

RELIGION AND NATIONAL INTEGRATION IN NIGERIA: A TRANSCENDENTAL RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The decision which was made by the people of Nigeria prior to independence to become the Federal Republic of Nigeria from Britain required that the People of Nigeria will be integrated with one another for the purposes of co-existence, co-sharing of resources, co-administering and co-development of the nation. But this goal seems to be elusive in Nigeria during the nearly 50 years of her existence as an independent nation. What seems to linger so much is the cries of marginalization; promotion of individualistic and ethnic interests such as ethnic resource control; propagation of exclusive religious ideologies; and the practice of sectional and tribal politics et cetera. In view of the above, this paper discusses first, the nature and essence of religion (specifically, Christian religion); second, the concept of national integration; and third, the paper suggests a transcendental religious orientation for national integration. According to the transcendental religious perspective, national integration in Nigeria after independence is not a choice; rather, it is an ontological necessity (Ajah 9). Therefore, the question of national integration should not be ignored, sidelined or discarded in the name of any religious, political or ethnic guise/affiliation; rather, it should be encouraged, embraced and put into practice by the people of Nigeria in order to promote unity and development within and outside the nation.

Key Words: Nigeria, Christian Religion, National Integration, Transcendental Religious Orientation.

I. INTRODUCTION

The title of this paper presupposes three things: first, that there is a relationship between religion and national integra-

tion; second, that this relationship could either be positive or negative and third, that a transcendental religious perspective is suggested for national integration.

The problem that this paper addresses is the apparent lack of national integration among the citizens of Nigeria. Nigeria obtained her independence from Britain since October 1st, 1960. Following from that independence, the country became, at least, in theory, a united nation known as the 'Federal Republic of Nigeria'. This scenario ought to have stirred a sense of oneness, unity, integration and indivisibility among the citizens of Nigeria. But alas! What seems to linger so much in the national and regional news is a negation of the concept of one united nation. There appear to be cries of marginalization; promotion of individualistic and ethnic interests such as ethnic resource control; propagation of exclusive religious ideologies; and the practice of sectional and tribal politics et cetera (which is manifested in the prevalence of ethnic militia). I suspect that all these individualistic, religious and ethnic propaganda are done at the detriment of national integration.

In view of the above, this paper offers a transcendental religious orientation for national integration in Nigeria. This is done by examining the following areas: First, the paper examines the nature and essence of religion (specifically Christian religion); second, the concept of national integration is discussed; and third, the paper describes how a transcendental religious (Christian) orientation functions as well as how it can enhance national integration in Nigeria and hopefully in Africa.

2. THE NATURE OR ESSENCE OF CHRISTIAN RELIGION

The Christian religion is anchored on the belief in the existence of a Triune God (Erickson 18-22, 362-353). This God is

believed to be the Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer. The Christian Scripture is also believed to be God's revelation to humanity. The will of this Trinitarian God about His creation and about human beings is revealed in the Bible. One other central tenets of Christianity is the conviction that God has expressed Himself in three persons (the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit). This concept of the *Trinity* is very important because it shows that in as much as God has revealed himself in three persons he is still one indivisible God. This is to argue that Christians do not worship three Gods; rather, they worship one Triune God. Another central belief is the fall of humanity (*sin*) in which human beings were separated from God. When this had happened, humanity was destined to eternal death. But the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ brought about *redemption, reconciliation* and *restoration* between God and humankind. The reconciling work of Christ has also brought about reconciliation between one human being and the other. As a consequence, Christianity advocates for brotherly love, peace, unity, reconciliation, integration, tolerance and progress, et cetera. In addition to the above, other Christian concepts are also integral parts of the Christian faith and community. Two of such have been selected for consideration. These include the concept of **one baptism** and that of **one family**.

