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Table of Contents

| | |
|---|-----|
| * C. O. Ogunkunle | |
| Evil: Man's Apprehension of Contrary Situation..... | 1 |
| Olusegun Olawoyin | |
| Mark 2: 23-28: A Humanist Interpretation..... | 12 |
| * S.O. Kolawote & B.S. Moruwawon | |
| Implication of Linguistic Approach for Bible Translation.... | 29 |
| * T. F. Jemiriye | |
| Roots of Misrepresentations between Yoruba Traditional Religion and Christianity..... | 38 |
| * F.A. Ojo | |
| Anthropomorphism in Relation to Jewish Faith and Yoruba Traditional Belief..... | 49 |
| *J. K. Ayantayo | |
| The Contemporary Channels of Religious Communication in Nigeria: An Issue of Environmental Management..... | 63 |
| * S. O. Eniola | |
| At-Tawhid Concepts and the Globalisation of Nature and Creation Philosophy..... | 80 |
| * Rafiu Ibrahim Adebayo | |
| Religion and National Unity: The Gap between Theory and Practice..... | 94 |
| * I.O. Adesanya | |
| The Bible and Homosexual Practice: A Critical Appraisal of Public Responses to Gays and Lesbians in Contemporary Nigeria..... | 106 |

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RELIGION AND NATIONAL UNITY: THE GAP BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE

By

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Introduction:

Man is a product of one single soul.¹ Differences in family, colour and race are deliberate acts of God, the Creator, for the purpose of identification on the part of creatures.² Realising the fact that living harmoniously is an essential factor for men to carry out their duties to their Creator, various means are explored by the Creator to ensure peaceful co-existence and unity among the creatures. The link between men and their Creator is religion. Through it, they become conscious of their duty to Him as well as to other creatures. The fact that religion is one in the sight of God is testified to in the preaching of virtues and frowning at vices in the various existing religions. The *Qur'an* clearly states that religion emanates from a source, and all the prophets preached that, when it says:

The same religion has He established for you as that which He enjoined on Noah, the which We have sent by inspiration to thee and that which We enjoined on Abraham, Moses, and Jesus: namely, that ye should remain steadfast in Religion, and make no divisions therein....³

Commenting on the above verse, Ali has this to say:

Faith, Duty or Religion, is not a matter to dispute about. The formation of sects is against the very principle of Religion and unity. What we should strive for is steadfastness in duty and faith, and unity among

mankind.⁴

The *Qur'an* further stresses that division and disparity in religion is a human factor when it says: "And they became divided only after knowledge reached them - being insolent to one another"⁵ From this, it can be unequivocally said that the differences in religions are man-made, for their deliberate recognition and preference given to one prophet or the other. According to the *Qur'an* all prophets are one and any attempt to discriminate between them amounts to injustice.⁶ Muslims are thus enjoined to say "We believe in Allah and in that which has been revealed to us and in that which was given to Musa and 'Isa and in that which was given to the prophets from their Lord, we do not make any distinction between any of them."⁷

Speaking in the same vein, the Bible does not mince words in informing that Jesus himself took some steps to guard against religious disunity. He told his disciples that he had not come to change or abrogate the Law of Moses, his predecessor. He further instructed them to hearken to the Law of Moses and that they should only be careful in following the steps and practices of those who upheld the laws, as they did contrary to the dictates of the laws. The Gospel of Mathew reveals this when it reads thus:

Then spoke Jesus to the multitude and to his disciples, saying, the Scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: All therefore whatever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works; for they say, and do not.⁸

In order to avert disintegration and interpolation of religion, Jesus further warned his disciples to beware of false-prophets and that they shouldn't believe anybody claiming to have seen him after he might have left them. In a clear language, he warned:

Take heed that ye be not deceived; for many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ: and the time draweth near; go ye not therefore after them.⁹

Reporting the same message, Mathew writes:

Then if any man shall say unto you, Lo here is Christ,

or there; believe not. For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall show great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect. Behold, I have told you before, wherefore if they shall say unto you, Behold, he is in the desert; go not forth; behold, he is in the secret chambers; believe it not.¹⁰

The possibility of making distinction between prophets by men does not catch God unaware. He thus declares anybody who wants to break this universal unity of the prophets as unbelievers, when He says:

Those who disbelieve in Allah and His messengers and desire to make a distinction between Allah and His messengers and say: We believe in some and disbelieve in others, and desire to take a course in between; these are truly disbelievers.¹¹

Thus, the line of distinction drawn by people between the prophets of God leads to emergence of different religions. Despite the differences in religion, the unity of a nation should not be disrupted, as everybody is expected to carry out his religious duty without hurting the feeling of others. "For you there is your religion and for me my religion" ¹² "There is no compulsion in religion."¹³ It is however our focus in this paper to examine the dichotomy between the theoretical teachings of Islam and Christianity and the practices of the adherents of these religions in an heterogeneous society like Nigeria vis-a-vis national unity.

