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## Religious Pluralism and National Development

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### Abstract

This paper examines religious pluralism and national development . It must be noted that Nigeria is a pluralistic country that has diverse religious groups. Recently, there is a debate going on among people that religious groups have contributed a lot to the religious uprisings that are going on in the country. There is a need to ascertain whether the existence of these religions are impediment to the growth and development of this country due to their varied beliefs and practices. The methodology used in this research is phenomenological approach to ensure the objectivity of the study of these religions. It made use of analytical and descriptive method. Through the research, it is discovered that despite the contributions of religions in the country yet religions have been responsible for the under development of the country through incessant religious riots, destruction of human lives and property. The religions in Nigeria, due to their penchant to scramble for Nigeria, have failed to address core challenges of corruption, unemployment, poverty armed robbery, kidnapping, and Boko Haram which have stagnated the growth and development of this country.

Key words: Religion, pluralism and development

### Introduction

Religious pluralism occurs where more than one religion practice their beliefs at a time. It showcases varied beliefs and practices of religious groups that co-exist in a given geographical location. There is no doubt that Nigeria is a pluralistic society that has more than one religious group. This paper examined the impact of religious pluralism on the growth of Nigeria which will shed more light on the role played by these religions to the growth and development of Nigeria. But in a situation where the religions that suppose to champion peace, unity and progress have now turned to objects of disunity, wars, destruction of human lives and property, it cannot be said that such religions are partners in progress, since no country can progress in a situation of acrimony and rancour. Therefore, this paper will proffer ways of resolving incessant religious uprisings in the

country and challenge these religious groups to rise to their responsibility of contributing to the development of this country. The phenomenological approach was used by the researcher to ensure that phenomena were interpreted as they appeared without the writer allowing his personal sentiment to overwhelm the objectivity of the research. It was descriptive and analytical. He also made use of primary source such as observation. The secondary sources used in this work include books, journals, News papers, and so on. It has been observed that there are those who have lost their beloved ones as a result of religious riots. There are some who are displaced while some survived the religious riots. In the affected areas, the socio- political religious and economic life of the areas is held to ransom. This ugly scenario has inflicted psychological trauma in the minds of people which has lingered on. All these negative impact of these religions has been responsible for the under development of Nigeria.

Religion is indispensable in every society due to the lofty contributions of religion in the society. Durkheim in Scharf (1970:32) said that “religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden-beliefs and practices which unite into a single moral community called a church all those who adhere to them”. The paradox of religion is that religion is both a binding force for members of a religion and also a disintegrating phenomenon between religious groups. It should be noted that religion is concerned with binding the adherents with the supreme being and not adherents of religions. Idowu (1973:32) asserted that the term religion came from European word. It refers to the transcendental Reality of faith, the inner reality of faith, rituals and ceremonies through which the adherents commune and communicate with the Deity. Religion offers man with the means of communicating and interacting with the Deity.

There is no doubt that if religion is properly utilized, it can be an instrument of regulating people’s behaviours for a better society. Okwueze (2003:3) opined that religion is a means of regulating a pattern of life of a group of people, which also embraces experiences, beliefs and knowledge of man, that helps him to understand himself in relation to others, his social , physical and metaphysical worlds. It should be noted that religion armed with educational gadgets provides man with the knowledge of his existential being as well as his universe and eschatological Parousia. Religion becomes philosophical when it seeks to aid man in understanding his world view that hinges on philosophical exploration of man and his place in the universe. Religion penetrates every aspect of human life. Gbenda (2006:1) saw religion as man’s experience, awareness, attitude, recognition, conception, and understanding of the existence of the deity or the multiplicity of spiritual beings and his interaction with them. This perception of religion as worship of gods provides a platform that is open for other religions.

