Religious Conflict And Politics In Nigeria: Implications For National Development

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Abstract

Man is a political as well as a religious being. Religion and politics therefore, are an intrinsic and integral part of man. It is pertinent to state that religion is a two edged sword and as such could be used as an integrative as well as divisive tool in any society. When the divisive aspect of religion is not properly handled, it creates conflict. In recent times, the rate at which religion is used to stir up political unrest in Nigeria is very alarming and has become a source of great worry to many Nigerians. The aims of this work are: to review some religious crises that have been used to cause political unrest in Nigeria, examine the factors that are responsible for this unhealthy relationship between religion and politics and its negative effects on national development. Finally, to suggest possible solutions to this cancerous and perennial problem. The paper employed a historical cum sociological method of research in data collections and analysis. Findings from the study showed that some politicians incite religious conflict in order to fight their opponents.

Key words: Religion, Politics, Conflict

Introduction

Politics and religion when well applied blend to produce a peaceful and progressive society devoid of ranchor. But in recent times because of the inordinate ambition by some to lead and acquire wealth at all cost now use religion to wage war against one another as a means of underscoring political differences between them and their opponents, especially when their selfish interest is at stake. Religious and political structures in every social setting appear to be inseparable but they differ in their methods and approaches.

However, the basic fact remains that the relationship between the two has been very cordial. Expatiating more on this, Yinger (1984) opines that religious and political orders are universally interactive and that both of them are involved with questions that arise from the fact that a greater number of values which man strive for; such as position, power, possession and prestige are inadequate in supply (p. 61).

Though they have been rubbing each other's back in romance as the society becomes more complex and sophisticated because of contact with other people and cultures, the attitude gradually changed giving rise to antagonism, and schism hence, the soured relationship. Lending credence to this view, Williams, cited in (Okafor, 1997) posits that:

> As societies become more heterogeneous, due to culture contact, and
> when sharper lines of stratification appear, a different pattern of
> relationship between religion and politics sets in. As these trends may

loosen the hold on social norms, some members of society acquire an instrumental attitude towards religion (p. 185)

Sequel to this, religion is now being used by politicians and political leaders to maintain their positions. Therefore, any time their selfish interest is at stake, they use religion to stir up a riot, hence the present terrorist acts of Islamist fundamentalist of sporadic shooting of guns and bombing in the North. It is disheartening to note at this juncture that this unfriendly relationship between religion and politics has taken an unprecedented dimension, hampered and crippled the socio-economic and political life of Nigerian citizens a great deal. And this has become a source of great worry to many Nigerians. The aims of this work are: to review some religious crises that have been used to cause political unrest in Nigeria, examine the factors that are responsible for this unhealthy relationship between religion and politics and its negative effects on national development. Finally, to suggest possible solutions to this cancerous and perennial problem, the paper employed a historical cum sociological method of research in data collections and analysis.

By way of conceptual clarification, conflict is generally perceived as a disagreement between one individual and another, groups or nations. In the frame of mind Phil-Eze (2009) sees it as the expression of disagreement over something important to two individuals, groups, states or nations when they have different views, different goals, different needs and different values and they fight over limited resources to address them (p. 393).

Okwueze (2003) quipped that religion is a regulated pattern of life of a people in which experience, belief and knowledge are reflected in man's conception of himself in relation to others, his social world, the physical as well as the metaphysical world (p. 3). On the other hand, politics according Ekwunife (1992) is the science and art of government. By government, is meant indispensable social organisation established in every society for the purpose of formally enacting, codifying and enforcing the laws and values of that particular society (p. 9).

Relationship between Religion and Politics
Man is a religious as well as a political animal. Man is an embodiment of the two; hence they are surreptitiously married to one another. In fact, rightly did Udoidem (1997) observed that what is even more intriguing and perplexing is that it is the same concrete human person who assumes both political and religious identity and that necessarily affects the other, what emerged from this ineluctable relationship is that the issue of separation of religion and politics is pragmatically problematic (p. 154). Moreso, man is highly religious and he manifests this in everything he does. No wonder Mbiti (1975) noted that Africans are notoriously religious and that religion permeates into all the departments of his life so fully that it is not always easy to isolate it.

