






A critical analysis of the impact of religion on the Nigerian struggle for nationhood



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Religion plays a vital role in the formation of conscience and therefore is very important in determining how people co-exist in a society. Nigerian citizens live in regions other than their ethnic geographical areas, but they are not recognised as people of the same destiny and subjects of equal rights. The long period of military dictatorship that truncated the country's democracy since the civil war gave Nigerians a constitution which adopted the Sharia legal system within a purported secular state. This encouraged a wide range of religious fanaticism and led to various demands for human rights, which has become a worrisome issue to concerned Nigerians. This article used secondary sources of data, such as newspaper publications and journal articles to examine the impact of religion on the state of the Nigerian nation today. The article calls for the harmonisation of Christianity and Islamic teachings in line with the secularity of the Nigerian state in order to reduce the increasing tensions in the country and make the journey to nationhood more realistic.

Contribution: This article proposes that the secularity of the Nigerian state has to be maintained by political and religious leaders in order to attain purposeful nationhood and achieve sustainable and genuine development of the country.

Keywords: Boko Haram; inequality; Islam and Christianity; nationhood; religion.

Introduction

Nigeria comprises 371 ethnic nationalities, of which three of them are recognised as major ethnic groups in view of their largest populations. Without consultations or a referendum, the colonialists joined all the peoples as a country through the amalgamation of 1914, and since then the country had never known peace. The challenge of peaceful co-existence in Nigeria is therefore as old as Nigeria itself, such that at the struggle for independence neither the colonialists nor the colonised had confidence in the strength of the Nigerian project to survive as a state (Akasike 2018; Akubo 2018).

According to Uwalaka (2003):

In 1947, Alhaji Tafawa Belewa (the first Nigerian Prime minister) said 'since the Amalgamation of the Southern and Northern provinces in 1914, Nigeria has existed as one country on paper and not in practice'. (p. 12)

In his own commentary, Ahmadu Bello, the Sarduna of Sokoto (the first Nigerian Governor of northern region) said:

Nigeria is so large and the people so varied that no person with any real intellectual integrity would be so foolish as to pretend that he speaks for the country as a whole. (Ugwuoke, Ajah & Onyejebu 2020:9)

Obafemi Awolowo, the post independent Yoruba political leader, noted that 'Nigeria is a mere geographical expression'. Even Gowon, who led the war against Biafra in August 1966, said, 'there is no basis for unity' (Ugwuoke et al. 2020:9). We have cited these statements to demonstrate the scepticism and veiled unacceptability of the Nigerian idea by these leaders. Odumegwu-Ojukwu (1989:13) remarked that 'the struggle for independence gave the Nigerian people a togetherness but not unity. It gave Nigeria confidence but not strength'. The six years of civil war tested the willingness of Nigerians to co-exist peacefully as a nation, but they do not seem to have learned from the bitter lessons of the war (Ezeanya & Ajah 2021).

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Several violent protests have been reported in Nigeria during the people's bid for the freedom to self-actualisation or self-determination, but the Islamist Boko Haram dimension of the crisis makes the urgent need for solution very crucial. Christianity is one of the major religions in Nigeria. Christians in Nigeria have suffered much hardship and cruelties at the hands of the various Islamic fanatical sects and adherents. It is as if history is trying to repeat itself once again in line with the era of forceful proselytising of peoples in defiance of their right to freedom of religion. This situation necessitated the present study that examines the healing from the roots and reappraised the co-existential tenets of the Christian religion as remedies to the present crisis situation that is already getting out of control.

Christian religion in Nigeria

The Christian religion is the system of beliefs possessed by those who are followers of Jesus Christ. It is synonymously identified as Christianity, which Doniger (ed. 1999:2) defined as 'the religion that traces its origins to Jesus of Nazareth, whom it affirms to be the chosen one (Christ) of God'. The followers of this religion are called Christians, and they make up one-third of the population of the earth as Doniger (ed. 1999) has stated. Without going through the historical excursus of the advent of Christianity in Nigeria, and the missionary activities that spread Christianity to different parts of the country, suffice it to say that Nigeria is not populated merely by Muslims; instead, there is also a considerable population of Christians in the country. In Nigeria the number of Christians is about half of the whole population of the country, while Islam and traditional religions share the other half. It is often said that Christianity is an Igbo religion in Nigeria, and this is true by the fact that more than 98% of the Igbos of Nigeria are Christians, while the remaining percentage is made up of adherents of traditional religions (Ajah, Dinne & Salami 2020b:3; Enweonwu et al. 2021:3; Okpa, Ajah & Okunola 2018:8).

