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Religion and the Prospect of Peace in a Pluri-Religious Society

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Abstract:
Religion is widely acclaimed to be one of the most cherished sources of peace, unity, justice, and development in the society. This is because its tenets are principally associated with genuine teachings of love for each other and the promotion of values. This religious task, however, becomes complicated with the composition of each particular society involved. In a pluri-religious society like Nigeria, it becomes much more demanding and complicated. The paper will, therefore, consider to a large extent the particular situation of Nigeria, which as a country has a peculiar history, a unique philosophy, and a complex religious orientation. All these factors contribute to define it as a special point of reference in Africa, especially in her inter-human, inter-religious, inter-cultural, and social relationships. The same factors also influence their understanding of justice, sense of freedom and responsibility. The paper aims at elucidating the significance embedded in the multi-cultural and pluri-religious composition of Nigeria as well as pointing out its role towards attaining the much-desired peace and unity for its development and progress. It will also highlight some of the problems and obstacles facing the continued realisation of the goal of religion as a symbol of peace and unity for the entire humanity, using some historical and analytical methods of exposition.

Keywords: Religion, Peace, Unity, Justice, and Development.

1. Introduction

Development and Peace are indispensable aspects of any society (cf. Nwanaju, 2011:25; Otonko, 2011:47) Development could be human or capital. The level of civilization of such a society is also measured by the level and quality of the development attained in the same society. This is why it is possible to categorise different countries and continents of the world into the so-called developed and under-developed nations. Africa, unfortunately, has been and is consistently described as under-developed irrespective of perceived abundant human and material resources because of crisis and lack of peace. One can best describe the continent as a crisis-ridden zone. Apart from the dearth of technological and scientific progress, religion has often been used as a tool of under-development in Africa through the activities of fanatics and religious fundamentalists like the current menace of Boko Haram in Nigeria and other parts of Africa such as Chad, Niger, and Cameroon. In Nigeria, it has forestalled the efforts of government to build up the affected parts of the country in the past six years (2009-2015). In this vein, religion has threatened, instead of, enhancing the peace, unity and the development of Africa as a whole. It is a crisis that should be addressed, not only philosophically and intellectually but also practically and collectively, especially by re-emphasising the importance of the values of peace, collaboration, integration, and mutual understanding in the society.

The paper wishes to explore the role of religion in the effort to enhance peace and nation-building; the threat of religious fanaticism and fundamentalism using Boko Haram as an example; prospects of overcoming the prevalent religious crisis undermining development in Africa; and suggestions for possible solution or way forward.

2. Religion, Peace and Development

The *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* simply describes peace as "a situation or period of time in which there is no war or violence in a country or an area" (2006:1071). This definition of peace is closely related to the original understanding attached to religion as a vehicle of peace and unity, as well as development in a society. In other words, wherever there is peace and peaceful co-existence, religion is positively affirmed as a divine project within a human ambiance. It ensures inter-dependence among nations and enhances development as well. According to Isizoh (2002:xi), "since the middle of the last century there has been a growing awareness of interdependence of nations, of peoples and of individuals. The world has passed the era when efforts were made to keep in defined geographical areas ... people of one ideology, one culture, and one religion". This means that religion has ceased from being a medium of confinement to prejudices and isolation to a new dimension of "economic cooperation and political collaboration" (Isizoh, xi). Furthermore, religion as an instrument of peace and development questions any attempt to subject society to any kind of exclusivism. Rather, the current trend in religious thought fosters the dynamism of inclusion and pluralism. This why the Second Vatican Council in *Nostra Aetate* (No.3) encourages the practice of interreligious dialogue and collaboration between the religions,

