

## **Religion, Ethnicity, and National Integration in the Light of Christian Religion**

By

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### **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to examine how religion and ethnicity can be used to bring about national integration in the light of Christian religion, using Nigeria as case study. Nigeria became an independent nation in 1960 with the hope that the country's diverse ethnic groups will be integrated to enhance peaceful co-existence, administrative and economic development of the nation. But these have not been significantly achieved. Since the colonial periods and up till now, there have been ethnic and religious crises that made the concept of national integration seem impossible. Ethno-religious crises in Nigeria are deeply rooted and are threatening the very survival of the country as a nation. Often, Nigeria has experienced intra- and inter-religious crises. The question is: how can this violence work for national unity, integration and development? It has negative socio-economic and political consequences for the nation and its citizens. Unresolved grievances are what aggravate ethnic and religious tension and what usually lead to sectarian crises, tribal unrest, bitter political tussles and insurgences, among others. However, the question of national integration is of necessity and not a matter of choice. The study used historical method of analysis for optimal results. The findings reveal that there have been ethnic and religious crises in the country since its inception as an independent nation; there is need to seriously look into the matter in order to proffer lasting solutions to the problem and prevent the disintegration of the country. The study recommends among others that Christian religious principles should be embraced and put into practice by Nigerians in order to promote unity, integration and national development in the country.

*Keywords:* religion, ethnicity, national integration, Christian religion

### **1.0 Introduction**

We would like to point out from the onset that this research paper will use Nigeria as a case study. When we mention national integration, we are referring to the awareness of a common identity

amongst the citizens of a country. It means that though we belong to different castes, religions and regions and speak different languages, we recognize the fact that we are all one. The decision which was made by the people of Nigeria prior to independence to become the Federal Republic required that the people would be integrated with one another for the purposes of co-existence, unity, progress and development. But this dream seems to be difficult in Nigeria.

Nigeria is a diverse country with about 200 million people, it is multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-religious and clearly heterogeneous.<sup>1</sup>What is evident also in Nigeria is the crises of marginalization, ethnic rivalries and practice of sectional and tribal politics among others. Amidst all these, the question becomes if there is such thing as National Integration. According to Awa, national integration “is a process of creating a sense of national consciousness, uniqueness of identity and loyalty among people of different socio-cultural identities (racial, ethnic, language, religion, and so on) into a single territorial political society”<sup>2</sup>. These diversities are evidently manifested in the citizens’ cultural and religious practices. For instance, there are more than four hundred documented ethnic groups across the country comprising of millions of people who are adherents of the two major religion, Christianity and Islam. Nigerians are very religious people though the nation has not adopted any religion as a state religion. How best, therefore, can Nigeria achieve this National Integration in the purview of such ethnic and religious practices and inclinations? In this paper, we recognize the importance and contributions of different religions and ethnic practices, but at the same time single out Christian Religion and her tenets as a necessary road-map for charting the course for National Integration.

## **2.0 Conceptual Analysis**

### **2.1 Religion**

Religion is human beings’ belief in God and human beings’ relationship with God. Alamu explains religion as that which “many at times depend on symbols and narratives usually employed to offer a meaning to human existence and also to explain the indices for the creation of the universe”<sup>3</sup>. The basic requirement is that religion being a belief system must be held by a

group of people who publicly share its doctrine. It is these doctrines that indicate how the people should behave in the given society. They include religious dogma, creed, conviction and principles. Religious ethics hence are those principles that guide religions and set standards for what is and isn't acceptable behaviour. Most Nigerians adhere to the two religions (Christianity and Islam), though it is widely known that there are differences in their understanding of the religions both at the inter and intra group levels. For instance, in spite of the fact that all Muslims are united in their belief of the fundamental pillars of the religion, many of them however differ in their actions, sometimes determined by sectarian variation. The same is similar among the Christians. This is not the problem, rather "the politicization, or outright mischievous projection of these sectarian differences or identities combined with ignorance and deep seated suspicions and stereotypes are what often resulted into violence and conflicts at the intra and inter group levels with severe consequences on the security and integration of the nation.

