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THE RELEVANCE OF INTERFAITH ENGAGEMENTS IN RESOLVING RELIGIOUS-BASED CONFLICTS IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper investigates the nature and character of religious conflicts in Northern Nigeria with a focus on the relevance of interfaith engagements in resolving them. Using primary and secondary data and analyzing it within the arguments of pluralism, the paper discovered that, the fear of domination, the politicization of religion, bad governance and the citizenship questions are central to the conflicts in the area. The paper also discovered that there will be no peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions. The paper, therefore, recommend among other strategies of fruitful interfaith engagement in resolving these conflicts good governance that will improve the livelihood of the people without religious affiliation. This will make people to separate religion from governance. The citizenship questions should also be removed from political resource allocation, this will reduce the fear of domination which is a critical trigger of the conflict and collaborate approach to governance that will involve members of all faith.

Key Words: Religion, Conflict, Interfaith, Peace, Northern Nigeria

Introduction

Nigeria, the biggest and most heterogeneous black nation on earth, is home to adherents of different religions; Christianity, Islam and indigenous traditional worshippers. However, Islam and Christianity are the most dominant. Islam had an early history dating back to the 9th century AD after the Jihad of Uthman dan Fodio in 1804 while Christianity was established following the arrival of Christian missionaries. Religion in Nigeria is serious business as most adherents are 'die-hards' who would fight for their gods in the face of provocation with the tendency for other followers to see their own religion as the 'true religion' which they hold in high esteem while other religion is treated with contempt. This situation is one

of the reasons the country has continued to experience religious conflicts. The country, with a population of over 180 million people, is almost half Christians and half Muslims, aside other religions (Paden, 2008; Schwartz, 2010) and by virtue of its complex web of politically salient identities and history of chronic and seemingly intractable conflicts and instability, Nigeria can be rightly described as one of the most deeply divided states in Africa (Osaghae and Suberu, 2005).

Religious diversity and conflict owing to regular intolerances and suspicions has for a long time been a matter of lived reality in communities in northern Nigeria - and as long as these traditions and practices of intolerance and suspicions are not counteracted, social cohesion and development in northern societies will continue to be endangered. Religion makes a significant contribution to the well-being of societies because it is a unifying factor but at the same time, it is clear that religion, because of narrow-mindedness, misunderstanding, fundamentalism, or fanaticism of adherents, may also block social progress and the breakdown of social order. Thus, tolerance is widely regarded as an indispensable commonly shared value for assuring the cohesion of plural societies. For communities in northern Nigeria, the rivalry between religious groups have profoundly affected the social and political lives of its people (Salifu, 2014).

There are many examples in Northern Nigeria where Muslims have turned against Christians and Christians turning against Muslims in episodes of bloodletting and the destruction property. Society scholars agree that religious conflicts are the most challenging of conflicts to manage and to resolve because religion deals with the belief and the emotions of people/adherents. To find answers, it is instructive to ask the following questions: why is it that the most bloodied of religious conflicts in Nigeria (between Christians and Muslims) always takes place in Northern Nigeria? Why is there tolerance, unity and self-respect between Christians and Muslims in Southern Nigeria and rarely in Northern Nigeria – because in the South, it is common to find adherents of both religions cohabiting peacefully within families and communities? In the Southwest, for example, it is not uncommon to see a Muslim man marrying a Christian woman (or a Christian man marrying a Muslim woman) and their children freely allowed to choose the religion they want to practice, but this is rarely possible in the North. What then is responsible for religious intolerance and fierce/violent divisions between Christians and Muslims in Northern Nigeria? How can regular interfaith engagement help in resolving religious conflicts in Northern Nigeria? This work examines religious conflicts in northern Nigeria and demonstrates how periodic interfaith engagements (dialoguing) between Christians and Muslims can help in resolving them.

Clarification of Concepts

Four concepts; religion, conflict, peace and interfaith engagement, were extensively used. Therefore, it is necessary to conceptualize these concepts so as

to make them clear for the reader to easily understand because not everyone is familiar with the jargons and arguments of the Social Science. This follows the advice the literary scholar, Lionel Trilling, once gave to the sociologist, C. Wright Mills. Trilling explained that:

You are to assume that you have been asked to give a lecture on some subject you know well, before an audience of teachers and students from all departments of a leading university... Assume that such an audience is before you and they have a right to know; assume that you want to let them know (Mills, 1959:p221 in Tsuwa and Otsapa, 2014:p40).

