

RELIGIOUS UNDERSTANDING AND RESPECT: A PREREQUISITE TO MEANINGFUL INTER - RELIGIOUS INTERACTION

Ogirima, Nuhu

Abstract

The paper attempts to redefine the approach to solving the seemingly intractable inter - religious crises in our society. The approach canvassed is principally socio-psychological. By this, the paper identifies and posits that religious understanding and respect is important, in the context of adherents changing perception of the concept of religion, to religious interactions necessary for fostering peaceful co-existence in a multi-religious society.

Introduction

Considerable literature has emanated from efforts at checking the incessant inter-religious conflicts witnessed since the mid 1970s, and the subsequent violent confrontations particularly in the 1980s. While successive governments has evolved measures to stem the tide, it is obvious that life in our contemporary society is yet characterized by consternation and fear because of the volatile environment, which readily ignites such crises. It could be contended, however, that these crises are in effect, extraneous to the religions themselves since scriptural provisions of the two main antagonists -Christianity and Islam - lay claim to the need for peaceful coexistence. In fact, adherents too often preach this idea. If that is the case, then, there does seem a conceptual misunderstanding of religion by adherents from its real and ideal sense.

Whereas efforts have been geared towards such measures as inter religious dialogue (Mala, 1984: 244, Ubaka, 2002: 5), much has not been realized in terms of the peaceful coexistence envisaged thereof. Of course this is quite evident in the recurrence of the crisis with the attendant consequences especially, insecurity and wanton destruction of lives and property, which is often of unimaginable proportion (Ogirima, 2001: 2-5). This had sought to question the potency and effectiveness of dialogue as an approach to solving this seemingly intractable problem. Critically examined, inter religious dialogue may not be entirely irrelevant but there is, obviously, the absence of certain necessary prerequisite for any religious interaction to achieve meaningful result. It is on this premise that this discussion takes bearing.

The paper makes a case for religious understanding and respect as necessary prerequisite to religious interaction for peaceful coexistence of the adherents of different religions 'in a multi religious society. The basis for this is encapsulated on the awareness of not only the contentious issues of theological differences but also the striking areas of similarities in the divine religions, in the context of our immediate environment, Christianity and Islam. Interestingly, the discussion focuses on the perceptions or viewpoints of the two religions on the approach being canvassed.

Conceptual Definition

Understanding, as a concept, has been defined as "realizing other person's feelings or points of view... The power of clear thinking ... (or the) capacity for sympathizing, seeing from another's point of view... but rarely in agreement... (Hornby, 1995: 1299). The term has also been defined as " the ability to have a sympathetic grasp of another person's point of view without necessarily agreeing with it" (Osume, 1988:304).

From the definitions of the concept of respect, it is obvious that it presupposes esteem, honor; and some sort of politeness. Again, Hornby notes that respect for something or somebody is "the feeling of admiration for (it) because of their good qualities or achievement". Also, he says, it signifies "polite behavior resulting from this" (p.999). Invariably, respect for something can be said to mean having a careful consideration of that thing in a polite manner.

The definitions of understanding provided suggest that it should entail some sort of objectivity, especially in relation to the issue of religion. One can better grasp the implication of this, considering the fact that objectivity in religious assessment creates open mindedness and the possibility of seeing the good side of other religions. Indeed, it paves way for the suppression of one's emotions without being unfaithful to one's religion (Ayantayo, 2002:9).

Furthermore, the realm of understanding can be clearly understood as of the cognitive domain and not, according to Osumu (1988) "in the avowal of faith" (p.304). For a clearer understanding of this submission, the assertion that it is "absolutely possible for a person to understand thoroughly a faith Other than his own just as a person may understand another language better than it's native speaker" (Wanbutdain Osumu, 1988:304) is a credible reference. In other words, understanding and respect for a thing does not suggest its acceptance. Rather, it creates an avenue for not only a proper assessment but also an insight into the why and how of such thing.

