

## Christian Religion and Peaceful Co-Existence for Sustainable Development in Nigeria: A Sociological Approach

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**Abstract.** The relationship between Christian religion and peace down through history has been ambivalent. On the one hand, most religions proclaim peace and have served the cause of peace. On the other hand, religion has been the cause of many wars. Christian religion permeates every aspect of man's existence in the world, be it the political, social, cultural or economic life of people. No religion preaches violence. The three main religions in Nigeria, namely, Christianity, Islam and African traditional religion, all advocate and preach peaceful co-existence in various ways. Thus, religion has been used as the most important instrument for the social control of man and society. Since progress and sustainable development can only occur in a rancor free environment, the role of Christian religion in fostering peaceful co-existence cannot be over emphasized.

**Keywords:** Christian Religion, Peaceful Co-existence, Sustainable Development, Nigeria, Sociological Approach.

### 1. Introduction

Religion's stem qualities of sincerity, honesty, selfless service to humanity and contentment among other qualities appears to be a better alternative for building a progressive, sustainable and peaceful society. From time immemorial, the desire to build a just, orderly, progressive and peaceful society has been

uppermost in the minds of Nigerian leaders. However, due to external influences on them, their mission and vision continue to remain a mirage. These influences coupled with high level of corruption, poverty, selfishness and lack of contentment heightened their problem. This made the Nigerian leaders derail from their avowed vision and mission with the result that at the end of a leader's tenure, little or no progress would have been made. Hence, the goal of peaceful co-existence is not achieved.

The escalation of religious related unrest around the world and Nigeria in particular has made the longing for peace and security to be intensified, especially in recent times. The spate at which confrontations between adherents of different faiths are taking the central stage is worrisome and thus suggests that a number of local and international treaties signed to declare violence illegal, seem to be active on paper and not in practical terms.<sup>1</sup> Besides, such conventions have relatively failed to achieve the desired goal. It is therefore imperative to make a paradigm shift by using the religious dimension to address the situation in a more subtle way to appeal to the different parties involved that, violence, hatred and religious bigotry do no one any good. This contribution seeks to unveil forms of religious strife in Nigeria as well as some of the issues identified as the underlying factors responsible for the fracas. The author believes that peace and tranquility could only reign in an atmosphere where there is tolerance and the spirit of give-and-take.

## 2. The Concept of Peace

Peace in its true meaning does not comprise solely absence of physical security or absence of war and conflicts. This condition is only a passive and limited, though very important and essential aspect of the wider concept of peace.

Peace means beneficent adjustment of harmony between the individual and his creator on the one side, and his fellow men on the other. This applies to the entirety of the concentric relationships between individual and individual, individual and community, community and community, nation and nation and in short, between the whole of humanity intersect and between man and the universe. Since the word peace is perceived in different ways by different people, peace is seen as security when one is free, without fear. When there is peace, people have freedom to develop their economic and social lives. No wonder, Ambi observes that the collapse of peace can be due to community lack of firm commitment and conformity to agreement<sup>4</sup>. It should be said here that peace or harmony will be difficult if not impossible except the concepts of justice and development are involved. In other words, there can be no peace without justice. That is, relationship between individuals or groups cannot be said to be in peace when one of the parties is held in perpetual bondage or subjected to extreme exploitation and deprivation. In such a situation a person would and should fight for his rights and peace is thereby threatened. The same could be said of development. There is no doubt that underdevelopment breeds deprivation, poverty, hunger and disease. It is usually said that a hungry man is an angry man. This is true whether his hunger is caused by other men, by underdevelopment or by natural disasters. However, achievement of absolute peace is not within human power to attain. As there is no complete happiness, there will never be complete peace. All that is necessary for peaceful and happy living is better understanding and tolerance of each other based on love. The world is built on conflict of light and darkness, blessing and disaster as well as change in seasons in God's final covenant with man. Thus, peace is not the absence of war but

as the prevention of all structural and social inequalities.

## 3. Causes of Ethnic and Religious Violence in Nigeria

Religious violence is a global crisis and Nigeria is not exempted from it. Ethnic and religious crises are not new in Nigerian society. They have been with the country since the advents of Islam and Christianity and their negative impacts remain with the society till now. In Nigeria, experience shows that the incidence of religious violence has recently become a daily ritual often leading to destruction of lives and property. Even in recent years we have seen Protestants and Catholics killing each other in Northern Ireland, while Jews and Muslims in Israel and Christians and Muslims in Bosnia and Nigeria have done the same thing. Let us examine some of these causes in the following order.

### 3.1 Ignorance and Poverty

There is the saying that "a hungry man is an angry man" and this is true of the Nigerian situation where hunger, employment and other related issues are prevalent. It is obvious that the majority of those who participate and play prominent roles in ethnic and religious violence are largely ignorant of the core tenets of their religions. Most of the times, the root and the cause of the conflict are totally unwarranted.

