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Religious violence in Nigeria: An obstacle to effective public service delivery

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In Nigeria, despite the lofty programmes embarked upon by different administrations to better the lives of Nigerian citizens, the extent to which these services are provided, in most cases, has remained stuck in swampy ground because of the pervasiveness of religion. Departing from the underlying causes approach, this study undertakes an analytical inquiry into how religious violence has hindered the smooth operation of public service delivery in Nigeria. A logical method of analysis was adopted. Findings showed that religious violence has remained endemic in the country since the last two decades. The adherents of the two dominant religions in Nigeria – Christianity and Islam – have fought more wars than they had sought peace. This has deterred the government's efforts in providing the required services that will benefit the Nigerian people. In view of these findings, the study recommends reforming the structure of the public sector and personnel management in Nigeria in a way that would help to check incidences of religion-based violence among the citizens.

Contribution: One of the most important is ignorance or a lack of understanding of the teachings of the faith being maintained by Christians or Muslims. Despite the government's numerous initiatives aimed at improving the lives of Nigerians, execution has remained a struggle because of considerations related to religious beliefs.

Keywords: religious violence; public service delivery; public policy; Christianity; Islam.

Introduction

Ideally, religion serves as an instrument of social harmony. When it is truly practised, it binds people together into an integrated social group. It becomes an instrument that inspires violence whenever it is wrongly practised, which is why some literature refers to it as a 'double-edged sword' (Maregere 2011:17–23; Obasi 2009).

In Nigeria, the most contentious issues often revolve around the religious affiliations of its citizens. On numerous occasions, religious extremists have sought to legitimise violence in the name of God, justifying extreme acts such as terrorist attacks as 'holy war'. This has plunged the country into a cycle of religious violence, which begins with intolerance, a rejection of religious pluralism, hypocrisy and fanaticism. The consequences of these factors have, in many cases, impeded the implementation of developmental programmes initiated by various governments in Nigeria to improve the lives of citizens.

In Nigeria, public service is a work in progress. Successive governments since independence have made attempts to transform the public service into a functional structure that will translate government policies into governance dividends for the citizens. Many Nigerians believe that for the country to develop, it is imperative for the government to provide goods and services that the private sector sparingly ventures into. These include the provision of pie-borne clean water, well-maintained roads, quality health care, quality education, affordable housing and reliable electricity, just to mention a few. According to Oyelaran-Oyeyinka (2006:1), these services are those that people cannot easily afford at prevailing market prices.

The domain of governmental activities is the public sector, and the service rendered by this sector is known as public service. The importance of the public sector in the development of any country cannot be overemphasised. Lamidi, Agboola and Taleat (2016:12), refer to the public sector as a tool available to African governments for the implementation of developmental goals and objectives. Egugbo (2020) observes that when there is effective and efficient service delivery, the citizens' well-being is assured and guaranteed. In Nigeria, however, this is not the case because of reasons related to religious and ethno-cultural issues.

This study examines how religion has deterred the government's efforts in providing the required services that will benefit the Nigerian people. It, specifically, looked at religious violence in Nigeria in an attempt to not only explain how it has hindered the smooth operation of public service delivery but also how it has contributed to the crisis of development in a complex modern Nigeria.

Theoretical and conceptual framework

Religious violence in Nigeria is a multifaceted issue, driven by a complex interplay of social, political, economic and religious factors. Relative deprivation theory posits that violence arises when groups perceive themselves as deprived compared to others, particularly in terms of socio-economic opportunities and political representation (Galtung 1969). In the Nigerian context, religious violence often stems from perceived inequality between different religious groups, especially between Muslims and Christians. The feeling of marginalisation by one group can fuel tensions, leading to violence (Collier & Hoeffler 2004). For instance, many of the conflicts in northern Nigeria involve Muslim communities that feel politically or economically marginalised compared to other regions.

Religious violence in Nigeria is a complex and multifaceted issue shaped by several interconnected variables. The historical context of religious violence in Nigeria traces back to the colonial period when the British colonial administration often used indirect rule to manage religiously and ethnically diverse regions. The north of Nigeria, predominantly Muslim, and the south, predominantly Christian, were administered differently, contributing to religious tensions that continue today (Falola 1998). After independence, religious identity became politicised as political elites used religion to garner support and consolidate power, further deepening the divisions between religious groups. It is evident that there is no room for politics where violence rules absolutely (Arendt 2006:18).

