

# GENERAL STUDIES IN THE ARTS:

## SOME FUNDAMENTAL TOPICS

*Editors:*

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B. L. Adeleke  
Director, G N S.  
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## CHAPTER TEN

### RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN NIGERIA: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL

Akiti Glory Alamu

#### Introduction

Contemporary Nigerian society is explicitly known for unreflective religious crises orchestrated either by religious sects or political anarchists who supposedly believe that they have been marginalised or relegated to the background. This highly presumptive and morally repugnant crisis is a manifestation of arbitrariness, insensitivity and arrogance, considering the fact that Nigeria is a pluralistic and multi-religious nation with attendant heterogeneous and diverse ethnicities. No doubt, Nigeria is a nation of diverse cultures, traditions and faiths. But of all the diverse elements, religion has proved to be most sensitive and volatile which has often led to hatred and divisions.

As a result of the nature of the Nigerian state as a pluralistic state, significant different patterns or conceptual schemes of variety must be adopted for the interpretation of human experience since a pluralistic theory becomes inevitable. In recent times, the use of dialogue has been a recipe for peace and world order, because it is a way of integrating, tolerating and accommodating other faiths. Despite the clamour for religious dialogue as the only method of unity in diversity, it has its own problems. Religious diversity in contemporary Nigeria lends itself to no easy answers as many actors in the religious arena have motivated impassioned behaviour that has affected importantly the lives of many. Therefore, the thrust of this paper is to critique religious dialogue in contemporary Nigerian society.

#### Religious Plurality: An Overview

Pluralism can as well be described as diversity. Thus, pluralism requires the cultivation of a public space where we all encounter one another.<sup>1</sup> Inter-religious dialogue claims to hold on to other faiths in learning about their paths, and how they want to be understood.<sup>2</sup> In essence, inter-religious dialogue does not portend the danger of syncretism or infidelity since learning the faiths of others is significantly involved. Basye is of the opinion that learning other faiths, their paths and how they want to be understood are means for building bridges and relationships that create harmony and peace on our planet home.<sup>3</sup> Gerald Lenski sees religious pluralism as "organised religious groups with incompatible beliefs and practices that are obliged to co-exist within the framework of the same community or the same society."<sup>4</sup> This position implies neither relativism nor indifferentism to truth. It simply suggests that we cannot coerce others into believing what do. We can offer our reasons for so believing, but these reasons, even if

sufficient to support our claims, will not compel others to accept our belief.<sup>5</sup> This is where incompatibility comes in based on Lenski's presupposition.

Plurality is "a condition of society in which numerous distinct ethnic, religious or cultural groups co-exist within one nation or it is "the belief that no single explanation or view of reality can account for all the phenomena of life".<sup>6</sup> Umejesi and Igboin hold that "pluralism implies sympathy, if not indulgence for differing or conflicting beliefs with one's own. In other words, each religion is recognised as representing a distinctive, yet equally valid, grasp of some ultimate spiritual reality."<sup>7</sup> Hick, who is an advocate of pluralism, takes a philosophical strand on the term. He observes:

Stated philosophically... Pluralism is the view that the great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to, the Real and ultimate from within the major variant cultural ways of the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Real-centeredness is manifestly taking place...<sup>8</sup>

Despite Hick's clarification, it is still not in tandem with Christian view or exclusivists. Here, it must be emphasized that a religious pluralist, such as Arthur describes, is someone with respect to a given issue when she claims not only that no specific religious perspective is superior but also makes the positive claim that the religious perspectives of more than one basic theistic system or variant thereof are equally close to the truth.<sup>9</sup> These scholars have variously described religious pluralism with the overarching statements such as incompatible beliefs and practices, in religiously organised groups with the sole aim of cohabiting, considering their areas of common interest. While others see pluralism as a way of integrating, tolerating and accommodating other faiths than theirs. There is a general acknowledgment that multiplicity of religions is not evil or conflict centred. According to Schillebeeckx

The multiplicity of religions is not evil which needs to be removed, but rather a wealth which is to be welcomed and enjoyed by all... There is more religious truth in all religions together than in one particular religion.<sup>10</sup>

The foregoing reveals the diverging views on religions as to the monopoly of truth claims. In spite of this, each religion should respect other faiths or exist side by side with sympathy and objectivity.

