

## ISAIAH BERLIN'S VALUE PLURALISM: IMPLICATIONS FOR ETHNO-RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE IN NIGERIA

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### **Abstract**

This work discusses Isaiah Berlin's insight on value pluralism and its implication for ethno-religious tolerance and respect in Nigeria. Nigeria's ethno-religious diversity and plural nature has posed one of the greatest challenges to her development. The history of Nigeria has thus been a history of strife, crises and conflicts largely borne out of ethnic and religious differences. The crises facing Nigeria as visible in Jos Plateau crises therefore largely predicate on indigene-settler dialectic, minority question, ethnic hegemony, religious differences, religious fundamentalism and, ethnic and religious politics. These have become signs that Nigerians have failed to appreciate the multiplicity of human values, ends and incommensurable and incompatible nature people according to Berlin share with one another. It is against these backdrops, that this paper attempts to employ Berlin's insight on value pluralism to promote a culture of ethno-religious tolerance. With expository method the paper espouses the meaning of relevant concepts such as tolerance, ethno-religious tolerance and multiculturalism. With the analytic method, this paper examines Berlin's value pluralism and how it can be used to boost ethno-religious tolerance in Nigeria. This paper submits that the lack of a single metric with which to judge human values, and the fact that human cannot dependably evaluate the truth claims of competing moral standpoints, means that Nigerians must accept everyone as he is, tolerate and respect the beliefs and choices of others both at the social and private levels. This paper therefore concludes that no religion or tribe can dependably claim to be superior to others and so enforcing a single religion would backfire as belief cannot be compelled by force. As such, Nigerian institutions charged with the responsibility of promoting peace and tolerance in Nigeria should be strengthened and stiffer penalties imposed on perpetrators of religious and ethnic crises in order to curb the rise of religious crises in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Incommensurability; Incompatibility; Value Pluralism; Tolerance; Multiculturalism.

### **Introduction**

The multicultural and plural nature of Nigeria is a reality. This diversity could be seen in the areas of language with the country said to have over 250 indigenous languages, religion and ethnicity. Nigeria has three dominant

religions; Christianity, Islam and ATR with a multiplicity of ethnic groups said to be over 400 (Aghemelo and Osumah, 2009). Other areas where this plurality manifests are in occupation, dress and food patterns etc. This has been a major source of division rather than of strength. Unfortunately, the numerous efforts to mold the people into one cohesive unit has not succeeded in overcoming the challenge of diversity. As such, each passing day, gets Nigerians further divided along religious and ethnic lines. Shuaib (2014) rightly notes the most potent tools used by mischief makers to cause disaffection, hatred, disunity and tribal war in the country are ethnicity and religion. This affects not just social cohesion but also economic and political development. The diversity crises in Nigeria is, however, manifest in the indigene-settler conflicts, minority questions, religious fundamentalism, ethnic politics, religious politics, resource control conflicts, agitation for self-determination and other conflicts especially in some parts of the middle belt states, south south, south east and south west states. These conflicts with their multidimensional consequences have posed a great obstacle to the progress, economic growth, political instability and overall socio-economic development of Nigeria (Edewor, Aluko and Folrain, 2014; Salawu, 2010).

Today almost every ethnic nationality and religion has a body speaking for it and ostensibly protecting its interest. In the ambience of religion, there is the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN), Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (SCIA) and Jama'atu Nasril Islam (JNI) for Christians and Muslims respectively. Socio-culturally, there is Ohaneze Ndigbo for the Igbo nation, Afenifere and Odua Peoples Congress for the Yoruba nation Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF) and Northern Elders Forum (NEF) for the Northern part of the country.

