

Christian Ethical Response to Inter-Religious Violence in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Inter-religious violence in Nigeria is a worrisome problem that calls for an ethical response. Nigeria as a country has been bedeviled by incessant religious conflicts mostly between the two of the three major religions practiced in it – Islam and Christianity. The paper argues that some principles of morality can provide an objective standard by which the menace of inter-religious violence in Nigeria can be tackled. The study presents some Christian ethical values that could be employed to address inter-religious violence in Nigeria. Accordingly, using the analytical method, this study discusses the reality of inter-religious violence in Nigeria, the causes of inter-religious violence in Nigeria, and possible ways of addressing the unending chain of inter-religious violence by appealing for nonviolence, reason, dialogue and the value of human life. Findings from the study show that intolerance and ignorance of others' religion are major factors that trigger conflicts in Nigeria. The study, therefore, recommends the introduction of inter-religious education at all levels of education by the Federal Government of Nigeria, as a panacea for nipping inter-religious violence in the bud.

Keywords: Ethics, Violence, Inter-religious Violence, Dialogue, Nonviolence.

I. INTRODUCTION

The subject of inter-religious violence, in its multifaceted forms, has become an issue of global concern. Nigeria, as a country, is not exempt from the manifestation of inter-religious violence. As a matter of fact, Nigeria has experienced a fair share of the eruptions of inter-religious violence in various forms. The world, as a global community, links people of different religious orientations and

ideologies together (Shupe, 1990; Gwamna, 2010). Thus, as people from different religious orientations and ideologies continue to interact, there is the tendency of a conflict which manifests as inter-religious crises occasioned by religious convictions and ideologies (Adeoye, 2005). Nigeria, no doubt, stands out as a typical example of a country inundated by religious conflicts. As a result, religion has become a divisive instrument and constitutes a growing flash point in Nigeria (Best, 2001). Okebukola (2012) aptly describes religion as the underlying force, precipitating conflicts, civil and international oppression. As a matter of fact, there is no form of violence in Nigeria that is not usually linked to religion (Mayer, 2013).

There is no doubt that Nigerian citizens have been traumatized by these unabated waves of inter-religious violence in different parts of the country. This culture of violence, which has become prevalent and unpredictable, has further heightened the level of insecurity in Nigeria, and by implication, spelt doom on the peaceful coexistence of its citizens. Nigeria, as a country, lacks the institutions to properly manage the excesses and fanaticism arising from the two, out of the three major religions in Nigeria, that is, Islam and Christianity. This view is supported by Kwaja (2009) who opined that Nigeria stands out as an example of a state plagued by inter-religious crises evolving from lack of institutional structures and proper management. These inter-religious crises, says Wotogbe-Weneka (2012), usually occur among the constitutionally recognized religions.

Inter-religious violence in Nigeria is a by-product of competing religious beliefs and rivalry. There is, therefore, an urgent need to address this

hydra-headed menace which is fast becoming a norm in the Nigerian society. This is due to the fact that adherents of Islam and Christianity are not tolerant and accommodating each other (Onaiyekan, 1997). As a result of the evangelical activities of these two religions, they see themselves as potential rivals, rather than neighbours, as noted by Sampson (2012). Thus, both religions usually fight for supremacy in matters of politics and the economy. In this regard, adherents of African Traditional Religion seem to be more tolerant of other religions. Although this attitude of intolerance is not peculiar to religions in Nigeria, the fact remains that the form it assumes in Nigeria poses a serious concern. There is no doubt that the rate at which inter-religious violence is spreading in Nigeria deserves attention (Abbas & Uthman, 2012).