Mbiti (1969) added that, whenever the African is, there is his religion, He comes with it to the fields where he is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop, he takes it with him to a beer party, to attend a funeral ceremony, and if he is educated, he takes, religion with him to the examination room at school or in the university. If he is a politician, he takes it to the House of Representatives. The truth is that as it applies to Africans, so it is applied to the rest of the world. In the same line of thought, Ononogbu (2012) writes that, "Religion is pivotal to understanding the quotidian experiences, relationships and struggle of a typical Nigeria". In fact, the reality of it is that religion and politics by

whatever definition are closely related. Within religious circles, it is often said that all power belongs to God (Udoidem, 1997). God should therefore, be the determinant of human actions. and religion should be used to determine the socio-economic and political life of humans.

The situation becomes even more complex where those who held that religion and politics should be inseparable in the determination of human actions in both private and public life and those who hold that there should be a separation of religion and politics in human affairs co-exist in the same community. Definitely, there is bound to be conflict in the understanding of issues and how they are to be resolved. Nigeria is a typical example of a nation where this type of co-existence is found. The two predominant religions are Islam and Christianity. Islam teaches the inseparability of religion and politics in human affairs, while Udoidem (1997) insists that Christianity, traditionally and doctrinally upholds the separation of religion and politics, church and state.

As noted by Mathew (1994) cited in Udoidem (1997), "these two religions are straddled across the Nigerian polity, each no longer looking and pleading to be admitted but seeking to take over the architectural design and construction of the Nigerian polity" (p. 154). Udoidem concluded by saying, it is the struggle for control that is the root cause of the conflicts and crises in the nation's political and religious life.

A Review of Religious Crises Caused by Political Interests
Igwe (2012) opined that almost 80% of these religious crises are fueled by political factors (p. 10). Corroborating this view the Centre for Reduction of Religious – Based Conflict cited in (Ejim, 2012) observes that:

> Political and Sectarian violence have claimed more than 16,000 lives since the end of military rule in 1999 protests by opposition supporters in 12 northern states following the April, 16 presidential election degenerated into three days of violent riots and sectarian killings between Christians and Muslims that left hundreds dead including at least 680 in Kaduna State (p. 15).
> Examples of such riots are as follows:

Sharia Riots
Sharia is an Islamic law which is meant to govern the activities of Muslims. It is believed that a true Muslim cannot live in a society without practising the sharia law. The protagonists of Islam go about campaigning for the adoption and implementation of the Sharia law in Nigeria. It is important to note at this juncture the first step towards the introduction of Sharia law in the Nigerian legal system was taken in 1960 following the Abu Ramat panel report on the northern regional judiciary and the first Sharia Court of Appeal was established in 1960. That same year, the first judges to the court were appointed. Its jurisdiction was restricted to Islamic personal law, apparently, in recognition of the religious plurality of the then northern region. In 1979, the Sharia Court of Appeal found a place for the first time in the Federal constitution. Section 240(2) of the constitution states as follows, "there shall be for any state that requires it a Sharia Court of Appeal for the state" (Canute, 2002). This being the status quo, the Zamfara State governor Alhaji Sanni Ahmed in 1999 adopted the Sharia Law following the success of it in his state. Other governors in the north attempted to do same contrary

to the wish of the Christians and this caused the infamous Sharia riot of 2000 in Kaduna and other neighbouring towns.

OIC Crises
In fact, since January 8, 1986 when the news of the alleged membership of Nigeria in the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) filtered into the ears of Nigeria, voices of dissent have been rife from well-meaning Nigerian citizens especially, Christians. As one scholar (cited in Ekwunife, 1992) succinctly observed:

> OIC issue is an acid test of President Babangida's wisdom and commitment to the course of Nigerian political stability, unity and peace… anybody in Nigeria who cannot yet understand that the possible exception of the Nigerian civil war, there is no other issues that has so threatened the peace, unity and stability of the country more than the OIC issue is either dishonest or dreamer (p. 25).

The off shoot of this alleged deal is that it has divided Nigerian political citizens into two major religious groups; Islam and Christianity. While the adherents of the former try to throw some light on the benefits of membership, the latter see the venture as an attempt to Islamise the whole nation (Ekwunife, 1992). In another development, Igwe (2012) aptly remarks that from 1999 – 2012, almost 80% of these religious crises are fuelled by political factors. For example, the Centre for Reduction of Religious Based Conflict observes that;

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Boko- Haram Islamist Sect
For many years in Nigeria up to present, there have been religious crises. The recent phenomenon in this religious conflict is Boko Haram. This is an Islamic militant sect that detest all forms of Western civilization that are absolutely against the experience, ideological values and behaviours of Islam. The sect was founded by Abubakar Lawan in 1995 known as Shahaba. He later went to Saudi Arabia for studies, and the mantle of leadership rested on Muhammed Yusuf in 2002. Yusuf, who claimed to be articulate and knowledgeable at the same time, later parted ways with some of the teachings and interpretations of the Qur'ans. Henceforth, the Islamic doctrine he proclaimed changed radically and become fanatical in temper (Jando, 2011).

