

DE-EMPHASIZING STATE RELIGION AS A VERITABLE MEANS TOWARDS NIGERIA'S NATION BUILDING

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Abstract

The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999 as amended) clearly and in unambiguous terms declared/stated in Section 10 that "The Government of the Federation or of a State shall not adopt any religion as State Religion". No doubt this provision was included and made part of our Constitution because of the recognition of the importance religion is in the psyche and heart of its adherents. It is further to provide a level playing ground for religions and their adherents to freely practice their faith without any fear of superiority or inferiority of one religion over another. However, Nigerians witnessed how some States in Nigeria adopted Islam as a State Religion; the yearly sponsoring of Religious Pilgrimages both by the Federal and State Governments, and the building of, and ownership of Religious Institutions by the various levels of government. The participation of State Actors in Religious affairs in such brazen magnitude against the well intentions of the formulators of the Nigerian Constitution is to say the least very petrifying, and not in our national interest. It has overtime encouraged various Religious adherents to have the feeling that governments at the various level of our country Nigeria prefer some Religions over others, thus encouraging divisions and divisive tendencies amongst the Nigerian citizens. There is therefore an urgent need for the government of Nigeria at different levels to go back to the positions of the Section 10 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999 as amended) so as to encourage the building of a United Nigeria not only in words but also in our collective actions. This paper relied heavily on the documented source of data collection while employing descriptive and phenomenological approach in its data analyses. At the end it is considered opinion of this work that Nigerian Governments at all level should de-emphasize the manifest support, preferences and interest shown to religions as an antidote to conflicts towards the search for peace and Nigeria's Nation building.

Keywords: De-Emphasis, State. Religion, Veritable, Nigeria, Nation, Building

Introduction

It will not be out of place to argue or posit that Nigeria as we have it today is a fall out of the 1914 amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates under the Sir Lord Lugard's administration. Going by 2020 estimate by UN Projection, World Population Prospects 2017, Nigeria is believed to have a total population of two hundred and six million, six hundred and thirty thousand, two hundred and sixty-nine (206,630,269) people. Nigeria has been home to several indigenous pre-colonial states and kingdoms since the second millennium (BC), with the Nok civilization having been the first time the country had been unified internally in the 15th Century B.C. (www.en.m.wikipedia.org). As a multinational State, Nigeria is inhabited by more than 250 ethnic groups speaking about 500 distinct languages, all identifying with a wide variety of cultures (Ethnicity in Nigeria, PBS. 5 April 2007 Nigeria, Ethnologue; Pereltsvaig, 2011).

Nigeria is a religiously diverse society, with Islam and Christianity being the most widely professed religions. Nigerians are nearly equally divided into Muslims and Christians, with a tiny minority of adherents of Traditional African Religion and other religions (CIA Factbook: Nigeria). It is further believed that an estimation of 53.5% of Nigerians are Muslims, 45.9% are Christians, while others stand at 0.6% (Africa; Nigeria-The World Factbook). In a 2019 report released by Pew Research Center in 2015, the Muslim population was estimated to be 50% while the Christian population was estimated to be 48.1% (Pew Forum. 2010 P.3). The 1963 Nigerian Census found that 47% of the population was Muslim, 34% Christian and 18% others (www.qeh.ox.ac.uk). The brief analyses herein are to lend credence to the fact that in Nigeria, the major religious actors remain, the Muslims and the Christians as far as Nigerian polity is concerned.

The Meaning of Nation Building

Onyeacho (1994), argues that the concept of nation-building instinctively paints a picture of some kind of building with real brick and mortar-the edifice this time being the nation. One often hears the expression that "Rome was not built in a day". The implication of nation-building could be seen to be that all citizens work together to achieve a common ideal of temporal well-being for all citizens. The people adopt the appropriate means to maintain an internal order as they pursue their ideal; and take appropriate measures to safeguard the community from attacks by non-members. (A Joint Pastorial Letter, Oct. 1st 1960). It could be further

argued that Nation-building is the process whereby a society of people with diverse origins, histories, languages, cultures, and religions come together within the boundaries of a Sovereign State with a Unified Constitutional and Legal Dispensation, a National Public Education System, an Integrated National Economy and Shared Symbols.