### 3.2 Politics

Politics is also another factor that is responsible for ethnic and religious violence in Nigeria. It is true that when the politicians fail to fulfil their promises to the people, there is bound to be violence which will eventually disturb the peace and unity of the community. Religion plays a significant role in the political stability of a nation including Nigeria; therefore, politics must be properly handled in order not to constitute problems for its citizens.

### 3.3 Intolerance

Intolerance means unwilling to accommodate ideas or behavior that is different from one's own. According to Oxford dictionary of current English describes intolerance as unwillingness to

let other people act in a different way or hold different opinions from one's own. This is a situation where religious faithful are unwilling to accommodate the perceived lapses or excesses of others. This is common among Christians and Muslims in Nigeria in the sense that they both see their faiths as being superior to others which normally generate problems for their adherents.

### **3.4 Abuse of Freedom of Expression and Fundamental Human Rights**

The Nigerian constitution guarantees freedom of expression for every citizen of the country, but the freedom seems to have been abused by certain people of extreme religious conviction. In a situation where human rights are being violated or abused, there will always be religious uprising and violence. Thus, when religious groups fail to recognize and respect other faiths within the same society, there is bound to be religious crises and uproar emanating from the aggrieved groups.

### **3.5 Economic Issues**

The economic situation of a nation can also cause ethnic and religious violence. Nigerian Government had been accused of exploitation, domination, victimization, oppression, discrimination and marginalization among others. Different ethnic groups in Nigeria have diverse interests and demands which they want the government of the day to meet. Conflicts often occur in a situation where a particular group believes it is deprived of certain amenities or is being neglected. The breakdown of social amenities and increase in poverty rate can also aggravate violence and disturb the peace of the society.

### **3.6 Religious particularity and bigotry**

Religious particularity could be described as absolute claim to religious truth or an exclusive claim to revelation. This is when each religion want to assert authority to itself. It is the weapon of exclusivists who see their own faith as the only one that can lead to salvation. In Nigeria,

Muslims and Christians have always quarreled on certain aspects of their beliefs. We have these quarrels because each of the two religious is guilty of religious particularity. Besides, a bigot is an obstinate believer who is intolerant of others. He is an extremist who is ready to sacrifice anything for his faith. He is not ready to reason along with others as far as religion is concerned. He is always militant in matters of religion.

### **3.7 Confrontational Preaching**

Another factor directly militating against peaceful co-existence among adherents of different faiths in the country is confrontational preaching. The missionary nature of both Islam and Christianity in inviting people to belief and worship of the Almighty God is highly influential in guiding humankind to lead a spiritually structured life. This noble task is regarded as an obligatory duty or evangelism in all monotheistic religions especially in Islam and Christianity respectively. But the way some preachers from both sides go about this noble duty usually creates serious problems in the society. In other words, some Muslim and Christian preachers are guilty of this offence. Such a provocative act of preaching is usually carried out by inexperienced and untutored religious personnel who do not weigh the gravity and consequences of their actions.

## **4. Christian Religion as Source of Conflicts**

It is painful and unfortunate that Christianity has had some record as an instrument of conflict. There have been crusades and inter-religious rivalries that left indelible stains on the history of Christian religion and inter-religious relationship. Christianity as the trumpeter and herald of peace has lost its credibility having begun to issue forth cries of different wars. For instance, between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, Christian monarchs conducted nine bloody crusades in an attempt to wrest control of Jerusalem from the Muslims. Unfortunately, such wars are not just a relic of the past. Even in recent years, we have seen Protestants and Catholics killing each other in Northern Ireland

while Jews and Muslims in Israel and Christians and Muslims in Bosnia have done the same thing.

According to Dzurgba, he argued that aggressiveness, hostility and brutality have mostly marked men religious behavior. It is a fact that the church tortured and even killed some of her own adherents who were condemned for heresy or apostasy in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>9</sup> The persecuting exercise was regarded as the inquisition. The holy wars conducted by Christians against Muslims, during the middle ages, are best known to us as crusades. Even from biblical point of view, we read of various conflicts and wars fought by the Israelites against the Jebusites, Canaanites, Hivites, Amorites, Perizites and so on. They are the original owners of the land flowing with milk and honey. It is of paramount importance to say that the contemporary society has witnessed and is still witnessing a lot of religious wars and riots especially in the Northern part of Nigeria.

### **5. Christian Religion and Peaceful Co-Existence in Nigeria**

The powers of Christian religion as an instrument of peace rest on theological, moral and socio-political foundations. It is obvious that different religions have different beliefs about God, and the supernatural and their influence on the achievement of peace. Christianity shares certain common beliefs with other religions which could serve as a basis for common action for peaceful co-existence.

