



RELIGION, PEACE AND CONFLICT

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Abstract

The function of religion in Peace and Conflict is complex and multifaceted. While it can be a catalyst for violence through religious extremism and intolerance, it also serve as a powerful force for peace, reconciliation and social justice. The way religion is interpreted and practiced as well as its interaction with other factor like socio-economic conditions, political structures and cultural and peace building. This paper therefore, gives an overview of religion, peace and conflict. The study relied on secondary data drawn from an array of published and unpublished materials relevant to the study. These include books journals, magazines, conference papers encyclopedias, newspapers and the internet. The results of findings revealed that the relationship between religion and conflict has witnessed different phase and it ranged between acceptance, promotion and caution to even denial and rejection.

The study concludes that religion plays the role of mobilization of faithful's around competing identities especially religion based on the politicization of such identities. While the aim of peace is to bring about the cessation of hostilities by working on parties and persuading them to look for and utilize non-violent alternatives, and conflict on the other hand connotes a confrontation between one or more parties aspiring towards incompatible means. Among recommendations is the obvious fact that there should be a conscious and deliberate education, restraint and respect for others.

Keywords: Religion, Peace, Conflict.

Introduction

Religion which is the belief in the unseen is as old as the human society itself, this is because every civilization has had to battle with explaining the wonders of creation and its destiny. As a result, there has been as many religious as there have been human civilizations.

Religious conflict is a worldwide historical phenomenon. It is as old as the emergences of a religion itself precisely because the emergence of a religion presupposes a contest with an existing one. The two, contest for influence and supremacy because the belief in either of them carries with it acceptable or prohibitive forms of personal and societal conduct, compulsion of others to follow suit using state apparatuses if need be and the false belief that once we belong to the same religion there would be social and societal harmony.

The relationship between religion and conflict on the one hand and religion and peace on the other hand has been a subject of investigation by scholars of different persuasions. It is unclear whether religion can be said to be a cause of

conflict or a condition for peace just as it is easy to assume that all religions profess peace and as such should be accepted as having little or nothing to do with conflict. Therefore, it remains a truism that violent conflicts have been associated with religion throughout the ages, thereby negating the assumption that most religions profess peace.

Nowhere does the relationship between religion and conflict become more tense, dubious, controversial and suspicious than is the case between Christianity and Islam, probably the world's largest and most universally practiced religions. The role of religion as a causal factor has to be investigated by scholars beyond the mere labeling of commentators and the media.

This study therefore gives an overview of religion, peace and conflict. The study proceeds from an analytical framework which attempts to explore the meaning of religion, peace conflict, religion and conflict as continuity and change, theories of religion and conflict, and the relationship between religion, peace and conflict.

Conceptual Clarifications

Religion

In a deeply religious and multi-faith society like Nigeria, religion can be taken for granted because it is widely felt and seen, and because of the many religious structures and symbols that colour the social space. However, scholars and lay persons alike have different understanding of the concept. According to Johnson and Sampson (1994) religion may be define as “..... an institutional framework within which specific theological doctrines and practices are advocated and pursued usually among a community of like-minded believers”. This many broadly include the socio-political and economic structures that support such beliefs on the one hand, and those that are continually produced by it; as well as the ideology, philosophy and social relationships generated and encountered by the religion in question. The Religious and development programe of the University of Birmingham understands religion as “a set of believes concerning the supernatural sacred and the moral codes practices, values institutions and ritual associated with such belief”.

To Heynes (1993), religion is a system of language and practices that organizes the world in terms of what is deemed holy; it is perhaps the specific features of religion like institutionalism doctrine belief and its reproduction rituals community spirit, social relationships a sense of holiness association with values, etc. that easily associate it with conflict, as well as make it a potential instrument of conflict. Religion is associated with belief the unseen life, in the hereafter, rituals and practices etc. and could be perpetuated by institutions and systems of reproduction.

PEACE

This term has been generally associated with former United Nations secretary-general Boutros Boutros-Ghali in his book, an agenda for peace launched in 1992. In that article, Boutros-Ghali discussed a number of interrelated peace concepts and outlined various options for outside intervention into conflict situations that had become rampant in the aftermath of the cold war.

