

VIOLENCE AND THE MORALITY OF RELIGION IN NIGERIA

BY IORYUE JULIUS SAMUEL AND MUSA KANNU JOHN,

EXCERPT

The living God creator of heaven and earth and the Lord of history is the Father of the one great family to which we all belong as members. He wants us to bear witness to Him through our respect for the faith, religious values and traditions of each person. He wants us to join hands in working for human progress and development at all levels, to work for the common good, while at the same time assuring reciprocal respect for the religious liberty of individual persons and that of communities.

God does not want to be an idol in whose name one person would kill other people. On the contrary, He wills that in justice and peace we join together in the service of life in the hearts of humanity and in human communities. We are bound to give one another the best there is in our faith in God, our common father. (Redemptoris Missio No.39)

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is a politically and religiously diverse country. The issue of religious diversity and how to manage it has been with the country since the attainment of independence. The politicization of religion and in many instances, its manipulation by vested interests has resulted in a series of conflicts, involving members of the two main religions in the country namely, Christianity and Islam. Thus it is becoming increasingly clear that the current situation is not the best for the corporate existence of the country. A high sense of suspicion, distrust, mistrust, and self-centeredness has overheated the polity. The fact remains that these unhealthy attitudes of people have been the cause of painful conflicts and bloodbaths. As a result, diversity has become a vice and not a virtue for Nigerians. Among other differences, the basic questions that arise regarding the morality in Nigeria are: is religious difference a vice? What are the causes of religious crises in Nigeria? How can we achieve peaceful co-existence between the two major religions? Can the two religions go beyond mere tolerance to a proper appreciation of each other's beliefs? These and many others are the questions we shall set out to answer in this article.

VIOLENCE AND RELIGION: A CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

To avoid misunderstanding and ambiguity, it is necessary that we define the prominent terms that formed the title of this article.

VIOLENCE:

This is defined as an exertion of physical force so as to injure or abuse. It is an intense turbulent or furious and often destructive action or force.² The Oxford Advanced Learner's dictionary 6th Edition, defines it as a behaviour that is intended to hurt or kill somebody. Violence therefore is a compulsive influence brought to bear upon one against his will by some extrinsic agent. It is not caused by moral force such as fear but only by the compulsive force of some physical or psychic agent. Though this agent is extrinsic to the will, it need not necessarily be extrinsic to a person's body and psyche, since violence can also result from pathological conditions.³

These are just few out of the many religious crises that Nigeria has recorded for those caused or experienced in remote villages did not attract the attention of the press but in actual fact did happen.

Having brought to limelight the ugly myriads of religious violence in Nigeria and going by the nature of its repeated occurrence, the general experience is that of lamentation, awful as well as sympathetic one. With all these experiences many Nigerians have concluded that religion (especially Islam and Christianity) has contributed more to the disunity than to the unity and peace of our great nation. "Some have even written it off as irrelevant to private and public morality. Worst still religion is said to aid abet corruption, and to have now become a great threat to the unity and security of our country".¹⁵ Many Nigerians, who used to look up to religion as a moral institution that could ransom them from the pains of injustice in all ramifications and physical brutality, have today dismissed it on the ground that it has become the tool for the political denomination of people who happen to be in the ethnic minority. What politicians do now is to identify with religion that is in the majority as a means of getting support. Bala Usman is quoted to have observed that:

*The intermediary Bourgeoisie cannot appear as what he really is in political economy of Nigeria. He cannot claim political leadership openly on the grounds that he is, or wants to be an exporter-importer, a contractor.... He has to take cover as a Moslem, or a Christian. He has to take cover as an Igbo, Hausa, Idoma, or Efik. He has to take disguises.*¹⁶

Most Rev. J. O. Onaiyekan expressed a similar view about the manipulation of religion for political ends when he said:

*There are many people who use religion as a war-horse to fight other battles. Politicians in this country realize that most people take religion seriously. They therefore try to use it to their own advantage, if they can get away with it. A Christian politician running against a Moslem contender will not fail to warn his audience- "those Moslems". Similarly, a Moslem fighting against a Christian contender in a predominantly Moslem community would carefully remind his hearers of their Islamic duty to choose "Him whom Allah has chosen" and hinting Allah is not likely to prefer a Kafir to a Moslem. It may well be both of them are crooks and rogues who have neither the love of Jesus nor fear of Allah at heart.*¹⁷

This attitude of appeal to religious affiliation for the sake of their political interest is not unconnected to past events. Alhaji Abubakar Gumi is reported to have said in an interview that in Islam, Moslems are not allowed to vote for non-Muslims and in the event that non-Moslem cannot live with this, the country should be divided.¹⁸ With this conceived hazardous statements or point of view from Gummite, George Ehusani is not wrong in his description of violence when he said:

Violence does not impose itself on any society it is not an intruder. It is often sought after invited or lured. Violence is often the child of a long-standing romance with evil, the

*offshoot of an unruly alliance with death. It is often the outcome of deliberate acts of choices of individual or of entire societies.*¹⁹

From what we have been saying it is right to state that our major problem is not whether religion and politics can work hand in hand. Rather the problem is how to sift the grain of religion from the chaff of politics. We do not advocate for an irreligious society because we know from history that religion has a lot to contribute to the Nigerian society especially in terms of morality and character formation despite its shortcomings. What we seek is that the populace be liberated from blind allegiance to so-called political patrons. Our task therefore, is how to make a distinction between "political rascality under the banner of religion and the genuine commitments of many Moslems and Christians which transcend the limited political barriers and ambitions of those who see religion as one extra rung in their ladder to power."²⁰ Such a distinction is crucially important in order to distinguish between political opportunists from politicians whose consciences have been nurtured by truth.

THE EFFECTS OF RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE

Religious violence could be seen as a physical combat, an intense exchange of arms between two or more religious groups prompted by certain religious beliefs and practices. It could also be as a result of abuses of certain religious beliefs that lead to destruction of lives and property.

There are various effects of religious violence which include the following; destruction of life and property, political Instability, economic backwardness, etc.

Destruction of life and property: the God or Allah which we both serve (Christians and Muslims) is a God of well being, freedom, liberation, redemption and salvation. For the traditional African, "life" is the "ultimate reality and meaning". Human life has its origin, its substance and its end in the supreme deity. Human life, deriving as it is from the supreme deity and its fulfillment in the supreme deity is of supreme value and dignity. This is why human life was inviolable...in traditional African society; an offence against the human person, or a violation of human life invited the wrath of the Supreme Being, of the ancestors and of the human community. This has rendered many people homeless, orphans, widows or widowers. We need to understand that religion is supposed to safeguard life and to promote our well being as people created in the image and likeness of the One true God we worship in our unique ways.

Political instability: nobody can reasonably deny that religion has been a major cause of political instability. Elections in Nigeria are conducted based on which religion this or that person belongs to. The notion that a Christian should vote a Christian and a Muslim his fellow Muslim no matter how corrupt and handicap such a person may be is very disheartening and unacceptable in an ideal society.

Economic backwardness: Nigeria has been backward in recent years because the right persons with good intentions for the growth of the country are not elected into various offices due to religious discrimination. Many are even losing their sense of godliness due to increasing violence and conflicts. Evil is on the increase. Every day we experience gross moral decadence, sexual promiscuity, rampant abortion and dumping of unwanted children, prostitution, bribery and corruption. Even in Churches and Mosques, various means of extortion and exploitation are

created in the name of God.

In some religious violent exercises, it is unfortunate that children and the youth are used in the name of an assumed cause to destroy opponents. At the end of the day, the masterminds go unscathed while the innocent who have been sent into the field are destroyed or eaten up by the crisis. From this exposure we have an increase in armed robbery and the establishment of private militia a euphemistic expression for personal thugs for the religious and political leaders. To crown it all, poverty and unemployment are the twin causes of the usage of youths as perpetrators and harbingers of religious or political violence.

