

Religious Violence in Nigeria: Christianity as Panacea

Akande, Lydia Bosede

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14991435>

Abstract

Nigeria is one of the African countries that is secular and pluralistic in nature. Despite her state of pluralism and secularism, findings have indicated that cases of religious violence, kidnapping and ritual killings have been recorded from time to time. This has brought untold hardship to the unity of the country, to the extent that Nigerians themselves feel unsecured, with the fear of unknown. If nothing is done to bring a lasting solution, the end result would be catastrophic for Nigerian, African and the entire world. This work seeks to identify and proffer lasting solutions to religious violence in Nigeria. The approach to be employed include historical, theological and interpretative methods based on primary and secondary sources. It was discovered that dialogue, tolerance, unity, love, prayer and patience are vital Christian virtues or keys to resolving the violence. It is therefore concluded that, to put an end to religious jingoism in Nigeria, all hands must be on deck. The government, religious bodies, especially the Christian Association of Nigeria, must wake up to their responsibilities, mandate and vision of keeping the peace and unity of the nation.

Keywords: religion, violence, Christianity, pluralism, peace, unity

T **Introduction** hroughout the history of Nigeria as a nation, especially from 1999 when democracy became deeply entrenched with President Olusegun

Obasanjo as the democratically elected President of the nation, up to the current regime of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, cases of violence have taken diverse dimensions despite the religious outlook of the nation as a secular country where three different religions are officially recognized and practiced. These religions are African Religion, (Afrel), Islam and Christianity. The constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria is very clear about this as section 38 (1) of the 1999 Constitution states that:

Every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom (either alone or

African Religion has been on the soil of Nigeria before the advent of Islam and Christianity. It is not a missionary or imported religion like Islam or Christianity. Africans are born into it. Hence no propaganda machinery. The religion permeates the total life of man from birth till death. Abioye (2010:1), thus opined that; “its major aims are to bring peace and harmony among Africans.”²

The emergence of Islam in Nigeria is earlier than Christianity. It came in from the Northern States of the country, precisely from the Borno Kingdom. According to Trimingham, (1972:115), “Islam got to Kanem-Bornu in the 11th century. Then it was introduced into the Hausa States as from the 14th century.”³ Generally, the Islamic religion teaches about the absolute unity and power of God, the Creator of the entire universe who is also kind, just, merciful and wishes man to repent and purify himself on earth for a better life in paradise after death.

Christianity was first introduced to Nigeria in the 15th century by the Portuguese Roman Catholic in the Benin areas of the country. Their efforts met with failure because they were using the opportunity of spreading the gospel for trading activities. It was not until the 19th century precisely on the 24th of September, 1842 through the effort of a Methodist Missionary, Thomas Birch Freeman and Henry Townsend of the Church Missionary Society (Anglican Church) who arrived on December 17th, 1842.⁴ Their first station was Badagry, which eventually served as a base for sustained missionary efforts in Nigeria.

The Christian faith teaches that God is Almighty, Righteous and above all that “God is Love.” The creation of the world out of nothing, and that of the human race were expressions of that love. This classic statement was expressed in the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount “Look at birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they”? (Matthew 6: 26). This teaching of love is expressed in the three religions.

However, of these three, despite their areas of convergences such as absolute believe in the existence and oneness of God as the most righteous, loving and merciful, cases of religious violence have been recorded between Muslims and Christians. They appear to be the most intolerant. Unfortunately and ironically, they also appear to be the most religious considering most of their activities, such as; Muslims observance of five times daily prayers, Christian -Muslim pilgrimages to the holy lands of Jerusalem and Mecca, Nigerian observance of religious festivals holidays, full attendance of worshippers on Friday Jumat and Sunday service, to mention but few. Akande (2015 :35), supporting the religiosity of Nigerian Muslims and Christians opined that;

From all indications, Nigerians are seen to be religious. Through the stages of life, religious doctrines are observed and recognized. Religious songs and choruses of various types are not far from the lips of all and sundry. It can therefore be said that in all things they are religious. However, despite the entire religious outlook that Nigerians project to the outside world, it is ironic that, religious commitment of the people is below one's expectation.⁵

The above reveals the hypocritical nature of adherents of the two faiths who had equally exhibited all manners of inter and intra violence, which for decades have affected national developments negatively. This is further made evidence when Alana (1993:214), postulates that:

