

## **RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND SUSTAINABLE NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT: THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Nigeria as a nation is passing through developmental crisis. Contemporary events in the country seem to suggest that religious pluralism appears to be the greatest challenge to sustainable development and unity of the nation. Nigeria's religious diversity is evidenced in the three main religions; African Traditional Religion, Christianity and Islam, which are widely practiced in the country. These religions dominate the daily lives of their practitioners and because their adherence tends to be ethnically oriented, they have generated intolerance and deadly violence that threaten the corporate existence and development of Nigeria as a nation. This paper therefore, seeks to examine some of the religion-related crises that have taken place in the country and how they have transformed the national psyche and patriotism of the citizens. The paper also attempts to establish the link between religion and the sustainable development of Nigeria. Recommendations are made for peaceful coexistence for sustainable development. In presenting the arguments, both the historical and analytical methods have been adopted.

**KEYWORDS:** Nigeria, Religion, Religious Pluralism, Sustainable Development

### **INTRODUCTION**

Religion is fundamental to man as there is hardly any human society without some form of religion. Historically and irrespective of its form, religion has made and continues to make recognizable and far-reaching impacts on the political, physical, social, moral, spiritual and economic affairs of both the ancient and modern societies. The high premium placed on religion is portrayed by the diverse manner through which it is practiced in many societies (Anyacho 2005). Religion has served as a guide and control of human behaviour. The most important aspect of religion is its capacity to shape human personality and values ([http:// www.exampleessays.com/viewpaper/26173.html](http://www.exampleessays.com/viewpaper/26173.html)). However, as observed by Ekwunife (1992:5), "religion can be both an integrative and divisive factor in any society. When the divisive elements of religion are not handled and brought under control, they create tension and unrest in the society. Often, these manifests themselves inform of religious riots and intolerance". This is the case with Nigeria with serious effects on the development of the nation.

Nigeria as a nation is passing through developmental crisis as a result of religious pluralism. A multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious society with African Traditional Religion, Christianity and Islam as the three main religions, Nigeria has been denied the harness and harvest of her rich natural endowments by the yoke of her heterogeneity. Yakubu and Rothfuss (2012:74) recognized this diversity when they stated that "with a population of over 160 million, over 250 ethnic groups, about 400 languages, 36 States and a Federal Capital Territory, divided into six geopolitical zones, and with Christianity and Islam and a variety of African Traditional religions, Nigeria is inherently a mosaic of diversities". Diversities, which otherwise ought to be a source of strength and economic power have unfortunately constituted a sore source of mutual suspicion, intolerance and insurgence with instability, insecurity and stifled development and investment as direct consequences. Thus religious diversity in Nigeria has had the unintended

consequences of riots, killing and maiming of individuals, destruction of properties and disruption of peace and unity of the nation. This intolerant situation is mainly witnessed between the two dominant, but foreign, religions in the country; Christianity and Islam, with Islam dominating the Northern part while Christianity is predominant in the South.

Consequently, there has been mass exodus of people of southern extraction living in the north, who are mostly Christians, from the north, abandoning their businesses and life-time investments. Thus, despite the fact that evidences abound that Nigeria is endowed with abundant human and natural resources, this situation has upset the dynamics of human migration and population, stifled socio-political and economic development and provided a launching pad for agents and proponents of the disintegration of the nation. Barring this untoward development, with her diversity, rich human and natural resources, Nigeria has the potential to be Africa's largest economy and on the top echelon of the global economic ladder. Unfortunately, this seems to have eluded the nation.

Currently, the emergence of fundamentalist Islamic sect known as Boko Haram has added a new dimension to the already existing problem. "Boko Haram" is derived from a combination of the Hausa word *boko* meaning "book" and the Arabic word *haram* which is something forbidden, ungodly or sinful. Literally, it means "book is sinful", but its deeper meaning is that Western education is sinful, sacrilegious or ungodly and should therefore be forbidden. Characteristically, the sect not only opposes but outrightly rejects Western education, Western culture and modern science (Adesoji 2010:100). In addition, the sect openly declared Christians as unbelievers and enemies who should be killed. Religion has therefore assumed a new impetus in the integration debate considering the pluralistic nature of the Nigerian society. The thrust of this paper, therefore, is to bring to limelight how the two foreign religions (Christianity and Islam) in Nigerian have transformed the nation. Against this backdrop, there is the exigency to unravel some of the religious riots with a view of identifying how they affect the sustainable development of the country and what could be done to bring social integration and development.