Religious understanding and respect especially in the context of this discussion, can therefore, be seen as having to do with knowing another religion; its doctrines, and belief systems, its peculiarities and similarities with others with a view to relating well with the adherents without compromising one's faith. This should necessarily lead to religious freedom, which the constitutions of most multi-religious and secular states advocate.

Basics, for Religious Understanding and Respect

The religious crises witnessed hitherto has reflected the Christian - Muslim hostility in spite of the fact that both trace, like Jewish orthodoxy, their origins to the patriarch, Prophet Ibrahim (Biblical Abraham) (Quran 3:68). Also, Dopamu (1984:209) notes, inter alia, that "scholars found astonishing areas of similarities; both claim inspiration and revelation, divine messenger ship of some people, scriptural doctrine, unity of God etc". Although this submission is a general surface perception, it could be contended that an in-depth comparison of the provisions of the religions on these issues would reveal considerable differences. In matters of detail on the unity of God, for example, orthodox Islam upholds an indissoluble unity of God as against the unity of Godhead in three propounded by Christianity. Similarly, the issue of prophet hood may be common but the intricacies in the perception of adherents of the religions are quite enormous.

Apart from the fore-going, the vast literature available on the subject of religious crises panacea has placed us in good stead to be able to assess such contentious issues as particularity, fanaticism, bigotry and even the Shariah debate which emanated in the 1970s and which, converse!), has become popularized by the antagonism of Christian fundamentalism (Clarke, 199:219).

In an age in which religious bigotry, commercialism and fanaticism have assumed leadership of the ethics of the religions themselves, objective analysts have had to grapple with these problem? through more formal ways in the form of seminars and workshops, with inter religious dialogue predominating (Mala, 1984:255). It is the contention of this paper that these formal gatherings, though helpful, need to be refocused at zealots who emphasize religious particularity as means of salvation while the often controversial preaching sessions on commercial slots of the teeming gospel (Christian religious) preachers are redirected towards mass enlightenment on need for inter religious understanding and respect. This becomes imperative given the reminder to Christians by the Second Vatican Council that: "The Church... urges her sons to enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions (Borman in Ubaka, 2002:5). This assertion is, without prejudice, predicated on the fact that more often than not, it is Christendom that seeks to oppose or question the very existence of the Islamic faith hence the consequent crises. Of significant relevance in this context are the submissions of Nzeribe (1988:14-15), Clarke (1991:219): and Muhammed (2005:48) to mention just a few.

Furthermore, orthodox Islam encourages believers into meaningful discussion with people of the scripture especially on areas of basic common theology (the Unity of God) and to maintain peace even in the event of non- acceptance of the overture by them (Quran, 3:64 in Khan, 1995). The provision to be steadfast and maintain peace, as implied at the end of the verse is predicated on the Quranic declaration that Christians, not Jews and pagans, are indeed the closest in love to the Muslim (Quran 5:82, in Khan, 1995). These necessarily form the basis of understanding and respect being canvassed.

Since no meaningful discussion can hold without prior understanding of the subject, it is expected that adherents of religion should emulate their respective prophets in relating with others. It is imperative to ensure a congenial atmosphere with one's neighbors' as a pre-requisite to getting to understand his religion. The prophet Muhammed so much emphasized on good neighborliness, irrespective of creed, ethnicity and socio-political status that even the possibility of neighbours inheriting one another was almost enjoined. (Quadri, 1995:48). This is reminiscence of the declaration

of Jesus in his beatitudes that "blessed are the peace makers for they shall be called the sons of God" (Matt. 5:9).

It is expedient to note that the kind of peaceful coexistence being envisaged is premised on the adequate understanding and regard or respect for the faith of one's neighbor. This stems from the fact that religion is a sacred affair, which presupposes that its treatment should be with reverence. Without prejudice to Paul's declaration: "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers; For what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness and what communion hath light with darkness?" (2 Cor. 6:14), understanding should be geared towards tolerance and avoidance of emphasis on factors that tend to ignite tension, and should lead to smooth interaction between adherents of different religions. This has informed our subscription to the assertion of Christian scholars, especially Perkins (1990) that "adequate understanding and respect for other's faith can best be achieved through some lessons from the various injunction to love God, one's neighbor and even one's enemies", (p. 92).