A brief account of the Boko Haram activities from 2009 to 2014 are summarized in the table below:

Some Major Attacks by the Boko Haram Sect from 2009 to 2014

S/No	Date	States	Nature	Casualties
1	11 June 2009	Bauchi	Clash between members of the Boko Haram and	17 members of the sect were killed

			the police	
2	26 – 30 July 2009	Bauchi, Borno, Kano, Yobe	Religious violence unleashed by the radical *Boko Haram* sect	Over 700 persons killed; 3,500 persons internally displaced; over 392 women widowed; and several property destroyed.
3	8 September 2010	Bauchi	Attach on the central prison with arson and sect members released from custody	Destruction of the prison and death of some prison officials
4	28 January, 2011	Borno	Murder of ANPP Governorship candidate, ModuFannami and six others	An attempt to fight bad leaders led the murder
5	9-31 May 2011	Bauchi and Borno	Bomb blasts, killings of solders, policemen, Bauchi military barracks and murder of Alhaji Abba AnasGarba El-Kanemi, a brother to the Shehu of Borno	The use of explosives on humans, traditional leaders and strategic military buildings.
6	1-16 June 2011	Borno, Abuja and Yobe	Explosion at St. Patrick Catholic Church, Police Station, Police Force Headquarters, Beer Parlour, the Chairman of Ijere LGA and numerous others shot dead.	Core government institutions, prominent leaders and social recreational and relaxation centres targeted and destroyed. The first successful suicide bombing was recorded.
7.	26th August 2011	Abuja	Bombing of United Nations building	The bombing of the UN House at Abuja on 26th August, 2011 caused diplomatic strain. At least 23 persons (11 UN personnel and 12 non-UN personnel) were killed
8	20th January 2012	Kano	Boko-Haram bomb attack in Kano city and police barracks.	186 people were killed
9	February 2012	Damaturu and potiskum	Boko-Haram Islamist sect and the members of the public at large.	Nine churches and more than 90 people were killed. Media houses, banks, schools and market places were destroyed.
10	2nd December 2013	Maiduguri boronu	300 Boko-Haram Isalmist sect members attacked a military formation, with 25 hillux pick-up vans loaded with rockets propelled grenade launchers, with AK-47 riffles.	Some air-crafts were destroyed, buildings, ships, petrol stations. With 24 killed.

11	14th & 15th april, 2014	Abuja (Nyanya)	Nyanya motor park bomb blast and Chibok secondary school girls abduction.	Over 88 people died and over 200 injured. Over 200 students were abducted.

Source:no.1-7 Onuoha (2011) and Jando (2011) in Ukandu (2014),source10 Omonobi (2013), AFP (2013) English news.cn (2013).Source 7, Okwor (2012).source 11, Ibenwa (2014)

Identifiable Causes of Religious Conflicts In Nigeria
Several factors are responsible for immediate and remote causes of religious crises in Nigeria. The factors are discussed here under:

Poverty This is the inability of a person, state or nation to adequately provide for itself. Irrespective of huge resource, Nigeria is still rated as one of the poorest countries in the world. This being the status quo people gives out themselves when offered any peanut to participate in religious or political crisis in order to make ends meet. The same truth was acknowledged by Isah (2009) when he reports that the Sultan of sokoto, Alhaji Saad Abubakar 111, posits that poverty contributes to Jos crises, that it is not just politics, it is not just religion, it is total hunger and poverty in the land. Onwudiwe (2004) asserts that:

Much of the bloody disorder in the northern cities of Kano, Kaduna, and Jos is restricted to poorer neighbourhoods, a situation that suggests an economic dimension to his general atmosphere of distrust and violence in the country. In these poor, overcrowded and starved communities, youthful gangs of Muslims and Christians burn down churches and mosques and savagely hack each other to death over trivial provocation (p.1). As of April 2014, Nigeria ranks third on world poverty index. International Monetary Fund/World Bank said that in April, 2014 that Nigeria is one of the five top countries that has largest number of poor people .(Onah,2014).

