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RELIGION AND THE CHALLENGE OF PEACEFUL CO-EXISTENCE IN LIGHT OF TODAY'S REALITY IN SOUTH WEST NIGERIA

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Abstract

The escalation of religious related unrest around the world and Nigeria in particular has made the longing for peaceful coexistence intensified in recent times. Meanwhile, religion is a cardinal part of the society because almost every person is attached to a religion or the other; it also forms an important aspect of the social fabric of every nation and contributes to human development. However, peaceful co-existence in Nigeria has consistently been proven almost impossible amidst various crisis and efforts to live together in harmony. The fact that religion contributes largely to the challenge of peaceful coexistence in Nigeria is widespread. Notably, this study observes a paradigm shift among the people of the Southwestern part of Nigeria, with regards to the threats religion poses to peaceful coexistence. As a result, this study employs descriptive and historical research methodology. It also focuses on southwestern part of Nigeria as the periscope of this study. Thus, this article aims to examine the link of religion with peaceful coexistence in Nigeria as a nation. It explicates the reality of peaceful living in Nigeria as that which is filled with religious undertones. From the foregoing, this study discusses the issue of religion in Nigeria with regards to its impact on adherents and its threats towards peaceful living. It plies memory lane to unveil obstacles of peaceful co-existence and atmosphere of tolerance.

Introduction

According to Shittu (2013), it is estimated that the population of the adherents of the two most popular Abrahamic religions, Islam and Christianity, accounts for more than half of the world population, and over eighty percent of what is said in the media about religion refers to Muslims and Christians, while majority of intra and inter faith fracas is traced to the two religions. Therefore, almost every person is attached to a religion or the other; this is because it also forms an important aspect of the social fabric of every nation and contributes to human development. Nigeria is one of the most populous nations in the whole world, situated on the west coast of sub Saharan Africa, with the largest population of any African nation with total population of about 188,462,640 million people. This country is composed of multiple ethnic groups, cultures and languages which result to intermixing of religious groups (Alao, 2019). However, peaceful co-existence in Nigeria has consistently been proven almost impossible amidst various crisis and efforts to live (Alubo, 2006).

Observably, these two religions seem to have been scrambling to "outdo" each other. The onus of playing it safe thereby lies with their followers who are expected to learn to tolerate each other and go about their Da'wah (invitation to faith) and Evangelical activities in such a way that peace and security of the entire human race is not jeopardized (Shittu, 2013). The escalation of religious conflicts around the world today has intensified the yearning for peaceful coexistence. The spate of confrontations between adherents of Christianity and Islam in recent history is worrisome (Elaigwu, 2004). The peculiarity of this study lies in the fact that the periscope of this research does not only have to do with Islam and Christianity; it also involves African Religion.

The Southwestern part of Nigeria is known for its peaceful relations within its domain in time past; regardless of religious affiliations (Salawu, 2010). Thus, this paper attempts to explicate how religions have fueled crisis and also persuade adherents to revive the culture of peaceful co-existence demonstrated by early believers. Early Muslims and Christians lived together in peace and practiced their faiths without fear of harassment or intimidation. As a result, this paper shows that tranquility can be ensured only by tolerance.

Conceptualizing the Idea of 'Peaceful Co-Existence'

It is important to note that one cannot understand fully the concept of peaceful co-existence, without being familiarized with the word 'peace'. From the foregoing, peace emanates from a person's state of mind. The word peace could mean several things to different

people. According to Francis (2006), peace means absence of war, fear, conflict, anxiety, suffering and violence. Therefore, peace is an important factor for human survival and sustainable development. On the other hand, peace is not just the absence of war, but the prevention of all structural and social inequalities (Asuquo, 2013). This means that a person who does not have peace within himself or herself cannot establish peace with another person. It can also be said that an individual or group of people that do not cherish or enjoy internal peace among them cannot establish peace with another individual or group.