The first is the concept of *one baptism in Christ*. This is a process in which every believer is baptized and identified with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The person who receives baptism becomes a member of the body of Christ. He/she belongs to Christ by virtue of that baptism. All those who receive baptism find a common dwelling place in Christ. Being in Christ, therefore presupposes that other differences such as race, culture, ethnicity and language, et cetera will take a back seat (August 295). In other words,

Christians by virtue of Baptism become ontologically one. This oneness is wrought through the redemptive/reconciliatory work of Christ and his Spirit. Therefore, the oneness must express itself not only in the spiritual sense but also in a visible form¹. There is no colour, race, ethnicity, or any distinction as to the application of this reconciling work of Christ. His One Spirit applies this work in each and every believer. In other words, the church is spiritually one by virtue of this reconciling work of Christ.

Now, let us draw this concept closer to the Nigerian context. What is the basis for the apparent disunity between one group of Christians and the other which underlies our religious practice in Nigeria? Why is it difficult for Christians to give this spiritual reality (unity) a concrete structural expression today? A fig tree should produce its fruit according to its kind; but if a fig tree produces another kind of fruit, the ontological nature of that fig tree could possibly be doubted.² Similarly, the ontological unity of the Christian community in Nigeria needs a concrete structural expression. But if this concrete structural expression is elusive, the ontological unity of the Christian community in Nigeria may also be doubted. The above premise is that the church is ontologically one and therefore, the Christian family in Nigeria should also express this oneness through concrete structural unity and integration.

Christians are called to do something about the lack of visible unity in the society today. Spiritual unity must be given concrete expression as suggested by the Christian creeds and Confessions (Smit 313). "what we believe and confess

¹ For an in-depth discussion on this ontological unity of the church, see W. Nicol, "Church unity and diversity in the New Testament," in W. S. Vorster (ed.), *Church Unity and Diversity in the Southern African Context*. (Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1980), 7-16.

² Cf Matthew 7:16-20; Luke 6:43-45; James 3:12.

should be put into concrete practice, should be translated into acts of obedience, discipleship, transformation, sanctification, in short, should become Christian life". (Smit 313)

Cortzen argues in support of both spiritual and structural unity by pointing to a list of Biblical concepts from Ephesians 4:1-6. (56-57) He explained that the Church has one Spirit, one body, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one hope, one God and one Father. He also contends that this unity became part of the Apostolic Confession. According to him, this spiritual unity of the church must necessarily express itself in a concrete structural form in order to be that which it has been called to be. He cautioned that even though there were different churches in the New Testament period, this does not mean that they were structurally divided. The various churches were admonished to keep the bond of the unity of the Spirit.

Failure to keep the bond of unity in the church may lead to associated negative consequences. For example, Apartheid policy was given a theological dress by the Dutch Reformed Church when it argued that it was God's ultimate will for every nation, language and race to hear the gospel in its own language and culture and to live separately from each other (Coertzen 2001:60). This theological or ideological colouring of the apartheid policy was rejected by the World Council of Churches and subsequently by the Reformed church family in Southern Africa and other Christian religious groups as a sin, a travesty of the gospel and a theological heresy (Smith 2003:316-317; Meiring 2004:120-125). Therefore, in order for the family of the Dutch Reformed Churches to remain consistent to the Gospel and true to the ontological unity of the Church, it became necessarily for them to achieve a re-unification and racial integration. Attempts to prolong the process of re-unification casted a shadow of

doubt not only on the witness of the Dutch Reformed Church family but also on its ontological unity (Villa-Vicencio 1983:35).

American experience of racism was such that the church paid a high price for standing aloof about racial integration in the church and in the society (Massie 21). The church in America had assumed that social integration will naturally bring about a similar integration in the church between African-American and White Caucasian Churches. This belief was not accompanied with concrete efforts toward racial reconciliation and integration in the church. As a consequence, the church allowed the virulent epidemic of racism to remain active in the United States long after its demise was projected. Therefore, since the Church is the body of Christ, a person who accepts Jesus Christ has logically dissolved his/her cultural, ethnic and racial ties et cetera.³ In this sense, there is no Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female because all are one body in Christ. (Massie 23)

Second, is the concept of *one family* as employed by Oduyoye to illustrate the nature of Christian unity (467-471). To put it in her own words: "the African family... may be used as a symbol of what Christians mean by ecumenism, and *oikos*, a household whose ruling, morality and ethics are of Christ, whose religion is the religion of Jesus of Nazareth, and whose faith is anchored on the Christ of God. The ecclesia, the church (of Christ or of God) becomes a kin-group, a community of Christ's believers, called together by and around Christ event". According to her the concept of *one family* provides Christian believers with a model by which they could build their visible unity.

