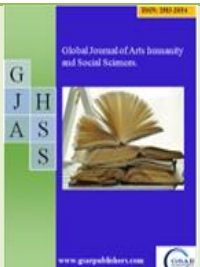
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## RELIGION AS AGENT OF CONFLICTS IN NIGERIA

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### Abstract

In most cases, religion has been considered a trigger factor in many of the conflicts throughout the world. Rather than being as a main cause, it has been used also as a mobilizing agent in some of the conflicts in Nigeria. Although not necessarily so, there are some aspects of religion that make it susceptible to being a latent source of conflict. All religions have their accepted dogma or articles of beliefs which the followers must accept without question. This can lead to inflexibility and intolerance in the face of other beliefs. This article sets out to examine the role of religion as agent in fuelling conflict in Nigeria. The study adopted secondary data as a method drawn from an army of published and unpublished materials relevant to the study. These include books, journals, magazines, conference papers, newspapers, encyclopaedias and the internet. The result of findings revealed that the inability to recognize and accommodate views and opinions of others is therefore one of the major sources of religious violence in Nigeria. Nigerian religious adherents especially the Christians and the Muslims have demonstrated intolerant attitudes which result to violence. The paper concludes that religions traditionally have been moats of separation rather than bridges of understanding between people and In spite of peace potential of religions, organized and institutionalised religions have not been able to prevent conflicts or control religious passions once they have been aroused. The paper recommends that the stability of Nigeria will be greatly enhanced if religious influence or its use is underplayed in order to safeguard the rights and privileges of fellow Nigerians.

**Keywords:** Religion, Conflict, Ethnicity.

### Introduction

The role of religion in conflict has all too often been depicted in binary terms. It is seen as a source either of violence or of reconciliation. This implication obscures the complexity of the subject and shows that there is no common understanding of the central terms of the debate. Religion is never a static or isolated entity but should rather be understood as a fluid system of Variables contingent upon a large number of contextual and historical factors. Nigeria has witnessed diverse conflicts, some, of which are violent in nature from political to economic conflicts, Nigeria has been characterized by communal conflicts, oftentimes, with ethnic and religious under—pinning. While politically motivated or even economic crisis could easily be understood and

explained. Thus, religion and ethnicity have emerged as the constantly used elements in fuelling crisis in Nigeria. "Religion is becoming a divisive issue, and constitutes a growing conflict flash point." (Best 2001) Egwu presents this scenario thus:

Nigeria has demonstrated a very high propensity for ethnic and religious violence in the past three decades... there has also been a rise in the level of religious fundamentalism, millenarian religious movements of all kinds, and an extreme sense of religious intolerance resulting into numerous cases of intra and inter-religious violence on the other. (Egwu 2011) Kukah corroborates Egwu's observation but added ethnicity as the twin evils along with religion which pose serious threats to the stability of the Nigerian nation. He says that, "most students of the African



political scene are agreed on the fact that both ethnicity and religion are the most dangerous threats to the attainment of democracy in Africa. (Kukah 2000). It is a fact that religion is compounding the ethnocentric rivalry in Nigeria. Today, religion has become a major defining factor of identity, particularly related to political identity in Nigeria. Kukah also agrees when he says that "almost the entire gamut of social, political and economic relations revolve around these two identity formations. (Kukah 2000). For Egwu, "ethnic and religious violence is the extreme manifestation of conflicts rooted in the crises of identity. (Egwu 2001). *The Strategic Conflict Assessment Reports in Nigeria*, notes that "religious factors become dangerous when they are linked to politics but even more so when linked to ethnicity and North-South divisions." Strategic Zonal Reports (2003). That Nigeria has witnessed more than its own fair share of internal conflicts cannot be exaggerated. In most of these crises, factors such as religion and ethnicity have been the major underlying recurrence. It is Best's conviction that "Nigeria is a country with appropriate credentials for dysfunctional conflicts," (Best 2001) and situates these conflicts to Nigeria's diversity in language, religion, culture, history, geography, and mentality.