According to Karl Wolfgang and William J. Folt Ed. (1966), Nation-building is constructing or structuring a national identity using the power of the unification of the people within the State so that it remains politically stable and viable in the long run. Harris Mulonas (2017) posits "Legitimate authority in modern National States is concerned to popular rule, to majorities. Harris (2012) thus concluded that "Nation-building is the process through which these majorities are constructed. In an attempt to achieve nation-building Onyeocha (1994) states that it involves a mutual understanding between the people and leadership. With this understanding, the leadership will be expected to face up to its responsibilities on behalf of the people. It should be careful to recognize, operate within, and never seek to exceed the limits of its powers. It must therefore respect the functions and operations of other agencies beyond its jurisdiction. These agencies and societies include the family, the group and the church.

According to a Columbia University Sociologist Andrea Wimmer (2018), three factors tend to determine the success of nation-building over the long-run;

5. The early development of civil society organizations;
6. The rise of a State capable of providing public good evenly across a territory;
7. The emergence of a shared medium of communication.

It is manifest that the Nigerian leadership overtime have been found wanting on item No.ii above in the management of Religious issues as we shall soon discover. And this no doubt has stalled Nation-building as far as religion is concerned in Nigeria.

Nigeria Constitutional Provisions on Religion

Section 38(1) of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended) makes clear and unambiguous provision for the citizen's freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This freedom further includes freedom to change one religion or belief, and further freedom (either alone or in community with others), and in public or private to manifest and propagate one's religion or belief in worship and teaching. Scholars and Lawyers have argued that such provision was inserted in the Constitution to address problems associated with ethnic and

religious minorities in the country. Ahmed Salisu Garba (2020) does not agree less with this assertion as he opines “the idea was to protect minorities across the different parts of the country against possible domination by majority ethnic and religious groups in the country including alleged forceful imposition of the religion of Islam on minority Christian group in Northern Nigeria. The provisions originated from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by member States of the United Nations in 1945. The UN Charter, agreed in 1945 declared that one of the purposes of the United Nations was “Promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion.

Further, Section 10 of same Constitution States “The Government of the Federation or of a State shall not adopt any religion as State Religion”. By this, provision, it is manifest that no one has the right to demand the adoption of one’s religion as official religion of the government of the Federation or of a State. The citizens of Nigeria and their different levels of government have no legitimate right to also make any religion a State religion nor accord it any Superior Status above and over another. The citizens and the government at all levels must exercise the right in a manner that is consistent with the Supremacy of the Constitution. Ogbu, O.N (2014) has argued that the 1999 Constitution as amended did not expressly proclaim Nigeria to be a secular State. However, Ogbu argues that the Constitution prohibits both State and Federal Government from adopting any religion as State religion; and guarantees to every person the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion as well as the right to freedom from discrimination on grounds, inter alia, of religion. The Constitution makes further provision for the establishment of Sharia Courts of Appeal though with Jurisdiction restricted to questions of Islamic Personal Law.

It ought to be noted that chapter one (1) of the said Constitution States “This Constitution is Supreme and its provisions shall have binding force on all authorities and persons throughout the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Based on its Supremacy therefore governments and institutions of government including its citizens ought to and must operate within the confines and provision of the Constitution to assist in Nation Building. The State is therefore not to get involved in religion and thereby wittingly or unwittingly pitch one Section of society against another in a deadly religious strife and its multiplier effects. Other Constitution Provision relating to Religion in Nigeria are; Section 1(3), Section 14(2), Section 15(2), Section 17(3), Section 23, Section 38(1),(2),(3) and Section 42(1)(a)(b).

Federal/State Governments influence on Religions in Nigeria

Not minding the provisions of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended) especially in Sections 1 and 10, a critical look at the different levels of Nigeria government will showcase glaring areas where it appears that government across board have been directly involved in recognition, sponsorship and seeming preference of a particular religion over others. In Nigeria after the 1999 general elections, the twelve Muslim-majority States instituted Sharia Law as a main body of Civil and Criminal Law as the then Zamfara State Governor Ahmed Sani Yerima began the push for the institution of Sharia at the State level of government (BBC News 2002).

