

Inter-religious Dialogue in Conflict Resolution: A Pragmatic Approach Towards Religious Crisis in Nigeria

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Abstract: Various studies have revealed that the most challenging threat against African's social-political and religious sectors today is insecurity. This is due to incessant violent conflicts among political and religious classes. In Nigeria for instance, conflict, in its various forms, is becoming a permanent feature of the country. All efforts, especially theoretical solutions, at resolving the crisis in the past have proved abortive. This paper therefore aims at presenting inter-religious dialogue as an alternative and pragmatic approach towards conflict resolution in Africa as a whole and in Nigeria in particular. It also aims at reviewing some religious conflicts in the country, their causes and the ways out. It will then examine the general role that inter-religious dialogue can play in engendering societal peace, harmony and development in Nigeria. Since everybody in a given community belongs to one religion /ideology or the other, it is believed that inter-religious dialogue is capable of bringing together people of different belief systems in an atmosphere of love and respect for one another's faith in order to solve their burning issues of life. The paper employs both primary and secondary research methods and the result/findings have shown that the causes of conflicts are multi-dimensional. Thus, if inter-religious dialogue is embrace as a veritable means of conflict resolution then, peace, which is the desire of many people shall be attained and meaningful development will also be realized.

Keywords: Dialogue, Interreligious, Conflict, Resolution, Pragmatic approach.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria as a country is a pluralistic religious state. It is blessed with three major religions namely: African Traditional Religion (ATR), Islam and Christianity. The country is characterized by diversity of cultures and traditions that are very complex [1]. ATR is the indigenous faith known to Nigerians before the emergence of both Islam and Christianity in the country. It is this religion that intimates the Nigerian society with the power that reside in nature through which the Supreme Being constitutes a safeguard for the people [2]. Its doctrine is based on five major structures namely: Supreme Beings, divinities, spirits, ancestors, magic & medicine.

Coupled with ATR is Christianity. This is the religion of the followers of Jesus Christ who believed that salvation could only be sought through Jesus Christ, who died for the sin of the whole world. Christianity sees nature as a manifestation of God's power and recognizes God as the ultimate power acknowledged through the power of the gospel [2]. Islam on the other hand is the religion of the followers of Prophet Muhammad. The religion sees nature as God's display of power and identifies devotion as a symbol of closeness to God. Likewise the society can maintain this closeness through devotion.

Each of these religions relates to the Nigerian society and they fulfill their different roles which are deeply noted in the nature of each one of them. In addition, each of these religions offers hope of salvation to their adherents. However, because of the inbuilt weakness in a pluralistic religious state, one would not be surprise that manipulators capitalized and cashed on the sensitive nature of religion to create confusion, violence and conflict in society [3]. As a result of this, Nigerians have been witnessing series of religious conflicts which had led to the early death of many Nigerians and property worth million of naira destroyed.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts both primary and secondary research methods. The primary method involves personal observations and experience about the various conflicts in the country and some failed attempts towards conflict resolution. The secondary method involves the use of relevant books, journals, monographs and internet materials. Besides, the study employs various approaches to achieve the aims of this work. Among the approaches are: phenomenological, historical and sociological. The phenomenological approach which was propounded by Edmund Husserl

[4]. projects religion the way it is to the adherents and not merely as it appears to outsiders. The principles of epoché and eidetic vision of the approach bring to light what religion meant to the adherents. The historical approach is also of immense help to this work because the study of the past is necessary in order to understand the present and effectively plan for the future. Likewise, the sociological approach is of great benefits since both the religion and conflict are social issues within the society. The combination of these methods brought about the desired goal of this paper.

RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS IN NIGERIA

Emergence of religious crises in Nigeria ushered in the Maitatsine attack on the people of Kano in 1980. After this, there have been several upheavals in different parts of the country. These conflicts appear in different forms and levels; which include intra and inter- religious conflicts. Intra- religious conflicts exists within a particular sect or denomination. Examples of this are: Maitatsine riot of 1980 in Kano, Skirmishes between the Izala and the Tijjanyya in Gombe in 1987[5]. Inter-religious conflicts on the other hand occur between two or more different religious groups or traditions. Examples of this category are: the Bulumkutu riot of October 1982, various Kaduna riots since 1987, 1988, 2000 and even at present[6]. The current and the worst religious crisis that is threatening the very foundation of Nigerian today is *Boko haram*, an Islamic sect that is launching incessant attacks on the people of Northern Nigeria. Through bomb attack by this sect, people had been killed in thousands, both churches and mosques were razed down and at the same time the government houses were not spared.