Religious war borne out of religious intolerance is unheard of in indigenous African history. This is because of African Religion's spirit of openness and tolerance. It is a religion that has no zeal for membership drive and devoid of religious superiority complex. It has no territorial ambition to conquer and evangelize if need be, by force of arm.⁶

Though religious issues are not the only causes of violence between adherents of Islam and Christianity in Nigeria, there are other factor(s), such as political, communal or ethnic where often religion has been used as a cover up. But our major concern in this paper are violence issues connected with religion, where scores of Muslims and Christians have lost their lives and property to the hands of miscreants and perpetrators of violence in the name of religion. No wonder it was postulated by Awolalu (1976:5), that "religion is often seen as the cause of violence and instability in Nigeria as the country's northern and southern regions are equally divided along religious fault lines."⁷ It is against this background that we try to examine the concepts of religion, violence and selected cases of religious violence, its causes and the ways out for all to have peaceful coexistence and meaningful developments.

Conceptual Clarification

The main concepts that need clarification here are religion, religious violence and religious tolerance.

Religion

Religion which originated from the Latin word *relegere* (to unite) and *religio* (relationship or bond) (Sani 2007:12)⁸ has no universally agreed and acceptable definition. The definitions are as many as the scholars of religion. Few among such definitions and their criticisms to be considered in this paper are as follows:

According to Kant «Religion is the recognition of all our duties as divine commands.»⁹ This definition is faulty as it fails to mention the activities involved in religion. Just recognizing the divine commands are inadequate. Alfred North Whitehead sees it as “what an individual does with his solitariness.”¹⁰ This too is not without its fault, because there are many activities connected with every religions of the world that are done corporately, and not just in solitude. Hebert Spencer says, religion is “a feeling of wonder in the presence of the unknown”¹¹. This definition very vague and lacks objectivity. To every believer in the Universe, especially to the adherents of African Religion, Islam and Christianity in Nigeria, the concept of God is that, He is Loving and Caring. If He is unknown, then He cannot be worshipped the way Nigerians do with the level of their commitments to religion.

However, it should be noted that from the few definitions of religion and the criticisms observed, religion plays significant roles in human society. Notable among these is its emphasize on individual to forbid acts that are inimical to the society. This therefore portends that no religion of the world supports violence.

Religious violence

Religious Violence from the concept of this paper are acts that are capable of inflicting pains or causing injuries, destruction or loss of life and property for religious reasons. Such destructions most often threaten the peace of the immediate community, State and nation at large. Wellman & Tokuno 2004: 291.), define it specifically as, “violence that is motivated by or in reaction to religious precepts, texts, or doctrines.”¹² These include violent acts perpetrated against either Churches, Mosques, or adherents of Christianity or Islam as the case may be.

Religious tolerance

It became germane to examine this concept here because it is the concern of this work that adherents of all the religions practiced in Nigeria should learn to tolerate one another in a religiously pluralistic environment. To this end, Answers.com defines religious tolerance as “the willingness to accept and permit religious beliefs and practices which disagrees with one’s own”¹³ It goes further to say religious tolerance simply means “tolerating and recognizing each other’s religious beliefs, without any provocation or hindrances to practice.”¹⁴ It could also mean that a person with religious beliefs can accept another person with their different religious beliefs

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in Paris at its third session on 10 December, 1948 recognized the importance of religious tolerance when it declared that “the inherent dignity of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and

peace in the world. It declares that human rights are universal to be enjoyed by all people, no matter who they are or where they live.¹⁵

Based on the above, religious tolerance could be understood to be about an individual's civil rights, which is the acts of one encouraging or accepting religious freedom of people of other faith traditions, even when such faith is contrary to one's beliefs or practices divinely. Therefore in Nigeria today, the need for peaceful coexistence and tolerance become very necessary "among adherents of different faiths dwelling unavoidably in the same society."¹⁶ Bidmos.(1993:32-39)

Causes of Religious Violence

Nigeria as a religiously pluralistic nation has witnessed series of religious violence. Religion, which is an important factor in national development has been employed by some selfish individual or group to rain havoc. Supporting this point, Sulaiman (2014:), opined that, "Between the year 1980 and the year 1990, Nigeria recorded eight major religious disturbances with heavy human and material losses; many monuments of high and historical value were also destroyed.¹⁷ Notable among these crises as recorded by Olukorede (2003:8) are that;