According to the U.S Department of State (2008), twelve out of Nigeria's thirty-six (36) States have Islam as the dominant religion as they chose to have Sharia Law regulating their activities. By the year 2012, the following twelve (12) States have instituted Sharia;

- Zamfara State (27 January 2000)
- Kano State (21 June 2000)
- Sokoto State
- Katsina State
- Bauchi State (June 2000)
- Jigawa State
- Borno State
- Kebbi State
- Yobe State
- Kaduna State
- Niger State (4 May 2000)
- Gombe State

Nmehiele (2004) argues that institutionalizing such by some Northern States in Nigeria raises a number of Constitutional questions and impacts the Supremacy of the Nigerian Constitution. Sharia Law is a religious and moral code of Islam, which controls the different aspect of a Muslim's life such as prayer habits, nutritional obligations, and the type of business Muslims can partake in and how they interact with others. Such recognition and institutionalization no doubt placed Islam as a recognized religion in the affected areas of Nigeria and further recognizing its superiority above others. This is further highlighted by the fact that Christians are prohibited from sharing the word of God with Muslims in these

States and if a Christian is caught propagating the gospel, she or he could face jail term or be fined. It is on record too that some State governments like Kwara State established Kwara State College of Arabic and Islamic Studies in Ilorin. This school was established through an Act in 1992 (www.kwaracalls.com). The College is one of the four that are affiliated to the Bayero University in Kano, Nigeria (www.buk.edu.ng). On September 7th 2020, The National Board for Technical Education (NBTE) approved the college to begin National Diploma (ND) Programme (Geeky Nigeria 2020).

This again is a big source of division, and divisive tendency amongst religions in Nigeria towards Nigeria's Nation-building. Governments, both Federal and States have over the years engaged in the sponsoring of religions Pilgrimages to foreign lands for both Muslims and Christians. Pam (2018) reviewed Government Sponsorship of Pilgrimages in Nigeria and observed that the first Pilgrimage to be sponsored at government expenses was Alhaji Isa Kaita in 1954 (Enwerem 1995). The practice is now the vogue for the Federal, State and Local Governments of Nigeria. Agencies like the Nigerian Army have joined the fray. Niger State in 2013 spent about ₦5.1 billion to subsidize both Muslim and Christian Pilgrims from the State in six years. Lagos State spent ₦41.9 million in Pilgrimage in year 2015, ₦45.3 million in year 2014, Edo State budgeted ₦40 million to cater for both Christian and Muslim Pilgrims Board in year 2014. Late President Yar Adua's Minister of Information, John Odey, announced in 2007 that Government would discontinue the Sponsorship of Pilgrimages with effect from 2008. This plan was later abandon following an outcry by religious leaders and other interest groups against the policy decision. Several State Governments have announced that they too would phase out the Sponsorship of Pilgrimage.

The Sponsorship of Pilgrimages to holy cities for religious purposes by governments apart from the huge financial implication has also brought about discriminatory tendencies as alleged by different religious enthusiasts. Pam (2018) argues that included in his report to President Jonathan on the 2012 Christian Pilgrimage, the then Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) Chairman, Pastor Ayo Oritsejafor, complained that Seven States in the Country refused to Sponsor Christian Pilgrims that year. The Seven discriminating States were Jigawa, Kano, Sokoto, Katsina, Zamfara, Benue and Gombe States. While some of these States Sponsored Muslim Pilgrims, they refused to sponsor a single Christian Pilgrim without offering reasons for this discrimination policy. Oritsejafor argued that such practice amounted to religious discrimination, which the country's Constitution has outlawed.

Bishop Matthew Hassan Kukah of the Catholic Diocese of Sokoto and the former Zamfara State Governor, Senator Ahmed Sani Yerima, disagreed on whether States should continue the Sponsorship of Religious Pilgrimages or not in their individual submissions to the 7th Senate Committee on Constitutional Amendment in Asaba, Delta State in 2012. Kukah contended that States should stop the practice of funding religious Pilgrimages because the Country did not have a “religious insufficiency” problem but a “Constitutional Justice Inadequacy” problem. Yerima countered by saying that States should not be stopped from sponsoring religious Pilgrimages as long as they can afford it.

VOA (Africa) (2015) reported that every year, thousands of Nigerians travel overseas on religious Pilgrimages. Under previous administrations, Nigeria Federal governments paid for these Pilgrimages. But the new administration of Muhammadu Buhari announced it will stop paying for these trips. Elonu and Madume (2019) argued that in Nigeria, over 7.9 billion naira concession was given by the Federal Government of Nigeria for Sponsorship of Pilgrims. Pilgrimage is about spirituality. Most people find their spiritual life intricately linked to their association with church, temple, mosque and synagogue or in performing a Pilgrimage. Thus the sponsoring of Pilgrimage by government has the potentiality of recognizing a particular religion more than the others thereby creating religious disharmony which in turn will breed conflict amongst adherents and further divide Nigeria along ethnic and religious lines. It is further in evidence that to organize these Pilgrims to be orderly and have their data, governments established Pilgrims welfare board both in the States and at the Federal level. These Boards are yearly given financial allocation for the smooth conduct and carrying out of their statutory functions.