## **2.2 Ethnicity**

Ethnicity refers to the shared social, cultural, and historical experiences, stemming from common national or regional backgrounds that make subgroups of a population different from one another. Similarly, an ethnic group is a subgroup of a population with a set of shared social, cultural, and historical experiences; with relatively distinctive beliefs, values, and behaviours; and with some sense of identity of belonging to the subgroup.

According to Brumfiel,

ethnicity is an identity based upon a presumption of shared history and common cultural inheritance. Ethnic identity is shaped by both ethnic affiliation and ethnic attribution. Ethnic affiliation refers to individuals' own sense of group membership and the characteristics of the group as defined by its members. Ethnic attribution concerns the characteristics of the group as defined by outsiders.<sup>4</sup>

He explained further that States acted opportunistically and inconsistently in dealing with ethnicity. Sometimes they suppressed ethnic affiliation to weaken the resistance of subject groups to the state. At other times they encouraged ethnic affiliation to accentuate division within the commoner class. States

also used derogatory ethnic stereotypes to legitimize their exploitation of their subjects.<sup>5</sup>

### **3.0 Religion and National Integration**

Nigerians are very religious people. There are three major religions in Nigeria: Christianity, Islam and Traditional religion. Kukah opines that

in 1960, the country was divided along religious zones of influence notably the Muslims in the North and the Christians in the South. The Traditional religion appears to be un-proselytized religion because it does not go forth seeking converts neither does it pick offence when deserted by its adherents nor assume that its object of worship is superior<sup>6</sup>.

However, our concern here is to investigate whether religion has contributed to national integration or not.

During the regime of Babaginda, Nigeria became a member of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC).<sup>7</sup> Though Babaginda's government claimed to have taken the decision on economic reasons, namely, to be able to access the loans available to OIC member countries at a time Nigeria was in need of finance. Christians viewed this as an attempt to 'Islamize Nigeria'. This of course was the beginning of Christian versus Muslim open confrontation in Nigeria.

On another note, the Nigerian constitution does not at all raise any religion to a state religion. Yet, this principle was violated when the governors of the Northern states adopted Sharia law. In Zamfara, the first state to introduce a strict form of Sharia, the government claimed that its religious reform was bringing about major changes, whereas all spheres of public life were being transformed into Islamic oriented institutions. This state sponsored Islamization affected non-Muslims as well, for "they were subjected to gender separation in hotels and restaurants, in buses and taxes."<sup>8</sup> All these have hampered national integration in Nigeria even in terms of social, political and economic development. According to Asemota, "the tendency of religious groups to politicize religious activities has made the country more difficult to govern"<sup>9</sup>.

Another negative effect religion has had on the country's

integration is the promotion of the culture of corruption. In some churches and mosque today, preaching tends to focus on money, prosperity and so on, whereas, the Holy Books (both the Bible and Quran) have not taught us that. Some of the pastors and Imams have aided and assisted corruption by tasking their followers to look for money at all cost because poverty is not meant for the children of God. Furthermore, religious morals are expected to regulate the entire human life or activities, yet religion has led to various religious conflicts. Remarkably among them are the Maitatsine riot of 1980 in Kano and conflicts between the Izala and Tijany in Gombe in 1987 (Larkin, 2009:126). Also, the Bulunkutu riot of October 1982, the various Kaduna riots of 1987, 1988, Jigawa riot 2001 and Lagos-IdiAraba, 2002. As these were not enough, another riot erupted on 22nd November, 2002, in which about 200 people were reportedly killed, and property worth millions of naira were destroyed.<sup>10</sup> This was believed to have been caused due to “blasphemous publication” against the Islamic sect.

