



The Believer-Unbeliever Saga and Violent Religious Crises in Northern Nigeria

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Abstract

No problem has threatened the corporate existence of Nigeria in the recent past as much as religious violence particularly in the northern part of the country. Within the spate of thirty years, the nation suffered from not less than fifty violent clashes mostly between adherents of Islam and Christianity in the north, with the ongoing Boko Haram insurgency as the most recent, deadliest and widespread of all. This daunting social problem has no doubt retarded the development of the nation, as she has been tagged one of the unsecured and violent nation of the continent of Africa. Using the Group Conflict theory and the Rational Choice theory as the background, this work discusses the issue of Unbeliever as critical to the persistent religious clashes in northern Nigeria, the destination of beliefs, religious practice in Nigeria, religious hypocrisy and the need for religious tolerance. The position of this work is that the country must take a rational step to overcome the problem of religious violence as fast as possible by ensuring that other geo-political zones emulate the south-western zone of Nigeria where religious tolerance has become a norm. More so, as the achievement of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of many African countries are linked to the peace and development of Nigeria as the giant of Africa.

Keywords: Christianity, Hypocrisy, Islam, North, Religion, Violence.

Introduction

Religion plays critical roles in the life of a people. It in fact, in most cases directs the actions of adherents particularly from the standpoint of the conscience. This is possible because, a people's religion is purely based upon belief, the action that is often difficult to proof empirically. Yet, it directs most of human actions as it unifies groups into single moral community. Because of beliefs, conviction and personal perception, it is possible to have people developing more than one moral community in a geographical area. More often than not a people's religious belief is influenced by their socio-cultural environment as attested to by the practice of animism and totemism, where a people's belief is symbolized by objects they readily find around them. The diversity of human environments and their perception of the supernatural have created myriads of religious groups even among a people or social groups generally perceived to possess common socio-cultural characteristics such as the family. Sociologically, religious beliefs and practices are considered as parts of a people's cultural traits (Giddens, 2009). People from different socio-cultural settings tend to embrace the practice of similar religious beliefs through integration. However, integration and dynamism are characteristics of a people's culture. These characteristics of culture have engendered in multicultural societies like Nigeria, the practice of religions that are hitherto considered alien, such as Christianity and Islam. Globalization and the widespread application of breakthrough in science, information and communication technology have further made possible the practice of trans-border religious beliefs. The implications of this development no doubt are the unstable nature of beliefs or the erosion of the age-long beliefs, the modification and adulteration of religious beliefs with wider adherents.

Moreover, religions do consciously or unconsciously play the role of social inclusion and or exclusion to a people. This role stems from the views of one of the sociological fathers- Emile Durkheim. He argued that, religion is a system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, things set apart (holy) and held in awe, which unites the believers into a single moral community or church (Onwuejeogwu, 1992; Haralambos and Holborn, 2006). The fact that religion unites groups into single moral community suggests that, those who did not subscribe to the faith are automatically excluded from such moral community and thus stand the risk of being considered infidel or unbeliever, and out-group by members of the group. The out-group members of such moral community may however belong to another moral community based on a different set of belief that defines their own morality. They probably would perceive others in bad light or as unbelievers just because they are out-group members having different perception of social realities. This notion about a people may have probably manifested in the northern Nigeria (Kaduna and Kano, Sokoto, Yobe, Adamawa, Borno States in particular) wherein religion has partitioned the enclave into "us and them". Kukah (1993:214-215) remarked that:

Unfortunately, the destructions by Islamic fanatics continued to reinforce the belief in the minds of many non-Muslims that the evil deeds were being perpetrated by Islam. The apparent silence of the traditional and political classes among the Muslims further fuelled the feelings that they were the sponsors of the riots. Identities began to be narrowed and religion became the basis of identity. Thus, one was either a Muslim or a Christian, a fractionalization that fitted the Us and Them mentality that had gained prominence.....

The dichotomies of in-group and out-group membership of religious faith have often set religious groups from same community against one another (Giddens, 2009). What then becomes morally upright to a people/group may not necessarily mean same to another, since morality invariably becomes a relative term. Therefore, in multicultural societies, there is a greater tendency of groups being engulfed in conflict or violent confrontation than the unity that religion is originally envisaged to provide adherents. Moreover, religion as a group activity may function to stimulate

among adherents the zeal to support developmental programmes of the state and or use same zeal to destabilize the harmonious co-existence of a people and thus hinder the growth and development of a people (Onwuejeogwu, 1992). Olarinmoye (2012: 226) corroborates the dual functions of religion thus:

Religious organizations can use their framing/meaning creating abilities to either stabilize the flux that is endemic in democratic consolidation by mobilizing their members for developmental purposes as non-state service providers of health, education, water, orphans and vulnerable children services or heighten the instability by engaging in anti-state and counter-religious mobilizations and contestations such as has marked Nigerian political landscape since the beginning of the Nigerian 4th Republic in 1999.....The ability of religious organizations to play a key role in stabilizing or heightening flux associated with democratic consolidation makes the issue of their accountability a key one for the citizens and government of democratically consolidating states such as Nigeria.