In year 2000, many killings were recorded from religious disturbances. From February 21 to 22, an estimated 3,000 people lost their lives in a clash between Muslims and Christians in Kaduna, the capital of Kaduna State. There was a reprisal attack in Aba, Abia State and about 450 persons were killed. The riot was initially sparked up by the introduction of Islamic criminal law in some northern states. Also, from May 22 and 23, Kaduna was again brought to its knee when Muslims and Christians clashed. Over 300 lives were lost.¹⁸

The aforementioned are just few of the cases of religious violence which had led wanton destruction of lives, property and disruption of academic calendars of institutions of learning, all because of inability of adherents of the two faiths to tolerate one another. These cases resulting from religious intolerance have been very alarming and embarrassing. (Alanamu 2005: 165- 170), also confirmed that; "In the year 2001, the religious clash between Muslims and Christians in Tafawa Balewa local government area of Bauchi State, which began on June 19 and ended on July 4, resulted in the death of over 100 persons."¹⁹ Based on the aforementioned, some of the reasons that have been identified as causes of violence include the following:

Unhealthy rivalry/ competition for converts

The religious nature of Nigeria encouraged unhealthy rivalry especially between Christians and Muslims. The notion that what is good for one is equally good for the other has generated a lot of rivalry. These rivalries and competitions between

the two prominent religions are so rampant, and cannot be compared to the tolerant, accommodating and hospitable nature of adherents of African Religion. To this extent,

Dimes in Alana (1993:19), testifies that;

Religious war borne out of religious intolerance is unheard of in indigenous African history. This is because of Africa Religion's "spirit of openness and tolerance," It is a religion that has no zeal for membership drive and devoid of religious superiority complex, it has no territorial ambition to conquer and evangelize, if need be, by force of arm.²⁰

Similarly, the zeal to evangelize or trying to convert are parts of doctrinal injunctions for both Muslims and Christians, but attempts to carry out this injunction by some overzealous adherents could lead to violence. Supporting this view, Afolabi, (2013), is of the view that; "Religious adherents of both Islam and Christianity in Nigeria believe that their religion is not only superior but possess salvation for one's soul and the enjoyment of life after death. This is done by preaching religious conversion."²¹ Going further, Jenkins (2002), argued that "the mechanism of religious conversion has the capacity to promote rivalry and shift the demographic balance between adherents of different religions within a state. Thus, religious conversion can bring about demographic shift and cause religious violence."²²

Proselytization or unnecessary claim to superiority

This is the belief that one's religion is superior and acceptable to God than others. In the process, the doctrines and beliefs of others could be destroyed. This could be a serious provocation, which can lead to religious violence. Such provocative statements like "Jesus is the only way," or "There is no other religion acceptable to God than Islam," could lead to crises. Therefore, still in the words of Afolabi, (2016), "when religion is personalized, adherents tend to see their religion as superior to another which forms a strong mark in their mind to fight and die for their religious beliefs and use religion to justify the use of violence."²³

Provocative religious publications

This has to do with publication of provocative, offensive and divisive materials through the various media, who are expected to properly inform, entertain and educate the public. This act could as well lead to religious violence. For instance, the publication of the press about the 1987 Kafanchan religious riot was a point of reference. It was reported that "members of the public were grossly misinformed by the press with partial reports which created another crisis between Muslims and Christians"²⁴ (Sulaiman & Ojo 2013: 21-38). We are quick to mention here that mass media reports should be carefully broadcasted to the

public to avoid any form of provocation especially among Muslims and Christians.