He noted that preventive diplomacy is purposed to prevent the escalation of conflict into violent confrontation by dealing with its underlying contradiction; While peace making aims to bring about the cessation of hostilities by working on parties and persuading them to look for and utilize non-violent alternatives peacemaking to him tries to maintain a state of non-violence achieved by peace making while building peace consolidates conflict solutions aiming at sustainable settlements (Ghali, 1992).

To Lederach, peacemaking (peace building) could be taken to the metaphor of building a house a process requesting different component and stages it includes for example, a vision usually contemplated in the architectural design, the structure and its details, sourcing for materials, a strong foundation will strategically place pillars, cross-cutting beams and boards to strengthen the structure detailed finishing and maintenance (Lederach, 2001). He provides what he calls a

comprehensive framework for peace making that should be in corporate structure process, relationships resources and coordination. Peacemaking (peace building) is not a one off event that can be started and completed after which is main stakeholders can walk away believing it has been achieved. Therefore, peacemaking is a continuous exercise needing constant investment and re-investment and counter-investment. It gulps resources and these have to be sources for and provided. Peacemaking (peace building) at the maintenance stage like the metaphor of building a house should be taken with all seriousness otherwise the structure will deteriorate.

CONFLICT

Conflict like religion does not have a single meaning and even through scholars may present different images and meaning there are many points of convergence. The term originates from the latin word *Confligere*, meaning “to clash or engage in a fight”. It connotes a confrontation between one or more parties aspiring toward incompatible or competitive means (Miller, 2002). Miall et al (1999) see conflict as “the pursuit of incompatible goals by different groups”. (Wallenstein, 2006) defines conflict “as a social situation in which a minimum of two actors strive to acquire at the same moment in time an available set of scarce resources”.

The predominantly confrontational image of conflict and the way it is being easily equated with fighting, crisis, destruction, war, Misunderstanding, etc. is responsible for the negative and something to be avoided prevented, fought, resolved, managed etc. Conflicts involving religion particularly fits this typology yet not all conflicts carry such effects. There is a deliberate attempt among most conflict scholars especially those of the functional school so as to draw attention to the positive possibilities and the opportunities presented by every conflict.

It is increasingly being admitted by conflict workers that some amount of conflict is necessary for social progress to take place. This recognition has found expression in the use of terms like conflict transformation and peace making for example. Thus, while admitting that conflict could be negative and destructive, there is a sense in which the other side of the coin views conflict as potentially positive and constructive on opportunity that can be exploited by parties to bring about the desired change and transformation. In taking a positive and constructive approach to conflict, one need to recognize the prevalence of two discernable forms of conflict as follows:

- a. Functional Conflict: this is conflict that is positive which also brings about change. This form of conflict should be tolerated and understood as part of life and should lead to questions being asked injustices being challenged and corrected contradictions being resolved deprivations being addressed etc.
- b. Dysfunctional Conflict: this is negative conflict mostly accompanied by violence that leads to problems and destruction of relationships, property and even the parties to the conflict themselves.

Dysfunctional conflict should be discouraged using the methods of management like dialogue, negotiation, meditation, adjunction etc.

Conflict takes place in the course of interaction between individuals and groups. Furthermore, it takes place because individuals and groups are seeking to achieve goals and objectives which may be scarce and which others are also seeking to share with others. These individuals and groups could vary from religious, ethnic, class, clan, national or other forms of identity. In this case conflict becomes an inevitable outcome of human interaction. (Best, 2011)

Although conflict is potentially dangerous, it is also malleable and can respond to positive management and resolution depending on the willingness of parties to the conflict themselves to find a solution and work towards such solution. For conflict to be malleable, parties involved have to make compromises and concessions to reach a settlement. It is an uphill task for any intervener to try to impose a solution on unwilling conflict parties, since it takes at least two for conflicts to happen, it must also take the acceptance of peace by such parties for conflicts to be managed and for peace to be achieved. Thus, from a conflict progression and escalation stand point it is very necessary that stakeholders and persons responsible for solving problems that could eventually turn out as a collective thing do so at the right time (Best 2011)

John Burton, one of the founders of the field of conflict resolution, along with some of his colleagues, tries to distinguish between conflicts and disputes. He suggests that many of the things we refer to as conflict are not really conflict but disputes. Conflicts to Burton occur over deep seated human needs such as security, identity; access participation etc. cannot be resolved unless these needs are met with appropriate satisfiers (Burton 1990)