This study sets out to examine the role of religion as agent in fuelling conflict in Nigeria. *History of Religious Conflict in Nigeria*: By religious conflicts, we mean the differing religious opinions, interests and viewpoints, between contesting religious which have oftentimes resulted into situations of hate, anger, bitterness and even war. We shall limit our case study to Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria. "This is so because Nigerian politics, even when pitched on other lines (North Vs South), always ends beings largely about Islam and Christianity." (Kukah 2000) Onigu Otite has noted that conflict is natural in plural societies and Nigeria provides fertile grounds for breeding conflict including religious conflict. He says:

It is inherent in all kinds of social, economic or political settings and in business management, job, and so on, characterized by ethnic, religious and other forms of pluralism. (Otite and Albert 1999).

Isaac Olawale Albert has also identified other causes of conflict to Include: Competition for recourses, quest for power and conflicting values/identities, among others. (Albert 2001)

The quest for political space and influence, competition for scarce resources and conflict of values, have expressed themselves even in religious conflicts in Nigeria.

The 1970s marked a watershed in Nigeria. While some see the collapse of the oil boom years in Nigeria as partly responsible for religious conflicts, Usman situated the conflicts in the manipulation of internal and external forces. He states that:

The real basis of the manipulation of religion in Nigeria today is the need to obscure from the people of Nigeria a fundamental aspect of our reality. That is the domination of our political economy by a class of intermediaries who are being increasingly exposed. And this is to enable this class to cover themselves with

religious and ethnic disguises in order to further entrench division among our people, slow down their awakening at any cost; even unity of our country for which so much has been sacrificed. (Usman 1987:23).

### Usman concludes this observation thus:

A series of violent demonstrations, riots and civil uprisings in the country in the last two years, have forcefully made many Nigerians come face-to-face with the harsh reality that religion is being systematically manipulated, by some forces, for specific purposes which are clearly opposed to the unity of the people of this country. (Usman 1987:71)

Usman's manipulation thesis of religion in Nigeria has long become a major tool for analysing religious conflicts in Nigeria.

The 1980s sparked off the Maitatsine riots in Kano as intra-religious conflict among Muslims which later spread to northern cities. The death toll and general carnage in the Maitatsine riots introduced the very violent and brutal execution of religious conflicts later in Nigeria. Eades note that, "the 'Yan Tatsine rising was an occasion on which religious ideology did present an alternative political agenda.'" (Eades 1991)

It was the 1987 Kafanchan riots, which introduced a dangerous dimension of religious crisis between Christians and Muslims, in what was generally, referred to, as the *civilian equivalent of a coup d'etat*. The Kafanchan religious riots shook the foundation of inter religious peace in Kaduna State and some Northern parts of Nigeria.

Egwu has hinted that numerous cases of urban violence including religious ones were strongly associated with the impact of the *Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP)* of the 1980s. (Egwu 2001) Tunde Lawuyi captured it well when he notes that:

The 80s was unique in Nigeria's history as the year of the failure of the Second Republic (1979-83) which was another attempt at democracy, the introduction of harsh economic measures such as the *Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP)* in 1986, and the development of frustrated hopes and ambitions arising from tensions in state society relations. (Lawuyi, 1991:232)

The 1990s on the other hand, marked the full militarization of religious conflicts in Nigeria. From then on, Nigeria witnessed the Bauchi (1991), Kano (1991, 1994), Zangon-Kataf (1992), and other crisis, using sophisticated weapons, and hired mercenaries from neighbouring countries of Chad and Niger Republic. Most analysts see the long military presence in Nigeria as responsible for the brutality exhibited in religious crises. It is a popular view that the military culture has pervaded the Nigerian life to the extent that Nigerians have been robbed of every element of civility.