especially between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The success of this effort is seen in the active collaboration of nations to fight any kind of religious insurgency and violence in any part of the world. The formation of the United Nations (UNO), the European Union (EU), the African Union (AU), the Arab League, etc can be seen as a practical step to cut across religious and cultural boundaries to ensure peace and development. Although the nations and persons involved in this goal have not been totally and honestly committed to its realisation, one can claim that the initiative is a right step in the right direction. The suspicion of incomplete commitment to the realisation of peace and development through religious bias can be observed in the various sects operating in the name of one religion or the other in the destabilisation of societal peace, development, and progress. Currently, Islam has been highly misrepresented through the actions of Al-Qaeda and ISIL, Al-Shabaab, and Boko Haram leashing out harm on humanity in the various continents of the world. Justice demands that every person, irrespective of religion and culture should be fully committed to ensuring peace, justice, and development in the world. The demand becomes more glaring in the case of Africa where religion and religious bigotry have contributed grossly to the derailment of its real development and progress.

3. Peace and the Holy Scriptures of Christianity and Islam: The Holy Bible and the Qur'an

The Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam proclaim peace as fundamental aspects of their doctrines and practices. In the context of this paper, it is important to consider at least the notion of peace in both Islam and Christianity, as predominant religions in Africa, and Nigeria in particular. The Latin word, *Pax*, describes peace while the Arabic word, *Salam*, practically denotes the meaning of Islam as an embodiment of peace. This is why Muslims identify their religion with Peace.

The use of the word, peace, in both scriptures show the importance attached to it as a medium of societal harmony and development. Whereas the Holy Bible uses the word more than **430** times, the Qur'an also uses it more than **45** times. In both applications, one discovers the need for religion and its adherents to foster mutual understanding and peaceful collaboration in order to improve humanity and achieve good relationship with the divine. For instance, one of the parting gifts of Jesus Christ to his disciples was peace. In the Gospel of John (14:27), he said, "Peace I bequeath to you, my own peace I give you, a peace which the world cannot give, this is my gift to you". In the Eight Beatitudes, Jesus recognised the role of peacemakers, thus: "Blessed are the peacemakers: they shall be recognised as children of God" (Matthew 5: 9).

In Islam, peace is mentioned after the name of Prophet Muhammad to indicate importance accorded to peace. Muslims are enjoined to do good and guard against evil as a way of making peace between men. Surah 2:224 says: "And make not God's (name) an excuse in your oaths against doing good, or acting rightly, or making peace between persons; for God is One who heareth and knoweth all things". The Qur'an exalts God as Peace-maker who demands peaceful co-existence among men. Surah 2:220 says, "But God knows the man who means mischief from the man who means good. And if God had wished, He could have put you into difficulties: He is indeed exalted in Power, Wise".

From the foregoing, one can rightly say that one of the fundamental teachings of Islam and Christianity is peace and peace-making among people, communities and nations. The divisions and acrimonies imposed on human society in the name of religion are foreign to the true nature of religion as a symbol of peace, love, justice, and development because development can only take place where there is peace.

4. The Threat of Religious Fanaticism and Fundamentalism to Peace and Development

Fanaticism and Fundamentalism are the major problems and obstacles which any religion and its adherents can pose in the development of any particular society. Religious fanaticism and crisis have manifested themselves through various channels in Africa and Nigeria in particular. In the latter, Boko Haram has become a household name, identified with violence, destruction of both human life and property. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (7th edition)* defines fanaticism as "extreme beliefs or behaviour, especially in connection with religion or politics" (2006: 531). Its synonym is extremism. It has retarded meaningful development and progress in Nigeria since 2009. Though the major area of concentration of this ill within Nigeria is the North-eastern part, comprising the states of Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa, the impact of its nefarious activities touches the entire country. The estimated damage of the Boko Haram insurgency is only paralleled by the story of any war-ridden part of the world. In fact, Boko Haram is presently another name for chaos in the human society. A. U. Abonyi (2014:79-80) describes the situation most vividly, thus:

Though, Nigeria as a State is faced with several challenges ranging from collapsed social values, failure of leadership, neglect of the youths, women and children, corruption, increased spate of unemployment, abject poverty, illiteracy and other frustrations, the greatest, most repressive and devastating challenge faced by the country of late is the rising insurgence of terrorist groups.