Religion and National Unity: A Theoretical Approach:

A glossary look into the Bible and the *Qur'an* reveals that no religion preaches violence and intolerance. Anything that can tamper with the peaceful co-existence in any community is frowned at by the religions. Enforcement of orderliness and friendliness in the nation is the major function of religion in the nation. The Holy Bible enjoins love, peace and tranquility as ingredients of national unity in the following verses:

Let love be genuine, hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good, love one another with brotherly affection, outdo one another in showing honour... Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints. Practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another, do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly, never be conceited. Repay no one evil for evil but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends upon you, live peacefully with all.¹⁴

In his preaching on the Mount, Jesus equally advised man to love other human beings.¹⁵ In the same vein, the *Qur'an* says:

And not alike are the good and the evil. Repel evil with what is best, when Lo! He between whom and you was enmity would be as if he were a warm friend.¹⁶

Apart from enjoining virtues as a means of promoting national unity, such acts as vandalization, violence, theft, prostitution, adultery, false witness, looting, usury and murder which are bane to peaceful co-existence in the community are condemned by both Islam and Christianity. It is reported by Bukhari and Muslim that "when two Muslims draw weapons against each other, they are at the brink of hell. If one of them kills the other, they both enter it together. Someone asked: 'O Messenger of Allah, this one was the murderer, but what was the fault of the murdered?' He replied, 'He was eager to kill the other'¹⁷ In another hadith, the Prophet said:

None of you should remain in a place where a man is being killed unjustly, for the curse of Allah descends on anyone who was present and did not defend him.¹⁸

As part of the measures to promote national unity, religion regulates business transactions between human beings for the purpose of encouraging productive business transactions and ensuring functional socio-economic relations between them. As such

trading in unlawful goods, hoarding, exploitation, usury, buying stolen properties, withholding full measure and interest, are seen as threats to national unity and are condemned in clear terms. The institution of *zakat* in Islam is equally an effective weapon of strengthening unity between the rich and the poor. It facilitates transfer of some resources from the rich to the poor and thus contributing to the realisation of the social objectives.

Looking at the issue of national security from political perspective, there are interactions between religion and politics. Religion provides useful hints on the fact that public office is a trust from God and so, must be used judiciously to enhance peace and harmony in the society. The duties and functions of leaders and citizens are spelt out in the scriptures, while religious figures reputed for honour, integrity, gallantry, generosity and piety are there for people to emulate. All these made Madu to conclude that 'religion is the blood of the nation, which provides the strength to what makes the nation function.'¹⁹ As appropriate as the observation is, one wonders whether or not the blood has not been contaminated by contagious diseases or the deadly HIV, or whether its genotype is AA, AS or SS in relation to other factors. The reason is that despite the fact that most citizens of Nigeria profess one religion or the other, apart from the physical littering of our major roads and popular roundabouts with religious posters and boards, as well as the shouting of Hallelujah and Allah, together with highly decorated and magnificent churches and mosques, the application of the teachings of these religions to daily life is at zero level. There is little or nothing to write home about in the conduct of the people, and this has created loopholes in the theory and practice of religion in relation to national unity.

Factors Militating Against Using Religion to Achieve National Unity: A Practical Experience:

Despite the teaching of religion on the need to maintain peace and unity in the nation, experience has shown that lip services are only paid to these teachings while in practical sense, opposite side is taken by adherents of religion. To go beyond the local level, one tends to ask whether the First and Second World Wars were about

eighteen and thirty-two million people were said to have been killed respectively, were fought by who and against whom? The nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan where thousands of innocent civilians were killed was undoubtedly done by some who professed Christianity as a religion. The war between the Islamic Republics of Iran and Iraq was equally fought by Muslims and against Muslims. One is equally sure that Joseph Stalin was an orthodox Christian, Adolph Hitler was a Roman Catholic, Charles Taylor, the Liberian dictator was an orthodox Christian, while the acclaimed brain behind the September 11 occurrence in America, Bin Laden, is a Muslim. All these personalities have killed thousands of innocent souls by their actions, whereas their religions preach sanctity of lives and properties of innocent people.