Presently, there are evidences of increasing inter-religious violence bedeviling the country. Available records show that about ninety-five (95%) of these inter-religious crises occur in the northern part of Nigeria (Ezeanokwasa, 2009). Lives and properties, which cannot be quantified have been destroyed and the socio-economic life of Nigerian citizens has been terribly disrupted (Gwamna, 2010; Adegoke, 2012). Remarkably, there are conflicting records to adequately account for all inter-religious violence that have erupted in Nigeria and their casualty figures (Salawu, 2010). Notwithstanding, available records show that the past two to three decades have been characteristically bloody (Alanamu, 2006; Egwu, 2011). Thus, discussions on how to address inter-religious violence have come to occupy a prominent place among top security issues in Nigeria (Sampson, 2012). As more of these cases on inter-religious violence continue to erupt unabated, it has become absolutely relevant to address these issues from the ethical perspectives of Christianity and Islam. This paper, however, explores a Christian ethical perspective to inter-religious in Nigeria with a view to providing a long term solution to the menace.

The Reality of Inter-Religious Violence in Nigeria

McCain (2005) narrated his personal experience of what transpired in a Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN) meeting which he attended in Jos where the reports of religious violence in Kano were discussed. According to McCain, there were three parts of the meeting: the first part was an official report of the number of churches that were burned and the number of members that were killed in each of the

denominations; the second part of the meeting was on how the churches in Jos could give assistance to some of the people who had been displaced as a result of losing their homes and all their possessions; while the third part of the meeting was a discussion on how pastors and church members could defend their church buildings in case of an attack. There is another reported incidence of the deadly church bombing on Christmas Day which claimed the lives of 20 Christians. This was followed soon after by the bombing of an Islamic school (Feddes, 2012). In April 1991, there was an outburst of inter-religious violence in Tafawa Balewa which was precipitated by a quarrel in the market between a Christian butcher and some Hausa/Fulani people. In the ensuing impasse, many Muslims were killed. On carrying the corpses from Tafawa Balewa to Bauchi town, a reprisal was launched on the Christians in the town. This led to the massacre of many Christian settlers in the town (Alanamu, 2005; Armstrong, 2014). There was another incidence from February 21-22, 2000 where an estimated 3,000 people lost their lives in a clash between Muslims and Christians in Kaduna. There was a reprisal attack in Aba, Abia State and about 450 persons were killed (Olukorede, 2002). In May 22-23, 2000, Christians and Muslims clashed again and over 300 lives were lost (Olukorede, 2002). The above incidences are indicative of the reality of inter-religious violence in Nigeria and their attendant casualties. There are concerted efforts by scholars to address the menace of inter-religious violence from sociological, theological, psychological, economic, normative, religious and historical perspectives (Gambari, 1992; Jibrin, 1997; Istifanus, 1997; Korieh, 2005; Adogame, 2005; Jibrin, Agbiboa, 2012; among others).

Causes of Inter-Religious Violence

Ekanem (2014) underscores the causes of inter-religious violence when he attempts to discuss why adherents of religion hide under the auspices of religion to perpetrate violence in the name of God. He identifies two main factors that are responsible for this. The first is the inherent ambiguity in the founding texts and stories of these religions. The second is related to the stories of heroes in these religions who considered themselves as acting under divine authority to kill and destroy those they perceived as infidels or enemies. He argues that there have been elements of violence in all the major world religions, even though they do not necessarily preach violence in those religions. Ekanem, however, appeals for peace among religious adherents, since he believes

that killing in the name of God is a contradiction to the very core of religion.

Omotosho (2013) examines the causes of inter-religious violence in Nigeria with a view to proffering possible solution. He identifies three types of religious violence prevalent in Nigeria. They are: intra-religious violence, inter-religious violence and political violence. He explains that intra-religious violence occurs within a particular religion, citing the Maitatsine riots of December 1980 in Kano and the one of October 1982 in Maiduguri, among others, as notable examples. He explains further that inter-religious violence occurs between two to more religions that are different. He cited the Kafanchan violence of March 6, 1987, the violence between Christianity and Islam on April 1991 in Bauchi State and the Reinhard Bonnke riot in Kano, as notable examples of this classification. He identifies disrespect for other religions, manifestation of hatred, blackmail, lack of understanding and extremism as five major factors responsible for inter-religious violence in Nigeria. Remarkably, he posits that political violence is usually erroneously mistaken as inter-religious violence simply because members of the parties are usually members of the major religions. A notable example is the Zangon Kataf riot of 1992 between Hausa settlers and non-Hausa people of southern Zaria. He opined that the origin of inter-religious violence in Nigeria could be linked to a long-standing rivalry between Christianity and Islam, which dates back to the sixth century A.D. He also identifies colonialism as a factor for inter-religious crises in Nigeria.