According to Abdulrasheed (2013), peace means beneficent adjustment of harmony between the individual, his creator on one hand and his fellow men on the other hand. The importance of peace to societal harmony cannot be ignored. This is evident in the words of Francis (2006), when he opined that peace is the prime value in all human societies. He also described peace as the most valuable public good and yet the most elusive in our human society. Asuquo (2013) argued that peace to a great extent is synonymous to life and good health. It guarantees and facilitates human life, good health and societal life and health When the society is peaceful, it promotes the life, health and total well-being of the people which translates to development both human and infrastructural development. It is therefore worthy of mention that where there is no justice where there will be no peace. Thus, justice and peace are two birds of the same feathers that should flock together or two sides of a single coin.

It is of paramount importance for a country as diverse as Nigeria to pursue with vigor the full attainment of national integration, so as to promote peaceful co-existence among different ethnic groups that make up the geopolitical territory called Nigeria (Chukwu, 2021). A country cannot achieve sustainable development or economic growth in an atmosphere with inter-tribal and inter-religious hostilities; hence the need to promote national integration and peaceful co-existence (Suleinman, 2014). In the same vein, no nation can enjoy peaceful co-existence without laying a solid foundation that would precipitate, encourage or entrench national integration. Very vital among the entities to facilitate this unity and diversity is religion.

Peaceful co-existence can be construed in the sense that in a heterogeneous society such as Nigeria, where there are distinct differences in our cultures, languages and religions, there is need to appreciate and recognize the inherent truth that there is one indivisible, indissoluble, united country which has a common aspiration toward the overall development and wellbeing of citizens irrespective of tribe, language or religion (Chukwu, 2021). In other words, this is a quest for unity in diversity; the idea of 'one Nigeria' (Shittu, 2013). It is

also a conscious effort aimed at ignoring or neglecting all the factors that promote division, prejudices, discrimination, injustice, extreme and negative ethnocentrism, and marginalization and so on (Jegede, 2019).

Peaceful co-existence therefore means putting the welfare of the country first before any tribal or religious sentiments. It does not connote the outright denial of ethnic, tribal, cultural or religious differences, which are in most cases glaring, overt or crystal clear, but it entails the process or the act of the awakening of the spirit of patriotism and nationalism in the hearts of the citizens of a given country. The relatively peaceful religious coexistence and absence of religious disturbances in south west could be explained from the perspective of the fact that many family groups have Christian and Muslim members. Peaceful co-existence further presupposes the act of acknowledging religious differences and ignoring them. Such that it does not allow these factors translate to object of disunity or division. Through this strategy, the Nigeria citizens irrespective of the religion, tribe, or culture can build a common identity that promotes unity and peaceful co-existence which will automatically give rise to development in all spheres.

Challenge of Peaceful Coexistence in South West Nigeria

According to Kanu, & Ndubisi (2018), religion is the belief in an ever living God that is, in a divine mind and will, ruling the universe and holding moral relations with man. Before colonization, religious practice in Yoruba land was diverse, including Ifa divination and the worship of deities and ancestors; these practices are now understood as 'traditional' Yoruba religion and their practitioners are generally called 'traditionalists'. Today, many Yoruba people have converted to Islam and Christianity. The last census that recorded religious identification in south-west Nigeria was carried out in 1963. For the area of the present-day states of Ekiti, Kwara, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Osun and Oyo, covered by the KEO survey, the census data reported roughly similar numbers of Muslims (46.3 %) and Christians (45.5 %), with smaller numbers of religious others (8.2 %) (Ostien, 2012).

Without doubt, the greatest threat to peaceful coexistence, economic and political development as well as national security has always been religious conflict (Ogunleye, 2012). According to Jegede (2019), religion is a cultural phenomenon, as such, it has played dominant role in the socio-political organization of man though out the course of history. As an institution, it has served to meet certain needs within the society. Oftentimes, states in the south west Nigeria are known for tranquility with regards to religious interactions. Although saturated with diverse opinions in terms of politics, an

average person from this part of Nigeria sees people with another religious inclination as brother.