Unemployment and poverty

These are vices or cankerworms that have eaten so deep into the fabric of Nigerian nation. There are teeming population of Nigerian youths that are unemployed, which had consequently led to poverty with increasing and inability capacity to have access to basic needs of life such as housing, food, clothing and basic health care. Thus the yearly increase rate of unemployment gradually results to poverty. Just like the saying that “an idle hand is the workshop of the devil,” poverty-stricken youths or groups can be manipulated with very meagre amount to cause religious violence. This is the situation in some northern parts of Nigeria, as advanced by Sulaiman (2015), that, “the poor youth (Almajiris) particularly in Northern Nigeria are manipulated with small amount of money to cause religious disturbance.”²⁵

On this note, we appeal that Nigerians should have respect for one another’s belief system. Christians and Muslims should broaden their views to accommodate other faith, and in the words of Alana, (1993), they should understand that; “It is the living that practice religion. The dead do not. Muslims and Christians alike should understand this. Religion is only relevant in the land of the living”²⁶

Religious Violence in Nigeria: Christianity as a Panacea

Attempts have been made to examine the concepts of religion, religious violence and religious tolerance, its causes and the various havocs it has rocked on individual and different spheres of national development. To provide solutions to the menace, all hands such as the government, religious leaders and especially Christian bodies under the umbrella of the Christian Association of Nigeria, must be on deck.

Going by the tenets of Christianity, there are scriptural texts that promote the social and spiritual function of religion for peaceful coexistence among all and sundry, which will enhance unity and national development. For instance, the messages of Christianity on Love, Unity, Peace and Dialogues are intended to promote peaceful coexistence devoid of religious violence. The Bible in Romans 12:18 and Hebrews 12:14 enjoined Christians to “live at peace with everyone.” By this injunction, Christians are expected to be peace maker and not to break peace, following the examples of their Jesus Christ, the prince of peace.

Similarly, the message of love as contained in the tenets of the Christians is capable of discouraging religious violence, as proposed by Fagbiye (2013:343-344), that

This principal concept of love drives home the Christian message of true and unconditional love for fellow human beings in Africa irrespective of tribe, language or status. These teachings on love is been upheld by Christians in all facet of life to enhance peaceful coexistence where ever they are practically and pragmatically applied especially in Africa.²⁷

Additionally, Unity is another tenet of Christianity that discourages religious violence. Christianity strongly believes that all human race regardless of religion are created in the image of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Hence, it is the plan of God that all irrespective of race, colour or religion should be one, as stated in John 17:21, “that they all may be one.” This is a phrase that encourages the unity of all denominations in Christianity as well as other faith for the sake of peaceful coexistence.

However, the question that rightly comes to mind is that to what extent are these ethical teachings of Christianity such as peace, love and unity strictly adhered to by the adherents of the Christian faith? Events have shown that, even among perpetrators of religious violence, some Christians have been identified. Nonetheless, Christianity as a religion of the book with its doctrinal teachings and practices has in no small measure contributed to harmonious living in the society. Churches have assisted in reducing the poverty status of the society through her provision of employments, care of widows and orphans through their welfare package programmes.

On the part of government, it is very germane for adequate provision to be made for the basic necessities of life, such as; food, shelter and employment for affected citizens. They should know from past experience according to Opeloye (1993), that, “people who are often readily involved in religious riots are the disgruntled elements in the society who seize the riot opportunity to loot. The provision of employment will make all idle hands to be busy with worthy ventures.” Also, going by Opeloye,(1993:64-65), to put an end to religious violence in Nigeria, the following suggestions were put forward;

In order to bridge the gulf between our religious leaders, dialogue forum should be created for them where they should meet from time to time to resolve their religious conflicts. Christian Faith Based institutions in Nigeria, should endeavor to promote religious harmony by evolving a kind of religious education curriculum that will expose students irrespective of religious background, to religious traditions apart from Christianity. They should be made to know that religious traditions have many things in common.²⁸

From the foregoing, it can be said that Christianity and other religious faith should as a matter of urgency and importance have deep respect for the doctrines and teachings of one another’s faith and the right to existence.

Conclusion

In sum, it has been established that religious violence is a scourge that has eaten deep into the fabric of Nigeria, despite her pluralistic nature. The concepts of religion, religious violence and religious tolerance have been carefully examined. The causes of the vices which have taken diverse dimension and had caused untold hardship to national development have been looked into, with relevant suggestions as solution to the menace from the Christian perspective. From the discussion, it has been seen vividly that Christianity with its doctrinal and scriptural tenets of love, peace, and unity to mention but few, have meaningfully impacted on the adherents the need to live peacefully to avoid religious and other acts of violence.

