

MANIPULATION OF RELIGION IN NIGERIA: IMPLICATIONS ON SECURITY AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

The reality of religious practices in Nigeria has often triggered diverse reactions, and in many cases, some form of complexities that characterized religious interaction of adherents of the Abrahamic religions – Christianity and Islam in Nigeria. These adherents, in most times, have been overtly or covertly indoctrinated to view others as people heading toward the wrong path or people that are committed to spreading heretical teachings that negate their ‘absolute truth claim.’ Hence, the need to defend their religious ‘interest’ with every possible means arise. Therefore, this paper examines the implications of manipulation of religion on national security in Nigerian society. This work adopts the phenomenological research approach to understand religious manipulation in Nigeria better. The study discovered that Nigeria has continued to witness high-level inter and intra-religious conflicts occasioned by manipulation of religion. And such has resulted in insecurity which has and is still hindering Nigeria’s national development. This paper identified religious, political, and ethnic division and insecurity in Nigeria as consequences of manipulation or abuse of religion. This work presents that religion is a tool for societal development if properly handled, and religion can become helpful in addressing security challenges in Nigeria when proper religious education is secured.

Keywords: Development, Religion, Manipulation of Religion, Insecurity, Nigerian Peace

Introduction

Nigeria is regarded as the most populous nation in Africa, accounting for about one-sixth of the African population (Onmhawo 2011:28). The country is a multifaceted society with a varied plethora of opinions and views regarding the religious state of the people. Some have labelled it a secular state. This is so because Section 10, 1999 constitution of Nigeria, as amended in 2011 maintains that Nigeria will not adopt any religion or belief system as a state religion. Despite this constitutional provision, the reality of events in Nigeria today presents a picture that is at variance with the constitutional provisions on this matter. The religious demographic distribution of the country has made it possible also to have labelled it a multi-religious country by scholars (Imaekhai2010:171). This reality, no doubt, speaks of the fact that Nigeria houses different religious traditions but prominently the religions are traditional indigenous religions, Islam and Christianity. The arrangement here also reflects their growth sequence in Nigeria.

Idowu (1991) captures the conception of religion in contemporary society through the elements of Nigerian religious and cultural heritages that puzzle foreign investigators. As Idowu (1991:3) remarks that religion exists at all moments (morning, afternoon and evening) and stages (birth, childhood, adulthood, and death) of existence. It exists in the “innermost beings,” major and minor aspects of life, manifest in the mass media, social media, and peoples’ conversations at all levels. This position can be better understood within the context of what can be referred to as contemporary and everyday understanding of religion as it connects to the historicizing of religion (Bergunder, 2014: 255).

Defining religion has continued to remain a herculean task, especially for scholars of religion, and has also been a major work for scholars from the beginning, but without consensus results (Greil, 2009:135). This is so because there are diverse complexities that characterize different religious phenomena. Also, the concept ‘religion’ is a Western and an academic idea and construct involving changing perceptions that could hardly explain the complexity of Nigerian religiosity. The expression of religion as a variable separated from culture is not a suitable representation of the intrinsic and extrinsic attributes of religion in the Nigerian experience. Olupona (2021:46-47) affirms that African spirituality is holistic with belief system revolving and involving every area of human existence and remains inseparable from the mundane as it manifests in both the private and public spaces. He pontificated that the Western idea of religion acknowledges that there is disparity between religion and the secular or other societal variables such as culture and environment. However, Africans do not see, think, and acknowledge any existing disparity between religion and

everyday activities. In Africa, religion manifests in every aspect and space of human activities such as art, health, politics, marriage, and dress. Hence, the term religion is foreign to the Africans, making it difficult for them to align with the Western idea of religion.

Olupona further points out that African Traditional Religion is holistic but not a theocratic or totalitarian religion. Religion, in its totality is a phenomenon of ultimate concern and interest for human society. Religion in every society undoubtedly provides a template for moral, social, economic, psychological, and spiritual growth and development, leading to social, political, and economic transformation. However, this would be impossible if spirituality is not included in human religiosity, that is, obeying societal, divine, and religious rules and regulations. This is because human, societal, political, socio-economical, and technological development cannot be achieved through indiscipline and ungodliness. Religion is expected to assist people to possess and exhibit virtues and social justice in human relationships. It should encourage people to embrace harmonious relationships for a peaceful and well-secured society actively.