### **Conceptual Clarifications**

For one to understand fully the concept of Religious pluralism, definition of the term Religion should be taken. The term Religion has been variously conceptualised because of its complex nature. But in this work a few will be adopted. Etymologically, religion is derived from three Latin words namely, *Ligare* (meaning to bind), *Relegere* (meaning to unite, or to link), and *Religio* (meaning relationship). Thus, the etymology of the word 'religion' shows that it is essentially a relationship, a link established between two persons namely, the human person and the divine person believed to exist. It is something that links or unites man with a transcendent being, a deity, believed to exist and worshipped by man (Omogbe 1993:2-3). In his own definition, Kilani (1998:16) avers that religion is "the relation of man to that which man regards holy...the system by which man recognizes the existence of super-human controller of the universe, the recognition of God as the object of worship, love and obedience which ultimately leads to practical piety and morality". Ejizu (2012:1) defines religion as "man's experience of the holy and ultimate reality, as well as the expression of that awareness in concrete life". These definitions underpin the view that religion involves believe in Supreme-being and expression of such believe in our practical life situations. Religious pluralism connotes the existence of many religions in a particular society. In this situation the tendency for unhealthy rivalry cannot be ruled out.

### **Development – Towards a Definition**

Whenever the term development is mentioned, the idea of improvement of infrastructural facilities and availability of funds oftentimes strike peoples mind. This is misleading. Development as a concept has a wide connotation. It encompasses man, environment, material as well as infrastructure with man as the most important resource in the

development of a nation (Ejizu 2012). Rodney (1981:3) stated that development in human society “is a many-sided process. At the level of the individual, it implies increased skill and capacity, greater freedom, creativity, self discipline, responsibility and material well being... At the level of social groups... development implies an increasing capacity to regulate both internal and external relationships”. For Bassey (1985:3) development “must aim at creating the appropriate environment for the individual to live a happy, contented, spiritually meaningful life”. For development to be achieved and sustained in any nation there must be social harmony, peace and tranquillity.

### **The Introduction of Islam to Nigeria**

Islam is a religion started by Prophet Mohammed in 7<sup>th</sup> Century by A.D in Arabia (Anyacho 2005:221). Islam was introduced into Kanem Bornu in the 11<sup>th</sup> Century. From there it got to Hausa States as from 14<sup>th</sup> Century and got to Yorubaland around 17<sup>th</sup> Century. The propagation of Islam was peaceful from inception through commercial activities and Muslim Cleric. The situation however changed in 1804 as Usman Dan Fodio, a Fulani Muslim Cleric came with the idea of purifying the religion. He waged a successful war known as Jihad from 1804-1810 which led to his conquering and Islamising the Hausa States (Omotoye 2010:11). According to Onwubiko (1973:14)

The Fulani conquest of Hausaland began with Usman’s victory over the army of Yunfa, King of Gobir at Tabkin Kwatto in 1804... In 1805, Leaders of Fulani communities all over the north came to Usman. He gave flags of authority to each leader enjoining him to conquer unbelievers in his area and establish true Islam. Following this, Kebbi, Zaria, Katsina, Gobir and Kano fell to the Fulani jihadists between 1805 and 1809. By the end of the latter date, the conquest of Hausaland was almost complete. That year Usman retired from active life leaving his son Muhammad Bello and his brother Abdullahi to continue the Jihad.

The consequence was that it brought great changes which had far reaching effect on the religious, cultural, social, political, and economic lives of the people. The Hausa states which presently are in Northern Nigeria were known as Central Sudan.