There are also inter-religious crises caused by indigenes versus settlers' rifts and that caused by politicians which are purported to be inter-religious violence. The reason is that there are political and ethnic crises which have a religious coloration. In his essay, Sampson (2012) presents another important perspective on the causes of inter-religious violence in Nigeria. He noted that since 1999, religious crises have been on the increase in the country. He, however, observes that these crises do not occur in a vacuum. He identifies certain visible factors such as religious intolerance, fundamentalism and extremism, obstructive and disruptive modes of worship, disparaging preaching and stereotyping, method of proselytizing, government patronage of one religion to the chagrin of the other, religious preferentialism and marginalization, sensationalism in media reportage and the suspicious use of religious symbols as visible causes of inter-religious violence in Nigeria. He also acknowledges and identifies some measures taken

by the federal government in a bid to bring these crises under control. Despite these measures, he notes regrettably that religious violence continued to pose serious security challenges to the country. As a solution to religious violence in Nigeria, he recommends the kind of education he calls "neo-religious educational praxis".

In his article, Danjibo (n.d) posits that the failure of Government is responsible for the recurring sectarian violence in Nigeria. This article provides an insight into one of the fundamental factors that is responsible for the incessant inter-religious violence in Nigeria, which is the failure of government to provide adequate security and to execute culprits and sponsors of inter-religious violence. Even though the Nigerian government has taken a number of constitutional, legislative and policy measures to manage the incidence of inter-religious violence, there is no remarkable long-term strategy that is targeted at addressing the remote and immediate causes of inter-religious violence in a comprehensive manner. In other words, there is no comprehensive conflict management approach to address or forestall inter-religious violence in Nigeria. Corroborating this fact, Achunike (2008:287) asserts that "government involvement in religious matters, among others, is responsible for inter-religious conflicts in Nigeria."

In his work, Muhammad (2008) contributes to the causes of inter-religious violence in Nigeria. He posits that the increase in ethno-religious violence in Nigeria since the wake of democratic rule is partly due to the freedom inherent in democracy itself. He argues that this freedom has made it possible for Muslims and Christians to see religious considerations as a normal phenomenon. The situation is further aggravated by deep-rooted ethnic consciousness in the country. These have resulted in increase in recruitments of ethnic and religious militia since 1999. Muhammad concludes that political stability is only possible if the federal government takes urgent and responsible steps in addressing religious and ethnic contestations in the country.

Contributing to the causes of inter-religious violence in Nigeria, Sani (n.d) presents a comprehensive list of seventy (70) causes of religious conflicts in Nigeria. He identifies poverty, corruption, non-implementation of previous probe panel reports, impunity of past perpetrators of the violence, proliferation of preachers and worship centers, provocative and inciting utterances, sensational journalism, political manipulation of religion, incitement in the social media and the use of mobile telephones, among others, as fundamental causes of religious violence in

Northern Nigeria. Even though the causes are quite comprehensive, they are not elaborated upon.

