

RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN NIGERIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR NATIONAL INTEGRATION

Sunday Idakpo
Kogi State College Of Education, Ankpa,
Kogi State

Abstract

Religious pluralism has always posed a challenge to national identity or integration in Nigeria judging the level of religious crises and violence over the years. This paper assesses the trend and its implication on national integration. It recommends among others that tolerance and accepting of individual religious differences is a key to peace and harmony. Religious leaders should emphasize the integrative aspects of religion. Religious education should be made compulsory at both primary and secondary schools to expose youths to the ideals of other religions. Finally, politicians should not use religion as a language of power but rather emphasize its role of fulfilling social needs that affect the well-being of the people.

Key Words: Religious Pluralism, National Integration, religious education, tolerance, Nigeria

Introduction

National integration or unity in a pluralistic society like Nigeria has been a problematic issue since the attainment of independence in 1960 (Ker, 2003). It is the most populous nation in Africa with a population of over 160 million people. As a political entity, she came into formal existence in 1914 with the amalgamation of the northern and southern protectorates by the British government. However, one of the chief characteristics of the Nigerian society is its pluralistic character. This has over the years made the task of building a united nation out of the heterogeneous ethnic and religious groups one of the greatest challenges facing political leaders.

As a religiously pluralistic society, the place of religion in analyzing and addressing national issue appears evident. It is part of the fabric of peoples lives and strongly tied to their cultural identities (Imaekhai, 2010). This has made religious issues play roles in crisis generation and resolution. However, Mason (1985) has observed that people's attitude about the role of religion is by no means uniform. To him, there are those who wish to put an

official religious stamp on all political and social institutions, like the Muslims. Also there are those who would want to see the role of religion as providing the conscience of the nation and the gadfly of its leadership. This is a view shared by many Christians.

The challenges of religious pluralism are manifested in various ways and varying degrees and in all parts of Nigeria. There are manifested in political instability, disunity, distribution and participation in the political process Ekeh (2007) contended that as a result of these factors, Nigeria has never been an integrated nation. The country has demonstrated a high propensity for religious conflicts in the past three decades. The ubiquity of religious conflicts is attested to by the dramatic rise in the incidents as well as the ferocity and volume of destruction of lives and property that have accompanied and, the tension and animosity that have been generated in the relationship between religious groups in the country. This has continued to engender mutual suspicion and distrust among Nigerians. The incidents of hostilities in different part of the country have shaken the very foundation of peaceful disposition, and a threat to national integration.

This paper shall attempt to do an appraisal of religious pluralism in the context of national integration and its implications for integration in Nigeria.

Concepts and Dimensions of Religious Pluralism and National Integration in Nigeria

Religious Pluralism: Pluralism describes the existence of diverse cultures within the same society. It is the harmonious and enriching co-existence within one political community of people of divergent, at times incompatible views, establishing and promoting their common good. It arises from the fact that while people differ from each other in many aspects, they interact with each other and have a unity as members of the same political community. It is this sense of shared identity involved in the interaction of peoples who are ethnically, politically and religiously diversified that makes for the pluralist society.

In the world of religion Idowu-Fearon (2009) says religious pluralism is a situation where people of different religions and faith live together and interact at all levels without fear or prejudice. It is an attitude or policy regarding the diversity of religious belief systems co-existing in society. It therefore, enables a country made up of people of different faiths to exist without sectarian warfare or the persecution of religious minorities. Like other African states, Nigeria is one of the most religiously diversified with the people practicing three main religions: Christianity, Islam and Traditional Religion. However, the two most dominant religions are Islam and Christianity and with their arrival asserted themselves by dislodging the traditional religions of the various communities and also imposing their ways on the indigenous peoples (Kukah, 1999). A major challenge that have

confronted the country over the years is that of religious violence between Muslims and Christians. The relationship between the two have been one of mistrust and suspicion. This has led to incessant religious crises. This is as a result of their different perceptions of the ideal society and the conflicting strategies of power and posturing which has made the ideological gap impossible (Mason, 1985). Between the 1980's to the present, there have been more than 50 religious crises recorded in 30 years in the Northern part in Nigeria only which have left political, social, economical and psychological losses and pains on the affected people and area (Abimboye, 2009). The following examples according to Umejese (2011) are illustrative of this trend: The Zaira crisis 1980, Maitatsine Kano religious riots 1980, 1982, 1985, 1990 and 1994, the Ilorin crises 1986, the Kafanchan crisis 1987, the Shiite religious riots in Kastina 1991, Bauchi crisis 1991, Kaduna crises 2000/2002, Maiduguri crisis 2006, Jos crises 2000/2009, Adamawa state riots 2004, 2005 and 2006. etc.