#### Religious Pluralism in Nigeria

Nigeria as a state or nation is characterized by cultural diversity, ethnic heterogeneity and religious plurality. Dopamu supports the fact that Nigeria is a country of diverse cultures, traditions and faiths. But of all the diverse elements, religion has proved to be most sensitive and the one that has often led to hatred and division.<sup>11</sup> In contemporary Nigerian society, religious pluralism is a datum. The country is heterogeneous in culture and in terms of religion, practising the major religions of African Religion, Islam and Christianity, among others.



The history of indigenous religion is as old as Nigeria herself. It is a religion handed down through our forebears from the yore and it is orally transmitted from one generation to another. Albeit, without sacred scripture, it is thus written in the book of the very world we live and transmitted orally as the occasion demands. It is not a proselytising religion nor does it guzzle for members, rather it is tolerant, it accommodates and remains autochthonous.<sup>12</sup> Traditional Africans were born into it, live in it and die in it.<sup>13</sup>

Islam and Christianity are the proselytizing religions which had been imported to Nigeria at various times in the history of the nation, and at the same time struggle for membership via propagation. The membership drive at times lends credence to mutual suspicion. To this end, the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria recognizes the pluralistic nature of religions and as such, section 10 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria prohibits the adoption of a State religion both at the Federal and State levels and therein after declares, "The government of the federation or a State shall not adopt any religion as state religion". This expresses the fact that Nigerian government should not favour or promote any particular religious group at the expense of others. Similarly, section 38 of the 1999 constitution states that every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom... to manifest and propagate his/her religion or belief in worship.<sup>14</sup> The constitution recognizes the pluralistic nature of the Nigerian state.

However, one of the consequences of religious pluralism in contemporary Nigeria is religious crisis between Christians and Muslims. Cantwell Smith argues that at the cost of insensitivity or delinquency, it is morally impossible actually to go out into the world and say to the devout, intelligent fellow human beings we believe that we know God ... we are right and you are totally wrong.<sup>15</sup> This insensitive, arrogant or presumptive measure to convince others that their perspective is wrong has been the most challenging exclusivist leaning. This corresponding religious superiority and truth claim has severally led to religious conflict. It has been argued that there is no calculus to measure the best religion in the universe and Nigeria in particular. Instead of these differing religious perspectives to practise their faiths unencumbered as a result of the pluralistic environment, killing and maiming in the name of God has been the order of the day. Alamu has observed that sheer sentiment, passion and emotion make Islam and Christianity to be a prey in the hand of religious fundamentalists and political anarchists, considering the fact that the exclusivist, particularistic, absolute and monopolistic interest can protect only their bigoted position, which results in wanton destructions of lives and property.<sup>16</sup>

Historically, religious violence was sparked off in the 70s, since when Kano and Jos have assumed a symbol of religious fundamentalism capable of tearing the nation apart if not curbed. Hardly does a year pass by without some zealots unleashing religious mayhem and terror. Obasanjo commented that "Kano has rapidly acquired a reputation for intolerance, murder, violence and political rascality".<sup>17</sup> Alamu has catalogued the various religious crises that have harmed the Nigerian state so far. Close observation of

the arson and bestial killings in the name of religion since the late 1970s have revealed the level of irreligious activities. They include the Maitatsine disturbance in Kano (1977, 1979, and 1980). Zaria 1981, Maiduguri 1982, Kaduna 1982, Kano 1982, Yola and Gombe 1988, Bauchi 1999. Kaduna 2001, Jos 2001, Kano and Abuja 2003, Sagamu 1996, Lagos 1999, Owerri 1996, Shagamu 2001, Aba 2001, Wase 2002, Yeldam and Shendam 2002. Jos 2008, Bauchi 2009. The Boko Haram religious insurgence of July 2009 is the most recent one. The crisis started in Bauchi and spread to Yobe and Borno states.<sup>18</sup> In the process, Muhammed Yusuf, the leader of the sect was arrested and killed. Consequently, thousands of people have been sent to their early graves. Jos which was known as a state of harmony has become a state of cemetery for the innocent people.