In Christianity, the Lord's Prayer effectively affirms the fatherhood of God and the belief that if man follows God's commandments, the same peace and harmony which exist in heaven will prevail on earth. The idea of retribution in the after-life is another strong theological base for peace and peaceful co-existence found in Christian religion. The belief that certain wrongs will be righted in the next life, reduces the risk of violent conflicts. The Old Testament of the Bible quotes the Lord as saying "Revenge not for revenge is mine". The Sermon on the Mount in the New Testament clearly links peace with retribution in the after-life: *Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of*

*God Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 6:9-10)*

Thus, Christian religion engages in teachings on moral principles and practices. The religion is a great sustainer of morality. The issue of war and peace is a mainly moral issue which needs constant surveillance in a now complex and rapidly changing world.

Another important instrument for religious dialogue and peaceful co-existence in Nigeria which is yet to be set up is a forum for interfaith dialogue composed of expert in the three religions practiced in the country. This could be called a "Panel of Experts on Inter-religious Affairs". This should be a standing committee which should meet regularly to discuss and ensure smooth inter-faith relationships to preempt inter-faith conflicts. In 2 Cor. 5: 18, Paul teaches: "All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation". Thus, Christians are enjoined to reconcile human beings irrespective of religion or race to God and to one another.

### **6. Towards Peaceful Co-Existence and Sustainable Development in Nigeria**

Sustainable development does not stop at provision and accessibility of physical infrastructure in a particular moment, but is a continuous process. Sustainable peace is not just the mere absence of war or maintenance of balance of power between enemies and dictatorship. It has to do with the sustainability and promotion of peace always and at every time of the year and among persons and group irrespective of the tribe, ethnic nationality or religion at all given moment. Any religious that does not propagate peace and peaceful co-existence remains inimical to sustainable development.

For the attainment of durable peace it is pertinent to re-educate people's attitudes and to guide public opinion in the direction of peace. The construction of peace cannot be attained through the efforts of the few people who negotiate disarmament or the efforts of

governments alone, since these who must also protect the interest of their people, depend to a very large extent on public opinion and public feeling. Peace building or peaceful co-existence is therefore, the responsibility of all. Everybody should master his passions. The peace efforts of governments will be fruitless as long as hostility, distrust, racial or tribal hatred and uncompromising ideologies continue to divide men and put them in opposing camps. There is no doubt that in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society like Nigeria, Christian religion can serve the noble role of preserving peace and bringing about sustainable development that can move the country forward. This can be achieved through the following:

### **6.1 Interaction and Dialogue should be Encouraged**

The government should encourage interaction and dialogue of different religious groups. This is of paramount importance because the government is at the centre of affairs in the country. This will pave way for tolerance among religious groups. As a result, religious and moral education should be included and encouraged in schools. This will prepare the youths for the future and allow them to respect other people's religion.

### **6.2 Demarcation between Politics and Religion**

One of the major problems facing Nigeria as a nation is the people's inability to separate religion from politics. Religion is often used and seen as a strong weapon during politics; yet the majority of those seeking political offices are not sincerely religious. They merely use religion as a stepping stone to their destinations. If citizens can play politics without emotions and sentiments, then there will be a better society. Thus,, politicians should not be voted for on the basis of their religions but on their ability to perform in the office.

### **6.3 Emphasis on Positive Element of Faith**

The two religions (Christianity and Islam) causing violence in Nigeria should check

themselves and have a change of mind. The religious leaders should inculcate the spirit of good neighbourliness from the word of God in their adherents. There are lots of positive virtues which the adherents can imbibe if properly taught. As a result, the Imam and the pastors should see themselves as agents and representatives of God in the midst of the people. It is high time they stopped criticizing each other and misinterpreting the holy books (Bible and Qur'an) and rather focus their attention on what they were called for.

### **6.4 Poverty Alleviation**

There are a lot of social evils in our society today because of high cost of living and low standard of living which has threatened the peaceful co-existence of people in contemporary Nigeria. This is so simply because the poverty level in our society presently is worrisome. This is caused by high rate of unemployment among youths of productive age. This calls for concern because if urgent step is not taken to reduce the poverty level to the minimal level the violence in the country will continue. Government should therefore create opportunities for gainful employment by ensuring that the educational system adopted in the country has a heavy dose of entrepreneurial training, especially at the lower level. The government also needs to create enabling environment for economic development that can enhance standard of living of the people.

