

Socio-Ethical Fraternity of Christianity and Islam: Healing Balm for Conflict Resolution in Nigeria

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Abstract

Socio-religious conflict and crises have characteristically emerged as a predominant and factorial experience of the Nigerian populace. Nigerian history is consistently replete with instances of socio-cultural and religious conflict. The rate of killings, maiming and wanton destruction of lives and properties have alarmingly escalated over the years. This is accrued to the distinct polarization of Christian and Islamic scruples. The passionate adherence and extrematization of these religious teachings by ignorant, less-informed but over zealous admirers of these religious views have often set the various groups at war against each other. It is against this backdrop that this paper projects the fraternity of Christianity and Islam as a therapeutic instrument for conflict resolution in Nigeria. The formulation of common grounds for mutual and complementary co-existence of Christians and Muslims remains as focal point for the actualization of the task of this paper. This paper believes strongly in the cordiality and fraternization of the two prominent religions to be a signpost and consequent cynosure for peace, unity and co-operation. It is in the wisdom of this paper, very disheartening that lives and properties are carelessly and consciously wasted all in the name of religious fanaticism and preservation. It is indeed, disappointing that God (Allah) whom the defenders of the two religions are worshiping is not an author of violence, and has not seen conflict as a better or one of the accepted approaches to reaching him. It is on this premise that this paper is viewed as a clarion call for all concerned apostles of the two religions to tow the path of honour by approaching peace, using the instrument of dialogue, enlightenment campaign, workshops and seminar for the re-education of their intellect. It is also, necessary for the sermon of fraternity of the two religions to be preached and widespread due to its unlimited advantages in both human and material resources. This paper strongly submits that fraternity and the unity of both religions will go a long way to addressing Nigeria's perennial socio-political quagmire which is worsened by the apostles of religious sect.

Introduction

The challenges of many multicultural and multi-religious societies have increased all over the world. In this multicultural setting where various cultures are akin to diversity of religious scruples, clamour and conflict have tremendously hampered the socio-political progress of these settings. Traditional African society has a way of attending to issues, resolving conflicts and making peace between and among members before the advent of colonialism, and this gives room to what is called community justice system. Kekong Bisong contends that "in Boki traditional society, like most societies in Africa, there were usually no prisons.

The whole family took responsibility for the offending member. Reparation became their problem as well as that of the offender” (33). Also, in a similar vein, Olawunmi posits that: “with the advent of colonization, restorative was substituted with retributive justice built on punishment and vengeance rather than reparation and reconciliation. Since the colonizers were mostly European: British, Dutch, Spain, Portuguese, German, so was the law that accompanied them. Since much of this law had been built up during times of monarchy when the king ‘had the divine right to rule’, so it was heavily into punishment as its means of maintaining social control. Since all the European colonizers were largely formed by the church, so the teachings of scripture and the church became distorted and tainted by the close identity of the church with the various colonising powers” (221).

This ailing situation with particular reference to the conflicting strives for dominance between Christianity and Islam has immensely escalated the temperature of the world’s peace. Nigeria falls within the myriad of nations experiencing this malady, in an extreme intensity. One of the profound challenges of the contemporary Nigerian nation is security. Many are overwhelmed with the traumatic experience of killings and loss of properties by many Christians living in the Northern region of Nigeria predominantly occupied by the Muslims. The continuous killing of Christians by Boko-Haram, an Islamic Sect in the Northern part of Nigeria has not only become a threat to many Christians in the Northern part of Nigeria, but a seeming albatross and thorn on the flesh of the Nigerian government. This socio-religious and political conflict is a predominant cause of instability, and setback in the progressive development of the Nigerian populace. It has become a snag, a virus and cancerous ailment which its end is death.

Amongst the searching and craving solutions to the socio-religious and political conflict in Nigeria, this paper purports the socio-ethical fraternity of Christianity and Islam as a therapeutic measure for the traumatic experiences of Nigeria. It is a healing balm because of the very many benefits of being in a peaceful atmospheric environment.

The bond of relations and interconnectivity which is sublime in Christianity and Islam can be characteristically envisaged in the similarity of the basic teachings of these two religions. Christianity as with Islam holds tenaciously to foundational teachings and doctrines which prompt the peaceful co-existence of humanity, and in line with Aristotle’s insufficiency of humans as reason for the formation of state.