In Nigeria, the conversion of people to Islam was very successful in the North, partially successful in the West and totally unsuccessful in the East. Christianity on its part became extremely successful in the East and partially successful in the West and in the North (Ajah et al. 2020b:3; Enweonwu et al. 2021:3). One of the chief characteristics of the Easterners in Nigeria is that they are highly republican in the sense that they, more than other Nigerians, see every part of the Federal Republic as their home and readily coexist with the natives and adapt to the culture of their new environment very easily. They feel free to build houses and establish their business enterprises wherever they are, without considering whether it is their tribal region or not. They are also predominantly merchants, and as they enter every nook and cranny of the society they carry their religion along with them (Okpa et al. 2018:8). That is why the Christian religion spread in the North and other terrains that are difficult for the expatriate missionaries to reach.

The Hausas of north-east and North-west Nigeria are mainly cattle rearers and farmers. Incidentally, the cattle that are produced more in the North are consumed more in the South of Nigeria. In order to make the cattle available to the place of profitable consumption, some Muslim adherents of the North relocate to the South with their cattle and their Islamic religion. However, the Yoruba of West Nigeria were among the first people who came in contact with the western world. Their contact made the Yoruba the first imitators of the westerners and they spread both their West-oriented trade and religion to the places they visited (Ajah, Dinne & Salami 2020:3; Enweonwu et al. 2021:3; Ugwuoke et al. 2020:6). Hence it may be said that the republican mobility of the Igbo of Nigeria, and the activities of other agents that spread religion, made Nigeria a multi-religious – as it is also a multi-ethnic – country.

Problem of nationhood in Nigeria

None of the ethnic nationalities in Nigeria today agreed to be under one umbrella of one Nigeria, which has forced them into inter-ethnic mistrusts as it is today. It is only the coercion and exploitative drive of colonialism that caused it (Ugwuoke et al. 2020). Ojiako (1981) in Ugwuoke et al. (2020) has gone through the history of Nigerian architectonic climb to nationhood from the cradle of the colonial encounter to the present form of presidential system of government and found out that there had never been a time the Nigerian project has been an easy and nostalgic one. The conquest of Lagos in 1857 by the British through military manoeuvring started the exploitation of a part of the territories that make up Nigeria. By 1906 the British military powers had been planted in virtually all territories of today's Nigeria and they had firmly established the exploitative colonial leadership (Ugwuoke et al. 2020). One of the major problems they encountered during the scramble for territories of Nigeria is the great difference in the languages and cultures of the natives. Three major ethnic nationalities inhabited the three major regions of the country, and they included the Hausa of the North, the Igbo of the East, and the Yoruba of the West (Abdulkabir 2017; Ugwuoke et al. 2020). Their languages, religions and cultures differed from each other.

The British colonialists discovered this problem of differences among the people and knew that the approach they take would determine the colonial political gains or losses they would make out of the situation (Egobueze 2017; Francis 2017). Faced with that problem, they chose divide-and-rule system, which highlighted the ethnic differences among the people and made them hostile to one another. As the natives advanced in their inter-tribal hostility among themselves, they could never form a common front to fight the colonialists. The amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Nigeria in 1914 to form a single government out of the two was part of the plans to maximise colonial interests to the detriment of the colonised (Egobueze & Ojirika 2017; Francis 2017). With this the Nigerian nation was built on a shaky foundation, the strength of which both the builders and occupants were very sceptical.

As the United States of America pressurised the British government to give political independence to their colonies in line with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, in Nigeria, the British allowed a Governor General, Sir James Robertson, to stay on into the period of freedom, with particular interest of making sure that power went to the North, their favourite region (Joseph 2017). As Achebe (2012) remarked:

It is now widely known that Sir James Robertson played an important role in overseeing the elections (or lack thereof) at independence, throwing his weight behind Abubakar Tafawa Bewlewa, who had been tapped to become Nigeria's first prime minister... Later it was discovered that a courageous English junior civil servant named Harold Smith had been selected by no other than Sir James Robertson to oversee the rigging of Nigeria's first election 'so that its compliant friends in {Northern Nigeria} would win power, dominate the country, and serve British interests after independence'. (pp. 50–51)

The story continued that the young man was promised much wealth as bribe, and even a knighthood, should he carry out the assignment of rigging the election in favour of their chosen candidate. However, he declined the assignment with all the tempting offers, and thus was maximally disgraced, including termination of his job and soiling his career. The British however achieved their aim of rigging the election in favour of the north (Achebe 2012).