Poverty and unemployment create an environment ripe for violence, as disillusioned youths are often recruited by extremist groups promising material rewards or spiritual salvation (Onapajo & Uzodike 2012). Economic deprivation in northern Nigeria, which is predominantly Muslim, fuels grievances that manifest in religious violence. Politicians frequently exploit religious differences to gain electoral support or maintain power, using religion as a tool for political mobilisation. During elections, religious rhetoric is often amplified, heightening tensions between Christians and Muslims.

Many religious conflicts in Nigeria, such as the ongoing violence between Christian farmers and Muslim Fulani herders, are fuelled by competition over land, water and other resources (Omotola 2010). These economic conflicts are framed in religious terms, deepening divisions between religious groups. The Nigerian government's failure to provide security and enforce laws often leaves communities vulnerable to violence. Corruption further exacerbates the situation, as state actors are sometimes complicit in the violence or fail to act decisively against perpetrators.

Radical religious ideologies, such as those promoted by Boko Haram and ISWAP (Islamic State West Africa Province), play a significant role in perpetuating violence. These groups seek to establish a theocratic state governed by Sharia law, targeting both Christians and moderate Muslims. Religious identities in Nigeria are often linked with ethnic identities, compounding the intensity of conflicts. Christian-Muslim tensions are at the core of many violent confrontations, particularly in northern and central Nigeria, where both religions have significant populations. Žižek (2008) proposes a 'Bartlebian politics' of violent non-action that undermines the power, especially the discursive power of the prevailing order. Such a politics refuses to use and reproduce the highly ideologised, 'hegemonic' language and counters the existing system's power to name with subversive silence.

In Nigeria, religious and ethnic identities are closely intertwined. The overlapping identities of religion and ethnicity mean that conflicts framed as religious often have ethnic undertones, further complicating efforts to resolve them (Gurr 1970). Religious violence is not purely a result of theological differences but is deeply embedded in the social fabric of Nigerian society. Large numbers of unemployed youth are vulnerable to radicalisation. Extremist groups exploit their frustrations by offering them a sense of belonging, purpose and economic opportunity through religious militancy.

Public service delivery public policy

The definition of any term depends on the way it is used and understood in practice, and so the process of understanding the term 'public service' must begin with an examination of its use (Spicker 2009). To clarify a common confusion, one may perhaps ask: What is 'public' in the public service? To answer this question, it is pertinent to note that the public service is different from the public sector, regardless of their identification in standard texts (Bailey 2002, in Flynn 2007).

While the public sector is owned or controlled by the government, the public services may not be. In fact, some public services are established and operated by voluntary, independent and nonprofit organisations. A few examples of public services are voluntary-administered social housing, schools, libraries, emergency health services, etc. Bolderson and Mabbett (1997) state that in France, some job centres known as 'the Assédics' are developed and run by a convention between employers and trade unions. The public sector, by contrast, includes many activities that may not necessarily be considered as public services. Spicker (2009) lists examples such as operating the functions of government

(e.g. the legislature, the civil service or the courts), making money for the government (including nationalised industries) or providing services to government agencies, et cetera. Further to this, Section 318(1) of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended) defines public service of a state as service in any capacity in respect of the government of the state and includes service as:

• Clerk or other staff of the House of Assembly
• Member of staff of the High Court, the Sharia Court of Appeal, the Customary Court of Appeal or other courts established for a state by this Constitution or by a law of a House of Assembly
• Member or staff of any commission or authority established for the state by this Constitution or by a law of a House of Assembly
• Staff of any local government council or any statutory corporation established by a law of a House of Assembly
• Staff of any educational institution established or financed principally by a government of a state and staff of any company or enterprise in which the government of a state or its agency holds controlling shares or interests.

The above analysis simply shows that the public service performs a function that benefits the people. Like public administration, public service delivery is designed to satisfy public will through the implementation of public policies, enforcement of public laws and realisation of public welfare (Ogunna 2004). They are those services provided by governments to the people living within their jurisdiction. They could be local, municipal or larger scale.

