

RELIGION AND PEACEFUL CO-EXISTENCE IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN SOCIETY

John Clerk KOKO

Area of Specialization: Philosophy of Religion

Lecturer: Department of Religious and Cultural Studies

Faculty of Humanities

Rivers State University.

08037101793

Email: johnclerk1@yahoo.com

Abstract

Religion can serve as an instrument for development and peaceful co-existence on the one hand, and on the other hand, serve as a tool for violence and disunity depending on its deployment and context. Unfortunately, Nigerian society appears to be manifesting the latter part of this cliché. Although efforts are being made by the government, scholars, and other stakeholders to promote peaceful co-existence from independence till date but this goal has not been achieved. The current spate of insecurity resulting from activities of Boko-Haram, ISWAP, bandits, IPOB among others has compounded the issue and diminished the hope of achieving peaceful co-existence. This paper, therefore, examines the role that religion has and can play in promoting peaceful co-existence in Nigeria using the discursive and historical approaches. The paper argues that the link between religion and peaceful co-existence is such that where the former is abused, the latter becomes impossible and vice versa. Hence, it identified some abuses of religion in Nigeria that are inimical to peaceful co-existence among religious confessors. The paper also identifies three main paradigms that have emerged in the quest to address peaceful co-existence namely: public-private dichotomy, public-private non-dichotomy and integrative paradigms. Overall, it recommends that the Nigerian National Assembly should make laws that can promote the principles of religious pluralism, give room for representation of each of the major religions in governance structure at all tiers of government and mandate future Nigerian Presidents to clearly publish their strategic religious security policy before assuming office. The paper concludes that unless the role of religion is brought to bear in the quest for peaceful co-existence in Nigeria, insecurity and disunity will remain.

Keywords: Religion, role, insecurity, peaceful co-existence, Nigerian society.

Introduction

Peaceful co-existence amongst citizens is one of the top priorities of every nation in the world. This is because national security, economic prosperity and overall development of a nation depend largely on it. However, the goal of achieving peaceful co-existence amongst citizens in any nation can prove to be very difficult

especially if the role religion plays in the lives of citizens is often either undermined or overamplified. Nigeria is one of the nations in which the role of religion has often been either grossly undermined or unnecessarily overamplified. Hence, it is commonplace for citizens and government to abuse the principle of religious pluralism in the country. Unfortunately, over the years, this has created high-level suspicion amongst religious adherents and in worst situations resulted in intense religious violence that have claimed lives and properties, thereby making peaceful co-existence more difficult to attain. Although several efforts have been made by citizens and successive governments towards attaining peaceful co-existence, not much has been achieved in respect of this. Sadly, with the current spate of insecurity arising from religious terrorists' sects such as Boko-Haram and ISWAP, the hope for peaceful-co-existence has further diminished. Therefore, the paper examines the role that religion has and can play in either preventing or promoting peaceful co-existence in Nigeria. The paper relies heavily on data gathered through literature review and personal observation while discursive and historical approaches are used in the entire discussion. It is the thrust of this paper that there is a nexus between religion and peaceful co-existence and this understanding can enhance efforts in promoting the latter. Also, for purpose of clarity, the paper is divided into four main sections. Section one delves into conceptual meanings of the terms: religion and peaceful co-existence. Section two discusses the paradigms for dealing with religion and peaceful co-existence. In section three, issues pertaining to abuses of religion and their attendant conflicts in Nigeria are discussed while the last section examines some strategic steps that should be taken seriously in national discourse in Nigeria to address the impact of religion on peaceful co-existence.

Conceptual Meaning of the Terms: Religion and Peaceful Co-existence

Koko (2020) has argued that concepts can easily be misconstrued if their contexts are not clearly defined. Thus, it is appropriate to begin the paper by providing conceptual clarifications of the main variables of the paper, namely religion and peaceful co-existence.