At independence in 1960 the leaders of Nigeria saw themselves as privileged replacements of the colonialists, such that rather than looking for ways of remedying what the colonialists distorted or uprooting the seeds of discord, they rather became loyal friends of Britain and sought advice from them in continuation of the domineering strides of the colonialists, to the benefit of the ethnic groups in power, against other ethnic groupings (Momoh 2014; Nnenna 2015). In this way the ugly seeds of discord kept on growing and spreading its branches to virtually all facets of the social, political, religious and cultural life of the citizens. It did not take much time for the time bomb of visionless leadership to blast the pseudo-nationhood, especially as the civil war of 1967 to 1970 exposed the hypocrisy of the situation and showed the people the true nature of their unity and oneness. According to Yakubu (2003):

The perversity of corruption and bad governance led to the termination of the first government that was put in place within the first six years of its existence. When Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu led the young officers that struck on the 15th day of January 1966, no one was left in doubt as to the veracity of their mission. The first broadcast was couched in this language: 'The aim of the Revolutionary Council is to establish a strong and prosperous nation, free from corruption and internal strife... our enemies are the political profiteers... that seek bribes... the tribalists, the nepotists....' (p. 14)

One bitter reality about the cause of the war is that while all Nigerians agreed that the pre-war government in the country was extremely corrupt and needed to be changed, such that the intervening military coup d'état was highly welcomed

both by the remaining people in government and the masses, yet the pogrom against the Igbo which followed was a shallow-minded approach of the people who understood the revolution that should have been applauded as national victory as an Igbo ethnic triumphalism (Ukwayi & Okpa 2017; Ukwayi, Okpa & Dike 2018). They then called it an Igbo coup d'état because an Igbo was at the head of the revolution, not minding the fact that the success of the coup was foiled by two Igbo top military officers: Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu (in Kano) and Major General Aguiyi-Ironsi (in Lagos). Thus, they started killing the Igbo people in the North, forgetting the fact that soldiers from other ethnic groups were also involved in the coup and approved of it. That shows that Nigeria may hardly enjoy the freedom of a revolution because any heroic act to that effect must be assessed with the bias of tribe and tongue or the players' ethnic linings.

The National Cake Syndrome and the culture of impunity

The elitist and non-elitist Nigerians alike make use of euphemisms in ordinary social life. Euphemism is the use of pleasant or harmless-sounding words or expression to describe or mask infamous truths. Over an annoying power outage Nigerians may simply say that 'the holders of power have taken it' (Nnenna 2015). Armed robbery attack may remove life and property, and the people may merely say that 'the youngsters have collected their own share'. Along the same line, a government official may embezzle public funds in billions of naira and Nigerians may be less concerned with the belief that the person had only taken his or her own share of the national cake (Sahara Reporter 2019). This euphemistic approach to serious issues creates the atmosphere of nonchalance and encourages corruption to the highest degree. This is the reason why Nigeria is recognised as one of the most corrupt countries in the world. The nonchalant attitude is also promoted by resentment in addressing certain truths based on the disposition that nothing may be done after all, especially since each tribe tends to support even thieves from their ethnic group in Nigeria. Once a politician is ready to corner everything in Nigeria to his or her ethnic geographical region, his or her people would be ready to die protecting all his or her actions (Shamsudeen 2015; Ugwuoke et al. 2020). This spoils the integrity of the people and replaces love for the Nigerian nation with ethnic inclination. That is why most Nigerians merely love the country for what they can gain from it, without thinking what to give the country to ensure its survival.

