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The State and Religious Balancing in Nigeria

By

*Abdulrasheed A. Muhammad**

Introduction

The quest for a peaceful and stable polity is a pivotal aspiration of countries all over the world. This is true to the extent that peaceful coexistence of various groups within the state is a prerequisite for the attainment of whatever goal the state sets to achieve. For this reason, strategies are devised to attenuate the worst effects of various competing identities within the state. Such identities usually manifest in the existence of different ethnic groups, religious groups, cultural groups or some other base of ascription. Indeed, the 20th century witnessed the emergence of several modern states as heterogeneous entities defined by one or a combination of these identities. Within this ambit fall many African states with Nigeria serving as a typical example. The entity now known as Nigeria was a product of European ambition and rivalry in Africa. It emerged as an independent country after

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prolonged years of colonial rule formally established in the early 20th century. With a land area of about 923,708 square miles, it is composed of a multiplicity of ethnic and religious groups engendered by her colonial past. The existence of a multiplicity of religious groups consequently places the burden of creating a peaceful atmosphere and co-existence on the government which is the agency responsible for maintaining peace and stability in the country.

Interestingly, Nigeria's religious character is such that the north is predominantly Muslim and comprises mostly Hausa/Fulani ethnic group; the western Yoruba are partly Christian and partly Muslim while the eastern Ibo including the southern minority groups are predominantly Christian. This is not to suggest that there are no other religious groups in existence, such as the variants of African Traditional Religion (ATR). Consequently, relations between the two have been characterized by series of ups and downs. Cognizant of this fact and the potent consequences which an unbalanced relation could engender, the Nigerian state put up some balancing mechanisms aimed at ensuring harmonious relations between the two groups. Some questions arise at this point: How has the character of the Nigerian state impacted on relations between the Muslim and the Christian? What has been the content of such relations and how has the state maintained a balance between the two? How has the state's balancing techniques impacted on Muslim-Christian relations and what implication(s) does this have for the Nigerian state. Examining these issues forms the crux of this paper.

On the Concept of Religious Balancing

The concept of religious balancing could be said to

imply a process of ensuring equilibrium in relationships between the state and its various religious groups on the one hand and between and among the various religious groups themselves on the other hand. Religion, according to scholars, is a system relating man to an ultimate value epitomized in a `god' or 'the supreme being' and embodying a creed, code and, a mode of worship and communication. It is an expression of man's belief in a divine or superordinate being which requires not only succumbing to the tenets of the belief system but also a total acceptance of its dictates and doctrines.

Several perspectives exist in the literature on the concept of religion. These have been aptly documented by scholars such as Gofwen and Ogunji. The dominant perspectives however include the evolutionary perspectives; the functional perspective which reflects in the writings of scholars such as Durkheim, Parsons among others and; the radical perspective championed by Karl Marx and his adherents. In spite of the divergence of perspectives, however, it is generally believed that there is an interaction between religion and society with which its functions. This aspect constitutes the basis for inter-religious relations in society and shows the necessity of maintaining a balance between them. Consequently, religious balancing implies putting appropriate mechanisms in place to ensure that inter-religious relations with a state occurs in an atmosphere of peaceful coexistence and the potentials of religious groups impacting positively on the entire societal process. In Nigeria, these mechanisms include both constitutional and extra-constitutional means. But before elaborating on them it is expedient to look at the character of the Nigerian state.

Evolution and character of the Nigerian State

The entity now known was a product of European ambition and rivalry in Africa. Located between latitudes 4°n and 14°n and longitude 3°e and 15°e, and with a massive population currently estimated at over a hundred million, it is the most populous country in Africa and among the five most populous in the tropics. Indeed as Gulrez notes, it is the 10th most populous country in the world. Equally, it has a land area of about 923,768 square kilometers roughly equivalent to France, Italy, Belgium and Holland rolled together.