It is surprising that religion has been used as instrument of disorganisation, polarisation, disintegration and destruction. Since no religion teaches these obnoxious practices, our observation is that some factors are working against effective use of religion to promote national unity, or rather, some evil forces are suspected to have been working underneath religion as an institution for achieving personal selfish goals.

One of the salient factors is leadership tussle. Cases of intra-religious disputes are traced to the problem of leadership among religionists and these have been contributing to the incapability of religion to be an instrument of national unity. The problem of leadership has torn many communities apart. Immediately after the death of Prophet Muhammad (SAW), the Muslim community was faced with the problem of leadership. While some gave preference to the candidature of an *Ansar*, others preferred that leadership should come from the *Muhajirun*.¹⁹ If not for divine intervention, the *Ummah* would have fallen apart. This is also the case in the Christendom as observed by Winkworth when he writes:

Apart from displaying intolerance to those who did not agree with them, Christians were also very intolerant among themselves. Disputes and bloodshed occurred not only over points of doctrine, but also over the choice of leaders.²⁰

The incessant leadership tussle has been one of the major factors for the proliferation of different denominations in the country.

Excessive patriotism to one sect and looking at others as infidels is another major factor. In short, sectarian jingoism is a strong bane to using religion for national unity. The emergence of such sects as *Shiah* and *Kharajites* during the time of 'Ali did not only cause filthy ideological acrobaticism, but also developed to disunity and warfare among the early Muslims.²¹ This is also the case in Northern Ireland where the Catholics and Protestants engaged in battles that led to loss of lives and properties. In Nigeria, the *Maitatsine* hubbub is a good example where more than four thousand lives were said to have perished in Kano State alone. This was equally the case in Zaria, Maiduguri, Kaduna, Yola and Gombe.²²

One needs to add that most of the religious chauvinism is ethnically engineered. This explains why adherents of the same religion take arm against one another. Or what can one say about the Basques nationalists who were devout Catholics in Spain, but were shooting down other equally devout Catholics in order to be granted a separate state.²³ The recent Kaduna riot on *Shari'ah* was fuelled by the problem of ethnic chauvinism between the settlers and the Kaje tribe in the area.

It is observed that religion has no place where ethnicity is dominating. Though, the June 12 election could not be said to have been annulled exclusively for ethnic reason, yet an element of it was observed, as both the acclaimed winner of the election and the then military president were Muslims. The Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs under which the acclaimed winner served as Vice President could not intervene in this and the subsequent imprisonment of the winner by the Abacha junta for ethnic reasons, despite that they were Muslims too.

The fracas between different factions of religion as well as the claim of doctrinal superiority by these factions has shaken the unity of the nation to its root. This has led to the propagation of such doctrines through fanatical means. Some of the foul means taken to achieve this include 'brute force, economic, political and social strangulation of the rights of the so called 'infidels' and unbridled political, educational, economic and social favouritism of the so called

elects of God to the disadvantages of other citizens'²⁴

The legacy of hatred, animosity and antagonism of some people to religions other than their own is promoted by some print and electronic media. Rather than using the news media for the promotion of religious unity in a multi-religious society like Nigeria, some dailies in their editorial, news reports, column and captions, contain derogatory, defamatory and provocative remarks on other religions. Thus, some papers promote intellectual dishonesty and foster the spirit of disunity in their bid to promote the religion they profess. Writings of some people in our dailies show their ignorance of the religion they criticise and reaction to such writings becomes a threat to the peaceful co-existence of the people in the community. A good example of this is a write-up of one Lana Balogun, who in the *Sunday Standard* under the caption "Master of Yesteryears Ahmed the Camel Driver" described Prophet Muhammad as an epileptic prophet.²⁵ Or how can there be unity in a multi-religious nation where a Professor in a University Department of Religious Studies, Dada Adelowo made a provocative statement against the Muslims saying:

The Yoruba Muslims' priests maintained themselves by deceits and charm making. Their religion was the greatest obstacle to the progress of civilisation and to all that is pure, holy... Islam was as stagnant as it was obstructive to progress. It discourages free labour.²⁶

In addition to the above, some textbooks contain wrong information about some religions. In such textbooks, Muslims names were used to portray such vices as looting, defaulting, adultery and religious fanaticism. This demonstrates how educational medium and disciplines are used to persecute religious vendetta.

