

The Amalgam of Inter-Religious Beliefs: A Panacea to Peaceful Co-Existence, Stability and Security Challenges Facing Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria has suffered various conflicts that were aggravated by multi-ethnic and multi-religious features, which has made managing these conflicts highly difficult. It is even sad to note that religious conflict is emerging as one of the most devastating of all. Islam and Christianity which were imported religions have become more populous than the Indigenous Religion. Despite the fact that they all preach that a sincere believer is one whose quest for justice, peace, tolerance, and support for all people to attain peaceful coexistence, their beliefs and teachings in most cases have worked against each other thus creating more conflicts in the country, hence a call for the deployment of the approach; the amalgamation of inter-religious beliefs towards conflicts and insecurity to ensure peaceful co-existence of all the people. The task of this review is to establish a platform where all the three main religions of Nigeria will fess their beliefs in a way that allows for peaceful co-existence. Although religion has been in the fore front of aggravating conflicts in Nigeria despite preaching peace, this study is aimed at bringing together and bridging the gap between the three major religions in Nigeria by creating awareness of the fact that they all preach peace and believe in one Supreme God whose believers seek justice, peace, tolerance, and support for all people thereby creating an avenue for freedom to religious right devoid of conflict and enabling peaceful co-existence among every citizen.

Keywords: Christianity, Islam, Indigenous Religion, Inter-religion, Amalgamation

INTRODUCTION

Usman Dan Fodio an Islamic teacher in feeling offended at the way his fellow Muslims were compromising with the adherents of African Traditional Religion, organized some of his followers into a fighting force and waged a holy war (Jihad) against those who did not accept Islam, or those who were compromising with the traditional religion (Nnaukwu, 2010). This gives room for the assertion that Christianity and Islam, when they came in contact with traditional religion, caused a disruption and a division, and that there was a big struggle between the imported religions and the indigenous religion held by Nigerians which resulted in the indigenous culture badly shaken (Oke, 1986). Although there are three major religions involved, that is African Traditional Religion, Islam and Christianity; those often involved in conflict are Islam and Christianity (Osaghae and Subaru, 2010). The Muslims finds it difficult to withstand the Christians and their expansionism programme into what they regard as Muslim States as experienced personally in Ede, Osun State in 2011 'Ede for Christ Crusade'. "For the Christians, the spread of the gospel includes not only evangelization, it also implies fighting Islam" (Oke,1986). That is why religious violence has occurred primarily between the two major foreign religions in Nigeria as they fight for

who has authority over the other or whose religion is superior to the other. This rivalry is intensified according to the strength of either Christian or Muslim in a particular section of the country (Nnaukwu, 2010). This religious violence, destruction and wanton killings in Nigeria have been mainly between the Muslim north and largely Christian south. In February 24, 2004 armed Muslims killed more than 75 Christians in the town of Yelwa in Plateau State, out of which 48 of them were killed inside a church premises.

Subsequently, on May 2 and 3 of the same year in a reprisal attack, hundreds of well-armed Christians surrounded the town from different directions of entry into the town and killed about 700 Muslims (Human Rights Watch, 2005). In reaction to the Yelwa attacks a week later, Muslims in the northern city of Kano on May 11 and 12 turned against Christian residents of the city where more than 200 people were killed. Another conflict which caused a national uproar was the February 18, 2006 religious riot of Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State, where it was believed that the uproar was provoked by a publication of a Danish News Paper that ridiculed Prophet Mohammed (Haruna, 2006). The inexplicable nature of the religious crisis in Nigeria is the reprisal attacks in other parts of the country. For instance in Abia State, a reaction to the 2000 Sharia riot in Kaduna led to a reprisal attack of both Christians and Muslim of the northern origin, and the offload of death bodies from Maiduguri crisis in Onitsha Town of Anambra State led to the hunting and killing of Northerners, where roadblocks were mounted and places of Islamic worship were destroyed in February 2006.

