

RELIGION IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA



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CHAPTER TWO

Issues and Challenges of Religion in Nigeria in the 21st Century

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Introduction

Issues relating to religions, be it Christianity, Islam or African religion, in the development of any nation, cannot be ignored. It is in line with this opinion that this chapter examines the level of sincerity of Nigerians about religious commitment. Attempts are made to look at the historical evolution of Nigeria as a nation vis-à-vis the various indecent behaviours which had made the country to become a threat not only to her citizens but also to the international community. It is indeed an irony for a nation that is acclaimed as religious to continue to wallow in the ocean of all forms of indecency like drug trafficking, prostitution, bombing, internet frauds, etc. It also discusses how religion can be a catalyst for a decent Nigerian society and the challenges for the future.

Much of Nigeria's early history is contained in myths and legends.¹ The frame work that now bears Nigeria existed as an heterogeneous society, consisting of powerful kingdoms and regions.² Before her amalgamation in 1914, in 1898 in an article in the *Times Newspaper*, Flora Shaw, was said to have suggested that, the various British protectorates in the Niger

be collectively called Nigeria³. Thus Nigeria assumed her name.

On 1st October 1960, Nigeria became independent politically as a result of the efforts of nationalists such as Herbert Macaulay, Tafawa Balewa, Obafemi Awolowo, and a host of others. The country became a Republic on 1st October, 1963, with Nnamdi Azikwe as the first president of the new nation.⁴

However, since independence, Nigeria has been ruled by various leaders of different political and religious backgrounds, some of whose regimes have been characterized with series of indecencies and woes, ranging from lack of the fear of God, economic malpractices, corruption of various degrees and lack of knowledge and purpose, thus causing the nation to sink into economic, political and religious jeopardy as contained in the words of Buah:

The leaders placed regional interests above the common good of the country as a whole. The chief concern of several of these men was to amass wealth at the expense of the ordinary people⁵

The level of indecency and corruption experienced in the country in the first republic was insignificant compared to that being witnessed in the 21st century. A critical assessment of the country's political scene suggests or reveals that majority of the leaders assume office with an intention and opportunity to amass wealth for themselves at the expense of the poor or the less privileged. Ango Abdullahi opined that:

No doubt corruption has eaten deep into the fabric of Nigerian Society, so much so that it is at present one of the obstacles to national development. Corruption in its various manifestations and ramifications can be described as less purity in the minds and actions of Nigerians.⁶

From the religious perspective, Nigeria is a multi-religious society with three officially-recognised religions, namely: African Religion, Islam and Christianity. Each religion is contributing its quota to the political, social, economic, educational and religious developments of the country. But despite the religious outlook of Nigerians, the lives of her citizenry do not reflect a religious society. In this regard, Christianity and other religions have a lot of challenges to face in order to make the nation a decent place for everyone to live.

Are Nigerians Truly Religious? Issues for Discussion

The fact remains that Nigerians are religious. But how sincere are they in the practices of these religions? Different denominations and sects exist in each of these religions; thus reasonable number of Nigerian populace claim to be religious people.

As religious people, Nigerians strongly believe in the sovereignty and supremacy of the Almighty God, to whom prayers, offerings, supplications and sacrifices are offered. The Christians, Muslims and Afrelists attach great importance to all these aspects of their religious practices. Different types of prayers and fasting are offered on different occasions depending on the prevailing circumstances. These include organised prayers in crusades, Sunday or Jumat worships, all night vigils and prayers on mountains. Worship centres such as Churches, Mosques, Shrines, hired shops or primary school classrooms for religious activities are very many in the country. For instance, more than five different churches can be found in one building. Religious stickers are easily and conspicuously sighted on cars, Holy Books, shops and buildings. Fasting during Ramadan period as well as religious holidays are observed, while large numbers of faithful Christians and

Muslims turn out yearly to perform the holy pilgrimages to Jerusalem and Mecca, becoming JP (Jerusalem Pilgrim) or Alhaji and Alhaja as the case may be. Visits to various camp meetings such as Christ Apostolic Church Camp ground at Ikeji, Osun State or at Odo-owa, Redeemer, Mountain of Fire and Miracles and Deeper Life camp grounds, enable one to behold very large crowd of worshippers joyfully attending to their religious obligations. Supporting this view, Onishi opined that:

Christianity is growing faster in sub-saharan Africa than in any other place on earth. Roman Catholicism and the major protestant denominations are gaining more followers everyday but new Churches are leading the boom.⁷