Religion and conflict as continuity and change

Religion has been used by revivalists, jihadists, revolutionaries, crusaders, state and empire builders, colonial conquerors, political parties, opposition groups among many others, yet there has been a tendency among many scholars of Marxist, positivist, realist, Liberal and other traditions to devalue its explanatory weight in conflict. The analysis of the relationship between religion and conflict has witnessed different phases and it ranged between acceptance, promotion, and caution, to even denial and rejection. Religious groups were once seen as "remnants of tradition which would inevitably and invariably decline in significance as cultural rationality and national integration developed" (Heynes, 1993). Some prefer to take relations of religion as "psychological features of emotions, prejudices, frustrations, perceptions and misperceptions, often under the general title of attitudes (Lewer and Ramsbotham, 1993).

What we know for sure is that within the social sciences tradition, the devaluing of the role of religion in academic analyses of social phenomena, conflict inclusive, has been made possible by a number of factors. These include the rise

of industrialization, the industrial revolution and improvements in science and technology, the dominant role of Marxist political economy, and the rise of socialist regimes in Eastern Europe, among others. In the classical sense and based on the impact of scientific development on religion, many had dismissed religion as undeserving of analytic significance. Religion was seen merely as a dependent variable; it does not explain but is explained. During the 1960s, scholars began to explore the relationship between religion and violent crises, but this shortly went off the scholarly radar due to lack of enthusiasm. Religion became unpopular because in the heat of the Cold War, there was preference for the analysis of the threat of nuclear war and the ideological rivalry between the East and the West at the time, promoted by realist and neo-realist international relations. More attention was paid to the conflict between capitalism and socialism liberal democracy and socialist dictatorships, etc. While the Eastern bloc nations highlighted left wing socialist ideology, the West led by the US promoted liberal democracy and capitalist economics for which religion was an incidental factor.

With the rise of modernization theory, religion was rather projected as an element of primordialism needing to give way to modernity (Moyser, 1991; Tleynes, 1993). While modernization theory did not pick on religion for destruction as did socialism within the context of industrially-based development, it did not mainstream religion as a modernizing factor. Neo-Marxist underdevelopment and dependency theory which was popularized by Third World and other neo-Marxist scholars further had very little to say about religion's role in conflict. The Iranian revolution of 1979 and its aftermath globally, however, helped to point to the portent power of religion in political life and conflict, but just that. For the West, tendencies like the Iranian revolution needed to be contained and isolated and at worst fought with the arsenal of the superpowers.

This neglect of religion was, however, for only a while, it would seem. The end of the Cold War and the "new" conflicts in Bosnia Herzegovina, the many ethnic and identity conflicts following the Cold War, the September 11 2001 terrorist attacks in US, etc. have all helped to rekindle new interest in the study of the relationship between religion and conflict (Hasenclever and Rittberger 2000). In the 1990s, scholars began to admit what some called "the resurgence of religion". Among them were Douglass and Talal who accused social researchers of bias in leaving out religion; Gilles Kepel (1994) who made reference to "the revenge of God" by way of an upsurge in religiously-based conflicts arising from three universal religions of Christianity, Judaism and Islam; Johan Galtung (1991) talking about emerging conflict formations after the Cold War and cosmologies; Jeff Heynes (1993), Johnston and Sampson (1994) on religion as a missing dimension of statecraft, etc. In 1993, Huntington published his famous article on the clash of civilizations and had deep concern about the role disputing civilizations, driven by religion, would play in the new world order following the demise of the Cold War (Huntington 1993). Although many

of these works were keenly debated within the scholarly community, they did point to the increasing recognition of the role of religion and other forms of identity in shaping post-Cold War conflicts.

Theories Of Religion And Conflict

Two broad categories of theory have emerged to guide our understanding of the nexus of religion and violence, namely the primordialist and the instrumentalist approaches.

