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Religious Tolerance as a Means for Peaceful Co-Existence in Nigeria

by

Raji Abdullateef, T.K. Araba-Yusuf and Ilemaiye Festus Olorunfemi

Astract

The search for religious tolerance in the world has become particularly pressing today in promoting peaceful co-existence in a religiously plural society like Nigeria. In Nigeria, religious tolerance as a means for peace is expedient because of the near frequent occurrences of religious strife during the past three decades. Within this understanding, this paper examines religious tolerance as a means for peaceful co-existence in Nigeria. It considers the manifestations and consequences of religious intolerance and the search for religious tolerance as a panacea for peaceful co–existence. Prominent of these recommendations includes public enlightenment and re-orientation of the cit.zens on religious tolerance.

Keywords: Peace, Religious Pluralism, Tolerance

Introduction

The plurality of ways by which human beings express their spiritual cravings is a reality. This fact points in a way to the view that human beings are by nature religious and that they differed and would continue to differ in religions. As regards the first assertion of man being by nature religious, this is in line with the anthropological fact that no human society has been found without one form of religion or the other (Maishanu, 2007). Since the existence of a plurality of religions is a reality, then there is bound to be religious intolerance.

In fact, many religiously pluralistic societies all over the world have had to grapple with the problem of religious intolerance. Like most plural state, Nigeria is a country with religious diversity. African traditional religion, Christianity and Islam constitute the dominant religions in Nigeria, with each enjoying large followership. Aside from these major religions, there are other faiths like the Olumba Olumba, Eckankar, Bahai faith, Sat Guru and of course, the beliefs that claim secular humanism.

Intolerance among different religious adherents has become veracious and alarming during the past two decades. This is more pronounced between the Christians and Muslims, with obvious effects on peaceful co-existence. Looking at the dangers of intolerance among the various religious groups in the country

and its attendant violent outburst, this paper therefore, set out to examine the need for religious tolerance as a means for peaceful co-existence in a religiously pluralistic society like Nigeria.

Religious intolerance entails 'hostility towards other religions, as well as the inability of religious adherents to harmonize between the theories and the practical aspect of religion' (Balogun, 1988). It encompasses bigotry, which is the obstinate and intolerant devotion to one's opinions and prejudices, especially the exhibition of intolerance and animosity toward persons of differing beliefs (Baird and Staurt, 1999). The lack of religious intolerance in Nigeria has led to various crises such as the Boko Haram insurgency. In the last two decades, Nigeria had experienced events of tensions violence and killing between Christians and Muslims. These violent conflicts are not unconnected with the complex nature of interreligious and intercultural relationship that exists in the country, which have been that of religious riot ((Ekanem, 2013). The major reason for the violent conflict is largely due for either lack of tolerance among the followers of different religions.

Conceptual Framework

Peace: Peace is defined as the state of harmonious relationship, absence of violence, war, and freedom from disputes, mental stress or anxiety between individuals, groups, states or nations (Phil-Eze, 2009). It is also seen as a state of mind in concourse with serenity: a state of harmony, tranquility, concord and a balance of equilibrium of powers (Ikejiani-Clark and Ani, 2009). Ibeanu (2006) maintains that peace is a process that is conditioned by a state or nature, mind and society. He continues by saying that peace is a process involving activities that are directly or indirectly linked to increasing development and reducing conflict, both within specific societies and in a wider international community. We shall be guided here by the above definitions in the subsequent discourse to show the inter-connection between religious tolerance and peace.

Plural Society: A plural society is a term used to denote a society which consists of a variety of communities. This of course, might be said of almost any society, but the term usually refers particularly to nation states or confederates (Mitchell, 1979) made up of clearly distinct social groups (ethnic, political and religious) e.g. Malaysia, Indonesia, India and Nigeria etc. The major task facing such states is the development of a common will, and usually there is the very minimum to maintain order and provide for self-defence.

Religion: An acceptable definition of religion is difficult to find, because so many definitions have been framed over the years but with one deficiency or the other. Adeniyi (1993) defines religion as the consciousness of one's dependence on transcendent being and the tendency to worship Him. To him religion is a body of truths, laws and rites by which man is subordinated to the transcendent Being. Peter (1988) sees it as a system of symbols which act to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seems uniquely realistic.

Religious Pluralism: According to Alanamu (2003), religious pluralism is a normative perspective that emphasizes the importance for liberty of maintaining a plurality of relatively autonomous religious organisation. It can also be referred to a condition in which diverse religious groups live in relative peace and harmony. This is opposed to religious monopoly or monolithic religious state, where constitution recognizes one official religion.