First, we begin by clarifying the concept of religion, then conflict, peace and interfaith engagement.

Religion

The English word religion is derived from a Latin noun *Religio* and a Latin verb *Religare* meaning to bind – and refers to the state of affairs in which obligations bind a worshipper to his deity. The main ingredients of all religions in the world are belief and prayer. All religions believe and pray to a supreme being – this is what attaches emotions to religion such that we need to handle them with utmost carefulness. Elaigwu (2005) argues that to some people, religion is seen from an ideological coloration to the extent that it provides a guide for faith, action and evaluation of private and public life and for others, it guides only their private life. Karl Marx in Ian Roberstone describes religion as the opium of the masses and as the soul of the soulless circumstances (Roberstone, 1977). This perspective sees religion as a drug that intoxicates adherents/followers.

Emile Durkheim in Schuefer and Lamm (1982) defines religion as a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things that are set apart or forbidden. However, the definition of religion by Salifu (2014) will be used as the working definition for this work. He defined religion as “a set of beliefs and practices based on faith which are sacred and defy rational scrutiny” (Salifu, 2014:p37). Some of the world’s leading religions are Africanism, Bahaism, Babism, Christianity, Buddahism, Shintoism, Zoroastrianism, Confucianism, Judaism, Hinduism, Islam, Taoism, Jainism and Eckankar.

Conflict

It is important to immediately clarify that conflict is a natural phenomenon because disputes, claims, contestations over resources, values and wealth are part and parcel of human interaction (Tsuwa, 2014). The concept, like others, is broad and diverse and as such there are different and divergent opinions and views about what conflict means. Stanger (1967:p41) defines conflict as:

A situation in which two or more human beings desire goals which they perceive as being obtainable by one or the other but not both. Each party is mobilizing energy to obtain a goal, a desired object or situation and each perceives the other as a barrier or threat to that goal.

This means that conflict occurs when two or more individuals or groups are in contention over a particular resource that both or all of them cannot own. Wright in Tsuwa (2014:p62) views conflict as "opposition among social entities directed against one another". To Best (2007) conflict occurs when one party perceives the action of another party as blocking the opportunity for the attainment of a goal. From these definitions, it is easy for the uninitiated to see that conflict is mainly about needs, interests and goals which are scarce and are often fiercely competed for by different individuals and groups in society. Importantly, we must again emphasize that conflict/disagreements in itself is not a bad phenomenon – except when it becomes violent.

Peace

Peace, as with most concepts in the Social Sciences, has proven difficult to define and this is perhaps because it has rhetorical uses for political leaders who benefit from the ambiguity of the term (Cuzzort, 1989) and which, according to Ikejiani-Clark and Ani (2009), is one of humanities' highest values. This ambiguity notwithstanding, most scholars who try to define peace incorporate the definition given by Ishida (1969). Psychologically, and according to Tsuwa and Otsapa (2014), peace is the state of mind where an individual or a group of people enjoy harmony and balance. On his part, Johnson (1979) looked at peace from a global perspective, and defined peace by categorizing it under three theoretical categories: peace as a world without war; peace as world justice; and peace as world order.

Ibeanu (2006) noted that there is a tendency to see peace as the opposite of war. That is, peace is the absence of war and war is the absence of peace. He however counseled that this notion of peace is inadequate because it is not applicable to situations of structural violence. Societies with social constraints such as poverty, deprivations, fear, oppression, unemployment, etc. may not be experiencing war but it certainly would not be peaceful. In other words, it would be wrong to assume that there is peace in a society where there is large scale poverty, unemployment, want and oppression. As operated in this article, peace is simply defined is a condition where there is the absence of war and where the basic needs of citizens are met.

Interfaith Engagement

This refers to cooperative, constructive and positive interactions between people of different faiths (religions) at both the individual and institutional levels. It refers to interaction between different faith groups and in this case, interaction between Christians and Muslims. Interfaith engagements involves promoting understanding and tolerance between adherents/followers of different religions or beliefs so as to increase the recognition and the respect of these religions by adherents of other religions.

