



19 Fr. Aboreng Useni James, Doctoral student of Missiology, UKSW

Priest of the Jos diocese from Nigeria.



THE PERSPECTIVE OF RELIGIOUS PLURALITY AND IDENTITY IN NIGERIA.

ABSTRACT:

Nigeria can be rightly described as one of the most deeply pluralistic country in the continent of Africa. Religiously, there are three major religious groups: Islam, Christianity and Indigenous Religion (ATR). The population of the religious groups is at 50% Islam, 40% Christianity and 10% ATR. However, northern Nigeria is predominantly Muslim, with many Christians in the cities and in minority communities throughout the region. In most part of the “Middle belt”, Christians and Muslims communities are equivalent and are often controversial. The south-eastern areas of the country are overwhelming Christians, whereas the Yoruba in the South West are religiously plural as marriages and conversion between different faiths is common.

INTRODUCTION:

Nigeria is a purely plural- ethnic, plural- cultural, plural- religious and plural-linguistic nation. Before the historic amalgamation in 1914, the various ethnic and cultural groups that now make up Nigeria existed as autonomous political entities, having their own political systems, social and religious values. Many have today associated the problem of Nigeria to the failure of the Colonial masters to recognize and respect these diversities. The resultant effect of this negligent, they had maintained, is the loose and cosmetic merger of the ethnic and cultural groups in Nigeria, which has turned to be the main source of the Nigerian headache. In Nigeria for example, religion being a persuasive source of identity is not disputable. Thus, it is not difficult to identify a Christian from Muslim or a traditionalist since their dominant beliefs betray them openly in many spheres of life. Studies have shown that in Nigeria, ethnic and religious differences form sentiments which override perception of Nationalism. Leaders are distracted from national thinking and focus on religious interest, hence, religion frames people's identity.

Having viewed the other religious groups as rivals, members of a particular group work to discredit the members of the other group and these results into prejudice and discrimination of other religious groups. The outcome of the impulse is the division of the society into "we" and "them"; "us" and "them"; "Muslim" versus "Christian" mindsets and this draws our minds to the fact that religion is a major source of identity and division in the country. Therefore, how do these religions framed identity in the midst of religious plurality? Put in another way, what is the co-relationship between religious plurality and identity? This presentation is set out to look at the Nigerian perspectives of religious plurality and identity. After the introduction, I will look at the pluralistic nature of religion in Nigeria with the advent Christianity and Islam forming the background, I will also look at religious identity vi sa vis ethnicity. By highlighting the conflicts and differences shared by these religions will help me proposed the way forward and then conclude.

PLURALITY OF RELIGION IN NIGERIA:

Religion, despite its concern with the spiritual matters, also affects us socially. Religious rights therefore, remain an important topic in contemporary society such as Nigeria. Simeon Onyewueke Eboh, asserts that religion "has always manifested itself as a social fact, an associative reality with a communitarian character"¹. He further argues that "although religion concerns the spiritual and other-worldly dimensions of man", it also "affects deeply the temporal dimension of man"². Religion therefore, can effectively reinforce societal norms and values only when a single religion within the society has a monopoly on the truth³. Against this background, it is pertinent to note that, a typical indigenous African society hardly tolerated religious plurality, but the advent of Islam and Christianity brought religious plurality and social upheaval to Nigeria by introducing different cultures and ideas.

¹ Eboh S. O., Church-State Relations: A Juridical Survey of the Church-State Relationship, (Nigeria: 1994) pg. 1

² Ibid.

³ Haralambos M. & Heald R. M., Sociology: Themes and Perspective (2nd ed. 1985), pgs. 476-78.

There are estimated 250 – 400 ethnic groups in the over 180 million population of Nigeria, with different cultures and modes of political organizations. Despite that, currently, Christianity, Islam and Indigenous religion are the three main religions practiced in Nigeria, with Christianity and Islam being the dominant religion in the country, at a level of almost equal percentage.⁴ Based on this, there are few traditionalists in Nigeria, most towns, particularly in the southern Nigeria, still retain their traditional deities and have custodians who worship those deities. Indigenous religions typically involve the worship of idols who serve as intermediaries to the main god. It is therefore not surprising that the followers of the indigenous religions due to their insignificant number, suffer discrimination, mainly from fanatical Christian and Muslim groups. This can be seen in the religious fanaticism displayed by some Muslim groups and Christian sects, together with some politicians' use of religion to further justify their ends

It is of essence to mention here, the Nigerian Constitution grants freedom of religious worship to all Nigerians. The constitution provides that "the Government of the Federation or of a state (36 States and the Federal Capital Territory) shall not adopt any religion as State Religion"⁵ It does further to say, "every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom (either alone or in community with others, and in public or in private) to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observances".⁶

CHRISTIANITY IN NIGERIA:

Owing to the European military conquest of southern Nigeria, European missionaries, from the 17th centuries, began introducing Christianity primarily into southern Nigeria. Please note here, these same European Christian missionaries worked in all parts of Nigeria. Today, as I speak, Christianity has spread into many parts of the northern Nigeria where the Islamic religion is most dominant. However, prior to the advent of Christianity, most communities, in the southern Nigeria maintained their identities through their indigenous religion. Even when Christianity's presence was relatively new, it only introduced a new world view that complements the religious identity of these communities. A renowned Nigerian novelist, Chinua Achebe, captured the cultural conflict, social trauma, and destabilization caused by the introduction of Christianity into the Nigerian communities, by his description of the prevailing social situation in Umuofia, a village representing the Igbo region in the south-east at the time of the advent of Christianity.⁷ Today, Christianity has become more integrated into the indigenous Nigerian cultures. An emerging problem now is that of religious identity posed by differences caused by religious pluralism.