Actually, the indices of the severe crises show the mixture of ethnicity and political grievances to interpret such disagreements as the genie of religious violence. Dopamu has noted in line with the above that:

The question of personal gain, political ambition, selfish ends, egocentricity, power of domination, ethnicity and the question of the perversion of an entirely human and reasonable process, may enter into the enthusiasm one throws in one's propaganda activity. This is fatal for religion and intention.<sup>19</sup>

Within the Nigerian nation, several ethnic, religious and cultural groups co-exist in a common territory. This makes Nigeria a pluralistic, secular and multi-religious nation.

#### An Appraisal of Religious Pluralism

Despite the secular constitution of the Nigerian state, religion has been manipulated by religious zealots over time. Bala Usman has vividly argued that the systematic manipulation of religion has already reached its climax in its opposition to the unity of the peoples of Nigeria.<sup>20</sup> Many of those who are stakeholders in the nation's religions are fanatical. Olaniyi captures holistically the position of many of the religious stakeholders. According to him:

They are dishonest because they call for peace on the pages of newspapers and other media but plant seeds of discord in their places of worship, inciting their followers to defend their faiths with their blood. During crisis (sic), they run into hiding and leave their unsuspecting followers to die.<sup>21</sup>

Admittedly, religious laws are rarely adopted in a pluralistic and democratic environment. In a civil and a democratic setting, the constitution takes precedence over any religious law. But in Nigeria, religious laws are promoted at the peril of the Nigerian constitution. This informs why the Islamic legal code, the Shariah, has been politicised.

Leo Igwe supports this when he writes that:

Religious laws are imposed, and foisted on the people by force and sometimes by violence and bloodshed. In my country, the tree of sharia law has been watered with the blood of too many Nigerians as well as non-Nigerians.<sup>22</sup>



In Nigeria, the bloody campaign for the implementation of Sharia is still going on at the moment. Shortly after Nigeria returned to democratic rule in 1999, Islamic theocrats in the Muslim majority states imposed Sharia law. Many Nigerians lost their lives in the riots, protests and clashes over the implementation of Sharia.<sup>23</sup> Today, the Islamic sect, Boko Haram, is the latest face of this bloody campaign in Nigeria,

Islamic militants agitating for a government under sharia law kill at the slightest provocation or offence: if it is not the publication of cartoons of Mohammed in Denmark it is the invasion of Afghanistan by American forces or the staging of the beauty pageant or the burning of the Koran, or the coming of an American preacher to the city of Kano.<sup>24</sup>

The fact remains that in the civil society and democratic setting, religious laws are not compatible with civil laws. Religious laws cannot override the constitution. However, in this case, that is under religious laws, there is no place for equal or universal human rights or the right to freedom of expression, freedom of religion or belief; there is no assurance of the basic rights to life. Religious law has no regard for human rights. Religious laws are incompatible with the values of democracy and human rights. And those who peddle them will always see themselves swimming against human progress, hope, civilization and enlightenment.<sup>25</sup> Of course, a handful of Nigerians and government agencies are aware of this truth. Obasanjo may have been informed by this when he expressed with chagrin political sharia in contemporary Nigeria. He avers:

What we have is essentially a political sharia. That is why it worries me. It does not augur well for this country... we must do something about the legal practice.<sup>26</sup>