Indeed, the discordant tunes being played by these groups and bodies have led to a fractured relation among the various ethnic groups and religions. The implication of this is that national unity suffers while cherished national values such as patriotism, tolerance, social justice, equity and inclusiveness which are values clearly spelt out in the national philosophy of Nigeria to promote national unity and social cohesion are lost

### **Conceptual clarification**

#### **Toleration/tolerance**

Andrew Murphy opines that the tendency to use toleration and tolerance interchangeably has encouraged a misunderstanding of the liberal tradition and impeded efforts to improve upon it. He defines “toleration” as a set of social or political practices and “tolerance” as a set of attitudes (Murphy, 1997). Here, however, the two terms are employed interchangeably for the use here involves the dispositions – institutional practices and individual attitudes. Murphy

further suggests that toleration denotes forbearance from imposing punitive sanctions for dissent from prevailing norms. This is what Harrison (1987:427) calls “the practice of deliberately not curtailing the freedom of others. Horton and Nicholson (1992:4) describe it as “a deliberate choice not to interfere with conduct that is disapproved.

Toleration involves at least, a disapproval of the conduct/action that is tolerated, for if we approve of an action, it is then difficult to see how we can be said to tolerate it. In other words, toleration involves a complex blend of rejection and acceptance. At the heart of toleration is self-control. When we tolerate an action, we resist our urge and the inner push to forcefully prohibit the expression of the action or activity we find unpleasant.

It is the conditional acceptance of or non-interference with beliefs, actions and practices that one considers to be wrong but still ‘tolerable’. In this sense, it is strictly a ‘negative freedom’ which Murphy says fits well into the classical liberalism and other traditions that define liberty as absence of constraints. In practice, toleration and tolerance – the tendency towards toleration – indicates support for practices that prohibit ethnic or religious discrimination and allows for various forms of dissent. It can be understood as a political practice aimed at neutrality, objectivity and fairness on the part of political actors. These ideas are related in that the goal of political neutrality is deliberate restraints of the power that political authorities have to negate the life activities of citizens and subjects. The understanding of toleration is usually grounded upon an assumption about the importance of the autonomy of the individual which is central to the liberal tradition.

### **Ethno-Religious Tolerance**

Religious tolerance according to Zagorin signifies forbearance and the permission given by the adherents of a dominant religion for other religions to exist, even though the latter are looked at with disapproval, as unfair, mistaken or harmful. In that regard. Therefore, ethno-religious tolerance refers to the ability to appreciate spiritual beliefs, values and practices which are different from one’s own. This goal is a great one due to the great diversity of religious beliefs and ethnicity in the world today. Both religion and ethnicity are emotional topics. It is often difficult for people to put aside personal biases and consider issues and situations objectively.

### **Value pluralism in Berlin’s political and moral thought**

Berlin’s determination to understand cultures and their characteristic thinkers on their own terms has given rise to the suspicion that he was a relativist but he was not (Galston, 2009). The incommensurability theory which as a value pluralist he holds could easily give lead to the conclusion that value pluralism is a form of relativism, the school of thought that according to Berlin holds that

there is no objective value. Berlin (1995) appreciates diversity both culturally and morally, but at the same time wanted to protect certain universal values. He distinguished between pluralism which he espoused and monism which he repudiates when he writes:

Pluralism, with the measure of ‘negative’ liberty that it entails, seems to me a truer and more humane ideal than the goals of those who seek in the great disciplined, authoritarian structures the ideal of ‘positive’ self-mastery by classes, or peoples, or the whole of mankind. It is truer, because it does, at least recognize the fact that human goals are many, not all of them commensurable, and in perpetual rivalry with one another. To assume that values can be graded on one scale, so that it is a mere matter of inspection to determine the highest, seems to me to falsify our knowledge that men are free agents, to represent moral decision as an operation which a slide-rule could, in principle perform (1995:167).

Berlin describes his philosophical position as follows: “If, as I believe, the ends of men are many, and not all of them are in principle compatible with each other, then the possibility of conflict—and of tragedy—can never wholly be eliminated from human life, either personal or social. The necessity of choosing between absolute claims is then an inescapable characteristic of the human condition” (1995: 168). This is an acknowledgment of diversity and plurality in values and ends in both personal and social life. Berlin denied that there is a single highest value, that there is a single metric by which all values can be ranked, and that the many goods and principles we regard as worthy form a harmonious whole.