The climax of the effects of lack of love and spirit of sacrifice for the country Nigeria is the evolution of a horrible monster identified here as the culture of impunity. According to Shamsudeen (2015), this impunity is a self-appropriated exemption from punishment in cases of lawlessness. It is foolhardiness, an unperturbed boldness in evildoing nourished by an air of gangsteric triumphalism. Crimes are committed and the criminals strongly feel that nothing will

happen to them even when their actions are known all over the country (Ajah & Onyejebu 2019). This attitude is reflected in the Igbo expressions of '*Ginigeme?*' '*Onwerifegeme*' (What will happen after all? Nothing will happen). This culture which has grown to a colossal proportion makes people think that they can do anything they like any time anywhere without anything happening to them (Ajah & Onyejebu 2019; Nnam et al. 2019). They put themselves above the law and threaten whoever is charged with the protection of the law with their tribalistic, fanatical and criminal-minded cohorts. The same people who are charged with protecting the law also have skeletons in their cupboards such that they lack the moral standing with which to question the outlaws.

Ill-gotten wealth is used to silence the authorities who could seize the culprits, and whoever tries to insist on exposing them may simply be lynched, or be bullied, learning some bitter lessons (Eze et al. 2021). The government of Nigeria has been so weakened by this wicked culture that nobody seems to know what to do to correct it.

To worsen the situation, government officials ally with those criminals to further their nefarious and iniquitous acts. Elections are rigged with the support of this cabal, and the nation's wealth, like in the colonial era, is siphoned in partnership with them (Shamsudeen 2015; Ugwuoke et al. 2020). Those who want to exploit Nigeria and its citizens may simply gratify some wicked and greedy government officials with pecuniary enticements and they would be given access to do what they like (Oluwale 2018; Shamsudeen 2015). One may ask questions like, why is it that government officials in Nigeria are not prohibited from receiving free airtime from the Global System for Mobile Communications (GSM) service providers while the poor masses of Nigeria pay through their nose to make calls, whereas in other smaller and poorer African countries communications are relatively cheap? Why is it that contractors who fail to complete the works they agreed to deliver as specified are not prosecuted in Nigeria? Could it be that some contract issuing officials of government still collect some percentages of the excessively bloated contract money as the quoted coup speech earlier stipulated? Why is it that the often rascal children of the rich in Nigeria, and their parents, rarely go to jail or are never prosecuted at all, such that Nigerian prisons seem to be meant for the poor and the wrongly victimised? Why do the police and other government officials who stand on Nigerian roads usually not stop beautiful vehicles of the rich but misbehave towards people with wretched-looking vehicles and motorcycle users and extort unauthorised money from them? That is perhaps why kidnappers use the same fully police-guarded roads to move about their victims and they are not caught.

The questions can be endless and they show the extent of damage the culture of impunity has done to the social life in Nigeria. In this situation it is extremely difficult to make any headway. Any planned calamity very easily befalls the people. That is why Nigeria has not been able to handle the issue of corruption in public office (Ajah 2018). That is why

insecurity seems to be another name for Nigeria (Otu, Nnam & Uduka 2018). That is why Nigerians die of starvation in the midst of plenty (Ezeanya 2018a). That is why the existing situation in Nigeria continues to become worse and sustainable and genuine development seems to be an illusion in the country. That is why terrorism is a growing concern in Nigeria and the authorities seem helpless in combating it.

Coordinated forces of division

The Igbo would say: '*Onye nna ya zili ori, n' eji okpa agbawa uzo*' (a thief whose father commissioned to steal breaks the door with his legs) (Ezeanya 2018). This means that where criminality is given a position of pride among a section of the society, then the people being used to unleash societal mayhem see themselves as heroes when they make others cry and die. Nigeria has been severely divided along ethnic and religious lines with each group in biased aversion for the others (Ezeanya 2018). The lack of acceptance of others makes the unity and strength of Nigerian nationality a mere hypocrisy. The reality is that right from the colonial era until now, Nigeria has never known peace. Since independence, regional and sectarian crisis have been the order of the day. Schineller (ed. 2002) has presented a documentation of the pastoral letters and communiqués of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria from independence till recent times, and the document is overwhelmed by persistent and recapitulated calls on Nigerians to be united, and the leaders to do meaningful things to ensure the security of lives and property of Nigerians, especially of those who find themselves in regions that are different from their ethnic geographical boundary. The words of the bishops seem to be falling on deaf ears, because the more they speak the worse the situation becomes.

