

**A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF RELIGIOUS NEXUS:
LESSONS FOR CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA**

BY

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Abstract

It has become fashionable in Nigeria to posit that Islam and Christianity are two religions that are mutually antagonistic in virtually all ramifications. Aside from the fact that both religions are believed to be among the Abrahamic faiths; the antecedents of the two belief system in the context of evolving socio-economic and political dynamics of Nigeria have not been palatable and one that is enmeshed in controversies and in some instances open confrontations with debilitating consequences. This paper intends to bring to limelight the historical relationship which existed between Islam and Christianity from the point of view of historical scholarship. The paper adopts the Functionalist theory of religion in its analysis, and argues that peaceful coexistence in these religions have been undermined in Nigeria largely by the political elites for their personal aggrandizements that are far apart from the injunctions of their creeds. The paper relies on the historical methodology which emphasizes the retrieval, evaluation and interpretation of sources of the past human experience. The finding of the paper is that contrary to popularly held views, there had been robust relationship between Islam and Christianity, which is dated to the epoch of the historical development of Islam in the 7th century. It is recommended that based on these historical ties between these two universal religions, the Nigerian government, and by extension the populace, should constantly explore means of solidifying cooperation and mutual tolerance between the adherents of the two religions.

Introduction

Judging by the physical manifestation of religiosity, Nigeria is arguably the most religious country in the world.⁷ Today, both Islam and Christianity, two universal religions, are straddled across the Nigerian polity, each no longer clamouring to be admitted into what Rodney Stark referred to as the “religious economy”, where different religious bodies compete for followers, much like the way businesses compete for consumers in a commercial economy. In other words, the duo of Islam and Christianity, right from the 9th and 19th centuries respectively, had been established in Nigeria and had considerably decimated the impact and influence of the indigenous religions contemptuously referred to as traditional religion by mainstream liberal scholarship. A familiar trend, however, is the reality which ultimately confronts observers of the role and impact of religion in society, and in this case, the Nigerian state.

Right from the era of British colonialism, but importantly in the post- colonial setting, the Nigerian landscape was not entirely immuned against the intrigues, issues and the complexities associated with religion, as a form of belief system saddled with the role of regulating the deeds of men in line with certain ethical, moral and spiritual specification. However, limiting the meaning and role of religion in society to its theological and dogmatic underpinnings is fatally parochial. History has shown that religion is not exclusively

concerned about the supernatural, but also functions as a dominant system of social and political control. Marx Weber in his Protestant Ethics and Spirit of Capitalism argued that religion functions to reproduce and legitimize the prevailing dominant power structures in societies.³ As a dynamic and creative force, it potentially has a transformative power which emanates from the very fact that it serves as a model and forms the world view of many.⁴ The validity of Weber's thesis in relation to the emerging trend in Nigeria is noteworthy. It is, of course, not an overstatement to posit that an average Nigerian is not prone to atheism, hence, ascribes to a particular religion, whether faithfully or nominally. Notwithstanding the fact that religion was negatively conceived by Karl Marx as a retrogressive system that legitimizes oppression and exploitation of the downtrodden by the dominating privileged class⁵, he however still acknowledged the fact that religion could serve as a veritable tool for promoting social integration and bringing about social change. The point here is that whereas religion can usher in progress and promote the wellbeing of the masses; it can also be a potential ideological tool in the hands of a privileged few in their campaign of brazen manipulation in the bid to consolidate their hold of the common wealth of the society. This apparently seem to be the case in Nigeria.⁶

The issue therefore in perspective, is to illuminate from historical inference the fact that Islam and Christianity have not always been mutually hostile as the unfolding trend in Nigeria seems to portray. The paper delves into the past by unraveling the historical cases of relationship that existed between the two universal religions which most Nigerians ascribe to. The essence of this venture is to debunk the erroneously held view that Islam and Christianity had always been antagonistic. The paper invariably shows that Nigeria, as a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society can draw from the lessons of history on how to correlate peacefully.