Most Christian families observe daily family altars where prayers are offered and the Bible read. Civil Servants in government offices now have specified day(s) of prayer meetings. Churches and Mosques are filled on Sundays and Fridays with worshippers. Registration of new Churches is on the increase as stated by the Ministry of Internal Affairs in *Sunday Vanguard* of January 18th, 1987 that "Churches spring daily having broken up from the established ones".⁸ Religious consciousness of Nigerians is encouraging. Religious exclamations like 'Praise the Lord' and 'Thank you Jesus', are not farfetched. Supporting this consciousness of Nigerians great and small, rich and poor, Rev. Fr. George Ehusani said:

In the last few years, a new dimension has also been added to the thriving religious enterprise. It is the increase in patronage of high ranking public officials who not only openly call for and sponsor regular prayers sessions in different prayer houses, but have themselves become born-again Christians and prayer merchants, often appearing at Church Crusades and Prayer vigils with all the paraphernalia of public office, and sometimes grabbing sanctimonious homilies and earth-shaking prayers.⁹

He went further to say:

The largest billboards in our towns and cities are those advertising upcoming religious crusades and faith healing carnivals. Religious exclamations such as 'To God be the glory,' 'Praise The Lord', and 'Alaahu Akbar', are often on the lips of Nigerians, at work or at play from the exalted members of the National Executive Council or Council of State, to the young ones who are about to sit for common Entrance Examination¹⁰.

Hence, from all indications, Nigerians are seen to be religious. Through the stages of life religious doctrines are observed and recognised. Religious songs and choruses of various types are not far from the lips of all and sundry. It can therefore be said that in all things they are religious. However, despite the entire religious outlook that Nigerians project to the outside world, it is ironic that, religious commitment of the people is below one's expectation. It is difficult to turn those religious teachings into action. According to Nural Alkali:

Nigeria has claimed to be among the most religious people in the world. In a recent survey conducted by the British Broadcasting Corporation, Nigeria topped the list of the countries having the highest percentage of people who believe in God, compared to 46% in the United Kingdom and only 28% in South Korea. Yet, the 2004 report of Transparency International, the Berlin based global corruption watchdog, showed that Nigeria has still maintained its permanent position as the second most corrupt country in the world after Bangladesh.¹¹

Selected Social Problems in the 21st Century

A very close look at the following corrupt practices among Nigerians contradicts in totality their religious protestation. These include religious violence especially among the Christians and Muslims and the contradiction of the law of

love in both the Bible and Qur'an (Hebrews 13:1, Qur'an 41:34)

Lawal and Oyebanjo also supported this view by saying that:

Conflicts and intolerance in religions pose a lot of danger to the lives of the people of the world in general and to Nigerians in particular which is against the teachings of the two major religions namely Christianity and Islam.¹²

Badmus further observes that "both Islam and Christianity lay down very clear and adequate regulations, if these were strictly adhered to, there would be no case of bloody clashes during preaching sessions".¹³

Pilgrims to the holy lands being involved in drug trafficking, money laundering, prostitution, advanced fee fraud, and child trafficking are on the increase. In some towns or cities, particular streets are associated with these acts. They are either Christians or Muslims. Even housewives, in order to make ends meet, get involved in these shameful practices. Arowosegbe says it succinctly thus:

Every street of our cities is now flooded with brothels completely full of whores that have sent many men into perpetual sufferings ranging from gonorrhea, herpes, syphilis and to the most dreadful of all sexual diseases called Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS).¹⁴

In addition, Nigerians are subjected to rigorous bodily searches at foreign airports as a result of the bad image the country has. Other nations see Nigerians as experts in burning places of worship and killing of fellow human beings during religious riots. Kidnapping of human beings for rituals is on the increase. A story was told on the Nigerian Television Authority on the popular Sunday Network programme 'News Line' by Kehinde Young Harry on Sunday 10th June, 2007 by 9:00pm, of how some men deceived a seven-year old boy to a

sugarcane plantation and plucked out his eyes in an attempt to use them for rituals, rendering the boy blind for life.

In addition, cases of ministers employing magic to aid the work of God abound. Bilikisu Yusuf buttressed this point thus:

This has fuelled the competition among prosperity preachers who in a bid to meet the aspirations of worshippers, mix ancient paganism with Christianity, they then coin agnatic messages like faith, prosperity, healing and deliverance and more and more people fervently besieged the churches for miracles and excessive urge for wealth and materialism¹⁵.

Illicit affair between Pastors and female members of the Church is also prevalent. *The Nigerian Tribune* of Tuesday 16th January, 2007 reported Pastor of a Pentecostal Church in Awka, Anambra State who raped a 13year old member of his Church and impregnated her¹⁶. This is just one of the many cases of atrocities perpetrated by supposed Ministers. This was further confirmed by a former herbal healer who is now a pastor during one of his confessions:

I have seen many things since I came in. I have seen many of the Pastors who have taken female members to different churches at midnight and made love to them for various reasons, at times, occult. Some use their churches as a base for 419 activities; many used occult and questionable powers¹⁷.

