Religion and Nation Building in Nigeria: A Critique

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ABSTRACT: *From its etymological definition, religion connotes relationship, bond and reverence. Ipso facto, it ought to be fundamental and a veritable tool for nation building, if nation building implies a systematic process of making a people with cultural and ethnic differences become integrated as one and feel belonged under one nation. Unfortunately, religion as it is practiced in Nigeria by the adherents of the dominant religions: Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion, rather than integrate the peoples of Nigeria, turns out to be one of the major causes of conflict and division among Nigerians. What is the reason behind this paradox? The philosophical method of critical analysis is employed to dissect the historical cause of this in view of finding lasting solutions. On this, the nature and mode of propagation of these faiths in Nigeria is identified as the major cause of the seed of division witnessed among these religions. If only the government and the religious leaders would liaise to educate the populace on the need for religious tolerance and freedom of worship, religion would have assumed its natural role of bridge building among the peoples of Nigeria.*

KEY WORDS: religion, nation building, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Man is an *ens religious* as well as an *ens socialis*. From time immemorial, man has always lived with one form of religion or another. Communicating with his unseen maker has always been man's priority in the scheme of things. Man has also never lived alone but is "…always a being in the midst of others with whom he interacts and shares experiences."[1] The natural tendency of man is to be open and interact with people of same cultural orientation. It is also natural for man to be suspicious of any foreign intruder who has come to stir the water of his comfort zone. This implies that man has always communed with his God and with his fellow man only in the company of those he is at-home-with. However, the complexity of our globe created a need for nations to come together and form allies and sometimes become one. Nigeria as a nation was formed by her colonial masters, though for her selfish gains, but she has come to stay. What is left for Nigerians is to make conscious efforts to build a nation where mutual co-existence, tolerance, peace and progress abound, amidst the different ethnic and religious groups that make her up. Given the nature of religion, it should be a veritable tool towards nation building but the Nigerian experience shows that religion is rather a bane to nation building. This is demonstrated by the incessant

religious crises we experience which sometimes intermingle and come as ethnic crises due to the propagation of the foreign religions (Christianity and Islam) via ethnic lines.

This research sets out to critically analyze how and why religion which should be a catalyst for nation building is paradoxically the bane of nation building in Nigeria. From this analysis, possible causes are exposed and lasting solutions are proffered. At the end, the *Sitz-im-Leben* that has prevented religions in Nigeria from playing their primary role of unification and nation building would be exposed and it is hoped that when proffered solutions are carried out, religion will rather help in Nigeria's nation building than being its bane.

Religions in Nigeria
Scholars have grabbled with attempts at defining the concept of religion and have ended up with multiplicities of definitions. This is partly because as the concept deals with something spiritual, different interests like psychologists, anthropologists, scientists, sociologists, theologians, philosophers, etc. would naturally see it from their different perspectives. Be that as it may, an etymological definition would lead to a proper perspective of what religion is all about. Religion derives from Latin, *religare* (to bind) and *religio* (obligation, bond, and reverence). The use of the word gradually extended to all the forms of social demonstration in connection with the sacred. From the etymology, a relationship that binds is established as pivotal to the meaning of religion. Thus, "Religion is the set of beliefs, feelings, dogmas and practices that define the relations between human being and sacred or divinity."[2]

Some definitions of religion form prominent scholars are as follows: Emile Durkheim defines religion as,a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a church, all those who adhere to them.[3]

Max Lynn Stackhouse defines religion as "a comprehensive worldview or metaphysical moral vision that is accepted as binding because it is held to be in itself basically true and just even if all dimensions of it cannot be either fully confirmed or refuted."[4]

Peter Mandaville and Paul James define religion as "…a relatively-bounded system of beliefs, symbols and practices that addresses the nature of existence and in which communion with others and otherness is *lived* as if it both takes in and spiritually transcends socially-grounded ontologies of time, space, embodiment and knowing."[5]

Yinger defines religion, "as a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggle with the ultimate problems of human life. It expresses their refusal to capitulate to death, to give up in the face of frustration and to allow hostility to tear apart their human association."[6]

