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AN ASSESSMENT OF THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN CONFLICT PREVENTION AND MANAGEMENT IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Conflict is a feature of every society. This is because wherever human beings are found living a patterned way of life, there is always competitions, agitations and rivalries. Thus, sociologists see conflict as an indispensable phenomenon in society. Conflict varies from one society to another and from one period of time to another. Like other societies, Nigeria has, right from its inception as a nation state, experienced different kinds of conflicts. Such conflicts include anti-colonialism, military intervention in politics, intertribal conflicts, minority agitations for recognition, inter and intra religious conflicts, and so on. Some of these conflicts have, at one time or the other threatened the existence of the country as a single indivisible political entity. Since the wish of every Nigerian as well as the government is to see the country united rather than divided, there is need to identify and explore factors that will help in conflict prevention and management. This paper therefore, examines the important role of religion in conflict prevention and management especially in the 21st century.

INTRODUCTION

Religion is a social institution (a belief system, a mental complex and a system of worship) found in every human society. In fact, as a social institution religion is characterized by its universality, its rituals, its sacredness and its persistence. Religion exists in all societies because it offers answers and some purported solutions to such ultimate questions as why we fail or succeed and why we die (Atere and Olagbemi, 1997). Different cultures produce very different systems of religious beliefs but they all share a common feature – they center around a fundamental belief in the supernatural (Awofeso and Ogunbodede, 2000).

Religion performs important functions in the society. These functions are vital for the survival and continuity of the society. Firstly, religion makes the world more comprehensible to man. There are many unexplained aspects of man's life which religion helps to explain. For example, religion helps to explain such phenomena as death, miracle, man's existence, and so on. Secondly, religion acts as a social control mechanism. It provides foundation for social norms and values. Thus, religious sanctions are sought for certain desirable patterns of behaviour to persist in society in the form of norms. As people adhere to the dos and don'ts prescribed by religion, they are able to live together in peace and harmony. Thirdly,

religion is a major force both for personal and societal change and stability.

Fourthly, religion provides succor to the emotionally wearied and materially poor. It gives hope that "a future exists for the materially weak". Equally nearly all religious rites, rituals and ceremonies point to a beautiful end to be achieved by those who are steadfast, prudent and disciplined. Religion therefore, helps in many ways to stabilize human thinking and the society, especially in times of conflicts

Like religion, conflict is a universal phenomenon. It is indeed, a feature of every society though it occurs more in plural societies. Coser (1959:8) defines conflict as "a struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power and resources in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralize, injure, or eliminate their rivals". Otite (1999) conceptualizes conflict as "a way of settling problems originating from opposing interests and from the continuity of society." Ordinarily, conflict is seen as something abnormal dysfunctional and therefore detestable. Yet it cannot be avoided totally in societies.

Conflict resolution can be very difficult in a complex society. Otite (1999) attributes such difficulties to the determinate effects of culture and language symbolism Avruch and Black (1993) argue equally that it is dangerous to ignore culture in conflict resolution in multi-ethnic/multi-cultural societies. Taking cognizance of culture in conflict resolution is, by implication, having regard for cultural traits such as religion in conflict resolution. This is because religion, for example, can play an important role in conflict prevention and resolution. It is equally possible however, to use religion as an instrument for conflict creation. This paper assesses the role which religion has played in conflict prevention and management in Nigeria. It also examines how religion can be used for conflict prevention and management in the country.

CONFLICTS IN NIGERIA

Nigeria is a plural society. That is, it is made up of heterogeneous cultures and societies. The country is multilingual with over 513 languages (Bangbose, 1978; Modo, 1998). This implies that there are certainly more than 513 cultural forms in the

country. British colonialists identified 250 ethnic groups in Nigeria, but recent studies (e.g. Otite, 1990; Crozier and Blench, 1992; Grimes, 2000) put the figure at between 370 and 400.

It has been observed that plural societies are often characterized by different types of conflicts, hence, hardly can conflict be discussed outside the concept of pluralism (Otite, 1999). As a plural society, Nigeria has witnessed several conflicts which range from communal/ethnic to religious conflicts (Oluwabamide, 2006). Though the plural nature of the country may encourage conflict, it is not entirely responsible for the multiples of conflicts it has witnessed since Independence. After all, there are plural societies that do not experience such. A good example is Canada where there has been relative peace.