Beyond the clashes between the Christians and Muslims which usually has the undertone of ethno-religious conflict, traditional religion has also experienced its share of conflicts with other religious groups especially the Muslim. One of such conflict in Nigeria was in July 1999, when some Oro cultists in Sagamu, in Ogun State accused a Hausa woman of coming out when the cultists were outside with their gnome. This led to some confrontational disagreement, which eventually led to full-blown crisis where many people, majority of Hausa and Yoruba origin were killed. The reprisal killings over this conflict in Kano, left many more people dead and property worth billions of Naira were destroyed. Kano residents of Southern extraction who had lived, all their adult lives in the ancient city of Kano had to return to their native land to count their losses. This led to another violence eruption in Lagos visibly seen as a mark of vengeance of the Kano mass killing of the Yoruba tribe men. Many Hausa/Fulani traders in the popular 'mile 12 market' were killed by the O'dua People's Congress (Kura, 2010). Many more attacks have taken place including the attacks carried out by the Islamic fundamentalist sect – Boko Haram. These well organized and coordinated attacks were orchestrated on the targeted victims, base on their religious and ethnic affiliation (Nnaukwu, 2010). The focus of this study therefore is the amalgam of interreligious beliefs as a panacea for peaceful co-existence, stability and security challenges facing Nigeria. The significance of this study is to create a bridge that will link members of the three religions to understand that the coming together of the three main religion in Nigeria, with the believe that they worship one Supreme God of justice and peace is healthy for Nigerians, and creating an environment of peaceful co-existence devoid of intimidation, discrimination and oppression.

RELIGION AND ITS ROLE IN THE SOCIETY

According to Appleby (2000) in his book “The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence and Reconciliation” religion is ‘the human response to a reality perceived as sacred.’ Also, religion is a ‘formally organized community of faith’, and ‘the beliefs and spirituality of individual members, subgroups, or movements operating at various psychological and social distances from the institution and the official custodians of the tradition’ (Appleby, 2000). Some scholars defined it as a ritualized system of beliefs and practices related to things defined as sacred by an organized community of believers. Religion may take a variety of forms. Religious beliefs give meaning to life, and the experiences associated with them provide personal gratification as well as a release from the frustrations and anxieties of daily life. Sociologists define religion as a cultural system of commonly shared beliefs and rituals that provides a sense of ultimate meaning and purpose by creating an idea of reality that is sacred, all-encompassing, and supernatural (Berger, 1967; Durkheim, 1965; Wuthnow, 1988).

There are no known societies that do not have some form of religion, although religious beliefs and practices vary from culture to culture. All religions involve a set of symbols, invoking feelings of reverence, linked to rituals practiced by a community of believers. It is commonly believed that religion takes place only in the church, temple, or other spiritual places of gathering. Religion and society is seen as complete, separate entities, but a closer look reveals that the two are not separate, but are intricately interconnected and are dependent on each other. In reality, religion is inherent within many aspects of society, and religious beliefs inevitably affect areas such as politics, economics, and cultural values.

Religion plays a very vital role in today’s society; it cannot be separated from the society because religions play a very important role in uniting the society, having mutual co-operation, understanding and peaceful coexistence in the society. When there are conflicts or violence in the society, religion is most often used to solve the problems in a peaceful way. Many destructive things are avoided through the role played by religion. Every member who is aware of their respective religion can think positively and can build a healthier society. A community where there is no religion stands the risk of conflict and violence in that community. Most of societal problems could be solved by following religious morals and mankind would be nothing more than animals, although it has weakened over time.

The role of religion in today’s society should be to help heal the individual. When individuals are healed, families are healed, and when families are healed, society is healed. There is absolutely no peaceful society without a peaceful religion and vice versa. Anything to the contrary is chaos. Unfortunately, the role that religion sometimes plays in the society today is a departure from that as seen and is evident by all the animosity, bigotry and religious intolerance in the world today. It has become a very effective and rewarding tool in the hands of shrewd individuals and religious leaders to manipulate people to fanatically accept theological concepts that have no actual evidence that can be proven beyond doubt. Because of the sensitivity of religion as part of an individual or group identity where some religious group identifies themselves as “Gods people”, and for the

fact that religion is at the heart of a society's value system in most parts of the world, people who practice a different religion are easily categorized as worthless or infidels (Kellas, 1998; Goldstein, 1994). That is why people are willing to fight for their religious beliefs because a threat to one's beliefs is also a threat to one's very being. Religion can be seen as glue that binds and unifies a nation or a group of people in a society and on the other hand, it can lead to the destruction of nations as well as lead to intra-state conflicts. Most religious teachings are that war and conflict is wrong and that violence must only be used as a last resort. Their religious scripts (Holy Bible and Holy Qur'an) give guidelines on when it is just to use violence, but people interprets and misuses these scripts in different ways and situations to support violence and war. Some of these scripts are taken out of context, given a wrong historical interpretation and translated with biases to sooth their selfish goal.