In all these definitions, the etymological idea of bond and relationship is established. In modern idea, the bond and relationship is between God and man and between man and his neighbors who

share in the same faith. In any of these relationships, a conscious struggle to discard our diversities and align ourselves to oneness is attempted: oneness with God and oneness with fellow worshipers. Nigeria could be said to harbor many religions, but primarily, two most dominant world's religions are most prominent: Christianity and Islam. The third religion that could be visibly seen is African Traditional Religion practiced by the minority residents in areas predominantly Christians or Muslims. It is pertinent to note that, "since the country has over 371 ethnic groups and more than 520 languages, it is understood that one single religion cannot unite such a diversity of beliefs, ethnicities, cultures, and philosophies."[7] The major religions are further sub-divided into denominations. Thus, Christianity has denominations like: Catholic, Anglican, Pentecostals, Protestants, Orthodox Christians, etc. On the other hand, Islamic religion has denominations like: Sunni, Shia, Sharia, Mahdiyya, Ahmadiyya, Izala, Quraniyoon, Sufi.

Christianity is popular in the Southern part of Nigeria with the Igbo, Yoruba, Ijaw and some of the Middle Belt's area as practitioners. Islam gained grounds in the Northern part of Nigeria and some parts of the middle belt and south western parts.

Christianity was established by Jesus Christ and was brought to Nigeria by the European missionaries, in the fifteen century, though enduring and successful missionary enterprise started in the nineteenth century. By the twentieth century, Christianity had permeated the nooks and crannies of the Southern part of Nigeria. Today, different denominations abound and more are springing up. The Holy Bible is Christianity's primary book.

Islam was founded by Prophet Mohammed and the word, 'Islam' means submission to the will of God. Those who practice the religion of Islam are called Muslims and the Quran is their holy book. Kanem-Borno empire first witnessed the new religion, Islam about the 10the century AD and from there it spread to the rest of the northern areas of Nigeria and then to the Western part. The Fulani Jihad of the 19th century helped in the spread of the religion.

Unlike Christianity and Islam, the African Traditional Religion which was practiced by the locals before the advent of these two major foreign religions, was a religion that originated from the soil of Africa, and was a non-missionary religion. It has no known founder and its tenets are found in songs, myths, folklores, proverbs, etc.

Nation Building and the Nigeria Experience
Nation building is a concept that gained prominence in the late 1960s and early 1970s when President Julius Kambarage Nyerere of Tanzania strongly advocated it for fragile post-colonial African states.[8] The colonial masters amalgamated different ethnic and cultural groups to form countries, for their own gains in utter neglect of the resultant effects. These formed states of different ethnic and cultural identities soon crumbled into different shapes of crises. Nigeria for example, having been formed by different ethnic groups soon after her independence witnessed a civil war which was fought along ethnic lines.

Apart from civil wars, there were also other signs of the need for nation building like President-for-life syndrome, tribalism and nepotism against meritocracy on the side of leaders.Nigeria as a nation is bedeviled by the challenge of nation building. Uchendu captures this challenge as, "the commencement of change in Nigeria's political, economic and social structures in order to meet the demands of its peoples, their needs and their future expectations."[9] She goes further to contend that nation building in the Nigerian context refers to a number of things:

…the deliberate effort by which, through articulated programs and policies, the different peoples of Nigeria, while retaining their cultural diversity, would become effectively integrated as one or made to regard themselves as having a lot more in common than they ever thought they did.[10]
She concludes by saying that, "This explanation of what nation building means would be incomplete if it is not stated that it includes stages by which a young nation like ours, attains infrastructural development."[11]

In a similar note, Olalekan Adigun defines nation building as, 'the systematic process of making a people who hitherto are from different cultural, ethnic, religious, racial, or national backgrounds to feel they belong together under a nation."[12] Expatiating on this, he pointedly rolled out Karl Deutch's five stages of achieving the 'systematic process' of nation building which are as follows:

1.   The group exists as a tribe, with its distinct language and proud culture, and will resist any attempt to integrate it with other groups.
2.   The next stage is to incorporate them forcefully into other group with the use of naked force.
3.   The third stage is for them to minimally accept, often with the use of force or threat of it, the new arrangement by cooperating minimally.
4.   At the fourth stage, their level of resistance is reduced to the minimum and their cooperation and obedience have risen astronomically, though they still keep their cultural identities intact.
5.   The fifth is when the group becomes almost indistinguishable from other groups within the state. This is when total assimilation is achieved.[13]

It is pertinent to note at this juncture, that nation building is but not limited to national integration, national development which involves service delivery and infrastructural development, political development and national consciousness. But in all these, a clear element that sprouts up is the element of integration of a distinct ethnic and cultural cum religious groups into one.