We shall now examine some of the major conflicts that Nigeria has experienced. These are the Ife-Modakeke conflict, Kano ethnic and religious conflicts, Tiv-Jukun communal conflict and Zango Kataf conflict.

The Ife – Modakeke conflict is an intra-ethnic (Yoruba) conflict. It was one of the most prolonged conflicts in Nigeria. It went on for more than one century and claimed many lives (Albert, 1999). Warlords of the warring communities continue to maintain their conflicting positions. While the Ifes sought to drive the Modakekes away from what they claimed as their land, the Modakekes regarded where they are as their ancestral home. Both sides were prepared to fight to the last in maintaining their stands. Past efforts to resolve the conflict failed. Most recent efforts at resolving the crisis has reduced tension and brought relative peace to the area. The present governor of Osun State (where the two communities are situated), Prince Olagunsoye Oyinlola was the initiator of a peace move that brought a relative calmness to the area.

Several ethnic and religious conflicts have been recorded in Kano, the most populated and industrialized city in Northern Nigeria. These conflicts have been traced to modern migrations into Kano (Albert, 1999). That is, the 20th century migrations of the Christian-dominated Southern Nigerian traders and public servants into the City. Though the Yoruba

were the first Southern the Igbo now domi population in the Ci According to Albert (15 inception of the coloni: Kano, the British fore would mar the relatio..... en the “Kanawa” and the Southern Nigeria settlers in their midst who were at that time mainly Yoruba. The first problem that revealed itself was religious. Kano, a predominantly Islamic urban center, was very aggressive towards Western civilization. On the other hand, the Southern Nigerians had a long history of contacts with the Europeans and hence, Western civilization. In the 1950s, the City of Kano became more industrialized and attracted more Southern Nigerians especially Igbo who formed the largest percentage of the migrants. The Kanawa became increasingly sensitive to the settlers (Paden, 1973; Albert, 1999). Many violent conflicts subsequently emanated from this background. These include the 1953 ethnic violence, the 1966 crisis and the 1995 ethnic disturbance at Sabon Gari market.

Religious conflicts have also been recorded in Kano. They range from intra-religious to inter-religious conflicts. The former was between the fundamental and orthodox Muslims while the latter was the Muslims and Christians. These conflicts often result in serious loss of lives and properties. Intra-religious conflicts include the Maitatsine riot of 1980, the Shiite attacks of 1996 and 1997. The inter-religious conflicts on the other hand, include the 1982 Faggo crisis, Reinhard Bonke riot of 1991, the Akaluka incident of 1994, etc.

The Tiv and Jukun communities in Taraba State had a prolonged dispute over land, traditional rulership, political authority and fears of domination and marginalization (Best et al., 1999) The conflict which began in 1990 persisted for more than two years. Large number of people were killed while properties worth so many millions of Naira were lost. According to Best et al (1999:83), “the carnage associated with the conflict was probably unprecedented in the history of communal conflicts in Nigeria”. The Nigerian government had made moves in reconciling the parties concerned. But recently, some success was recorded as relative calm has returned to the area.

Kano, nigrant (1999). om the tion in es that en the

The Zangon Kataf crisis is another major conflict that has recorded serious losses to the country in terms of lives and properties. It was a riot which occurred in Zangon Kataf area of Kaduna State in 1992. The riot spread to Kaduna city and some other parts of the state, leading to loss of lives and properties. According to Akinleye et al (1999) the riot broke out as a result of an order to relocate a market. The order given by the then Kachia Local Government Council was not executed until 1992 under the Zangon Kataf Local Government Council. The attempt to execute the decision sparked off the riots, which claimed thousands of lives and valuable properties.

The fundamental causes of the Zangon Kataf crisis include: ethnic factors, political/traditional/chieftaincy. socio-economic/cultural disparity and religious disparity (Akinteye et al, 1999). Thus, the Zangon Kataf riots were not just a religious conflicts but also ethnic, political and cultural conflicts. This explains the interdependence of social institutions as posited by functionalist, sociologists and social anthropologists.

ROLE PLAYED BY RELIGION

In Nigeria, religion has served not only as a means of conflict management or resolution but also as a means of conflict prevention. This was essentially through the mechanism of inter-religious dialogue. The mechanism has been explored and used frequently by the government in handling not only religious conflicts but other types of conflicts.