Religion The term "religion" has no single definition that is universally accepted as Chineke (2016) had observed. Fraser and Moore (2019) have argued that this lack of consensus among scholars on the definition of religion is due to the fact that religion functions in dynamic ways. Accordingly, two strands of definitions have emerged, namely: substantive and functional definitions. Generally, those who hold on to the substantive dimension of religion conceive religion simply as a system of beliefs, symbols and practices that tend to provide understanding of the world in which we live. For example, Sibani (2020), Barkan (2012) and Okujaku (2006) conceived religion simply as a transcending system of various beliefs and practices which help a society, group or individuals to understand the meaning and purpose of life. Moreover, Iyer (2016) observed that the substantive definitions of religion attempt to investigate it as a system of beliefs or as a philosophy with a

view to understanding the world. This conception is also common with Durkheim (1912) who conceived religion as a unified system of beliefs and practices pertaining to sacred things, where “sacred things” are taken to mean things set aside and considered forbidden such as: beliefs and moral practices which unite into one single moral community. Similarly, Radhakrishnan (1928:25) has noted that “religion is an expression of the spiritual experience of a race, a record of its social evolution, and an integral element of the society in which it is found”. Hence, religion, from its substantive conception, is connected to beliefs and practices that are accepted by religious individuals and religious communities, as a guide to human life and purpose on the one hand and society on the other hand. The functional definitions of religion focus attention on what religion does for people in terms of its role in their lives or supporting them either socially or psychologically, as Iyer (2016:398) observed. For example, Glock and Stark (1965:4) have argued that religion has to do with an institutionalised system of symbols, beliefs, values and practices which relate to questions of ultimate meaning. Also, Durkheim, cited by Barkan (2012:5), has outlined some roles of religion namely: “that religion gives meaning and purpose to life; reinforces unity and stability; is an agent of social control and thus strengthens social order; provides greater psychological and physical well-being; and motivate people to work for positive social change”.

However, some scholars think that religion should be seen as playing a “double-edged sword” role in the sense that it could inspire violence and at times promote social harmony (Ekanem and Ekefre, 2013 and Chineke 2016). A similar view of religion was given by Yihua (2013) who bluntly described it as both a “spoiler” and a “builder”. The implication of the above definitions is that religion plays a major role in the lives of individuals and the society. Given the above therefore, Koko (2020) has conceived religion as an integral human experience which plays both substantive and functional roles not only in the lives of the individuals but also in all that happens in the human society. This includes the role of providing citizens with the motivation to promote peaceful co-existence which is the main concern of this paper.

Peaceful Co-existence

The phrase “peaceful co-existence” may mean different things to different persons depending on the context in which it is used. However, for purpose of clarity, it is safe to define the phrase by first and foremost understanding its independent constituents namely: peaceful and co-existence. Semantically, the term “peaceful” is coined from two English words: “peace” which connotes the absence of war or conflicts, and “full” which means abundance, maximum, total or complete. Literally, the word peaceful may translate as “peace-in-full”, “peace-in-abundance”, “total peace”, or “complete peace”. In this light, “peaceful” simply means “peace that is complete”. Notwithstanding, the New International Webster’s Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language (2010) has defined the term

peaceful as “exempt from war, riot, or commotion while peace in itself refers to the absence or cessation of disturbance, agitation, war, riot or violence; and a state of friendly relations. The implication of this definition is that the words “peaceful” and “peace” are two sides of the same coin and denote a situation in which there is no war, riot, conflict, violence or disturbance. However, approaching it from a behavioral sense, Joseph (2019) defined peace as a lack of conflict and freedom from fear of violence between individuals and heterogeneous social groups. What is new about Joseph’s view is that peace does not take place in a vacuum; instead, it occurs between individuals or social groups. Chukwu (2021) has explained that peace emanates from a person’s state of mind and that a person who lacks peace within himself or herself cannot relate peacefully with others. The importance of peace is well noted by Francis (2006), who described it as the prime value and most valuable public good in all human societies but often becomes elusive in our society. Algera (1989) is then perfectly to have expanded the scope of meaning of peace to include the prevention of all structural and social inequalities. It is important to note that while Algera’s explanation is true of the situation in Nigeria, in this paper, the term “peace” is used in a limited sense to refer strictly to mean the absence of violence, riots, conflicts, insecurity, and disagreements arising from religious differences.

Similar to peace, the word “co-existence”, according to the New International Webster’s Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language (2010), is the noun form of the verb “co-exist”, which carries the idea to exist together in the same place or at the same time. Consequently, “co-existence” refers to the state of simultaneous existence of two or more societies, nations, peoples, etc., which differ in ideology but which agree, often implicitly to non-interference in each other’s political affairs. The problem with this definition is that it attempts to limit the scope of co-existence to political affairs, whereas peoples, nations, or societies which differ in ideology can also agree tacitly to non-interference in each other’s religious affairs.