Bolatito (2013) identifies two major factors that are responsible for inter-religious violence in Nigeria. These include modernism and the intermingling of religion and politics. He argues that the absence of love in modern societies has culminated into lack of respect for human dignity among religious people. He posits that the intermingling of religion and politics has also made inter-religious violence inevitable. He explains that once religion enters the public arena, violent conflicts are inevitable, because politicians use religion for their own personal interest. The violent and incessant attacks in the northern parts of Nigeria give credence to this fact. He asserts that religiously motivated political struggle is what has given birth to the terrorism that is plaguing the Nigerian state. Accordingly, he advocates for strong laws as the solution to inter-religious crises in Nigeria. He adds a clarion call on religious leaders and security agencies to play a major role in ensuring that this goal is achieved. Suffice it to say that hatred, distrust, insecurity and animosity among the adherents of the three major religions in Nigeria are causes of, as well as creations of inter-religious violence in Nigeria.

Effects of Inter-Religious Violence in Nigeria

There is no doubt that inter-religious violence has led to the displacement of many Nigerians living in violence prone areas; it has also caused citizens to live in fear in the areas that are prone to inter-religious violence; it has also created hatred, distrust, insecurity and animosity among the adherents of the three major religions in Nigeria.

Gwadah (personal communication, July 16, 2017) and Ako (personal communication, April 25, 2017) narrate that a visit to the areas, communities and places ravaged or prone to inter-religious violence shows that adherents are traumatized, disillusioned, discouraged, devastated and are in apparent shock to continuously and freely exercise their faith and witness due to the impact of human and materials losses, as well as loss of properties they have suffered from the menace of inter-religious violence in Nigeria. This is obvious, considering the fact that any inter or intra conflicts or violence, whether religious, political, economic, social or otherwise leaves or inflicts severe unimaginable, immeasurable and unquantifiable losses, damages and injuries to lives and properties. This assertion is in agreement with the submission of Mayer (2013) and Wotogbe-Weneka, (2012) that there is no form of violence in Nigeria that is not usually linked to the

constitutionally recognized religions, namely, Christianity and Islam. According to Sampson (2012), the modulus operandi, worship, undertakings, propagations, and practices among the adherents or believers of Islam and Christianity often portray them as potential rivals or adversaries, rather than worshippers of one God. Akanji (personal communication, April 23, 2017) opines that religious conflict, more than any kind of conflict, has become highly inflammable because of its propensity for eruption and escalation. According to him, an occurrence in one part of the nation spreads easily to other parts through reprisal attacks with unlimited damaging effects.

A situation where religion has turned into a conflict-ridden, discordant or acrimonious tool that consistently and continuously creates a rising flash point for intra and inter-religious conflicts, crisis and violence in Nigeria are unhealthy for evangelistic endeavours (Best, 2001). Akanji (personal communication, April 23, 2017) narrates that inter-religious violence has led to attacks of innocent citizens, incalculable destruction of property and the displacement of many people. Thus, inter-religious violence has led many of our Nigerian citizens to be internally displaced and others to become refugees in neighbouring countries.

Christian Ethical Response to Inter-Religious Violence in Nigeria

In addressing the issue of inter-religious violence in Nigeria from a Christian ethical perspective, it is pertinent to apply some Christian principles of morality such as, the value of human life, an appeal to nonviolence, an appeal to dialogue and an appeal to justice, in order to curb inter-religious violence and its attendant consequences in Nigeria.

(a) The Value of Human Life

In applying ethical principles, logical reasoning demands that the value of human life must be paramount; for without life, there are no human beings and there can be no morality (Thiroux, 1977). Bolatito (2013) observes that the absence of love in modern societies has culminated into lack of respect for human dignity among religious people. Accordingly, a consciousness of the dignity and value of human life will serve as a template for resisting the temptation of wanton destruction of human lives in Nigeria during inter-religious violence. It is not just enough to protect human life; Nigerian citizens must also work to preserve the dignity of human life. Human life warrants protection in all circumstances as the

highest priority, because without it, no other rights or protections can achieve their purpose.