Primordialism

Primordialists argue that differences in religion and religious traditions help explain violent interactions between religious groups as different actors form alliances along similar cosmologies or religions. They add that when these compete with other cosmologies, tensions can rise leading to violence. It believes that cultural and historical differences, including ancient hatreds create diverging interests, and it is possible for conflicts to take place over and between civilizations that are built on different cosmologies (Hasenclever and Rittberger 2000, Huntington 1993)

Instrumentalism

Instrumentalists on the other hand argue that although religion may aggravate conflict once it has occurred and been caused by other factors, religion is hardly a cause of conflict, let alone violent conflict. They believe that the politicization of religion and religious identities and the radicalization of religious communities become a possibility when there is a situation of economic and political decline (Hasenclever and Rittberger 2000). Following this, self-interested political entrepreneurs can mobilize loyalties into violence using either religious or ethnic markers. They contend that political leaders play an important role in manipulating their followers and supporters to violence as they justify violence as God's war. The instrumentalisation of religion has been made possible by many factors, among them the failure of development and failed modernizations that have created Vacuums which are conveniently filled by religion. Thus, the surge in religious revivalism does not narrowly represent growing beliefs, but the product of what Heynes calls "political dead ends" (Heynes 1993). People who cannot look up to governments to tackle development problems and poverty readily embrace religious ideologies, including the most dangerous of them. One means of determining a relationship between religion and conflict is by examining the roles played by religion in violent conflict.

These include, in the main, but are of limited to:

- (a) Religion plays the role of identity where the markers of groups and their members are known.
- (b) Religion provides boundaries and means of demarcation between groups manifesting as "us" versus "them"
- (c) Religion plays the role of mobilization of faithful's around competing identities especially religion based on the politicization of such identities.

The Relationship Between Religion, Peace and Conflict

Until recently, the conventional wisdom has been that religion is an irrelevant social value and should be kept out of public affairs including international diplomacy. Consequently, de-secularization has been caricatured as a regressive, fundamentalist, backlash against progressive, emancipatory forces of secular modernity, inevitably causing intolerance, war, devastation, political upheaval, and even the collapse of international order. Many argue that this can be evidenced by the growing number of violent inter-communal conflicts that has loomed large in many parts of the world following the collapse of the Soviet Union (Johnson, 2010)

However, the same event; the collapse of the Cold War and the subsequent attack on the World Trade Centre on 9/11 in US drew the attention of scholars to the question of religion, conflict and peace (Little, 2000). It is not as if religious conflicts have not been there before. Rather existing ethno religious conflicts, which we had become familiar with, such as those of Sri Lanka, the Sudan, Israel-Palestine, Kashmir, Cyprus, and so on were all cast in a new light as a result of the changing international climate. It was not that these conflicts suddenly erupted when the Cold War ended: rather, it was that we began to perceive them in a new way. Similarly, the subject of religion and peace can also be traced to the demise of the Cold War (Little 2000).

Since then there has been a growing interest in the constructive side of religion and not just its destructive side. Indeed, there has been a kind of revolution in thinking about violent conflicts and the constructive role of religion. There has also been a growing interest among religious practitioners in conflict resolution, mediation, and conciliation, and other non-violent techniques. Religious and non-governmental groups have increased their activities to assist in negotiations or create an environment conducive to peace. As further illustrations of these important changes, terms like "forgiveness, "mercy" "reconciliation," and "restorative justice," which were previously the exclusive preserve of theology and religious worship, have moved to the Centre of public discussion. These terms are today widely used by politicians, lawyers, diplomats while trying to find the best way to organize post conflicts settlements including truth and reconciliation programs (Little 2000).

Conclusion/Recommendations

The paper has tried to show that religion plays the role of mobilization of faithful's around competing identities especially religion based on the politicization of such identities. While the main aim of peace is to bring about the cessation of hostilities by working on parties and persuading them to look for and utilize non-violent alternatives; and conflict on the other hand connotes a confrontation between one or more parties aspiring towards incompatible means. Similarly, because of the inherent conflictual characteristics of religions; it requires depth state craft (via constitutional arrangements) and leadership to manage the coexistence of a modern multi-religious state system such as Nigeria. It

therefore requires a conscious and deliberate education of the citizenry to imbibe the virtues of tolerance, restraint and respect for others without which there could be violence, chaos and eventually disintegration of the policy. Moreover, caution should be taken not to overestimate the function of religion in conflict or peace making situations to the exclusion of other factors and dynamics involved.

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