### **Religion And pluralism In The Society**

There is a clear cut difference between 'plural' and 'pluralistic' society. This led Nazir-Ali (1998:4-5) to assert that "The term 'plural' is simply about the way things are in a given society. 'Pluralistic', however, has to do with an ideological, even theological, estimate of such a situation and its implications for society at large". It denotes investigation of the effects of plural society on the entire country. Religious pluralism takes place in a situation where there are different religious groups with diverse religious beliefs and practices. Netland (1999:108) maintained that pluralism is practiced where there is "religious diversity in the world". For pluralism to be what it should be, it must occur in a well defined geographical area, in which various religions co-exist in a consistent and perennial disposition. Pluralism cherishes differences in religious building patterns, places of worship, liturgy, belief and spirituality. It also accommodates differences in religious heritages, ideology and perception. Pluralism thrives in a society that is open to change as well as ready to imbibe new ideas. The dynamism of society predisposes it to pluralism that flourishes in a platform of freedom of worship. There is no doubt that Nigeria considered the plural nature of this country which led her to enshrine freedom of worship in her constitution. Some scholars such as Onwubiko (1992:13) do not see pluralism to connote diversity of religions, rather he said that pluralism depicts "the diversity of the correct theological approaches to matters of ... faith, life and beliefs". It must be noted that pluralism is not meant to be critical and biased rather its target is to bring into reality of the multiplicity of many religious groups. Pluralism is not a mere acknowledgment of the existence of religious groups, rather it creates awareness of the need for the religious groups to share from one another. Madu (1996:93) opined that "pluralism therefore consists in the sharing of different traditions for the benefits of the whole society". From the positive point of view, the co-existence of religious beliefs and practices are geared towards one aim which is to usher in unity in the society and among the adherents of the religious groups. In collaboration with this view, Idowu (1970:87) said that irrespective of the fact that this country is a plural society that has different ethnic groups that co-exist, yet they meet in conferences, assemblies, eat and drink together. They work together in the same office and inter marry with one another yet when it comes to religion, the religious groups cannot agree with one another. In almost all the religions, particularly in Islam religion and politics are inseparable. They are interwoven to the extent that religion influences political actions and decisions. In fact for the Muslims religion supersedes politics and politics cannot do without religion. This accounts for the frequent interference of religion in political matters. It should be noted that criticism of religious pluralism revolves around its encouragement of many voices and propagation of relativism in which what is regarded as truth in one religion is conceived as falsehood in another religion. The existence of pluralism necessitates religious dialogue in which religious groups discuss areas

of agreement and accommodate areas of conflicts. It is observed that religious dialogue may lead to compromise of one's faith and truth. In response to this view musser and price (1992) aptly averred that,

Amid many voices and perspectives, the impression of sheer relativism challenges theology to articulate distinctive, clear, and persuasive claims about God and reality. The pluralist must risk the challenges of real dialogue without forgetting his or her own finite limits and commitment to truthfulness. As pluralists seek to learn from the many voices within Christianity itself and from other traditions, religious, and socio political realities, they will benefit from a variety of methods and fields of knowledge-convinced that no single angle of vision will comprehend the ever changing intersections among God, ourselves, and others (p.117).

The co-existence of multi-religious faiths and varied approaches to the supreme being should not be a responsible factor for religious crisis and social tensions that are visible in almost all the pluralistic societies

The amalgamation of this country by the British and its consequent conglomeration of religions do not spell doom for the country, rather the misconception of the necessity of the amalgamation and co-existence of religious groups is the bane of this country. Iroegbu (2004:126) opined that pluralism is not the cause of religious conflict as people claim, rather it is the manipulation of ideology of pluralism and psychological disposition of people towards pluralism that have been responsible for misinterpretation, misunderstanding and misrepresentation of pluralism over the years. In most cases, religious groups find it difficult to tolerate one another's differences. Eckman (2004:8) affirmed that pluralism demands that the religious groups concerned should tolerate one another but the problem with some of these religious groups is the unquenchable desire to convert members of another religion and if possible to exterminate its existence. In Islam apostasy is punishable by death which poses a serious problem for those who have been converted to other religions as well as those who intend to join other religions, particularly Christianity.

Pluralism has caused problem to the society by ushering in an enabling environment for adherents of a religious group to drift to other religious groups of their choice. Netland (1999) made it clear when he stated that

availability of many alternative options tends to trivialize and relativise the significance of any one tradition. Loss of confidence in one's own tradition is not unusual. Furthermore, pluralization also encourages a consumer mentality regarding religion, which is reflected in a highly pragmatic view of religion, emphasizing what religion does for individuals or society at large and minimizing questions of truth (p.111).

It must be stated that pragmatic disposition of religion with its attendant focus on this worldly has created consciousness in the minds of critics of religion that approval or disapproval of religious beliefs depends on their ability to solve numerous challenges that confront the society. Unfortunately, it is on this basis that critics of religion advocate for the abolition of religion which they insist is no longer relevant to the society.