#### **4.0. Ethnicity and National Integration**

Ethnicity is a major task confronting the achievement of democracy in Nigeria since independence in 1960. Ethnic sentiment is present almost in all areas of Nigeria’s political, economic and social organizations. In fact, low productivity and ineffectiveness presently experienced in the country can be attributed to ethnic sentiments. One can rightly say that ethnicity has negatively affected national integration.

Nigeria is made up of 250 ethnic groups<sup>11</sup>. This therefore implies that Nigeria is multi-lingual and multi-ethnic in nature. These tribal differences have given rise to diverse nature of the Nigerian nation. This indicates that though housed in one country, the ethnic groups do not have identical needs, objectives and aspirations. No wonder Obafemi Awolowo as quoted by Ejikeme says that “Nigeria is a mere geographic expression without any basis for unity”<sup>12</sup>. These expressions are more real judging from the happenings in the country since independence than the deceit embedded in the slogan of “one Nigeria”. Most often, ethnic sentiments are used in place of merit and skills. For instance, in the case of appointment, ‘God fatherism’ comes in, and one has to favour his people whether they are qualified or not.

Ethnicity has been one of the major factors that have seriously reduced the image and glory of Nigerian party politics. The

“federal character” principle, which has been enshrined in the Nigeria constitution since 1979, seeks to ensure that appointments to public service institutions fairly reflect the linguistic, ethnic, religious and geographical diversity of the country.<sup>13</sup> It then becomes a fact that federal character is a tool for ensuring fairness in public service over professionalism and good attainment. According to Adamolekun, “the total systematic collapse in Nigeria’s socio-economic and political environment can be attributed to the federal character practice”<sup>14</sup>. The implication is that Nigeria will have unqualified people in sensitive government positions. It is observed that parties now adopt the principles of federal character as a means of gaining credibility which goes along with ethnic coloration.<sup>15</sup> In addition, the demand and desperation for the creation of states and local governments in the country have been informed by ethnic sentiments and marginalization.

The effects of ethnicity could be noticed in the area of allocation of national resources. For instance, in the first republic due to the fact that the control of government was in the hands of the North, such opportunity was used to allocate much funds to the Northern parts at expense of the South. Ethnicity had affected the Nigerian policy because it heightens political struggle and competition in electoral contest. The activities of the Northern People’s Congress (NPC) in the first Republics when the North insisted that its candidates must win at all cost, to actualize this, some Northern candidates were returned unopposed even before the commencement of the general elections. Also, the current President Buhari once said that Nigerians should vote on religious and ethnic lines.<sup>16</sup> Whatever the intentions were, these actions and statements could trigger suspicion and crises among ethnic groups and between the two dominant religious groups.

### **5.0. Ethno-Religious Violence in Nigeria**

Nigeria as a nation since 1960, from all indications, has not been able to attain her set objectives of unifying the diverse ethnic groups in all facets, socially, economically, politically, and otherwise. The contributing factors to this reality could be attributed to lack of unity caused by ethnic and religious conflicts. Gradually, Nigerians of different religious and ethnic affiliations are feeling insecure and highly helpless in some parts of the

country. Such conflicts had affected the spirit of unity and integration, which is about peaceful co-existence, unity, and harmony of the diverse people of Nigeria.

The various 'ethno-religious' disturbances were strong force for socio-political instability, and national disintegration. Those disturbances described the gross inadequacy and ineffectiveness of the national security. Thus, in Nigeria security of lives and property could not be guaranteed. The climate of insecurity created by violent conflict deters investment. The economy becomes stagnant and democracy dividends equally become illusions. However, the growing incidence of ethno-religious crisis in Nigeria is worrisome and if ethno-religious conflicts are not reduced now and gradually completely eradicated, the memories from such could create future conflicts. Thus, we can make the argument here that religion and ethnicity contribute largely to national disintegration in Nigeria, and if not resolved will kill Nigeria in the nearest future.