Religion is therefore, to a people what they care to make of it. It can be a good source of solidarity, tranquility and stability if they wish. It can equally be a source of woes and calamity if its tenets are abused by adherents and mediocre as it has been in Nigeria for decades wherein, within a spate of thirty years, over 50 violent religious conflicts occurred living on its trail political, social, economic and psychological losses and pains in the citizens (Onwuejeogwu, 1992; Abomboyee, 2009; Ibrahim, 2012). Adopting the Rational Choice and Group Conflict theories as guide, this work discusses the concept of unbeliever, its implications in multi-cultural societies, the fluidity of the continuum of believer and unbeliever, the ultimate destination of beliefs, and the need to sue for religious compromise/tolerance as a veritable route to developing religious harmony in a multi-cultural Nigerian polity.

The Problem

Religion is a critical trait and an integral part of a people's culture. It functions to unify a people into a single moral community. Such bond is necessary for social solidarity and cohesion that the society need to achieve economic growth and development (Giddens, 2009). However, religious practice in Nigeria has over the years created unimaginable pains and losses to millions of Nigerian citizens particularly in northern part through violent clashes (Kukah, 1993; Imam, 2004; Abimboyee, 2009). Unabated religious intolerance and violence as experienced in northern Nigeria in the past five decades has not only painted Nigeria as violent and unsafe nation (Human Rights Watch, 2005), but tends to scare investors (domestic and foreign) from the economy. For example, Kuah (1993:205-206) have argued that:

....when the people of Funtua surveyed their town after the same riots, the somber picture that emerged compelled the chairman of the local government to plead with the Kaduna State government to send a delegation to Anambra and Imo States to plead with the Igbo traders to come back. As in all other northern cities after any of these social upheavals, the economic dislocation that follows is usually the compelling force for the plea for Igbo traders to come back. After their departure, social and economic life grinds to a halt as there is no one to mend tyre, sell kerosine, spare parts, beer, run transport and other forms of commercial activities.

It is appropriate to stress that, if citizens are scared to participate in commercial activities in their country, one should not expect non-nationals to invest their resources in such unpredictable society. The continuous absence of investors in the economy is responsible for the underdevelopment of the giant and most populous nation of the continent of Africa in the face of abundant human and material resources. Suffice here to note further that the underdevelopment of Nigeria will no doubt affect the attainment of the millennium development goals of many African nations (Odoma, 2011a).

Theoretical Base

The paper is guided by the Group Conflict and Rational Choice theories.

The Group conflict Theory

George Vold's Group Conflict theory provides explanation to group inclination in human society and how involvement in group activities by members of the society breeds conflict. Taking a cue from the functionalist theoretical perspective, Vold presents human beings as fundamentally group-involved beings. Groups are formed in human communities based on shared interests. These shared interests can best be furthered through collective action (Vold, 1986). New groups are formed as new interests arise, while existing ones may get weakened and fizzle out if they no longer serve their usual purposes. Groups when formed become effective action unit through the direction and co-ordination of the activities of members by their leaders. Society to Vold is a network of groups driven by diverse interests. Group consciousness develops through experience gained from participating in regular group activities. Consequently, emotional attachments to group activities rather than rational thinking develop. However, inter group conflict begins when interests and purposes of groups tend to overlap and or encroach on one another, hence their relationship becomes competitive. The competitive relationship engenders in members' emotional attachment and loyalty to their various groups. Like other conflict theorists, Vold posits that inter group conflict is not entirely destructive, because it is one of the principal and essential social processes in the functioning of the society as it ensures stability, cohesion and social order (Vold, 1986; Kukah, 1993; Ritzer, 1996; Coser, 1998; Okunola, 2002).

In relating the theory to this work, violent religious conflicts in Nigeria over the years could be explained. Religions no doubt organize a people into perceived moral communities. When such moral communities are formed, members tend to develop allegiance and emotional attachment to group ideas to the extent that only group members enjoy sympathy and solidarity in the face of serious challenges, while developing nonchalant/carefree attitude to out-group members. Furthermore, where the interests of the groups (making more converts) conflicts with or encroach on the interests of any other group, efforts are then directed at sustaining group views even if it mean the termination of the lives of others, since the existence and views of other groups are considered as threats and inconsistent/ incompatible with own views. This position creates mutual suspicion and struggle to outdo one another, thereby creating the possibility of conflict.