The history of interfaith engagement is as ancient as religion itself. When not at war with their neighbors, human beings have made an effort to understand them (not least because understanding is a strategy for defense, but also because for as long as there is constant engagement, wars are delayed and history has recorded instances of interfaith engagements that dates back to many centuries ago. For example, Emperor Akbar the Great encouraged tolerance in Mughal India; which is a diverse nation with people of various faith backgrounds including Islam; Hinduism, Sikhism, and Christianity. Another example of ancient interfaith engagement is the case of the *Disputation of Barcelona* between Jews and Christians in 1263 when the apostate Paulus Christiani proposed to King James I of Aragon that he allows a formal public religious disputation on the fundamentals of both faiths to be held between him and Moses B. Nahman - so that adherents of both religions would have a better understanding of the other religion, as a way to stopping the hostilities between Jews and Christians.

The main argument of interfaith engagement is that it promotes religious tolerance, encourages understanding, trust and unity between and among religions and builds peace.

The People of Northern Nigeria

Despite its monolithic appearance, the North has been the home of three distinct religious groups; Christians, Muslims and Pagans (Salifu, 2014). Bala (1987) and Paden (1986) in Salifu (2014) explained that these three groups are made up of hundreds of linguistic and ethnic groups with attendant conflicting historical past. Although different languages with different dialects can be found in the north, the Hausa language is the most common language among the people of the region – with an exception of some communities in the Middle Belt areas of the north.

The Hausa-Fulani, the main ethnic group in Northern Nigeria who are predominantly Muslims, can be found and are in the majority in the North-western states of Zamfara, Sokoto, Kebbi, Kano, Jigawa, Katsina and (Northern) Kaduna while minority ethnic groups like the Idoma, Igala, Jukun, Tiv, Berom, Afizere, Atyap (Katap), Eggon, etc. are predominantly Christians and occupy the North-central states of Benue, Niger, Plateau, Nassarawa, Taraba, Kogi, Kwara and (Southern) Kaduna. The Kanuri and Shuwa-Arab ethnic groups are predominantly Muslims are found in the North-eastern states of Borno, Bauchi, Yobe, Adamawa

and Gombe. According to Salifu (2014) among all of these groups, the Hausa-Fulani had the most organized and centralized system of government administered under Islamic doctrines. Takaya (1992) gave a narration of how Islam, introduced after the 1804–1857 Jihad, became a state religion at the time. Takaya explained it thus:

....the Fulani Jihad of Danfodio which started in 1804 succeeded in overthrowing most of the Hausa kings and replacing them with Fulani led administration. By 1859, emirate systems of government had been established over the hitherto practically Islamized communities of the plains and non-forest areas of present-day Northern states of Nigeria.... Native communities, which hitherto had minimal or no contacts with Islam, particularly those located in the accessible forests, Plateau and hilly surrounding, however remained outside the emirates; the areas being impregnable to the invading Fulani cavalry. Hence they remained hostile and independent until the advent of British colonialism and indirect rule (Takaya in Salifu, 2014:36).

The seed of religious conflict in northern Nigeria was planted when the areas not conquered by the 1804 Sheikh Uthman dan Fodio led Jihad, having embraced Christianity instead of Islam, became hostile to Islam and resisted its spread and dominance in their areas. This naturally divided the former Northern Region into a Muslim-North (dominated by the Hausa/Fulani) and a Christian-North (dominated by non-Hausa/Fulani).

Overview of Religious Conflicts in Northern Nigeria

Religious conflicts in Northern Nigeria reared its ugly head with the coming of colonialism and Christianity into what is present-day Nigeria. Before colonialism and Christianity, indigenous communities in Northern Nigeria experienced relative peace as Islam, the dominant religion following the Sheikh Usman dan Fodio-led jihad that displaced the pagan governments, existed side by side with the different traditional religions, especially in areas unaffected by the Jihad. Machava (2008) linked the roots of religious and other identity conflicts in Nigeria to colonialism and the Cold War. The British imperialists, in 1914, decided to 'marry' the indigenous peoples of present day Nigeria without recourse to their different religions (and different ethnicities) and this is one of the root causes of religious conflicts in northern Nigeria. On the other hand, some scholars see religious conflicts in Nigeria as rooted in bad governance, politicization of ethnic and religious identities, competition and conflict for political power by ethnic and religious communities (Anafi, 2004; Conversi, 1999).

