

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND TOLERANCE: CATALYST FOR STABILITY AND DEVELOPMENT IN A DEMOCRATIC NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper identifies Religious Freedom and Tolerance as Catalyst for stability and development on a pluralist democratic Nigeria. It defines the term Religion, Freedom, Tolerance and Democracy in relation to the topic. The position of Nigeria's constitution to Religious Freedom is identified. How freedom and tolerance constitute stability and development is discussed. Religious issues that can cause disability are pointed out. The advantage derived from the study of this nature is identified. How freedom and tolerance constitute stability and development is discussed. The advantage derived from the study of this nature is identified. Emile Durkheim and sociologists' ideal instrument of cohesion and stability is suggested. Strategy for keeping the Nigerian Religions together for national stability and development is suggested. The paper concludes that Religious Freedom and Tolerance are indispensable for stability and development in Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is constitutionally a secular state. It is diverse in religion, ethnic background, culture, and language. There are however many religions in the country thus making Nigeria a pluralistic religious state, with most Nigerians being Muslim, Christian or believer of traditional religion.¹ Nigeria as a pluralistic state in the view of Olupona needs democracy or secularly to maintain stability.

The basic objective of this paper is to identify religious freedom and tolerance as catalyst for stability and development in a democratic Nigeria. In an attempt to achieve this objective, effort will be made to define the terms Democracy, Religion, Freedom and Tolerance. The position of Nigeria's constitution to freedom is identified and how freedom and tolerance constitute stability is discussed. It will be pointed out. Durkheim and other sociologists' views on religion as instruments of cohesion and vehicle of economic progress will be discussed. The advantage derived from a study of this nature will be identified. The work will conclude with suggestion or recommendation of strategies for keeping Nigeria's religions together for national stability and development.

Definition of the Terms

Democracy is defined as government which encourages and allows rights of citizenship; such as freedom of speech, religion, opinion, and association, the assertion of the rule, majority rule, accompanied by respect for the rights of minorities. Religion on the other hand is the belief in the existence of supernatural ruling power, the creator and controller of the universe, who has given to man a spiritual nature which continues to exist after the death of the body. Freedom is defined as the condition of being free, without constraint, fearing nothing while tolerance is defined as the quality of tolerating opinions, beliefs, customs and behaviours.⁴ How these terms affect the topic of discussion will be seen later. Meanwhile the position of the constitution of Nigeria on freedom will be the next focus.

The Position of Nigeria's Constitution on Freedom

Nigeria's marked religious pluralism according to Olupona is attributable to a number of factors.⁵ The factors include absence of any dominant or established religion, the spirit of free

enterprise, and perhaps most importantly, the religious freedom guaranteed by the "1979 constitution".⁶ In the constitution, Nigerians are free to practice the religion of their choice and no religious groups are favoured or discriminated against, although membership of secret societies is prohibited. This attitude of tolerance with regard to religious growth and Olupona is worthy of note when one considers those African countries which had resorted to religious repression because they view religion as divisive and subversive, and a barrier to social and political development. Despite a few isolated cases of government reaction to the anti-social practices of some religious groups in the past, a relatively harmonious co-existence between religious institutions and the state has generally existed in Nigeria. Successive governments in Nigeria since 1979 have had to recognize the persistence of the religious dimension in all its varied expressions in Nigerian life. It could be argued, therefore that the policy of cooperation is borne out of popular support for religion rather than because of the political power or influence of the religious institutions themselves. Moves by the government to curtail religious freedom have proved to be controversial. An example of this was popular backlash witnessed in the early 1980^s over mooted proposals to make Churches pay taxes. Each successive government in Nigeria has attempted several solutions to the problems posed by ethnic and religious diversity in the quest for national integration.

How Freedom And Tolerance Constitute Stability

Attempt has been made thus far to establish the fact that religious freedom is entrenched in the Nigeria constitution thus it makes Nigeria a secular⁷ state. In this section, effort will be made to discuss how freedom and tolerance constitute stability and development.

Freedom of religion on the part of government makes each citizen to practice the religious faith he likes without any hindrance from any quarter and no preference is given to one at the expense of the other. Tolerance on the other hand is when two opposite religious groups tolerate each other. It is when one religious group does not hold another one to ransom. Government on her part should not favour one religion for propagation and exercise. In this way, stability and development will exist. It is the role of the Church and Mosque to raise the standard of living of the entire Nigerian masses. Religion has divine responsibility to achieve a better and more fully integrated human life for their people. Nigerians cannot expect to have self-respect based on self-reliance if the religious communities do not cooperate with one another to develop the people. There must be the spirit of give and take among the Muslims and Christians. Religious bodies are known to be pioneers in health, education and industry such projects could be resumed in the midst of tolerance especially as now that Nigerian masses are facing massive unemployment. As Babs Mala observes religious bodies have a responsibility to supplement government serious and genuine efforts to raise people's living standards.⁸ This they can do by providing their own services and cooperating with the government in every possible area. Inter-religious dialogue among adherents of religions is an important tool for stability where religious freedom and tolerance exist.