Religion is a significant element of a human society which is not dispensable. World history and the history of human race cannot be reasonably presented devoid of the significant role of religion. Human is contingently attached to religion, and religion which is as old as human forms an integral part of human’s existence. Imaah observes that “ontologically and metaphorically, human beings believe in a superior power” (5). Religion therefore cannot be done away with in so far as the existence of human remains continuous.

Religion is the intimate relationship between the human person and a divine being whose existence is perceived and believed to be largely an agent of social and peaceful co-existence, educational progress, mutual understanding and international cooperation. Surprisingly, this unique and fascinating element could also double as an instigating force of violence, civil unrest, stagnation, retrogression, discrimination, operation and war, and not only the aforesaid, but possibly extinction of human race.

The negativity of religion has plagued the human race immensely, and in the Nigerian dimension, it has escalated to its peak, beckoning for an urgent attention, due to the negative attendant consequences to lives and property, unity and peaceable interactions. Christianity and Islam form the predominant religious groups in Nigeria, orchestrating profound influence on the majority of Nigerians. It is expedient having an expository view of these two.

Christianity and Islam: An Overview

Christianity is arguably the most widespread and universally accepted religion in the world today. It builds its foundation and basic teachings on Jesus Christ of Nazareth. Jesus is said to be the son of God that came in the human form to save humankind from sins. It is arguably stated that he was born of earthly parents, Joseph and Mary. Jesus Christ took the form of man in order to fulfill his divine mission on earth, as planned by God, the creator of heaven and earth according to biblical account. The conception and birth of Jesus, is surrounded by supernatural occurrences.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, is said to have conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit without any intimacy with Joseph her husband. 'Although the actual date of Jesus' birth is uncertain, yet scholars generally put it at 6 BC' (Omogbe 16). The date and month of Jesus birth remains uncertain. All that is known from the gospel narratives is that his birth falls within the winter period, which spans from October to January. However, historical evidence and conviction placed 25th December as the generally accepted date for which all Christians celebrate the birth of Christ. The Bible remains the holy book and reference point of Christian teaching.

The basic Christian teaching which is centered on God and of heaven, projects Jesus Christ as the Saviour of the world. The existence of Angels and Devils, the existence of Heaven and Hell, the Redemption of man from sin (Repentance), Rapture, judgment etc, are embedded in Christian doctrine.

Foundationally, Christianity projects the redemption of man from sin and its consequences through Jesus Christ. Jesus is seen as the Saviour of the world, who came in the likeness of man, to die for the remission of sin. Love, joy peace, long suffering gentleness, goodness, faith meekness, temperance form the outcome and fruits of salvation and deliverance from sin (Gal 5:22-23) Jesus in his earthly ethical teachings emphasized love as an indispensable element of Christian virtues. In Luke chapter 6, verse 2 to 29 Jesus states:

But I say unto you which hear, love your enemies, do good to them which hate you, bless them that curse you, and pray for them which despitefully use you. And unto him that smiteth thee on the one cheek offer also the other; and him that taketh away thy cloak forbid not to take thy coat also. (Holy Bible KJV).

Love permeates Christianity as an essential element of peaceful coexistence and progress. Jesus crowned his sermon on the mount by emphasizing the Golden Rule; "And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise" (Luke 6:31). Again Jesus emphasized the necessity of service to God. Christians should be less materialistic, but seek heavenly possessions through commitment to the desires and will of God. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matthew 6:33).

On the other hand, Islam is one of the most influencing religions of the world. It arose more than six hundred years after the birth of the Christian church and no religion ever spread so extensively in so short a time as it did in the first one hundred years of its existence. It has since its beginning been in constant touch with Christianity. (Boer, 5). For many Orthodox Muslims, Islam was never founded by Mohammed, but by Allah. For this, Mohammed could be addressed as a messenger and instrument through which Allah relayed his message to human kind. For the non-orthodox Muslims, there is no contention that Mohammed is the founder of Islamic religion.

Mohammed is said to have been born in A.D 510 in Mecca. Growing up in a humble beginning, Mohammed who is said to have lost his father before his birth grew up with his paternal uncle, Abu Talib. At the age of twenty-five, he was engaged in the services of a rich widow Khadijahi, who assigned him to the management of her trade and the care of camels. Mohammed's affiliation with Khadijahi culminated into a marriage that produced two sons and two daughters. Mohammed possessed an insatiable search for the things divine. This was illuminated by his consistent solitudes in the mountains and caves, where he engaged himself in irresistible meditations. Amongst the doctrines of Islam, are teachings on God, Heaven and Hell, the prophets, the existence of Angels and Devils, unconditional submission, the last day etc.