However, religion in contemporary society is used by some human beings as a tool for causing and spreading violence, deceit, terrorism and destruction of living and non-living beings. It is constantly accused for much exploitation and manipulation in Nigeria. People harm and kill one another by suppressing the truth, denying justice and equity, and the commodification and commercialisation of religious products. It is abused to create division, intolerance, fundamentalism, fanaticism, discrimination, violence, exclusivism, superiority and particularity, which are not the core value of religion. Based on the above background, this paper examines the implications of religious abuse on security in Nigerian society.

The Meaning and Purpose of Religion

It is uneasy to define religion in its holistic forms, but some scholars have attempted to define religion from different angles based on individual perceptions. In the words of (Zed, 2017), religion is defined as a sacred way of walking, but not a way one talks. Zeb focused on the practical aspect of religion rather than its abstract aspect. However, religion involves beliefs and practices or saying and doing. Emile Durkheim defines religion as “a unified system of beliefs and practices relating to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden, beliefs and practices which unite into a single moral community called a church—all those who adhere to them” (Alamu 2021:9-10). Durkheim described the functionality of religion and situated it within the institutionalised religion or Christianity; however, confining religion to the western religiosity makes the definition insufficient and cannot capture the oriental and primal religions.

The above reveals that religion has been defined segmentally or based on individuals' area of interest. Also, authors such as Aderibigbe (2016) and Alamu

(2021), amongst others, have presented various definitions of religion based on scholars' fields of interest and perspectives or approaches such as sociological, anthropological, psychological, and theological perspectives among others. The two authors cited religion to represent deeds individuals perform in his or her solitariness (Whitehead), attitude of human beings to sacred order in the society (Peter Berger), "the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world" (Karl Marx), "the awareness of an "awe" that instills a unique blend of fear and fascination of the divine" (Rudolf Otto), faith in Spirit Being(s) (Edward Taylor), "the phantasies of an infantile life, and the return of the repressed" (Sigmund Freud). It could be stated that each scholar picked section(s) of religion known to him or her or prevalent in his or her society or society understudied. Hence, religion becomes what human beings call it.

Religion is an institutionalised set of doctrines that mostly relate to the belief in and veneration of a powerful force, such as divinity, a supernatural being, or a living Being, who ordered, controlled, organised and maintained the universe. As stated earlier, religion means different things to different people; for instance, western understanding of religion is quite different from African understanding of religion. Religion is both a private and public phenomenon in Africa, while it is a private variable in the Western world. Also, in the Asian world, there are religions such as Taoism, Confucianism, Shintoism, and Buddhism without the concept of God as it is well pronounced in African religiosity. In every society, religion involves cultural patterns, sacred places, revelations, morals, trances, philosophy, symbols, and sacred texts loaded with meanings and teachings to direct adherents and useful during rituals, prayers, sermons, meditation, and festivals.

Religion in the individual or private space plays crucial role in shaping and improving individual's life, thinking process, experiences, health, and well-being. In addition, studies revealed that religion through its scriptural instructions assists people develop positive healthy culture, good behaviours, and morals (Aldwin 2014:15). Religion, as a social variable, functions at every level of human existence in Nigeria. It should be said that the foundational and fundamental purpose of the existence of religion is positive. This study observed that religion is a channel through which Nigerians are comforted during hard economic and provided guidance during pandemic, gave a template for moral uprightness and sense of belonging. Nigerians often turn to religion to confront mental, social, political, economic, and family issues. The question is not about whether could be used to solve or has solved these issues, but it is a matter of noting that religion exists to give answers to fundamental questions arising from human existence on earth and about the hereafter.