Issues of Government Policy That Can Cause Disability In a Democratic Society

It is one thing for the government to entrench religious freedom in the constitution; it is another thing to make policies and actions that will render the freedom obsolete or ineffective. Religious issues that generate heated debate and caused bad blood in Nigeria varies. The constituent Assembly question of Sharia Court of Appeal the issue of OIC, Pilgrimage and favouritism in key apartments. It was then resolved that, the state that want to establish Sharia court of Appeal could do so but the secularity of Nigeria still stays. Another issue was Pilgrimage and government involvement. This was a thing of concern for the Christians until

recently that government set up Pilgrims Welfare Board for both Muslim and Christian Pilgrims. Thus the hot argument on Pilgrimage was put to rest. The issue of Nigeria becoming a full member of Islamic Organisation of Countries (IOC) also generates heated debate and opposition from the Christians. Nigeria was formerly an observer until recently she became a full member of the OIC.

Political appointment that favours one particular religious group was also a thing of concern. The Christians who accused the government of allowing the Muslims to dominate key positions in government seriously attacked this type of policy. The government also looked into this sensitive issue as it could destabilize the nation.

Apart from the issue of Sharia, OIC, favouritism in political appointment, arbitrary law and censorship of religious messages or sermons can constitute disability.

Intolerance among adherents of religions in a pluralistic religious community can constitute disability in the society.

All the above problems are issues that can derail the development of the country in the present civilian dispensation. The military was able to tackle the problems because of the force of arms at her disposal. The government should maintain and execute policies that will not constitute any clog in the wheel of progress and development in nation building. As observed earlier, Nigeria is made up of people of diverse religious backgrounds. Because of in-built weakness in a pluralist religious state manipulators tend to cash on the sensitive nature of religion to create confusion. This is why government should play her role as stipulated in the constitution without any bending to any side, if not for anything but stability and development.

Durkheim And Sociologists Views On Religion As Instruments Of Cohesion, Stability And Vehicle For Economic Progress.

Attempt has been made thus far to discuss issues and government policy that can affect stability and development. This section will deal with the view and idea of sociologists that can constitute cohesion, stability and economic development. Particular attention will be paid to Emile Durkheim's theory of cohesion.

Scholars have observed that "Religion that plays no role in human society is worthless".¹⁰ Religion must have sufficient impact on human life and society satisfying to the fullest hopes and desires. In political arena, Onwu is of the opinion that Religion should serve as agent of Cohesion and stability.¹¹

Emile Durkheim propounded the functionalist approach, which maintains that religion persists as a critical vehicle for humanity to attain its evolutionary goals as a species. Its advocates argue that it is functionally indispensable for man in regard to both his life in society and his individual personality. It was Emile Durkheim that elaborated the functional value of

religions for the social order Religion for him consists primarily in a system of "collective" representations' such as concepts of God, notion about sin and evil etc. That is patterned essentially after the structure of community life.¹³ Although he spent much time dissecting the totalistic religion of the Australian Arunta in developing his models, he however recognized the role of religious image in upholding the unity and stability of society. Durkheim's philosophy of Religion as agent of cohesion in the society to curb all unethical behaviour could help Nigeria in her quest for national stability and development if freedom of religion or secularity of Nigeria in constitutional provision is maintained.

Other sociologists following Durkheim's work, see religion as an instrument of social control, instrument of cohesion, and as a means of maintaining moral unity of society, moral reality and moral entity.^{11h} The most widely discussed example of the influence of religion on economic growth probably center on Weber's treatise, the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism,

1904-5 (Protestant ethic). Despite its spectacular merit however, 'Protestant Ethic' is a very controversial book.

The main thrust of Weber's thesis is that Protestantism was instrumental to the development of modern capitalism in Europe. Nevertheless, his methodology left a lot to be desired. For example, in the view of the present Writer, Weber's use of the word 'Protestant ... is only symbolic since in essence, Protestant Ethic is simply Calvinistic Ethic. Besides, he almost went to the extreme to create an unnecessary gulf between Catholicism and Protestantism in attempt to substantiate his hunch about the instrumentality of Protestantism (really Calvinism) to economic development. Some of his fellow Europeans like Giddens and Bryan Turner criticized him. Giddens said Weber misrepresented Catholic doctrine while Bryan Turner said Weber failed to recognize the solidarity of Islamic cities, which focused on the law schools and criminal groups. In spite of criticism, some of the virtues that Weber attributes to Calvinism like honesty, punctuality, industry and frugality can motivate economic development. Religion also functions as a vehicle of economic growth by being a massive employer of labour.¹⁸ It is the contention of this writer that if the spirit behind Durkheim, Weber and other sociologist on cohesion, social control, moral unity, and economy is inculcated in Nigeria's political ethic stability and development will be achieved.