The evolution of a modern Nigerian state can be traced to the Berlin Conference of 1884-85 where territories of Africa were partitioned among the European powers. At the conference, Britain's right over the territory now known as Nigerian was recognized by other powers. Consequently, the British chartered the Royal Niger Company to trade in, and administer, the area. By 1900, the British formally took over its administration after revoking the charter of the Royal Niger Company thereby establishing formal colonial rule. Much of the country's colonial and post-colonial political and economic developments have been well documented by scholars. It must be stated however that the Nigerian state as presently constituted represents a plural society per excellence. This derives from its multiplicity of ethnic and religious groups. But while emphasis in the literature on Nigeria's plurality has often been on its ethnic character, little has been done to examine its religious concomitant. At best, religious plurality is viewed from the angle of Islam and Christianity while other belief systems are subsumed under the label of African Traditional Religion (ATR). These include, Ogun (God of iron); Sango or Amadioha (God of thunder) and several others. The reality however is that all

the groups subsumed under the ATR are not in themselves of the same content as they often assert their differences to the extent that an individual is not expected to be a member of more than one belief system. But this is not to say that adherents of the ATR do not participate in the celebration of each others festivals – at least, in showing solidarity with fellow members of the community.

Of equal importance is that most of the ATR predates Islam and Christianity, though these two have come to be domineering especially in the post-colonial era. Some factors, perhaps, serve to explain this. First, the imperialist character of the colonial state with the tendency to, impose its own civilization on other cultures. Other religions are thus classified as barbarism while the imported ones are portrayed as a saving grace. This is true of Christianity which came along with colonialism. At another level, each of the imported religions has an inherent tendency to dominate and in the case of Islam, it sought to bring people out of their Jahiiiyah state into one of enlightenment based on teachings of the Quran and Hadith. Second, in the post-colonial era and following from established practices during the colonial era, the government is more disposed to the two religions, Islam and Christianity, than any other religion in existence. Third, there is also the tendency for people irrespective of their ethnic or professional background to show themselves more as either Muslim or Christian outwardly whereas they are sentimentally attached to the ATR. These factors encourage the preponderance of Islam and Christianity above other belief systems.

Apart from the existence of a multiplicity of ATR groups along with Islam and Christianity, there are also other imported religious belief systems. These include, Hari

Krishna from India, Eckankar movement, among others. Again these groups have not been influential enough as to assert their presence beyond the domineering character of Islam and Christianity.

In terms of establishment, religious plurality in Nigeria could be said to have occurred at three different epochs in history. First are those already established before colonialism and which are autochthonous to Africa. These are those categorized under ATR. Second are those formally established during the colonial period and which enjoyed the support of the colonial state; they are Islam and Christianity. Commenting on their arrival in Nigeria, Kurian notes that, Christianity came through the Southern coast with the arrival of Europeans in Southern Nigerian. With the establishment of formal colonial rule, it became firmly rooted in the South and spreading towards Western Nigeria but met Islam there. Islam on the other hand came through Northern Nigeria via trade contact with Arabs of North Africa and through activities of Islamic Jihadists. It became firmly established in Northern Nigeria and was spreading to the South but was stopped in the West thus:

> ...the resulting religious composition closely fellows geographic and ethnic lines, the Southern Ibo are predominantly Christians, while the Northern Hausa are... Muslims, and the Western Yoruba are partly Christian and partly Muslim.

Noteworthy is that, their different origins coupled with their been rooted within separate geographical localities, as well as differential pace of socio-political and economic developments between the localities typified by the North and South during the colonial era are what sowed the seeds

for a discordant relationship between them after the country's independence.

Finally, at the third level of the establishment of Nigeria's religious plurality are those belief systems that registered their presence in Nigeria after independence, though with few followers. These are the Hari Krishna, Eckanker and so on. All the above arguments notwithstanding, all the various groups have come to stay and co-exist within the Nigerian state. What is to be noted is that the multiplicity of ethnic and religious groups have now become institutionalized diversities within the Nigerian state. It is within these historical facts therefore that we can locate the reasons behind the preemptive relations that exists between Islam and Christianity in Nigeria and the role carved out by the state for itself.