Based on the aforementioned, there is no gainsaying about the fact that religious violence had caused untold hardship on the development of Nigeria with its devastating effects. There have been colossal lost of lives and property. Innocent citizens most of whom are youths, women and children are in most cases the victims. With this ugly development, it becomes very relevant to suggest that in addition to the ethical teachings of the Christians earlier mentioned, religious leaders of the Christians, Muslims and African Religion, should come together from time to time for dialogue. Mass media should be an objective and dispassionate watchdog in the society instead of aggravating religious crisis.

Also, government at various levels are major stake holder in this matter. In the words of Sulaiman (2014), to avert religious violence, the Nigerian government should, at the federal, state and local levels, adopt an open and uncompromising neutral attitude towards religious groups in the country. By this, it means that anyone in the position of power in a multi-religious country should not allow his religious inclination to override common interests. Nigerians should be treated equally and be given equal rights and privileges irrespective of their religious background.²⁹

Finally, to restore the needed peace, religious tolerance and harmony among all and sundry in Nigeria, the contents of the Nigerian educational curriculum should be reviewed to incorporate the basic tenets of all the religions practiced in the country, which are African Religion, Islam and Christianity. Proper teaching and learning of these tenets at all levels of the nation's educational system would go a long way to reducing cases of religious disturbances as students would have learnt better and appreciated the tenets of other faiths apart from theirs.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Chapter IV, Section 38
2. Abioye, S.A. *Basic Text on West African Traditional Religion*, Ilorin: Ray-High Int.Ent, 2010
3. Trimingham, J.S. *A History of Islam in West Africa*, University of Glasgow, 1970
4. J.A. Farounbi, *A Brief History of Pentecostal Movement in Nigeria* (Mushin: Lemuel Publishers, 1997) p.13.
5. Akande, L. B., "Issues and Challenges of Religion in Nigeria in the 21st Century" In *Religion in Contemporary Nigeria*. Y.A.Quadri, R.W.Omotoye and R.I.Adebayo (eds), 3145. (London: Adonis and Abbey Publishers Ltd. 2015).
6. Alana E. O., "The Relationship Between Christians, Muslims and Afrelists in History with Particular Reference to Nigeria," In Abubakre, R.D, Yahaya,M.T. Opeloye, M.O. Akanmidu,R.A, Dopamu, P.A, Odumuyiwa, E.A, and Dime, C.A (eds), *Studies in Religious Understanding in Nigeria.*, Nigerian Association for the Study of Religions, 1993.
7. Awolalu, J. O., "What is African Traditional Religion?" *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol.10, No. 2. (Spring), 1. (7), 1976
8. Sani, S. . *The Killing Fields: Religion, Violence in Northern Nigeria*. (Ibadan: Spectrum Book Ltd. 2007).
9. Ajayi A. *50 Questions and Answers on West African Traditional Religion*, (Ado Ekiti: Standard Press Co. 1998).
10. <http://web.pdx.edu/~tothm/religion/Definitions.htm>
11. Ajayi A. *50 Questions and Answers on West African Traditional Religion*
12. Wellman, J. & K. Tokuno. Is Religious Violence Inevitable? *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 43: 291-296. 2004 doi:10.1111/j.1468-5906.2004.00234.x.
13. www.answers.com
14. . www.answers.com
15. <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>
16. Bidmos, M.A. *Inter-Religious Dialogue - The Nigerian Experience*. (Lagos: Islamic Publications Bureau, 1993).
17. Sulaiman, K.O. Jerusalem as a Uniting Factor for Muslims and Christians: Historical and Scriptural Grounds, in *The IAFOR Journal of Arts and Humanities* II, I. 2014.
18. Olukorede, Y. "2002: A Do-or-Die Affairs?" in *The Source* III, June 3, 8. 2003.
19. Alanamu, A.S. "Reflections on Religious Violence in Nigeria (1999-2004)." In Alanamu, A.S. (eds.): *Issues in Political Violence in Nigeria*. (Ilorin: Hamson Printing Communication, 2005).

20. Alana E. O., "The Relationship Between Christians, Muslims and Afrelists in History with Particular Reference to Nigeria," In Abubakre, R.D, Yahaya,M.T. Opeloye, M.O, Akanmidu,R.A, Dopamu, P.A, Odumuyiwa, E.A, and Dime, C.A (eds), *Studies in Religious Understanding in Nigeria.*, Nigerian Association for the Study of Religions, 1993.