Uwaezuoke and Ethel (2010) posit that Islam and Christianity enjoy special government protection during the Colonial Era. Each however claimed Superiority over the other and sought to outdo each other in the unfolding competition in the influence of National Policies. This according to them has severally led to religious tensions, culminating into serious social crisis and disruption of public order.

Religious Conflicts in Nigeria

Having observed before now that Nigeria has an imposing religious identity featuring in the main of substantial percentage of Muslims (Islam) and Christians (Christianity) with a relatively lower percentage of other adherents of other

religions, it is therefore not farfetched to conclude and indeed expect that with governments manifest of open patronage of one religion or another, crises, conflicts and the killing of Innocent Nigerians even in cold blood will be the order of the day. Haldun and Opeyemi (2016) argue that an average Nigeria is very religious as observed by Oluduro (2010) and Ekundayo (2013), and that religion plays a critical role in Nigeria, expressing itself as a potent force that has led to numerous conflicts in the country. According to Warner (2012), Nigeria has been engulfed in numerous religious crises and/or conflicts between 1980 and 1994. The Newswatch (2009) reported about fifty (50) cases of Ethno-Religious crises in Northern Nigeria between year 1980 and year 2004.

Some of the reported cases included that of disturbances in Zaria during which property belonging to Christians were destroyed on Thursday, May 1 1980; the Yari-Awaki Ward in Kano riot on December 18th - 20th 1980 carried out by Maitatsine Sect during which period about 4,177 people were reported to have died while extensive damages to property were observed; The Limankara in Borno State conflict on Monday, September 27, 2004 wherein a self-styled Taliban group on the Goza hills and Madera mountains on the North Eastern border with Cameroon raided a Police Station killing officers and stealing ammunition.

Haldun and Opeyemi observed that recent religious conflicts in Nigeria include the July, 1999 conflicts in Nigeria include the July 1999 conflict among the Oro cults in Sagamu in Ogun State which witnessed the killing of many Yoruba and Hausa people; the Oct. 2000 Lagos - Kano conflict because of the use of convenience. Between 1999 and 2013, numerous conflicts have been witnessed in Nigeria based on religious differences. The most important among them is the Boko Haram attacks which are on-going. Based on this, the country's stability is under constant threat. The further politicization of religious identities especially during contests for political office and appointments often lack any sustaining unifying ideology.

Okpanachi (2010) rightly observed that due to religious crises in Nigeria, thousands of Nigerians have been left dead, wounded and homeless over the years. At different levels and times even today, the Nigeria people have complained of religious discrimination. The state of Nigeria cannot be exonerated from the use of religion in political discourse or action. Therefore, it is clear that accusations, suspicion and allegations of neglect, oppression and domination through the instrumentality of state religion are the major causes that fuel religious conflict thereby shaking the various foundations of Nigeria-nation building. In Ogbu (2014), Muslims have alleged the Christianization of Nigeria. The Jama'atu Nasril Islam had before now contended that Nigeria is heavily "Christianized".

They alluded to the political system of Nigeria as being based on Western civilization which is Christian. Further, that the Nigerian legal system which has English ideals and Common Law as its cornerstone as Christian-inspired, laden with Christian doctrines; that Sunday is made a public holiday while Friday is not; the adoption of Gregorian (Christian) calendar for official purposes to the exclusion of the Islamic calendar and many more are manifestations of the government support, preference and recognition in the Christian religion over and above Islam.

