have been the cause of conflicts throughout history. From time immemorial, God in his infinite mercy created human beings with different races, languages, cultures and religions to co-exist and integrate for development in the society. Today however, religious conflicts have become a global threat to human co-existence, integration and development. These conflicts are all over the world. In the Middle-East, conflicts continue between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Moslems. Different religious groups in Iraq fight against each other as well as against US led coalition. Conflicts continue between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland (Kunhiyop 2004). In Europe, there are conflicts among the Bosnian Serbs and the Bosnian Moslems in Kosovo. In Asia, there are serious conflicts in Sri-lanka between Christians and Moslems. In India among Hindus and Moslems (Kunhiyop 2004).

In Africa, particularly Nigeria, conflict exists between the Christian Beroms and Hausa/Fulani Muslims in Jos Plateau state. In April 1991, there was a religious conflict between Tafawa Balewa Christians and Hausa/Fulani Moslems in Bauchi state (Armstrong 2014). Between 1979 and 1983, two Maitatsine uprisings occurred in Kano and Yola in Adamawa state (Rowley 2014). From the 21st to 22nd February 2000, there was religious conflict between Muslims and Christians in Kaduna, over introduction of sharia law in some northern states. As if on a break, the crisis in Kaduna resurfaced from May 22nd and 23rd of the same year when the city was again brought down to its knees by adherents of the two major religions with wanton destruction of lives and property. It was the turn of Tafawa Balewa again when in the year 2001 religious crisis arose between Muslims and Christians in Tafawa Balewa local government area of Bauchi State (Alanamu 2005). Meanwhile Adamawa state was not spared of this madness. On the 8th June 2004, religious violence erupted in Numan town, headquarters of Numan Local Government in Adamawa state (Alanamu 2005). In 2013, there was a religious conflict that erupted between Christian and Moslem community in Wukari, Taraba state (Sunday Trust 20th May 2013). Presently, there are increasing conflicts between Muslim Fulani herdsmen and the minority Christian indigenous farmers in most of the states in Nigeria, especially in the Middle belts region of Benue, Taraba Kaduna, Nasarawa Plateau, and Adamawa state. These conflicts claimed 3,642 lives between January 2016 and October 2018 (Amnesty International 2018). Religious conflicts in Nigeria continued to manifest, claimed thousands of lives, thousands of people displaced and property worth billions of naira were being destroyed because of religious intolerance, use of religious symbols and differences and doctrinal issues. The Boko Haram disturbance in Northern Nigeria has claimed many lives with over 3,000 residents already displaced. This work therefore sets out to examine how religious conflicts undermine national integration and underdevelopment in Nigeria.

Conceptual Clarifications

Religious conflicts

Iwe (2003) defines religion as an institution that is characterized by belief in the supernatural being, a body of doctrines, ethical code and a system of worship that must have a definite organizational structure. For religion to be what it should be, it must have a defined structure that is responsible for regulating the entire beliefs and practices of such religion. This is not to say that religion is limited to an organized structure, but it cuts across every aspect of social structures.

Conflict is a struggle or contest between people with opposing needs, ideas, beliefs, values, or goals. Oyeshola (2006) defines religious conflict as disagreement, dispute or controversy in ideas or viewpoints held by two or more individuals, communities or religious groups. Many scholars have written on religious conflicts defining the term variously. However, one denominator that binds all of these definitions, diverse as they may be, is the connotation of disagreement between the two or more religious groups.

Religious conflict is thus the type of disagreement that occurs among two religions or between some sects within the same religious group. Religious conflict may occur over religious intolerance, doctrinal issues and the use of religious symbols.

National Integration

National integration is a major component of nation-building in nearly all society of the modern world, whether underdeveloped, developing or developed. It is simply and briefly means national unity. It is a unity in diversity. It means unifying all the forces in the country so as to give the idea of one nation. The Indian Study Channel (2010) identifies national integration as the sentiments of nationalism; the feeling of oneness; social, political, economic, linguistic and cultural unity; common ideas of life and code of behavior; the ability to subordinate sectarian and parochial loyalties to the loyalty of the nation. Indeed, citizens of Nigeria have sharp contrasts with the above ideology of national integration.