Kastfelt (1994) explained that the rivalry between Muslims and Christians started because Muslims sought to dominate the entire Northern Region, an attempt that was stoutly resisted particularly by minority ethnic groups like the Tiv, Igala, Idoma, Berom, and Jukun in the Middle Belt, presently called North-central, who had embraced Christianity. Along with them are other minority ethnic groups like the Atyap, Jaba, Kanuri, etc. who had also embraced Christianity but who lived in the core north, the present-day North-east and North-west. It is important to note that religion became politicized in the 1950s during the period of decolonization in the Middle Belt, when political conflicts were formulated primarily out of religious terms with the Christian minority fighting to maintain their independence from the dominating Hausa/Fulani Muslim hegemony. Also, religious conflicts in northern Nigeria usually takes the form of ethnic division because they are mainly between the Muslim Hausa/Fulani on one hand and minority Christian tribes; Tiv, Berom, Jaba, Jukun, Atyap, Idoma, etc., on the other.

But Egwu (2001) is of the opinion that what people call religious conflicts in Northern Nigeria, especially in the last three decades, have little or nothing to do with religion. He believes that these so-called religious conflicts are rather conflicts over lands, market places, chieftaincy titles, political appointments and disagreements over who controls the local economies. The 1992 Zango-Kataf Local Government Area (Kaduna State) conflict between Christians and Muslims is one of the many instances of religious conflicts that mirrored Egwu's argument. Zango town is a modest and principally Hausa-Fulani town ringed by ethnic Atyap farming communities. The Atyap (also known as Kataf) are predominantly Christians while Zango town's Hausa-Fulani are for the most part Muslims. The root of the conflict was planted when the Chairman of the Local Government, Kataf Babang Ayok; an Atyap Christian, announced his intention to relocate the urban market in the town, which is dominated by Hausa-Fulani Muslim traders, to a new site. The Hausa community in Zango town predictably resisted the relocation of the market claiming that the newly proposed site was a part of the Muslim Annual Eid praying ground.

They also argued that the relocation bid was vindictively orchestrated to hurt their economic position because the Hausa-Fulani group was more enterprising commercially than the indigenes or natives of the town; the Atyaps (Abada, 2009). Consequently, the Hausa-Fulani community sought and obtained a court injunction with accompanying police protection restraining the relocation of the market (Mahmood in Abada, 2009). This notwithstanding, violent conflicts between the two groups began and the Hausa-Fulani community bore the brunt of the fighting as hundreds of Hausa-Fulanis were killed and the town was almost entirely destroyed. News of the violence in Zangon-Kataf sparked clashes in other parts of the state including the state capital, Kaduna where Christians and Muslims (freely) attacked each other (Kazah-Toure, 2003).

Northern Nigeria has witnessed several religious conflicts. Some of these religious conflicts that have consumed the north are:

- i. The Maitatsine conflicts in the 1980s that ravaged most states in the core north;
- ii. The Kano October 1982 clashes when Muslim zealots forced the Anglican Church from expanding its size because they saw it as a threat to a nearby mosque;
- iii. The 1991 violence in Kano over the visit of German evangelist Reinhard Bonnke;
- iv. The June 2002 Yelwa Shendam (Plateau State) mayhem over indigene/settler issue;
- v. The November 2002 Gwantu (Kaduna State) crisis over the relocation of the LGA headquarters;
- vi. The February 2000 conflict over the proposed introduction of Sharia in Kaduna State;
- vii. The March 1987 clashes between Muslims and Christians at the College of Education, Kafanchan (Kaduna State);
- viii. The February 1988 Kaduna Polytechnic student riots over the destruction of the foundation of a chapel;
- ix. The March 1986 Muslim and Christian clashes in Ilorin (Kwara State) during a Christian Easter procession;
- x. The December 2000 Hadejia (Jigawa State) sectarian disturbance caused by a debate between Christians and Muslims;
- xi. The September 2001 violent clashes in Jos (Plateau State) over a political appointment in Jos North LGA;
- xii. The March 2003 Langtang North, Wase and Kanem LGAs (Plateau State) religious conflict;
- xiii. The April 2004 religious protest in Makarfi town (Kaduna State) over alleged desecration of the Qur'an by a Christian teenage boy;
- xiv. The Numan (Adamawa State) June 2004 clashes over the construction of a Mosque over Haman Bachama's palace;
- xv. The November 2002 violent protests by Muslims in Kaduna following a newspaper editorial on the hosting of the Miss World beauty pageant;
- xvi. The September 2000 Kaltungo (Gombe State) religious violence sparked off by the presence of the State Sharia implementation committee;
- xvii. The January 1993 Funtua (Katsina State) crisis when the Kadalakato religious sect assaulted the village head and burnt down a police van, etc.