³ This does not mean that race and culture of a Christian will automatically cease to exist. Of course, these social ties could still be there but may not be made to stand in opposition to the unity of believers in Christ.

In Matthew 10, the notion of a *household* where one could find hospitality and a willingness to listen features prominently. In Luke 2; 9:52-62, the *new family* constituted by Jesus was based on an ideology [theology] and style of life rather than on blood; on discipleship, rather than parentage. Similarly, the parable of the *prodigal son* in Luke 15:11-32 recalls family solidarity, resentment and a style of conflict resolution and reconciliation. The event of the wedding in Canaan of Galilee (cf John 2:1-11) draws home the implications of celebration, cooperation and solidarity. Most of all, the theology of Paul is coloured with family ethics (cf Ephesians 5). Here, Paul compares the relationship between Christ and the Church with that of spouses. Oduyoye argues that if Christians can affirm this caring orientation of church as *one family*, the various implications from the African family and the Biblical portrayal of the new family could foster visible unity in the body of Christ and in the society where that body lives (478). Therefore, the essence of the Christian religion presupposes integration. Consequently, a religious assembly which is devoid of peace, unity and development, has no ontological basis and does not fit to exist in a civilized society.

3. THE CONCEPT OF NATIONAL INTEGRATION

What is national integration? The word integration means “the bringing of people of different racial or ethnic groups into unrestricted and equal association, as in society or an organization”. (Soukhanov 938) If we adopt the above definition of the word integration, then ‘national integration’ in Nigeria will literally mean the bringing of the different ethnic, racial, religious, economic, social and political groups into unrestricted and equal association on national issues. Nigeria has more than three hundred ethnic groups with several

languages and dialects. There are three major religions in Nigeria. These include: Christianity, Islam and African Religions. There are also different social, economic and political groups. These groups exist in order to promote their specific group interests and wellbeing. It is a natural thing to find different social, economic and political groups et cetera existing side by side in a particular geographical location. The strength of such is that what is lacking in one group is supplemented by the other. So, in the end the various groups benefit from mutual co-existence and co-sharing of resources.

But what this paper addresses is the apparent lack of interest for national integration among the citizens of Nigeria. Nigeria obtained her independence from Britain since October 1st, 1960. Following from that independence, the country became, at least, in theory, a united nation known as the 'Federal Republic of Nigeria'. This state of affairs ought to have inspired a sense of oneness, unity, integration and indivisibility among the citizens of Nigeria. On the contrary, what seems to feature so much in the national and regional news is a negation of the concept of one united nation. There appear to be cries of marginalization; promotion of individualistic and ethnic interests such as ethnic resource control; propagation of exclusive religious ideologies; and the practice of sectional and tribal politics et cetera. This is manifested in the prevalence of ethnic militias around the country, who are bent on protecting their individualistic and ethnic interests. My worry is that all these individualistic, religious and ethnic propaganda are done at the detriment of national integration. One group is prepared to eliminate another group so that they may exist without the other. This situation is worrisome. Should the progress of one ethnic, social, political and or economic group be done at the ruins of the others? Will it not be of more service to the develop-

ment of Nigeria as one nation if all these various groups live together and promote collective interests rather than otherwise?

To my mind, national integration in Nigeria after independence was and still is not a choice; rather, it is a necessity (Ajah 9). In other words, the decision which was made by the people of Nigeria prior to independence to become the Federal Republic of Nigeria from Britain required that the various ethnic and religious groups accepted to integrate with one another. This step was necessary for the purposes of co-existence, co-sharing of resources, co-administration and co-development of the nation. As a result the people of Nigeria cannot shy away from coming together to live as a united nation under the rubrics of the 'Federal Republic of Nigeria'. This is why national integration is a necessary precondition to the unity and development of the country.

Therefore, this paper suggests that a transcendental religious perspective should be adopted and put into practice as one of the ways that the people of Nigeria could promote national integration. The nature of this transcendental religious orientation will be discussed below.