The Rational Choice Theory

The rational choice theory seeks to explain the action(s) of social actors (Ritzer, 1996). Actors are purposive, rationally minded and has preference guided by the utility they expect to derive from their choice. Such actions are often informed by objective(s) that are consistent with their preference hierarchy. However, social decisions of actors are often guided by scarcity or otherwise of resources, availability of possible alternatives and the cost of the choice likely to be made. Hence at decision making, actors have their eyes on the cost of foregoing the alternative attractive action. The question that this work seek to address is that, if rationally Nigerian citizens and northern Nigerians in particular have been parts and parcel of Nigeria and have thus incorporated or wholly adopted alien Christianity and Islam as their religion, and if there are no possible alternatives to our unity and strong nationhood, it should equally be rational for our eyes to be on the cost of the actions *abinitio* taken (weak and undeveloped status). This action which was taken on the need for a vibrant nationhood ought to occupy the position of the highest preference in our social relation. It also ought to be the major determinant of social relations in the multi-cultural Nigerian society. It is further a rational choice of Nigerians to remain abjectly poor and backward among nations in the face of abundance if we continuously allow religious violence and intolerance to thrive.

Conceptual Clarification

Central to this work and religious conflicts in northern Nigeria is the concept of unbeliever. The conversion of an individual to either of the two religions (Islam and Christianity) is critical to the expansion of religious faith in Nigeria. Attempt is made here to provide clarification on the concept as intended in this piece.

Unbeliever

One sentence definition of the term unbeliever will no doubt be quite misleading. Belief and disbelief/unbelief are terms intricately linked to ideas or views purely based on individual and or group perception about a phenomenon. Religions are often surrounded by myths and views that have engendered varied opinions and perceptions of adherents and the non adherents alike. Since myth should not be assumed to be accepted by everyone in the society, the attitude of individuals toward religion ought necessarily to be both positive and negative, depending on personal or group's conviction. Individuals who develop positive attitude towards a belief purely upon their views and perceptions are termed believers, while those who hold alternative views are considered unbelievers. This is evident with many renowned world religions such as Christianity, Islam etc (Kukah, 1993).

However, there is a thin line of demarcation between believer and an unbeliever. The believer today might end-up as an unbeliever tomorrow, while those considered unbeliever today might be advocates of the faith they hated so much in the past. This is because the basis of their perception and decisions in the past may probably have turned out to be irrelevant with time or is overtaken by events, which then decide the believer-unbeliever status of individuals. The continuum of belief and unbelief is the basis for conversion and backsliding status of adherents in religious circle today. There is however, the tendency of bonding among adherents of religious faiths either to tap into the virtues inherent in the group (Vold, 1986) or to ensure the expansion of scope and activities of the group, while viewing others as out-group members. Furthermore, emotional attachments to group activities rather than rational thinking often develop as members are bound to identify with groups that are consistent with or better projects their interests (Odoma, 2011) and thus view others as enemies since they do not seem to further their interests. The fear of overlapping and or encroachment of interests/ purposes of other groups incubate jealousy and hatred among groups (Vold, 1986). Interest and perception are therefore, the basis of religious belief and unbelief. However, today's unbeliever could be the believer of tomorrow and vice-versa.

Literature Review

Religion is one of the key attributes of a people's culture. Religious beliefs are evident throughout the history of mankind (Oke, 2002). However, scholars have different views of religion as one of the cultural traits of humans. For instance, Giddens and Duneier (2000) remarked that religion involves a set of symbols, invoking feelings of reverence or awe which are linked to rituals practiced by a community of believers. Yet, presenting the anthropological perspective, Oke (2002) argued that religion is characterized by the belief in supernatural beings and their powers to assist or harm man. Moreover, a sociological view of religion is presented by Durkheim as unified system of beliefs and practices related to sacred and profane things, that is to say things set apart and forbidden (Onwuejeogwu, 1992; Giddens, 2009).

Often credited to Karl Marx, is the dialectic views which present religion as the action of the few privileged group to conceal their inhuman treatments on the poor and down-trodden masses that are in the majority. To this school of thought, religion is the opium of the masses (Harlambos and Holborn, 2004; Giddens, 2009) encouraged by the elites as a means of taking the minds of the masses away from possible revolution against the inhuman treatment of the ruling elites. Whichever way one look at religion, it is no doubt concerned with two critical issues. One, it is concerned with human action arising from the perception of the existence of a supernatural being who must be revered by man and secondly, religion wherever it is practiced, is identified with group rather than individual working in isolation.

Although, several reasons have been advanced for religious crisis in Nigeria over the years, the reasons are woven around the nexus of believer/unbeliever, converts, attempt to expand the frontier of religious groups and the hatred for believers of other religious faith (Kukah, 1993; Imam, 2004; Salami and Akeem, 2012). There have been cases of religious intolerance in Nigeria and particularly in northern Nigeria which date back to early 1900s where individual's perception and conviction were not allowed to guide the choice and practice of religion (Kukah, 1993; Abimboye, 2009). Many religious faithful suffered several forms of persecutions ranging from banishment from the mainstream society to inhuman treatments and assassination by adherents of the dominant religion. For instance, Crampton (1975:129) quoted one Mallam Ibrahim thus:

I determined to make a careful study right through the Koran and collect all references to the prophet Jesus. Who is this of whom our own Prophet writes? Can this be a man like the other mentioned in our sacred book? Is this not a greater than all, greater than even Mohammed himself?