CAUSES OF RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS IN NIGERIA

Many factors have been discovered as the major causes of religious crises in Nigeria. First and foremost is religious intolerance. Despite the fact that Nigeria is a secular society, religious intolerance still abounds. Most of the religious crises in Nigeria, according to Onimhawo and Ottuh [1]. are based on the unwillingness of religious adherents of divergent beliefs to accommodate the point of view of one another. With the existence of religious intolerance in Nigeria, the peaceful religious scenario no longer remains the same again. The situation is just like ‘an ill-wind that blows no one any good’[7].

Coupled with intolerance is the political undertone. Politics in Nigeria today is taking a new dimension. The average politicians see politics as a shortcut to instant wealth. It is therefore pursued with a do- or- die approach. Their major aim is to amass wealth as much as they can and save much money to fight future elections so that they can continue to be the choice of their constituencies for political posts [8].

Another major reason is fanaticism. The word, according to Hornby, is a violent unreasoning enthusiasm [9]. By this, we simply mean religious claims to absoluteness. This is a common feature of modern religions in Nigeria. Religious fanaticism in Nigeria, especially between Muslims and Christians, has reached a dangerous dimension whereby each group of adherents enthusiastically calls on God to annihilate the other group [10].

Moreover, unguarded and reckless utterances often lead to religious conflicts. In a pluralist religious state like ours, one expects that a preacher would preach the idea of the religion and leave his audience to compare with those of other religions and made their choice. However, instead of this, some preachers dabbled into the doctrine of the other religions, distort facts and misrepresent its teachings in order to impress their audience [11].

Fear of domination by other faith is another cause of religious conflicts in Nigeria. Both Muslims and Christianity are aiming towards converting all members of their society to their faith. This is very clear in their aggressive evangelism throughout the country. The fear of extinction by non-Muslims in a densely populated Islamic community often generates conflicts. Likewise, in Christian community, non-Christians may find their survival at stake.

Last but not the least is poverty. This is a serious phenomenon as it goes hand in hand with violence, bribery and corruption. Though, poverty from the African perspective is a social condition that was intolerable and unwelcome way of life yet, the larger percentage of Nigerian citizens are wallowing in abject poverty. Even those that are working are not different as they could not get their salary from their employers. Bouvier, in his observation, pointed to the social reality of our time. He said inter alia that, ‘today the poor are no longer individuals, but entire nations that become increasingly poor’ [12]. It is unfortunate to hear that, despite the fact that Nigeria is the third biggest economy in Africa, Nigeria is ‘ranked 160 out of 177 countries on the scale of the *Human Development Index* (HDI)’[12]. Poverty therefore led many Nigerians to engage in criminal activities that made them threats to their various communities and nation at large.

INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AS PANACEA FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN NIGERIA.

Various means and avenues have been employed to address the issue of religious conflicts in Nigeria; unfortunately, none has yielded the desired result. Nevertheless, the hope is not lost; researches and investigations have revealed that the strongest instrument to be used in order to achieve religious

tolerance, peace and harmony is dialogue. To be specific, the dialogue we are referring to here is inter-religious dialogue. This is a discussion and exchange of religious views by various religious adherents or groups. Inter-religious dialogue has been seen as the last resort if truly we are interested in peaceful and harmonious existence. In the word of late Pope John Paul II as cited by Babs Mala, he said inter-alia:

The experience of history clearly shows that dialogue is necessary for true peace and that lack of it leads to conflict and war. Since 1945, there has been over hundred and fifty armed conflicts where dialogue was ignored and people show that they preferred to use arms rather than try to understand one another [13].

Without mincing word, the above quotation clearly revealed the relevance of inter-religious dialogue. Although Nigerians are not unaware of it, it is only they do not take it seriously. Nigeria has various religious associations such as: Ecumenical Council of Nigeria (ECN), Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN), various Islamic Movements and Religious Advisory Council of Nigeria.

Now that arms and ammunitions had failed to restore peace and order, inter- religious dialogue is now attracting a considerable interest in recent years. To embark on a meaningful interreligious dialogue, three things must be put into consideration, these are: cognitive, affective and objective aspects of dialogue [14]. With reference to the cognitive aspect, participants must be well familiar with their own religious traditions and their aim must be to acquire much knowledge from the religions of others.

On the affective level, a sympathetic attitude towards other's religions is very important. An inter-religious dialogue must be approach with an open mind; otherwise, the dialogue will turn to be a monologue. The third one which is very important is on the issue of objective. This has to do with the reason, purpose and why do we need this type of dialogue in conflict resolution in Nigeria.