4. A TRANSCENDENTAL RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVE AND NATIONAL INTEGRATION

4.1. Presuppositions of the transcendental religious worldview

A *transcendental* perspective on national integration is founded upon the following presuppositions:

- First, that, the source of all existence including human beings in general, transcends the ordinary realm of human affairs. It is the conviction that the source of our being and existence is derived from the Trinitarian God

who has revealed himself in creation, scripture and in his son Jesus Christ.

- Second, that the Trinitarian God *created* the universe and all other galaxies including human beings (cf Gn 1:1-31).
- Third, that He *rules* and *sustains* it through his providence.
- Fourth, that He has redeemed human beings and his creation through the death and resurrection of his Son Jesus Christ.
- Fifth, that this God has given human beings several *mandates* including the mandate *to govern* the nations and other creatures (cf Gn 1:26-31).
- Sixth, that God has done all the above things (*i* to *v*) for his *glory* (which was, his *goal* or *purpose* for creation).
- Seventh, that the Bible, that is, the Old and the New Testaments, the whole created order and the person and work of Jesus Christ together form God's grand revelation to human beings.
- As a consequence, all humanity owes a duty to glorify this triune God. Human beings are *accountable* first, to God and second, to one another. A *transcendental* orientation therefore takes its benchmark upon the above presuppositions; hence, its perspective has two dimensions, namely, the vertical or *theo-centric* and the horizontal or *anthropocentric* dimension. One who has a transcendental orientation will reveal the glory of God by being *disciplined, visionary, humble, honest, relational, empathetic, accountable, democratic* and *altruistic et cetera*.

4.2. The description of the transcendental perspective on national integration

4.2.1. Background

It has already been suggested that a transcendental perspective has two aspects both in its presuppositions or theoretical framework and in its practice. The first dimension is *Theo-centric*, while the second is *anthropocentric*. *Theo-centric* dimension means it takes its benchmark from the Trinitarian God of the Bible and it is aimed at reflecting, revealing and accomplishing the *plan, purpose* and *glory* of God for his creation. *Anthropocentric* direction means it is specifically concerned with improving the plight of human beings. This means, it is concerned with the maintenance of orderliness, provision of an enabling environment for human and capital development, enhancement of justice, equity and fair distribution of the available resources and the preservation/improvement of human life in general. All the issues of human existence are given considerable or serious and adequate attention by this philosophy of being and existence. In order to achieve these two dimensional goals, one must be empowered by the wisdom and knowledge of the Trinitarian God who has revealed himself in Scriptures. The ontological consequence of embracing this transcendental orientation is the exhibition of the glory of God through *godliness, self-discipline, vision, humility, honesty, friendliness, empathy, accountability, democratic attitude* and *altruism* et cetera.

A transcendental orientation therefore, requires a Christian worldview as its precondition. A shift from other worldviews to a Christian worldview becomes an important ingredient for a proper comprehension and practice of the transcendental perspective on national integration. Van de Walt

(1994) has discussed extensively what a worldview is and particularly what a Christian worldview entails. Since this article presupposes that a Christian worldview is pertinent for the understanding and the practice of the transcendental religious perspective, the following discussion will explain what a worldview is and particularly what a Christian worldview entails according to Van der Walt (1994).

4.2.2. *A Worldview*

Van der Walt (1994:39) argues that ideas give birth to deeds. How people think determine how they live and what they do. This means that in order to understand the deeds of people properly, it is imperative to learn about what such people think. He proceeded by defining a Worldview as “an integrated, interpretive set of confessional perspectives on reality which underlies, shapes, motivates and gives direction and meaning to human activity” (Van der Walt 1994:39). Other worldviews include materialistic worldview, individualistic world view, a totalitarian worldview and an ideology et cetera.

In his analysis of these worldviews, Van der Walt (1994:55) argues that a materialistic worldview cannot promote human dignity since it is more interested in material possessions. Similarly, an individualistic worldview is too self-centred and therefore unfit to cater for the welfare of others; while a totalitarian worldview lacks focus. Meanwhile, An ideology according to Van der Walt (1994:46) “is a petrified, hardened worldview which has no interest in reality any longer or what it looks like, but only wishes to impose its preconceived ideas on reality”. Therefore this paper submits that the transcendental Christian religious worldview should be adopted in order to promote national integration in Nigeria.