Religious Balancing Mechanisms in Nigeria

To say the least, Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria have been more of strange bed fellows. Both religions preach peace and peaceful co-existence but have been involved perpetually, in a race of ascendancy especially in post-independence Nigeria. Noteworthy is that, the marriage of convenience between them dates back to the pre-independence period when the British colonialists had to embark on a policy of protecting the Muslim North from the destructive influences of the Christian South yet, went ahead to amalgamate the two into one political entity. Suffice it to say therefore that the present antagonism between the two groups was the fruit of the discordant seed sown at that period. It is the desire to bring order out of the disorder that leads to some balancing mechanisms inspired by the state.

As noted earlier, religious balancing in Nigeria is

predicated on both constitutional and extra-constitutional means. These are with the intent to avert possible religious controversy and guarantee the equal rights of citizens to profess their faith. Thus, Nigerian governments since independence have often proclaimed the principle of secularity of the Nigerian state. Secularity implies a secular situation. 'Secular' means not to be concerned with spiritual or religious affairs. A secular state therefore is one which is established on the assumption that political authority is completely independent of religion or supernaturalism and therefore not concerned with the spiritual life of its citizens. The emphasis here is that religion is confined to private practice and individual preference. The sate will not adopt any religion as official, neither will it give overt or covert recognition and assistance to any group. As an idea, this notion of secularity originated from Europe at the end product of conflict between the church and the state which started in the eleventh century. The church at that period claimed to be superior to the state in both spiritual and temporal matters. The state of course rejected this claim on the grounds that the church is only a part of the whole because it existed within the state. Therefore, the part cannot be greater than the whole.

In the opinion of the church, the priests were ordained by God and this conferred on them an authority over that of the state including the right to make laws and collect taxes. Refusal of the state to concede to such a claim led to series of crises until both parties, through mutual consent, agreed to demarcate their spheres of influence. Consequently, it was agreed that the church could exercise authority in spiritual matters while authority over temporal affairs was vested in the state. Modern nation-states subscribed to this idea as a way of achieving the peaceful co-existence of all religious

groups existing within it. This idea was thus clearly stated in Section 10(1) of the 1979 Nigerian constitution. Also, section 10 of the 1999 constitution clearly states that "the government of the federation or of a state shall not adopt any religion as a state religion". This provision is further complemented by section 38(1) which guarantees individual's "right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion". Suffice it to say therefore, that these constitutional provisions have in the strictest sense confined religious practices to the private realm. Hence, Nigeria can justifiably, by law, be termed a secular state and no religious group is expected to enjoy undue patronage from the state above others.

With regards to the extra-constitutional mechanisms, it involves the states pragmatic support to religious groups within it. As will become obvious soon, this idea stands in contradiction to its proclaimed secularity and is partly responsible for the stiff contest for public space between Islam and Christianity in the country. Essentially however, the Nigerian state's adventure in extra-constitutional provisions is anchored on its belief that every religion has a positive and soul-redeeming message which ought to be propagated formally and informally in order to promote a culture of religious tolerance in a multi-religious society. Obviously this idea of propagating formally such religious messages was directed towards the Christian and Islamic faiths. Lending credence to this argument, the government, during a seminar organized by NARETO in 1992, declared that, 'the need now is very urgent not only to propagate Islam and Christianity but also to propagate tolerance and peaceful co-existence in all its religious and ethnic dimensions'. Consequently, year in, year out, some days are declared as public holidays for the celebration of Muslim and Christian festivals. Both enjoy

five days annually as public holidays commemorating one event or the other. In addition, the government does send goodwill messages to them on such occasions through both print and electronic media. Apart from this, huge amounts are usually paid from government coffers as allowances to some categories of state officials for the celebration of one or the other of either Muslim or Christian festivals to the extent that a Senator was recently alleged by a probe panel to have received up to the tune of 16 million Naira of tax money as Sallah gift.