Kukah agrees with this position, "that the rise and application of violence as a tool for negotiation became prominent during the rule of the military. This coincided with the breakdown in the rule of law and the moral order." (Kukah 2002) The recent radicalisation of region through violent killings and ethnic crisis using sophisticated weapons, points to the negative hangover of the

military on the Nigerian polity. It is a fact that it was the military that lunched Nigeria into ethnic religious conflicts of the very violent kind.

The new millennium started on a violent note in respect of religious experience in Nigeria. Most of these crises have been Shariah-related, with Kaduna and Tafawa Balewa crises of 2000 and 2001, the most devastating. The same was the case with the 2001 *Osama Bin Laden* crises in Kano and the Miss World Protest of 2002 in Kaduna. The 2001 Jos September 7, crisis, was also a religious conflict which took on other factors of ethnicity to dangerous dimensions, resulting into the loss of lives and property. Religion again played a major role in the November Jos 2008 crisis.

It is to be noted that, apart from the Maitatsine riots that were intra-religious between Muslims, other subsequent religious crises have been between Christians and Muslims, with the Middle Belt recording the greatest number. Karl Maier rightly notes that, "since independence, the Middle Belt has been the scene of frequent flare ups, rooted in minority attempts to free themselves from Hausa—Fulani establishment." (Maier 2000).

Dike concurs that, "ethnic and religious disputes are common currency in the volatile Middle Belt region" (Dike 2001). In fact, within the Middle Belt region, Kaduna has emerged as the hottest boiling point of religious crises. The truism of the above observations shows that apart from Kano which has recorded several crises (1980, 1982, 1991, 1994, 1996, 1997, and 2001), most others have been within the Middle Belt region. Otite and Albert note that, "there is a high degree of religious intolerance in Kano and this explains conflicts in the city. Religious intolerance cuts across all religious groups." Otite and Albert (1999). *The Strategic Conflict Assessment Report in Nigeria* corroborated this when it states that: There is a definite feeling especially among Muslims Clerics in Kano, that the zone's identity is mainly religious, particularly Islamic, and that such identity should be protected at all costs. The options are for the acceptance of such identity or the division of the country. Strategic conflict Zonal Reports 2003:34)

A reference to the Middle Belt region shows that the following crisis has occurred, each assuming religious and ethnic colourations: Kafanchan (1987), Kaduna (1982, 2000) and Tafawa Balewa (1991, 1995, 2001) and Jos (2001, 2008). The Kafanchan crisis started as a religious disagreement between Christian and Muslim students, but degenerated into ethnic conflict between predominant Christian populations of the southern Kaduna versus the Hausa-Fulani who are predominantly Muslims. Similarly, the Zangon Kataf crisis, which started as a political conflict, took on a religious card. Akin Akinyele and others observe that, "we found that the 1992 conflict in Zangon Kataf was ethno-political, caused by socio-economic and cultural factors. But it took a religious dimension in Kaduna city and its environs. (Otite and Albert 1999).

The Tafawa Balewa conflict of 1991 started as a religious problem but took on an ethnic card between the Zaar (Sayawa) who are predominantly Christians on one hand, and the Hausa-Fulani who

are predominantly Muslims, on the other. The 1995 conflict at Tafawa Balewa was political but it took both ethnic and religious grabs. Similarly, the 2001 crisis at Tafawa Balewa was a reaction sparked off by Christian opposition to Shariah implementation in the area. The Kaduna religious crisis of 2000 was a fall out of planned implementation of Shariah in the state.

The Jos crisis of 1994, 2001, and 2008 had both political and religious undertones, with religion taking the centre stage. Mvondiga *Jibo et al* note that:

The violent clashes in Plateau may be infrequent, but they are very dangerous because any conflict involving the predominantly Hausa/Fulani with the non Hausa-Fulani Christian has both ethnic and religious component. (Jibo et al 2001:233).