Religion also encourages people to become advocates of equality, discipline, patience, morality, social justice, equity, freedom, selflessness and diversity in the society. It serves as a means of orientating, re-orientating, and emancipating people from ignorance and mediocrity. Religion is expected to be a binding force that unifies people through the principle of diversity. It was said by religious scholars such as Dopamu that God, who is at the centre of religion in Nigeria, “loves variety and hates monotony” (Alamu 2010:1). This assertion affirms the existence of the theology of diversity in purpose for the existence of religion regardless of the prevalence of religious particularity and exclusivism in Nigeria. Religious diversity is also evident in the statement of E.J Sharpe that one who knows only one religion does not know religion deeply as he or she supposed to know (Alamu 2010). Hence, the theology of diversity paves way for religious knowledge and understanding in the society. Furthermore, religion served as a conscience-strengthening and motivating phenomenon used to checkmate materialism, discrimination, inequality, poverty, and injustice, encourage unity and concord, and make people think and act constructively in society. It discourages dissension, social unrest, violence, unhealthy competition and strife, and the absence of this will pave way for social, economic, and political growth and development and harmonious relationships in the society. Religion fosters communalism in human society; that is, everyone must seek the common good of the society.

Religion provides the template to combat greed, hate, ignorance, and injustice, but human beings control and dictate the tune of religion, and the implementation of the various religious instructions also rest on the shoulder of human beings. The discussions so far about what the true meaning of religion could mean bring to the fore some of the positions and reflections of some of these scholars as to what they think, observe, or interpret as to mean religious experience around them. While scholars find it difficult to come to term with a universally accepted definition, it is also important to focus our attention on the fact that:

If we asked just some rephrased questions, we would no longer be concerned with simply describing religions and their effects, searching for a better way of conceptualizing religion, or correcting the lamentable misconceptions of so-called secular people and godless culture. Instead, we would proceed on the assumption that there is no proper conception that is sadly veiled (just what criteria would we ever use to distinguish conception from misconception?). We would begin in earnest the effort at re-describing and thus historicizing the “rules and recipes” that enable certain of us to classify various forms of human praxis *as* religious or spiritual or devotional or authentic, and the practical outcomes of such classifications (McCutcheon 2003: 9).

The argument of McCutcheon, as stated above, suggests that many scholars are putting much effort in trying to understand what religion could mean within the context of their 'subjective' mind, while others are making frantic efforts in framing it within the context of their preconceived mind. But more importantly is the understanding of the whole idea about religion, its understanding within any given specific milieu and how it reflects the specific experience of people within their ontological and epistemological settings.

Manipulation and Abuse of Religion and National Security in Nigeria

The realities of events in Nigeria since her independence in 1960, and majorly in the late 1970s clearly show the prevalence of religious influence in the public spheres. In most cases, this has continued to remain a bane to national development, especially when religion is not allowed to be practiced within an ideal context. When religion, as a social institution meant to promote social order, is being manipulated or abused, the consequential effects continue to hunt such society, ultimately debar sustainable development. Such is the case when discussing religion and religious practices in the Nigerian society, which is a multi-faith society. Research reveals that many factors are responsible for the seemingly unending cases of violence in Nigeria. These are but not limited to politics, ethnicity, and religion. However, it was gathered in the 2015 Annual Report that politics and religion were implicated as major drivers of violence in Nigeria (NSRP 2016).

Fundamentally, religious abuse is any form of violence, crisis, harassment, humiliation, discrimination, hatred, exploitation, and manipulation perpetrated under the name of religion, leading to the violent destruction of lives and properties, psychological trauma, economic loss, and insecurity among others. Also, it includes the misuse of religion or clerical position for selfish, material, and personal gain (Wright 2001:10). The term religious abuse speaks of psychological manipulation of religious teachings to inflict pain, suffering and to cheat people, create division and social unrest in the society. It is most often inflicted on adults and children suffering the negative impact of the abuse. The abuse is intentional and malicious (Wright 11). Religious violence and extremism cover all phenomena, spaces and times in which religion appear to be the reason for violent and social uproar (Wellman; Tokuno 2004:10). Religions, Islam, and Christianity in particular, are used as a vehicle for crisis, violence, conflict, deceit, manipulation, and destruction of humans and properties. It is widely identified as being responsible and criticised for many exploitations, divisions, intolerance, and manipulations in Nigeria (Utensati 2020:65).