The principles of life and dignity are deeply enmeshed. An application of this principle is vital and of utmost importance, considering how many human lives are lost and devastated in the various recorded cases of inter-religious violence in Nigeria. Wariboko (2015:178), opined that “Muslims and Christians in Nigeria who appear to be perpetually in verbal as well as physical combat and vanguard most bloody religious conflicts in Nigeria ought to have a rethink and appreciate that life is sacrosanct and must not be toyed with at the whims and caprices.” It is virtually impossible to have a peaceful society without acknowledging and defending the right to life, upon which all other inalienable rights of individuals are founded and from which they develop. Only respect for life can be the foundation and guarantee for mutual co-existence in Nigeria and the promotion of a healthy and safe society. It is evident that the ethical concept of nonviolence is built on the principle of the sacredness or sanctity of human lives who are made in the image and likeness of God.

The human life is of inestimable value that should be preserved and protected as much as practically possible. Thus, the appeal to the value of human life will help us to eschew violence as a solution to problems, knowing that no matter how serious the issue in question may be, the life of one single individual who may be lost in the ensuing violence is of far greater importance. Even in a situation where violence is a reaction to an earlier violence (reprisals or revenge), the appeal to the value of human life offers us the option that the best and right thing to do is to limit the number of the dead rather than increase the number. The value of human life is low in Nigeria and there is an urgent need to reverse the trend. It is, therefore, incumbent on all Christians in particular and Nigerians in general, to place high value on human lives in responding to inter-religious violence. This is the way human lives can be protected and preserved.

(b) An Appeal to Nonviolence

The term, “nonviolence,” according to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, is “the practice of refusing to respond to anything with violence; it is also the avoidance or abstention from violence as a matter of principle.” Weber and Burrowes (2011) posit that nonviolence is “an umbrella term for describing a range of methods for dealing with conflict, which share the common principle that physical violence, at least against other people, is not used.” However, it is evident that there is a considerable debate on the precise meaning of

nonviolence. There are some who consider nonviolent action as an expedient technique for dealing with conflict or bringing about social change, while others consider nonviolence as a moral imperative or even a way of life (Sharp, 1973). Sharp makes a very significant statement about non-violent action:

Nonviolent action is a technique by which people who reject passivity and submission, and who see struggle as essential, can wage their conflict without violence. Nonviolent action is not an attempt to avoid or ignore conflict. It is one response to the problem of how to act effectively in politics, especially how to wield powers effectively (64).

In essence, nonviolence is to protest peacefully or work for social changes without resorting to violence. Thus, nonviolence depicts a principle, a personal value system and a way of life; and it is often linked with or used as a synonym for peace. In the words of Weber and Burrowes (2011:4), “nonviolence consists of acts of protest, persuasion and nonviolent intervention designed to undermine the source of power of the opponent in order to bring about change.”

Disagreements and conflicts among people are inevitable. Accordingly, human beings are divinely endowed with the ability and capability to proffer solutions to problems through reason and nonviolence. Therefore, instead of using violence, humans should deliberately and consciously decide on better and more reasonable options to solving problems. Even when the possibility or reality of violence is recognized, rational thinking teaches that there are other methods of conflict resolution that should be employed rather than resorting to violence and reprisal attacks. Accepting violence as inevitable can weaken the moral resolve to confront and face its challenges and deadliness. Humans should, therefore, be willing to explore other ways of resolving conflicts and disagreements.

It is worth stating that resorting to violence is demeaning and reduces humans from the high pinnacle of dignity where God places them in the order of creation. Therefore, when plans are being made to perpetrate violence, it is good to think about the possible effects of such violent actions. When violence results in death, as often seen in inter-religious violence, the loss is irredeemable. Even when there is no loss of lives, destruction of properties, injuries and harm done to persons affect lives negatively. Such realization should compel people to imbibe the moral principle of nonviolence and to eschew hatred which

accompanies violence, thus making our society a better and peaceful place to live in.