ISLAM IN NIGERIA:

⁴ Available at <http://www.cia.gov/publications/facebook/geos/ni.html#people>.

⁵ NIG. CONST. chpt.1, pt. II, § 10 (The 1999 Nigerian Constitution was promulgated on May 5th, 1999 and came into force on May 29th, 1999).

⁶ Ibid., NIG. CONST. chpt. IV, § 35.

⁷ Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, (Nigeria: Anchor Books, 1994).

History has it that, Muslim merchants from North Africa introduced Islam into the northern parts of Nigeria during the 10th century. Therefore, Islam existed in Nigeria for six centuries before the introduction of Christianity. The Muslim traders from North Africa who first introduced Islam exposed the indigenous communities to visual manifestation of the faith. As the faith gains ground, two main Islamic denominations were practiced in Nigeria: *Tijaniyya* and *Quadirriyya*, with *Tijaniyya* practiced more widely. Although we have the *Ahmadiyya* movement found in the western Nigeria as a third Islamic sect, but it has not been fully accepted by the more Orthodox Muslims.⁸ Furthermore, a multiplicity of sects and movements has emerged within the Islamic faith. The prominent sects include the *Izalatul – Bid’ah Wa Igamat al’ Sunnah*, abbreviated as the *Yan Izala*, founded by Mallam Ismaila Idris. Another prominent sect is *Izala*, a strong reformist group favored by Islamic intellectuals. These two sects have clashed over modes of worship and have other differences as well. Islam, as practiced in northern Nigeria, does not reflect a demarcation between the social, political and religious live of the people.

RELIGIOUS IDENTITY AND ETHNICITY:

Ethnicity and religion are some of the many forms of identity to which large academic literature attach in Nigeria. The majority ethnic groups are the Hausa-Fulani in the north, the Yoruba in the southwest and Igbo in the southeast. All the other ethnic groups fit into the minority category, with varying degrees of political status, depending on their numerical size and political influence. The Hausa-Fulani and other communities residing in Northern Nigeria are mainly Muslims while the south-south minority areas and Igbo speaking areas in the southeast are predominantly Christians. The Middle Belt (north-central zone) is a mixture of Christian and Muslim populations, while the Yoruba speaking communities in the southwest are about half Muslims and half Christians.

These differences underlie the North-South and sharpen ethnic cleavages in the country. Firstly, ethnic identification is presumed to be the most outstanding and consistent source of social identity in Nigeria. Second, ethnicity is regarded as a central avenue for collective action. Thirdly, ethnicity is assumed to be a generally destabilizing influence, with particularly suspicious influences on democracy. Among the three religious identities in Nigeria: Christianity, Islam and Indigenous religion, the latter is the least politically active; numbering several hundreds of ethnic groups and subgroups, villages, clans and kin groups; and, involving the worship of different gods and goddesses. It is this unique religious divide that prompted Archbishop Onaiyekan of Abuja to describe the country as “the greatest Islamo-Christian nation in the world”.⁹ Underlying this deep religious identity is the deep distrust each group feels toward the other.

⁸ <http://www.bartley.com/65/ah/Ahmadiyya.html>.

⁹ Onaiyekan, J. 2008. Panel Discussion on the Role of Bishops in Peace building: A contribution from the Nigerian Perspective. Catholic Peace building Network Conference Notre Dame University, South Bend, USA. April 13. http://www.nd.edu/~cpn/papers_2008CPN/Homily%204-14%20-%20Onaiyekan.pdf.

CONFLICT OF DIFFERENCES: CHRISTIANITY, ISLAM AND ATR

Even though Christianity and Islam have contributed positively to the growth of the country; they have also created a history of conflict and violence. This includes a war of words motivated by conflicting beliefs: A good Muslim is one who is able to withstand Christian conversion tactics and campaigns. A good Christian is also one who is able to confront Islam and challenge their instigating utterances. These beliefs sanction symbolic violence, and Muslims and Christians use each other's sacred writings to perpetuate stereotype that expresses fear and anxiety about the domination of others, thereby reflecting a narrow extremist subculture of either their community or their religious group. Violence begins with the discrimination, dehumanization, stigmatization of others. It takes place in cleavages, which can be described as marginalized and defensive groups seen in the Christian minorities or Islamic majority, Intra-Religious groups and State establishments. These cleavages are fairly permanent and their violence could be a quest for freedom from domination, or perceived threat to their sociopolitical position.