In Nigeria, national integration is the soul of national question. It is generally assumed that national integration is the answer to the national question. According to Awa (2013), national integration “is a process of creating a sense of national consciousness, uniqueness of identity and loyalty among people of different socio-cultural identities (racial, ethnic, language, religion, and so on) into a single territorial political society.”

The concept of national integration connotes the process of arriving at an acceptable formula for resolving the grievances, suspicions and fears expressed by different ethno-geographical, religious and ideological groups against one another and the federal state. Talla et al (2010) observe that national integration concept is expected to bring about a union in which the different groups rather than bear grievances against each other fear and suspect one another, they cooperate, respect, appreciate, understand one another and share common loyalty to the federal, state and above all other primordial interests.

Theoretical framework

The paper adopts Social Exclusion or social marginalization theory coined by Red Lenoir, Secretary of State of Social Action. It is a term that has been used widely in Europe and was first used in France in the late 20th century. It is used across disciplines including education, sociology, psychology, politics and economics (Silver 1994). Social exclusion is the process in which individuals are blocked from or denied full access to various rights, opportunities and resources that are normally available to members of a different group, and which are fundamental to social integration and observance of human rights

within that particular group. For example, housing, employment, healthcare, civic engagement, democratic participation, and due process.

Alienation or disenfranchisement resulting from social exclusion can be connected to a person's social class, race, skin color, religious affiliation, ethnic origin, educational status, childhood relationships, living standards, and or political opinions, and appearance (The Salvation Army 2008). Such exclusionary forms of discrimination may also apply to people with a disability, minorities people, drug users, institutional care leavers, the elderly and the young. Anyone who appears to deviate in any way from perceived norms of a population may thereby become subject to coarse or subtle forms of social exclusion.

The outcome of social exclusion is that affected individuals or communities are prevented from participating fully in the economic, social, and political life of the society in which they live (Young 2000). This may result in resistance in the form of demonstrations, protests or lobbying from the excluded people (Walsh 2006). Some religious traditions recommend excommunication of individuals said to deviate from religious teaching or doctrine, and in some instances shunning by family members. Other religious organizations permit the censure of critics. A study by the Pew Research Center on international religious freedom (2009) found that 61% of countries have social hostilities that tend to target religious minorities are Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, Iraq, and Bangladesh. Across societies in Nigeria, individuals and some communities are socially excluded on the basis of their religious beliefs. Social hostility against religious minorities resulting to communal violence occur in Nigeria because governments fail to recognise policies restricting the religious practice of minorities. This can be seen especially in Northern Nigeria and has seriously affected national integration leading to underdevelopment in Northern Nigeria.

Some major causes of religious conflicts in Nigeria

Nigeria has been inundated with a gamut of religious crises from 1980 to date resulting to the death of thousands of people, wanton destruction of property including churches, mosques, public and private property running into hundreds of millions of naira (Nwaomah, 2010).

One of the major causes of this conflict is religious intolerance, fundamentalism and extremism. These form the base upon which other sources of religious violence rest. Religious intolerance simply means hostility towards other religions, as well as the inability of religious adherents to harmonize between the theories and the practical aspect of religion (Jegede 2019). It encompasses bigotry which is the obstinate and intolerant devotion to one's opinion and prejudices, especially the expression of intolerance and animosity towards persons of differing beliefs (Jegede 2019). Further, the use of religious symbols is another source of religious conflict in Nigeria (Jegede 2019). For instance, the use of the Hijab by Muslim women even where the regulatory regime prohibits their use. Also, following the prohibition of the use of head scarves by female law students in the Faculty of Law, Ahmadu Bello University (ABU), Zaria, a Christian lecturer, Dr. Andrew Akume, turned back a female student who was on Hijab from attending his lecture. His action provoked the Muslim Student's Society (MSS), thus, they mobilized themselves and issued a fatwa (i.e. Islamic death sentence) on the said lecturer, thereby forcing him into hiding (Jegede 2019). This act led to religious tension on the campus just as it led to stain relationship between the governments of Kaduna (ABU) and Benue State (where the man came from). Not only that, the inscription of Arabic symbols on Nigerian currency denominations has also been vehemently

opposed by Christians in Nigeria, who associate it with Islam and an all-embracing Islamization agenda by northern Muslims. Muslims, on the other hands, have also opposed the use of the “cross” as a symbol on public hospitals sign and bill boards and other hospital accessories (Jegade 2019).