The above quotation suggests the basis of religion and true religious practice, which necessarily should be by personal perception, inquiry and conviction as driving forces for religious participation and practice. However, for such disposition, Mallam Ibrahim was publicly impaled in Kano, while persons of similar views suffered various forms of persecutions for their perceptions, conviction and belief.

Although, there are several religious groups in Nigeria, religious animosity that have resulted into violent and destructive clashes, wherein thousands of lives and property were destroyed, have consistently been linked to two dominant alien religions – Christianity and Islam (Bamaguje, 2001; Abimboye, 2009). Nearly all key northern states of Nigeria such as Kano, Kaduna, Borno, Adamawa, Bauchi, Plateau to mention but a few, have had their share in the avoidable but destructive religious conflicts (Kukah, 1993; Imam, 2004; Salami and Akeem, 2012). Even though, factors that stimulated the violent religious clashes were not the same, once started, the victims were always those considered as unbelievers (infidel) and non-faithful by the dominant religion. Relevant to this view was the case of Izala (an Islamic religious sect), which applied every possible means to woo or hated converts and were thus antagonistic to non-members. Kukah (1993:218) succinctly remarked that:

The mission of the Izala is the conversion of the Muslims whom they believed have been led astray and are going in different directions. The movement rejects among other things, ostentatious naming ceremonies and weddings, the act of prostrating before anybody as all men are equal, or the celebration of the prophet's birthday...The most serious challenge posed by their teachings lies in their claim that anyone outside their belief system is an unbeliever, a charge that is at the heart of the intense animosity between the group and other Muslims in Nigeria.

The above view has consistently intensified both intra and inter-faith conflicts in Nigeria as non-members are considered unbeliever and infidel. It should be noted here that virtually every religious groups in Nigeria seem to have in principle endorsed this perception even though they are seen to preach oneness and love. Even within religious group, adherents in most cases enjoy and propagate closer ties only with people belonging to the same sect and denomination than with others. The case is worsened when viewed from inter faith relationship. There is always skepticism and deceit in inter faith relationship in Nigeria. On this premise is the foundation of religious violence laid. The implication of this perception therefore, is that non religious members does not deserve any sympathy whenever there is inter religious conflict, in fact, they are often the target and victims of religious violence in Nigeria.

Furthermore, attacks on non members have assumed a dangerous dimension in recent times. The perpetrators embarked on the destruction of others on the ground of sincere devotion to the tenets of their faith and thus tend to be fanatical (Bamaguje, 2001; Nwolise, 2012). This position is rightly corroborated and captured by Imam (2004:24) who stressed that:

The personality of Muhammad Marwa was venerable because his followers took his words as commands and considered fighting in his cause as a source of martyrdom. As a matter of fact, the followers had been indoctrinated that whether they were killed or they slay their opponents they will be admitted into paradise where they will enjoy eternal bliss. An examination of utterances of some of the fanatics shows this belief. In Jimeta for example, a witness before the committee that investigated the Maitasines' disturbance there, reported that they heard some Maitasines saying that "if we kill them we have killed unbelievers and if they killed us we shall go to heaven. Similarly, one of the fanatics in Pantami ward of Gombe said before he breathed his last that I do not care whatever you do to me now as I am going straight to Paradise" Armed with this faith and expectation, the Maitasines fought gallantly with the police and soldiers.

Ibrahim (2011) corroborated the assertion of Imam above when he recalled the views of Abubakar Shekau, one of the leaders of the dreaded Islamic sect in Nigeria – Boko Haram that "We understood from the book sent to the Prophet Mohammad that there is no better way to earn our dignity than through the path God tells us to follow, that is holy war". Arising from this dangerous indoctrination to which some fanatical sects have shown utmost devotion, not only are non adherents and their property destroyed in their thousands, but have also encouraged among other religious organizations a reprisal spirit which are often coated with acts in self defence. The situation is further complicated with the presumed insensitivity and insincerity of both the northern ruling class and the government in particular to deal impartially and decisively with religious matters (Kukah, 1993; Animasawun, 2012). The aftermath of the whole scenario is a near anarchy and anomie to the extent that an average Nigerian (who tends to be more religious than any nation of the world) suddenly become violent prone.

It is equally important to note that the current security challenges in northern Nigeria caused by Islamic fanatical sect – Boko Haram, is no doubt linked to the dangerous indoctrination that propagate the destruction of others as the right and necessary route to heavenly bliss. Members of Boko Haram for instance, are not out to terminate lives of Muslims who they perceived are believers. Where they do, it is either by accident or such Muslims are accused of supporting the government or governmental agencies such as the Police and the military (Balogun, 2011; Ibrahim, 2011). This explains why bombs are yet to detonate in Mosques after several Churches and security posts have been burnt or destroyed. It can further be argued that the same orientation explains why those accused of either masterminding or sponsoring the Boko Haram activities are still people of same faith with the Boko Haram members(Abubakar, Musa and Garba, 2009; Ibrahim, 2011; Oritsejafor, 2012).