Appraising the State of Religion in Nigeria

The revivalist movement of the 19th century led by Sheik Uthman Dan Fodio was to radically transform the status of Islam in Nigeria. Islamic principles of religion, politics, economy and society permeated a greater part of Northern Nigerian society and was to have profound effect in the nature of relationship between the British colonialists and the Muslim Emirs in the far North.⁷ On the other hand, the advent of the European Christian missionaries in Nigeria through the opposite ends of the Nigerian coast, Badagry and old Calabar 'in 1842 and 1846 respectively marked a turning point for Nigeria, from the point of view that, missionary enterprise -turned the white man's activity in Nigeria into a veritable political and social force.⁸ From the outset, these two religions that came to Nigeria had their modus operandi, which was largely defined by the teachings of the two faiths, but the rate of spread and its impact was largely dictated by the sociopolitical circumstances of the period of their spread. In the case of Islam, it integrated and assimilated vital indigenous and social institutions like polygamy.⁹ Christianity, however, was bent on total *metanoia* and perceived no wisdom in compromising with indigenous customs and institutions. They therefore, vigorously sought for the creation and institutions of a new socio-cultural milieu that would trample most of the "devilish" customs of the old society.¹⁰ A Capuchin priest in 1710 clearly put this mindset into force when he declared that, "*the people of Warri were obstinate, idolatrous and given to witchcraft and all sorts of abominable vices*"¹¹ In the words of a zealous missionary, "the only complete cure for all the evils that had engulfed Africa was the introduction of Christianity into Africa"¹² On the part of the militant Jihadists that sought to bring as much Nigerian groups under the banner of the crescent, the intention was "to deep the holy Qur'an into the ocean," seeming to imply that the frontiers of the Islamic religion should be extended up to the coastal communities of Nigeria.

It is imperative to decipher the actual intention of these agents of proselytization. While the initial disposition of the early Christian missionaries in Nigeria was not far-fetched from the need to regenerate Nigerian societies in line with the imperial convictions of the west, laced with their hegemonic mindsets, the Muslims rulers of the far North, who were the *defensor fidei* of the Islamic religion in their territories were hostile to white rule at the beginning, partly because of the fact that it was generally believed that the Europeans administrators, some of whom were not practicing Christians and were heavily secularized and liberalized, came from a Christian nation and most likely to be at the service of Christianity.¹³ As it turned out to be the British colonialist, by virtue of the pact they entered into with the Emirs, restricted the activities of the missionaries to areas contemptuously referred to as “pagans and savages”¹⁴ Ayandele had argued that the fascination of the British with the centralized system of government of the emirate north and the subsequent attempt to impose alien political administration in areas that were hitherto referred to as “primitive pagan society” turned out to be a platform for proselytization by some of the appointed Muslim District Heads.¹⁵ These groups of people, currently inhabiting what is today referred to as the Nigerian Middle Belt, were assumed by both the British and their collaborators to be at a low level of political and social development and their allegiance to Emirs adjacent to them, or their conversion to Islam, is better than the pale of heathenism and paganism that pervaded their societies¹⁶ Evidence abound about the British deliberate involvement and manipulation of religion in order to achieve their set objectives. Both Islam and Christianity were not spared in this grand attempt to sustain the colonial system, even at the expense of these religions.¹⁷ In addition, the colonialists policy of discrimination and segregation in residential areas between the “indigenes” and “settlers” in some town was to breed further suspicion and sense of religious and ethnic exclusivity.¹⁸ This was to eventually heighten tension between adherents of different religions in Nigeria.

Since the attainment of national independence, a combination of factor made religion a powerful factor in Nigeria. Cleavages as a result of religious sentiments have severally undermined national peace. Leaders of religious organizations, both Christianity and Islam, seem to have been using the style and language of politics in their quest for propaganda, control of converts and prevention of one another from dominating the political environment.¹⁹ In their various interactions, virtually everything seems to be politicized, sometimes to the neglect of their callings. Religion has turned out to be a potent tool of mobilization for political actors. Once a political candidate defined him-self as a Muslim and his rival happens to be Christian, politics sometimes snowballs into religious contest, with little or no recognition to their capacity or personality.²⁰ Events had shown how Nigerian politician turn to religion for power legitimization. The attempt to institutionalize the Shari’a into the body polity had resulted to the radicalization of some Christian groups in Nigeria.²¹ The secular definition of the Nigerian state has constantly been a source of concern to some Muslims who really cannot separate their religion with the state. The politics of religion revolves mainly around domestic agenda that is seeking greater access to political influence and national resources. Muslims and Christians do not necessarily agree upon a number of major national issues such as the secular nature of the Nigerian state as constitutionally defined, the nature of the foundation of Nigeria; the distribution of federal positions to rapacious members of the political class; the continuation or not of the English legal system; the retention of Nigeria as a federal structure; the place of women in society and politics, the religious distributions of Nigerians, among others.²² Amidst all these contentious and mind boggling issues, the Nigerian political class seems to be unable to find appropriate answers to these challenges but rather, appears culpable in contributing to the unresolved challenges posed by religious pluralism.

Historical Evidence of Religious Nexus

The thrust of the paper is to establish the basis of relationship between Islam and Christianity. This does not totally imply that these religions converged entirely in areas of doctrines and principles. While there are fundamental areas of divergence, there are also areas of convergence. Both Islam and Christianity, for instance, believe in the sacredness of the human life and the oneness of the Supreme Being. However, there are seemingly areas of divergence bordering on the nature of this supreme being.²³ The theological cum doctrinal points of divergence or otherwise is certainly outside the scope of this paper. The concern of the writer is ultimately to dwell on specific instances of relationship, in concrete historical terms, between the two faiths.