Of a truth, little is known of traditionalist's confrontation with other religions. This is because there are very minute instances of such; for example, *"Iwo worshippers allegedly attack churches, members in Ikoya" – (The Guardian, 2015). According to the Guardian (2015),* "hell was let loose at Ikoya in Okitipupa Local Council of Ondo State last weekend where the Iwo traditional festival was fixed on the same day with the conventional Sabbath of Christians, resulting in attacks on churches during which properties worth millions of naira were destroyed. Last Sunday, in the ancient town and ancestral home of the Ikale people, the Holy Cross Church of Cherubim and Seraphim, St Paul's Anglican Church and Deeper Life Bible Church, were attacked by worshippers of Enimale, the deity worshipped in Iwo." Cases above are rare, and so often, the logger head is between the adherents of Islam and Christianity. As a result, this study notes garb for students as one of the salient issues in the contemporary time which has and is consistently a cardinal factor which affects peaceful co-existence in the south western states of Nigeria. This is a top concern which paints religion as that which tampers the peaceful coexistence and communal living of south west Nigeria.

The Guardian (2019) captured the student's garb issue succinctly; "In Osun, there were melees. In Lagos, there were legal fireworks. Recently, in Ibadan, everybody was ready for a showdown – all in the name of religion and the theatre of the crisis are schools as wearing of head covering, otherwise known as hijab, by Muslim students became more than an issue of piety." Head, Education Desk, Iyabo Lawal, examines how religion is turning the heat on Nigeria's secular, even missionary schools." This began as *some female students of the University of Ibadan (UI) International School (ISI) in cahoots with their parents and guardians decided they wanted to be wearing head covering (hijab) that i*dentifies them as true Muslims to school. It all began, according to a report, when some parents and guardian began to distribute hijabs to their wards, leading the principal, Phebean Olowe, to shut down the school, as she was worried the development could lead to a breach of peace. According to her, the hijab negates the section of the school's constitution that guides dress code.

Away from Ibadan, similar debacle was brewing in the centre of excellence, Lagos State, as barely 48 hours after the approval to wear hijab in Lagos schools by the state government, the low level of compliance elicited concerns from Muslim groups and parents. Lagos State government had late last year issued a circular approving the use of hijab by female Muslim pupils in all public schools. The circular is

with reference no: ED/DISTVI/CCST/HI/14/I/63 and signed by the Tutor-General, O.A. Olukoya. The Supreme Court on July 17, 2022, approved the wearing of hijab by female Muslim students to school in Lagos State.

Sometimes in 2016, the Baptist Girls High School in Osogbo played host to an army of security operatives as the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) in the state began a joint prayer session to resist the court judgment approving the wearing of hijab in 'christian' schools. In Osun state, this crisis was a case of the curious and furious. Same scenario played out at the Baptist High School, Iwo, where some CAN representatives almost clashed with law enforcers as they ensured that robe-wearing pupils were not turned away from the school. CAN and its sympathizers were kicking against female Muslim pupils wearing hijab to schools deemed secular, especially those established by Christendom's missionaries. Meanwhile, a recent court judgment approved the use of hijab in the state. The crisis came to a head as pupils, who professed to be Christians, in protest, began to dress to school in cassocks, choir garments among others. CAN's vice chairman, Moses Ogundeji, said about the court judgment: "We are appealing it. But Christian pupils will continue to wear church garments to their various schools, not minding the state governor's warning to expel them" (The Guardian, 2019).

Discourse on hijab crisis in schools in the south west cannot exclude Kwara State; because it is populated by many Yoruba people, although the state is located in North Central geo political zone. It is ill-timed and in fact, this crisis could snowball into a more catastrophic situation if poorly handled. There have been several comments and statements showing diverse views; some made out of mere religious sentiment while very few were objective. In all of that, there are indisputable facts about the matter especially as regards ownership of the concerned schools in Kwara state and whose right it is to dictate how it should be administered (Vanguard, 2021). Unlike that of Lagos state,