To give just few but recent instances of this ethno-religious violence, since 2009, the Islamist movement, Boko Haram, has been waging war against the Nigerian military, sacking villages and towns and taking thousands of lives in battles and massacres against Christians, students and others they deemed enemies of Islam.

The events of Abuja in 2000 and Jos in 2001 were riots between Christians and Muslims. Another in Jos, Nigeria, was about the appointment of a Muslim politician, Alhaji Muktar Mohammed, as local coordinator of the Federal programme to fight poverty.<sup>17</sup> Other similar riot killed over 100 people in October 2001 in Kano State. In 2002, the Nigerian journalist, Isioma Daniel, wrote an article that led to the demonstrations and violence that caused the deaths of over 200 in Kaduna, as well as a fatwa placed on her life. The 2002 Miss World contest was moved from Abuja to London as a result.<sup>18</sup> The rest of the 2000's decade would see inter-religious violence continue in Jos and Kaduna.

The reaction to the Mohammed cartoons brought about a series of violent protests in Nigeria. Clashes between rioters and police claimed several lives, with estimates ranging from 16 to more than a hundred. This led to reprisal attacks in the south of the country, particularly in Onitsha. More than a hundred lost their lives.<sup>19</sup>

In May 2022, Deborah Yakubu, a Christian student in Sokoto, was lynched outside her university by a Muslim mob. Following the lynching, there was violence against other Christian sites; according to a statement released by the Catholic Diocese of Sokoto:

During the protest, groups of youths led by some adults in the background attacked the Holy Family Catholic Cathedral at Bello Way, destroying church glass windows, those of the Bishop Lawton Secretariat, and vandalized a community bus parked within the premises. St. Kevin's Catholic Church was also attacked and partly burnt; windows of the new hospital complex under construction, in the same premises, were shattered. The hoodlums also attacked the Bakhita Centre burning down a bus within the premises.

In June 2022, a massacre left over 50 parishioners dead in the St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church in Owo. Responsibility for the attack was unclear, but the Government blamed ISWAP, whereas many locals blamed Fulani herdsmen.<sup>20</sup>

## **6.0. Factors that Undermine National Integration**

**6.1. Illiteracy:** This results to insufficient understanding of the teachings of religion. Every religion preaches peace. The Quran discourages Muslims from caucus arguments with followers of other religions except to invite them to Islam through civility, good words, good manners, and good example. This suggests that it is forbidden to keep company with people who perpetrate negative acts like corruption, conflict, hatred, killing and other acts which are not the teachings of any religion. With peace, there will be development and national integration.

**6.2. Politicization of one's Religion or Ethnicity:** This relates to individuals in the country who describe their religion or ethnic group as superior or inferior for the sake of access to resources. Wild arguments are thrown on who is the majority, minority, and so on. If this is not controlled, it can degenerate into violent ethnic or religious conflict with its negative consequences on the lives and properties of people. Thus, failure to live in peace leads to destruction.

**6.3. Ethnicity/Tribe:** Nothing in Nigeria's political history captures her problem of national integration more graphically than the chequered fortune of the word tribe. According to Achebe "tribe has been accepted at one time as a friend, rejected as an



enemy at another, and finally smuggled in through the back-door as an accomplice”<sup>21</sup>. Ethnicity which creates feelings of pride or inferiority complex leads to social injustice and serious conflict to any given society. The sentimental feeling of either minority or majority would never help in nation building. Thus, with good citizenship and worship, we shall build a prosperous nation and live as a developing nation. Society, can only develop when there is peaceful co-existence and due regard in our social interactions.

**6.4. Political Manipulation:** This is another cause of ethno-religious crisis in Nigeria. It has always been the case that whenever politics is involved in Nigeria, people are swayed either by religious or ethnic sentiments. This has also resulted in loss of lives and property. Politicians have always used such divide and rule mentality to lure gullible citizens along religious and ethnic lines.