Historically, in the oriental world which gave birth to Christianity and Islam, each state and empire was held together and drew its authority and legitimacy by basically appealing to religious foundations.²⁴ It was the religious element of each empire that contributed to its universality and comprehensiveness. Prior to the advent of the monarchy in Israel, the form of government was theocracy with deep roots in religion. The history of the evolution of the western civilization, despite the aggressive secularization that is currently so evident, is incomplete without appreciating the role of the Christian religion as a formidable force in the transformation of Europe. All the dynasties in the Arabian Peninsula from which modern states that are Islamic by identification and orientation took root, understood themselves as representatives of a transcendent order.²⁵

The initial contact of Muslims with Christians, from the early days of the historical development of Islam was in Mecca. With the public declaration of the message of Islam from the Prophet to his early followers, the Muslims, at this time were of the view that the closest allies to them were the Christians.²⁶ Infact, because of the magnanimity of the Prophet towards a number of Christians, some of whom were non-Arab slaves, and because of the near uniformity between Islam and Christianity over some Messages, the “pagans” of Mecca were said to have taunted the Prophet because of their claim that he was relating stories from the slaves²⁷. Another illustration was how the Prophet agreed with his wife Khadija to visit a renowned mystic Waraqat Ibn Nawfal, given as a Christian in some sources, to narrate to him the initial experience of the Prophet at mount Hira.²⁸ A further illustration which is of particular relevance at this juncture, was the cordial relations which existed between the Prophet and the Christians Byzantine viceroy in Abyssinia (Ethiopia) by name An-Najashi (Negus).²⁹ The Prophet was said to have sent the early Muslims who suffered serious oppression and victimization from the Meccans to Negus on two occasions to seek asylum in lūs territory. The receptivity of the Christian ruler to the Muslims was never in doubt as he was reputed to have used his staff of authority and drew a thin line on the ground to the effect that the difference between the Muslims and his people is as thin as the line. The Christian king Negus was believed by the Prophet to be upright and generous.³⁰ His understanding of Negus was seen in the fact that the Muslims who found refuge in his Christian territory were never maltreated by him or anyone in Abyssinia. The Meccans who were oppressing and maltreating the Muslims even tried unsuccessfully to dissuade the Christian king Negus from receiving the Muslims warmly. The Prophet’s tie with the Christian king was so strong that when Negus died, the Prophet is reported to have performed ritual funeral prayers for him in absentia.³¹ This is a fundamental lesson for adherents of both Islam and Christianity in Nigeria.

Furthermore, before the Prophet migrated from Mecca to Madinah, in his bid to prove the oneness of God worshipped by three of the Abrahamic faiths, but most probably because the Ka’ aba was by then filled with idols which were repugnant to Islam, the Prophet decided at

first to face the direction of Jerusalem during prayers.³² He made a constitution which guaranteed freedom of worship and of decision to the Jews of Yathrib and its environ, on his arrival at Madinah were he was welcomed as the head of the Muslim community with superior administrative and political acumen to the existing rulers.³³ In the ensuing political rigmarole typical of the Arabian peninsula, at this period, the Prophet had a preference for the Christians than the Jews and even the Meccans who persecuted him and his followers. Muslims tolerated and appreciated the people of the revealed books during the days of the rise of Islam.

What Lessons for Contemporary Nigeria?

Nigeria is a multi-plural society with many ethnicities and two dominant religions, owing to the existence but almost official neglect of the traditional religion. Religious pluralism amidst ethnic differences ultimately have undermine the process of building and sustaining a Nigerian nation-state judging from the endless clamour of the two dominant religions for greater visibility and predominance in the affairs of the Nigerian state.³⁴ For instance, more often than not, some Muslims have wrongly or rightly been accused of wanting to impose the Islamic law on Nigeria as a prelude to the eventual Islamization of Nigeria. Besides, mobilization by some Christians has suggested that there would be secession or warfare in the event of the attempt to impose Islam on Nigeria. While these negative mindsets further create problems to nation building; they nevertheless should be exhaustively explored in the attempt to forge a sense of greater mutual cooperation, tolerance and continuous honest negotiations. The use of religion to tear people apart is partly of colonial creation and colonialism profited from creating cleavages on account of religion.³⁵ Religion is sometimes conterminous with ethnic or communal identities. Often, a north-south regional divide is also read as the Islamic-Christian divide. This mindset is parochial and is often the basis of lopsided conclusions in the attempt to decipher the composition and nature of the Nigerian state. For while there are Christians in the north, so also are there Muslims in the South. Therefore, Nigerian secularity should strongly be emphasized as a way of curbing extreme religious ideologies and views which do not encourage religious tolerance and cooperation among adherents of Islam and Christianity. The Holy Qur'an instructed that there is no compulsion in religion.