Differences in Belief Systems. Difference in the belief systems and practices account to a large extent for the frequent politico-religions unrest in Nigeria. For example, the 2000 Sharia religious riots in Zamfara, Kaduna and other northern parts of Nigeria and OIC issue of General Babangida (former military head of state) which Ekwunife (1992) described as: "acid test", and which the Christians fought against. The Christians believe in exclusiveness of salvation in Christ Jesus and the superiority of the Holy Bible over the Quran just as the Muslims believe in their Quran and this has cause serious problem today. Moreso, the Muslims believe that religion (church) and politics (state) cannot be separated while the Christians believe that the two can be separated. Supporting this view, Marcus & Gieckern (2012) wrote thus: "We also have discovered that most Christian believers do not approve religious pluralism due to its attendant denial of the exclusive salvation in Jesus Christ and its denial of the inerrancy of the scripture (p. 16).In the same vein, Udoidem (1997) averred that Islamic philosophy divides the world into two camps: believers and infidel. Infidels are to be humiliated and deprived of the due process of law and ultimately to be killed or converted as prescribed by the Holy Quran (p. 154 – 155).
Dominion. The struggle for control over one religion or which one becomes the state religion among the foreign religions of (Christianity and Islam) has resulted in an

unfriendly relationship between the adherents of the two religions and this is posing a serious threat to the unity of the country . Attesting to this, Marcus and Gideon (2012) assert that: The most alarming which many fear is that it may amount to another World War if not checked is the threat and resultant effects of fanatic or religious tussle for dominance among diverse religious beliefs and practices of the world. It has manifested in violence, terrorism, hatred, divisions, wanton destruction of lives and property (p. 1). Corruption. Corruption is one of the greatest problems facing Nigeria in the recent times. And this has led to politico- religious conflicts resulting in hijacking, kidnapping, killings, bombing and suicide bombing in Nigeria. Nwodo (2008) has this to say in this regard: Corruption has assumed an enigmatic shape in Nigeria and consequently difficult to describe or define. President Obasanjo during his swearing in ceremony in 1999, said that corruption was the greatest bane of the society and no society could achieve anything if it allows corruption to thrive.

Bad/Weak Leadership. One of the main characteristics of a bad leader is one who allows his/her interest to take precedence over that of the public. Most times, the leader is autocratic in the administration of the people, at times, he/she does not listen to the yearnings and aspirations of the people. He/she wants to perpetuate himself on the throne and this is what is happening currently in Arabian countries and in Africa. The cases of Libya, Cote D'Voire, Eqypt, Algeria, Senegal, Tunisia, Mali are good examples of such (Ibenwa, 2012). There is a common saying that when the head is sick, all other parts of the body is affected. The same is true of bad administrator. When this begins to happen, concerned citizens will capitalize on the bad government and use any means available to them to cause unrest and destroy lives and property. In the case of a weak leader, a similar thing happens. This fact was attested to by Asogwa (2008) when he wrote that: the effectiveness of government has a lot of rules to play with regards to the people's way of life. It was in the same frame of mind as Asogwa, Achebe and others that Nebo (2011) writes more about bad leadership in Nigeria as the bane of Nigerian society, thus;

> While the developed countries worry over the management of technological breakthroughs and volatile economic landscapes, many developing and underdeveloped countries are cruising in poverty, hunger and starvation, woeful health conditions etc. Nigeria's failure to develop and match such countries as the Asian Tigers who started the race to nationhood with us essentially is a leadership problem (p. 6).

Selfishness. The selfishness on the part of our leaders is a serious rift on the Nigerian society today. According to Chuta (2004), "selfishness as a practice of caring about one self and not about others, of attracting benefits to oneself first or in a disproportional manner to favour oneself" (p.44). It is the love of oneself and the quest to amass wealth to self at expense and detriment of others" This is wickedness and it creates problems which metamorphoses into conflicts. As Ekwunife (1992) rightly pointed out, the cause of religious crisis lies not in Christian, Islam or African Traditional Religion (ATR) as such, but in the unpatriotic approach to religion by their adherents to score political,

economic, social or religious gains. What indeed breeds intolerance among different religious groups or some members of any group is selfishness (p.8).

Implications for National Development

The ugly faces of the stained relationship between religion and politics in Nigeria are devastating. In a similar reaction, Ezeme (2007) pin pointing the evils inherent in religious and inter-ethnic conflicts says that: they are in every case negatively far reaching as in most cases these conflicts result in wanton destruction to life and property (p. 311).