Governments in every given society formulate policies in response to the diverse challenges confronting its citizens. A policy option made by an individual or private institution is known as private policy, while the one made by the government or its institution is called public policy. This comes to mean that 'policy' is central to the operation and activities of both private organisations and public institutions.

There is a lack of consensus on the definition of the term 'policy'. Scholars have defined it from different points of view. While some emphasise policy as an action, others see it as a choice. Furthermore, others see it in terms of scope of action (Ikelegbe 2006). In other words, whichever way any scholar defines it depends on the viewpoint from where the scholar is standing.

It is pertinent to state at this point that while the concept is central to the government, these actions do not necessarily have to emanate exclusively from the government; private organisations and individuals can also initiate them. However, the concern is always focussed on government policies because it is government policies that direct the economy and reposition the society in a manner where law and order are maintained (Ideobodo, Okolo & Eze 2018). Oftentimes, the mention of the word 'public policy' limits the meaning of policy to the involvement of the government in policy formulation and implementation. Little wonder,

therefore, Dye (1995) considers public policy as whatever governments choose to do, why they do it and the difference it makes. If we should consider the disagreement among scholars over 'the boundary' of what should constitute public policy, this definition becomes more confusing. This may, perhaps, be the reason Egonmwan (2000:1) ponders if 'the boundary' should be posited at the level of decision-making intention or the actual action of the government.

Ezeani (2006) observes that some scholars regard declarations of intentions, wishes or proposed courses of action as public policy. The scholar also strongly criticised the major flaws in the definitions of public policy attributed to Dror and Dye. Dror (1967:14) defines public policy as a 'major guideline for action', while Dye (1995) defines it as 'whatever government chooses to do or not to do'. To Ezeani (2006), the main weakness of the two sets of definitions above is their failure to provide a basis for distinguishing policy formulation from policy implementation.

Public policy determines the activities of government in relation to providing services designed to solve a given problem. This is amplified by Ugwuanyi and Chukwuemeka (2013) when they state that it is the making and implementation of public policies that determine, for instance, the level of provision of social services, the availability of financial services for economic activities, the level of industrialisation, the level of employment opportunities, the level of social or economic inequality, the availability of health facilities, the level of social security, the pace of educational development, etc.

Governments commit resources, time and energy to the development of policies. Some could take months or years to make, but once made, they become the guiding instrument in their related areas. Sometimes, policies may be brilliantly formulated but poorly implemented by the bureaucracy. This leads to the failure of public policies in achieving the goals and objectives for which they were designed. For instance, in Nigeria, in almost all aspects of public administration, there is a wide gap between formulated policy goals and the achievement of those goals as a result of ineffective implementation. Since independence, Nigeria has established and witnessed numerous policies that cover a wide spectrum of activity areas traversing through all sectors of the country's economy. Ideobodo et al. (2018) outlines some of Nigeria's public policies to include:

• The Agrarian Revolution Policy of 1963 resulted in a boost to the country's economy with cocoa export from the western region, groundnut export from the north and palm oil export from the east.
• General Yakubu Gowon's 3-R Policy of 1970: The rehabilitation, reconstruction and re-integration policy introduced by General Gowon at the end of the Nigeria/ Biafra civil war was introduced to heal the wounds and horror of the war as well as suit frayed nerves, calm tensions and give succour to the aggrieved relations of those who died as a result of the war.

- The Indigenization Policy (also known as Nigerian Enterprises Promotion Decree 1972–1977) transferred ownership of some foreign businesses operating in Nigeria to indigenous entrepreneurs.
- ShehuShagari's Green Revolution Policy of 1980 was introduced to ensure self-sufficiency in food production together with the introduction of modern technology into the Nigerian agriculture sector.
- Ethical Revolution Policy of 1981 was introduced to impart to Nigerians a national culture that recognises and respects people's rights and dignity.
- General MuhammaduBuhari's War Against Indiscipline (WAI) Policy of 1984 was a mass mobilisation programme organised by the military with the aim of correcting social maladjustment and attacking widespread corruption in Nigeria.
- Deregulation, Commercialization and Privatization Policy of 1986–1998 was instituted to stimulate Nigeria's economic growth and efficiency by reducing state interference and broadening the scope of private sector activity through the transfer of state-owned assets to private ownership, sale of shares and shifting decision-making to agents operating in accordance with the market condition.
- The National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS) Policy of 2005 was introduced with the aim to provide social health insurance to Nigerians, where health care services of contributors will be paid from the common pool of funds contributed by the participants of the Scheme.
- Operation Feed the Nation of 1976 was instituted as a measure to achieve self-sufficiency in food crop production and inspire a new generation of Nigerians to return to farming.
- Poverty Alleviation Programme (PAP) of 2000 was a programme that targeted reducing the increasing rate of unemployment and crimes among Nigerian youths. It was a part of the Government's effort to reduce poverty through the adoption of microcredit schemes and employment programmes.
- Rebranding Nigeria policy of 2008, launched by the then Minister for Information, Dr Mrs. Dora Akunyili. It was targeted to address the fundamental problems of the country and position the country as the technological hub of Africa.
- Treasury Single Account (TSA) Policy of 2012: a financial policy introduced by the government to consolidate all inflows from the country's ministries, departments and agencies (MDAs) by way of deposit into commercial banks, traceable into a single account at the Central Bank of Nigeria.