The Nigerian government institutionalised division in the country when it used the constitution to bring in some vexatious, tribalistic and religious discriminatory elements as part of the Nigerian law. Ezeanya (2010) meticulously reviewed and exposed such provisions of the constitution that are clearly divisive in quality. For instance, the constitutional issue of Federal Character, which divided Nigerians along their ethnic lines as a major consideration before any national benefit comes to anyone obviously contradicts and defeats the slogan of one Nigeria (Ezedike 2011). How can it be regarded as a fair principle when it set down different provisions for various ethnic groups in matters of employment, admission to federal government owned schools and other benefits from the government? Perhaps the most malicious feature of the divisive aspects of the constitution is making Islamic Sharia legal system part of the Nigerian law (Ezeanya 2018). If Nigeria is a secular state, as it claims to be, religious laws of a single religious group must not be recognised in the national Constitution and issues relating to that be sponsored from the national coffers and serviced with tax-payers' money (Ezeanya & Ajah 2021). Sections 260–264, and 275–279 of the 1999 constitution concern the establishment and functionality of Islamic Sharia law in Nigeria. There is no other religion that is represented

in the Constitution apart from Islam (Ezeanya & Ajah 2021). Having laid the faulty foundation through the impunity of criminality, the issues of discrimination and marginalisation became very pronounced. An egalitarian distribution of national benefits among citizens is lacking, and governmental impunity makes public servants nonchalant about it. Victims of the social injustice may have their say but their taskmasters would normally have their way.

The civil war which was based on the same tribal and ethnic problems seemed to escalate the venom of the taskmasters to further humiliate the vanquished, but at a stage some groups of the seriously marginalised around the Niger Delta came out openly to fight their way into the benefits accruable from Nigeria and get their own share of the national cake (Ezedike 2011; Segun 2015). Although their struggle tended to tear Nigeria apart and force the country to be honest in her dealings, the way the packaging of the civil disobedience was carried out made clear to the international community the genuineness of the people's lawful requests (Ezedike 2011; Segun 2015). The controversial amnesty programme, which tried minimally to respond to their requests, seems to have put an end to their military campaign, only for it to resurface in a worse manner as another leader of Nigeria came publicly to say that he would not treat all Nigerians equally, and began to subdue the little benefits granted to the Niger Delta people who are part of the victims of inequality (Ezedike 2011; Segun 2015). The bad thing about the whole show is that it seems as if Nigeria cherishes loss of lives and property in armed conflicts before she does the right thing. That may be why the federal troops engaged the Niger Delta forces militarily to see if they could crush them but failed to conquer the people because they are experts at their terrain (Ezedike 2011; Segun 2015). Perhaps the government would not have responded positively if its military option had succeeded. After futile efforts to cow the liberation movement it bowed to the superiority of the owners of the injured land that greatly enriches the country. Maybe still, if the government succeeded in their intimidating military action, the case of the Niger Delta would be worse than that of the Biafra challenge that still justly yearns for redress after more than four decades of the end of the war (Abiodun 2014; Ade 2019). Ade (2019) decried this inflexible military option of the federal government against its own citizens as he wrote on the Nigerian civil war as follows:

As an Ibo from the Mid-Western Region, I had every technical excuse to keep out of a quarrel between the Federal Government and the Eastern Regional Government. I joined the struggle on the Eastern Nigerian side when I did because I was convinced that the Federal Military Government had failed to give the Ibos the protection and care that was their right. It was reckless extremism in politics during the civilian days that wrecked what was Nigeria and ultimately led to the present bloody confusion. The same recklessness and extremism in military conflict is now threatening to destroy the best hopes of sane people on either side. (p. 27)

As the Niger Delta region came into the limelight of Nigerian governance through the election of Goodluck Jonathan as the

president of Nigeria, the country began to face another threat from a terrorist group named Boko Haram (Ajah et al. 2020b). The most annoying part of the Boko Haram group is that they carry out numerous killings, and they target and kill Christians in horrible ways, turning virtually all Christian joyful festivities into mourning occasions (Ajah, Ajah & Obasi 2020). Christians are targeted and killed in their places of worship at Christmas, Easter, and Sundays. Ajah, Dinne and Salami (2020) give information about the atrocities of the Boko Haram sect in Nigeria.

For the fact that the Boko Haram terrorist acts escalated with the election of a Christian president from the Niger Delta part of Nigeria, which is unbelievably the first of its kind throughout the more than half a century history of Nigeria, and for the fact that the recorded attacks of this extremist Islamic sect of Northern Nigeria extraction focus mainly on the Northern region of the country, one may rightly infer that the root of the conflict has both religious and ethnic biases (Ajah et al. 2020b; Anthony et al. 2021; Iheanacho 2009; Zenn 2017). The terrorists may simply be saying: Southern Nigerians should vacate the North and go back to their region and practise Christianity so that the Northerners would occupy the North and practise Islam (Ajah et al. 2020b; Anthony et al. 2021). This, however, is nonsensical because a good number of the Northerners are Christians. Moreover, because Nigeria is a secular state, people from different regions of the country can live and work in other parts of the country outside their ethnic regions.