In Nigeria, a conscious effort at nation building only came after the bitter experience of the civil war. This war as a matter of fact came as a result of the inability of the government to drive policies that would integrate the different groups that make-up the entity called Nigeria. However, after the war, conscious efforts were made at nation building which include: the promulgation of the Reconciliation, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction (3Rs); no victor no vanquish pronouncement; introduction of the Naira as our national currency; establishment of the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC); introduction of National Sports Festival; establishment of Unity colleges;

introduction of the federal character principle, etc. The pertinent question is: how far has these attempts fared on nation building?

Historically, attempts at nation building in Nigeria have been marked by challenges, tensions, successes and failures. The nature of the configuration of Nigeria has made ethnic consciousness and religious differences to undermine mutual inter-group relationships. The first few years of Nigeria's independence witnessed unprecedented affinities to ethnicity in our national polity. The country was divided along ethnic lines and this ultimately became the catalyst for the unfortunate civil war. Uchendu captures this thus: "As the history of Nigeria reveals, prior to the end of the nation's civil war, ethnicity was the bane of Nigeria's political unity and social harmony."[14] How religion intermingled with ethnicity to further divide us is not far-fetched. Incidentally, the two major religions: Christianity and Islam which majorly displaced traditional religion were propagated along ethnic lines. With this, Islam gained prominence in the northern part of Nigeria while Christianity flowered in the southern part. Thus, religion was viewed as "an important element of culture and ethnicity."[15] Consequently, it greatly contributed to the historical sub-national character of Nigeria.[16]

The above fact was equally echoed by Raphael Jospe when he opined that, "in combination with ethnicity and political strife, religion remains all too often a source and catalyst of violence and oppression." [17] As Nigeria became divided along religious lines, religion became a major contributor to the inhibition to nation building. How does religion contribute to inhibiting nation building in Nigeria?

Religion and Nation Building in Nigeria
Religion in itself is not a hindrance to nation building. On the contrary, it should be a catalyst for nation building if deployed definitively for that purpose. The case of Malaysia comes readily to mind as a case where religion played a vital role in nation building. Here, religion was incredibly important in fostering a sense of national identity. Matthew Elder et al exposed that Malaysia, "as a multi-ethnic country…has been deeply divided along ethnic line despite relentless effort from the state on integrating minorities into Malay majority."[18] However, from their study, the religion of Islam played an increasingly important role in the process of Malaysia's nation building to the extent that Islamization has been deeply entwined with nation building.[19] Thus, Malaysia's culture witnessed a significant transformation and its emphasis shifted from 'Malayness' to Islam. The culture of Islam took over and so un-Islamic behaviours were easily spotted and strictly controlled. Other features like establishment of Islamic institutions like Islamic banks, Islamic University, etc. became another source of integration. Gradually, Malaysia's history textbooks witnessed an increase in the proportion of Islamic history to the utter neglect of the contributions of other ethnicities. At this point, Malaysia was never again taken as "a post-colonial multi-ethnic 'imagined Community' shaped by British government; it is instead a part of the wider Muslim world."[20] The tension between different ethnic groups in Malaysia got subsumed by the heightened position of Islam which ultimately transformed the nature of the ongoing nation building in Malaysia.