Doctrinal issues and discrimination of people based on their religious affiliation cause religious conflict. In Nigeria there exist disagreements between adherents of the one or different religion(s) over doctrinal issues or unjust treatments carried out against member(s) of a particular religion by members of the same or another religion. To this extent, religious conflicts can be defined as any disagreement that occurs between adherents of the same or different religious group(s) over incompatible religious interests or contradictory doctrinal issues or values which is often interpreted in religious terms (Jegade 2019).

Government patronage of a particular religion

In spite of the constitutional prohibition of disqualifications of disabilities inflicted on persons on account of their religious leanings, religious patronage has been entrenched in the public realm, depending on the predominance of particular religious’ adherents in positions of authority (Sampson 2012). He further noted that at the federal and state government levels, public officials manifestly patronise particular religions at the expense of others. In many states of Northern Nigeria, public funds are used for the purchase and distribution of food items and other valuables for Muslim faithful during the Ramadan fast; however, government does not extend the same gesture to Christians during Christmas or traditional religious celebrations. This is also the case in some southern states of the country that are predominately Christians.

Ethnicity, Religion and Politics

The fact that the Nigerian populace is polarized along ethnic, religious and political divides has been a catalyst for religious violence in Nigeria (Uwaegbute 2013). Loyalty to ethnic and religious groups impedes true nationalism, peaceful coexistence and unity of the country. From the colonial times till date, leaders use ethnic and religious biases to win election and divide the country. The post-election violence of 2011 best describes situations whereby both religious and ethnic sentiments played out in some northern Muslims’ acceptance of the fact that Goodluck Jonathan, a Southerner and a Christian, won the presidential elections against General Buhari, a Northern Muslim (Uwaegbute 2013). Most of the conflicts that take place begin from these ancient religious identities fueled by selfish political motives. Bature (2005) observes that the proponents of both Christian and Islam use their faith to justify and engage in acts of the wanton destruction of life and property. He further noted that family members, neighbors, community leaders and government officials continuously turn against one another in the name of ethnicity, politic and religious expediency. Sharing similar view, Rotgak (2004) observed that “struggle for power and position in Nigeria has led to the manipulation of ethnicity and religion by the elites for selfish reasons.” He further noted that, hardly is there an appointment especially within or from northern part of the country without ethnic and religious interference made to it. In Nigeria today, employment into public office, ministries, agencies and directorates of federal government are mostly for ethnic and religious reasons and not competence. When you raise objections it snowballs into ethnic or religious fight.

Inept system of governance

In this work, the writers also discovered bad system of governance as causes of religious conflict in Nigeria. Bad system of governance is a government that fails to provide security, employment, education,

religious and political stability for the well-being of all citizens. It is important to note here that the failure of Nigerian leaders to establish good governments, forge national integration and promote what can be called real economic progress, security, employment, quality education through deliberate and articulated policies, has led to mass poverty and unemployment. This has resulted into ethnic and religious conflicts that have now characterized the Nigerian nation. Insecurity, poor standard of education, poverty and unemployment have served as nursery bed for many ethnic and religious conflicts in Northern Nigeria because the North has the reservoir of poor and uneducated people who are warmongers as mercenary fighters. What this means theoretically is that insecurity, poor standard of education, poverty and unemployment increase the number of people who are prepared to kill or be killed for a given course at a token benefit. These explain why all ethnic and religious conflicts that ever occurred in northern Nigeria have a large turnout of people (including under-aged) as fighters.

How religious conflicts undermine national integration and under develop Nigeria

Religious conflicts have undermined national integration and underdeveloped Nigeria as a nation socially, educationally, economically, and politically. In Nigeria, violent religious conflict, more especially between the Christians and Muslims have claimed thousands of lives and properties worth hundreds of millions have been destroyed (Jegade 2019). These conflicts have also resulted in fracturing the Christian/Muslim relationship in Nigeria (Onabanjo, 2011). The resultant effects of religious conflict on Nigerian national integration which is the focus of this paper are enormous. Socially it affects all aspects of human life, it breeds insecurity, discriminations, mutual mistrust and suspicious between individual and various religious groups. This is aside from thousands of lives that are wasted and maimed on daily basis (Apuwabi, 2018).

