

# ROLE OF RELIGION TOWARDS PEACEFUL CO-EXISTENCE IN NIGERIA

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## **1. Introduction**

A critical examination of the role of religion in engendering societal peace and development, with particular attention to the Nigerian nation is undertaken to highlight the necessary dimensions of a peaceful religious co-existence. From time immemorial, and from the history of human existence, mankind in every age has encountered a plethora of religious experiences, and therefore, man is prone to further and loftier experiences. When sociologically considered, religion is a complicated cultural state of affairs which is constituted by cult (rituals and worship), a doctrine, and an institutional organisation. The doctrinal aspect of a given religion is equally difficult to determine, for it consists of a complex and extensive system of beliefs, which are developed throughout the ages by generations of believers.

To solve the problem of religious crises and establish peaceful co-existence among the multi-ethnic groups in the Nigerian nation, it is held that religions play an important role. It will be pertinent to begin this discussion with the words of Emile Durkheim, who says: “religion is a unified system of beliefs and practice..., beliefs and practices which unite into one single community all those who adhere to them.”<sup>1</sup> In the words of Mike Isokun, “religion promotes cohesion and collective actions among members... [It is] an instrument of social activities, an anti-crime agency and a machinery for social control.”<sup>2</sup> Hence, I make an attempt to pay

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<sup>1</sup>E. Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, New York: Macmillan, 1915, 47.

<sup>2</sup>M. I. Isokun, “Religion and Justice: An Enquiry into the Place of Religion in the Nigeria System of Justice,” *Epha* (Ekpoma Journal of Religions Studies) 2, 1 (July 1998), 154.

particular attention to the affairs of Nigerian religious reality, with a goal of proposing this as a model for the rest of humankind.

## 2. The Concept of Religion

Etymologically, the word “religion” is derived from three Latin words: the first word being “*ligare*” which means, “to bind,” the second is “*relegare*” which means, “to unite” or “to link,” and the third is, “*religio*” which means “relationship.”<sup>3</sup> From the etymology of the word (religion), it can be established that religion is essentially a relationship between the supernatural and the natural realms. It is a relationship that exists between a divine entity and a human entity that the human entity believes to exist.<sup>4</sup> The human entity is man, while the divine entity is the Supreme Being who is simply called God in many religions. The God of religion is the God that is conceived differently by different religions. The Supreme Being is the focus of all adherents of religions. The God of religion is the worshipped being, the cosmic power, which is designated by different names in different religions, cultures, beliefs, and languages. The God of religion is conceived by various religions as an anthropomorphic deity.<sup>5</sup> By this, we mean a deity that is conceived in the image and likeness of man, having all human attributes.<sup>6</sup>

Religion, therefore, according to A. C. Bouquet, is a fixed relationship between the human self and some non-human entity, the sacred, the supernatural, the self-existent, the absolute, or simply, God.<sup>7</sup>

In Echekwube’s definition of religion, religion is considered as a vital encounter with the supernatural or divine being to whom one responds with one’s whole being; it is a special experience by man in depending on a superpower for the purpose of a greater realisation of himself.<sup>8</sup> Thus, religion involves a set of beliefs that are enacted through rituals, involving supernatural forces or entities and natural entities or forces with an attempt to influence these forces so as to provide

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<sup>3</sup>J. A. Omeregbe, *A Philosophical Look at Religion*, Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publications, 1993, 2.

<sup>4</sup>Omeregbe, *A Philosophical Look at Religion*, 2.

<sup>5</sup>Omeregbe, *A Philosophical Look at Religion*, 29.

<sup>6</sup>Omeregbe, *A Philosophical Look at Religion*, 29.

<sup>7</sup>Cited in Omeregbe, *A Philosophical Look at Religion*, 3.