Boko Haram and its Menace cannot be described in any clearer term than A.U. Abonyi has just done. It is not only the fact that Boko Haram is a threat. The threat itself has not been constitutionally adequately defined and contextualized by the Government. This is why the situation is full of confusion. To buttress the state of confusion surrounding the evils of taming Boko Haram legally, Abonyi (81) further writes, "As it is now, the sect members who are perpetrating several crimes against the Nigerian people (innocent and unarmed civilians) are not yet ready for peace and no law has been made to legitimize and legalize the programme.

The meaning ascribed to the name, Boko Haram, describes its purpose most vividly. It stresses the abhorrence of western education and civilization as well as the need to treat it as forbidden. To give religious credence to its notorious doctrine of hate relationship, it claims to be a group of faithful Muslims or people of Sunnah for Preaching and Jihad. Its transliteration from the Arabic reads: Jamaʿatu Ahlis Sunna Lidda' Awati Wal-Jihad or Jamāʾat Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Daaʿwah wa'l –Jihād. It is rigid adherence to the dictates of the Sharia without regard to other religious groups that makes it fanatic and fundamentalist. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (7th edition)* also defines it as "the practice of following very strictly the basic rules and teachings of any religion" (2006:605).

Fundamentalism is not restricted to Islam. In Christianity, it is "the belief that everything that is written in the Bible is completely true" (2006:605).

Boko Haram was brought into a criminal and notorious limelight by Mohammed Yusuf until September 2010 when he was killed by Nigerian security forces. Describing the criminality inflicted on the society in the name of religion, Ani (2014:98) argues that the credibility of religious practices is being increasingly questioned in Nigeria, due to the activities of some criminals, who have learnt to hide under the canopy of religion to commit a lot of unimaginable violent 'crimes' thereby debasing the central role of religion as a resort of man in time of troubles. Ani obviously refers to the Mohammed Yusuf led Boko Haram treachery, whose demise was seen by the belligerent and fanatical Muslim adherents as an affront to their mission of Islamising Nigeria and ridding it of western influence. Since his death, Nigeria as a nation has never known peace. Thus, in the wake of Yusuf's death, Abubakar Shekau took over the mantle of leadership of the self-proclaimed jihadist group based in North-eastern Nigeria under the acronym, "West Africa (Black people's land) Province", or the Islamic State in West Africa (ISWAP)". Boko Haram is also active in Chad, Niger, and Northern Cameroon. Boko Haram has been identified with Al-Qaeda, Al-Shabaab and since 2014, with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). With a population of almost 10,000 people or fighters, Boko Haram is a threat to nation-building and individual freedom.

Boko Haram, simply summarised, carries with it a very negative signal towards national unity, peace and progress. For instance, in the Daily Sun Newspaper of Wednesday, May 6, 2015, Adetutu Folasade-Koyi reports how 50 people were killed and about 20,000 displaced in Plateau State by Boko Haram sect members. He writes, "Fresh facts emerged yesterday (May 5th, 2015) on how militia groups kitted in army uniforms stormed Wase Local Government Area of Plateau State, killing 50 people and displacing about 20,000 villagers" (p.8). Anybody may question the identity of the perpetrators of the crime yet the situation in the North points strong accusing fingers at Boko Haram and their sponsors.

As a flash black at religious crisis in Nigeria, the same edition of Daily Sun recalled how on the same day and date in 2004 (May 6th), 630 people were killed in Yelwa, as the records of the Red Cross showed. *Daily Sun* (2015:18) writes,

The Red Cross announced on this day in May 2004, that the ethno-religious crisis that erupted in Yelwa town of Shelwa Local Government area of Plateau State had claimed the lives of more than 630 people.

In the current crisis in the North-east of Nigeria, The Red Cross International has estimated the number of displaced people to be approximately 1.5 million people.