These conflicts, between Christians and Muslims, have left thousands dead and property worth billions of naira destroyed in the North for which till today, many families and communities have not recovered.

One of the claims for the enthronement of democracy as well as democratic consolidation in Nigeria lies in the fact that as a centripetal force,

democracy is the only institutional arrangement that can guarantee the peaceful resolution or management of ethnic, religious and other identity conflicts (Olayode, 2007). However, Kwaja (2009) noted that in spite of the fanfare that greeted the return of democracy in May 1999, Nigeria has continue to witness resurgence in high level ethnic, religious, communal and citizenship conflicts with devastating consequences. Events since 1999 in the country have revealed that the practice of democracy alone is not a magic wand that would be waved and all forms of religious conflicts would cease.

Relevance of Interfaith Engagement in Resolving Religious Conflicts in Northern Nigeria

Many people who have experienced the effects of religious narrow-mindedness or fundamentalism expressed in religious conflicts in Northern Nigeria may shudder at the idea of any positive contribution of interfaith engagement between Christians and Muslims in resolving this ugly phenomenon. But there are immeasurable benefits of interfaith engagements in resolving religion-based conflicts in northern Nigeria because the power of religion can be used as a major force of unification among Christians and Muslims in the North and hence play an important role in the promotion of peace and reconciliation by bringing these warring groups together in order to establish and maintain constructive channels of communication and sustainable collaboration. Thus, we believe that regular interfaith engagements between Christians and Muslims will foster and promote a culture of love, brotherhood, tolerance, fraternity and togetherness among adherents of both religion. When this is done, religious conflicts in northern Nigeria are bound to cease.

An interfaith engagement, preferably holding once a month, to bring together Christians and Muslims in northern Nigeria would encourage religious tolerance that would allow everyone follow their chosen spiritual and religious path without hindrance, intimidation, harassment, or oppression. This interfaith engagement will bring together adherents of these religions to the table to talk about the differences between their religions and with talking, better understanding, tolerance and respect would be formed. A study of the Bible and the Qur'an would reveal that there are many similarities between Christians and Muslims but disagreements and violence occur when followers consciously or unconsciously twist the teachings to suit their selfish motives, especially for political and economic interests. An interfaith engagement, therefore, will play a vital role in peace-building as it will promote peace by uniting faiths, foster reciprocal understanding, acceptance and tolerance amongst disparate Christian and Muslim communities that will eventually break down the walls of division, suspicions and the barriers that stand at the center of numerous conflicts in Northern Nigeria. The opposite (religious intolerance) is to continue living in a region that has been ravaged by religious-based conflicts, terrorism and civil

disturbances where at the slightest provocation, followers reach for each other's jugulars. An interfaith engagement would build trust among the different religions and after trust has been built, it would lead to dialogue and dialogue leads to the settlement of disputes. But this can only be achieved when Christians and Muslims in the North are tolerant of each other.