A more challenging crisis is from the Boko-Haram religious sect. a group opposed to western education and values in place of full implementation of the Sharia law. The crisis which started in Bauchi has spread to states like Kano, Adamawa, Yola and Borno.

Several main factors are identified as source of these religious conflicts. One of such is religious intolerance and fanaticism. Onimhawo and Ottuh (2007) contended that in Nigeria the most prevalent problem confronting relationship between the religions is the absolute claim to religious faith especially between Christians and Muslims. Attempts to interpret and impose the various doctrines by the various religious group end up in religious riots. According to Eze (1999) oral or written statements made by the adherents or leaders either to show the superiority or inferiority of other religions lead to conflicts. Religious events in the northern states from the 1980s to the present show this trend. The Muslims in Nigeria have been demanding for the application of the Sharia law. To follow this demand means the state support Islam which violates its secular status. Where it exists, its application affect both Muslims and Christians like the sale and consumption of alcohol, gambling, segregation of women in schools and in public transport. Christians staying in these affected states are fearful of misapplication of these laws. Minority groups or Christians are sometimes forced to change to Islam or they are tried in Sharia courts (Eze, 1999).

Religious intolerance is also found within the various denominations. For example, Muslim against Muslim brothers whom they call infidels. Similar attitudes are shown by other protestant churches against orthodox Catholic Church and vice versa. Religious intolerance has become a very big obstacle to nation building in recent times. Blinded to the ideals of other religions, the Muslim sect like Boko-Haram have ignored the provisions of the

constitution and taken up arms against the Federal government with the aim of establishing a theocratic state.

Isiramen (2010) believes that poverty or deprivation of various dimensions provides empowerment for religious violence. A situation, where there are widespread social, economic, religious insecurity, endemic corruption, inequality, injustice, youth unemployment and absence of good governance among states in the north could serve as catalyst for religious violence (Gbenga, Inusa and Livinus, 2015). Unemployed youths especially the *Almajiris* are used as war machines to carry out violence in the northern part of the country. They receive their impetus from a promise of a ticket to heaven, should they die in the process.

In Nigeria today, positive gains of pluralism are being frustrated because of fanatical tendencies among the various religious groups.

National Integration

National integration is used here to describe a process of ensuring that the component parts (tribes and peoples) of a nation are brought together to achieve a higher sense of belonging, mutual understanding and nationalism. Okonkwo (2008) defines it as the process of opening up a group, community, place of organization, to all, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, gender or social class. Enebe (2007) expresses the view that “at the heart of meaningful integration must lie deep understanding of the relative importance of the value systems, customs, religion and behaviour of the various groupings. According to him, it will imply the weakening of certain types of ethnocentric tendencies as well as positive moves to build new relationships or fortify existing ones.

The essential task of national integration is that of building cohesion amongst the various ethnic and religious groups or it can be said to aim at fostering higher loyalties in the place of parochial loyalties to the ethnic or religious origin of the citizens.

One of the greatest development challenges facing Nigeria is the threat to national unity. According to Abel (2014) agitations for recognition by various ethnic groups, resource control, ethno-religious politics and other primordial cleavages have crept into national consciousness of many Nigerians. This development motivated various past administrations or regimes to establish national integration programmes like National Youth Service Scheme (NYSC), Unity Schools, National Orientation Agency, Federal Character, National Sports and cultural festivals among others. These efforts have not yielded the desired results.

Part of the challenge in this direction is the manipulation of religion by the political elites. Kukah (1999) stated that in Nigeria, the “entire gamut of social political and economic relations” revolve around Islam and Christianity and this has been the basis of legitimacy for the political class. In their quest for power and enhance their prospects of capturing and retaining it for their environment used religion. Notable politicians have been used or

known to sponsor misguided extremists in causing disturbance which has led to conflicts between Christians and Muslims resulting in death (Onimhawa and Adamu, 2011). It is for this reason that many have come to believe that the Boko-Harma insurgency is a political tool to score political points. During the 2015 general election, Ayorinde (2013) asserted that it does appear the northern elites have agreed to put the presidency under a siege believing that by doing so, they would put at a political advantage by instigating religious and ethnic sentiments in a multi-religious and ethnic country like Nigeria in order to capture power by all means. National issues are generally perceived from religious point of view by the political class. As a result, both the leaders and the led have continued to use centrifugal words and attitudes, based on their interpretation. Thus they polarized the nation (Ejigbo, 2015).