Furthermore, the government and particularly the political class have been accused of politicizing religion in Nigeria. Working particularly under the influence of poverty of political ideas with which to convince the electorate to endorse their candidature, politicians turned the Church and Mosque into means of political articulation for the populace who are grossly discontented for several years of failures and disappointments by the political class (Odoma, 2010). At other times, governmental policies were accused of being skewed toward a particular religion to the detriment of others (Kukah, 1993; Imam, 2004). Thus, in the words of Matthew Kukah, "Nigerians are faced the consequences of the irresponsibility of politicians playing political games with issues as dear to many Nigerians as religion".

The Appraisal of the Concept of Unbeliever

We have earlier noted that religion is purely or ought to be purely a product of personal perception and conviction. It further implies that religion majorly deals with abstract thinking and or could exist as a myth. Cumulatively, it is apt to suggest that every individual in the society may not subscribe to the same religious belief as they may perceive the supernatural in several ways. However, perception is not in most cases static but subject to modification particularly as the environment (physical and social) changes. Impacts of information and communication technology on man have made human perception more fluid than ever. This therefore, means that, individual's religious status (believer or unbeliever) is subject to modification over time. The foregoing suggests why every religious belief continues to notice backsliding of members and harvest of converts from other religions. It is also responsible for religious mediocrity, hypocrisy and proliferation of sects/denominations among adherents. When for instance, the perception and conviction of believer of a faith change from a hitherto cherished belief, his/her commitment to such faith no doubt change in the like manner. This situation breeds commitment or lack of commitment to erstwhile faith. Such persons are bound to develop another interpretation and attitude toward a religious faith earlier held in high esteem.

Moreover, other religious groups may capitalize on this to make converts of such persons. Such situation no doubt breeds conflict, particularly in societies where religious groups are historically jealous of one another. We have had cases of Christian converts from Islam as well as Muslim converts from Christianity for several reasons. Nigerian society is not new to cross carpeting, although, much of it are evident in our political lives, the same is no doubt extended to the religious realm since factors necessitating political cross carpeting could necessitate religious cross carpeting as well. If perception and conviction of adherents are then subject to periodic changes or modifications to the extent that their outward show of religious beliefs and piety are altered over time, then the best way religious groups can keep or expand their membership ought to be by addressing the conscience of members to either keep or jettison the age long religious beliefs and not through violent confrontations and coercion as has been the case with Nigerian citizens and particularly adherents of the two dominant religions – Christianity and Islam in northern Nigeria.

Similarly, if perception and conviction of individual adherents do change over time, it then means that religious status and groups are fluid, they can equally change. It is therefore, totally senseless to embark on the destruction of lives and property of out-group members just because they have chosen at the moment not to accept a faith or are yet to be convinced and or perceive a faith the way we would probably want them. Since there is the probability of repenting to adopt a new faith, persuasion, appeal and tact remains the best option. After all, it is only the living that repents and gets converted. Again, there is a greater possibility of enlargement of religious groups if their supposed antagonists live on, than when they are dead or destroyed. We have had instances of arc-persecutors of a faith becoming the lead propagators of the faith they have once hated most in the past.

Finally, it is important to note that when people are coerced or threatened into accepting a religious faith against their conscience, there is the tendency that they may not imbibe the basis of such faith, but rather end-up as mediocre and hypocrites, not really knowing why they must act in a particular way and not the other. This has led to in-fighting among religious groups and denominations as well as the proliferation of sects in multicultural societies like Nigeria. Therefore, continuous appeal and dogged display of genuine piety will rather do what coercion, hatred and threat will not.

The Destination of Beliefs

Why do people ever try to be religious, why must one belong to a religious group, why must one accept to defer pleasures of today till tomorrow that they cannot predict for the sake of religion and why do people make converts and prevail on others to belong to their religious faith? These are some of the questions that are of great importance to scholars of society and Sociologists in particular. Answers to these questions show the basis of religion and by extension the expected destination of religious beliefs. As noted earlier, two critical issues are involved in religion of whatever form. That is the belief in the supernatural being that must be revered and worshiped, since one hope to spend eternity with him. The other issue we have also established is that, religion in whichever way is a group practice. Eternity or everlasting living with the supernatural being create the spirit of resilience, patience and hope in adherents so that they can enjoy a blissful life at least in the life to come if not in this present life time. Since religion is a group affair, people we love so much such as our family members, relations, classmates, acquaintances, etc must be encouraged to join us in this expectation of eternity of bliss in paradise. If life in paradise is for eternity, the joy and riches of this temporal life can be sacrificed for the life expected to be spent in eternity. Therefore, eternity of bliss with God is preached with vigor by many religious groups to be the ultimate purpose of obedience, resilience, perseverance, conversion and godliness that most religions preach. It is therefore, argued that people are encouraged to be converted from their old ways to belong to a faith that could guarantee their salvation before they die, if they don't, they will miss eternity in paradise. This explains why every religion preaches conversion and repentance before the 'temporal death'. Non converts or unbelievers are believed to be heading for 'permanent death' in eternity.