In Nigeria, religion has been negatively used, and it has not effectively checked the materialistic nature of Nigerian society. It has even been diversely compromised by modifying its strict spiritual principles, and in several areas adopted materialism and adapted to the world's materialistic ideology. Such has

now led to the commodification of religion and religious experience in Nigeria. In most cases, the observable reality is that of unwholesome rivalry and competition among and between different religious communities. Thus, leading to ‘pastorpreneur-ship’ and ‘imampreneur-ship’ in Nigeria, and with a high level of materialistic concentration in their focus and planned religious programmes. Williams (1971:328) corroborates this fact by saying that the various religious abuses, crisis, and manipulations contribute to the political and economic problems of Nigeria, and the incessant religious abuses also make the problems to persist in Nigeria. To him, spiritual reasons underlie human’s current moral and socio-political degeneracy.

Nigeria has continued to witness high-level inter-and-intra religious conflicts, which frustrate development. However, the propensity and intensity of religious conflicts are particularly worrisome in Nigeria now. These conflicts are predominantly between Christians and Muslims with ethnic and political colouration. The crises are caused by ethnic, political, and economic related factors such as poverty, unemployment, land disputes, struggle for power, resource control, materialism and superiority. The outcome of the crisis has always been unpalatable as thousands of people had been killed, valuable properties being destroyed, and friends turning to enemies.

The rate of religious crisis in Nigeria is disheartening and very disturbing. Indeed, the level of atrocities being perpetuated has justified the claim of some scholars who argue that ‘religion is inherently violent’ (Apenda 2011:337). The recent of such violence was the clash between Christians and Muslims on Friday, February 4th, 2022, over the use of *hijab* in Kwara State, Nigeria which left many injured and disruption of the community. The most recent of the abuse of religion is the killing of Deborah Yakubu in Sokoto, a female student in Shehu Shagari College of Education, on 12th May 2022. She was allegedly killed for blaspheming Islam. Also, on 5th June 2022, unknown gunmen killed not less than fifty Christians in a Catholic Church in Owo during the Sunday service.

It was reported that Pastor Nuah Abraham of the Christ High Commission Ministry collected 310 000 naira from members as fees to the Kingdom of God (<https://rovingnaija.com/2022/05/09/pastor-who-asked-members>), and Pastor Josiah Peter Asumosa also deceitfully kidnapped 77 members of his church under the pretense of preparing them for rapture (<https://www.withinnigeria.com/news/2022/07/02/how-ondo-pastor>). The Boko Haram insurgency, now tagged as religious terrorism, is another form of religious manipulation which has given religion a bad name in Nigeria. And by extension, the avoidable incident sent dangerous signals to the already-charged religious atmosphere in Nigeria. Religious strife has displaced and rendered many people homeless, fatherless, and sending several to their early graves in Nigeria.

Religious fanaticism and unguarded religious enthusiasm are tools of abuse causing religious violence obstructing national security and development in contemporary Nigerian society. Religious fanatics display abnormal zeal, create upheaval as defend for their religions or God and consequently act as conveners of religious conflict in the Nigerian society (Balogun 1988:23). The adherents of Islam and Christianity have demonstrated intolerance triggered by fanaticism and the end products are violent demonstrations, killings of human being and destruction of properties. Aggressive evangelism and coercive attempts at converting and propagating the gospel at the expense of another in a multi-religious entity like Nigeria is another form of religious abuse bedevilling the country. This occurs when a sect or religious specialist sets out to propagate and convert people of other religion whom they consider heathens, pagans, unsaved or uncivilized.