Other major policies listed by Ideobodo et al. (2018) include: Go back to land policy of 1983, Deregulation, Commercialization and Privatization Policy of 1986, Agriculture Sector Employment Programme (ASEP) of 1986, Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) of 1986, National Youth Employment and Vocational Skills Development Programme of 1986, Better Life Programme for Rural Women (BLPRW) of 1987, Mass Mobilization for Social Justice and Economic Recovery (MAMSER) Policy of 1987, Family Support Programme (FSP) of 1994, Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP), National Policy on Food and Nutrition in Nigeria of 2002, Seven-point agenda policy of 2007, National Cashless Economy Policy of 2012, New Automotive Policy of 2013, National Enterprise Development Programme, Fiscal Policy Measure on Rice of 2014, Economic Naira Devaluation Policy of 2014, National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP), National Policy on Infant and Young Child Feeding in Nigeria of 2015, Anchor Borrowers' Programme of 2016, National Petroleum Policy of 2017 and National Industrial Revolution Policy.

An account of religious violence in Nigeria

Hostility between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria has deep historical roots and is linked to politics characterised by struggles between the northern and southern states over access to federal power and resources, inequalities in access to opportunities and different views about legal regimes. The outbreak of religious violence in Kano in 1991 was complex, with ethnic and religious identities interconnecting with other dimensions within society, politics and the economy. To explain and understand the multidimensional reasons for such violent outbursts, four possible factors that may trigger violence can be identified: socio-economic problems, weaknesses of state mechanisms in dealing with potential clashes, religious rivalry and radicalisation and external factors (Deegan 2011). These factors revolve around the threat to the social identity of members of the groups involved.

In most cases, economic competition between sections of urban communities takes the outward shape of violent ethnic conflict. However, history has shown that contact between people of different ethnic groups does not necessarily result in conflict. Rather, it is the competition between them that makes one group consider the other as 'strangers' or 'parasites'. Within this context, violence can erupt between conflicting groups. Social identity-caused violence in Kano State of Nigeria includes the 1966 Coup crisis, the 1982 Muslim-Christian crisis, the 1980 Maitatsine violence, the 1991 Muslim-Christian riot, etc. They all stemmed from social identity fears. Similarly, in Jos, Plateau State of Nigeria, the issue of who owns Jos North Local government resulted in violence that has lasted for many years.

In reference to religious violence in Nigeria, a 2008 annual report published by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom states that since 1999, more than 10 000 Nigerians have been killed in sectarian and communal attacks and reprisals between Muslims and Christians. The report listed the most serious of these clashes to have occurred in Kaduna state between February and May 2000 and November 2002; Jos, Plateau state in September 2001; Yelwa, Plateau state in February–May 2004 and in the northern and south-eastern regions of Nigeria in 2006, in the wake of the controversy over depictions of the Prophet

Muhammad in the Danish press in February 2006 (Eriksen 2010).