His fundamental notion is that in our (moral) universe, not only is there a diversity of values and ends but that which we consider to be good and worthwhile is itself filled with tension and conflict. These conflicts and tension occur not only between societies, but also within societies, within groups with their different subcultures and even within the various roles individuals play in life. Berlin (1999) writes:

in life as normally lived the ideals of one society and culture clash with

those of another, and at times come into conflict within the same society, and often enough, within the moral experience of a single individual; that such conflicts cannot always, even in principle, be wholly resolved (171).

An example of a value conflicts which Berlin cited is the conflict between liberty and equality, justice and mercy, tolerance and order, liberty and social justice, resistance and prudence which is intrinsic to human life. Berlin (1999) argues that:

It follows that when the pursuit of equality comes into conflict with other human aims, be they what they may - such as the desire for happiness or pleasure, or for justice or virtue, or colour and variety in a society for their own sake, or for liberty of choice as an end in itself, or for the fuller development of all human faculties it is only the most fanatical egalitarian that will demand that such conflicts invariably be decided in favour of equality alone, with relative disregard of the other 'values' concerned.

We are confronted not only with the problems of the incompatibility of values and ends but also with that of commensurability. There is no commonly shared yardstick available by which these value conflicts can be resolved. Thus, Berlin not only showed that there is moral diversity, but also that there are conflicts within the good, including different value system and different concepts of justice for resolving these conflicts. Thus, human lives should not be molded into universal and monist systems of values and norms.

Berlin is so subjectivist in moral matters by teaching that fundamental values spoke to objective features of the human species and the circumstances in which we are placed. But the things we rightly value are multiple, incommensurable and in conflict with one another. In practice (and often in theory), to realize one's value is to subordinate another. And not just in individual lives, cultures and moral codes constitute clashing assemblies of goods and principles. There is much to be said for magnanimous pride, and also for reverent humility; for an ethics that gives pride of place to citizenship and for one that focuses on the well-being of the soul. But they cannot be made to cohere with one another; we must choose between them, "The world that we encounter in ordinary

experience is one in which we are faced with choices between ends equally ultimate and claims equally absolute, the realization of some of which must inevitably involve the sacrifice of others” (171).

### **Incompatibility and Incommensurability in the Value Pluralism of Berlin**

Value conflicts (dilemmas) are characterized by a necessary combination of incompatibility and incommensurability, which in turn leads to a situation in which something needs to be sacrificed.

Incompatibility means that in life not all values (or different priorities in values) can be successfully combined with one another at the same time. Thus, it follows that not all the values can be accepted at the same time. Incompatibility arises because of the limitations of time, space, resources and means which make it difficult for one to choose to do everything at the same time. Thus, one cannot have or do everything and so must have to choose. Scarcity and finiteness of man and human existence lead to conflicts. These according to humanists, are important roots of evil (Aarsbergen-Ligtvoet, 2006). Incompatibility needs not lead to conflict if it is very clear which of the values at stake is better or more important. However, it becomes a true dilemma if both values in conflict are equally important. For instance, a policeman is chasing a criminal and at a road junction, encounters an accident victim writhing in pains and begging to be taken to the hospital:

There are many objective ends, ultimate values, some incompatible with others, pursued by different societies at various times, or by different groups in the same society, by entire classes or churches or races, or by particular individuals within them, any one of which may find itself subject to conflicting claims of uncombinable, yet equally ultimate and objective ends (Berlin, 1990:172).

The term ‘incommensurability’ is thus used by Berlin to describe the phenomena that within a specific (personal or common) value system, values are considered equally compelling and there is no common and pre-given higher value to which one can refer to in order to resolve the value conflict. Thus, value conflict becomes a true dilemma when there is not only incompatibility but also incommensurability. Incompatibility is therefore a necessary but not a sufficient characteristic for a value conflict. For Berlin “objective ends” are ends that are recognizable as a human end by other people. He believes in a common horizon of values. The number of values and ends cannot be finite and therefore, we can recognize them, although we may not share the same importance other people attach to them.