There is something fundamentally wrong and undemocratic about religious laws: that is the alleged source or sources as the case may be. But as long as religious laws continue to hinder the ability of the people to reclaim, revise or discard these archaic, outdated and dark age norms, religious laws will remain social and political liabilities to democracies and human rights across the world. Religious laws are supposedly divine, not man-made, crafted by a Supreme Being, not by mere mortals. Religious laws are not meant to protect the interest of the people but that of a god or particular gods, at the expense of human beings. "Under religious laws, the will of the people is superseded by the supposed will of a god believed to be greater than the human being. There is no place for the voice of the people. Instead there is only the voice of God or a god which is appropriated, patented, and employed by few males to tyrannize over the lives of others."<sup>27</sup>

Furthermore, our committed schools, now referred to as the practitioners of religions such as Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN), Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), Supreme Council For Islamic Affairs (SCIA), Nigerian Inter-Religious Council (NIREC), etc should always make statements on the religious and political state of the nation. Umejesi and Igboin observe succinctly that members of these groups belong to different religions under the tutelage of committed Pastor/Imam whose views spiritually are believed to supersede the one of the committed/detached school.<sup>28</sup> As a

result, their bearing is wrongly footed because their religious reaction at any given time has overlapping effect or it stands independently. Thus, these Nigerian religious groups lack the moral will power as a result of their foundation to implement their stand. Over time, the agitation is to acknowledge one's belief, and Christians for instance find it difficult to condemn the Muslim zealots or the Ulama and vice-versa. Even NIREC, which is the umbrella body, finds it also subtle to condemn any erring group during any religious conflict in contemporary Nigeria. In fact, no one has been brought to book because the existing law has been bottled up in the archive. Umejesi and Igboin again note that "yet we forget that Nigeria adopts sharia and even sets up shariah courts in accordance with the constitution against well-known secular states of the world."<sup>29</sup> All these are counter-productive to the space of religious pluralism in Nigeria.

### Towards Peaceful Co-existence

Hick believes that the differences of belief between or within traditions are legion and he has often discussed these conflicts in great detail. His basic pluralistic claim, rather, is that such differences are best seen as differing ways in which differing cultures have conceived and experienced the ultimate divine reality.<sup>30</sup>

Since religion is an issue that is touchy, sensitive and volatile in contemporary Nigerian society, students, laity and neophytes should be exposed to public school curricula or better still, exposed to religious education in their various churches, shrines and mosques. Kunzman opines that religious educators should increase students' understanding of diverse religious perspectives which will have positive social outcomes.<sup>31</sup> This would help students to better understand the increasing diversity, including religious diversity, they will be better prepared to live in a peaceful, productive manner with those with differing cultural and religious values. Specifically, this pedagogical understanding will encourage students to appreciate the other religion. When Christian students are enjoined to visit a Mosque and Muslim students are also implored to visit a church, there will be the air of religious belonging whereby they are encouraged to believe that it is wrong to treat those of other religions arbitrarily and discriminately, and to accept those of other religions as people with equal inherent value and worth. This religious education should not only be aired in the media but taken to the doorstep of the religious faithful.

Again, Christians and Muslims should live together peacefully. This is to engage intentionally and purposefully with people and groups whose religious practices are fundamentally different from one's own. The benefit of this kind of engagement/relationship according to Wuthnow is not only that it can minimize the likelihood of religious conflicts and violence that have been so much a part of human history, but such reflective engagement also allows us to focus on the shared concerns for basic human dignity found in the teachings of many of the world's religions.<sup>32</sup> Wuthnow's position must of necessity take us away from our social and emotional comfort levels in order to arrive at a workable relationship with one another.