Destruction of Lives and Property. First and foremost, among the implications of this evil relationship is the wanton destruction of lives and property. According to Okeke (2004), the spill over of Kano killings of Igbo ignited reprisal killings of Muslims in Eastern towns of Onitsha, Owerri, Umuahia etc. The reprisal attacks on Muslims in the East by Igbo Christian extremists left behind 2000 deaths and property put at 1.5 billion naira destroyed (p. 32). In a similar situation, Adukwu (1997) records that Kano city, the commercial hob of northern states incontrovertibly remains the hot bed of religious fundamentalism. In 1980, the ancient city of Kano was engulfed in the infamous Maitatsine religious uprisings that claimed over 6,000 lives and property put at 2.5 million naira were destroyed (p. 296).

Tarnishing of the Image of Nigeria Abroad: With frequent religious cum political crises in the recent times, the image of Nigeria abroad is being tarnished. Sequel to this, Nigerians abroad are seen by the white men as a hostile and a quarrelsome people and this is having a very negative effect on them overseas (Ibenwa. 2012)

It Creates Refugees/Accommodation Problem: Undoubtedly, many Nigerians up North are now homeless in their own father-land as a result of religious cum political tussle among Nigerian political elite. Continuing on this, Yahaya (2011) said that: "the violence soon spread to other places and that Kafanchan has became a refugee town with over 40,000 displaced persons". Onwubuiwe (2008) added that the side effects of violence often leave so many homeless and jobless (p.251)

Increase in the Number of Disabled Persons. Religious conflict leads to an increase in the number of physically disabled persons in Nigeria today due to the fact that in every religious disturbances, some people are killed, some wounded while others are maimed forever. They have their hands or feet cut off by angry rioters and this leads to an astronomical increase in the number of disabled people in Nigeria. A greater number of these victims join the beggars on the streets and highways, thereby impoverishing the nation (Ibenwa, 2012).

Increase in the Number of Widows/Widowers and Fatherless/Motherless Children. Over the last two decades, Nigeria has experienced a succession of ethno-religious and socio-political crises that have resulted in the loss of hundreds of lives and property worth millions of naira (Okenyi, 2012). Commenting on the side effects of religious fanaticism/riots, Onwukaiwe says that: The side effects of violence leave numerous women widows and countless member of children fatherless and motherless (p. 251).

Discouragement of Foreign Investment. Economically speaking, frequent religious unrest discourages foreign investment. Foreigners, who come to do business in Nigeria, when they witness these riots happening before their very eyes, know that they and their businesses are not safe and that one day it may be their own turn. They get discouraged

because of the insecurity of their lives and property. They may decide to withdraw and go back to their various countries thereby withdrawing their investments. (Ibenwa, 2012)

Recommendations

In any academic discourse, which is normally problem oriented, useful suggestions are made so as to improve the situation on ground. The solutions are as follows;

The Government should establish more poverty alleviation programmes to handle cases of hunger and starvation in order to reduce poverty in the country that make people give in to any form of crisis at the sight of monetary peanuts .The Government should take the issue of corruption in this Country more seriously. Anybody caught in any form of corruption should be dealt with irrespective of whose ox gored. That is to say that there should be no sacred cow. In order to minimize the problem of leadership in terms of bad or weak leaders, the government on its part, should appoint people of good reputation. In the case of democracy, they should allow free and fair elections. More so, the electorate should vote for people with good track records and images. The various religious groups and government should put in place machinery for checking and forestalling acts of fanaticism and constitutional breach of people's rights and freedom in terms of freedom of worship and association. The adherents and leaders of the two religions should learn to respect, tolerate and accommodate their differences in doctrines and practices. The political elite should try as much as possible to play politics according to the rules and stop the method of stirring up crisis whenever their selfish interest is at stake and go for dialogue. Therefore, there is an urgent need for re-orientation and re-enlightenment of the masses and those politicians who believe that religion can be manipulated to achieve political gains today. Finally, government should not be deeply involved in religious matter rather they should advice when and where necessary and government should separate religion from politics.

Conclusion

Religious members and political players should do whatever they are doing according to the rules of the game and as stipulated by Nigerian constitution in order to make way for peaceful co-existence of the two. It was discovered in the course of this work that some politicians incite religious conflict in order to fight their opponents anytime their political and economic interests are at stake. This battle to wanton destruction of lives and property, frequent bomb blasts and gun shots in recent times. And in the promotion of political instability thereby threatening the unity of the country and retarding the process of national development in the country. Politics should not be used to stir up religious acrimonies because of the self-interest of some political elite. Religion should be used and not abused. Religion, for whatever reason, cannot be used to justify war since it encourages peace, love of oneself and ones neighbour and God, justice, equity and fair play.

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