RELEVANCE OF INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN NIGERIAN CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Since 'there is no value-free action' [15], the values and relevance of inter-religious dialogue in Nigerian conflicts resolution cannot be over-emphasized. The involvement of this kind of dialogue will surely produce positive effects on the Nigerian society. In Nigeria, incessant religious conflicts has set governments at all level on their toes towards finding means of ensuring peaceful coexistence among people of different faiths in the country. Sequel to the failure of

arms and ammunition to produce peaceful atmosphere, inter- religious dialogue has been suggested to be the better alternative measure towards conflict resolution in the country. In the word of Ignatius Kaigama, President, Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) as cited by NAN said inter-alia:

Multiplying security agents on the streets can only bring about artificial peace. Even if we supply five soldiers to every family in Nigeria, peace cannot be achieved in total. Peace is neither enforced nor decreed. It is cultivated in the heart, inspired and taught at home, school and places of worship [16].

In addition to the above quotation, the Amir, Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat, Mashhud Adenrele, advised Nigerians to make dialogue a positive agent for the attainment of religious tolerance and peaceful co-existence in the country [16]. It is against this background that we want to examine the relevance of inter-religious dialogue in the present Nigerian situation.

First and foremost, inter- religious dialogue will remove both present and past attitudes of exclusivism and hostility which have characterized relation among people of different faiths in the country. Through this, historical prejudices and age-long enmities will be cancelled. Then, there will be possibilities of working together for common good [16], which will also promote unity in diversity [17].

Secondly, through inter- faith dialogue, people will be able to deliberate on how the spiritual resources of the existing religions in the country can contribute to the solution of some of the common problems we are facing in the society today. With the development of science and technology and its accompanied challenges, problems abound. Such problems include: terrorist attack, kidnapping, insurgency, religious conflicts and so on. The coming together of various religious groups will definitely bring out positive solution to some of these problems.

Thirdly, inter religious dialogue is necessary and essential for Nigeria so as to repudiate the arrogance and aggression that often manifest in religious fanaticism. It is a necessity for peace and peaceful co- existence in a pluralistic religious environment like Nigeria.

In addition, inter-religious dialogue is very relevant to the Nigerian situation in the sense that it involves sharing of understanding and experience. This no doubt, is a significant method of building community, as it is a preferable way of preventing clashes and settling conflicts between religious groups. In the final analysis, inter-religious dialogue is an

ecumenical encounter that is capable of bringing together people of different belief systems with respect for one another's faith.

CHALLENGES FACING INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN NIGERIA

Despite the relevance and benefits inherent in inter-religious dialogue, it is facing some challenges in Nigeria. It is these challenges that are serving as setback and preventing the benefits of inter-religious dialogue from manifesting. First among the challenges facing inter-religion dialogue in Nigeria is that religion is been mixed with politics. Nigeria is a pluralistic religious state and because of the inbuilt weakness of a state like this, some manipulators capitalized on the sensitive nature of religion to create conflict in political affairs [3]. Today, it is no longer news that politicians in Nigeria often use religion to achieve their aims. In the opinion of MAMSER as cited by Alana; Religion has become one of the important weapons which selfish leaders use in manipulating and dividing the people. Their misuse of religion has led to ugly riots and loss of lives and property [18].

This mix-up of religion and politics has negatively affected the various ways and means of putting an end to religious crises in this country (Nigeria).

The second challenge confronting inter-religions dialogue is suspicion and fear of domination. It may be difficult to have a successful dialogue where a group sees others as threat to its own group. Apart from this, minorities may decide not to take part in it because of the fear of been overwhelmed and absorbed by the larger groups.

Another impediment to inter-religious dialogue in Nigeria is the fear of syncretism. Each religious group would be protecting its faith against been compromised with other faith. For instance, Christians often find it very uncomfortable to engage in dialogue with traditional worshippers as they would be described as non-believers or infidels.

Furthermore, attitude of government at times in taking side with one religion at the expense of others is another impediment to inter religious dialogue. When it is very obvious that government (Federal, State or Local) is recognizing one religion as its favorite and sees others as less important, we cannot have desired result from any inter-religious dialogue in such a society. What happens in 1986 is a typical example. In 1986, the then military governments setup the National Advisory Council on Religious Affairs with membership from two of the three major religions in the country. The two religions are Islam and Christianity. It is unfortunate that the third, Indigenous Religion, was

not represented in that an important council [19]. If such an attitude is not checked it may have a counterproductive on the subsequent interfaith dialogue.