Other factors are: poverty, unemployment, influences of international extremists, shallow media coverage, among others which have contributed to the promotion of singularity of identities with the attendant consequences on diversity and multi-cultural outlook of individual and collective identities in the country. All of these impacts negatively on the tolerance level of Nigerians of diverse religions and ethnicity.<sup>22</sup>

#### **7.0. Christian Religion and its Importance in Fostering National Integration**

The crux of this research is to point out the key role Christian Religion must play to bring about national integration. The discussion so far has tried to expose the different dimensions of the problems we face as a nation. Conversely, it has been shown that religion and ethnicity have contributed to this problem. How then can we talk about bringing solutions through Christian Religion? Why Christian Religion?

The first thing we have to consider is the fact that Christian Religion has stood the test of time for at least 2,000 years. Learning from her long years of experience will not only assure integration but foster peace. In this long period, it has witnessed persecutions and schisms many a time. This long period has also helped in shaping its tradition and principles. The Christian Religion also boasts of being a living example of unity in diversity.<sup>23</sup> Although the Christian Religion started in a given

culture and tradition, it has traversed the entire world without losing its mission and purpose. It has been able to accommodate all ethnic groups in their varied cultures and languages.

The Christian Religion shows and proves to the world that there is possibility of peace even in our diversity and differences. This does not suggest in any way that there were no patches of conflicts and dichotomy. However, Christian Religion has been able to soar above these challenges. Therefore, for religion and ethnicity to promote national integration, the popular misconception that “religion cannot bring unity should be erased”. In realizing the integrative effort of human beings in ensuring national integration, Okwueze affirms that “the agencies of ethnicity and religion must work in close and harmonious co-operation”<sup>24</sup>. This is only attainable in a situation where peaceful co-existence is attained.

### **8.0. Recommendations from Christian Religious Principles for National Integration**

The heart of this research paper is to show how religion and ethnicity can contribute to national integration in the light of Christian Religion. Following our discussion so far, one could ask if there is something different that Christian Religion could bring to aid national integration since religion as a whole has contributed to national disintegration. However, our discussion here will show that within Christian Religion lies the very lasting solution to Nigerian problem.

As already mentioned, religious ethics are the principles that guide religions and set the standards for what is and isn't acceptable behaviour. These principles if applied in our pursuit for national integration will not only guarantee its realisation but also chart a better course for harmony and unity among the numerous ethnic groups in the nation. For Nigeria's national integration therefore, this paper recommends the following Christian Religious principles:

**I. Common Good:** The Catechism of the Catholic Church has this to say about the responsibility of the government in maintaining common good. “To ensure the common good, the government of each country has the specific duty to harmonize the different sectoral interests with the requirements of justice.”<sup>25</sup>. Fanaticism in religion must be minimized in order to pave way for redesigning the Nigerian society. This responsibility extends to every citizen of

the country. Pope Pius XI made this clear also in his encyclical, *Quadragesimo Anno*, when he says that “everyone also has the right to enjoy the conditions of social life that are brought about by the quest for the common good.”<sup>26</sup>

**II. Dialogue:** Man is created in the image of God. So if we are not able to treat as brother or sister any other human being, we will not be able to address God as the Father of all. The relationship that man has towards God and other human beings is inseparable as the scripture testifies (1Jn 4:8). The Church also condemns showing discrimination on the basis of caste, religion, colour, and the standard of life. She asks Christians to establish a friendly relationship with people of other religions (1Pet 2:22). They should try to live in peace with every person. It is only then will the Christians really become the children of the heavenly Father<sup>27</sup>. Leaders should strengthen existing policies that promote tolerance of other people’s culture especially through dialogue.

**III. Respect for the Dignity of the human person:** The basis for all that the Church believes about the moral dimensions of economic life is its vision of the transcendent worth -- the sacredness -- of human beings. The dignity of the human person, realized in community with others, is the criterion against which all aspects of economic life must be measured.