<sup>8</sup>A. O. Echekwube, *Philosophy of Religion*, Issele-Uku: Martin Industrial Press and Publishing Co., 1984, 36.

understanding of our existence and the world, and meaning for our actions.<sup>9</sup>

Man's many complex life-questions need rational answers, which are believed to be provided only by religion. These include questions such as related to human origin, purpose of life on earth, and the ultimate destiny. Man and the society cannot do without religion. Religion, therefore, is the heart of the society.

Several positions have been developed as regard the origin of religion, especially in the fields of philosophy, sociology, and psychology. While several theories have been advanced as regards the origin of religion, there is no general unanimous view as to the origin of religion.<sup>10</sup> Religion is as old as humankind and the created order. In fact, no one could tell factually as to when and how African Traditional Religion started. It has been the way of life (including cultures, traditions, norms, and values) of the African people from time immemorial – passing on from generation to generation.

### **3. General Functions of Religion**

Religion performs several unique functions both to the society and man. Several functional theories have been advanced by scholars as regards religion. Although Emile Durkheim was not primarily interested in individual phenomena of religious experience, he did recognise the supportive role of religion for the believers because religion gives the believers “the impressions of comfort and dependence.”<sup>11</sup> We shall now discuss the overall functions of religion under four headings: supportive, preservative, protective, and prophetic functions.

#### **A. Supportive Function**

Human world is full of complex uncertainties coupled with several existential problems. In this regard religion plays a very vital role by providing emotional aids and encouragement to man by way of consolation and reconciliation. When confronted with disappointments

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<sup>9</sup>Matthew Westra, *Religion and the Supernatural*, New York: HaviLand, 1999, 183.

<sup>10</sup>C. O. Isiramen and Donatus, *Philosophy of Religion, Ethics and Early Church Controversies*, Lagos: Associates Publishers, 1998, 183.

<sup>11</sup>Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 44-48.

religion provides consolation, and when alienated from societal goals, norms, and values, religion provides reconciliation between man and the society.<sup>12</sup> In times of defeats, distress, and impossibilities religion provides emotional support for revival and survival. This is done by establishing values and goals, reinforcing morale, and at the same time, providing immunization against disaffections.<sup>13</sup> Thus, religion supports and encourages growth and maturation of individuals in a society. It provides the ingredients for development, autonomy, and self-direction.

#### B. Preservative Function

Religion does not only sacralizes the norms and values of society, but also helps to preserve them in an established society. The *dos* and *dont's* in any society are highly controlled by religion in that society. Those things approved by the society are the ones approved by religion, and what the society forbids is also forbidden by their religion.<sup>14</sup> Thus, under its preservative function, social control, order, peace, and stability in the society are attained. Religion not only preserves, it also offers a guide to conduct and right behaviour.<sup>15</sup>

#### C. Protective Function

Religion being an essential relationship between God and man, offers a transcendental relationship through cults and ceremonies of worship including rituals, thereby providing the emotional ground for a new security and firmer identity through which man finds an escape from his numerous life complexities.<sup>16</sup> Religion provides free access to power especially for the powerless and the marginalized in an unfriendly society.<sup>17</sup> Religion, according to W. Herberg, gives the individuals a sense of identity with the distant past and the limitless future.<sup>18</sup> In periods of

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<sup>12</sup>J. Milton Yinger, *Religion, Society and the Individuals*, New York: Macmillan, 1957, 58-59.

<sup>13</sup>Yinger, *Religion, Society and the Individuals*, 58-59.

<sup>14</sup>Isiramen and Donatus, *Philosophy of Religion, Ethics and Early Church Controversies*, 186.

<sup>15</sup>Westra, *Religion and the Supernatural*, 384.

<sup>16</sup>Westra, *Religion and the Supernatural*, 384.

<sup>17</sup>W. Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic and Jew*, Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1955, 120.

<sup>18</sup>Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic and Jew*, 120.

rapid social changes, and large scale mobility, the role of religion in providing identity is very important. Religion, therefore, preserves and protects cultures and traditions of the people.