One of the fundamental pillars of the Islamic religion is their profession of faith. There they say '*I a ilah'la illa Allah, Muhammad rasul Allah*', which means in English, 'there is no God but Allah and Muhammad is the Prophet'. With this fanatical Muslims are disposed to kill the unbelievers so as to be rewarded in heaven. They also struggle not to allow non-Muslims to rule them (Ajah et al. 2020b). That may be why they found it difficult to tolerate a Southern president in Nigeria. Falola (1983) has remarked about Islam as follows:

Along with the new religion went politics and Arab civilization. In fact, the spread of the religion meant the establishment of Islamic government and the introduction of Arab civilization... Islam was not just a religion but a total socio-economic and political system. (p. 28)

When Chukwuma Soludo was the Governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria, he removed the Islamic and Arabic inscriptions on the paper money of Nigeria, leaving only the Nigerian languages in line with the secular nature of the Nigerian nation. The highly praised action died a premature death as his successor, Sanusi Lamido, (now the Emir of Kano) immediately brought back the inscriptions as he took over. He also introduced Islamic banking, which also invalidates Nigeria's claim to secularity (Enweonwu et al. 2021). As Nigerians frowned upon this controversial action, he merely advised any aggrieved person to go to court. This happened shortly after the government had refused to register a university under the name 'Catholic University of

Nigeria' as presented by the Catholic Church in Nigeria. It was insisted that the word 'Catholic' must be removed from the name before it could be registered. The same rejection was made to the registration of 'Bishop Godfrey Okoye University' on the insistence that the word 'Bishop' must be removed from it to reflect the secular state of Nigeria. This inequality in handling religious affairs in Nigeria may not lead the country to the desired peaceful destination.

The most recent threat of forcing Islam on Nigerians now is the current trend of Islamic Fulani herdsmen from Northern Nigeria, invading all states and communities of Southern Nigeria, the predominantly Christian region, asking people to join Islam or face the music (Enweonwu et al. 2021). People wake up in the morning and see hundreds of these Fulani herdsmen in their farmlands with their cattle and powerful rifles. They would travel at night and settle in different communities in the Christian dominated states unlawfully armed with sophisticated rifles, and no one questions their illegal possession of firearms. It came up in alarming proportions with the coming to power of a Fulani Muslim, Muhammadu Buhari, as the President of Nigeria in 2015 (Enweonwu et al. 2021:3). The herdsmen would rape and kill the women with their daughters who come to farm, kill the menfolk and allow their animals to feed on economic plants in the farms. For instance, the raping of Victoria Akinseye and the protesting of Oja Oda community over constant raping and killing by the herdsmen is on the air everywhere in Nigeria today. The president merely said that justice should prevail to that effect, but until now no meaningful action has been taken to redress the situation and put an end to the killing of thousands of Nigerians by the herdsmen. The president, however, sent an executive bill to the national assembly for a law to mandate all states in the country to provide grazing lands for the herdsmen. As the national assembly did not pass the bill, nothing else meaningful has been done, and the clashes and killings still continue (Ajah, Ajah & Obasi 2020a).

Anyika (2007) carefully narrates the genesis and spread of Islam in Africa, highlighting how the adherents used violent and forceful military invasions to kill indigenes who refused to bow to the Islamic religion in the name of religious war more commonly known as jihad. The North African region used to be among the most fertile land of Christianity and flourished with great Christian history and achievement. It produced great saints and theologians like Augustine, Tertullian, Origen and many others. Three saintly Popes also came from the North African region. As Thomas (1992) has documented, the names of these Popes are Saint Victor I (189–199), Saint Miltiades (311–314), and Saint Gelasius I (492–496). However, with the Islamic invasion and forceful conversion to Islam, the huge and vibrant Christian population of North Africa was wiped out and the entire region became Islamised until now. The same violent spread of the Islamic religion occurred in other parts of Africa, including Nigeria. But its success in

Nigeria is mainly in the North, partly in the West, but completely failed in the East. Could it be that history is about to repeat itself again now in Nigeria as it was with North Africa, especially as extremist sectarian acts are allowed to thrive with impunity in the Christian regions of Nigeria? This generation of Nigerians and the international community may stand to answer this question to posterity by the actions they may take.