The crises have equally taken its toll on the educational sector, it has led to incessant closure of schools, destruction of school facilities, abduction and raping of school girls by Boko Haram insurgents. The correlation between ethno-religious Conflict and under-development is well captured by Onwumah (2014) when he posits that: In economic terms, religious and ethnicity crises damage resources and facilities which took time to be acquired. No foreign investor will like to invest funds in a country that is divided by communal religious crises.

Politically, Nigeria is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation. As such, it needs peaceful co-existence as panacea for national integration of the country. Yet, this is not the case as the nation has continued to experience violent religious conflicts tainted with political undertone, more especially between the Christians and Muslims in the country (Jegade 2019). Further, despite the fact that Nigeria is a secular state, the interference of religion in political affairs is second to none. Religion has continued to destabilize the peace of the nation. The Muslims, in the northern parts, with a claim to numerical advantage have severally attempted to nationalize the Islamic faith to the highest level of the nation’s governance through various means like the Sharia Debate, OIC saga, and the introduction of Sharia in some Northern States by the Northern governors. Attempts by the Christians, especially those living in the North, to kick against the introduction of the sharia system of governance in view of the constitutional secularity of the country are opposed by Muslim adherents who deem it as their right to enthrone Islamic monotheism in Nigeria. Commenting on the activities of radical Boko Haram fundamentalism, one scholar observed that the sect is at the vanguard for the fight for Islamisation of the country (Lengmang

2013). The sect has increasingly become radicalised and more daring to periodically express themselves through violence, killing and destruction of lives and property for the enthronement of an Islamic theocratic state.

Recommendations

After a careful study of how religious conflicts undermine national integration and underdeveloped Nigeria, the paper observes the following recommendations.

Some of the major causes of religious conflicts in Nigeria are religious intolerance, fundamentalism and extremism. It is against this background that this paper strongly recommends for the introduction of Comparative Religious Studies in secondary schools. This should be taught as one of the general studies (GST) in colleges and universities in Nigeria. The curriculum of this subject will deal with the objective views of both religions. It will ensure mutual relationship. If this subject is introduced, it will take care of the problem of religious intolerance. Pupils should be taught from the early childhood the importance of religious tolerance. This will positively change the negative thinking patterns of our people on religious sentiment and ensure national integration and development in Nigeria.

Nigeria is a multi-religious society. Therefore, Government should maintain neutrality in inter-religious affairs. Religious violence is escalated because some religious affairs are believed by some people to be favoured by government at the expense of others. This can be seen in the involvement of government in the Muslim and Christian pilgrimage activities in Nigeria. Furthermore, some state governors in Nigeria use state resources to execute religious activities. Government should desist in dabbling in religious affairs and leave that to the various religious faiths.

Most of the major causes of religious conflicts in Nigeria are religious intolerance, fundamentalism, extremism, doctrinal issues and ethnic and religious politics. Religious leaders in collaboration with the government should organise regular conferences and seminars on religious dialogue to enhance participants the required skills to quell religious antagonism and extremism, doctrinal issues and religious politics. Conferences on inter-religious dialogue should be organised periodically in the Nigerian Universities and should be included in primary and secondary curriculum.

African religions have good conflicts management techniques for mitigating crises issues. There is a need for government and the Nigeria Inter Religious Council (NIREC) to give equal leadership to the African religion practitioners and not just Christian and Islamic clerics to help in conflicts management and resolution for a national integration and development in Nigeria.

Conclusion

The paper examined the causes of religious conflict in Nigeria with Christianity and Islam in focus. The paper discovered that religious intolerance, fundamentalism, extremism, use of religious symbols, doctrinal issues, government patronage of particular religion, inept governance, ethnic and religious politics as some of the causes of religious conflict in Nigeria. Further, from the findings, it is quite evident that religious conflicts in Nigeria have fueled social, educational, economic and political instability and have succeeded in driving religion into undermining national integration and underdevelopment. Nigeria is now labeled as one of the poverty capitals of the world after India, despite its abundant human and material resources. It is the conviction of this paper that if adherents of Christianity and Islam imbibe the spirit of tolerance, respect each other's religious beliefs, forge mutual trust across religious divides, the nation will be on its way to an "Eldorado" of conscientious and purposeful development.

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