Religious abuse revolves around psychological abuse, emotional abuse, sexual immorality, and acts that diminish human dignity. The act of intimidating members and propelling them to submit to a religious leader with no right to dissenting is an abuse of religion and religious right of people. Irrational control of a person's fundamental right to use his or her free will in religious and secular matters. Repeated criticism and false accusations by labelling people as rebellious, disobedient, faithless, demonized as an enemy of a particular religious group, disenfranchisement, and separation from people due to religious beliefs, esotericism, enforced religious practices, financial exploitation and enslavement of adherents are all different forms of religious abuse in contemporary Nigerian society.

Lambert (1996) defines religious abuse as psychological and religious enslavement. He identified five features of a leader who often abuses religion in society:

- i. **Authority and Power:** This involves religious leaders that arrogate too much power to themselves. In this instance, the religious organisations led by these leaders will lack accountability, and members will always be naïve and fearful, irrationally submissive, and unable to challenge the existing order of the groups.
- ii. **Manipulation and Control:** This second attribute describes how abusive religious organisations operate. Such group leaders input fear, uses threat to make members feel guilty, and obey them and conform to their strict and dogmatic rules without asking questions. Religious leaders with this attribute take total control, always demand members' absolute support and loyalty, make decisions for members, and pay little or no attention to the right of members.

- iii. Elitism and Persecution: The groups showcase themselves as being unique with tendency of isolation and schism from other groups. Furthermore, they are independent of other groups and lack necessary mechanisms that give way for internal and external correction and criticism.
- iv. Lifestyle and Experience: The behavioural pattern of the groups is rigid, and members must rigidly adhere to the ideals of the organisation.
- v. Dissent and Discipline: This kind of organisation has effective pattern of suppressing any form of opposition from members and non-members.

It remains clear that certain criteria that characterize religious abuse comprise intimidation, anger, pride, charisma, fraud, greed, immorality, authoritarian enslaving structure, exclusivity, demanding absolute loyalty, honour and respect. The questions arising are: Does Muslim and Christian teachings support or encourage members to engage in violence, killing, and terrorism? What is the teaching of Muslim and Christian on love, intolerance, and hatred? Are there examples of religious killing or instruction to kill in the Qur'an and Bible, or done by Prophet Mohammed and Jesus Christ?

The Implications of Manipulation of Religion on National Security in Nigeria

The discussions so far can be seen as a major survey of how religion has been grossly abused and manipulated either overtly or covertly in the Nigerian society. This manipulation, as pointed out is not limited to religious leaders but also involves religious adherents arising from religious indoctrination in most cases. As a matter of fact, the menace of religious abuse has devastating and negative impact on national security in Nigeria. The destruction that religious abuse and manipulation caused the nation cannot be overemphasized. The incessant clashes erupted due to the abuse of religions always resulted in untold hardship, and innocent people are the victims of such abuse. In the last three decades, the violence has made many Nigerians homeless and refugees, especially in the North-Eastern part of Nigeria (Egwu 2001:32).

Religion was supposed to be a contributing factor to national security and development in Nigeria was manipulated to wreak destruction on Nigerians. Also, the abuse of religion further advanced the existing division, suspiciousness, and discrimination among religions in Nigeria. Religious abuse and disturbance victims frequently have psychological trauma that cannot be easily forgotten. Religious abuse, such as religious terrorism dents Nigeria's image internationally. The frequent spurring of religious abuse and its attendant effects has caused advanced countries to tag Nigeria as unsafe nation and to warn their citizens against travelling to Nigeria because of religious terrorism and banditry in the

nation (Sulaiman 2016:35). For example, as of 2003, the American State Department stated the dangers of travelling to Nigeria to the Americans (Abubakar 2003:6; Sulaiman & Ojo 2013:37). Also, in 2004, the United States of America and Britain advised their citizens to desist from travelling to Nigeria due to the religious tension between Muslims and Christians, and Boko Haram terrorism operations in Nigeria. (Egua & Makinde 2004:6; Avalos 2005:32). This does not speak well of Nigeria, hence the need for an absolute understanding of religious tenets to promote peace and create a well-secured country for national development. Also, this culture of religious abuse, manipulation and insincerity of some Nigerians has caused citizens of other nations to develop attitude of mistrust for Nigerians. Nigerians alone are subjected to thorough screening and checking in the airport.