#### D. Prophetic Function

This function of religion is capable of contradicting the other functions of religion. In a situation where theocracy abounds, certain institutionalised norms and values can be attacked by religion. This is the case of the Hebrew prophets in Biblical history.<sup>19</sup> The prophetic function of religion is often a source of vital social crises in an established society. Religion performs the prophetic roles of salvation and redemption. It provides reassurance. It is religion that provides explanations and explications to life, the created order, man's existence and man's ultimate destiny.

### **4. The Problem of Religious Exclusivism in Nigeria**

Some major religions in Nigeria include Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion. All of them share the same characteristic of monotheism, yet they disagree in several areas. The most persistent problem confronting religious life in Nigeria today is that of religious exclusiveness – an absolute claim to religious truth by any one religion. Exclusivism is the by-product of religious intolerance. Most guilty of this practice are Christianity and Islam. No religion can claim to possess the whole truth. A religion, which sees itself as absolute, takes other religions to be pseudo-religions, that is, as false religions.<sup>20</sup>

It should however, be noted, that the claim to possess “all the truth” by religions have been a dichotomising factor among the Christian and Islamic religions in Nigeria. They claim to offer the sole way to salvation. As for the Moslems, all non-Moslems are “infidels” and, thus, fighting the “infidels” is considered a holy duty.<sup>21</sup>

### **5. Religion: Towards Peaceful Co-Existence in Nigeria**

Religion is a key player in enhancing national peace and welfare of the people. It is obvious that every home in Nigeria belongs to one religion or

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<sup>19</sup>F. O. Thomas Dea, *Sociology of Religion*, London: SCM, 1952, 15.

<sup>20</sup>W. C. Smith, *Question of Religious Truth*, New York: HaviLand, 1987, 130.

<sup>21</sup>Isiraman and Donatus, *Philosophy of Religion, Ethics and Early Church Controversies*, 203.

the other. In some cases, members of the same family may be adherents of different religions. In this sense, religion can play a vital role in enhancing peace and harmony in Nigeria, which is characterised by multi-ethnic groups and traditions. Some of the ways through which religion can contribute to peaceful co-existence in Nigeria are listed below.

#### A. Religious Tolerance

Despite the fact that the Constitutions of Nigeria<sup>22</sup> provide for religious harmony and peace, religious intolerance still abounds. In many of the cases, the source or root cause of religious intolerance is religious exclusivism.

Most of the religious crises in Nigeria today are based on the unwillingness of religious adherents of divergent beliefs to accommodate the point of view or belief of one another. This has often resulted in religious riots. According to Ray Ekpu, such crises are like “an ill wind that blows, doing no one any good.”<sup>23</sup> In March, 1987 there was a religious riot in Kafanchan that erupted between the adherents of Islam and Christianity. In this riot many lives were sacrificed and properties were lost. Post-riot analyses indicated that all these happened as a result of religious intolerance.

For Nigeria to move forward and for the Nigerians to co-exist peacefully, all religions within the nation must understand, embrace, and tolerate one another. That is, the adherents of religions must practise religious inclusiveness, and appreciate and recognise one another in good faith. It should be noted however, that people who fight for their religion are ignorant of even the basic tenets of that religion. In other words, their ignorance or false understanding cannot claim to know God who, in fact, can ‘fight’ for Himself, if called for.<sup>24</sup>

#### B. Religious Dialogue

Nigeria as a pluralistic nation is a multi-religious society, and at the same time, characterised by diversity of cultures and traditions that are very complex. The strongest mechanism to be used in achieving religious tolerance, peace, and harmony is dialogue. Dialogue promotes peaceful

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<sup>22</sup>The 1999 Constitutions of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

<sup>23</sup>R. Ekpu, “Opium of the People,” *Newswatch Magazine*, February 24, 1986, 10.