Co-existential tenets of Christianity

Church social teaching is a set of Christian doctrines concerning matters of interpersonal and other relationships in the social sphere. It is drawn from the Bible and also found in different ecclesiastical documents. It tells Christians what to do in different situations they may find themselves (Enweonwu et al. 2021; Ezeanya & Ajah 2021). Unfortunately, many Christians are ignorant of this teaching especially because some of the verses of the Bible need experts to interpret, whereas many ecclesial communities in Nigeria dispense with experts in their bid to form and manage their own churches and make money out of them. The principle of love for neighbour, for instance, is one of the co-existential tenets of Christianity which seems simple in meaning but needs to be expertly expatiated.

Theological exegesis of love may take a book bigger than the Bible itself to comment on. Love is the summary of Christianity, and the commandment to love each other sums up all other commands in the Bible. Love, however, does not mean timidity. The carnal approach to love goes with the disposition of 'love until it begins to hurt', but the Christian approach is 'love, even when it hurts'. This perpetual obligation to love often makes Christians wrongly think that the commandment of love renders them helpless and defenseless in the face of danger and threats to life (Enweonwu et al. 2021; Ezeanya & Ajah 2021). Christianity allows its believers to defend themselves against unjust oppression. Civil law also provides the right of self-defence to all the citizens. The biblical Letter of St. Jude teaches Christians how to combine different faces of love to make a spiritual headway in their social relationships as it exhorts:

But you, my dear friends, must build yourselves up on the foundation of your most holy faith, praying in the spirit; keep yourselves within the love of God and wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to give you eternal life. To some you must be compassionate because they are wavering; others you must save by snatching them from the fire; to others again you must be compassionate but wary, hating even the tunic stained by their bodies. (Jd 20–23)

From the above quotation it is clear that some element of force may be exerted on those to be snatched from the fire, while those on whom believers should be wary, are to be confronted and overcome with any form of trickery and defensive equipment as the necessary loving response adequate for their disposition.

'Turn the other cheek' to a person who slaps you on one cheek (Mt 5:39) is another Christian requirement that is most often misunderstood. A critical reflection on the teachings of Christ indicates that much discernment is necessary to fully understand their meaning. Ezeanya (2000) carefully presents a good approach to biblical interpretation that helps people to better understand the message of the scriptures as he delved more deeply into the social teaching of the Church. He explained turning the other cheek as a paradoxical statement that must not be removed from context, otherwise if the reader compares it with what Jesus himself did when he was slapped at his passion (when in Jn 18:23–24 he asked the person who struck him to point out what he said wrongly, otherwise why strike him?) it could seem as if Jesus did not practise what he taught. Turning the other cheek therefore points to the use of the superior power of enduring love to win over a confused agnostic or sceptic, but not an aimless vulnerability to the wicked machinations of unjust aggressors. Writing on the right of Christians to resist unjust aggressors, including governmental authorities, the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (2004) gave some interesting directives which highlight the following points:

Natural law places limits to positive law which entails that constant violation of principles of natural law by a legitimate human authority could reasonably be resisted. Hence according to Saint Thomas Aquinas 'one is obliged to obey... insofar as it is required by the order of justice'. Such resistance of authority could be to modify some obnoxious laws or even to radically change a distasteful situation. The Church's social doctrine gave some conditions for which arms resistance to legitimate authority could be necessary, which include (1) serious and prolonged violation of human rights, (2) exhaustion of all means of redress, (3) the said resistance not going to lead to a worse situation, (4) credible assurance of success, and (5) where there is no foreseeable better solution. Hence recourse to arms resistance should come as the last option. (p. 5)

By this the church teaches that Christians should defend their rights where necessary. One does not turn the other cheek to a person bent on destroying others with impunity; otherwise one may have only neglected one's duty of love.