Religious abuse gives rise to economic losses. The country is losing opportunities for economic development owing to the menace of religious terrorism, crisis, exploitation, and rivalry. It should be stated that Nigerians are also suspicious of one another. In 1984, for instance, some Nigerians kicked against the 2.5-billion-naira Saudi Arabia's interest-free loan because they were suspecting that Nigeria government then wanted to Islamise Nigeria by joining the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) (Ojie 2004:12). Countries such as Cameroon, Guinea Bissau, Gabon, Uganda, Sierra Leone, and Burkina Faso collected the loan and were not Islamised or became Islam States.

Concluding Remarks

A critical reflection on the discussions so far about manipulation and abuse of religion in Nigeria shows how such has continued to become a bane to sustainable development and a major factor responsible for some of the cases of insecurity being witnessed and still experiencing in Nigeria. Going by the aim of this work in assessing the implications of manipulation or abuse of religion in Nigeria, it becomes clearer in this work that othering of other people's religion especially in Nigeria are in some cases done deliberately, while in other cases are usually unintended. Moreover, in most cases, religious leaders are often instrumental to some of these manipulations. They often engage in religious polemics which are the seeds that often produce mutual distrust, mistrust, and suspicion.

The series of religious manipulation or abuse in contemporary Nigeria revolves around an unending quest for materialism, commercialization of religious activities, religious conflicts, exploitation, breakdown of law and order, disunity, injustice, moral decadence and bankruptcy, insecurity, political intolerance, and increased economic losses. The religious clashes which are products of religious abuse have inflicted serious hardship on individuals and the government. Apart from undermining national security and stability of the nation, manipulation of

religion tarnishes the image of Nigeria among the comity of nation. This study concluded that qualitative religious education, knowledge and exposure, sincere religious dialogue, and religious understanding should be used as panacea for religious violence and abuses in Nigeria. This will ensure national security in Nigeria and peaceful co-existence among adherents of religions. In conclusion, this paper recommends that:

- i. There should be enlightenment to showcase that the attempt by one religion to impose its tenets on another will continue to be resisted by at least a segment of the people.
- ii. Moral uprightness of religious adherents could showcase their integrity to attract people who are tired of the hypocrisy found in any religion. However, it is important to emphasise the need for most adherents to acquire Western education, which could help them to demystify all the gimmicks employed by leaders to abuse religion to their detriment.
- iii. To curb the feelings of one religion having a better lot over another, inquiries should be made about the place of origin of the two dominant religions in Nigeria, the first practitioner of the religion, and the primitive stage of the religion. Findings may show similarities to unite rather than differences that divide the adherents; it may equally show some cover-ups coupled with the fact that nearly all religions have gone through a transformation at various stages.
- iv. The future of religion in Nigeria, therefore, relies heavily on the knowledge of the general nature of religion. Knowing that every religion believes the supernatural being that is worshipped is real and that each of the religions of the world is acting according to its belief. The fact that one is performed by an Arabian, European, African, or Nigerian people has neither made one superior nor inferior to another.
- v. Religious fanaticism is the product of ethnocentricity and narrow-mindedness, which prevent a fanatic from seeing that there is no essential difference between what he is doing and what the other person is doing, no essential difference between his religion and that of the other person (Omogbe 2006:10). He ridicules the religion of the other person and calls it derogatory names. Blindfolded by ethnocentricity, fundamentalism, and superiority, he thinks that his own beliefs are the “true” beliefs and his religion the “true” religion (Omogbe 2006:11). To hope for the positive use of religion in Nigeria, all voices should be encouraged to join that of Omogbe to denounce this Asian Minor’s exclusivism.
- vi. We implore the Government of Nigeria, both at the Local, State and Federal levels to steer clear of every religious activity. Religious holidays should be scrapped totally to give room for peace. If the government refuses to aid any religion above the other but allows all

religions to be limited to the home, heart, and houses of worship of the deities of adherents, all religions will thrive equally without one having an edge over another.

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