

## Religious Diversity and National Integration in Nigeria

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Nigeria is a diverse country with about 150 Million people; it is multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious; hugely pluralistic and clearly heterogeneous. In fact, the beauty and strength of its existence as a nation lie in the variety and unity of its set up. Imagine the complexities and divergences that exist in the stretch from Port Harcourt to Sokoto; from Lagos to Maiduguri, or from Enugu to Yola. The geographical landscape of the country varies, stretching from the Sahel Savannah in the far North to the rain forest down South, just like the people who are also remarkably unique in their individual outlooks and orientations, but united in their humanity. These diversities are evidently manifested in the citizens' cultural and religious practices. For instance, there are more than 400 documented ethnic groups across the land comprising of millions of people who are adherents of the two major religions of Islam and Christianity and, to a lesser extent, the traditional religion (Albert, 2002). The citizens are religious in profession and even the Constitution is religious, as it begins with the words "UNDER GOD", though the Nation has not adopted any religion as a State Religion. God is centrally considered in the affairs of the people.

Most Nigerians adhere to the two religions, though, it is widely known that there are differences in their understanding and projections of the religions both at the intra and inter group levels. For instance, in spite of the fact that all Muslims are united in their belief of the fundamental pillars of the religion, many of them, however, differ in their actions, sometimes determined by sectarian variation. The story is similar among the Christians. But that is not the main problem; rather the politicisation, manipulation or outright mischievous projection of these sectarian differences or identities combined with ignorance and deep seated suspicions and stereotypes are what often resulted into violent shocks and conflicts at the intra and inter group levels with severe consequences on the security and integration of the Nation (Pate, 2010).

In recent years, the frequency and prevalence of such conflicts appear to be on the increase in Nigeria. Fifty years after our independence, we are still confronted with some irritating and unacceptable facts about our social reality that continue to dent the integrity and unity of the Nation. In particular, ethno-religious violence and fears have literally redefined our understanding and concept of trust as the basis of peaceful co-existence, especially in Northern Nigeria. For instance, between 1976 and 2009, over 100, 000 people had lost their lives and property worth billions of Naira have been destroyed in more than fifty recorded ethno-religious conflicts in that part of Nigeria (*Newswatch*, Nov 2, 2009; Elaigwu, 2004). These conflicts had left trails of political, social, economic and psychological losses and pains and injured and poisoned established relationships among Nigerians. Increasingly, Nigerians of different religions are feeling insecure and highly vulnerable in some corners of the country. Specific towns and zones have, rightly or wrongly, acquired images of terror centres that should be avoided. Such conflicts had affected the spirit of national unity and integration, which is about living together, about the unity and harmony of the diverse people of the federal republic with a common goal accustomed to each other in freedom, love, interdependence, to the extent that we cannot think of an alternative that can be better than the country.

A number of factors account for the explosion in sectarian violence in the country. The first is ignorance or insufficient understanding of the teachings of the religions. For instance, Muslims are enjoined to live as far as possible in the Islamic State. But, they are also taught to live with others (non-Muslims) and to treat these others well. All Mankind is informed and reminded by Islam in the Holy Qur'an that Allah created them from a Male and a Female, and made them into nations and tribes, only so that they may know one another and that the most honourable with Allah is the one who fears Allah most (Hujurat (49): 13). In other words, we are all created equal regardless of gender, race or nationality. Not only should Muslims treat all people as equal, but treat them with respect, speak good to people (Baqarah (2): 83) and make peace among all (fear God and make peace among (all) humans (Baqarah (2):) For the avoidance of doubt, the Qur'an discourages Muslims from raucous arguments with the followers of the other Religions of the Book (Christians and Jews) except to invite them to

Islam through civility, good words, good manners, and good example Aminu, 2003).

**The religion of Islam, for instance, admonishes its adherence to establish good manners of interacting with one another in as much as that will not affect the bounds set by Allah. Ash-Shulhoob (2003) observes that it is only natural that one befriends a person whose religion and manners you approve of and that you avoid the company of a person whose religion and manners you dislike. This suggests that it is forbidden to keep company with people who perpetrate negative acts like corruption, conflict, hatred, killing and other acts which are not the teachings of any religion.**

The second factor relates to aspects of politicisation where individuals in particular places in the country describe their religion or ethnic group as the majority or minority for the sake of access to resources. Huge energies are expended and wild arguments thrown around on who is the majority, minority, etc. Through careless handling, some of these arguments degenerate into violent ethnic or religious conflict that tends to be extremely savage and bloody with no end, because neither group can effectively, let alone permanently, neutralize the other. Failure to live in peace is thus not only lack of common sense; it is a charter for periodic genocidal bloodletting. Both the Christians and Muslims should know that, particularly the ordinary people who are the cannon fodder of these senseless conflicts.