Public officers of various cadres see embezzlement and misappropriation of public funds as the order of the day, using such stolen funds to seek important positions in the church. Related to this is the fact that, many Christians and Muslims holding one title or post in churches or mosques are involved in fraudulent acts including obtaining fake receipts for items not bought and falsifying their ages in order to stay longer in service.

Examination malpractice and cultism too have become the order of the day at all levels of our educational system. Akande submitted that:

Cultism among youths in Nigeria has become a popular discussion in the contemporary Nigerian society. It is one of the most important social problems experienced in Nigerian educational set up. The youths have always been in the core of it. This is incredible¹⁸.

Unfortunately, parents who are supposed to be responsible are initiators of some of these evils. Similarly, counterfeiting in drugs, food and spare parts are other evils perpetrated by some Nigerians. This of course has led to the premature deaths of many innocent Nigerians. Idleness and procrastination in places of work are common. Kumuyi observed that the "tasks are not carried out until such officers in charge are tipped off."¹⁹ These and many others are the ungodly practices that the Holy Books frown at. For instance, Jeremiah 22:13 says "Woe unto him that buildeth his homes by unrighteousness, and his chambers by wrong; that useth his neighbour's service without wages, and gives him not for his work".

In addition to the aforementioned is the fact that Nigeria has been turned to a great asylum of human misery courtesy of Jean-Martin, the 19th century French Physician. "419", and Boko Haram, have become household names. Our daily news is full of reports of ethnic or communal clashes. Nigerians do not practise "to love tenderly, to do justice, and to walk humbly before your God" as commanded by Micah 6:8. Cases of armed robbery on high ways, banks, homes, Churches and Mosques abound almost every day. Traveling on roads has become dreadful not only at night but even in the day time. Having a child outside wedlock has become the normal practice in order to ascertain how fertile a woman is

before she is lawfully married; a practice that is contrary to the teachings of Christianity and Islam. Sometimes a woman who is pregnant is joined to a man in a so-called Holy wedlock when the Bible clearly states in Hebrews 13:4 that "Marriage is honorable in all, and the bed undefiled...". If God's judgment is to be instant, many Nigerians both great and small who constantly exclaimed 'somebody shout Alleluia'; 'The Lord is good' and 'salam Alaikum' would have learnt their lesson in a hard way. But God is merciful and slow to anger. How can a nation recognised as very religious, be involved in all these vices when the three religions practised in the country teach people to love, respect human life and the constituted authorities?

Possible Solutions

The religious scenario in the present day Nigerian society is full of uncertainties. Issues related to these uncertainties have been highlighted. It therefore follows that Christianity and other religions more than ever before must stand up to face the challenges. They must sincerely commit themselves to the task of redeeming Nigeria and her citizens. Such a task involves the following steps:

(a) Placing adequate emphasis on the importance of worship in all religions is a vital challenge to all religious leaders and followers. For instance, the five pillars of Islam centre round the worship of Allah. These pillars are:

- i. Testifying that there is no God but Allah and that Muhammad is His messenger.
- ii. Performing prayers regularly (*Salat*)
- iii. Paying the poor-rate (*Zakat*)
- iv. Fasting during the month of Ramadan (*Sawm*) and

v. Pilgrimage to the sacred sanctuary of Allah (*Hajj*)²⁰.

In African Religion, fear of God, reverence for God, sacrifices, festivals and prayers of different forms to divinities and the Supreme Being are important features of African Religion.²¹ Also in Christianity, the belief in one God, Charity, Fasting and Prayers, love for God and one's fellow men²² are principles which its adherents must adopt. The concept of worship in the three religions connote similar meanings. It thus follows that without worship, there is no religion, because worship forms a strong pillar of any true and worthy religion. Hence, when Nigerian Christians, Muslims or Afrelist are sincerely committed to their various modes of worship, Nigeria will develop.

(b) Similar to the above is the fact that religious bodies should embark on very sound and intensive religious teachings instead of glorying in daily increase in the number of religious buildings and laying emphasis on prosperity-based sermons, thus commercialising religion. No wonder Kelly Elisha says that: "Religious leaders are doing contrary to the teachings of religions"²³.

Religious leaders today must rise up with vision and mission which should be noted in the desire to meet the challenges facing the masses. They must be pragmatic, committed and ever ready to work hard for social and economic development of Nigeria. Stephen Audu believes that:

Leadership position is an opportunity to serve towards achieving a set objective. In Christian leadership, the leader is modeled after the example of Christ who came, not to be served, but to serve. Those aspiring for political leadership must know that authority is to be used to render qualitative service to citizens. Thus, authority should be exercised in love, justice, compassion and the fear of the Lord.