### **The Power of Choice**

Berlin states that choice is essential to man and it is important that the human power of choice be respected and not be destroyed. Humans should be allowed certain areas in which they can act without obstruction (negative liberty). Berlin also characterized humans as beings who shape their lives as well as other people's lives "...active beings, pursuing ends, shaping their own and others' lives, feeling, reflecting, imagining, creating in constant interaction and intercommunication with other human beings" (Berlin, 1999: 181).

Again, he calls men "unpredictably self-transforming human beings" (Berlin, 1995: 181). These characterizations presuppose that man has no fixed or essential nature and is not destined to follow some pre-fixed goals, that is, a goal or end which he does not contribute to.

When Berlin defines human beings as self-transforming beings, he agrees with the existentialists' principle that "existence precedes essence." This means that human beings have no predetermined essence. When they are born, they exist and then create their own essence afterwards by their own actions. There is no human nature fixed in advance of human existence.

### **The manifestations and causes of ethno-religious crises in Nigeria**

According to Symth and Robinson (2001), Nigeria is a state where major political issues are variously and violently contested and examined along the lines of religious, ethnic and even regional divisions in the country. This is why Osaghae and Suberu (2005) have rightly described Nigeria as one of the most deeply divided states in Africa. The issues that generate the fiercest contestation they said include those that are considered fundamental to the existence and legitimacy of the state, over which competing groups tend to adopt exclusionary, winner-takes-all strategies. These include the control of state power, resource allocation, and citizenship (Osaghae and Suberu, 2005).

The history of Nigeria since independence has been one of ethnic and religious crises, the high point being the Civil War fought between the Igbo of then East Central Nigeria and the rest of Nigeria between 1967 and 1970. Since then, it has been one case of bizarre experiences in the domain of religious violence after another. Some of the worst cases include the Kasuwan Magani in 1980, Zango Kataf and Gure Kahuga in 1987, Kafanchan and Lere in 1987, Ilorin and Jere in 1989, Tafawa Balewa in 1991 as well as the 1992 crisis in Zango Kataf. There is also the highly violent and devastating crisis of Kaduna in February and May of 2000, as a result of the introduction of Sharia Law in some Northern states which claimed thousands of lives and destruction of property worth billions of naira.

Aside these crises that have seeming religious undertone, there are also ethnic inspired crises such as the Ife and Modakeke crisis in Osun State, the ongoing and protracted Tiv and Jukun crisis in some parts of southern Taraba State, Itsekiri and Ijaw crisis in Warri, Delta States, the Ilaje and Ijaw crisis in the riverine area of Ondo State. In the view of Sulaiman (2016), most religious crises have occurred mostly in the Northern part of the country between the Hausa/Fulani Muslims and Christian ethnic minorities. The two dominant religions have had their fair share of violence based on religious affiliations and policies. The situation is not helped by the multi-ethnic nature of Nigeria. The over 180 million people of Nigeria are divided among about 250 ethnic groups. On this, Dan Isaac (2004) of the BBC wrote:

The broad categorization of a Muslim Hausa-speaking North and a Christian South made up of two dominant tribes – the Yoruba in the south-west and the Ibo in the south-east – is a vast oversimplification. In some states across central Nigeria, for example, it is possible to drive down a road, stopping at each tiny settlement, encountering a different language spoken in every single one. And to further complicate this ethnic mix, over the decades and even centuries, people have moved around what is now modern Nigeria.

Given the presence of these religions that supposedly preach peace, one would expect that the relations between the different ethnic nationalities would be peaceful and harmonious, but they have tended to impart negatively on the nation creating mistrust, tension and unrest. Religion as Dukor (1988) rightly said is not intrinsically bad but its disintegrating force can be attributed to the organizers and organization of religion, the preachers and their preaching, the propagators and the propagation of religion.