### **Pluralism and National Development: The Nigerian experience**

The existence of religions in the country preceded the amalgamation of Nigeria as a political entity. Ferguson (1972:7) opined that Islam came to Africa in the seventh century through Asia. He further said that Christianity came to Africa in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It implies that Islamic religion had taken prominence in Africa before the arrival of Christianity. Inyama (1997:137) averred that Christianity and Islam are foreign religions due to the fact that these religions came from outside the shores of the country. These religions are not indigenous to the people of Nigeria. Islam came to Nigeria as far back as the 8<sup>th</sup> century through the North following the trade routes while Christianity came to the country through the sea into the Southern part of the country. This accounts for the origin of pluralism in Nigeria. The attitude of the British to Islam and Christianity negatively affected the smooth take off of pluralism in the country. Trimingham (1970:229) stated that the British who colonized Nigeria showed preference of Islam to Christianity and other religions. He said that the British adopted Islam as state religion. The British policy of indirect rule in the North subjected adherents of other religions under Muslim rulers and protected Islam from Christian influence. It is not over statement to say that the British contributed a lot to the dichotomy that exists between Christians and Muslims. Since then, this country has been divided into Northern and Southern Zones in which the former is predominantly Muslims with the later is predominantly Christians. The polarization of Nigeria into two has relegated national unity into the background. It has been discovered that division between Christians and Muslims has created dichotomy in the mainstream of politics in this country. Religious divide has been a serious criterion in the appointment of people into political positions, election into political seats and distribution of basic amenities. Pluralism has made it possible for political leaders to promote social injustice in the country. Some political leaders are using public fund to sponsor pilgrimage to Mecca and building of mosques. They have been maintaining pilgrimage welfare board with public fund (Kalu 1978:99). The same Government that has been refusing to allocate land for Christians to build their churches, more especially in the North, is the same Government that has been sponsoring Islamic projects all over Nigeria.

Unfortunately, despite the fact that Nigeria is a secular and plural Nation, yet Ibrahim Babangida secretly registered Nigeria as a member of organization of Islamic countries, which was a slap on the faces of Christians

who saw it as a way of Islamizing Nigeria (Adiele 2001:1). The flagrant registration of Nigeria into the membership of organization of Islamic countries was a direct attack on the plural nature of this country in favour of monotheistic aspiration of Islam that propagates the oneness of Allah amidst other Gods. Consequently, the introduction of sharia in some parts of Northern Nigeria has worsened suspicion between Muslims and Christians. According to Odoh (nd:138) Governor Ahmed Sani Yerima who was the Governor of Zamfara State inaugurated sharia in the State on 27<sup>th</sup> January, 2000. The sudden implementation of sharia legal system in some states of Nigeria has caused suspicion, distrust and hatred among the religious groups in the country. It is observed that suspicion and distrust among the religious groups have led to the fear of Islamization, Christianization and Indigenization of Nigeria. This resulted to the allegation leveled against the president of Nigeria, General Muhammadu Buhari that he had ulterior motive of Islamizing this country if elected as the president of this country, which resulted to his failure of presidential elections for some consecutive times, until he managed to win the presidential election, it is clear that if that prejudice had continued, it would have deprived this country the opportunity of electing a president who is committed to fighting corruption which has been a major obstacle to the growth and development of this country. There is no doubt that misinterpretation of holy books by the adherents of these religions is a responsible factor for fanaticism and intolerance with its negative effects on the growth and development of this country. According to Scharf (1970:27) religion impedes progress, encourages fanaticism and intolerance. Ugorie (2009:61) opined that fanaticism occurs where there is “an irrational attitude to religion which leads the religionist to the practice of religion beyond the bound of reason and therefore without moderation”. Adesuyi (2010:13) averred that the overzealousness of Seun Bunmi Adegunsoye, a law student of University of Ibadan disrupted jumat prayer led by the Imam of the mosque at university of Ibadan when she entered into the mosque and shouted that “except you accept Christ in your life, you are not safe. All of you here no matter the number of the congregation accept Jesus Christ. Allah is not God, Jesus is Lord”. This irrational attitude of Adegunsoye could have erupted religious crisis in the university of Ibadan if not that the vice chancellor of the university immediately went to the venue where the jumat prayer was going on and tendered unreserved apology to the Muslim community residing in the university of Ibadan. It should be noted that the intruder who disrupted the jumat prayer in the mosque at university of Ibadan did not consider that University of Ibadan is made up of both Christians and Moslems and none of these religions is more valid than the other. Fanaticism is born out of the inherent belief in exclusive doctrine of salvation that is shared by most religious groups. Islam insists that Allah is one God, there is no other God. If it is taken literally, it means that there is no other religion except Islam. It is either the ‘infidels’ (non-Muslims) submit to Allah or

face extermination (Chapman and Volgogard 1999:98). Similarly, Christianity is not left out in the controversial doctrine of exclusive salvation which was visible in the attitude of Christian missionaries towards Islamic religion. Ferguson (1972) collaborated with this view when he said that:

Samuel Ajayi Crowther, gave much thought to the problems of preaching to Muslims. On the one hand he saw in the Islam of his day much unenlightened superstition; on the other he saw the points of contact with the Gospel. He believed that false doctrines should be exposed and errors corrected; the same time he wanted to lead the Islamic teachers as well as their flocks to Him who is the way, the truth and the life(p.14).