Religious Tolerance: Religious tolerance the inverse of religious intolerance. It is the quality of tolerating or enduring others peoples' religious beliefs different from one's own. It could also means the ability to endure or accommodate peoples from other religious beliefs different from one's religion. In essence, there is religious tolerance when a particular group accepts or accommodates the views, opinions of other opposing religious adherents. According to Maishanu (2007), religious tolerance is mostly developed as a result of mutual respect.

Religious Intolerance: intolerance is a blind refusal to understand and respect views or positions that are opposed to one's cherished religious views. Ekwunife (1993) opines that religious intolerance is a blind and fixated mental and psychological negative attitude towards religious beliefs and practices that are contrary to one's cherished beliefs and practices. Such negative attitudes exhibit themselves in situations whereby leaders or groups in any society blindly refuse to understand and respect contrary religious views and practices except the ones they consider to be true.

There is religious intolerance when any group in a society deliberately and violently sets out to stamp out what the members subjectively consider to be error in religious thought and practice. In short, there is religious intolerance when a particular group refuses to accept or accommodate the views, opinions of other

opposing religious adherent. This refusal to accept contrary religious views and practices is often accompanied by series of violence and destruction as experienced in Nigeria during the past two decades.

Manifestation and Implications of Religious Intolerance in Nigeria Religious intolerance has become a chronic social disease, in fact a canker worm, which has eaten deep into the heart of many Nigerians. This is more pronounced among the Christians and Muslims. The activities of some of the adherents of these religions with regard to intolerance need proper diagnosis. Wherever there is more than one religious group in a place there are usually acts of intolerance, which manifest in the following ways:

(a) Throwing verbal insults at members of a religious group who may be worshipping or walking past;
(b) Attacking with dangerous missiles;
(c) Physical fights;
(d) Denying some religious groups fundamental social services like provision of land to build worship places;
(e) Mutilation in any form of the different religious holy books.

The causes of religious intolerance, according to Fan, Jerry and Nnaraonye (2014) include: religious bigotry, religious indoctrination, factionalism within a religious group, power tussles, ignorance and misunderstanding of the central teaching and practices of the different religions as well as Government interference in religious matters. A religious conflict can be brought about by religious intolerance. That is, when one religious group is unable to accept the beliefs, values and practices of another religious group, it breeds acts of intolerance and subsequently conflict.

Historically, Islam was introduced into Nigeria from the North by the Arabs while Christianity was introduced by the Europeans through the South (Ojie, 2002). The rise in the level of religious fanaticism and an extreme sense of religious intolerance had resulted into numerous cases of intra and inter and religious violence (Alanamu, 2004). Consequently, there have emerged several flash points of religious violence across the country in the sense of occurrence of direct violence in addition to a number of potential situations of violence outbursts.

Religious intolerance may not necessarily entail violence. However, it is the extreme manifestation of intolerance that embraces violence. Historically, religious intolerance dates back to the 1980s when the Maitasine sect emerged. This sect posed a serious threat to the unity of the country. Due to the massive killing by the Maitasine sect, the country became polarized along religious line (Ekanem, 2013).

The spiral of violent conflicts generated by religious intolerance in contemporary Nigeria had become ferocious over the last two decades. Beginning from the 1980s, the country has recorded very bizarre experience in the domain of religious violence (Egwu, 2003) embracing the three broad types identified by Ikenga-Metuh (1994): intra-religious disturbances which occur between different denominations or sects; inter-religious violence between adherents of different religious beliefs but capable of assuming socio-economic dimension; and inter-religious violence, which have socio-economic origin, end up in the form of religious conflicts.

The implications of religious intolerance cannot be fully measured. The problem of intolerance also makes Nigerian unity more elusive. Where there is religious intolerance, the call for national integration becomes a mirage. Apart from the above, religious intolerance has led to wanton destruction human lives. It has also caused colossal destruction to both private and public properties. Religious rioters have destroyed properties belonging to both the public and private individuals worth billions of naira. In the various religious violence that rocked Plateau state from 2001 to 2004, 25, 129 houses, 865 shops and 1,326 cattles among others were lost during the crises. Public institutions like primary and secondary schools estimated at over N130 million were destroyed by the rioters (Peter-Omale, 2004).