However, if people who do not repent before they die will resurrect into the condemnation of the supernatural (God) or miss blissful eternity, then those who in their zeal to make converts ends up killing their neighbours or their perceived enemies, who they ought to convert, need to re-examine their steps, because it is dangerous. Therefore, for such persons to miss the same paradise because we (supposed converter) were not patient enough to allow them see reasons to convert or allow them understand what it means to be converted amount to plunging them into the same eternal danger we claim to protect them from. Except there are different reasons for killing and maiming others, those who embark on religious wars and killings, should regret their actions as rather than aiding people to paradise, they send them to hell they would probably have avoided, had they lived to be converted. This perception should act as a discouragement to some of us that intend to destroy and kill others to rather seek to save lives.

Again, if the lives of humans are so precious in the sight of the supernatural to the extent that he would want them spend eternity with him in paradise, would the same supernatural be happy that the same people die in their untransformed state wherein they may not make the eternity? My candid view is that, those who take the lives of others

all in the name of doing service to God as a religious virtue (Kukah, 1993; Imam, 2004) are no doubt involved in unpardonable error.

On the whole, the religion that preaches blissful life hereafter should be able to show or exemplify similar lifestyle here on earth. If indeed God love mankind and will be pleased that men live joyful life with him, his worship here on earth should be able to show us the route to peace. We should be able to see the picture of paradise right on earth, if not, religion will create disillusionment and doubt in many. Most religions particularly Islam and Christianity preach peace, but the same has caused pains and loss of millions of lives and property through outright hatred instead of love that they preach (Abimboye, 2009). If avoidable destructions continue unabated among these religions, it is either they don't know what they profess or that they negate what they preach. Hence rather than encouraging people into paradise, they discourage same.

In the same vein, one of the functions of religion to the society is that it allays the fears of the adherents. This is made possible, as through religion man is able to provide answers and succor to some life threatening problems that science cannot explain. Chief among these problems are the issues of death and failure after one has done everything to succeed but experience spiritual and psychological challenges. It is therefore, safe to suggest that perceived problems ought to get their solutions in religion. This has always been the hope of religious Nigerians. The consistent violent religious conflicts particularly in the north (Bamaguje, 2001; Ibrahim, 2012) will rather create doubt and dissatisfaction and further generate problems than solutions to myriad security challenges facing over 160 million Nigerians.

Again, religion through its ability to unite a people into single moral community has the propensity to midwife economic growth and development. This is achievable if it is able to create moral order in a people. But because religion has failed to perform this role to Nigerians, the country has been described by scholars as one of the most unsafe states of the world (Human Right Watch, 2005). This assertion may not be out of place as virtually all the six geo-political zones of Nigeria have had their share of violent clashes that have claimed several lives and unquantifiable personal and public properties in recent times (Albert, 2012).

Religious Practice in Nigeria

Nigeria is both multi-ethnic and multi-religious state (Ayantayo, 2010). To give a sense of belonging to all the citizens, the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 Cap 3, Section 38(1) permits every Nigerian to belong to and practice any religion of their choice unhindered. This has enhanced the adoption and practice of several religions by the citizens to the extent that, the nation is considered as the most religious nation of the world. For instance, a study conducted by the BBC News (2004) showed that Nigeria leads the world in religious beliefs. It is further stressed that over 90% of Nigerian population said they believed in God, prayed to God regularly and would die for their belief if it becomes necessary.

However, a careful observer of a 'religious Nigeria' will notice that religious lives of most citizens including the clergy are overtaken by hypocrisy, deceit, narrow mindedness, ignorance and mediocrity (Akinola, 2011). This position is no doubt responsible for repeated violent religious crises that have become the defining characteristic of the most populous nation of the continent of Africa. Although, religious dialogue has been prescribed and experimented several times in Nigeria (Ayantayo, 2010), deceit and hypocrisy of adherents of the two dominant religions and the political class has made religious intolerance an incurable disease. Religious hypocrisy and mediocrity of Nigerians can be discussed thus: hypocrisy of peace, of filthiness of adherents of other religion, and of tolerance.

Hypocrisy of Peace

No violent conflict had done monumental damage to the peace, unity, development and our nationhood as religious conflicts that span over five decades of our nationhood. Surprisingly, virtually all of these crises occurred or were masterminded by adherents of the two alien but dominant religions that preach peace – Christianity and Islam. The duo has always claimed that they are religions of peace and have often supported this claim with verses from their most hallowed books (Holy Bible and Holy Quran). Ironically, these groups have through the practice of their faith instigated violent conflicts that have exposed over 160 million Nigerians to gross insecurity, losses, pains and chaos for over 50 years (Abimboye, 2009). Yet, there is no end in sight to the nightmare orchestrated by these bodies as the prevailing Boko Haram insurgency attests. It is therefore, hypocrisy and deceit of the highest order for adherents of such religions to make one believe that they are peace loving, after millions of the citizens have become homeless, orphans, widows and widowers due the practice of such religions.