For Christians, salvation belongs to them alone since Jesus is the only way, truth and life (Jn. 14:6). As a result of this, Christians regard believers of other religions as unbelievers who are doomed for destruction in the hell fire unless they repent and accept Jesus as their personal Lord and Saviour.

African Traditionalists are involved in this religious superiority. The indigenous nature of African religion has led the practitioners of this religion to discriminate, criticize and label Christianity and Islam foreign religions. They have also relegated Christianity to the background by calling it a Whiteman's religion. This derogatory name resulted from the Christians' attitude to the African religion. Taylor (1963:13) maintained that "it is bad enough that religious pictures, films and film-strips should have almost universally shown a white Christ, child of a white mother, master of white disciples". That these religions have caused religious conflicts and crisis cannot be over emphasized.

It must be observed that this country has experienced incessant religious crisis which has resulted to the loss of lives and property. Although, it is believed that these inter-religious conflicts could have been averted if this country is not a plural country. Udoidem (1997:167-168) averred that the first open and violent religious conflict occurred between Christians and Muslims in Kano on October 1982 as a result of foundation laying of Christ Church Fagege near the mosque in Kano State. It is a clear demonstration that Muslims are finding it difficult to accommodate Christianity particularly in the North in the spirit of pluralism. According to Udoidem (1997:172), it was the inability of Muslims to tolerate Christians who were on palm Sunday procession in Ilorin in March, 1986 led to the Ilorin disturbances where some churches were burnt and eight persons sustained injuries. Also, some time ago religious conflict took place at Ibadan. Udoidem (1997:173-174) opined that on May 1986, the statue of the risen Christ was burnt by unknown persons at the University of Ibadan which caused university of Ibadan Religious crisis. He asserted that this country witnessed another religious crisis on 6<sup>th</sup> March, 1987 at Kaduna when bello Abubaker from Kano compared the Bible with Koran during federation of Christian students' annual fellowship which did not go down well with Muslim students who attacked Christians and it later degenerated into religious crisis. Udoidem (1997:176-177) opined that there was another religious conflict in

June 1988 in Ahmadu Bello University during students' union election where Christians adopted a campaign slogan "A vote for Steve is a vote for Christ". Udoidem further said that religious riot took place in October 1991, due to Muslims' protest against Reinhard Bonke's crusade. This resulted to Kano riot on October 1991. It must be stated that religious conflicts have inflicted psychological problems in the minds of many families, particularly families who lost their loved ones as a result of religious riots

### **Pluralism and National Development**

Pluralism and National development is an effort to relate the existence of diverse religious groups with the aspiration of National growth and development. Every country wants to grow just as it is natural for organism to grow from one stage to another. But it is not yet clear whether the religious groups in the country are progressive or retrogressive towards the achievement of this lofty goal. Ogar (1995:68) opined that development consists of "advancement in educational level, socio-economic status, media exposure, agricultural innovations, acquisition of technical know-how, mass production of goods and cultural awareness. Development does not consist of living a flamboyant lifestyle by the few privileged citizens while the majority of people are living in penury. Ekwunife 2011:105) asserted that development occurs in "a process of natural growth which is creatively and rationally cultivated and nurtured within different environments in which one finds oneself". Development is not limited to natural growth, rather it involves man's initiatives in bringing development to the society. It consists of changes in an environment or organism which are not previously found in the environment or organism. The country can experience rapid growth if the political leaders can manage the natural resources in the country judiciously for the overall development of the country. According to Hornby (2006 :400 ) a country can witness development if it is gradually growing until it becomes more advanced and stronger. For Nigeria to be classified among the developed nations, it must be advanced in science and technology. The Christian missionaries established mission schools that trained people to know how to read and write, thereby giving them skills that enabled them to secure employment in the colonial period and beyond. This brought civilization that enhanced condition of living and raised socio-economic status of the people. The Christian church through the church missionary society introduced the Bible and plough which revolutionized Agriculture in Igbo land. According to Kalu (1978:18) who quoted Buxton as saying that "the Bible and plough must regenerate Africa". The introduction of Agriculture was informed by the missionary zeal to replace slave trade with legitimate trade. It was through the efforts of missionaries that cassava, maize and so on were introduced in Nigeria which boosted the economy of Nigeria and brought in Luxury goods in their households (Nwanaju 2005:60). Islam has made a tremendous contributions to National growth and development. Usman Dan



Fodio condemned girls who danced naked in the streets of Hausa land and mandated that men should wear long dress with turban and women should wear veils (Akuma 2004:39). Muslims apologetically insist that Muslim women should wear veil so that they will not lead men into temptation. Apart from that, putting on veils and turbans by Muslims have helped to check indecent dressing that is rampant in the country. Similarly, African Religion through its value has instilled moral values such as honesty hard work, and determination in the minds of the citizens of this country which are hall-marks of National growth and development. Unfortunately, despite the positive contributions of religious groups towards National growth and development yet Nigeria is still classified among the third world countries due to its level of underdevelopment.