Unfortunately, Nigeria's version of nation building in relation to religion is a far cry from Malaysia's experience. Rather than be a catalyst and an instrument for nation building, religion and religious practices in Nigeria has become a tool for division and conflicts. The reason for this is that the adherents to the two major religions in Nigeria encountered themselves with mutual suspicions which generated religious dichotomy. This credits Siddiqui's assertion that religions do not meet in a vacuum, but by their followers who encounter each other, and that the apprehensions of the members of varied religious groups are molded by events, which play an important role in their understanding of each other.[21] Thus, the events and happenings at the initial encounter between Muslims and Christians rather than build a bridge between the two religions, became a pointer to the build- up of mutual suspicion among them. Uchendu opines that the dichotomy between Christians and Muslims is not unconnected with the crusades of the 11th century.[22] It left trail of bitterness in Muslims that has survived to the present and is responsible for the clashes between members of these faiths in different parts of the world, Nigeria included.[23]

The amalgamation of Northern and Southern Nigeria brought together these two religions as they have differently propagated their faiths majorly in the north (Islam) and in the south (Christianity). Unfortunately, the colonial masters failed to lay a strong foundation for beneficial cooperation between these groups.[24] On the contrary, they rather facilitated a division among these groups by adopting a colonial policy which encouraged the isolation of Muslims from the rest of Nigerians. Christians who wished to live in the Northern part of Nigeria were restricted by the colonial authorities, to the *Sabon-gari* whereas the reverse was the case for Muslims wishing to live in the south. With this, Muslims in Nigeria saw themselves as superior to other religions. Thus the colonial policy stratified Nigeria along religious lined and even when some of their elites like Alhaji Ahmadu Bello saw some fault with this, the Northern Muslim leaders did not seek to reverse the trend.[25] Thus for decades, Nigerian Christians and Muslims judged each other's religion from their experiences and built – up misconceptions of these experiences. For Uchendu, "Nigerian Muslims and Christians based on their ignorance and misunderstanding of each other's religious tenets and worldview hold a lot of misconceptions but at the root of the conflicts has been the unspoken claim of religious superiority."[26] None would bulge to see his/her own religion as inferior.

Other identified issues that hinder the peaceful co-existence of Christians and Muslims in Nigeria are issues of fear and undiplomatic verbal declarations by either of the religious worshippers. With all the above, religion became a serious issue in Nigeria and undermined nation building from the moment the debate over the Sharia divided the Constitutional Assembly in 1977/78.[27] This was exacerbated by the unilateral decision of President Ibrahim Babangida in 1986 to register Nigeria, a constitutionally secular state, as a full member of the organization of Islamic Countries (O.I.C), wherein it had long maintained an observer status.[28] With these incidences, religion and issues around it became a serious consideration in the political discourse of Nigeria. According to Uchendu, "The colonial policy of Britain and later the Shar'ia debates of 1977/78 are responsible for the spate of violence that has characterized Nigeria's social life since the 1980s."[29]

From the first incidence of religious riot in Kano in December, 1980, religious crisis has continued in different forms and shapes and has remained a feature of Nigeria's social experience. The religious crisis has gained a complexity of intermingling with ethnic crisis as Nigeria's religious affiliations are to a great extent also formed along ethnic groups. Sometimes politics also play a role in these crises. It is therefore difficult today to distinguish between religious crises from ethnic one. In most cases, the line that demarcates them is very thin.

The effect of these is that nation building is stalled, as insensitivity, intolerance, extremism and abuse, flesh out to divide us all the more. The struggle to contend with these effects sets us back as a nation and pushes us down the line of nation building. Today, the insurgency in the north by Boko Haram, the Shiite riots are prevalent and the role of the government on nation building suffers.

Critique and Proposals for Nigeria's March to Nation Building
If nation building has to do with a 'deliberate effort' at integrating into one, the different peoples of Nigeria, for the purpose of peaceful co-existence, political and infrastructural development, then today's Nigeria has failed in this attempt. Nigeria is presently witnessing major divisions along religious and ethnic lines. The divisions observed in political lines have both religious and ethnic undertones. Unfortunately, the present government under President Buhari is not seen to be making any 'deliberate effort' at reversing this awkward trend and channeling efforts towards the road to nation building. On the contrary, this government is noted for inciting divisions among Nigerians through the president's body language of actions and inactions in his political appointments. From the religious angle, President Buhari's undue alliance with countries and organizations that are exclusively Islamic to the utter neglect of the secularity of our nation has raised fear and suspicion among Christians; a bane to nation building. Above all, there is no known 'deliberate effort' by this government through articulated policies and programs to match the peoples of Nigeria to nation building. Mere infrastructural provisions do not translate to nation building when the peoples are not well guided towards understanding the greatness inherent in unity in their diversities. The resultant effect is that their diversities are naturally so overblown that the crises that erupt therefrom, lead to the destruction of the infrastructural provisions of the government. To this end, this research proposes in addition to infrastructural provisions of the government, the establishment of policies and programs which educate Nigerians on the need for peaceful co-existence and mutual respect for their differences in their religious and cultural affiliations. Great care should also be taken in selecting the political leaders of this country especially that of the federal executive and legislative arms of government. People of proven nationalists should be preferred and elected against parochial and nepotistic candidates.