With the eruption of religious violence, social lives of the people are disturbed. There are also disruptions in the family life, with husbands becoming widowers and wives turn to widows and most children become orphans. In all cases, the loss, damages and the psychological trauma experienced by the affected Nigerians compounded the problems of stability and development which are central to the crisis of the Nigerian State. The various religious disturbances were a critical and potent force for socio-political instability as they portrayed the gross inadequacy and ineffectiveness of the state security. Security of life and property could not be guaranteed. The occasional provision of relief materials by government for the victims of religious disturbances is usually a drain on the public treasury and the nation's economy.

Religious Tolerance as a Means of Peaceful Co-existence

The search for religious tolerance in Nigeria has become particularly pressing today in view of certain important considerations. The first has to do with the obvious fact that Nigeria is a multi-religious state. Another consideration which necessitates religious tolerance as a means for peace is the near frequent occurrences of religious strife in the country during the past three decades.

To improve religious tolerance in Nigeria, Okediji (1982) calls for the establishment of a more humane social order. To him, this can be achieved through increased utilization of the intellectual resources of the land by encouraging social research and using the results for solving social problems, which of course include those relating to inter-group relations. Similarly, there is the need to mobilize Nigerians who are divided along religious diversities in the task of national development. This also constitutes part of Okediji's social action recommendations for the resolution of the national crisis.

To further promote religious intolerance and peaceful co-existence, Ojie (2003) suggested that a concerted effort to bring about cross-cultural awareness among the citizenry of this country should be advocated. Thus, the study of the people of Nigeria and their religions should be made compulsory all through our educational system. Efforts should also be geared up towards enhancing greater interaction between the various religious groups.

The need for dialogue is equally expedient to promote religious tolerance and peace in Nigeria. Dialogue will help to create religious accommodation, understanding and peaceful co-existence among the different faith communities in the country. The aim of dialogue should not be to obliterate the identity of a participating group. Rather its objective should be to discuss the various areas of religious disagreement. Christianity and Islam recognize the use of dialogue as a legitimate means of conflict resolution. The Islamic model for dialogue for instance, allows the recognition of the position of opposing group or groups and elicits accommodation of their views.

At the non-governmental level, Nigerians have distinguished themselves on the matter of common actions by various religious adherents. Numerous examples of location can be seen in political, socio-economic, academic and religious matters on local, state and national levels (Ogundana, 2006). Such common action can be regarded as precursors of effective dialogue towards national integration. It is also fashionable that during festive periods, Muslim and Christian leaders cum political leaders exchange greetings (Ige, 2006). In addition, the two dominant religions (Islam and Christianity) in Nigeria play significant role in the life of their adherents and the nation at large through the various welfare programmes. The case of St Mathew Catholic Health Project in Lagos readily comes to mind here. The health project located in Amukoko provides free medical services to all Christians and Muslims. Some other religious groups have similar projects.

Religious tolerance as a means for peace can also be achieved through the activities of religious organizations in the country. The various religious leaders

through their sermons, preaching and exhortations can promote religious tolerance. Example abound, in 2002 Nasrul-Lahi-Fathi Society of Nigeria (NASFAT) sponsored a peace initiative to promote religious harmony and unity in the country. The Mountain of Fire Ministries (MFM) and the Deeper Life Bible Church welcomed and participated in this peace initiative (Oso, 2002). These are some of the examples by which the various religious groups in the country contribute and promote religious tolerance.

In promoting religious tolerance, Fan, Jerry and Nnaraonye (2014) observed that Nigeria needs an Inter Religious Commission with branches in all the States of the Federation. This Commission would work out modalities for religious tolerance among Nigerians. Adherents of Christianity and Islam should be able to come together and identify the problems of the nation so that they could jointly fight such problems. The emphasis should be on a collective and genuine religious practice that could lead to the development of the nation.

Since all religious bodies preach love as a virtue, religious leaders should ensure that they emphasize this. Where love exists, there must, of necessity, be the absence of suspicion, religious discrimination, rivalry and competition, strife and tension (Kayode, 2000). Secularism should not just be concerned as the withdrawal of the Nigerian State from religious affairs but as a guarantee of religious freedom to every Nigerian.

Conclusion

Religious tolerance is a veritable tool for peaceful co-existence in a plural religious society like Nigeria. Without doubt, the absence of religious tolerance has been the major factor responsible for violent religious conflicts experienced during the pas two decades. The loss of human lives and wanton destruction of properties in the various religious strifes cannot be quantified. Hence, the need for religious tolerance to promote peaceful co-existence among different faith communities in Nigeria.

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