Hypocrisy of Filthiness of Adherents of other Faith

This is a form of hypocrisy that is at the heart of religious crises in Nigeria particularly in the northern states. The claim to holiness by adherents of some religious faiths, while non adherents are considered profane or filthy is intricately linked to the believer and unbeliever dichotomy noted earlier in this work (Bamaguje, 2001). The implication of the perception of holy and profane citizens is that, he/she that is holy has nothing to do with the profane and infidel. In fact, any relationship with the group considered filthy is believed to pollute the self-acclaimed holiness of persons/groups. A careful review of this perception no doubt reveals hypocrisy of the highest order among some religious groups in Nigeria. The personal experience of the author of this piece will provide elucidation in this regard. During a Christmas celebration, a group of Christians co-habiting with Muslims contributed and bought a live cow which they slaughtered and divided among themselves. But since his own share was more than he needed, he decided to share with neighbours (some of whom were northern Muslims). To his utmost surprise, some Muslim neighbours rejected the gesture on the condition that they can only eat cow slaughtered by co-Muslims (Mallams). The interpretation is that, the cow was not slaughtered by persons considered by them as holy, but by filthy unbelievers. Those who were not courageous enough to speak out their minds, quietly collected such gift only to discard them at refuge dumps, because they only eat food prepared by people of own faith whom they considered holy. This behaviour that is endemic in the northern Nigeria is to

me born out of hypocrisy or outright display of religious mediocrity, especially when we consider other aspects of social relation among these same people.

For instance, in businesses and commercial activities, such discriminatory practices are not experienced. Business ventures owned by core northern Muslims employ non-Muslims to work for them in different capacities. The same is experienced in the south where affluent individuals (non-Muslims) recruit Muslims from the north as security guards (Mallams), in fact, some Churches do. In the same vein, it is a common sight to find northern beggars who are in the majority of the total population of destitute in Nigeria, asking for alms from non-Muslims (Christians), at times on Sundays from worshippers in Churches after service. In all these instances, the services of non-adherents are not rejected neither is their money considered filthy to be used, they don't kill them either. The question that we must ask here is that, is it possible to define someone profane, dirty, infidel and at the same time see nothing wrong with their substance, services and money? Shouldn't the proceeds be as dirty as the source? Surprisingly, it is not the case; it is only in the practice of religion that we create different definitions for people, so that we can justify their destruction. This no doubt, amount to religious hypocrisy which has often instigated violent religious conflicts in northern Nigeria for over five decades.

Hypocrisy of Tolerance

Religious intolerance is evident in the multi-religious Nigerian state for decades (Kukah, 1993; Abimboye, 2009; Adi, 2012). Most of the cases of intolerance have consistently been between adherents of Islam and Christianity in the northern Nigeria. These crises notwithstanding, the two religious organizations have always advocated tolerance. If these religions claim they are vanguards of love and tolerance and are at the same time closely associated with over five decades of religious violence and religious motivated killings in Nigeria, then it would not be wrong to clad them as hypocrites. The mode of proselyting has been implicated in the recurrent violent and destructive clashes in northern Nigeria in recent times (Bamaguje, 2001). For instance, the famous Usman Danfodio led Jihad (Holy War) of the 17th Century in Nigeria, wherein the propagation of Islamic faith was basically through wars and violent overthrow of the erstwhile indigenous religions, bear eloquent witness (Crampton, 1975; Bamaguje, 2001). In the same vein, the perception among some categories of Muslims that taking the lives of others in an attempt to convert them or that dying as a martyr for Islamic faith, provides one with unhindered access to blissful Paradise (Imam, 2004), negates the peaceful disposition or claims and co-habitation of the religion. Furthermore, the common practice of outright condemnation of beliefs by adherents of other religions in a loudly projected open-air gatherings and crusades exposes the two religious faiths to violence. This has manifested several times in northern Nigeria over the years (Kukah, 1994). The duo is guilty of this allegation. Whatever perceived virtue in any religion should be left to individual's opinion and or perception, if religion must be practiced in the atmosphere of peace and if the religions seek to unify rather than destroy the society.