Islam teaches non-negotiably about the existence of a God (Allah) who is absolute, unique and transcendent. He is the omnipotent creator and controller of all things. He designs and wills all that is. Unlike the Christian monotheistic view which is much liberal, accommodating the expression of God the father, son, and Holy Spirit in one God, Islamic monotheism is rigid, it makes no room for the doctrine of trinity or divine sonship. Submission to the will of God is an indispensable teaching of Islam. The word Islam means submission. Therefore man is expected to have an unconditional submission to the total will and plan of God. The level of submission to the will of God determines the level of reward, or punishment of man on the last day. So, at all times, God reflects peace and submission to his will. His adherents supposedly carry the object and purpose of God.

Basic ethical teachings of Islam are centralized on the consciousness of God and universal brotherhood. Every being is a creature of the Omnipotent and Omniscient.

Allah demands an utmost and unalloyed loyalty and service to him. Obedience and service to God is an uncompromising command from God. It is in this sense that Quran instructs; “be careful of your duty to God and for God is aware of what you do” (Sura 5:9). It is expedient to note, that foundational teachings on love, peace kindness, compassion, justice, and mercy are indispensable in Islam. Every cultured Muslim must imbibe these virtues, be kind and compassionate with all men. For Allah, the best and most beautiful is one who is compassionate and gives alms. It is arguably accepted that, Christianity and Islam share a number of things in common.

First, there is a common ancestral lineage. Both Jesus and Mohammed could be traced to a common ancestral father, Abraham. The Jews and the Arabians hold their genealogy from the two sons of Abraham – Isaac and Ishmael. While the Jews are descendants of Isaac, the Arabs are descendants of Ishmael.

Secondly, Christianity and Islam are both monotheistic religions that teach the existence of a single sovereign, and Omnipotent God, who demands worship and obedience from his adherents

Thirdly, both appreciate the supernaturalism of Jesus of Nazareth, presenting him as the Messiah sent by God. For these religions, Jesus was a gift sent by God to mankind. Both acknowledge that Jesus was not conceived through the ordinary way. They both express that Mary had no carnal knowledge of a man, but Jesus’ conception was made possible through the power of the Holy Spirit. Sura 21 of Quran expresses God speaking “thus, we breathed into her (Mary) who was chaste of our spirit, and we made her and her son (Jesus) a sign to the worlds”. The Messiahship of Jesus as expressed in Su 4:19, 2:81, 3:48, of Quran, and Luke 1:26 – 38 of the holy Bible depict that Islam and Christianity have so much in common.

Again, both religions believe in the existence of Angels and Devils. Both hold that Angels are servants, messengers and instruments of God. While the devils are the evil angels who rebelled against God, and who go about trying to deter human’s from doing the things of God.

More so, the issue of judgment, Reward and Punishment in Heaven and Hell respectively hold a common ground in both religions. Christianity as with Islam, teaches that a day of judgment will come which will mark the end of the world. God will judge all humans, rewarding his faithful children and servants, who will be sent to heaven, and punishing all evil doers who will spend their eternal life in hell.

Almsgiving, fasting and prayer, love, kindness, mercy, faithfulness, peaceful coexistence, faith, total dependence and obedience to the will of God form an integral part of the teachings of both Christianity and Islam.

Corroborating succinctly, Shields asserts that the teachings of Christianity and Islam is profoundly potent as to “regulate the moral conduct of the people to enable them relate well with one another especially in the New Nation-hood” (Shields, 41).

The unifying strength of religion forms a common ground for the assimilation of cultures and breach of socio-political fragmentation and categorization. Religion can in no mean term be described as an umbrella of affiliation, association, familiarization, complementation and integration. It has the potency of bringing to a common purpose, people of various orientation, socio-ethnic and cultural background. The potency of this immense element cannot be over emphasized. This opinion is evidently not different from that expressed by Ikegbu when he argued to the conclusion “that religion is a veritable vehicle for building a nation and also, destroying it” (94-102). He argues further that “the Europeans used religion as a tool or weapon to collapse the African civilization and heritage” (94-102). The above goes to demonstrate that religion whether Islam or Christianity is so powerful that it can influence human behaviour in diverse ways.