Bridging the Gap Between Theory and Practice:

Undoubtedly, religion is a powerful and an effective mechanism of gaining massive support from the populace. The dichotomy between theory and practice of religion in relation to national unity is largely due to the division between 'religious' and 'secular' where the rulers are no more regarded as possessing the religious legitimacy of having a say in religious affairs, while the few

others who are loyal to religion could not exercise the teaching of their religion in its fullest form. The combination of power and religion is an essential ingredient of national unity. Thus, to bridge the gap between the two, there is the need to give religion its proper role to play in the lives of its adherents. Stressing the indispensability of the combination of power and religion, Mawdudi says:

If people are free to commit adultery, no amount of sermons will stop them. But if governments forbid adultery, people will find it easier to give up this evil practice. Similarly, is it not enough to preach sermons against drinking, gambling, usury, bribery, pornography and morally corrupting education, if the overall environment of the surrounding society encourages or at least condones these things. Power, however, can do much to eradicate them.²⁷

In addition to the above, the gap between the teaching of religion on national unity and the negative approach of the people could be bridged with the consciousness of the government in considering the conscience of the people while formulating their policies. The sense of intolerance becomes aroused where government fails to consider the feeling of its citizens in policy formulation. In such a case, religious hubbub becomes inevitable. The statement of Mawdudi is equally relevant here when he says:

It should be clear to us that no nation becomes really strong or could achieve any great progress in any field, if it is involved in a perpetual conflict between the conscience of the people and the policies of the rulers. Even if such a nation is compelled to tolerate its rulers, it cannot be expected to give them its wholehearted cooperation, and the people's non-cooperation and resentment might become a source of danger to the state itself. A nation can develop and progress only when there is complete harmony between the conscience of the people and the policies of the government.²⁸

The point we are trying to make is that any government or regime that prevents people from choosing their ideals and practising their beliefs is inviting the wrath of religious war. National unity could only be achieved via religion in the absence of oppression and tyranny. Real peace and unity can be attained when justice is allowed to prevail.

Furthermore, religious leaders have a hard nut to crack in terms of achieving national unity via religion. They should forget the wrong and mad person's notion of aspiring to make the whole nation profess the same religious faith and practice, as this is a negation of the community set-up. They should avoid derogatory and defamatory remarks on other religions and should preach the virtues of their religion. All religions enjoin mutual understanding, peaceful co-existence, co-operation and even dialogue among the people of diverse faiths and ideologies. Our religious leaders need to embark on deep reflection of the scriptures with a view to avoiding giving wrong interpretations to some verses of the scriptures to favour their own stand on certain issues.

Conclusion:

So far, we have delved into the teaching of Islam and Christianity on the peaceful co-existence and national unity and some factors militating against effective use of religion as a weapon of national unity in a multi-religious- society like Nigeria. Our observation is that religious crisis can not be treated in isolation as a major threat to national unity, as other factors also raise their ugly faces in the garb of religion. It is our belief that for religion to be used as an effective weapon of national unity, the gap between religious theory and practice needs to be bridged. This can be done if the government can incorporate some religious teachings into the nation's constitution and take the religion of its citizens into consideration in the formulation of its policy.

It is equally expedient to note that it is erroneous to judge a religion on the basis of behaviours and attitudes of its followers as, at times, its followers out of their whims and caprices, disobey the injunctions of the religion deliberately just because there is nobody to ensure their compliance with them. This explains why some who

profess one religion or the other are involved in the ever-growing criminal acts and violence. Since at times, ignorance of its teachings may constitute the major reason for committing certain criminal offence; it then becomes pertinent that religious education be fully integrated into all levels of the school system of the country. Also, punitive measure should be taken against anyone who commits any criminal act based on the injunction laid down by his religion. By this, religion will assume its proper position in the country and so will not be used as an instrument of disunity in the hand of unpatriotic citizens again.

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