Hence, it is safe to define “co-existence” in this context, as a situation in which diverse religious groups, irrespective of their distinct religious doctrines and practices agree to live together in the same place, nation or society. Against this backdrop, a synthesis of the two words: “peaceful” and “co-existence” according to Chukwu (2021) would therefore mean a situation whereby all members of a given society live in harmony, love, mutual respect and tolerance, irrespective of their differences in terms of religion, tribe, language or special status. The paper adopts Chukwu’s definition of the term “peaceful co-existence” with a proviso that the supposed members of a given society as it were can only live in harmony, love, mutual respect, etc. if they consciously promote certain indispensable principles that are required in a diverse society. This implies that peaceful co-existence does not take place in a vacuum; instead, it takes place where certain indispensable principles of dealing with religion, especially religious pluralism are taken into

cognizance. It is important to note that as a state, Nigeria is a religiously pluralistic society, consisting of three constitutionally recognised religions and other religions with limited number of adherents compared to the three dominant ones. This form of religious configuration requires that proper attention should be given to the practice and manifestation of religion at the public space. Regrettably, this is not the case as there are evidence of abuses of religion that often snowball into inter-religious crisis, thereby making peaceful co-existence difficult to achieve in Nigeria. In the next section, theories underlying the thought patterns about the relationship between religion and peaceful co-existence would be discussed.

Theoretical Underpinnings of the Nexus between Religion and Peaceful Co-existence

Theories pertaining to the nexus between religion and peaceful co-existence are not new in academia. However, for this paper, it is safe to categorise the various scholarly perspectives into three compelling paradigms namely: public-private dichotomy, public-private non-dichotomy, and integrative paradigms.

Public-Private Dichotomy Paradigm

The first view that seeks to conceptualise the nexus between religion and peaceful co-existence attempts to privatise religion for the purpose of promoting peace and national security. For the purpose of this discussion, it is safe to term this paradigm as “public-private dichotomy paradigm”. In expounding this view, John Rawls (1993; 1997; 1999) for example argued that citizens in a society of conflicting religious, moral and philosophical ideologies must treat their fellow citizens simply as citizens without recourse to religion, bearing in mind that individuals are free to hold on to what they consider as valuable and important. But while this is so, they must conduct their daily affairs within the purview of what he terms “public reason”. Such reason is considered public for three main reasons: one, because all free and equal citizens hold in common; two, because it is primarily concerned about political justice; third, because it meets the principle of mutuality, i.e., the belief that the reasons we would offer for our political actions are sufficient and reasonable not only to us but also to others. Also, public reason neither attacks nor imposes religious doctrines on others. Public reason applies to the discourse of judges especially of a supreme court; discourse of government officials, especially chief executives and legislators; and discourse of public officers and their campaign managers, especially in their public oratory, party platforms, and political statements. Citizens must also heed to public reason when exercising their civic responsibility, especially during voting (Rawls, 1997:767-768). However, they are not bound by it if they are involved in other private activities such as religious worship, research, or performing on stage (Rawls, 1993:13-14). Therefore, for Rawls, religious ideologies should not be introduced in the public space at all; instead, citizens should simply treat themselves as citizens without recourse to religious affiliations when relating with one another in the public domain. However, they are free to hold on to their religious ideologies at the private

sphere. The most important goal of Rawls' theory, as it were, is to promote a religiously pluralistic society in which citizens are undifferentiated when it concerns issues of the public space. This theory has wielded strong influence in the policies of governments of nations like the U.S, UK, France, and the Netherlands, among others.

Public-Private Non-Dichotomy Paradigm

Contrary to the first view, a second paradigm, which holds that social and democratic order is impossible without religious faith in the public space has also emerged. For clarity, it is appropriate to classify this as "public-private non-dichotomy paradigm". For example, Neuhaus (1984) has argued that the attempt to expunge religion from the public space may rather create public persons that are anonymous and irrational and who only define justice behind a "veil of ignorance". This position gains strength in Newbigin (1986) who argued that the dichotomy between public and private spheres with respect to religious practices is inimical to public morality. In this light, the hypothesis for an empty shrine is conceived as an ideological stand that is completely misleading. In fact, this explains why Eliade (1959) likened such a dichotomy to that between cosmos and chaos. This is so because it is believed that religion plays significant roles in promoting order and peace in any given society and as such should not be expunged from public life. A stronger position is even projected by Tocqueville (2004), who unapologetically argued that social and democratic order is impossible in a religiously pluralistic society without reference to religious faith. Therefore, the introduction of religious ideologies, whether in the private or public domain, should be encouraged because religion is the basis of morality. This view also gains support in Habermas (2003; 2006), who reverberated that religion plays a vital role in the public space and as such secularism is not a sufficient condition to guarantee equal religious freedom for everybody. But the question is how should the problems resulting from religious hegemony be addressed if it is allowed to play a role? The next paradigm appears to address this question.