In Niger State, the Shariah introduction led to a conflict in Salka village, and "the conflict, which started as a resistance to the Shariah legal code, soon assumed an ethnic dimension. From the sampled conflicts above, it is obvious that religion and ethnicity have played significant roles in fuelling crisis in Nigeria. They both complement and re-enforce each other. Otite has provided the dynamics of the workings of religion and ethnicity in some parts of Nigeria thus:

In a situation of ethnic conflicts in places like Kano, Kaduna, etc, an Igbo Moslem may not be saved simply because he or she is Moslem. Here, the ethnic component may become paramount. The Yoruba or Igbo Moslem is separated and identified and he or she does not have the same Moslem status as his or her Hausa neighbour or local community members. (Osaghae 2001:27)

Otite's apt observation played itself out well in the Shariah-related conflicts in Kaduna in 2000 and the religious riots in Jos, September 7, 2001 and November, 2008. In these instance, Muslims singled out both the Igbo, and Yoruba Muslims and other Muslims of the minority ethnic groups, for killing. The ethnic mark became the major identity and not religion. In fact, at this point, Hausa-Fulani identity now emerged as the Muslim identity, while "others" were grouped as aliens and unbelievers, and *arna* (in Hausa). In other words, religion was only used for expedience particularly by Muslims. When it comes to numerical arguments to assert superiority over others and not at critical moments in religious crisis. Again, the larger picture of Nigeria's citizenship and the national question is clearly brought to the fore. It is to be noted however, that while most religious crises in Kano have been religiously inclined, those of the Middle Belt are rooted in both ethnic and even colonial history of this region which had opposed Hausa-Fulani "dominance," which they saw as "oppressive," "exploitative" and Islamic. Hence, the Zangon Kataf, Kafanchan, Kaduna, Tafawa Balewa and Jos crises, are best understood within these contexts. But Sam G. Egwu has cautioned over-generalization of this claim thus:

Religion can hardly be a neat basis for delineating between minority groups and the "Hausa-Fulani" groups. Nor can it form the basis for the assertion of a separate identity by the former; for although religion is the key factor in the history of oppression and

resistance, the ‘Middle Belt’ has a significant Muslim population, a number of whom are opposed to the ‘Middle Belt’ movement because it is perceived as a Christian response to perceived Muslim domination. (Egwu 2001:21).

The presence in some families of both Christians and Muslims in the Middle-Belt has served as a ‘check’ to some extent in restraining hostile Muslim-Christian relations in this area. This so-called stabilizing factor is fast being eroded as religion might soon supplant family affiliations which cut across the religious divides.

### Effects of Religious Conflicts in Nigeria

The various religious crises in Nigeria have left negative imprints on Nigeria’s body polity. These crises have caused the death of several people, led to loss of property and disruption of the socio-economic life of the Nigerian citizens. This is in addition to threatening the security of lives of Nigerians. In most cases where official figures of losses were given, they were oftentimes, underestimated. The religious crises in Nigeria have left their enduring legacies of tension, insecurity, mutual suspicions; arms build up and negative inter-religious relationships.

Since the 1980s when religious crises heightened in Nigeria, people have relocated to what they consider *safe areas*. These relocations are based on ethnic and religious borderlines, which have serious security implications in future. This is because; battle lines are already being drawn for potential war in times of crises. Today, major cities in the North are patterned along Christian-Muslim divides. For examples, in Kaduna, there are Christian predominant areas like Television and Barnawa, while Muslims predominate in Tudun Wada and Kawo areas. Similarly, in Jos, Muslims inhabit Anguwan Rogo, Bauchi Road and Gangare, while Christians predominate in Jenta Adamu, Kabong, Anguwan Rukuba, and Tudun-Wada areas. This is because, as Danfulani and Fwatshak have noted, ‘since the events of 7-12 September 2001, there has been a great deal of suspicion, mistrust, fear, and even open resentment between some Muslims and Christians in Jos town’ (Danfulani and Fwatshak 2002).