Inter-religious dialogue has been defined as a forum purposely created to generate contact, discussion and interaction between two or more different religious groups with a view to bringing about an atmosphere of peaceful cooperation (Udo, 2006). Thus, Udo (2006:73) states:

Inter-religious dialogue is a process in which individuals and groups learn to wipe out fears and distrust to each other, and develop new relations based on mutual trust. It is a style of living that can lead to a common desire for a search for thorough and a reciprocal exchange of information and insights with each other and thus deepens and strengthens our knowledge of each other's religious truth.

From the above comments, it is very obvious that inter-religious dialogue is

a very reliable tool for conflict prevention and management. In virtually all the conflicts Nigeria has witnessed since her Independence, the government has, through time, realized the value of inter-religious dialogue and has used it extensively to achieve peace.

Successive governments in Nigeria have been concerned about how to create good relations among the various religions in Nigeria. The focus has particularly been the relation between Islam and Christianity, which are the major religions in the country today. In periods of communal conflicts, the government has found religious leaders very useful. For example, in virtually all the dialogues that brought some resolution to both the Tiv-Jukun and Ife-Modakeke conflicts, religious leaders were involved. Though these conflicts were inter-ethnic in nature, leaders of the two main religions prominently participate in every stage of dialogue involving members of the two communities concerned and their traditional rulers. It is believed that apart from the ethnic identity of each community, their members definitely belonged to either or both religions and they have high regard for their religious leaders and their views.

Inter-religious dialogue was particularly useful to the government during periods of intra and inter-religious conflicts. Nigeria has indeed, witnessed several inter-religious conflicts – the most recent of which are the Jos conflict of late 2008 and that of Bauchi in early 2009. Having realized that the prevention and management of inter-religious conflicts rest on creating good relations among the adherents of the two major religions (Christianity and Islam), the government continuously encouraged peaceful co-existence between the adherents of the two religions.

This has helped a great deal in both conflict prevention and management in Nigeria. Leaders of the two religions are often brought together by the government to emphasize their unity and also to help in creating peace and harmony where there are crisis and tension. They engage in dialogues that would restore peace. These are leaders whose views and instructions are highly esteemed by the adherents of their religions. Inter-religious dialogue played an important role in the management of all the religious

conflicts recorded in Kano and this has indeed always brought peace to the City. Similarly, during the Zango Kataf conflict, religious leaders were made to dialogue and a number of such dialogues took place together with other mechanisms and brought peace to the area.

USING RELIGION FOR CONFLICT PREVENTION IN NIGERIA

It is obvious that religion can be of immense use in conflict prevention and resolution. But it would need to be properly harnessed to make it useful for conflict prevention. Firstly, efforts should be made by the government to implore leaders of every religion in the country to preach unity and peace to their followers. In churches, sermons that encourage brotherliness among different ethnic groups should be preached. Similarly, in mosques, emphasis should be placed on brotherly love and unity, in most sermons. People should be made to know that ethnic identities notwithstanding, Nigerians are brothers and sisters who should always live together as one.

Secondly, government should take the teaching of religious studies at the primary and secondary schools levels more seriously. Teachers of such subjects should be made to emphasize aspects of religion that promote unity, love and peace among people. Inculcating a sense of patriotism with the teaching of religious knowledge can also be used to promote love for one's country. Children who grow with such notions are likely to accept one another and co-exist peacefully with other Nigerians.

Thirdly, prominent religious leaders should be included in the team of advisers to the President and State Governors. This would add some touch of love and compassion to government policies that the populace may not like. Such leaders would also find it much easier to educate the populace on the intentions of government.

Fourthly, appropriate quotations from the Bible, Quran and other respected religious books can be adapted for media campaigns and citizenship training programmes. Such programmes should focus on the essence of living in harmony regardless of ethnic/cultural backgrounds or religious differences.

CONCLUSION

Nigeria has witnessed series of socio-political conflicts in recent time. A number of such violent conflicts have threatened the unity of the country. Religious differences are certainly not the only cause of conflicts. However, religious education and admonition can be directed at conflict prevention and management in Nigeria. Among other recommendations, it is believed here that the inculcation of useful religious values at the primary and secondary schools levels could aid in conflict management and resolution in Nigeria.

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