One other area of pragmatic involvement in religious affairs by the Nigerian state is in terms of financial and material assistance to religious groups. In addition to donating expansive plots of land in the Federal capital territory, Abuja, the Shagari administration (1979-1983) for instance gave 10 million naira each to both Muslim and Christian groups to build their places of worship in the federal capital territory, Abuja. These have come to be known as the National Mosque and National Ecumenical Centre respectively. Recently as well, a rehabilitation committee for the National Mosque was constituted with the president as chairman and vice president as his vice as well. Additionally, mosques and churches were allowed to be built on the premises of some government establishments in order to cater for the religious and spiritual needs of their adherents. Recently for instance, the president Olusegun Obasanjo, commissioned a church built by his regime within the Aso rock premised. This was done with a view to correcting the previous situation whereby Muslims can always move out of their offices to observe their prayers in the mosque already built by the past administration – and opportunity which their Christian counterparts do not have.

Other areas of governments direct involvement in

religious affairs include its external fraternization with religious organizations and official support of Muslim and Christian pilgrimages among others. How all these impacted on Muslim-Christian relations and its implication for the state is our focus in the next section.

Implications and Consequences

There is no denying the fact that the post-colonial Nigerian state has been a hot-bed of religious antagonism and acrimony between Islam and Christianity. Both have become competitors for public space. At one level, it is rivalry for a greater number of converts and at another level, it is competition for vantage positions in the power matrix. In spite of government's endeavours to balance relations between the two, mutual suspicion and antagonism has remained a common feature. Although the country may not have experienced a full blown religious war, series of inter-religious conflicts occurring is a pointer to the fact that the country is not completetly immune from such.

What seems to be a major and direct antagonism between Christians and Muslims in post-independence Nigeria was first aroused in the controversy that trailed the Sharia debate in the 1977-78 National Constituent Assembly (CA). Before then, religion was never at the forefront in inter-group relations and plays little or no part in national politics. As Elaigwu notes, amidst the many sins of the first republic (1960-1966), perhaps the religious bigotry of groups ranked lowest. However with the controversies generated in 1977-78 CA on whether to include provisions on Sharia court in the impending Nigerian construction of 1979, issues of religion began to assume a vociferous dimension in Nigerian government and politics. Consequently as events unfolded

under different administrations the various religious balancing mechanisms employed by the state to manage its religious plurality especially relations between Christians and Muslims not only became sterile but often, counter productive. Consequently, each religious group became more and more suspicious of the other and/or the state while most policies and actions came to be seen through the lens of religion. Osaghae notes that the lens also extends to issues of dressing, food and the balance of religious propagation in educational institutions, allocation of air time on radio and television and religious composition of the armed forces among others. In effect, Islam and Christianity in Nigeria have become interlocked in the rivalry for public space and national politics. Even in the arena of inter-state relations, both Islam and Christianity have showed themselves as born-rivals. This is evident in controversies that trailed Nigeria's restoration of diplomatic relations with Israel and the Vatican; membership of the Organisation of Islamic conference (OIC) in 1986 and the D8 (group of eight developing countries) during General Sani Abacha's regime among others. The point of emphasis here is that, the Nigerian state's attempt to maintain a positive balance of relations between Islam and Christianity has been characterized by large scale counter-productiveness with excruciating consequences for Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria as well as the state as a political entity.

In other words, the place of the state as the center of activity, power and authority in a multi-religious society such as Nigeria makes it attractive and a point of contest for various groups seeking to dominate and influence the other. This coupled with the fact that, religion is one of the diversities highly susceptible to manipulation by politicians places