In Bauchi, the ancient city is still predominantly inhabited by Muslims, while Christians inhabit the Bayan Gari, Yelwa, and *Government Reservation Area* (GRA). The crisis in Tafawa Balewa has widened ethnic and religious relations in Bauchi particularly, between the Hausa-Fulani, the Sayawa and the Christian population generally. Even the resettlement houses that were built by government in the aftermath of the Zangon-Kataf crisis, separated people along ethnic and religious lines. The *Sabon Gari* (stranger settlements) in Kano still accommodates Christian and other non-Muslims population, with Muslims concentrated in the ancient city.

It is to be noted however, that these dislocations and relocations have created socio-economic problems as some are thrown out of their jobs, some of these settlements have also become a haven of idle hands who constitute potential bands of armed robbers, and other social vices. The continuous escalation of religious crises in Nigeria is gradually creating and conditioning people to harbour

bitterness, and grievances against each other, which has the potential danger of bursting into serious crisis.

The obvious spill over or hangover effects of these crises have also been the *weaponization* of the Nigerian state. It is a fact today that where religious crises have occurred, a lot of arms have been stockpiled as a measure to either checkmate potential ‘opponents’ or as deterrents to opposing religious foes in the future. This scenario has serious security implications for peaceful-co-existence of Nigerians.

In some cases, restive youths have taken advantage of these weapons to organize ethnic and religious militias and even armed gangs on the highways. In fact, the incessant religious conflicts have polarized even the military along religious lines.

The *politicisation of religion* by the state itself has created its own problems. Tunde Lawuyi has rightly noted this when he states that, ‘the state has appeared as an innocent bystander in the religious conflicts when actually it is not. For the religious actors. The state is partisan in its approach to religious issues.’ (Lawuyi 1991). For Ilori, religion has lost to a great extent, its spiritual authority in the society, in what has become a tool of the state. Due to political expedience, many lives have been lost in the name of religion. (Ilori 1993). It has also been observed that religion has suddenly assumed the role of defining identity, including political identity in Nigeria. This portends danger for the continuing corporate existence of Nigeria. The last elections (2007) in Nigeria were marked with the overt use of religion to either win or lose votes. Ntamu notes that, ‘for every riot with a religious undertone that has ever occurred in Nigeria. We have ended up retarding the progress of such people/areas by about five to ten years.’ (Ntamu 2002). Apart from physical losses, the peace which can hardly be quantified in real terms is punctured and it takes more years to rebuild.

### Conclusion:

From the issues raised and discussed above, it is obvious that religions traditionally have been moats of separation rather than bridges of understanding between people,’ and ‘in spite of the peace potential of religions, organized and institutionalised religions have not been able to prevent conflicts or to control religious passions once they have been aroused.’ This captures the typical Nigerian case where Christian-Muslim relations have been characterized by mutual mistrust, fear, bitterness, discrimination, and even open conflict. Religion however can be a wonderful path to resolving conflict, provided its teachings about humility, compassion, forgiveness and respect for the individual and communities are fostered by listening and speaking to each other in a spirit of openness. The stability of Nigeria will be greatly enhanced if religious influence or its use is underplayed, in order to safeguard the rights and privileges of fellow Nigerians. Once religion ceases to remain a major factor in determining political power, identity, and even favours in public life generally, Nigeria will emerge as a strong and united polity, than the fragile, religiously charged nation, which is the present state of Nigeria.

In the eyes of many, religion is inherently conflictual, but this is not necessarily so; therefore, in part, the solution is to promote a heightened awareness of the positive peace building and reconciliatory role religion has played in many conflict situations. More generally fighting ignorance can go along way, interfaith dialogue would be beneficial at all levels of religious hierarchies and across all segments of religions communities where silence and misunderstanding are all too common learning about other religions does not mean conversion but may facilitate understanding and respect for other faiths. Communicating in a spirit of humility and engaging in self criticism would also be helpful.

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