It must be stated here that it is self deceitful for anyone to think that this country is developed due to the mere existence of religions in Nigeria, when these religions both individually and collectively have not addressed the daunting challenges that confront this country. The religions in this country are unable to solve inadequate basic amenities such as good roads, power supply, shelter, cloths, food, water, health and so on which are some of the indices of measuring development. Religions in the country gloss over the high rate of poverty in the country which has made it possible for the poor masses to live in a miserable condition of living. In collaboration with this, Okafor (2004 :26) observed that “out of the ninety-four (94) developing countries which had reliable data, Nigeria ranked 54<sup>th</sup> in the Human Poverty Index, (HPI-1) with a value of 34.0% according to the United Nations Development Project (UNDP) Report, 2003”. There is no doubt that the poverty rate of this country is worse now since poverty increases as day passes by. Poverty increases the rate of mortality, malnutrition and diseases.

It has been discovered that despite the formation of Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) yet bribery and corruption have reared its ugly head in both private and public spheres of the society. Sequel to this, religions in Nigeria have not taken proactive measures to ensure that their adherents who take gratification or divert public funds for private use are punished so that they can serve as deterrent to others. Consequently, this country has lost a lot of money that could have been directed to developmental purposes due to corruption. This country is bedeviled with security challenges due to the menace of Boko haram insurgency. It has become a daily occurrence to see people who are either displaced, maim or killed by the boko haram members. Many people have deserted their homes in some Northern states and other parts of this country and become refugees in their own land. Even the refugee's camps provided for them are not safe which underscores inadequate security of these camps. For instance, bomb exploded in the refugee's camp at Yola and killed some of the refugees while others were injured. All the religions in Nigeria should emulate Pope of the Roman catholic church who gave directive that all

the churches in Europe should host two families of immigrants who sought refuge in Europe. In the South-East, there is incessant kidnapping of people for ransom. A lot of people in the south-East are afraid of participating in the self developmental efforts in which the people are known, particularly in the rural areas. They prefer to build in the cities while their ancestral homes are in ruin. Similarly, armed robbery attacks have become the order of the day. People are harassed, dispossessed of their precious property and in some extreme cases are killed by armed robbers. There is also vandalism that has become rampant in the society. All most on daily basis, unknown persons vandalize both Government and private property with impunity, thereby causing retardation of growth and development. The country is also confronted with oil theft which has sabotaged the economy and rendered further infrastructural development in the state of comatose. Some people have attributed these social problems to unemployment, poverty, greed and so on. It must be noted that no religion should boast of contributing to the growth of this country when these daunting challenges are not yet addressed. Therefore, religions should as a matter of urgency rise to their responsibility of proffering lasting solution to these problems or stand the risk of losing their credibility and relevance in the society.

### **Recommendations**

1. The religious groups in the country should sensitize their adherents to imbibe spirit of tolerance and accommodation of varied religious beliefs and practices.
2. Religious leaders of these religious groups in the country should avoid making provocative statements against other religions.
3. There should be inter-religious seminars, conferences and workshops that will bring all the adherents of religious groups in Nigeria together which will not only foster unity among them but will also motivate adherents of these religions to plan for National growth and development together.
4. Political leaders should refrain from pleasing one religion at the expense of the others, rather they should allow their policies and actions to reflect the secular nature of this country.
5. The constitutional provision for freedom of worship should be enforced and nobody should be compelled to belong to a religion that is against his choice.
6. Politicians who use religions to divide this country should consider National unity and interest above their selfish interests and respect the secular nature of this country.

### **Conclusion**

All these religious riots showcase intolerance and fanaticism that characterize pluralism in the country. As a result of that, it is difficult for these religious groups to co-exist peacefully in the spirit of live and let live. Although, it is not

the intension of this paper to call for the abrogation of these religions but what the adherents of these religions should do is to pay more attention to the developmental challenges that are confronting the country and redirect their energies employed in scrambling for the country to foster unity, love, progress, respect, cooperation, understanding, and patriotism.

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