Positively, religion exerts enormous influence on the people. It is without gainsaying the fact, that the utilization of these virtuous teaching of various religious groups can serve as a propitious tool of conflict resolution in Nigeria. The emanation of religious crisis in Nigeria which has over the years hampered on the socio-economic progress of the country, is often a resultant of the instigation by some unscrupulous, willful, self-centered, over ambitious, ignorant and evil individuals who consciously and unconsciously contradict and disobey the dictates and basic teachings of their religion. Those fellows willfully break the laws under the guise of religion. Christianity and Islam hold tenaciously to the teachings of love, gentleness, kindness, alms giving, peace, truthfulness, sincerity, etc.

The mutual correlations of Islamic teachings and Christianity erect a formidable foundational structure for the mutual, peaceful co-existence and complementary relationship amongst its ardent members. The acceptance and practical utilization of biblical and Quranic teachings avers a new spectrum of peaceful co-existence devoid of conflict and rancor. Morality and the application of ethical principles abase the excesses of human nature. It controls behavioral negativities and instills positive attributes and attitudes in a human being. Our moral and ethical consciousness both as individuals and at the societal level will not only avail us peace, progress and palatable socio-economic and political experiences, but will abase the conflicting challenge of our society and Nation “the development of Nigeria as a nation is dependent on how well Nigerians are groomed ethically to guide the destiny of their nation (Eyo, 17). The willingness to promote good conduct, through ethical values inherent in our religious teachings is the hall mark of an ordered society, which extols justice and denigrates lawlessness and violence, thereby providing “common good or benefit which human persons can only attain through the coordination of their several activities” (Offiong, 29).

It is expedient and necessarily imminent consenting to the clarion call for the obliteration of any form of polarization, categorization and hegemonic strife which catalyzes religious tumult in Nigeria. The unification and integration of Christianity and Islam in Nigeria is a conscious, conscientious demand which adherents of this religion must adhere. The basis of unification must be borne in mind with the intent of transcending every limitation and divide which sets in motion the menace of conflict.

Nigeria had over the years experienced a traumatic flow of incessant religious crises, which have more often than not distorted our socio-economic, political, and scientific progress. The socio-ethical fraternity of Christianity and Islam suffices therefore as a therapy for the ailing experience which has plagued Nigeria over the years. Christians and Muslims must conceive of themselves as brothers and sisters whose religious background and teachings promote peace and happiness. The essentiality of unity stands tall in the actualization of the crave for a conflict-free society. A conscious effort to transcend the divide that precipitate crisis remains an essential element to be cultured and utilized. We must allow the limitation of our being to be the cause and source of our joy.

Nigerians must realize that their destiny is in their own hands; hence all groups, association and religion must be mobilized towards the actualization of this destiny. “A perusal of the resolution of the Manchester congress reveals an admirable determination towards the regeneration, unification and progress of Africa” (Imbua, 59). This unification and search for progress must commence with the various groups 25 in African countries and Nigeria in particular. In examining the historical challenges of Nigerian leadership with the intent of fashioning a way forward, Ozumba cautions on the need for Nigerians to direct effort at obliterating ethnic and religious dichotomies that bedevil our nation. He asserts that “until we begin to see ourselves as one people with one destiny, it may be difficult to achieve the leadership, peace and progress of our dreams”. (Ozumba, 111).

The consciousness of our past mishap stimulated by religious crisis must chart a way forward for our peaceful co-existence, through the conscientious connect of our seeming religious differences. In other words the understanding of our predicament which has hampered on any reasonable progress must build in us the search for a peaceful cohabitation and sustainable development. Orji kingdom avers that “a sound knowledge of the historical past affects, and should affect every aspect of our total existence including socio-political and economic development” (1). In the light of this, Burns’ elucidation of history as “an inquiry into the causes of events and patterns of human organization and ideas, a search for the forces that impelled humanity towards great undertakings, and the reasons for its success and failures becomes appreciable (4).

The essentiality of a thorough study and understanding of our past with the intent of making the present and the future better is to increase the value and meaningfulness of the human life. Where the value and meaningfulness of human lives are borne in mind, conscious efforts to denounce violence will be exerted. The need therefore to “look for an all encompassing perspective that transcends the human situation and in terms of which human life can be given meaning becomes a necessity” (Wogu, 17).

It is an indispensable faith therefore, according to Quologuem “that man lives in the community and fellowship of his fellow man, and cannot attain the full meaningfulness of his life, satisfaction and goals, without a peaceful mutual complementary relationship with others. The primary responsibility of man in his holistic and inter-connected activities in the society is not limited to self fulfillment, but rather to the attainment of the well-being of the community as a whole” (87).