5. The Threat of Religious Bigotry to Peace and Democratic Growth

In the past fifty years, most countries in Africa have been moving strongly towards independence and self-rule through the evolution of democracy. Though the process has not been very easy, it has experienced a lot of progress. But no democracy succeeds without the peaceful atmosphere necessary for it. This is why the problem of religious insurgency in Nigeria and Africa in general deserves a serious attention in order to allow democratic growth. Al-Qaeda, Al-Shabaab, and recently, Boko Haram have built their strong nests in every nook and corner of the society. These religious sects are hampering both development and religious belief. Confirming the threat of the misuse of religion on the society, J. Odey (2014:11) writes, "As far as history can tell, religion has been turned into the most lethal weapon in the hands of bad men who hide under its cover to achieve their selfish ends".

In Nigeria, particularly, the Boko Haram onslaught has become a thorn in the flesh of its democratic growth and progress. It has made religious and its ideals suspect. Its challenges to the country has even been attributed to be one of the major reasons for the fall of the President Goodluck Jonathan's Administration in 2015. For instance, Eromosele Ebhomele (2015:15) writes, "One of the biggest injuries caused to the Jonathan administration remains the mistake of allowing the Boko Haram terrorist group to fester in the face of a reported helplessness on the part of the Nigerian military". To buttress the fact that Boko Haram has distorted societal peace, Ebhomele (2015:15) further argues that since 2009, "it has intensified its attack, first choosing soft targets, then later engaging in suicide attacks and bombings of churches, police buildings and later, the United Nations office in Abuja in 2011 which resulted in the death of scores of people". In other words, "Boko Haram sect has been a menace to good governance since its official emergence as a religious fanatical group since 2009" (Nwanaju, 2013:51).

6. Prospect of Overcoming Prevalent Religious Crisis: Suggestions/Recommendations

The prospect for peace, unity, and development in Nigeria and in Africa as whole should be fundamentally rooted in the idea of religion as a medium of peace, love, and justice in every society. Jesus Christ prayed for such peace and oneness before his Ascension (cf. John 17:21), thus: "May they all be One". To be "one" in spirit in a diverse country like Nigeria, for instance, is to be able to tolerate and forgive one another. Without the ability and willingness to forgive injuries, peace would continue to be an illusion in the society. The limit of tolerance is "Grenzenlos", that is, without boundary. In the Gospel of Matthew (18:21-22), the dialogue on the issue of forgiveness between Jesus Christ and Peter summarises it all: "Then Peter went up to him (Jesus) and said, 'Lord, how often must I forgive my brother if he wrongs me? As often as seven times?' Jesus answered, 'Not seven, I tell you, but seventy-seven times'. In the context of this biblical conversation and dialogue, the 'neighbour' or 'brother' includes everyone, even those to whom one must return good for evil' (cf. Mtt. 5:44-45).

The Qur'an makes it abundantly clear that religion has nothing to do with compulsion and violence as such. Surah 2:256 warns that there is no "compulsion" in religion and in 24:33 expresses Allah's disgust for such an act. The very name, Islam, signifies Peace (Salam). From its name, it means that anyone perpetrating injustice, violence, disunity, etc in the name of Islam is misrepresenting it. Perhaps, the Boko Haram Sect and its sponsors would realise after a deep meditation that their actions are not in line with the teaching of Islam. Again, Surah 2:112 says,

Whoever submits himself entirely to God and he is a doer of good to others is a Muslim; he shall have his reward from his Lord; there shall be no fear for such nor shall they be grieved.

The content of Surah 2:112 is not far from the biblical injunctions of Matthew 18:21-22; 5:44-45. Even the Gospel of Luke makes it very imperative when it says in Lk. 17:4, "If your brother does something wrong, rebuke him and, if he is sorry, forgive him. And if he wrongs you seven times a day and seven times comes back to you and says, "I am sorry", you must forgive him.