### **The Introduction of Christianity to Nigeria**

Christianity is a religion that bases its teaching on the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Christianity came to Nigeria in the 15<sup>th</sup> century through Augustine and Capuchine monks from Portugal ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church\\_of\\_Nigeria](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_of_Nigeria)) and was first preached in Benin and Warri (Omotoye 2010). Unfortunately, the attempt failed partly because of the introduction of Atlantic slave trade. The second attempt to propagate Christianity in Nigeria took place after the abolition of slave trade in 1807 by the British parliament. Immediately after the abolition, some ex-slaves from Britain, America, Brazil and Nova Scotia were taken to Sierra- Leone for resettlement. From there some of the ex-slaves who were already Christians found their ways to Badagry and other towns in hinterland (Omotoye 2010). Adekunle and Adegbaiké (2010:177) opine that:

In 1842, the first batch of Christian Missionaries Landed in Badagry on their way to Abeokuta after their liberation. From Badagry, Christianity spread into the interior of Yoruba land. As a result of the activities of Hope Waddell in the Southern/Eastern area of Nigeria, the area was Christianized. As regards Northern Nigeria, Reverend Samuel Ajayi Crowther and his Niger Expedition of 1841 and 1854, mission station was established in Bida. The tentacles of his operation were also extended to Nasarawa and Yola while Graham Willimot Brooke and Bishop Tugwel worked in Zaria and its Province. With the activities of these people Northern Nigeria came under the influence of Christianity.

Thus, in Nigeria a good number of Christians also resides in the Northern part of the country.

The successful implantation of these two main immigrant religions then brought in different cultures and values to Nigeria which interrupted the existing socio-cultural equilibrium.

### **Background to the Problem of Religious Crisis in Nigeria**

Before the advent of Islam and Christianity, each ethnic group that now makes up the entity known as Nigeria was practicing their traditional religion (African Traditional Religion) without any problem. But the introduction of the two foreign religions brought unhealthy rivalry among the different ethnic groups. These foreign religions were given advantaged position during the colonial period. The presence of British colonial masters gave leverage to the establishment of Islam and Christianity in the Northern and Southern part of the country respectively.

The British amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorate took place in 1914 under Sir Frederick Lugard and this gave birth to the country known as Nigeria. With this amalgamation, the Northern part of the country was put under indirect rule administered by the Caliphate while a system of direct rule operated in the Southern part. This phenomenon Yakubu and Rothfuss (2012:12) argue engendered a domination-subordination relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims. Christianity spread in the South while Islam which came to the North before the advent of Christianity was allowed to flourish in the North. Christian missionaries were restricted by the British colonial administration from taking the gospel to the north.

As a result, Christian missionary activities concentrated mainly in the south. It was also observed by Ibenwa and Ngele (2010) that in 1928, the Church missionary society was driven out of Zaria city, a site they have occupied since 1905 following complaints by the Emirs that the mission was abusing the privilege given to them. Lamenting on this, Uka (2008:1) noted that “though Britain was supposedly a Christian country, yet it hindered the spread of Christianity in the North to the advantage of the Muslims”.

He went further to note that these “were the genesis of the unhealthy ethnic politics and mutual distrust among the various cultural, religious, linguistic and ethnic groups in Nigeria and the main causes of Nigeria’s ethnic, religious and communal conflicts”.

This observation was earlier made by Ekwunife (1992:18), when he contended that the seed of religious intolerance in Nigeria was “quietly sown through the agencies of colonialism, Islam and Christianity”. This could be said to be the origin of perennial religious crises in Nigeria which has continued to cripple national development.

### **Religious Crisis in Nigeria: An Overview**

Nigeria as earlier mentioned is mosaic of diversities but three main ethnic groups exist namely, Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba. As U.S State department (2003) observed, there is a strong correlation between religious differences and ethnic and regional diversity (Roberts, Odumosu, and Nabofa 2009). Statistics on religious crises in the country however, reveal that at least 95 per cent of the crises occurred in the northern part of the country (Ezeanokwasa cited in Sampson 2012). Elaigwu (2005) has recorded 140 ethno-religious crises that took place in Nigeria between May 1999 and June 2005. Many more have taken place after that.