Ethnic and religious violence has continued in Nigeria, and the number of deaths resulting from the violence has increased. Dozens of people are killed, with churches and mosques being destroyed in several towns and villages in the northern, southern and Middle Belt regions of Nigeria. In September 2007, rioting in the northern state of Kano resulted in the deaths of 10 Christians and the destruction of at least nine churches. At least 60 people were injured and more than 500 displaced. The rioting started after Muslim students from a public high school claimed that a Christian student had drawn a cartoon of the Prophet Muhammad on the wall of the school's mosque. A Kano state committee investigating the September attacks stated that 19 Christians were killed, not 10 as previously reported. In another similar development, Ogbunwezeh (2023) reported another violence that erupted in a village in Kaduna State after a young woman was accused of blaspheming against the prophet Mohammed. She had spurned the advances of a young Muslim man on the previous day. In a last effort, the man appealed to her to speak to him in the name of the Messenger, to which she responded that she knew no Messenger. On the following morning, the youth attacked her house accompanied by a crowd, claiming that she had blasphemed against the holy prophet. When the girl fled to a police station for protection, a pursuing mob proceeded to set fire to the building. Policemen responded by firing live ammunition and killing a young man in his 20s, triggering a rampage in which police and Christian targets were attacked with their homes and churches destroyed (Ogbunwezeh 2023).

According to Reliefweb (2006) on religious violence that occurred in Nigeria in February 2006, at least 17 people, including a Catholic priest, were killed and 30 churches burnt in the north-eastern Nigerian city of Maiduguri when Muslims protesting cartoons caricatures of Prophet Muhammad attacked local Christians. The Nigerian Police spokesman Haz Iwen reported that a crowd of protesters in the predominantly Muslim city targeted the Christian minority, burning and looting their shops and churches on a Saturday morning, at the end of which 17 persons were killed and 30 churches and five hotels burnst (Reliefweb 2006).

In another sad development, in 2006, five days of Muslim-Christian violence claimed 64 lives in the city of Onitsha, South-East Nigeria. Later reports described it as a reprisal attack for the sake of Christians killed in the northern part of the country when Muslims rioted in the cities of Bauchi and Maiduguri earlier in the week (Voice of America [VOA] 2009). In the subsequent days, the violence was followed by riots in Bauchi when mobs of Muslim youths rampaged the city, burning churches and buildings belonging to Christians. Over 1000 people sought refuge in police stations according to police officials (VOA 2009).

Again, BBC News (2008) reported the killing of hundreds of people in the north-central region of Nigeria after a group of Christians and Muslims clashed over the result of a local election. Homes were destroyed during the clashes, with mosques and churches burnt, as gangs of men from the Muslim Hausa community and the mainly Christian ethnic groups, armed with machetes, fought. A Muslim charity in the town of Jos claimed to have evacuated more than 300 bodies (BBC News 2008). On 26th–30th July 2009, in Brunch, Borno, Kanu and Yobe, there was religious violence unleashed by the radical Boko-Haran sect, and over 700 persons were killed and 3500 persons were internally displaced, including 392 women. In February 2012, the Boko Haram Islamist sect attacked Damaturu and Potiskum and the members of the public at large. Nine churches and more than 90 people were killed; media houses, banks, schools and marketplaces were destroyed (Ibenwa 2014:287–288). On 05 June 2022, Ondo state persons were massacred by terrorists who invaded St. Francis Catholic Church Owo during a special mass to mark Pentecost Sunday, and 41 persons were killed. On 05 October 2022, in Kogi State, a terrorist group attacked the church service at the Celestial Church of God in the Felele area of Lokoja, the Kogi state capital, killing two persons and injuring three worshippers. On 26 September 2022, in Kano state, the Islamic state-back faction of Boko-haram, the Islamic State West Africa Province (SWAP), formerly known as Janaat Ahl As-SunnahLid-Dawah Wal-Jihad, claimed responsibility for the killing of two Christian businessmen in Kano state. On 26 April 2016, Enugu State People were killed by some Fulani herdsmen at Nimbo in Uzo-wani Local Government of Enugu State. About 40 people were killed. On 02 June 2016, Kano State Bridget Agbahime, a kitchen utensil vendor at Kano city's KofarWambai Market, was killed after she asked a Muslim engaged in ritual Islamic cleansing, identified as Alhaji Dauda, to move his ritual from her shopfront. On 12 May 2022, Sokoto State Deborah Samuel Yakubu, a second-year Christian College student, was killed by a mob of Muslim students in Sokotos (Sanusi 2023; Okoh 2020). On 08 July 2023, Benue State Islamic terrorists carried out a bloody attack on AdogoUgbaani, Akpuuna and Diom communities in Ukum Local Government Area of Benue State, resulting in the deaths of at least 27 people. On 23 May 2023, Benue State Suspected armed herdsmen again launched a deadly attack on the Iye community Uwir council ward in Guma Local Government Area, in which 18 people were killed. On 13 April 2023, Kaduna state terrorists invaded a community from a nearby bush and began a shooting spree, killing Christians. More than eight people were killed. According to Human Rights Watch and the International Crisis Group, 2023, 63,111 lives have been lost because of such attacks between 2015 and April 2023. For the researcher, this is outrageous and should be seriously fought against at all costs.