Muslims and Christians on their toes at moments of political appointments and contests. What logically derives in this context is that the amount of public space enjoyed by a particular religious group will be largely determined by who controls political power. That is, there is a tendency that whoever controls political power will be more favourably disposed to his/her own religious group as against the government depending on the religious belief of the president. For instance, in an undated piece recently circulated by the National Council of Muslim Youth Organizations (NACOMYO) in Nigeria, it alleged religious lopsidedness against the interests of Islam in the political appointments made by President Olusegun Obasanjo. According to the piece, out of 42 ministers, 26 were Christians while 16 were Muslims. Also, out of 60 special advisers and aides, 47 and 13 were Christians and Muslims respectively. The conclusion of this group therefore is that Muslims in Nigeria have become and endangered specie that may eventually be consumed under a Christianization agenda. Similar allegations have been leveled in the past by Christians against Muslim heads of government. Little wonder therefore that even issues of party politics and electioneering in the country have been characterized by a 'high sense of political ecumenism' to use Kukah's phrase. In fact, what could be gleaned from the writings of various scholars is that there is no election in post-independence Nigeria that is not characterized by either politicians maneuvering the religion cleavage or religious groups attempting to manipulate the political process.

It must be noted that, it is the government's recognition and support for some religious groups that is responsible for the unbridled antagonism between the groups (Christians and Muslims). Indeed Nigeria has witnessed

destructive religious crises in the past, but there is nothing to suggest that more of such will not occur given the extent to which religion has eaten into the fabric of Nigerian government and politics, unless the government treads with care. The government must realize that religious conflicts are usually wider in scope and more destructive than ethnic or political crises. First, religion, especially Islam and Christian, has a wider transnational existence than ethnic and political affiliations. As such, happenings in other parts of the globe can trigger violence in Nigeria. An instance was when the government in 2001 made a pronouncement that it was in support of the U.S. Offensive against Osama Bin Laden. Religious violence instantly erupted in Kano and some other parts of the country. While this represents a purely international issue and a foreign policy statement from the Nigerian government, it was understood by some as an attempt by the Nigerian government to join forces with the U.S. government against the Muslims.

Secondly, unlike ethnicity which creates several fronts of divide depending on the number of ethnic groups, religion creates fewer divides. In the case of Nigeria, the predominance of Christianity and Islam usually makes it result in two divides. Hence, most Nigerians at moments of religious crises usually fall into either divide irrespective of ethnic and/or political affiliation. The implication of this is that, unlike ethnic conflict which may be restricted to areas inhabited by members of the groups in conflict, the whole country would serve as a theater for any major religious violence. Little wonder therefore that a spark of religious violence in Lagos or Owerri instantly replicates itself in Kano or Kaduna, whereas ethnic conflicts of long standing such as that between Ijaw and Itshekiri in Delta state or Ife and

Modakeke in Osun state, Umueri and Aguleri in Anambra state among others, have not transcended their abodes.

Of equal importance is the fact that the state's romance with Islam and Christianity amounts to a violation of the fundamental rights of the other religious groups. One may then query what happens if the other groups are able to muster enough strength and support to begin to exert pressure on the state. This may occur as a result of constant conflict between the two dominant groups of Islam and Christianity in which non-members of the groups are affected. This has a tendency to inspire them into forming some type of resistance against the domineering character of Islam and Christianity and the state's support for them. The implication of this is that the country may likely be torn by more serious strife that will threaten its very foundations.

Conclusion

The preceding analysis revealed Nigeria's heterogeneous character evident in the diversity of its ethnic and religious groups. These diversities have often constituted a source of conflict within the entity. Perhaps cognizance of the fact that religion represents a political force capable of pushing in different directions, the Nigerian state adopted the principle of secularity. Thus it was given constitutional backing hoping that it would help avoid unbridled antagonism. This is in addition to other extra-constitutional mechanisms. However, through an assessment of some practices by the Nigeria state, it is observed that the notion of Nigerian secularity exists only in principle and not in practice. This is because the state has displayed so much affection for religious practices. The reality is that, this inability to maintain absolute neutrality in religious affairs

has serious implications for the Nigerian state and where care is not taken, religion for Nigeria, may be a time bomb waiting to explode and shatter its very basis of existence. It is therefore suggested that the Nigerian state should re-examine its level of romance with religious groups and make necessary adjustments in its relations with them in order for it to effectively contain the destructive potentials of inter-religious antagonism.