In congruence with this, Sulaiman (2016) has identified several factors which have caused and continue to cause religious crisis in Nigeria. They include:

1. Religious intolerance, which is a blind and fixated mental and psychological negative attitude towards religious beliefs and practices that are contrary to one's cherished beliefs and practices.
2. Religious fanaticism, which is a violent and unreasoning religious enthusiasm and an excessive irrational zeal to defend one's religion.
3. Negative reportage by the media. Some religious crises are known to have been instigated by misinformation by the press through junk journalism and sensational headlines.
4. Aggressive or militant preaching/evangelism. This means an offensive and coercive approach to conversion and propagation of one's religious



faith. This happens when any religious group or individual preacher within that group sets out to use force to convert those they consider infidels or unbelievers to their own religious system.

5. Indoctrination. When people are wrongly taught, what follows is obsession which invariably leads to violence.
6. External influence. There is mutual suspicion and distrust among Nigerians. While some people think that Christianity is a tool for western imperialism and expansionism, others think that Muslims have ties with Saudi Arabia (Sunni) and Iran (shia).
7. Ethnic crisis in Nigeria have largely been caused by disagreement over ownership and access to land.

### **Cost of ethno-religious violence in Nigeria**

The devastating consequences of ethno-religious conflicts can be felt in the destabilization of the stability order. These conflicts and crises have inflicted untold hardship on both individuals in terms of loss of lives and property and the government in terms of provision of relief materials to victims of the crises. For instance, the February 2000 religious crisis in Kaduna alone claimed not less than 3000 lives (Sulaiman, 2016).

Secondly, it has also dented the image of Nigeria abroad as many countries are forced to issue travel warnings to their citizens not to visit Nigeria as a result of ethnic and religious tensions that may arise without warning. According to information obtained from the US Embassy and Consulate in Nigeria, The US Department of State in a travel advisory dated 5<sup>th</sup> April, 2017 warned U.S. citizens of the risks of travelling to Nigeria and recommended that U.S. citizens avoid all non-essential travels to Adamawa, Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Kano, and Yobe states because of the precarious security situation in Northeast Nigeria. Similarly, the Government of Canada in February, 2021 advised Canadian citizens to avoid non-essential travels to Nigeria due to the unpredictable security situation throughout the country and the significant risk of terrorism, crime, inter-communal clashes, armed attacks and kidnappings (ICIR, 2021) There is no doubting the fact that these security warning do not augur well for the economic development of Nigeria.

### **Implications of Berlin's Value Pluralism for Ethno-Religious Tolerance in Nigeria**

In no country today is Isaiah Berlin's pluralism and liberalism more relevant than in Nigeria. This is given the challenges she faces particularly but not limited to national integration. Nigeria is a multicultural and of course a culturally diverse country. This diversity could be seen in the areas of language, religion, occupation, food and dress patterns etc. While in other countries such as the United States, Canada, Ghana and so on, diversity has been a source of strength. However, in Nigeria, it has been a divisive factor.

The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended) in Chapter 4 section 38(1) states that “Every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom ... to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance” (FRN, 1999). The afore mentioned provision of the constitution recognizes and appreciates not only the plural nature of Nigeria but also individual complexity and differences which Berlin’s value pluralism seeks to protect.

While successive governments in Nigeria have enacted policies to promote national integration, the tolerance level of Nigerians of different religious and ethnic groups, however, remain ridiculously low, aided in most parts by state sanctioned policies which seem to promote the interests of one ethnic group and religion above the interests of others. This is only going to lead to more conflicts in the society. For as Berlin opines, no culture and by implication, no religion or ethnic group is superior to the other. This is because the human society contains a panorama of a variety of cultures, each pursuing different and sometimes incompatible ways of life and possessing different ideals and standards of values.

His acknowledgement of the lack of a single metric by which all values can be judged shows that there is no way to determine which of the religion or ethnic group in Nigeria possesses the highest truth value and so superior to others. This compels every Nigerian to accept people’s right to hold any religious belief and opinion even if it does not agree with his. When government’s policies and programmes reflect this Berlin’s proposal, the frequency and incidence of religiously motivated crises and conflicts in Nigeria would reduce. It would also ensure that there is no forceful and violent conversion of the adherents of one religion to another. It would also create an open playing field for everyone to operate without fear of being victimized and killed.