Religious Pluralism and its implications for National Integration

Religious pluralism and its attendant conflicts have continued to create social divide between peoples making their coming together difficult. Christians and Muslims have not been able to co-exist and work harmoniously for decades. This is to say it leads to the polarization of Nigerian Christians and Muslims as most of the Christians live in the south and Muslims in the north. Religious crises which have claimed many lives in the north have left questions as to whether Nigeria is truly one nation. According to Oguche (2009) many find it difficult to imagine why the Southern Muslim or Christian should be killed in the name of religion in his or her own country. This has led to reprisal killings in the southern part of Nigeria in some cases. This polarization goes further to strengthen ethnicity which is another divisive social ills within the country. The result is that national integration consciousness which is a major ingredient in the process of national integration has been negatively affected.

Frequent religious conflicts or crises have effect on the country's survival. According to Enejor (2000) conflict or war is one of the most serious threat, to national integration because it has a bearing on the country's socio-cultural, political, science and technological development. Crisis resulting from religious pluralism has continued to compromise national development. This is because hundreds of human lives are lost while properties running to billions of Naira are damaged. For example, the activities of the Boko-Haram insurgency has left millions of Nigerians homeless in the country with others living as destitute without good shelter, adequate health and territorial inclusions being per- petrated by members of the same group in the Northern part of the country (Oji, 2015).

Also the situation has continued to tarnish the country's international image as a bastion of religious pluralism. This affect foreign investments as most multinational corporations wanting to do business will not find the environment receptive. There was the abduction of French nationals by Boko-Haram and the demand of a 9 (nine) million Dollars before they could be

released (Adadu, 2015). Where these threats attain alarming dimensions, they tend to undermine not only the legitimate functions of government to the generality of the people but also the existence of the government itself.

The meddling of religion with politics as experienced in Nigeria has not really helped the cause of democracy or its sustainability. Religion which should have been a unifying factor has been manipulated to cause division and hatred. Evidences abound on pages of newspapers and magazines of irresponsible and inflammatory remarks made at one time or the other by prominent Nigerian Muslim or Christian politicians (Akama, 2000). In most cases, democratic values such as dialogue, national unity, patriotism, self reliance, territorial integrity and political consciousness are not practised or promoted. Political leaders have continued to exploit the country's religious and regional diversity to create and consolidate political base of support. In so doing, they made the goal of forging a common consensus or integration among the people more problematic. The consequence is that Nigeria today is a deeply divided society in terms of religion. Countries like Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia that face the challenges of diversity since their independence, have been able to integrate the diverse groups and have forged national identities.

Recommendations

All religious leaders should preach tolerance in order to promote peaceful co-existence and unity in Nigeria. Religion has integrative functions. Where religious tenets are similar or related, it is easier for adherents to co-exist harmoniously. Muslim and Christian preachers, therefore need to demonstrate better understanding and sympathy for each other. They must uphold the sacred nature of the human conscience and accord individuals the freedom to search for truth of their choice.

For good understanding of each others religion by the citizenry the Federal Government should make religious education compulsory at the primary and secondary level of our educational system. Such curriculum should seek to inculcate religious tolerance and to discourage religious indoctrination. This will expose youth to the ideals of other religions, reduce religious fanaticism and foster religious virtues that promote national unity or integration.

The Federal Government should constitute a regulatory body which would be saddled with the responsibility to monitor and maintain peace. The body should discourage religious rivalry or groups from exhibiting destructive tendencies.

Politicians in Nigeria should learn to stop to use religion as a "language of power". Its role should be on fulfilling social needs that directly affect the well-being of the community. This non-state approach to managing religion will in-turn support and strengthen the democratization process.

Conclusion

To enhance national integration in Nigeria today, peaceful practice of religion with respect for other people's religion is a pre-requisite. Muslims and Christians adherents should henceforth emphasize their area of similarity and de-emphasize divergent aspects of their religion. This is to say they must seek beyond each other a basis of unity that brings them together without destroying their differences as far as religious affiliation is concerned. It is imperative that religion should always play its spiritual role as a source of ethical and moral inspiration in Nigeria.

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