In view of this, the attempts by some state actors to favour a particular religion against the other, across the nation, is an affront on the Constitution of Nigeria and the natural rights of Nigerians. In his message to the entire world on the celebration of the 2011 world day of peace, the Catholic Pontiff, his Holiness, Pope Benedict XVI aptly remarked that:

When religious freedom is acknowledged, the dignity of the human person is respected at its root, and the ethos and institutions of people are strengthened. On the other hand, when religious freedom is denied, and attempts are made to hinder people from professing their religion or faith and living accordingly; human dignity is offended, with a resulting threat to justice and peace, which are grounded with that right social order established in the light of supreme truth and supreme goodness. To deny or arbitrarily restrict this freedom is to foster a reductive vision of the human person and to stifle the growth of the authentic and lasting peace of the whole human family.³⁶

Furthermore, in a Covenant written by Prophet Muhammad to Muslims, he remarked thus:

This is a message from Muhammad Ibn Abdullah, as a covenant to those who adopt Christianity, near and far, we are with them. Verily, I, the servant, the helpers and my followers defend them, because Christians are my citizens and by Allah! I hold out against anything that displeases them. No compulsion is to

be on them. Neither are their judges to be removed from their jobs nor their monks from their monasteries. No one is to destroy a house of their religion, to damage it, or to carry anything from it to the Muslims' houses. Should anyone take any of these, he would spoil God's covenant and disobey His Prophet. Verily, they are all my allies and have my secure charter against all they have hate. No one is to force them to travel or to oblige fight The Muslims are to fight for them. If a female Christian is married to a Muslim, it is not to take place without her approval. She is not to be prevented from visiting her church to pray. Their churches are to be respected. They are neither to be prevented from repairing them the sacredness of their covenants. No one of the nation (Muslim) is to disobey the covenant till the last day (end of the world)"³⁷

In the light of the foregoing, the Nigerian state actors should, as a matter of public order and security, respect and uphold the rights of all citizens to practice their religion, in view of the fact that Nigeria is a multi-faith society and does not ascribe to any single faith as a state religion. The Nigerian state must always guarantee the right of all religion to exist and flourish. Part of the responsibility in this regard is to ensure that these rights are not just theoretical but enforceable and not infringed upon. Drawing from the historical account of the relationship between Islam and Christianity, Nigerian citizens should have places of worship built anywhere without molestation and discrimination. These rights must be universal and not parochial in favour of any particular religion. In the same vein, the institutional imposition of a particular religion, or creating a platform for a particular religion to thrive over and above the other should, as a matter of public security, be discouraged and contained.

The Nigerian state should employ workable steps to curb the nefarious activities of some unscrupulous people who fan the embers of religious divide and systematically manipulate religion in order to achieve certain political goals. The sacred character of religion is therefore arm twisted into serving the dangerous and selfish desires of this tiny and parasitic group. The Apparent danger emanating from abuse of religion is that it could undermine public peace and security, to the detriment of the masses, as implied by Karl Marx. In view of the indisputable sensitivity of religion, particularly in a volatile country like Nigeria, the politics of religion by political actors can be counterproductive and could potentially pose a threat to Nigeria's corporate existence if it goes unchecked. Therefore, continuous religious tolerance and co-operation must constantly be encouraged and even enforced by state actors. A form of state regulated control or an institutional control mechanism should carefully be put in place to checkmate the excesses of some state actors and religious bigot who abuse the sensibility of religion for self-aggrandizement.

Conclusion

The paper is centered on the historical basis of religious tolerance and cooperation between Islam and Christianity from the period of the evolution of Islam. The major argument of this piece is that these two Abrahamic faiths converged in some critical moment of their existence in history and are not necessarily antagonistic to each other. The essence of this illustration from history is to push for greater tolerance and mutual cooperation between adherents of these faiths towards fostering development in Nigeria. The paper also argued that the vituperative and suspicious state of affairs between the two universal religions in Nigeria is purely the handiwork of a tiny but parasitic class of oppressors whose primary concern is to sustain their crude exploitation of the common wealth of the Nigerian masses. Government at all levels should devise means to proactively arrest this ugly trend because of the sensitivity associated with religion in Nigeria.

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37. CUPS: The original covenant letter is now in the Topkapi Museum in Istanbul, Turkey. The researcher is indebted to Dr. Lawal Oladimeji who produced a version of the letter to him.