The root cause of evil perpetrated by religion is the claim by each religion that it is the only true religion revealed and approved by God. Fundamentalists' over-stress religiosity at the expense of spirituality. The danger inherent in fundamentalism has been beautifully portrayed by Mahatma Gandhi thus: "He who loves his religion more than his God will go to love himself more than his God".²¹

MORALITY OF RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM

Common to nearly every context in which we live is the emergence of what is sometimes called religious fundamentalism. The reasons for this are complex and varied, but they certainly include a reaction to the experience of colonialism, the search for authentic religious identity and the failure of both capitalism and socialism to create a prosperous and just society. This has been in some way a disguised dictatorship and unequal treatment in terms of distribution. This necessitated religious revolution of one kind or the other. Many countries have used their resources in fighting the cause of religious fundamentalism. They have provided the basis for identity and belonging for many young people who have lost confidence in the society in which they live.

Fundamentalism seems to offer the community hope and the possibility of a struggle to bring about change. The desire of the religious fundamentalists is to propagate their faith and beliefs and to impose it on their fellow countrymen. They also believe strictly that their activities are injunctions of the Holy Book, a responsibility which lies between two options either heaven (paradise), or hell and so to them, their striving in some way to attend paradise according to the promise of God in the Holy Book.

This could lead to a question; could this belief and concept of the fundamentalists be true? If yes, who was the being that founded such a religion? What was he exactly commanded to preach? It is what the founder preached that will help us determine whose and what kind of message he was carrying.

The over all implication of religious fundamentalism is that it does not appreciate pluralism to the detriment of 'non-believers' (people of other religions). This extremism has made some critical religious analysts to conclude that religion is becoming the cause of human suffering precisely because of inhumanity of man to man in the name of religion.

THE CHALLENGES AND THE STRUGGLE AIMED AT FORESTALLING THIS UGLY SITUATION FROM HAPPENING

It is an undeniable fact that both Christians and Muslims have many challenges and struggles to prevent or end religious conflicts. There are many ways to come

about these challenges. Dialogue is needed for mutual responsibility and for the awareness that none of the religions possess the truth 'ready-made' but all are on the way to the 'ever greater' truth.

The late Pope John Paul II calls for sincere dialogue among all peoples. He says: "The living God creator of heaven and earth and the Lord of history is the father of the one great family to which we all belong as members. He wants us to bear witness to him through our respect for the faith, religious values and traditions of each person. He wants us to join hands in working for human progress and development at all levels, to work for the common good, while at the same time assuring reciprocal respect for the religious liberty of individual persons and of the community.

From the onset, the history of relationship between Islam and Christianity in Nigeria is replete with violence due to the exaggeration of trivialities that do not really matter. Religious fanatics in Nigeria see adherents of other faiths as only good for the fire of hell. The use of derogatory language to describe Christians as "kaffirs", "infidels", or "unbelievers" who must be put to the sword if they do not convert to Islam is unreligious and should be discarded. Christians on the other hand see Islam as a heretical movement started by a deluded Arab. For fanatical Christians, these "heretics" or idol worshippers must repent and believe in Jesus Christ if they want to be saved. Such are some of the challenges facing the adherents of the two religions about each other.

Alongside dialogue, there is also the need for Interreligious dialogue, which concerns itself with people or groups of different religions, walking together in witnessing to God. Arinze says: "interreligious dialogue is the meeting of the heart and mind between followers of various religions. It is communication between two believers at the religious level. It is a walking together towards truth and a working together in projects of common concern."²²

Dialogue of life should also be employed at the level of daily life. It is seen as the basic foundation of all other forms of dialogue. At this level, people of different religious persuasions live and work together and enrich one another through the faithful practice of the values of their various religions, without the necessity of formal discussion.²³ People witness their faith by putting into practice their beliefs when they meet people of other faiths in school, marketplace, family and place of work. It is a non-formal encounter between people of different religions. The application of the sensibilities of one another helps in minimizing misunderstandings.

We can also talk of other forms of dialogues. It could be of Social engagement, which involves cooperation of Christians and Muslims in the promotion of human development and liberation in all its forms. Dialogue of Religious Experience which consist of sharing religious experiences of meditation, prayer, contemplation, fasting, almsgiving and other ways of expressing the search for God, Dialogue of experts which comes about when experts of different religions come together to discuss at a theological level.