This unsavory development makes a mockery of both education and the core virtue of tolerance that religion preaches. Children are currently at the verge because the gross effect of the crisis affects them. For example, The Kwara State Government recently approved the reopening of Oyun Baptist High School Ijagbo, for students to resume academic activities after 119 days of closure over the crisis caused by the wearing of Hijab. The school was closed down by the government on February 3, 2022, following a crisis between Muslim and Christian parents who besieged the school to defend their respective faith on the wearing of Hijab by female Muslim students in the school (Sahara Reporters, 2022). Punch Newspaper (2022) have it

that one person was reportedly feared killed while 11 others were injured during the crisis. And also, no fewer than 150 final year students of the senior secondary school who were expected to sit for their West Africa School Certificate Examinations have been the Casualties of the closure.

These have brought about a whole deal of confusion and suspicion; this can be substantiated with the claim of the National President of Al-Mu'minaat Organization, Nimatullah Abdul-Quadri; "from Lagos State schools to the University of Ibadan International School, Ibadan, to Ladoke Akintola University of Technology Staff School, Oyo State, to schools of Nursing in the Southwest, the sad story is the same. We have thus concluded that there is a grand plan playing out; a plan to either stop Muslim girls from being educated or change their religion, a colonial missionary policy in post-Independent Nigeria" (The Guardian, 2019).

Covid-19 and Peaceful Coexistence in Southwest Nigeria

The plague of the pandemic is not unconnected with the shift of things in the thread of peaceful co-existence. This somewhat unveils a new season of new-normality in the international community. Few among the devastating effects of the pandemic includes restriction of movements, loss of life and properties, downward slope of economy, sudden change in societal traditional activities, such as the disruption of civic engagement and need to improvise means for sudden adaptation within and without one's scope of living. This drastic shift is also not without notice in the Southwestern part of Nigeria. Before the happening of Covid-19, it is clearly stated in preceding part of this study that peaceful co-existence; though with diverse challenges have been a watchword in the lips of people who reside in this part of Nigeria. However, Covid-19 unveils an unimaginable reaction among the people.

It is important to note that the pandemic bring about economic disaster and aggravation of hunger, due to the fact that a lot of people could not have access to their means of daily sustenance. In this wise, the actions and reactions of Southwestern Nigerian are worthy of note. Disembodiment of religious communities as a disaster that permeated in the southwest Nigeria; this implies that churches, mosques and even African religious adherents could physically converge for meetings and gatherings. Although there were many means of improvisation introduced and established by the religious bodies, just to keep the soul and body of religious activities alive. Yet, such means, though viable, are somewhat alien to the people. Amidst all these, a strange and positive stream of peaceful coexistence was pioneered. Although it is very much logical to assert that religious

bodies and establishments in southwest Nigeria have always been involved in charity; but then, the dimension of charity cum co-existence introduced during the covid-19 period is without boundaries.

This experience has to do with the provision of food and resources for people by religious establishments for the sole purpose of helping people survive the hard times the pandemic has created. In this case, some churches are discovered to have distributed food items and even money, not only to church members, but also to helpless individuals in the community. This same attitude was done by the Muslims as well as African religion adherents; such that the people in community experienced co-existence via the activities which came as a result of helping people get a grip of themselves in this new normal era. Some of these provisions were also made available to people even outside specific religious beliefs and faith.

Towards a Peaceful Co-existing Southwestern Nigeria

Nigeria is a multi-ethnics and multi-religious nation. As such, peaceful co-existence is sine qua none to the development of the country. Yet, this is not the case as the nation has continued to experience violent religious activities that debar peaceful coexistence. Several reasons have been given for re-occurrence of religious conflicts or violence (Osamor, 2015; Rapheal, 2021). A good number of these causes have socio-political undertones. When values, norms, beliefs and ideologies are tempered with, conflicts are bound to erupt. We cannot lose sight of the fact that there are religious differences among people of different faiths or religions in our world. These differences often lead to tensions and conflicts that hamper development.