In rebuttal of the Muslims claim, the Christians have come up with a number of issues depicting government patronage and support for Islam over Christianity. Currently the issue or controversy surrounding the support of the Minister of Communication and digital economy Alhaji Isa Pantami is a case in point. Isa Pantami alleged to have been supporting the operations and teachings of the well-known terrorist groups, the AL-Qaeda and Taliban. In a DailyPost (2021) report, Apostle Johnson Suleman of Omega Fire Ministries declared that one million Pantamis, (the Minister of Communications and Digital Planning) cannot stop the spread of Christianity in the North. Apostle Suleman was quoted as saying that divisive and separatist ideologies would have adverse effect on governance, adding that “we are counting days to the exit of a failed system. We have survived, we will survive”. On her part, a former Minister of Education Oby Ezekwesili (Akelicious, 2021) was reported to have written, “In that singular act of siding with his Minister of Communication, the Nigeria President Buhari actually conveyed a message on his view on terrorism. Nigerians now know that he aligns with that of his Minister... Yesterday’s action by our President was an anti-climax. He has persisted in badly managing our Country’s diversity.”

DailyPost, (2021) reported on the Isa Pantami saga, that President Mohammed Buhari who was reported to have spoken through one of his aides, Garba Shehu was quoted as saying, “Today, there is an unfortunate fashion in public discourse that makes leader in politics, religion and civil society liable... the administration stands behind Minister Pantami and all Nigerian citizen to ensure they receive fair treatment, fair prices, and fair protection in ICT services”. Muslim communities and leaders also spoke in support of Dr. Isa Pantami. DailyPost (2021) reported on its April 26, 2021 edition that the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) has expressed anger over calls for the Department of State Services to invite the Communication Minister, Ali Pantami for questioning over his comments on terror groups by the President of the Christian Association of Nigeria, Samson Ayokunle. NSCIA called such “attacks” on the Minister, the

handiwork of enemies and premeditated and well-calculated plots to witch-hunt. These calls and counter calls when juxtaposed with the fate of a onetime Minister of Finance Kemi Adeosun, a Christian who resigned and was permitted to leave by President Buhari leaves much to be desired as the seeming claim of the recognition of a particular religion over another by the Nigerian Governments is concerned. In a seeming preference and support of Islam, a Presidential Spokesperson, Garba Shehu was reported in the Daily Post of April 23, 2021 to have argued that “certificate forgery involving Kemi Adeosun, former Finance Minister, is worse than Isa Ali Pantami’s views on terror groups”. The discourse has remained opened.

Conclusion

This paper notes that the privileged position enjoyed by the Christian and Islamic religious by Governments patronage and Support over time in different areas, did not and has not in any tangible and material way encouraged a better integration of Nigerians towards common self-consciousness as a nation of multi-religions. Hence the Country before and after her independence witnessed an unprecedented level of religious violence, which is currently threatening the peace, stability and economy of Nigeria. The time for Government to de-emphasize direct recognition of State religion(s) so that different religious bodies and adherents can mutually co-exist without the fear of one religion being superior to the other is now.

Recommendations

That, the different stages or levels of Nigerian Governments had been in support of one religion or the other since the amalgamation and independence of Nigeria is not in doubt. They have manifested their interest and preference in the areas of establishing religious Schools, sponsoring of religious Pilgrimages to holy lands, creation and or establishment of Pilgrims Welfare Boards, the building of worship centers, appointment and support of appointees based on religious backgrounds, the institutionalization of Sharia Laws in the twelve (12) Northern States of Nigeria and other secondary/related matters. The paper is therefore of the very strong opinion and view that these manifestations have directly and indirectly pitched one religion against others in the struggle for supremacy thereby creating divisions and divisive tendencies that have greatly affected the struggle and search for a better, genuine and long lasting Nigerian Nation-building.

Therefore, this study strongly recommends:

- i. That Governments at all levels of Nigeria stop forthwith with direct interferences in religious affairs.
- ii. Government should stop sponsoring religious Pilgrimages to holy lands.
- iii. The introduction of Sharia Laws in the twelve Northern States is a misnomer which presents the States as having removed themselves from being part of Nigeria. Such laws are better repealed and jettisoned through the appropriate means.
- iv. Governments may only retain Pilgrims Welfare Boards to serve as contact points with Nations housing the holy cities since going on Pilgrimage deals with foreign affairs.
- v. Government should de-emphasize manifest/open support or preference for political appointees based on their religious backgrounds.
- vi. Most importantly, Section 10 of the 1999 Constitution (as amended) and other relevant Sections of our law in support of non State religion should be fully activated to give a vigorous bite towards the building of the Nigerian Nation of Peace, Unity and Progress which was the dream of Nigeria founding fathers.
- vii. For peace and harmony in Society, the role of Government is to create a level playing field and an environment of equal opportunities for religious worship, and leave religion as a personal matter for the individual, who believes, to engage in his religious worship.

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