Effect of religious violence on public service delivery in Nigeria

Religious intolerance is one of the major drivers of religious violence in Nigeria. Balogun (1988) defines religious

intolerance as 'hostility towards other religions, as well as the inability of religious adherents to harmonise between the theories and the practical aspect of religion'. Religious intolerance is decorated with bigotry, which is the obstinate devotion to one's opinions and prejudices, especially the show of intolerance and animosity towards persons of differing beliefs (Baird & Rosenbaum 1999).

It could be stated that neither of the three dominant religions in Nigeria – Christianity, Islam or ATR – encourages religious violence. In spite of the fact that Islam had to engage in several self-defence wars at its advent, it believes in peace and peaceful coexistence. An example of Islam's attitude towards peace and peaceful coexistence is the way it dealt with the unbelievers in Makkan and the people of the Book (Christians and Jews) in Madinah. During these periods, none of the pagans had been harassed or molested simply because of their faith or refusal to become Muslim. They were allowed to continue with their religion even when they refused to change from idol worshipping, say:

> … ye that reject faith, I worship not that which ye worship. Nor will ye worship that which I worship. And I will not worship that which worship. Nor will ye worship that which I worship. To you be your way and to me mine. (Qur'an 109:1–6)

Islam rather extended the hand of friendship to them by inviting them to dialogue as stated in the following verse:

> O people of the Book! Come to common terms as between you and us that we worship none but God; that we associate no partners with Him; that we erect not from among ourselves Lords and patrons other than God … (Qur'an 3:64)

Christianity's denunciation of violence is based on the spiritual principle of Christian pacifism – a scriptural and rational basis for Christians, which affirms that any form of violence is incompatible with the Christian faith. The concept of Christian pacifism warns Christians to avoid cursing harm to others no matter the circumstance as embodied in the teachings of Jesus. Christian pacifists state that Jesus himself was a pacifist who taught and practised pacifism and that his followers must do likewise. Lind (1980) further argues God fights so that Israel does not have to fight wars like other nations because God delivers them. God promised to fight for Israel, to be an enemy to their enemies and oppose all that oppose them (Ex 23:22). Other verses and interpretations used by some biblical scholars as evidence for Christian pacifism are: You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth'. But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles (Mt 5:38–41 NIV); But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not

demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you (Lk 6:27–31 [NIV]).

Duffey (2015) in his work aptly states: In the Roman Empire, the early church adopted a nonviolent stance when it came to war because the imitation of Jesus's sacrificial life was preferable to it. The idea of Holy war, where fighting itself might be considered a penitential and spiritually meritorious act, did not emerge before the 11th century (Peters 1998).

For the Christians, therefore, any form of engagement with violence is a departure from the faith. When Christians become violent, they are no longer obeying Jesus but defying him who instructed them to:

> 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. (Mt 5:44; Lk 6:35; Rm 12:14 [KJV])

Christians believe that violence is incompatible with the teachings of Jesus Christ and are admonished to eschew every form of it. They believe that they are, primarily, called to be peacemakers (Mt 5:9), to let offences go rather than retaliate and leave the physical use of force (violence) to the authority of God (Rm 12:19).

The Christian Bible even extends the idea of violence from the physical to include violence of the mind. God lumps hate, vengeance or even holding a grudge as written in the Book of Leviticus 19:17–18:

> You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

The African Traditional Religion (ATR) uses African traditional values to enhance peace, respect, good relations, love between people and nature as well as love between people and spiritual forces. The religio-cultural beliefs and practices of the adherents of African traditional believers play a central role in averting conflicts. In indigenous African communities, there are well-defined religious methodologies for enhancing peaceful co-existence and settling disputes (Baker-Shenk 1983).