These have put Nigeria in a precarious situation. Here, some of them as catalogued by Ibenwa and Ngele (2010) and Sampson (2012) will be adopted with modifications and update from other related works.

**Table 1: Some Cases of Religious Riots in Nigeria from 1980-2012**

S/N	Date	Town/State	Grievances/Causes	Number of Casualties
1	December 1980	Kano	Abubakar Rimi, former Governor of Kano issued quit notice to Mohammed Maitatsine to leave his kingdom in the heart of Kano	About 4,177 people were killed
2	April 26, 1985	Bauchi	Mohammed Maitatsine under disguise of the same quit notice attacked Moslems in Gombe.	More than 100 people died after about ten hours of fighting.
3	March 1987	Kaduna	Moslems attacked Christian students who organized a crusade at College of Education Kafanchan.	This led to the killing of people and burning of Churches and Mosques by Moslems and Christians.
4	1990	Kano	Triggered by an Igbo Christian, Gideon Akaluka who was alleged to have defecated on the Koran.	Many people died and properties were destroyed.
5	October 1991	Kano	Triggered by Moslem fanatics who claimed to be protesting against the Christian religion crusade of evangelist Reinhard Binnke	Lives and properties worth of millions of naira were destroyed
6	May 1992	Zangon-Kataf riot Zaria, Kaduna	This simply arose as communal feud between Kata Christians and Zango Moslems (Hausa)	This equally led to the loss of lives and properties.
7	20 Dec. 1999	Kwara	Muslim fundamentalists attacked and destroyed over 14 churches in Ilorin.	Properties worth millions of naira were destroyed and unspecified casualty reported
8	21-22 Feb. 2000	Kaduna	Riots over the introduction of Sharia	An estimated 3000 people died
9	28 Feb. 2000	Abia	Religious riots in Aba, and minor disturbances in Umuahia	Over 450 persons killed in Aba, Abia state, as reprisal for the Kaduna crisis
10	12 Oct. 2001	Kano	Religious riot in Kano in protest to US invasion of Afghanistan over Osama bin Laden	over 150 persons were killed
11	September 7 <sup>th</sup> to 17 <sup>th</sup> 2001	Jos, Aba, Owerri and Umuahia	A Christian woman attempted to cross a barricaded street. This led to a scuffle between her and a group of Moslems	The fight spread to Bauchi, Lafia and Nassarawa. There was a reprisal attack at Aba, Owerri and Umuahia. 3000 people were mowed to dead 2700 internally displaced,
12	16 Nov. 2002	Kaduna	The miss world crisis in which Muslims attacked Christians and churches	The crisis was triggered by an article authored by Isioma Daniel in this day newspaper, alleging that prophet Mohammed would have loved to have the girls. Over 250 people were killed and several churches destroyed.
13	8 Jun. 2004	Adamawa	Religious conflict between Christians and Muslims in Numan town. Caused by the location of the town's central mosque close to Bachama paramount ruler's place.	Over 17 persons killed.
14	2005	Maiduguri in Borno State and Onitsha in Anambra State	Reprisal attack by the Igbos on the Hausa indigenes as a result of killing of innocent citizens under the guise of protesting against the publication of caricatures of prophet Mohammed by Danish Newspaper	Over 50 lives lost in Maiduguri, over 30 churches and 5 hotels were burnt while many shops/businesses belonging to Christians were either vandalized or looted. Christians at Onitsha staged a reprisal attack on the Muslims