Since it has been observed that conflicts between two particular religions arise only when one assumes superiority over another, the need for objectivity in assessing other religions cannot be over emphasized. This may have informed the views of some scholars, such as Ayantayo (2002), that to foster understanding and promote tolerance,

Rather than engaging in conflict or take occupation of looking at doctrinal differences in some controversial theological issues, religious adherents should tailor their dialogue towards examining and providing solution to social problems (p. 12).

This may be taken as echoing, in more specific terms, the teachings of religions on the need to be in good relationship with God. This cannot be achieved in exclusion of man's relationship with others especially his neighbors, kith and kin since he is a highly social animal.

Recommendations

1. National Policy on Education, especially on religious education, needs to be readdressed to make religious studies, especially on comparative basis, compulsory for all students irrespective of their religious beliefs.
2. Sustenance of exchange courses in religious studies in tertiary institutions and introduction of same where not adopted should be ensured.
3. Censorship of religious programmes, especially commercial ones geared towards proselytization, by the various religious bodies themselves to complement the effort of National Broadcasting Commission has to be made continually.
4. There should be massive regular preaching sessions directed at enlightenment on areas of similarities in the various religions not only by clergies but also by the National Orientation Agency.

Conclusion

The lesson of the foregoing is drawn on the need to ensure good human relations, which can lead to sustainable inter-religious peace, and invariably harmonious living in the society. The understanding should encompass knowledge of the philosophy, belief systems and custom/traditions of other religions with the sole aim of promoting religious interaction for a peaceful multi-religious society.

References

- Ayantayo, J.K. (2002). Application of Dialogue to the Contemporary Nigerian Multi-Religious Society. A Public Lecture Note. P. 9.
- Clarke, P.B. (1991). Religion and Political Attitude Since Independence. In *Religion and Society in Nigeria*. Olupona, J.K. and Falola, T. (Eds). Ibadan: Spectrum Books. P. 219.
- Dopamu, P.A. (1984). Religious Particularity in Nigeria. In Mala, S.B. and Oseni, Z.I. (Eds). *Religion, Peace and Unity*. P. 209.
- Gideons: *The Holy Bible*, in English Language.
- Hornby, A.S. (1995). *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*. Pp. 999, 1299. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Khan, M.M. (1995). *The Interpretation of (the Meaning of the Noble Quran in English Language)*. Riyadh: Darussalam.
- Mala, S.B. (1984). Religious Pluralism in Nigeria; The Way Out and Factors Favoring it. In Mala, S.B. and Oseni, Z.I. *Religion, Peace and Unity* (Pp. 242 - 257)
- Muhammed, G.D. (2005, March 5-11). The Manipulation of Religion. *Weekly Trust*, P. 48.
- Nzeribe, A. (1988). *A Manifesto for the Third Republic*. London: Kilimanjaro, Pp. 14-15.
- Ogirima, N. (2001). The Relevance of Religion to National Rebirth. Unpublished Conference Paper. Pp. 2-5.
- Osumi, C.E. (1988). A Practical Way Forward to Religious Peace in Nigeria. In *The Place of Religion in the Development of Nigeria*: Unilorin, Dept. of Religious Publication P. 304.
- Perkins, P. (1990). Jesus as a Teacher. In Howard Clark Kee (ed) *Understanding Jesus Today*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, P. 92.
- Quadri, Y.A. (1995). *The Sayings of the Prophet*. P. 48 Ijebu - Ode: Shebiotimo.
- Ubaka, C. (2002). Inter-Religious Dialogue at the Grassroot: Methods and Prospects. Mission and Dialogue Seminar and Workshop Paper, Madonna Renewal Centre, Nkpor P. 5.