While Christianity and Islam have opposing worldviews and thus incommensurable and incompatible with each other to some degree, there are, however, common values which their adherents can refer to build a culture of tolerance. Such values include peacefulness, truth, justice, forgiveness, love and empathy, courage and patience, respect for the sanctity of human lives and so on. However, the presence of these common values in both religions does not make both the same. The different values of both religions are compelling, competing with each other and there is no common or pre-given value to which one can refer in order to resolve conflict arising from their interaction. Thus given this situation, Berlin advocates a compromise. This compromise involves accepting every religion for what it values and this demands tolerance on the part of individual citizens of Nigeria as painful and difficult it may be.

Tolerance is a choice which every Nigerian is condemned to make so as to maintain a free social life.

The government of Nigeria at all levels must create a level playing field for all religious groups to flourish and ensure that no Nigerian is discriminated upon on the basis of religion or ethnicity. The government must enact policies that promote inclusiveness and which gives every Nigerian a sense of belonging rather than of religious and ethnic particularism. No religion or ethnic group should by a deliberate (or otherwise) policy of the state be given the impression that it is superior to others.

This demands that government's programmes designed to promote inclusiveness such as the Federal Character Principle should be strengthened. The principle as stated in the constitution aims to ensure that all public service institutions fairly reflect the diversity (linguistic, ethnic and geographic) of the country. It is meant to ensure that there is no predominance of persons from a few states or a few ethnic groups or other sectional groups in that government or in any of its agencies. Keeping to the provisions of the principle ensures that every Nigerian is giving a sense of belonging notwithstanding the diversities of ethnic origin, culture, language and religion. Thus the government must ensure that there is equitable distribution of appointments, natural and economic resources for the benefits of all.

In addition, Berlin's position that communication between cultures is only possible "because what makes men human is common to them, and acts as a bridge between them" (1990:11) demands the promotion of interfaith dialogue. Interfaith dialogue is aimed at creating greater understanding and cooperation between Christians, Muslims and adherents of other faiths in Nigeria. Interfaith dialogue Gerard Forde says refers to cooperative and positive interaction between people of different religious traditions at both the individual and institutional level. It does not take away a party's right to their own beliefs but it respects the right of the others to practice their own faith freely. Interfaith dialogue is a necessity that counters terrorism and promotes the justice and peace that befits our common faith in our God that creates all. It maintains and promotes understanding, cooperation and mutual respect that will ensure that Nigerians live a peaceful and harmonious social life. This paper calls for an Interfaith Commission to be established by the government and charged with the responsibility of promoting dialogue at both the federal, state and local council levels. The commission chairmanship should be on a rotational basis and should have equal numbers of Christians and Muslims as members.

Finally, the government as Berlin suggests, should maintain a precarious equilibrium that will prevent the occurrence of desperate situations of intolerable choices. This will greatly minimize political and social conflicts and

ensure that the country's diverse nature is maintained. Furthermore, Berlin's (1990) liberal proposal that the government should aim to give "each human group sufficient room to realize its own idiosyncratic, unique, particular ends without too much interference with the ends of others is very much applicable to Nigeria today. So long as groups do not harm or damage others, the government should interfere or intervene as little as possible in their affairs. In other words, the government should not try to impose a specific vision of the common good that contains an ideal for society like the government of Nigeria is doing currently with the proposed enforcement of 'decent' dressing.

### **Conclusion**

Indubitably, ethno-religious tolerance is one of the outstanding banes of development in Nigeria. This is based on the crises, tension and conflicts it breeds in the country. These conditions are exacerbated by the mutual distrust, suspicion, rivalry and intolerance among Nigerians of different ethnic nationalities and their ethno-religious affiliations. In all these, the Nigerian state has been detrimentally polarized in such a way that people generally work against others. This has been the basis of present Nigeria's instability and chaos. Against these backdrops, there is great need for Nigerians to cultivate the culture of ethno-religious tolerance, appreciate cultural and religious diversities and respect the different human beliefs, feelings, practices and opinions which are what Berlin's value pluralism calls for.

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