**In essence, the notion of dominance over resources is a violation of Islamic teachings. There is emphasis on equality in Islam. Ethnicity which creates feelings of pride or inferiority complex leads to social injustice and serious conflict to any given society. On this the Quran says: “O mankind, we have created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another. Verily, the most honorable of you with Allah is that (believer) who has At-Taqwa (the pious)” see Q.49:13. The sentimental feeling of either minority or majority would never help in nation building. However, with good understanding and respect of one another’s right to citizenship as well as worship, we shall build a virile nation and live as a developing community. Society can only develop when there is peaceful co-existence and due regard in our social interactions. That is why Islam emphasizes Taqwa (piety) as the thing that brings one to reputation in life.**

Furthermore, factors like lack of appreciation of different cultures, intolerance, poverty and institutional fragility also fuel the degeneration in the appreciation of issues of religious diversity in the country. **Nigeria with about 150 million people has numerous cultural backgrounds. Religious intolerance is rooting weaknesses and contempt against each other’s religion. Such attitude still may lead to frictions misunderstanding, discordance, hostility and confrontation. Islam, as a matter of fact, abhors every traces of intolerance to the extent of giving serious warning in the Quran that; “there is no compulsion in the religion”. Many adherents are ignorant about their religious teachings and ultimately resort demonstrating anti-religious behaviors.** Others are: unemployment, influences of international extremists, shallow media coverage, localization of knowledge and spread of provincialism among young people, and similar factors contribute to the promotion of singularity of identities with the attendant consequence on diversity and multicultural outlook of individual and collective identities in the country (Sen, 2006). All of these impacts negatively on the tolerance level of Nigerians of diverse religions, which are reinforced by the poverty of ideas in the body politics and the irresponsible behavior of the elites.

**Although cultural difference would hardly be buried in many communities, let such differences remain in areas of promoting unity and development of the respective institution only. Muslims are admonished to think positively for their betterment and development of Islam. Intolerance hinders constructive development and that would be the genesis of poverty and social problem to an institution such as Nigeria. The Muslim community is balanced in the sense that it is not rigid or dogmatic. It holds fast to its ideals and traditions and to the sources of its religion as a way of life while fostering change and progress in all fields. It is an open society that welcomes new ideas and learns from the work and experience of other societies, cultures and civilization. Its main objectives are to seek the truth, wherever that may come from, and to adopt it with courage and confidence.**

Balance and moderation are clear in the way Muslim society is run and organized. It is neither permissive, undisciplined community nor a regimented one run but brute force of rigid rules. It is a society raised by learning, education and rich cultural AND SOCIAL traditions.

**Within the Muslim ‘middle’ community, equitable and fair relationships are cultivated and regulated among individuals and social groups in the community. Individual right and liberties are guaranteed and protected in order to encouraged innovation, production and growth, in a manner that will serve the common good without infringing upon the rights of the individual, or endangering the society as a whole. Individual as well as collective rights and obligations are clearly defined to enable people to a society that will care for them and protect their rights and interest (Qutb 1999).**

Thus, for the promotion of religious diversity for strengthening of Nigeria’s national integration, we may need to positively consider the following:

Promote general knowledge about Nigeria among the people. The understanding of the Nigerian nation and its citizens in terms of geography, history, sociological and anthropological set ups and other basic information that can foster the spirit of empathy are grossly deficient. This is why today even basic arguments on general issues of governance are easily and stoutly localized into the ethnic or religious prisms. Matters arising are simplistically ethicized or religionised to the detriment of the collective good.

- Promote effective transformational leaderships that lead by examples; if the political leadership appreciates the enormity of the challenge, it could strengthen existing policies that promote mixing up in schools where young people of diverse backgrounds are encouraged to learn in communities outside of their own( others like excursions, sports, etc)
- Strengthening of weak institutions like the media, transport system, etc to encourage free flow of ideas and goods and services across narrow boundaries (e.g SW broadcasting, railways, etc.)
- Promote active debates on democracy and related ideological issues to expand the democratic space so that people would have enough to talk on instead of denying them the opportunity to openly debate on such issues thereby confining their imaginations to their ethnic and religious groups. We have to encourage open debates on issues across ethno-religious boundaries.
- Address the challenges of poverty and mass unemployment in a more creative manner. Poverty promotes desperation making the poor to believe any false proposition made to him to exit from poverty. So, to reduce the vulnerability of the poor to mischief makers, their conditions must be ameliorated.

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