<sup>24</sup>D. Babarinsa, “Fire of Religion,” *Newswatch Magazine*, March 30, 1987, 8-12.

co-existence. Dialogue is the contact that is established between people of different and sometimes opposed positions who are attempting to overcome their mutual prejudices and broaden as far as possible their areas of mutual agreement whether this takes place on the plain of human relations or that of a quest for the truth or of collaboration to attain ends of practical nature.<sup>25</sup>

The function of religious dialogue cannot be over emphasized. It provides an enabling platform for adherents of divergent religious groups or sects to come together and discuss their problems. In dialogue, every party is considered important, views and opinions are respected and given careful consideration. The ultimate goal of dialogue is peace and harmony. Future religious crises in Nigeria could be averted if Christians and Muslims close ranks by entering into or engaging in mutual dialogue.<sup>26</sup>

The Council for Inter-religious Dialogue established by the Federal Republic of Nigeria should not be given lip-service. This Council should be replicated in all the States and Local Government Areas of the federation. For genuine dialogue to attain its ultimate goal in Nigeria, religious adherents must avoid all provocative utterances, be quick to hear and understand, but must be slow to speak and react. For dialogue to be useful and resourceful in the promotion of national peace and religious harmony in Nigeria, religious stakeholders must practise love and forgiveness since all religions teach and emphasise love.

### C. Humanity and Brotherhood

The value of African communalism based on the ethical model of human-centrism must be upheld to the fullest in order to realise peaceful relations among all in Nigeria. The philosophy of communalism is “All for one, one for all, and all for God.”

Religion expects and encourages its adherents to help one another. The Africans place great value on humanity. They believe that humanity is

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<sup>25</sup>V. C. Chuwulezie, “Christian–Muslims Dialogue and Philosophy in the African Context,” *Nigeria Dialogue* (A Journal of Inter-Faith Studies) 4, 4 (1982), 34.

<sup>26</sup>O. P. Okafor, “Islam and the Survival of Nigeria,” *The Torch* 91 (April-July, 1989), 21.

a creation of God; all human beings, therefore, are the children of God.<sup>27</sup> In this sense, the Africans believe that all human beings, irrespective of their ethnic affiliations, belong to one universal human family.<sup>28</sup> “Everybody” in the African concept of humanity is related to “everybody else.”<sup>29</sup> Muslims should regard Christians as brothers and sisters and *vice versa*. True religious brotherhood transcends ethnic and religious boundaries barriers. Both Christians and Muslims should live the exemplary lives of Jesus Christ and Prophet Muhammad, respectively.

#### D. Inter-Religious Marriages

Nigeria being a pluralistic society, one powerful instrument that can enhance peaceful co-existence among the people is the instrument of inter-religious and inter-tribal marriages. Marriages contracted between adherents of different religious sects, cutting across ethnic identities, will help to encourage and promote peace and harmony in the society. It will also help to solidify brotherhood and promote understanding. All these will, in turn, promote peaceful co-existence in Negeria. It is heartening to note, that this type of marriage called “mixed marriages,” between Catholics and non-Catholics and even non-Christians, is already being practised in the Roman Catholic Church. It should be emulated by other Christian denominations. There are, even, examples of such marriages between Muslims and Catholics.

#### E. Religious Inclusivism

In a pluralistic religious society like Nigeria, no religion or religious group should claim absoluteness of religious truth. All religions should de-emphasize extreme doctrinal differences and establish common areas of cooperation for the purpose of peace and harmony. All religious adherents should consider one another as important, and see themselves as partners in progress, in a society that has been corrupted with materialism, nepotism, bribery, and corruption.<sup>30</sup> All these can be done without one compromising his or her faith.

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<sup>27</sup>K. Gyekye, *African Cultural Values: An Introduction*, Acra: SCM Publishing Co., 1996, 23-24.

<sup>28</sup>Gyekye, *African Cultural Values*, 26-27.

<sup>29</sup>Gyekye, *African Cultural Values*, 26-27.