(c) An Appeal to Dialogue

Copeland (1971) discusses the possibility of inter-religious dialogue between Christianity and other world religions. He defines dialogue as an interaction between persons in which both persons are willing to give up their particularistic tendencies in order to promote mutual relationship. He posits that this understanding of dialogue may not be easy to achieve because of the deep differences between the major world religions, the passion that accompanies religious commitment, the esoteric nature of religious experiences and religious languages, among others. Accordingly, he identifies five conditions upon which inter-religious dialogue may be possible. They are:

- The use of a common language or interpretations into languages understood by all religious parties;
- Respect for other people's religious convictions, even if one radically disagrees with them;
- In-depth knowledge and conviction of one's own religion;
- In-depth knowledge of other people's religion; and
- The willingness to take the risk which inter-religious dialogue entails.

The relevance of Copeland's article lies in the fact that it delves into the issue of dialogue, which is a Christian principle or value that can be utilized to address inter-religious violence in Nigeria. Dialogue here refers to cooperative and positive interaction between people of different religious beliefs aimed at achieving peace and mutual coexistence. Even though, at present, the possibility of achieving inter-religious dialogue still remains a Herculean task among the two major religions in Nigeria, there is no doubt that inter-faith dialogue can produce and nurture better mutual understanding and promote mutual coexistence among the adherents of different religions in Nigeria.

(d) An Appeal to Justice

The failure of Government to provide adequate security and to prosecute culprits and sponsors of inter-religious violence are fundamental factors that succinctly make inter-religious conflicts to thrive unabated in Nigeria. This finding conforms with the assertion of Kunhiyop (2008) who reiterates that the inability and failure of government authorities to responsibly provide adequate security and protection for its citizens eventually makes law-abiding citizens and other victims of religious

violence to resort to using legitimate or illegitimate means to protect and defend themselves against the menace of miscreants and invaders, who in most cases are not even punished or reprimanded for the injuries, harm and destruction they inflict on lives and property of the citizenry (Adesola, personal communication, December 18, 2016; Jakali, personal communication, June 25, 2017; Aliyu, personal communication, March 18, 2017).

Consequently, this deliberate cover provided for lawbreakers and scoundrels by the government portends great danger for evil to thrive. While there is an advocacy for Nigerian citizens' nonviolent response to various violent attacks and injustices, such nonchalant attitude by government is capable of soliciting for individuals and groups to resort to self-defense and reprisals when confronted with inter-religious violence. Thus, failure of government to execute culprits and sponsors of inter-religious violence is a fundamental factor that fans the embers of inter-religious conflicts in Nigeria. There is no doubt that insecurity and inter-religious violence thrives in an atmosphere of impunity. A situation where criminals are not afraid of the wrath of government against the wanton destruction of lives and property, the escalation of inter-religious violence is inevitable. Any outburst of inter-religious violence has devastating consequences or effects on both the perpetrators and the victims of the violence. When the government fails to provide adequate security for its citizens, they give room for individuals and groups to defend themselves and their families against attacks. When perpetrators and sponsors of violence are brought to justice, it will serve as a deterrent to others.

II. CONCLUSION

The menace of inter-religious violence in Nigeria is an issue of concern to all and sundry. Accordingly, Christians should explore and adopt more peaceful, rational, nonviolent and lawful means in solving societal problems rather than resorting to violence. This is the basis for this study on inter-religious violence in Nigeria from a Christian ethical perspective. It has been proven that violence is not the best strategy to stop violence, even though it may be permissible in some extreme cases, as a last resort for self defense and the defense of others. The Christian ethical principles discussed in this study will promote a new order of mutual and peaceful coexistence among the three main religious groups in Nigeria. There should be a new orientation and changed attitudes from the adherents of Islam, Christianity and African Traditional Religion for a better and

more peaceful society. Governments on their part should brace up with the task of securing and protecting the lives and properties of its citizens and also bring the sponsors and perpetrators of violence to speedy justice. This will serve as a deterrent to further escalation of all forms of inter-religious violence in Nigeria.

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