Throughout the long era of human history, religion has been a major contributor to war, bloodshed, hatred, and intolerance. Yet, religion has also developed laws and ideas that have provided civilizations with a cultural commitment to critical peace-related values (Nwanguma, 2018). An average Yoruba cherishes religious consciousness and the concept of eternal judgment. They socialize through celebrations such as weddings, baby naming, birthday parties, new house opening, funerals and other areas considered an essential part of living that calls for rejoicing. They interact through family connection and community meeting (Lateju, 2012). As far as increasing mobility and timely communication among the people of different religions is concerned, it is important that adherents of different religion hear about each other's view point and come into contact as never before. Mutual respect, understanding and cooperation are the foundation bricks to construct a peaceful world.

What we need today is to iron out these religious differences, which most of the time are doctrinally based. Religion has a dual legacy in human history regarding peace and violence. People need to understand, respect, cooperate and communicate with each other especially in everyday life as decent neighbors, friends and colleagues (Nazi and Farman, 2018). Therefore, dialogue is one of the best sources to diminish hostility, religious bigotry and factor a peaceful coexisting southwestern Nigeria. According to Adekola (2019), the quality of learning and value addition has nothing whatsoever to do with school uniforms. Thus, it is important for stakeholders to see the need for children to learn in environment devoid of the hatred and rancor on uniform controversies. The emergence of sects within religions in Nigeria, with leaders who are deemed to preach hatred and intolerance creates a widening gulf between the followers of religions. This is contrary to the resolve of the people as reflected in the preamble to the Nigerian Constitution, with its admonition to the Nigerian people "to live in unity and harmony as one indivisible and indissoluble sovereign nation".

It is disheartening that religious organizations, parents and their children have allowed themselves to be sucked into the hijab crisis. In many parts of this country many years ago, parents freely enrolled children in schools established by other faiths, and vice versa (Oke, Adebayo, and Ishaku, 2017). The wards abide by the school protocols and learn the practices of other faiths without issues. Indeed, the children of prominent Nigerian Muslims are being trained in established universities in Europe and America, where religion or adornment of hijab is irrelevant, but the content of their intellect and character. So, where has that tolerance, enlightenment and broadmindedness gone in south west Nigeria? Indoctrinating and dividing the children along religious lines is hypocritical in nature. The religious organizations and parents need to wake to modernity and disallow being against one another by self-serving political and religious 'leaders'. Everybody has the right to freedom of religion insofar it is practiced in such a way that it does not offend the sensibilities of others.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Nigeria's peaceful co-existence is not negotiable. Religious diversities must be seen as a blessing and not a curse, because variety they say is the spice of life. The basic interest of this study is on the place of religion in the challenge of peaceful coexistence in south west Nigeria. No issue is as important as how to find lasting solutions to the ever increasing rates of religious crises that have been a block in the wheel of progress in all spheres of Nigeria. The observed religious crises have resulted in dwindled educational fortune as well as socio-

political instability. On this note, the government must come up with viable concerted efforts, by formulation of policies and reforms that would help promote national integration and peaceful co-existence. Also, it is advisable that individual should acclimatize the tenets of his religion, and be watchful of the teachings of religious leaders in order to avoid manipulations and further foment trouble with other people. Based on the findings, this study posits that religious leaders should weigh their utterances and so; make preaching persuasive rather than inciting or insulting. Also, dialogue should be used as an effective weapon in resolution; meanwhile, not only between Christians and Muslims, but among all religionists. On this note, this study recommends that;

1. Government and officials assigned with respect to intervening on religious conflict and crisis related issue should not be in support of any religion. In other words, they should stand as neutral as possible, so that the matter can be effectively handled from an objective point of view.
2. Religions and religious bodies should see dialogue as a vital instrument in achieving peaceful co-existence in Southwest Nigeria
3. Unbiased, free and fair formulated government policies, void of sentiments will also be a cardinal implement in promoting peaceful co-existence.
4. The importance of any religious should not be sidelined, downplayed or trampled.
5. Cautions and boundaries should be seriously emphasized to the Southwest religious leaders concerning the need to curb teachings and preaching that can jeopardize peaceful living among the people, especially with regards to how to relate with people of other religious beliefs.

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