In the case of Islam, the rise of this dimension of fanaticism and intolerance through Maitatsine sect, Izala, Islamic Movements and recently the Boko Haram sects has manifested itself in a very dramatic manner over the past years through their activities. Take Izala Movement for instance, is a powerful and orthodox 'return to source' group that emerged under the leadership of Sheik Abubakar Mahmoud Gumi, a former Grand Khadi of Northern Nigeria in the 1950s and 1960s, who became the inspirer of a major modern organization of Islamic reform in Northern Nigeria.¹⁰ The Movement, which has buses and public address systems, organizes regular campaigns in many towns and villages in the north and their recorded cassettes are sold throughout northern Nigeria. Gumi also has the support of a number of well-placed intellectuals and administrators. Yet as the movement grew, so also its leaders became more and more intolerant. For instance in an interview in This Week Magazine (6 April 1987) Abubakar Gumi came out strongly against Christians: "... "What is Christianity?" And even the Christian prophet doesn't know. All that he will say is that Christians are the followers of one who was crucified ..."

Like the Islamic religion, Christianity has divided into numerous sects since the Protestant Reformation in the 16th and 17th centuries. In Nigeria, the proliferation of denominations and churches has been on an increase, with everyone trying to identify with his own. The new Pentecostal churches are characterized by their radical approach; they are more militant in their evangelistic and proselytizing movements, particularly with respect to nonbelievers. Christian fundamentalists regard themselves as engaged in a three branched conflict: with Muslims, with mainstream Christians whom they accuse of abandoning the basics of their faith, and followers of traditional religion. Just like the Muslim fundamentalists, they also seek to expand their support base, hence conversion and poaching of followers of other religions through stereotype,

¹⁰ Tsakuwa U. A., The Contribution of Sheikh Abubakar Mamoud Gumi to the Understanding of Islamic Ideology in Nigeria, (Sokoto, Nigeria: Unpublished Project from Usman Danfodiyo University, 1999), pg.23.

hateful preaching, twist and misapprehension of the various religious texts in such manners that promoted bigotry and intolerance in both camps. This reaction is based on the scenario that, a Christian is free to change his or her religion, but a Muslim appears unable and even more dangerous to freely and publicly become a Christian. In the case of the Indigenous religion (ATR), it is hardly noticeable due to the insignificant percentage, except in the regions where it is practiced.

THE WAY FORWARD:

Having known where we are, the next question to ask at this point is where do we go from here? What are the ways forward? One major confrontation associated with plurality and identity (especially in religious beliefs) as seen in our analysis so far, is the temptation of exaggeration of both the differences that existed between the groups. Each group ordinarily would want to project a positive image that will make them look pleasant and unique before other groups. This is very normal. But the danger therein is when this normal impulse is misconstrued; when it is negatively expressed and when it leads to discrimination and antagonism.

This presentation therefore, recommends that in as much as the group would want to project a positive image of itself, they should not lose sight of the fact that the other groups have an image to project too. Therefore, there is serious need for each group to appreciate and respect the needs and aspirations of the other; be it Muslim, Christian or Indigenous Religious groups. Each has an image to project and protect and this will go a long way in ushering an atmosphere of peace in the country. Furthermore, the right culture to be adopted in such plurality should be one that recognizes and respect these diversities. National integration can only be achieved if we accept our differences and be ready to accommodate our each other not minding whatever it is that have divided us, knowing that life is full of contradictions which must be resolved to form a united and stable society. Unity in diversity should be the appropriate model of the unity to be sought.

CONCLUSION:

It is pertinent to note that, a reasonable percentage of people in Nigeria who are Christians or Muslims inherited these religions as hegemony of cultures, traditions and accident of history and birth. This reality must be accepted. Taking cognizance of this plurality, Madu in his book: *Fundamentals of Religious Studies* looks at the pluralistic nature of Nigeria as a reality that we cannot do without. Instead, Nigeria's survival depends on the level of awareness by the different ethnic and religious segments. Being born as a Muslim or Christian or belonging to any ethnic group and more still, whether you are from the predominantly Muslim or predominantly Christian region is the matter of accidental history. It is my contention to say that all these differences must be there, for it is in these differences that we shall manifest our level of awareness to share our assets and liabilities and be ready to resolve seeming contradictions to our own advantage, growth and development¹¹. Plurality therefore, is a step to an authentic enculturation and dialogue. This dialogue opens the way for mutual understanding,

¹¹ Madu, J. E. *Fundamentals of religious studies*. Franedoh: Calabar, 1996.

tolerance and respect of the view point of each group, as long as each group endeavor to listen to one another, understand each other in sincerity and honesty.¹²

¹² Nwanju, I.U. Religious Bigotry and Good Governance in Nigeria. An unpublished paper presented at the 2012 faculty of Arts, Nnamdi Azikiwe University annual conference.

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