It is observed that the Federal Government of Nigeria has taken a noble step, starting with the Regime of the Late President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua to initiate a strong and stable process of healing wounds with the amnesty Programme, which acknowledged the wrongs done to the people of the Niger Delta. The immediate Ex-President, Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, who succeeded Yar'dua continued with the Amnesty Programme very assiduously. He even went ahead to set up a Commission that also recommended amnesty for members of the Boko Haram sect, and out of constraint simultaneously recommended the use of military option with support from the international community and regional front.

In the face of the problems posed by the dangerous indoctrination of people that western education is evil, conscientious effort should be made to disabuse the minds of people – Muslims and non-Muslims alike – that the prejudiced and prejudicial conception of western culture and civilization cannot help in the development of Africa as a whole. The importance and contribution of the values of western culture and civilization in the positive well-being of Nigeria and Africa cannot be under-estimated.

The paper recommends the following for proper and objective consideration to reduce the crisis of development, especially as fuelled by religious extremism and ethno-religious bias. First, Integration. Concerted effort should be made by both the citizenry and the government to ensure that every section of the country is properly and equally integrated. It will reduce bitterness and rancour. It will break the perennial yoke of hostility visible in all sections of the country, especially in politics. Secondly, Reconciliation is also very important in the sense that people should show each other decorum and respect, imbedded in tolerance and mutual understanding. Reconciliation reduces hatred and calumny. Thirdly, respect demands that all and sundry should eschew all forms of bitterness, close ranks and see themselves as brothers and sisters. Fourthly, the politics of religious affiliation and ethnic bigotry should be properly checked in order to allow peace, justice, and equity to reign. In fact, in a country of diverse religions and cultural affiliations, only a sincere government of national unity can bring about development and progress. Fifthly, if Nigerians should see themselves as living under the umbrella of diversity, unity and justice, the cultural and religious differences that have always caused frictions would become highly insignificant as media of conflict and under-development. According to Jerome Okonkwo (2011:229), "Cultural alterity or diversity has become one of the most debated issues in the globalizing world of this millennium" Sixthly, the greatest cankerworm against the effort to achieve peace and development in any society is corruption. It is word that scares the promotion of peace because the later would demand justice and since corruption is ethnic, parochial, and prejudiced in the distribution of goods and service, it would always generate dissatisfaction among the generality of the people and so, leads to under-development. Corruption is antithetical to development, which is the natural product of peace. Thus, for peace and development to be really seen in any society, truth must prevail. In other words, corruption should be put to flight because it is both dehumanizing as well as a grievous crime to humanity (cf. Omaka & Ukandu, 2013:241).

7. Conclusion

In the course of human history, Religion has contributed in no small measure to the development of nations and societies, especially through the promotion of values. This is why it is argued and rightly so that religion is an integral aspect of human existence, development, and even crisis. Religion has not only contributed in the development of education but also in architecture and industry. The great universities of the world have one connection or the other with religion and religious organizations. Some medical institutions of repute and care for the poor have also their humble beginnings traceable to hospitals established by religious organizations and efforts made by holy men and women. But religion has also been identified with the underdevelopment of so many communities, especially in Africa through fanaticism and fundamentalism. In other words, religion has often been misused to destroy the values it is supposed to promote. Human life has been wasted and property has also been destroyed without any genuine reason to do so.

However, Religion is no doubt an integral aspect of human existence, whether from its developmental strides or the crisis it has succeeded in generating due to one form of misuse or the other, especially through extremism or fanaticism. In fact, it has been seen that the history of human development could not have been complete without the role of religion during the course of the Millennia. The African story as a whole would also not be complete without the part played by religion – before and after contact with western civilization. It is in view of this obvious reality that the paper has endeavoured to contribute to the on-going rational discourse regarding the peculiar situation of Africa, especially as a crisis-ridden continent in the world. Whether traditional, Christian, Islamic, or any other world religion, the basic function of religion is to highlight the importance of human relationship with the Divine, with the Sacred, and with the Extraordinary, as well as with fellow human beings. In both the vertical and horizontal relationships fostered by religion, the basic aim should be the development of humanity through peace, justice, unity and attainment of eternal bliss.

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