Moreover, lack of sincerity of purpose is another hindrance to inter-faith dialogue. In some cases, delegates to inter-religions dialogue were not sincere with what they were saying. It is the opposite of what they had in mind that they say out. This made it difficult for some religious leaders to practice what they preached. Other impediments to inter-religious dialogue in Nigeria include; doctrinal differences, deficiency in the knowledge of other religions, superiority and inferiority complexes, etc.

In spite of the aforementioned challenges, inter-religious dialogue still remains the better option and way out of the bitter wrangling that are prevalent among people of living faith in Nigeria. What we need to do now is to have sincerity of purpose towards the subsequent interreligious dialogue in the country.

TOWARDS A SUCCESSFUL INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN NIGERIA

For Nigerians to have a successful and effective inter-religious dialogue, certain principles and actions must be put in place. It is the combination of these principles and actions that would pave way for an effective ecumenical strategy for peace building among various religious groups in the country [6].

First and foremost among the principles that must be followed in order to have a successful inter-religious dialogue is the principle of equality. All delegates to the dialogue centre must purge themselves of self pride. The erroneous idea that one religion is superior to others must be remove as there is no unique religion. They must be aware that all religions claimed to be revelations of what is true and right. Therefore, people to be involved in the subsequent religious dialogue in this country must see themselves as equals and partners in progress.

Second, government at all level must enforce compulsory and basic education in the country. It is on record that most of the religious crises in the northern part of the country are often executed by youths. In most cases, they did this out of ignorance because they lack basic education. If these youths are well educated, they would be aware that they too have their own future to protect, and that nobody can use them as tools to foment trouble in the society. If they are aware of this, the delegates at the inter-religious dialogue will have only few issues to deliberate upon.

Third, our leaders should lead by example. It is to be noted that some violent conflicts erupted because of the unguarded and reckless utterances of our

religious leaders. Many religious leaders, especially Christian and Muslim leaders, are yet to see more similarities than differences between the two religions. Instead of working towards mutual coexistence, inflammatory statements are often made in order to impress their congregations.

Apart from this, many violent conflicts that could have been averted were experienced as a result of reckless publication and unguarded utterances. Some even went to the extent of having their own newspapers and magazines through which they publish their provocative articles [10]. Since there is nothing as convincing as leading by example, our religious leaders should learn to be leading by example.

Furthermore, there must be a high sense of reverence for other people's religion. Religion is a thing of concern for man; it therefore deals with man's aspiration and dreams. Sequel to this, all delegates embarking on inter-religious dialogue must prepare to acknowledge what other religions hold holy. The spirit of cocksureness should be avoided at all cost. It is through this means that meaningful and successful deliberation can be achieved.

Moreover, openness and sympathy must be the watchword for a successful inter-religious dialogue. In a dialogue of such magnitude, delegates must display a large measure of openness and sympathy. This is very important if a meaningful deliberation is to be attained. Through openness, both biased conclusion and preconceived notions concerning religion would be avoided. This is because; it is through openness of mind that truth can be revealed [20].

Last but not the least, the Press through which our religious leaders publicize their activities must be objective in their duties so as not to cause confusion [21]. Before any announcement could be made on the air, it should be carefully edited since what we hear and see often determine the way we act and react. In the same vein, the Press that would cover the dialogue proceedings should be objective in its dissemination of news. The Press therefore has an important role to play in fostering peaceful inter-religious co-existence in Nigeria.

CONCLUSION

A discussion on inter-religious dialogue clearly shows that all is not well among the three major religions in Nigeria. Series of religious crises have been witnessed in recent years. Various efforts have been put in place to arrest this ugly situation in the past but none produce the desired result. This paper therefore presented inter-religious dialogue as the major practical way of resolving religious crises in Nigeria. Since religion is a phenomenon of concern to every man, it is

believed that through inter-religious dialogue, people of different belief systems can come together in an atmosphere of love to solve their burning issues of life.

Although, inter-religious dialogue is not without its own challenges such as: confusion of religion with politics, fear of domination, suspicion, fear of syncretism and so on. Nevertheless, inter-religious dialogue is not an insurmountable task. A successful inter-religious dialogue is possible in Nigeria if the earlier discussed principles are followed. These include: self-purge of pride, leadership by example, reverence for other people's faith, principle of equality, openness and sympathy. In the final analysis, inter-religious dialogue is recommended for Africa as a whole and Nigeria in particular so as to have a better pragmatic approach towards resolution of conflict in all ramifications.

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