Religion in itself is not contra nation building. The example of how Malaysia attained their nation building through religion (Islam) is a case in point. However, the problem with religion in nation building is that it has the tendency of breeding fanatic adherents that make difficult, the openness and tolerance required for peaceful co-existence. Religion for nation building worked in Malaysia because one religion was involved in the integration of the peoples. In the case of Nigeria, multiple

religious adherents would be more challenging in our quest for nation building. In this case, dialogue becomes a veritable tool for the different religions to use to assist in nation building. Thus, Nigeria's attempt at nation building will succeed when there is greater contact, conversation and effective dialogue between Muslims and Christians in the country. ...Effective dialogue will reduce areas of conflict and will be the basis for establishing a healthy relationship among different faith communities.[30]

Going further on dialogue, Uchendu opines that,
…official policies that have strengthened Muslim exclusivity in the Northern part of Nigeria, preventing non-Muslims from living among Muslims, must be discontinued to promote mutual unrestricted and unsuspicious intermingling of Muslims and Christians.[31]

Education should be the basis for the furtherance of dialogue for nation building. 'Catch them young' policy should be developed where children are encouraged to go to school and in the school. The curriculum should be developed to inculcate the teaching of the need for dialogue, mutual understanding and peaceful co-existence among the different tribes and religions in Nigeria.

Other policies of government like the National Youth Service Corps scheme, national character policy, etc. that are aimed at fostering unity and nation building, should be made to work effectively. The practice where prospective corps members lobby to be posted to states they are conversant with should be discouraged. This should therefore place added responsibility on the government to protect all corps members wherever they are posted, especially those posted to conflict prone areas.

The national character policy should be visibly seen to be implemented. Laws should be promulgated criminalizing the neglect of national character policy. Punishment like impeachment should be placed on any leader that neglects this policy. Apart from national character, the state of origin principle that eschews people from getting employment in states that are not their original state should be discouraged. Rather than 'state', 'place' of origin should be allowed. Again, inter-tribal marriages should be encouraged.
The use of the media to educate the masses on the proposed 'national lifestyle' should be encouraged. The media should also showcase events and cases where attempts at nation building are made to encourage further attempts.

The different religious leaders should take the lead in fostering unity among the members of their different religious sects. They should preach more on the things that unite these religions rather than the things that divide them. Curriculum on the comparative study of the religions should be encouraged.

EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

From its etymological interpretation, religion means to bind, to unite. It connotes relationship. From this vantage point, it therefore implies that religion is fundamentally, a bridge builder. It is a

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medium that bridges the gap between God and man in a unique relationship and worship. If it is able to bridge the gap between the supernatural and the mortals it is then more natural for it to bridge the gaps between mortals.

The challenge that Nigeria encounters in religion as a bane to our nation building is not as a result of the fundamental nature of religion itself, but rather as a result of ignorance from the adherents of these religions. The two major religions in Nigeria believe in the supremacy of one God. It is however disheartening that our perception and mode of worship of this one God is what separates us to the point of religious violence. Scharf viewing religion from this horrible perspective argues that, "religion impedes progress, encourages fanaticism and intolerance."[32] There is need for a conscious effort to redress the role of religion in Nigeria and make it take-up its original role of bridge building. For it to assume its fundamental role as a catalyst for nation building, government and religious leaders should endeavor to create awareness and educate the people on the need for religious tolerance and respect for religious freedom. Only by these will religion be useful in nation building.

ENDNOTES

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