Forgiveness is another tenet of Christianity that needs to be explained. Generally, Christians are required to forgive others in order to free their minds for God's grace. Peter asked Jesus how often he would forgive the one who offended him, and Jesus encouraged him always to forgive without limit (Mt 18:21–35). This is the root of the misunderstanding of the requirements of forgiveness. Analysing the demands of forgiveness, the Lord says:

If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he wrongs you seven times in one day and returns to you seven times saying, 'I am sorry' you should forgive him. (Lk 17:3–4)

He went further to say: 'Do not give what is holy to dogs, or throw your pearls before swine, lest they trample them underfoot, and turn and tear you to pieces' (Mt 7:6). The wrongdoer to be forgiven is the penitent one. That is why if

he wrongs seven times, he is expected to appear seven times to ask for forgiveness, and the request must come from repentance and not from fear over the impending punishment for the wrongdoing. This is what is involved in Christian forgiveness. Any person who forgives an unrepentant wrongdoer who has a disposition to perform evil acts would simply be giving what is holy to dogs or throwing one's pearls before swine. One may simply clear one's conscience over the offender's wrongdoing but should be ready to combat any evil which the offender may further unleash.

Other Christian teachings regarding anger, retaliation, love and prayer for enemies and the rest are to be reflected upon in the light of the foregoing. It could be recalled that within a given context Christ had to make a whip out of a cord to drive people away from defiling the Temple (Jn 2:13–17). It was not an outburst of unholy anger but the prophesied 'zeal for the Father's house' driving him. There are also principles justifying certain wars Christians may engage in without error. Loving and praying for enemies, of course, could even be in the form of making them suffer in the flesh to save their souls as St. Paul encouraged Christians to deliver certain deviants to Satan for the destruction of their flesh so that their spirits may be saved on the day of the Lord (1 Cor 5:5). Jesus summed up the social teaching with the golden rule where he encouraged his followers to do to others as they would want them to do to them; that is the obedience to the law and the prophets (Mt 7:12).

The Christian religion therefore encourages egalitarianism in socio-political relationship of Christians and people of other religions and teaches its adherents not to be reluctant to defend their rights when faced with agents of division and disunity (Ezeanya & Ajah 2021). They should not only pray and fast when they are attacked, rather they should resist the attackers with adequate weapons comparable to the ones used against them, and if their attackers die in the clash for self-defence it is not culpable for the Christians. This is in line with the social teaching of the church and the message should be spread with great urgency in Nigeria to redress the impending danger of extermination of Christianity by Islamic militants.

Conclusion

Nigeria is a multi-lingual, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious country. Even though the country is regarded as a secular state, all Nigerian citizens are not enjoying equal rights and treatments. In 1914, the various ethnic nationalities were amalgamated into one Nigeria by the colonialists. The British colonialists officially applied the colonial ideology of divide and rule to maximise the gains of colonialism. And after the independence in 1960, Nigerian leaders did not change the system which further polarised the people with the ugly effect of hostilities to fellow countrymen along ethnic and religious lines. It is therefore recommended that the Nigerian government must put its house in order and make meaningful efforts to resolve the issues of the country.

Thorough constitutional review and legal reform that will remove all Islamic religious sentiments from Nigerian laws are to be urgently embarked upon. Sovereign national conference and referendum that will give Nigerians the first opportunity to decide whether to be together as a nation, and how the political leadership of the country should be organised are to be carried out. The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999), which in section 2(1) provides that 'Nigeria is one indivisible and indissoluble Sovereign State...' appears to be rooted on hypocrisy and nurtures the greed and corrupt practices of the enemies of the country in high and low places of public domain. It also contradicts Article 28 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations, which recognises people's right to self-determination. It states that 'Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set out in this Declaration can be fully realized' (Ezeanya 2009).

The leaders of all religions in Nigeria should take responsibility of the actions of their believers. This is important in the face of the challenge of Boko Haram and Muslim Fulani herdsmen who invade Christian communities. It is not enough to say that they do not support their actions, as in the case of the Boko Haram, whereas they seem to be giving tacit approval to the negative acts when they targeted only Christians; until the notorious group now attacks Muslims too, accusing them of not joining in the struggle for establishment of Islamic States. If the leaders take a more definite stand it would save the country from the great danger that looms. Who knows the next terrorist or militant group that would rise up tomorrow if nothing decisive is done to eliminate the roots of violence? Christians in Nigeria should learn more about their religion, especially the Church's social teaching, and be acquainted with the responses required of them at different situations in which they may find themselves. A healthy body entails mutual cooperation of its major organs. In the same way, for there to be a meaningful national development in Nigeria, all major stakeholders must play their role with justice and equity to prevent a bleak future.

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