On the other hand, there are many teachings and ethical imperatives within the Qur'an and Bible that promote peace and present the means to achieve it. Some of these teachings include mandates to strive for political, social, and economic justice; tolerant inter-communal coexistence; and nonviolent conflict resolution (Thistlethwaite and Stassen, 2008). The Qur'anic scripture that calls on Muslims to kill infidels "wher-ever they are found" (9:5) is being interpreted by some 'Muslim clerics' or Islamist group as a call to force conversion of non Muslim to Islam or establish an Islamic empire whereas according to some Islamic scholars in their explanation to this scripture and of course putting into consideration the historical context of the passage explain that "members of the early Muslim community, led by the Prophet Muhammad, suffered various forms of harassment, torture, confiscation of property, and murder due to their faith. The Qur'an commanded them to respond to this persecution with patience and prayer, rather than violence. After thirteen years of unrelenting oppression, however, Qur'anic verses were revealed to Muhammad that justified violence against oppressors as a means of self-defense (Thistlethwaite and Stassen, 2008).

On the Qur'anic call to "*jihad*", it is interpreted as a call for 'holy war' against the infidels. Some see it as one of the characteristics of Islam as a religion that is enthusiastically committed to holy war while ignoring other Islamic principles. While some modern Muslim apologists, meanwhile, have sometimes attempted to explain *jihad* as an armed struggle (Esposito, 1993), the Qur'an and Muslim practice, refers to *jihad* as the obligation to strive or exert oneself to follow God's will (Thistlethwaite and Stassen, 2008). It is an obligation that makes individuals to live virtuously, as well as to the Muslim community to spread God's rule and law through teaching, preaching, and, where necessary, armed conflict. Overall, Muslim scholars throughout Islamic history have agreed that there are conditions that permit *jihad*, which is the use of force primarily in instances of self-defense. Many such studies, however, have concluded that *jihad* does not mean the constant use of the sword to resolve problems between Muslims or with non-Muslim enemies.

RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE

Religious violence is seen as a term that covers all phenomena where religion, of any form is either the subject or object of individual or collective violent behaviour (Wellman and

Tokuno, 2004). As a result, “it covers both violence by religiously motivated individuals or religious institutions of any kind, of the same religion, a different sect, or secular targets. The other case is of violence of any kind against objects that are explicitly religious (such as religious institutions, the persecution of people on the basis of their religion, religious buildings or sites” (Wikipedia Encyclopedia, 2007). Religious violence can either be in the form of ritual violence which can be in form of human sacrifice, ritual murder, or self-inflicted violence in the indigenous religion, or can take the form of collective religious violence which is a form of “violent activity that is perpetrated within the context of society and is legitimated by at least a subset of society or religion and always has a political dimension. Religious terrorism is a form of religious violence” (Wikipedia Encyclopedia, 2007).

THE EFFECT OF VIOLENCE ON THE NIGERIAN POPULACE

The big question one is tempted to ask is; what happens to the individual or community when interpersonal relations turns sour to the extent of violent actions? It is most often limitless. One usually experiences some biological reactions such as fatigue, tense muscles, headaches, stomach upsets and ulcers. Psychologically, poor interpersonal relations can trigger almost every human emotion, and the actions of people in conflict can range from a mild inclination to not cooperate all the way to murder (Gary and Collins, 2007). Apart from the biological and psychological reaction, the sociological effects are also not left out as identified thus, “verbal outbursts, violence, withdrawal from others, and the breaking of previous relationships. This may be seen, for example, when two business associates abruptly terminate their partnership, a family stomps out of church because they are unhappy with the church leadership, an employee quits “on the spot,” a couple decides to separate, or two nations go to war over a minor issue. Actions like these often escalate and maintain the conflict, but they rarely solve anything. They may bring temporary feelings of superiority, control, power, or revenge, but they are destructive and immature reactions that often lead to suffering, negative attitudes, increased anger, loneliness, and later feelings of regret” (Gary and Collins, 2007).