Violence in the name of religion is central to political issue in Nigeria. Therefore, it is rather appropriate to implore the faithful to be religiously patriotic in their various confessions than taking undue advantage over the other. Constructive actions that promote peace should be engaged in so as to recognize that political matters should be dealt with politically through the process of examining, re-claiming and re-forming their political slogans. The same should also apply to religion instead of using it for destructive venture.<sup>33</sup>

Christians and Muslims should see themselves as living under the sun of the one merciful God who is the creator of man. We acclaim God's sovereignty and we depend on man's dignity as God's servant. Therefore, we must employ dialogue on issues relating to religious matters. As a matter of fact, dialogue talks about understanding in relationship and interaction between people of various backgrounds to the common concerns of mankind. True dialogue is the essence of contemporary human life. Balogun advocates true dialogue. According to him:

We are not advocating a fusion of the religions, what we advocate is tolerance, co-operation and understanding of one another's point of view. In order to achieve these, it is very essential that serious dialogue should obtain among the adherents of religions.<sup>34</sup>

Religious laws are legalised religious doctrines, sacred dogma institutionalised. They religious hatred, intolerance, discrimination and fanaticism turned into state policies. Here, it must be de-emphasised because religious laws are not compatible with civil law or the constitutions of the state. We must strive to ensure that no legal code sanctions or condones these dark and destructive rights in this 21st century. In a democratic state, people not only know about those who govern them but also about the laws that are used to govern the society.<sup>35</sup> In Nigeria, the totality of the constitution should be embraced fully by undermining any legal code of religious formalism. As long as Nigerian state is a secular and pluralistic state, any religious law should be discarded because Nigeria should not promote any religion as a state religion.

All the committed schools of PFN, CAN, SCIA, and NIREC which is the umbrella body should as a matter of urgency embark on rigorous religious campaigns like political parties during elections on the essence of religions and the beauty of living together and the need to respect other faiths with the aim of inter-religious co-existence that weaves bonds and builds bridges, which is devoid of conflict and bloodletting. Such a religious campaign would help religious believers of all faiths practiced in contemporary Nigeria to identify and focus on what these religions have in common. It seems reasonable to believe that widespread acceptance of the validity of diverse religious perspectives and increased focus on the communalities in diverse religions might well result in a more peaceful, mutually beneficial interaction among followers of diverse religions.

However, there is a different, less controversial option for members of NIREC who want to do more than simply encouraging tolerance of expression and empathetic

understanding. It is justifiable to attempt to signify the important common values held by most of the living faiths of the world, values that we can all accept and should all desire to see lived out. The major faiths of the world prohibit such things as killing, lying, stealing, and sexual exploitation, and most religions encourage such things as helping those in need and treating adherents of other faiths with respect. This would simply be of immense value within the Nigerian community. "Since religious convictions clearly influence social, political and economic activity on a global scale, emphasizing the shared common values of religions has the potential to facilitate better global relationships."<sup>36</sup> Of course, the positive commonality is an added value indispensable to accommodating other religious perspectives.

It is unethical and inappropriate for religious stakeholders whom many adherents are looking up to suddenly to prohibit them not to embrace or respect people of other faiths. It is equally sad to prevent adherents of other faiths from expressing and acting in accordance with their own beliefs. These conservative religious stakeholders carry with them explicit and implicit assumption that is inappropriate, controversial and fundamentalistic. Religion should not be politicised because it is very volatile and sensitive. All the stakeholders should get rid of exclusivist persuasion, extremist confession and fanatical trademark. Also, the various stakeholders should not employ the service of their followers to promote their selfish ambition.

### Conclusion

As we have seen, discussions of religious pluralism lend themselves to no easy answers. The issues involved are many; the arguments complex and the responses within the Nigerian context are varied. It is not out of place to state that exclusivist and inclusivist religious convictions have not behaved well, which has affected significantly the lives of thousands of citizens. In other words, exclusivist conviction is distasteful and disparaging. Similarly, people seem not to understand the nature of Nigerian state vis-a-vis her heterogeneity in all perspectives. Consequently, religious conflict becomes a way of life in Nigeria.

However, the continuing philosophical discussion of religious pluralism by religious educators; the emphasis on the nature of the constitution of the land; and right attitude and respect for the practitioners of other faiths become instances for a healthy and peaceful co-existence. To this end, various stakeholders should get rid of exclusivist, extremist and fanatical persuasions, as well as violence and embrace genuine dialogue. This seems the best way to address religious pluralism in contemporary Nigerian society.



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