African religion portrays African communities as people who are governed by structures that compel their members to engage in conformist conduct. These structures serve as conduits of peace and harmony in the community. African religion believes that ancestors are not dead but very much alive and active in the universe under various forms to monitor the behaviour of the living. In view of this, the living strives to observe the moral values so as to be in good relations with the ancestors.

If the three major religions in Nigeria preach against violence, one then begins to wonder how religious violence managed to creep into the country's national psyche. Oftentimes, the

Nigerian government initiates life-saving policies that develop into well-designed programmes, which when effectively implemented will benefit the Nigerian population. Delivering these services by public servants, more often than not, becomes hindered by the violent attitudes of some Nigerians because of their religious beliefs. Nigeria's national health promotion policy can be used as an example to illustrate this.

The Nigeria health promotion policy is a strategic thrust developed to address the weakness in the national health care delivery system. It contains guidelines that help to create positive outcomes such as empowerment for health action and increased community involvement. The deteriorating state of health of the people of Nigeria was the driving force behind the policy. In the year 2000, Nigeria's overall health system performance was ranked 187th among 191 Member States by the World Health Organization (World Health Report).

Recent studies show that violent attitudes of people in Muslim-dominated northern states of Nigeria hamper the government's efforts in health care service delivery (Abdulkarim et al. 2024; Benn 2002). For instance, vaccinations against major communicable diseases like human immunodeficiency virus and/or acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV and/or AIDS), tuberculosis and malaria have not been carried out effectively in the North because of faith-based influences.

Similarly, the successful conduct of community engagement in health services such as exclusive breastfeeding, free immunisation of children and the use of oral rehydration therapy by nursing mothers has also not been achieved in most rural and pre-urban Muslim areas. This also includes the uptake of ante-natal services by pregnant women and the services rendered to women living with HIV as a result of pregnancy complications.

Oftentimes, the religious belief of the husbands of Muslim women in the North prevents health care providers from reaching the women who are supposed to be the core beneficiaries of the programme (Ganle 2015; Usman 2009). Persistent attempts to reach the women by health care providers are usually met with stiff opposition and sometimes, confrontation from their husbands (Werner & Malterud 2003). There are occasions when the confrontations would become violent. Such developments negatively affect the government's effort to improve service delivery. Under this circumstance, the government and government institutions would have failed in their duty to deliver services that the society requires to improve its welfare.

Recommendations

To put an end to religious violence in Nigeria and improve public service delivery, there is a need for the government to set up a religious committee to serve as an advisory body that would regulate religious activities in the country. The committee will also serve as a link between various religious groups. The government should also encourage the teaching of genuine dialogue at all levels of education to enable people to learn how to tolerate and respect each other's faiths and accept them as part of the reality of life.

There should be a separation of state and religion. The government's conduct towards religion should be free from bias. It should not build or sponsor religious-based schools or maintain separate schools for different religious faiths in order not to encourage religious hatred and segregation. Government-sponsored public schools should be free from all religious entanglements.

The government should employ enough manpower to deliver services to the people. Also, there should be improvement on those bureaucratic procedures and practices that conspire to impact adversely on service delivery by the public sector. There is a need for a proper policy delivery strategy that will critically evaluate the elements of public policies before they are delivered. Public policy goals, challenges and implementation strategies should be studied before they are executed.

An adequate awareness campaign should be made by the government to sensitise people living in rural areas in order to address all existing information gaps. The structure of the public sector and personnel management in Nigeria should be reformed in a way that would help to check incidences of religion-based violence among the citizens.

There should also be regular reviews of public service performance in order to ensure efficient and effective service delivery to the public. Those involved in providing essential services should be encouraged to carry out their duties with benignity and be provided with adequate security to function.

Conclusion

Religious violence has long existed in Nigeria. The three major religions in Nigeria preach against violence, yet religious violence has continued to be witnessed in the country. Many factors are responsible for this. Key among them is ignorance or poor knowledge of the teaching of the religion being defended by the group involved. In spite of the numerous policies established by the government to improve the lives of Nigerian people, implementation has remained a challenge because of factors attributed to religious beliefs.

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C.N.I., F.C.U. and O.O.O. contributed equally to this study.

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Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

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