THE AREA OF AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE RELIGIONS

It is good to note that Christianity and Islam have a lot in common. According to Omoregbe (1999) Mohammed grew up among Arab Christians who rendered great help to him during his youthful age. Even when his followers were attacked in Mecca while they were preaching they fled to Abissinia for their dear life. At Abissinia they were well received and protected by the Abissinia Christians who also allowed them to practice their religion freely without hindrance. Omoregbe (1999) further affirms that Mohammed appreciates this friendly gesture of the Christians as reflected in the Quran–Sura 5:85 “You will find the most affectionate friends will be those who say ‘We are Christians’”. So Christians were referred to here as “affectionate friends”. So what are the common beliefs of the religions?

Belief in one God: Christian and especially Islamic religions are monotheist in nature, which is the belief that there is only one God. The oneness and unity of God is greatly emphasized by Muslims. It is important to note that the assertion of the oneness of God by

Christians is sometimes misunderstood, because Christians believe in the Holy Trinity of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. This position of Christians does not imply as erroneously understood that those are three different gods but an attestation for the fact that God the Supreme Being does manifest through His son Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. However, this is not a denial of monotheism but a pronouncement of the complexity of the Divine Being. In the African Traditional Religion, God is seen as the Supreme Being that created humans and all other living things. They believe that God who is the Supreme Being is viewed in different forms and has diverse dwelling places, yet he is the almighty. All the three religions have the belief that God is the origin and source of all that exists in the universe, He cares about all the things that have been created and desires the well-being of all. He is a just God and has provided basic rules for human guidance so that we may be good and righteous, according to His intention. God is also merciful and it is only by the means of God's grace that we are given strength to be more like what we ought to be.

Understanding Human Beings: The three religions believe that human beings are the highest creatures here on earth. They also believe that the human beings God created are full of mysteries. That man is capable of both good and evil and is often the battle ground between evil and good forces. Human can only become more like what God intended them to be when they grow in goodness, righteousness, and love for one another. Human become evil-doers when they abuse their freedom and do harm to fellow human beings, and the environment as against the plan of God. The three religions believe that God has access to human beings in terms of communication through revelation especially, through the prophets and in African Traditional Religion through a lesser god who is represented by the chief priest. African Traditional Religion, Christianity and Islam are in agreement that God has made covenants with humans. It was because man broke the covenant that is why there is separation between God the Creator and humans.

God's Guidance: It is absolutely the belief of the three religions that God did not leave man guideless in terms of behaviour, He gave to humanity some basic rules and commandments that will guide them in addition to sound and rational minds to learn the application of those rules as a guiding principle to individuals' daily living. God also gave human the ability to choose between good and evil. All three religions abhor murder, the arbitrary killing of innocent people, telling the truth and not to take from others what rightfully belongs to them. It is the duty of every human to respect the dignity of every person and help especially those who are not capable of helping themselves, such as widows, orphans, and the poor. Human beings are to completely submit themselves to the dictates and the will of God/Allah. All the three religions believe in the 'golden rule'; doing unto others what we will have them do unto us (Matthew 7:12; Surah 24, "The Light," v. 22; Hadith, An-Nawawi's Forty Hadith 13 p. 56).

The Need for Peace and our contribution in achieving Peace

In exploring the role of religion in the pursuit of peace, it is pertinent to reexamine the level of commitment that everyone has invested in peace as believers, following varied traditions,

but having a common origin and a common destiny. According to Curaming (2002), religion is a power to reckon with in society, and it serves as a force that affects changes. For this reason, one wish to listen to another. It is believed that this in itself is already a sign of peace. In listening to one another there is already a reply to the disturbing questions that worries. This already serves to scatter the shadows of suspicion and misunderstanding. The questions before us are: How can we bear witness to a most loving and compassionate God who loves each one of us and the whole world? How can we live as creatures whose common Creator, the common Beginning and common End, is nearer to us than our jugular vein? God himself placed in the human heart an innate predisposition to live in peace and harmony. With all efforts to pursue this peace and harmony among all peoples, individuals are aware that one is representing the deepest sentiment of every human being. History has given believers who have distinguished themselves as witnesses to peace. They enunciate the cry for peace in the hearts of believers. By their lives and examples, they have shown that it is possible to build bridges and lead people, who are always in need of peace, to walk together in the path of peace.