When trust has been built through better understanding and respect of the teachings of both religions, Northern Nigeria can begin to enjoy uninterrupted growth and development. The North, particularly the North-west, is the poorest region in Nigeria and the reason for this backwardness is the incessant religious conflicts between Christians and Muslims. When people are constantly in conflict; the type of violent conflict that leaves communities destroyed and thousands of citizens dead, growth and development is difficult to achieve. The reason for this is not farfetched. Growth and development can only take place in a peaceful environment because investors; local and international, would not be afraid to invest in such places. The cities of Kaduna and Kano used to be vibrant metropolitan cities booming with business and trading activities but owing to the series of religious conflicts in these cities (add the Boko Haram terrorism), many individuals and companies have, out of justified fear, moved out of these cities - a situation that has negatively affected the economy of not just these states but the entire north. Thus, interfaith engagements between Christians and Muslims will usher-in an atmosphere of religious peace, trust and cooperation leading to a stable polity which is a prerequisite for sustained economic growth and development. Ilori (2001) in Salifu (2014) agreed that Muslims and Christians in Nigeria must recognize that negative attitude illustrates the gap which exists between the two religions. Both Muslims and Christians in Nigeria must face up to the fact that they come from religiously pluralistic societies where consistent conflicts will only destroy the future of the country, more so because peaceful co-existence is a condition for meeting the urgent needs of their developing societies. Countries like the USA and South Africa are heterogeneous societies like Nigeria but Christians and Muslims live peacefully and putting hands together to build their communities seeing that there is strength in diversity.

Having observed that ignorance is one of the causes of religious intolerance leading to religious conflicts in Nigeria, an interfaith engagement will create opportunities for knowledge sharing among followers of both religions through interactive forums such as workshops, seminars, conferences, etc. A critical target category is the political class that tends to leverage religious differences and turning citizens against one another, for their personal political ends. For example, the year 2000 Sharia crisis in Kaduna State Northwest Nigeria between Muslims and Christians was fueled by politicians when one considers that they failed, through their comments, to douse the tensions that was brewing. Again, while Christians were against the implementation of Sharia in the state, the government, and in total disregard of the wishes of the Christian community, went

ahead to implement it. Hence, the placing of shadow (religion) instead of the object (politics) to win political advantages over opponents should be dropped.

The good thing about Christianity and Islam, and even indigenous traditional religions, is that each preaches peace, fairness, good neighborliness, love, tolerance and honesty - but it is the fanatical and selfish elements among them that instigates and sponsor these conflicts. And as observed in Northern Nigeria, the problem is not with these religions but with the adherents; preachers and followers. For example in Southern Nigeria, particularly in the Southwestern states of Lagos, Ondo, Ekiti, Ogun and Oyo, Christians and Muslims live together in peace and religion is rarely a cause of conflict. But in Northern Nigeria, especially in the Northwest and the Northeast, most of the violence and conflict that occurs have religious colorations because spiritual leaders in the North rarely preach religious tolerance, coexistence and brotherliness. An Interfaith engagement is relevant here as it would regularly encourage spiritual leaders to live exemplary lives that demonstrates tolerance of other religions. Sermons and comments made in churches and mosques by religious leaders have often led to conflict because their followers who see pastors and imams as the mouthpieces of God. However, when followers hear and see their pastors and imams relating friendly with each other, they would almost naturally behave likewise. Thus, when religious leaders meet periodically in interfaith meetings and genuinely discuss in a friendly atmosphere, shake hands and smile, and their followers hear about and see this happen, religious tolerance and mutual-respect between Christians and Muslims would be achieved.

Another relevance of interfaith engagements is that it encourages and creates covenants. Covenantal relationship; whether in Islam, African tradition or Christianity, rests on shared commitment to mutual trust, ideas, values, goals and management of common problems. De Pree once argued that "covenantal relationships reflect unity, grace and poise and are the expression of the sacred nature of relationship". We argue that an interfaith engagement will promote covenantal relationships that enables religious groups to be hospitable to 'unusual' persons because covenants repudiates all conventional modes of social organization that are conflictual, exploitative and hierarchical but favors justice, equity, mercy and reconciliation. Such covenant engagement would thus tolerate risk and forgive errors. Conflicts in Northern Nigeria would be best managed through periodic covenantal interfaith engagements.

Concluding Remarks

This work has demonstrated how regular interfaith engagements between Christians and Muslims can help Nigeria in reducing, if not entirely eradicating, the incidences of religious conflicts in the Northern Nigeria. A regular interfaith engagement between the two major religions in the north; Christianity and Islam, would reduce (and eventually eradicate) mutual-suspicious, mutual-disrespect and

mutual-intolerances between the religions, foster trust, brotherliness and build bridges of togetherness. However, it is important to note that religious conflicts in Northern Nigeria and in Nigeria as a whole are also the manifest reality of the high level of unemployment, poverty, frustrations and deprivations in the Northern and in the country. In a country where unemployment is 23%, people become willing tools in the hands of self-centered, greedy and unpatriotic politicians who use them to cause religious conflicts, particularly when they profit from them.