Integrative Paradigm

Integrative paradigm is a French model that attempts to respond to the issue of religion and peaceful co-existence within a religiously pluralistic context. For example, Caeiro (2016) has observed that in France apart from the deployment of "secularism as a domestic security instrument" and "Islam as unified exceptional force", a third operational belief on religion that may be referred to as "integrative paradigm" has also been adopted. This integrative paradigm, according to Caeiro (2016), dates back to the establishment of the Gallican Church (1682-790), and maintains that the best way to neutralise the destructive force of religions is through an official state recognition of organised religions, which are closely regulated and required to select a single privileged interlocutor from each religion to represent them vis-à-vis the state. This has been found to be influential in formulating French counterterrorism policy over the years. This, as Mode (2019) observed, explains

why in a nation like the United States, there is increasing recognition of this nexus between religion and national security as evident in the development of language in national security strategy, statements, activities, and emerging academic research. Similarly, Bar-Moaz (2020) argued that Israel's decision-makers incorporated thinking about religion into its national security doctrine from the very inception of the state in 1948. It is important to state that if other nations have incorporated religion into their national security strategies, then it means that religion plays a significant role in engendering peaceful co-existence. Therefore, Nigeria can borrow a leaf from it.

Abuse of the Practice of Religion in Nigeria

There is no doubt that the 1999 Constitution, Section 38(1), expressly guarantees the right to practise one's religion whether in public or private. In exercising this constitutional right, individuals often practise their religion to the extent that indications of the abuse of religion are evident. Acts that can be tagged as abuse of the practice of religion are common among Nigerians, irrespective of status. As such, there have been series of abuses of the practice of religion by many Nigerians – public office holders, market men and women, business men and even academics. There is no doubt that abuses of religion are inimical to promoting peaceful co-existence. The paper will briefly present an overview of such abuse of religion using some examples.

One noticeable manifestation of abuses of freedom of religion is the frequent blockade of public roads and highways by Muslims and Christians during worship services or conferences as Ehigiator & Akinbaani (2002) and Sampson (2012) have observed. Unfortunately, the blockade on roads and highways can potentially generate inter-religious crisis. For example, the violent inter-religious crisis of September 10, 2001 in Jos was the aftermath of a road blockade by Muslims during Jum'at prayers (Adebayo 2002; Sampson 2012).

This could have been averted if religious practices were not allowed to override citizens' public right. There are also similar blockades from Christian and traditional gatherings such as the annual blockade of Lagos-Ibadan Expressway by the Redeemed Christian Church of God and traditional restrictions on peoples' movement in Oyo during New Alaafin Coronation, etc. Regrettably, the story is not different in market places, universities and business environments. In fact, it is commonplace to see businessmen and market women in Nigeria carry out full-blown religious worship services during business and market hours. In most cases, such open-air worship services are carried out using loud public address systems without considering the feelings and rights of other religious adherents as Sampson (2012) has again observed. Undoubtedly, such practices have the potential to steer up violent inter-religious conflicts. Another inter-religious crisis occurred on the 6th of March, 1987 in Kaduna State between Muslims and Christians on the campus of the College of Education, Kafanchan, following an open-air crusade of

one Rev. Abubakar Bako. This resulted in the death of over twenty-five persons, with churches and mosques burnt and several other victims hospitalised (Koko, 2017). Similar inter-religious crises occurred in 1985 and 1986 in the University of Ibadan, Oyo State, following controversies over the Chapel of Resurrection, the erected cross, the mosque and an annual interdenominational crusade called “Explo 85”. Many lives were lost in these crises and property worth millions was destroyed (Koko, 2017).