The reasons why the transcendental perspective is more reliable and functional are as follow:

- Those who embrace this transcendental orientation are able to adapt or adjust to new reality.
- They are able to understand the nature and function of God's laws, orders and structures of reality and they adapt to God's plan and purpose for his creation
- They live a positive life; that means they promote human life not suppresses or destroys it.
- This transcendental Christian religious worldview rests on the Christian faith in the Revelation of the Triune God. This revelation transcends this cosmos. Its origin and subject is God. The Holy Scripture, the person and work of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit as well as the work of creation are bound up together as the one revelation of the Triune God⁴.

A Christian worldview considers human beings as God's image bearers who need to be treated with honour and dignity since a human being is more than his/her body. It emphasizes love and brother/sisterhood between human beings. Furthermore, a transcendental Christian religious worldview believes that social relationships such as marriage, family, ethnicity, race and nationality et cetera are not the inventions of human beings so that they may fashion them according to their own whims and wishes, but they are institutions made by God. A transcendental Christian reli-

⁴ Van der Walt (1994:48) makes an important remark on a transcendental Christian religious orientation or worldview. He observes that one has to make a choice between a Christian worldview and other worldviews. He emphasizes that all unbiblical faiths are of necessity false; and that all other revelations are nothing but pseudo-revelations. The existence of such revelations cannot be denied nor the right of other people to trust in them. However, the authentic revelation is the revelation of the Triune God in the person and work of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, the Holy Scripture and the entire creation. This is the basis of a Christian religious worldview.

gious worldview therefore demands for a careful management and distribution of natural, economic and human resources-the basis for the survival of future generations.

It is on the basis of a transcendental Christian religious worldview that the concept of national integration is premised. A transcendental Christian religious orientation on national integration believes that nationality is not only a human institution to be manipulated for selfish interests. It is ordained by the Triune God specifically to reveal his glory, honour, orderliness and to protect and promote human life and the natural resources. Therefore, other worldviews such as the totalitarian, materialistic, individualistic and ideology do not fully provide the necessary basis or precondition for national integration. Human beings are not machines; they are living bodies with souls and spirit. Human beings are made in God's image. Therefore, any ideology, worldview or social ethos that destroys human lives and property in order to promote its individualist interest is going against the ethos of a transcendental Christian religious orientation. The Trinitarian God must therefore be a benchmark for promoting national integration. This is where the concept of love God and your fellow human being becomes evident.

5. CONCLUSION

The problem that I have discussed in this paper is the apparent lack of national integration among the citizens of Nigeria. When Nigeria obtained her independence from Britain it was assumed that the nation had become a united nation known as the 'Federal Republic of Nigeria'. This scenario, I hope would have provided a spirit of oneness, unity, integration and indivisibility among the citizens of Nigeria. Unfortunately, reality has pressed itself upon the nation that the national integration or unity which was hoped for was a nightmare. Rather, what is in reality is the cries of marginali-

zation; promotion of individualistic and ethnic interests such as ethnic resource control; propagation of exclusive religious ideologies; and the practice of sectional and tribal politics et cetera (which is manifested in the prevalence of ethnic militia). In view of this, I argued that all these individualistic, religious and ethnic propaganda are done at the detriment of national integration.

Consequently, this paper offers a transcendental religious orientation for national integration in Nigeria. This is done by examining First, the nature and essence of religion (specifically Christian religion); second, the concept of national integration; and third, a description of a transcendental religious (Christian) orientation and how it functions as well as how it can enhance national integration in Nigeria and hopefully in Africa.

The paper insists that national integration is an absolute component for the development of Nigeria that must never be ignored, sidelined or discarded in the name of any guise (whether it is religion, ethnicity or political affiliation etc). Nigeria is ontologically one since independence. It must therefore brace itself to put into practice what is already a necessity. The transcendental Christian religious orientation if adopted will serve this purpose of enhancing national integration in Nigeria and hopefully in Africa.

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