### **6.5 Tolerance and Respect for other Religions**

Every individual in the society should tolerate and respect other people and their religion. All human beings cannot practice the same religion because God did not want it that way. As a result, there is the need for religious tolerance and understanding in order to move the society forward. There are common elements that bind every member of the society together. All religions should be respected and the adherents should view themselves as common citizens within boundaries of the nation. Thus, the only road to harmony and peaceful co-existence in contemporary Nigeria is the path of tolerance and respect for other people's religions.<sup>11</sup>

## 6.6. Observation

Peace is simply understood as the absence of hostility. As earlier noted, it is a state of harmony characterized by lack of violent conflict and the freedom from fear of violence. It should be said at this point that peace is not only the absence of war or conflict, but also the presence of love and respect for the role of law. The evidences of peace in any life are: good health, prosperity, justice and love. At a family level, the members are caring, kind, considerate, just, respectful and tolerant of others' beliefs and attitudes. In a peaceful society or country, there is good governance and the citizens are loyal and patriotic to the state.

Contrary to the insinuations by some people with second-hand information about Christian religion that the religion is exclusive and intolerant of other religions and their followers, the religion of Christianity could be regarded as the most tolerant faith on the surface of the earth. However, the overzealous actions of some Christians which sometimes contradict what the faith teaches, have left some non-Christian with no option but to conclude that such people act according to the teachings of their faith.

Besides, lack of adequate understanding of religion has been observed as a major factor militating against peaceful co-existence among adherents of different faiths in Nigeria. This kind of ignorance is of two forms. First, ignorance of one's own religion, which usually makes an individual to behave contrary to the standard teachings of the religion he professes. Second, ignorance about other peoples' religion, which may perhaps generates unnecessary hatred towards that religion and its followers. Similarly, such naivety customarily gives room for unsubstantiated allegations and irrational acceptance of all sorts of vilification about other people and their religion. In the same vein, some people that were born Christians or Muslims have little or no interest in seeking appropriate knowledge about their religion. They only capitalize on the fact that they are not converts, as such, they assume that everything about their faith is inborn. Such people often act

irreligiously, and are usually ready to blindly follow the instructions of their leaders, irrespective of whether the latter are in conformity with the teachings of the faith or not. According to a population saying: "ignorance is not an excuse".

Religion stimulates social habits and checks anti-social behavior. According to Odiba, he observes that religion is "an efficient means of social control, stimulates social habits and checks anti-social tendencies".<sup>12</sup> Religion aids morality and shapes the ethical life of the people. It embodies ethical norms in religious laws. Morality originated from religion and without morality no society can survive. Religion introduced taboos in order to promote harmony, ethical standard and peaceful co-existence in the society. Some religious laws have forbidden the mechanism of birth control, the sale of alcoholic beverages, abortion, conducting business on sacred days, adultery, stealing, murder, lying, unhealthy rivalry, competitions, crisis etc. Thus, religion can be both a blessing or vice in society depending on the nature of the society and the doctrinal contents of the religion.

## 7. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has critically examined the concept of peace, causes of religious violence, Christian religion as a source of conflict and as a means to obtain peace for sustainable development. Efforts needed to achieve peaceful co-existence in contemporary Nigeria were also considered. Possible solutions to the problem were also discussed as there is the need for permanent solutions to religious violence in Nigeria. Because the issue of peace and peaceful co-existence concern everyone, it therefore calls for immediate action with the following recommendations:

First because of the incessant violent crisis occurrence in our contemporary, society, there is a need to acknowledge and practice the positive roles of religion. There is nothing inherently bad about religion. Except people, especially the adherents of different religions are sufficiently sensitized and conscientised to use religion

positively, peace and peaceful co-existence will be unrealistic in Nigeria.

Second, there is need to always organize seminars and symposia by different religious groups. Based on this orientation or training, there should be inter-religious dialogue among different religious adherents especially Christians and Muslims. This will certainly enhance and give room for peaceful co-existence in our contemporary society.

Third, the adherents of all religions should have mutual respect; and understanding of others' religious beliefs and culture. Nigerians must be impartial and all groups in the country must be treated equally. In other words, religious institutions are to be encouraged to avoid the deliberate use of arms in resolving conflicts or disputes arising from inter-religious relations.

Fourth, the government should be just on religious matters. The trouble makers should be severely dealt with as this will serve as deterrent to others. Above all, Nigerian should be ready to demonstrate to the outside world the capability to transcend their difficulties or turn these difficulties to opportunities.

Finally, the opportunists who advance their own personal interests at the expense of the national interest in the name of religion should desist from their acts; religious leaders should be embodiments of tolerance. Religious tolerance means to refrain from discriminating against others who follow a different religious path. Religious leaders and adherents should allow followers of other religions to follow their spiritual beliefs and practices without oppression or discrimination. Thus, religious tolerance is a fundamental right in ensuring peace in our society. If all the aforementioned suggestions are strictly followed and implemented, there will be peace and peaceful co-existence in our contemporary Nigeria.

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