<sup>30</sup>Isiramen and Donatus, *Philosophy of Religion, Ethics and Early Church Controversies*, 215.



#### F. Government Neutrality

The pluralistic nature of the Nigerian society, coupled with the presence of multiple religious practices, calls for absolute neutrality on the part of the Nigerian government at all levels. In this sense, the government should not use any government machinery to propagate any one religion to the neglect of others.<sup>31</sup> Any religious principle to be incorporated by the government should be beneficial to all religions that exist in the country. If this is done, religious peace and order will be enhanced. Partiality on the part of government in religious affairs, on the contrary, can only lead to the break down of law and order, and widespread loss of lives and properties. It is advisable, therefore, that in religious matters, government should play the role of an impartial umpire.<sup>32</sup>

#### F. Nigeria as a Secular State

A rigid adherence to the secular character of the Nigerian state is a *sine qua non* to the attainment of peaceful co-existence in Nigeria. By the provisions of the Nigerian Constitutions of 1999, Nigeria is a secular state,<sup>33</sup> although this provision has been liberally interpreted. Secularity in the Constitutions refers to a situation where, although there may be several religions in the state, none of them is adopted by the state as the official religion.<sup>34</sup> The 1999 Constitutions clarify it as follows: “The government of the Federation or, of a state, shall not adopt any religion as a state religion.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, the adoption of *Sharia* (Islamic laws) by some States in Nigeria is no doubt a flagrant contravention of the Nigerian Constitutions. It is, therefore, according to Ejiro’s expression, a complete *nullity ab initio*.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>Isiramen and Donatus, *Philosophy of Religion, Ethics and Early Church Controversies*, 217.

<sup>32</sup>Isiramen and Donatus, *Philosophy of Religion, Ethics and Early Church Controversies*, 217.

<sup>33</sup>Section 10, Nigerian Constitutions 1999.

<sup>34</sup>E. G. Adjarhore, “The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 and *Sharia*,” Ekpoma: LLB Thesis, 2000, 66.

<sup>35</sup>Section 10, Nigerian Constitutions 1999.

<sup>36</sup>Adjarhore, “The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 and *Sharia*,” 66.

The Nigerian Constitutions recognise the fact that Nigeria is a multi-religious state where all religions are accepted, tolerated, and respected equally.<sup>37</sup> Nigeria as a secular nation must ensure equal tolerance, practice, and possibility of perpetuation of all religions in the state. In April, 1991 one Mallam Ibrahim El-Zakazaky, the national leader of an Islamic group in Katsina, declared in a press conference that he did not recognise the Nigerian Constitutions, but only Islamic laws.<sup>38</sup> Even some of the Muslims who are in support of the *Sharia* operating in some states of Nigeria would agree that the *Sharia* is not conducive to peaceful co-existence in Nigeria which is constitutionally a secular state.

For peace and harmony to be achieved in the Nigerian nation the secularity must be upheld in its totality according to the provisions of the Nigeria Constitutions. *Sharia* or any religious laws should be restricted only to their religious sects, and cannot be legislated to be State Laws, or to replace the Constitutions. Any religious law should have no business in the Nigerian polity.

## 6. Conclusion

In order to achieve peace and harmony in the Nigerian society, religious tolerance and harmony is a *sine qua non*.<sup>39</sup> This means that religious adherents must use the instrument of dialogue to create an atmosphere of friendship and fellowship with one another. The government must play an impartial role in religious affairs. The values of love, humanity, meekness, prudence, moderation, hospitality, contentment, faith, hope, kindness, patience, etc., which are taught in all religions should be upheld for the peaceful co-existence of all Nigerians.

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<sup>37</sup>P. Nwabuike, "In God's Name," *The African Guardian*, September 5, 1988, 23.

<sup>38</sup>Nwabuike, "In God's Name," 23.

<sup>39</sup>Isiramen and Donatus, *Philosophy of Religion, Ethics and Early Church Controversies*, 218.