Regrettably, the situation could have been avoided if the principles of religious pluralism had been strictly adhered to. Surprisingly, the situation has not fared better among academics, who would be presumed to realise the need to prevent and protect Nigeria’s public space from the invasion of religious activities. Instead, academics consciously or unconsciously promote this invasion of the public space with their religious activities as well. For example, it is commonplace for some academics in Nigeria to start academic conferences and other related activities with religious prayers, which in most cases would favour a particular religion over others, depending on which divide the coordinators or organisers of such academic or formal activities belong. This does not in any way imply that prayers should not be said in the public domain. Arguably, there is nothing wrong in starting academic conferences, faculty and departmental meetings and other academic fora with prayers. Certainly, public prayers should be encouraged as much as possible especially if all religious groups present in such academic gatherings are given equal recognition to offer prayers. Moreover, the fact that religious people have a right to pray whenever and wherever they want should make the issue of no consequence. But this is not always the case because experience has shown that religious prayers during academic conferences, faculty, departmental and other academic fora in Nigeria, are usually discriminatory, tilting towards favouring either Christians or Muslims depending on which religion constitutes majority at the instance of such academic gatherings. Other religious groups in Africa – Traditional Religionists, Hinduists, Buddhists, and even atheists have always been relegated to the background. This is a serious violation of the basic principles of religious pluralism which place maximum priority on equal recognition, neutrality, and respect for other religions. The danger is that lack of attention to principles that underlie religious pluralism can polarise Nigerians along religious lines and further aggravate the already existing tensions in the country. Where this happens, religious conflicts would be inevitable thereby making national cohesion, consensus, peace and stability difficult to achieve. This is inappropriate for a country like Nigeria, that is already suffocating from numerous security challenges. In the next section, some strategic recommendations that could engender peaceful co-existence would be made.

Strategic Recommendations for Peaceful Co-existence in Nigeria

The quest for peaceful co-existence requires conscious efforts at providing remedy to innumerable cases of abuse of freedom of religion, few of which were cited

above. In pursuance of this, the paper proposes strategies that could be taken to address these abuses with a view to promoting peaceful co-existence in Nigeria. The first strategy is what Koko (2020:41) fittingly termed ‘responsible religious pluralism.’ This refers to a scenario in which religious practices within a multi-religious state are not allowed to override public order, collective interest and individuals’ human rights and freedom. In other words, in the context of responsible religious pluralism, religious people, businessmen and women, academics and public officials, adhere strictly, in the exercise of their religious freedom, to the principles of neutrality, equal recognition of all religions, respect for public order, collective interest and individuals’ human rights and freedom. It is crucial to note that responsible religious pluralism neither subscribes to irresponsible and discriminatory religious practices nor tilts towards absolute secularists’ tendencies.

The second strategy is for citizens to adopt the reciting of the national anthem and pledge in all political, academic and civil society gatherings. Certainly, as an alternative to the abuses associated with the practices of religion in Nigeria, recitation of the national anthem and pledge during public gatherings has become imperative. This is because the public domain of any nation ought not to be invaded for purpose of exercising our religious freedom. Therefore, one way to avoid this is to enact laws and make policies that can encourage citizens to adopt recitation of the Nigerian national anthem and pledge during public gatherings – academic, political and civic. A benefit of this is that it can spur national consensus, cohesion, consciousness, peace and stability.

Third, there is need for the National Assembly also to enact laws that would give room for representation of each of the constitutionally recognised religions at the state in all the three tiers of government. This implies the adoption of the integrative principle in Nigeria as a way of promoting peaceful co-existence. In pursuance of the above recommendations, there is the need for those in government to enforce the 1999 Constitution in a manner that would promote the basic tenets of religious pluralism namely: neutrality, equal recognition and respect for individual rights and liberty. It is crucial to note that beyond religion lies our humanness, which all individuals must endeavour to protect at all costs. Sadly, in Nigeria, religious activities have been allowed to override our humanness and this is not healthy for a nation in search of peaceful co-existence among her citizens. These strategic recommendations are crucial in contemplating possible models that can reposition the nation on the path of national unity, peace, stability and sustainable development.

Conclusion

In this paper, efforts have been made to draw a link between religion and peaceful co-existence in Nigeria. The paper argued that religion is a very fragile phenomenon that should be treated with caution in any given multi-religious

context, if peaceful co-existence must be achieved. This special treatment means that the basic principles of religious pluralism must be strictly adhered to in the practice of religion, especially with respect to what happens in the public domain. Also, citizens in such multi-religious contexts must place first and maximum priority on collective humanness and not on religious confessions in their relationship with one another. This has been the trend in nations like France, United States, United Kingdom, etc. Regrettably, the Nigerian experience has shown that these basic principles have been violated by religious practitioners, businessmen and women, academics and public office holders. Therefore, the paper concludes that peaceful co-existence, national cohesion, or stability is only possible in Nigeria if the principles of religious pluralism are duly taught and practised.

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