All human beings, therefore, are ends to be served by the institutions that make up the economy, not means to be exploited for more narrowly defined goals. Human personhood must be respected with a reverence that is religious. When we deal with each other, we should do so with the sense of awe that arises in the presence of something holy and sacred. For that is what human beings are: we are created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27).<sup>28</sup>

**IV. Rights and Responsibilities:** Every person has a fundamental right to life and to the necessities of life. In addition, every human person has the right to what is required to live a full and decent life, things such as employment, health care, and education.

The Church supports private property and teaches that “every man has by nature the right to possess property as his own.” The right to private property is not absolute, however, and is limited by the concept of the social mortgage. It is theoretically moral and just for its members to destroy property used in an evil way by others, or for the state to redistribute wealth from those who have unjustly

hoarded it.

**V. Preferential option for the Poor and the Vulnerable:** Jesus taught that on the Day of Judgement God will ask what each of us did to help the poor and needy: "Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me."

Through our words, prayers and deeds we must show solidarity with, and compassion for, the poor. When instituting public policy we must always keep the "preferential option for the poor" at the forefront of our minds. The moral test of any society is how it treats its most vulnerable members. The poor have the most urgent moral claim on the conscience of the nation. We are called to look at public policy decisions in terms of how they affect the poor.

**VI. Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers:** Society must pursue economic justice and the economy must serve people, not the other way round. Workers have a right to work, to earn a living wage, and to form trade union to protect their interests. All workers have a right to productive work, to decent and fair wages, and to safe working conditions.

Workers must fully and faithfully perform the work they have agreed to do, and employers must not look down upon their employees, but treat them with respect as persons ennobled by Christian character.

**VII. Solidarity:** Solidarity is a Christian virtue. It seeks to go beyond itself to total gratuity, forgiveness, and reconciliation. It leads to a new vision of the unity of humankind, a reflection of God's triune intimate life. It is a unity that binds members of a group together.

All the peoples of the world belong to one human family. We must be our brother's keeper, though we may be separated by distance, language or culture. Jesus teaches that we must each love our neighbours as ourselves and in the parable of the Good Samaritan we see that our compassion should extend to all people.

**VIII. Subsidiarity:** Subsidiarity charts a course between the individualism and collectivism by locating the responsibilities and privileges of social life in the smallest unit of organization at which they will function. Larger social bodies, be they the state or otherwise, are permitted and required to intervene only when smaller ones cannot carry out the tasks themselves. Even in this

case, the intervention must be temporary and for the purpose of empowering the smaller social body to be able to carry out such functions on its own. Pope Pius XI explains this better when he puts it thus, “just as it is gravely wrong to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry and give it to the community, so also it is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations can do. For every social activity ought of its very nature to furnish help to the members of the body and never destroy and absorb them<sup>29</sup>.”

## **9.0 Conclusion**

This research has so far revealed that ethno-religious conflicts are inevitable in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society like Nigeria. It is not an over statement to state that ethno-religious conflicts retard national integration, soils social relations and destabilizes the economy of Nigeria nation. Ethno-religious bigotry in Nigeria has become a hinge of various forms of nationalism. The occurrences of ethnic and religious conflicts in Nigeria are alarming and require urgent and continued attention. The spate of ethno-religious crises in Nigeria since independence has produced a catalogue that resulted in an estimated loss of over three million lives and unquantifiable psychological and material damages. In fact, ethnicity and religion have affected negatively on the development of the nation in many ways namely: socially, politically, and economically. In order to proffer solution that brings peace and promote national integration, both religious and political leaders must begin to emphasise the need to embrace peace. The use of ethnicity, and religion should rather unite us as Nigerians in order to promote peace, peaceful co-existence and unity. Okwueze sees peace “as an enterprise of justice, peace results from that harmony built into human society by its divine founder and actualized by man as they thirst after ever-greater justice”<sup>30</sup>. We therefore conclude that following the principles laid down in this paper, the problem of ethno-religious crises will not only reduce but gradually die a natural death.

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