Table 1: Contd.,

15	22 Mar. 2007	Gombe	Muslim pupils killed their Christian teacher, Mrs. Oluwatoyin Olusesan.	The pupils claimed that their teacher desecrated the Qur'an while attempting to stop a student from cheating in an examination hall.
16	November 18, 2008	Jos	Alleged rigging of local government election by PDP against ANPP	More than 100 people killed, over 1000 vehicles, houses, Mosques and Churches burnt
17	April 2009	Wuse in Jos	Expulsion of Fulani nomads from Wuse market by the government because of their alleged involvement in November 2010 Ethno-religious crises.	2 Fulani people were killed and several Fulani settlements were burnt at Gwarza. Police arrested and prosecuted 23 Fulani people
18	26-30 Jul. 2009	Bauchi, Borno, Kano, Yobe	Religious violence unleashed by the Boko Haram sect on Christians	Over 700 persons killed, 3500 persons internally displaced, 1264 children orphaned, over 392 women widowed, and several properties destroyed.
20	January 17, 2010	Jos	Crisis caused by Moslems youths who had gone to attack worshipers in Nassarawa Gwom on Sunday 17 <sup>th</sup> of January 2010.	Over 100 lives and properties worth of millions of Naira were wasted.
21	7 Mar. 2010	Jos	Attacks by Fulani Moslems on Christian dominated villages of Dogo Nahawa, Shen and Fan in Jos	Over 500 people mainly women and children were killed.
22	17 Jul. 2010	Plateau	Muslim Fulani herdsmen launched an overnight attack on a Christian village, Mazab, north of the city Jos	About eight people were reportedly killed, including the wife, two children and a grandson of a pastor. Seven houses and a church were also burnt during the attack.
23	16 Jun. 2011	Police headquarters, Abuja	Suicide bomb attack at the police headquarters, Abuja by suspected Boko Haram Islamists	Authorities said 6 persons were killed and 73 vehicles destroyed
24	26 Aug. 2011	UN House, Abuja	Suicide bomb attack at the UN House, Abuja by suspected Boko Haram Islamists.	23 persons (11 UN personnel and 12 non-UN personnel) were killed.
25	5 Nov. 2011	Potiskum, Damaturu and Maiduguri	. Coordinated attacks on churches and police stations by suspected <i>Boko Haram</i> Islamists	More than 90 persons were reportedly killed, several churches and police stations torched
26	25 Dec. 2011	Madala, Niger state, near the FCT	The bombs were alleged to have been planted at the Church's parking lot	About 45 persons were killed. Over 80 others were injured.
27	5-6 Jan. 2012	Mubi, Adamawa state	Suspected Boko Haram militants stormed a gathering of Igbo Christians and shot sporadically killing over a dozen and injuring others in apparent execution of an ultimatum given by the <i>Boko Haram</i> Islamist sect to Southern Christians living in the North to leave.	22 persons were reportedly killed; a dozen others were injured.
	Jan 20, 2012	Kano	<i>Boko Haram</i> Islamist sect targeted a series of police facilities in Kano	About 185 people were reportedly killed in the attacks.
	January 22, 2012	Bauchi State	Boko Haram attack	Two churches were destroyed, two military personnel, a DPO and eight civilian also killed. .
	Feb, 26 2012	Jos	<i>Boko Haram</i> Islamist sect bombed Church of Christ in Nigeria (COCIN)	4 people were killed and 38 people injured.

Table 1: Contd.,

	June 3, 2012	Bauchi state	Boko Haram sect attacked the Living Faith church in Yelwa.	13 people were killed. The blast also led to the collapse of a wall of the nearby Harvest Field Church of Christ, leaving three people in critical condition.
	25 Nov, 2012	Jaji Kaduna	Sucide Bombers suspected to be Boko Haram members attacked St Andrews protestant Military Church	11 people were killed while some were injured.

The above scenario which has become endemic is a big obstacle to sustainable national development.

### Secularity of the Nation - Legal framework

By Nigeria's Constitution, Nigeria is a secular State. Section 10 of the 1999 Constitution which is a verbatim recopy of section 10 of 1979 Constitution attests to this. Section (38) 1 of the Constitution also states that "every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom (either alone or in community with others, and in public or in private) to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance". These are meant to protect individual's religious freedom and secularity of the nation. Despite this, Zamfara State government went ahead to adopt Sharia as the supreme legal code in 1999 under Governor Ahmed Sani Yerima and later eleven other States (Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto, Niger, Bauchi, Bornu, Yobe and Gombe) in the Northern part of the country followed suit. The demand by the then President, Olusegun Obasanjo to reverse the situation fell on deaf ears. This generated a lot of controversy that made Nwabueze in Oraegbunam, (2010:112) to state that section 10 of the 1999 Constitution in all its spirit and letters does not permit for the adoption of State religion by any constituent part of the federation. He warns that the adoption if not withdrawn would have effect of compromising the federal states as a whole. For Nwabueze the withdrawal from the introduction of the Sharia by the Zamfara State is the only panacea to the continued existence of Nigeria as a Federal State. However, Ibrahim (2003:136) argues that:

The application of the Sharia legal system has been limited to Muslims in northern states, and is not applicable to non-Muslims living in those states, because the Penal Code is to apply to the non-Muslims in the magistrate, and High courts. It will therefore be wrong to assume that the application of the Sharia Penal Law by the northern States is contrary to section 10 of the Constitution since they have not yet declared or adopted Islam as the religion of their respective States.

In his own line of argument, Adesoji (2010: 95) explains that the outbreak of Boko Haram uprising in the country in July 2009 "reinforced the attempts by Islamic conservative elements at imposing a variant of Islamic religious ideology on a secular state". He went further to note that "beyond being an organization with elaborate plans, the intensity, spread and gallantry of the sect members serve as evidence of their remarkable commitment to their cause" (p.102). Boko Haram insurgence explains deepening religious crisis in Nigeria which threatens her unity and corporate existence and undermines national development.

### Religious Pluralism and Sustainable National Development- The Way Forward

It has to be stated that despite the divergent views of the adherents of the three main religions in Nigeria, fundamentally all the religions inspire people towards spiritual excellence and foster the common good of all (Onah 2011). Common good of all is a key ingredient in social stability and sustainable national development. Every religion promotes moral values such as peace, tolerance, honesty, justice, brotherhood, humility and love. Instead of manipulating religion for

selfish interest, people should imbibe such positive principles and teachings of religion, as these can serve as springboards to achieving peace and social harmony in the society. Peace and social harmony provide enabling environment for national development.

Equally, respect for the rule of law is essential for national integration and development and should not be taken for granted nor should the secularity of the nation as contained in the Nigerian Constitution be flouted. Politicians should not thwart the law to achieve their political ambition.

The government should punish perpetrators of religious violence according to the law. This will act as a deterrent to others and a consolation to victims.

Inter-religious dialogue must be encouraged among the different religions in the nation to curb incessant ethno-religious conflicts that have besieged the country till date. This will foster peaceful co-existence which is an important factor in national development. The educational system at all levels should include in its curriculum the religious beliefs and practices of the other with emphasis on their common features.

Religious leaders should act as models and avoid utterances that can anger people of other faith. This will enhance good neighbourliness and national stability.

Government at all levels should organize conferences, seminars and workshops periodically to educate her citizens on the importance of unity in diversity to enable them come to terms with the multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious nature of the Nigerian society. Demonstrating the importance of unity in diversity, the quotation by Mahatma Gandhi remains apt for Nigeria. According to him:

The need of the moment is not one religion, but mutual respect and tolerance of the devotees of the different religions. We want to reach not dead end but unity in diversity. The soul of religions is one, but it is encased in a multitude of forms. The latter will persist till the end (cited in Nigossian 1975: 1).

## CONCLUSIONS

In Nigeria religious pluralism has generated insecurity and instability in the nation. Many religious conflicts have been recorded especially between two immigrant religions in the country. These have led to unquantifiable waste of human and natural resources which are prerequisite for national development. The most worrisome of all is the emergence of Islamic sect known as Boko haram that has continued to terrorize people by engaging in suicide bombings and sporadic shootings resulting in numerous loss of innocent lives and properties. Their activities have taken a great toll on the nation's developmental process. There is no gainsaying that no meaningful development can take place in an atmosphere of rancour and distrust among members of a given society. Religious conflicts constitute a serious threat to socio-economic development of the nation. The issue of one religion trying to take upper hand in a heterogonous society has continued to generate tension in the society. It therefore becomes pertinent to recommend that for peaceful co-existence and sustainable national development to be achieved, there must be respect and tolerance among members of different faiths. The secularity of the nation must be respected by all to maintain social stability and enhance development.

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