The main advantage derived from the study of this nature is that it enables the government to create an atmosphere conducive for progress and stability by sticking to the provision of the constitution on freedom and tolerance.

Strategies for Keeping the Nigerian Religions Together for National Stability and Development.

In this section suggestions will be made as to possible strategies or solution to intolerance among religions which often threaten peace and stability in the society. The government has done well in entrenching freedom of religion in the constitution but such guarantees should not be paper work alone. Odumuyiwa has recommended some strategies for keeping adherents of the three religions in this country together.

It is observed that adherents of Islam and Christianity conflict with one another because of certain reasons. First each religion is evangelical and wanted to convert more people into their religions. Secondly, both religions adopted wrong evangelical methods by attacking the doctrinal beliefs of their religions. Thirdly, the inequalities experienced in the government appointments of Christians and Muslims to key posts in the state and federal administration generate a lot of hostility and conflicts between adherents of the two religions: Maitasine and other religious riots in 1980s was a factor and thing of concern.

Any attempt to suppress the adherents of other religion not in power in the state or federal government brings conflicts and free for all fight mostly in the Northern part of Nigeria Traditionalist hardly have conflicts with Muslims and Christians unless when their shrines or festivals are looked down upon and treated with levity by any of the two religions of the book (Islam and Christianity).

In order to guarantee peaceful coexistence and cordial relationships between the three religious, Odumuyiwa has recommended the eight strategies. ^u

One, State and Federal Government should not get themselves involved in any religious activities of any religion in the country. There should be no favoritism from government towards any religion. Every religion should be given equal treatment and opportunity.

Two, Government positions of authority should be evenly distributed among the adherents of all the three religions.

Three, no religion should step on the toes of the doctrines of other religions. Conversion

into any of the religions should be through appeal and embracement rather than through force.

Four since Nigeria is a multi-religious state, every religions should be allowed to evangelize and win converts across the country.

Five, the teaching of the tenets of religions should be allowed in all Nigerian schools, colleges and universities.

Six, religious leaders of all religions should endeavour to come together occasionally for inter-faith dialogue so as to live together peacefully.

Seven, any erring adherents of any religion should be severely disciplined by the Government agencies without fear or favour.

Eight, religion should be seen and practiced as a forum of unity and peaceful co-existence and not as a divisible force.

The above suggestions are the functions or roles of adherents of Nigerian religions to maintain peace and stability. The religious leaders also have their own roles to play. All religious leaders should:

Teach, practice, and enjoin their adherents to honestly practice the tenets of their religion. No true religion teaches wickedness, hostility, and hooliganism.

Be peace loving and teach their adherents the same. This should be demonstrated by accepting other religious leaders different from their religions as a colleague in society.

Be able to check any erring adherent of their religion. Discipline, love and godliness should be their watchword.

Create a forum for inter-faith dialogue whereby proper understanding of the tenets of every religion would be learnt. Their adherents should be properly guided as regards the belief system of religions other than their own.

No religious leader should look down on other religious leaders. All should respect one another's religious belief system. There should be no religious victimization, hostility and disregard among leaders and adherent.

When these and much other friendly cooperation exist among religious leaders and adherents, then there would be religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence among all adherents of religions in Nigeria. Such peaceful coexistence would advance the socio-economic, educational, and moral development of the country, All the three religions should work together to foster unity, peace, and progress in Nigeria. Finally, inter-religious dialogue is very important and crucial to stability in a pluralistic religious society.

CONCLUSION AND SUMMARY

It is the opinion of this writer that Religious Freedom and Tolerance are indispensable for stability and development in a diverse pluralistic religious, ethnic, linguistic and cultural Nigeria. Freedom of religion should not be limited to paper work, guarantee or theory alone but must be seen in action. Inter-religious dialogue is also very important.

In summary, this paper has discussed religious freedom and tolerance as catalyst for stability and development in a democratic Nigeria. Definitions of the key terms are given. The position of Nigeria's constitution on freedom and fundamental human rights has been pointed out. Freedom of religion is expected to be ascertained or guaranteed by the government while tolerance is expected to be given by the adherents of religions. The government is also expected to create conducive atmosphere for freedom and tolerance.

Religious issues that cause disability are pointed out. These issues include the Sharia court of Appeal, membership of QIC, Government involvement in pilgrimage, inequalities in government appointments to key posts in the state and federal administration. Durkheim and other sociologists view as instruments of cohesion, stability, economic processes discussed.

The advantage derived from a paper of this nature is that afford the government

opportunity to have the awareness of creating atmosphere conducive for freedom, tolerance, and stability in the society and to work for achievement of unity in diversity in a multi religious society. The paper concluded by recommending strategies for keeping diverse ethnic, cultural, political, social, and religious society together in the spirit of unity in diversity.

As a pluralistic religious nation, Nigeria needs religious dialogue. All believers should pursue it for it is only through dialogue that the nation can know religious peace and harmony, which is a crucial basis for socio-economic and political development.

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