In the light of this, conflict, crisis, rancor and violence must be totally rejected for the pursuit of peace. The passionate crave for peace and stability must grow in our society thereby illuminating the minds of individuals such that every attention is focused on the identification of the perpetrators of conflict and violence for appropriate sanctioning. The moral sanctity of our country must be extolled, and preserved. Enunciating on this, K. A. Ojong asserts:

“The society must cultivate a change of heart whereby the desire for a peaceful social order would translate into popular rejection and stigmatization by the citizens, of those who are known to be perpetrators of electoral violence (176).

In corroborative terms, Makiti emphasizes the need for a process of socio-cultural and religious re-orientation, as a felicitous tool of abolishment of youth restiveness and violence (173). Social order devoid of conflict must be a passionate desire of Nigerians. As an indispensable element of a refined society, it must be culture-groomed, sustained and maintained. Adumbrating on the content of social order and its pivotal force, Fayemi avers:

It is a state of harmonious relationship among individuals and groups that live in a society or state. Social order involves achieving cooperation for the common good of the members of a society through balancing of conflicts of interest among individuals and between individuals and the state or society. Social order is the end result of human arrangements, values, norms, regulations, ideologies and institutions that enhance the proper functioning of the various parts of society or community (116).

Social order is the synthesis of well groomed moral and ethical values established by the institutions in the state. Religious fraternity is a necessary element of conflict resolution and the sustenance of social order. The unity and bond of relationship which exist in Islam and Christianity must be emphasized practically. Exhibition of tolerance, equality and fair hearing must be appreciably utilized to foster the peaceful co-existence and complementary interrelationship of Christians and Muslims. The society and its inhabitants cannot pretend as if things are going on well. The spate of killing, maiming, kidnapping, trafficking in persons, bombing and other related vices are cynosure of collapse of social order. It is indeed, worrisome that the agents of these dastard and barbaric acts wear the garment of Christianity and Islam. The acts so carried out by these fellows have equally reduced or watered down the potency of the existing laws.

The law enforcement agencies and law making arm of government with the judiciary should wake up from their slumbering posture for an efficient, effective and stern combative approach towards redefining Nigeria and bringing it back to its enviable position. The country cannot also wait until its best in all strata of professions are sacrificed on the altar of religious fanaticism and bigotry before it can rise up to the challenges for a touch of nature makes the world keen. Corroboratively, Ntamu admonishes thus:

Religious leaders, representatives or those in governmental authority should de-emphasize areas of religious differences and disagreements, avoid the temptation to be partial in favour of anyone religion, and promote unity and tolerance by educating their followers of the pluralistic nature of Nigeria (196).

Fostering peaceful coexistence and mutual complementation through religious fraternity is in no mean terms the roadmap for socio-economic, political and scientific progress of Nigerians.

Conclusion

The indubitability of religious crisis in Nigeria and its concomitant trauma has become an immense challenge to many around the globe. It is this concern which has aggravated to a restless search for a durable and substantial solution. The civil unrest and social disorder precipitated by religious conflict and crisis has not only hampered on the search for a multi-dimensional progress in Nigeria, but has belittled the value and meaningfulness of human life. Poverty which is also the child birth of this ailing situation has also increased the fear of survival.

It is against this backdrop therefore that socio-ethical fraternity of Christianity and Islam is projected as a panacea for conflict resolution in Nigeria. The attainment of peace and order through a mutual complementary relationship of Christians and Muslim is an essentiality of socio-economic, political and scientific progress in Nigeria. This paper aligns itself considerably with calls for a proper re-orientation and re-examination of our value system.

It aligns itself with the call to reform the legal system and come up with a better and proper approach to the resolution of the religious conflict in Nigeria. Nigeria is a secular state by reason of her law, no person or group of persons or association or religion of any scale can compel the entire nation to a rule or norm that does not conform to its standard of operation. To do so violates the principle of law and provision of section 38(1) of the 1999 constitution of Nigeria (As Amended) which states thus:

Every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom (either alone or in community with others, and in public or in private) to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance (1999 No24,A899).

The above provision as cited above is reasonably and presumably known to the perpetrators of these heinous crimes in the name of religion. It is known to the sectarian group-Boko Haram who feel that the country is entirely in their hands. The sermon of this paper is no less than peace, love and mutual unity; the sermon for dialogue as a vehicle for complementary unity for the two religions for economic, social and political cohesion. The above is the symbolic kernel of the nature of God whom the Christians and Muslims are worshipping.

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