Religious freedom should also be employed so as to acknowledge the profound differences between Christianity and Islam. The Catholic Church in particular sees religious freedom as a reason for Christians and Muslims to seek to live together in peace. Vatican II declares thus: freedom of this kind means that all

men should be immune from coercion on the part of individuals, social groups and every human power so that within due limits, nobody is forced to act against his convictions nor is anyone to be restrained from acting in accordance with his convictions in religious matters in private or in public, alone or in association with others.²⁴

These factors form the basis of the challenges and the struggle aimed at forestalling this ugly situation of violence from happening.

ANY CRITERIA FOR "JUST WAR"

From all these factors that we have examined as causes of violence in Nigeria, the question that still borders our mind is, are these enough reasons to spark out a religious violence? How just are the motives behind all the religious violence we have noticed in Nigeria? Is violence the last resort to settling issues? To be able to clear this doubt we shall look at the theory for a just war.

A just war is one, which respects the basic Principles of warfare, with limit to use of arms and unintended destruction of lives especially the innocent and property.

St. Augustine is the explicit founder of the Just War tradition. St. Thomas Aquinas, however, expanded upon Augustine's thesis, which later founded expressions as follows:

- i. It is to be waged on the authority of the ruler charged with the care of the common good.
- ii. There must be a just cause, that is, those against whom it is waged must have merited this through some faults.
- iii. There must be a right intention; and in the 16th and 17th centuries Victoria and Francis Suarez, further expanded these to:
- iv. It must be fought as a last resort.
- v. It must be fought in the proper manner, that is, without destruction of the innocent.

However, the just war theory seems no longer to have the Church's support. It has been observed that in the Papal teachings of Pius XII and John XXIII, there are no longer any just war theory because these have withdrawn the right of war in the situations to which these tests had references that is offensive war. Pius XII in his Christmas message in 1944 denies that aggressive war is the legitimate solution of international dispute.

More recently too, Pope John Paul II on the war in Iraq holds that any form of conflict that threatens the ultimate destiny of humanity cannot be the legitimate means for settling international conflict.

However, as in old Christian tradition, Pius XII holds that defensive war cannot be avoided because it is necessary for self-defense and self-preservation of a state from its enemy. It can therefore be inferred that the Church supports only the "defensive" (Just) warfare as against the aggressive or offensive warfare since the latter cannot be regarded as the proportionate means for settling conflicts, and further more, as Pius XII says, they tend to undermine man's inventiveness in creating an international organs for the maintenance of peace.

CONCLUSION

Although the dialogues between Christians and Muslims have met hard times, the

effort is commendable and should continue. On both sides, approaches have been tried and mistakes have been made. Sensitivities have been sharpened and methods have been refined. Where hopes have been unrealistically high, more sober expectations have been fashioned. New crises have continually arisen and present new challenges. Yet, we are all learning that living together in mutual respect and cooperation is not easy, nor is the way to go about this clear, but those involved in this venture have come to realize that the goal of harmony and mutual enrichment among those who worship the one God and seek to do His will deserves the effort.

Now, the question to contend with is "how do we facilitate the requisite change that would enhance the abolition of the culture of religious violence and the evolution of the culture of peace and non-violence in Nigeria? We understand the culture of peace and non-violence as the set of values, attitudes, beliefs and institution that would enhance peaceful co-existence and non-violent resolution of conflicts in society. To provide a plausible answer to this question, we need to understand that what we seek for is a way through which those values, beliefs and attitudes that encourage or engender violence are undermined and systematically replaced by those that enhance peaceful co-existence and a commitment to the use of non-violent methods in society. To enhance this ideal culture, some salient points are worth noting:

Firstly, an ideal relationship among the various religions in Nigeria particularly Christianity and Islam requires that one's faith is neither put to the fore in an aggressive triumphant way. As such it must be accepted that no genuine dialogue or co-operation can be achieved if one thinks that the other must subscribe to her creed.