Perhaps, the only cheering experience is in the southern Nigeria particularly the south-western part, where members of a family can freely choose to belong to any of the two religions without any form of molestation (Salami and Akeem, 2012). If the experience of the south-west can be replicated and or emulated by other parts, Nigeria will certainly become the toast of the entire world. Religious tolerance in the south-west manifests even among the political elites. This has solidly laid the foundation of political decorum in the zone. Mention can be made of states such as Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, and Edo states where the Chief Executives are Muslims, yet, are married to Christian spouses. These individuals are 'at home' in Mosques as they are in Churches and other places of worship and prayer grounds. For instance, Governor Isiaka Ajimobi of Oyo State (a Muslim married to a Christian) was not only comfortable in Christian gatherings, but played active role in the dedication of Dominion City of Living Spring Chapel on 30 November, 2013 in Ibadan. Persistent appeals and show of love has been the route to propagating faith in the south-western Nigeria. The exemplary lives of these public figures have no doubt robbed on their subjects whose homes are equally a mixture of the two religions and yet have lived happily for years. When such people and zone condemn religious killings elsewhere, you can be sure of their objectivity. In fact, Mr. Labran Maku – the Minister of Information could not hide his admiration of religious tolerance of the south-western people, when he encouraged northern Nigerian citizens to emulate them. In the same vein, Salami and Akeem (2012) lauds the South west for their religious tolerance. It is only the south-west (the zone that produced the Secretary General of the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs) that has made Nigerians to feel that there can be religious tolerance in Nigeria. The same cannot be said of the northern Nigeria wherein thousands of people and property have been killed and destroyed in violent religious clashes which have affected virtually every states of the north in the recent past (Kukah, 1993; Imam, 2004; Abimboye, 2009; Adi, 2012).

The greatest challenge to peaceful cohabitation of religious groups in northern Nigeria is no doubt the method of proselyting and orientation of Muslims. As exemplified in the strategy of Ustman Danfodio, Islam is better propagated through jihads and aggressive evangelism. In the same vein, Islam hardly condone bedfellow (Bamaguje, 2001). Crampton (1975:129) presents the repulsion of other religions (Christianity) to the extent of excommunicating and assassinating non-adherents. More so, the belief and indoctrination of adherents that the best and quickest route to paradise is by dying in the attack and or killing non-adherents through jihad makes the northern Nigeria that is predominantly a Muslim enclave vulnerable to violence (Bamaguje, 2001; Imam, 2004; Ibrahim, 2011). Considering the foregoing, it amount to religious hypocrisy to profess Islam as a tolerant, accommodative and all embracing religion, especially as its adherents from the northern Nigeria hardly practice what they preach.

Conclusion

Religious practice is an aspect of a people's culture that should aid good moral conduct as a foundation for social control and development of the society. Religious practice encourages social solidarity, cohesion and bonding of a people, but if not carefully managed can be a source of disintegration and destabilization (Onwuejeogwu, 1992) as has been the case of Nigeria for the past four to five decades.

Several scholars and opinion leaders have argued that the amalgamation of culturally distinctive nations into an entity called Nigeria in 1914 was a political blunder of the colonial Britain (Fawehinmi, 2000; Appolos, 2012). Whether or not that assertion is correct is not necessarily the issue at the moment. What is of utmost importance is that, if such error in political arrangement cannot and has not been corrected hundred years after, it suggests that we have in principle accepted the arrangement of our erstwhile colonial master. By extension, we have no other option but to respect and honour our distinctive cultural differences and see how we can explore and utilize the social solidarity virtue of religion than its divisive tendencies that we have for long advocated to our peril as a people (Abimboye, 2009; Adi, 2012).

Islam and Christianity are two separate religions having large followership and similar objectives in Nigeria – wishing that many Nigerian as possible be converted to their beliefs. This expectation to my mind is achievable if patience, sincerity, persistency, diplomacy and advocacy are used rather than violence and aggression to convert non-adherents. If only these religions practice their piety in sincerity, there will be no reason for obsession of losing converts to the other. It is not until we kill that we convert others. If we destroy and kill before we have the opportunity to convert ‘unbelievers’, we certainly would have sent them to hell that we ourselves abhor. Furthermore, prophet Mohammed and Jesus who are believed by adherents of these religions as both leaders and mentors, had in their days lived among people who did not only turn deaf ears to their teachings, but hated them. There are no records that they hated or killed anyone in their days for failure to accept their views, but through their piety, they impacted positively on their generations to the extent that we are proud of them today. If these same persons are the leaders of these religions, and if their teachings and life styles are supposed to be the guiding principles for the religions, then the present followers have no doubt strayed from the ideals of these religions. The best is for them to urgently retrace their steps.

Multi-cultural nations that are able to accommodate one another have turned out to enrich themselves culturally and thus are able to develop their society. We have destroyed ourselves for too long, our horrible past should teach us to rethink and retrace our steps which will usher-in development and economic growth. The peace and stability that Nigeria need are not negotiable, particularly as the nation is believed to be the giant of Africa, the most populous nation of black race, geostrategic player and geopolitical pivot in Africa (Kolapo, 2009). The implication of uncontrolled religious violence in Nigeria is no doubt grave, as the development of other nations of Africa particularly in meeting the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are linked in one way or the other to the peace and development of Nigeria (Odoma, 2011a). Therefore, all stakeholders in the Nigeria project must endeavour to be proactive in ensuring that they nab future conflicts in the bud.

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