Religious traditions have the resources needed to overcome fragmentation and to promote mutual friendship and respect among peoples. A genuine religious belief is an inexhaustible wellspring of mutual respect and harmony among peoples. In a millennium marked by multiplicity of religions and cultures, all religions are called to provide a common and complementary moral and religious foundation for this struggle (towards liberation and wholeness) and be forces for growth and communion rather than sources of alienation and conflict. Religions have a prophetic role in public life. What then are the integral parts of religion that can help promote world peace? Curaming (2002) outlines six points which are:

Religion appeals to conscience: It is because religion appeals to individual conscience and to the heart, that is why some fundamental questions that concern human existence such as the meaning, purpose, and end of human life; the meaning of evil and sin; the cause of sorrow and suffering; the relationship of humans with God and neighbour; and the path to true happiness people seek to find the answers in religion, making it possible for justice and fraternal cooperation to prevail, therefore giving peace to both the individual and the society.

Prayer and meditation: It is only in a deep and intimate relationship with God that one can find peace since God is the source of peace. The prime wellspring of true peace which is openness, listening, dialogue, and union with God can only be achieved through a priority commitment to prayer which will enable all persons to build the peace of order, justice, and freedom. All the three major religions in Nigeria strive to show faith in God, the absolute and transcendent, by prayer, meditation, sacred readings as the need arises, and other spiritual exercises. These are useful stones in the foundation of peace. They help us to understand deeper truths and see our relationship to our Creator and to our neighbour.

Asceticism: Believers live in such a way that they do not become slaves to things because these religions teach that things of this world have no permanent value and that they are

passing away. Religion equips persons to live according to a hierarchy of values and to grow in spiritual heights. This dimension facilitates the building of peace because war is often caused by immoderate desire for power, honor, and wealth. The nonviolence of Mahatma Gandhi was a power of the spirit, nourished and sustained by asceticism understood as overcoming aggressive instincts (Curaming, 2002).

The Golden Rule: The three main religions of study including the other religions such as Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism believe in the golden rule of moral conduct as professed by Christians: “Always treat others as you would like them to treat you; that is the meaning of the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 7:12).

Religious Freedom: This is the situation where all persons are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power, in such wise that in religious matters no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his/her beliefs. It further means that no one is to be restrained from acting in accordance with one’s beliefs, whether alone or in association with others, within due limits or under compulsion to act otherwise. The acceptance and practice of this principle by the three main religions in Nigeria and even the world at large are ways of promoting peace.

Justice and Human Promotion: Peace is the fruit of commitment to justice. There can be no true peace without respect for the dignity of persons and peoples, respect for the rights and duties of each person, and respect for an equal distribution of benefits and burdens between individuals and in society as a whole. It can never be forgotten that situations of oppression and exclusion are often the source of violence and terrorism (Curaming, 2002).

The above reasons show why religions are at the service of peace. It is the duty of religions and of their leaders above all, to foster in the people of this time a renewed sense of the urgency of building peace. They must weave a priority for peace into the mindset of the global community.

CONCLUSION

The beauty of interfaith dialogue is the opportunity presented to highlight the unifying factors between religions. It is accepted that there are differences in beliefs, practices and philosophy of the various religions of the world, but if the basic tenets and interpretations of these faiths are presented in an honest and open way, an understanding of the reasons for any misunderstandings can be looked at, opened to dialogue and, hopefully, removed. It is therefore important that the beliefs and practices of each religion are presented without any hint that the presenters are trying to convert the listeners to their way of thinking. Rather, these beliefs are presented with a true respect and honouring of all beliefs and teachings. The goal is to promote an understanding of one’s faith and encourage the desire for further dialogue between participants and their audience. Regardless of what name may be used to refer to this higher power, and regardless of the differing places of worship, the fact remains that every person looks to the same God. Armed with this knowledge,

one will then be able to search for uniting commonalities when encountering new and different peoples, rather than keep divisive differences in mind, thus allowing us to truly work towards a culture of peace. Therefore the amalgamation of inter-religious beliefs towards conflicts and insecurity to ensure peaceful co-existence of all the people is the solution to religious conflict in Nigeria.

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