Authority and power are meant to be used to improve the welfare of the people not to impoverish them through plundering of available resources²⁴.

(c) Another task for religious bodies to undertake is that they should be bold enough to expose corrupt leaders and guide their followers against voting for them. Their followers should be encouraged to vote for credible leaders. The Bible, for instance, calls the Christians the light and salt of the earth (Matthew 5:13 and 14). These values of light, salt, love, selfless services, justice and equality should be reflected in every segment of Nigerians' lives. Christians, especially must stop calling politics a dirty game. If truly the game is dirty, then God expects them to join and make it clean, thereby renewing and transforming the hope of the poor and suffering Nigerians for good.

Prophet Amos in his book says "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever – flowing stream" (Amos 5:24). The scripture further says "righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach". This Biblical injunction therefore proves that meaningful development in Nigeria cannot be achieved through corrupt, greedy and evil-minded leaders or politicians; it can only be attained through Nigerians who are always conscious of the religious values they profess.

(d) Poverty, which has eaten deep into the fabric of Nigerian culture should be addressed not only by the government, but more importantly by the religious bodies. The causes of many of these societal vices could be traced to poverty. It needs to be noted that government is making commendable efforts in this regard through her many poverty-alleviation programmes such as "National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP); Family Economic Advance Programme (FEAP), Federal Government Poverty Alleviation

Programme(PAP), and National Directorate of Employment (NDE). Akande said:

All these programmes are arranged to eradicate poverty in Nigeria. Youths are mainly involved. Through these governmental efforts, many have been able to set up their business and become self employed, thus reducing the number of those searching for jobs.²⁵

To complement Government's effort, religious bodies too must rise up to the challenges. It must be noted that some religious groups or denominations are making frantic efforts in this regard. Many of them have set up charitable homes to cater for the less-privileged, the welfare unit of most Churches and other Muslim bodies are working vigorously to rid Nigerians of all forms of poverty by offering assistance in form of finances, clothing and food. Visitations to the prison yards on regular basis for evangelism are part of these efforts. So also is the building of mission hospitals and schools by the various religious bodies. This step by the religious bodies agrees with what Apata said:

Alleviating the condition of the poor must be in the practical sense. The Church has men who can do it successfully. The Lawyers, Engineers, Economists, Teachers and Politicians in the Church do not only have to be men of religion but also of Godliness. The Nigerian Society is of widespread poverty and outrage against human and dignity and freedom. The root causes of all these must be probed so that overcoming the evil will be easy.²⁶

The danger inherent in a nation that is poverty-stricken can be expressed in the words of John F. Kennedy that, "if the poor cannot sleep because they are hungry, the rich cannot sleep because the poor are awake".²⁷ It is to this effect that every hand must be on deck. The task must be carried out by all and sundry - the government, religious bodies, NGOs and even individual Nigerians.

(e) The diligence, integrity, dedication, loyalty and devotion manifested by some characters in the Bible and Qur'ān should pose challenges to all. We must be honest, dutiful, dependable and loyal in our places of work showing forth the religious virtues we profess. It is only in this way that Nigerians can beautify and project to the whole world that they are truly religious.

(f) Parents must endeavour to inculcate religious ideals into their children from the cradle. These children are future leaders who will grow to handle the socio-economic, political and religious affairs of the nation. If they are not properly brought up religiously, they may be led away from the religious virtues by their peers, bad magazine, and even the daily advancement in technology. Hence, all efforts must be made to get a child's soul freed from the clutches of evil as early as possible. The Biblical injunction that says "train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old, he will not depart from it" (Proverbs 22:6) should be parents' guide.

(g) Only those of enviable and noble characters should be made to handle issues relating to the religious life of the nation. The teaching of moral education at all levels of the Nation's institutions of learning should be made compulsory. This is because "the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom" (Psalm 111:10).

Conclusion

The religious situation of Nigeria today calls for solemn reflection. In a country where unrighteousness prevails, injustice, oppression, corruption and indecency will become part of her custom. However, there is hope for a better

Nigeria if the citizens, irrespective of religious affiliations, are united and committed to hard work. This will purge or cleanse the nation of the atrocities pervading every sector of her life. Olalere is also of the opinion that, "Nigeria would be a better place to live if we are ready to cooperate with God's plan for us"²⁸. Talking about a healthy Nigerian society therefore, calls for a viable political system, and better governance, which can only be facilitated if religion is practised the way it is expected to be practised.

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