Secondly to truly appreciate the other and to avoid the type of simplistic statements which stir the benign condescending smile of the polite and the ire of the impatient, every Christian or Muslim should endeavor to have at least a basic acquaintance with the faith of the other while some learned representative of each community should have a specialized knowledge of the faith and history of the other community as well as its present day understanding of itself.#

Finally, Nigerians ought to stop thinking of political power as necessarily related to religion. A certain kind of security equivalent to impartiality is basically needed. Thus, there is no reason to become anxious over whether the Head of state belong to the Christian religion or to the Islamic religion, any more than if he should come from a minority or majority ethnic background provided he does not use his political power to advance the cause of his religion or ethnic group at the expense or exclusion of the other components of the nation. Nigeria has had series of violence which have caused a lot of psychological, economy, social, etc. trauma and hardships on the people; thus religion should not be another enemy but a true friend that will bring solace and hope to the people

END NOTES

- 1 INNOCENT Jooji, *Mending the Cracked Pot*. (Ibadan: Daily Graphics, 2003), P.15.
- 2 FREDERICK C. M., *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th edition, (USA: Webster's Incorporated 2003) 560.
- 3 PESCHKE K. H., *Christian Ethics; Moral Theology in the Light of Vatican II*, Vol. 1,

- (Bangalore: Theological Publications, 1999), 247.
- 4 OBIOHA Owaezuoke Precious, "Science, Religion, and the Conflict in the Quest for Relevance" in West African Journal of Philosophical Studies, Vol. 6 (2005), P.36.
 - 5 Ibid.
 - 6 Ibid.
 - 7 Ibid.
 - 8 IGNATIUS A. Kaigama, Dialogue of Life, (Jos: Fab Educational Books, 2006), P.6.
 - 9 Ibid.
 - 10 Ibid.
 - 11 Ibid.
 - 12 JOHN Odey, The Sharia and the Rest of Us, (Enugu: Snaap Press, 2002), P.17.
 - 13 Ibid.
 - 14 IGNATIUS A. Kaigama, Op. cit., 6
 - 15 ISAAC Abu – PETER Nnanga, "Religion A Tool for National Destruction or Construction: Scanning the Nigerian Experience", (A Paper Presented at NOMSPAN Conference, Abuja, 2002), P.5.
 - 16 BONIFACE Nkum, Christian Involvement in Politics: A Case Study of the Nigerian Situation, (BST Thesis, Jos, 1999), P.29.
 - 17 Ibid, 29-30
 - 18 MATTHEW Hassan Kukah, Religion, Politics, and Power in the Northern Nigeria, (Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 1993), P. 261.
 - 19 EHUSANI George, Nigeria: Years eaten by the Locust, (Ibadan: Kraft Books Ltd, 2002)
 - 20 MATTHEW H. K., Op. Cit., P.241.
 - 21 EHUSANI George O., A Prophetic Church, (Ibadan: Kraft Books, 2003), P.42.
 - 22 IGNATIUS A. K., Op. Cit., P.6
 - 23 The Gleaner Magazine, 8(2005/2006), P. 43.
 - 24 JOHN Paul II, Redemptoris Missio, December 7, 1990, P.39.
 - 25 FRANCIS Arinze, Church in Dialogue: Walking with other Believers, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), P.162.
 - 26 FRANCIS Arinze, Op. Cit., P.163.
 - 27 AUSTINE Flannery, (ed), Vatican II vol. 1., The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents, Dignitatis Humanae, N2, Iperu-Rocmo: Ambassador, 1996, 800.

OTHER SOURCES

1. Joseph J., Richard A., eds., A Peace Reader: Essential Readings on War, Justice, Non-violence and World Order, (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1992).
2. Michael W. –Brian D., eds., Proclaiming Justice and Peace, (Fulham: Twenty-third Publication, 1994).
3. Maurice Quinlan, Comp. , Guide for Living, Selected Addresses and Letters of His Holiness Pope Pius XII, (London: Pan Books Ltd., 1958).