Recommendations

Resolving religious conflicts and achieving peaceful co-existence between Christians and Muslims in northern Nigeria is possible and periodic and continuous interfaith engagement between leaders and followers of both religions has been identified as one of the measures to be employed. The following are also recommended.

Educating Followers of both Religion

A man's mind is the most important aspect of his being. When a man changes the way he thinks, he ultimately changes his way of life because victory and defeat is won or lost first in the mind. The National Orientation Agency (NOA) and civic education groups in the north must take it as a matter of urgency to continually educate followers of both religion on the need to tolerate each other and the need to live in peace. Recorded messages promoting ideals of brotherliness, religious tolerance, love and unity should be frequently broadcasted through the mass media, especially through radio and television, to the general public. Along this line, academic courses on peace, conflict management and religious tolerance should be introduced to schools from primary to higher levels. This move will catch citizens when they are young and build a new generation of Nigerians who would value and work towards peaceful coexistence between Christians and Muslims, a new generation of citizens who respect, tolerate and love each other.

Separating Religion from Politics

As Egwu (2001) noted, most religious conflicts in northern Nigeria are conflicts over political (and economic) matters, and not actually over religion. Politicians, knowing the emotions attached to religion, fan embers of misunderstanding between Christians and Muslims and use the confusion that follows to achieve their selfish and primitive interests. To resolve religious conflicts in Northern Nigeria, Northern politicians must desist from using religion to cause chaos between Christians and Muslims. Also, Christian and Muslim leaders and preachers must not dabble into and preach about political issues in churches and mosques. Pastors and Imams should focus on the spiritual aspect which they were called by God to do and leave the political calculations and bickering to politicians and their supporters/followers.

Alleviating Poverty and Creating Jobs for Unemployed Youths

One of the many manifestations of poverty and unemployment in northern Nigeria is the ongoing Boko Haram insurgency, especially in the north-eastern states, regarded as the poorest geopolitical region in the country. Poverty and unemployment is one of the major causes of religious conflicts in northern Nigeria where majority of its youths are uneducated and unemployed, and become ready tools in the hands of mischief makers. The devil tempts everybody but the idle man tempts the devil. When able-bodied youths are idle, they tempt the devil who gladly leads them into aggressive behavior. These youths, hiding under the garment of religion, vent their anger and frustrations through riots and violent clashes. The many religious conflicts in northern Nigeria can be resolved and managed when northern youths, who are mainly the foot soldiers during religious conflicts, are gainfully employed and engaged in productive activities that help them meet their basic needs and keep them busy, they are unavailable to be hired by mischief makers. It is therefore instructive that government and other relevant institutions, public and private, design poverty reduction and employment creation schemes that will be inclusive of all identities thus helping to reduce the level and scope of poverty, unemployment and inequality, which are often the real causes for violent religious conflicts.

Addressing the Citizenship/Indigeneship Imbroglia

The 1999 Nigerian Constitution is clearly flawed in its definition on the issues of citizenship and indigeneship. This lacuna has contributed to the many religious conflicts the country and Northern Nigeria is facing and this is because most religious conflicts also wear ethnic colors where different ethnic groups lay claim to particular settlements. It is therefore expedient for these provisions and other relevant provisions to be reconciled through a constitutional reform process that should be undertaken with due consultations with the Nigerian people.

Good Governance

Government plays a key role in the efforts to resolve religious conflicts in Northern Nigeria. Northern leaders in positions of authority and leadership must consciously pursue peace between adherents of both religion and should not be seen or suspected to favor one religion over another. Political office holders should therefore pursue equity and equality between Christians and Muslims in all of their dealings. For example, the governments in states like Kano and Katsina where majority of its people are Muslims, should not marginalize the Christians among them and in states like Plateau and Benue where Christians are the majority, the Muslims among them should be carried along, particularly in matters that concerns them. When governments openly pursue justice, equity, equality and fairness among Christians and Muslims, violent religious conflicts would rarely occur. When good governance is in place, democratic ethos are institutionalized and they would help in promoting peaceful coexistence among religions in north.

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