



CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF RELIGIOUS ISSUES IN NIGERIA'S BROADCASTING SPACE

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Abstract

Nigeria is a nation with diverse religions, cultures, languages, and ethnic groups. This diversity plays out in various dimensions of its life. As well, one can put it to either constructive or destructive use. Unfortunately, the tendency to use this diversity negatively often makes some people have misgivings about this great heritage. However, this paper does not dwell on all aspects of Nigerian diversity. Instead, its focus is on the religious dimension, particularly religious issues. These comprise the issue of religious protectionism, the existence of diversity within different religions and denominations/sects, politicisation and commercialisation of religion, religion-culture/tradition dichotomy, and fanaticism-heresy phobia. So, the new task of broadcasting media is to disseminate information that deescalates religious tensions and improves the peaceful coexistence of all the citizens of Nigeria. With the analytic method and agenda-setting theory as the primary tools, this paper treats these issues in the context of Nigeria's broadcasting space. It shows how broadcasting media influence these issues, the necessity of the National Broadcasting Commission as the regulatory body, and the National Broadcasting Code as the embodiment of the fundamental requirements for religious broadcasting in Nigeria. Finally, the paper suggests ways to maximise the positives of broadcasting religious issues and minimise the tendency to put the same into harmful use.

Keywords: *Broadcasting, Code, Diversity, Fanaticism, Heresy, Issues, Politicisation, Protectionism, Religion*

1.0 Introduction

It is unarguable that Nigeria is a society with diverse religions, cultures, ethnic groups, languages, traditions, and customs. Likewise, this diversity plays out in all aspects of the nation's life: social, political, economic, academic, cultural, information, and communication. Interestingly, each of these diverse natures is related to other issues. Thus, one can talk of religion-related issues, and culture-related issues, to name but a few. In this discourse, however, the accent is on religious issues, especially those with negative undertones on the corporate existence of Nigeria as a nation. These issues include religious protectionism, diversity within diversity, commercialisation/politicisation of religion, religion-culture/tradition dichotomy, and fanaticism-heresy phobia. Of course, in societies characterised by these issues, the "...choice of what or what not to broadcast is... difficult" [1]. The media as the fourth estate of the realm is susceptible to manipulation positive and otherwise, place and time notwithstanding [2]. The relationship between broadcasting and religious issues is all the more crucial, especially when viewed against the backdrop of thinkers such as Marshall McLuhan, for whom "the medium is the message" [3]. The story is different if one considers these religious issues in the pre-deregulation era of the Nigeria Broadcasting Commission.

On the contrary, the deregulation of the Commission in 1992 makes this much more appealing. Therefore, in this era of broadcasting media deregulation, there is the fundamental question of what constitutes the essential role of broadcasting media on the aforementioned religious issues. The question boils down to the extent to which the issues influence the choice of what to broadcast, the place, time, manner, and means of broadcasting

it. In this context, there are two camps. For the first group, broadcasting media heighten the volatile religious atmosphere in the country [4]. It implies that the media have "...helped in fanning and sustaining the embers of bigotry. The way it portrays religion places more premium on the altar of mammon than of the nation's wellbeing" [5]. Some broadcasting media have employed hate speeches coded in abusive and denigrating religious languages and unwarranted *ethnicisation* and politicisation of religion.

In contrast, the second group maintained a neutral stand. They argued that it is impossible to conclude that the media is guilty or innocent of heightening Nigeria's religious tensions. Instead, "...the growth of media coverage and production at the local and national levels, and in ever more varied forms, has accentuated the (perceived or real) religious fault lines by projecting them to a wider public. It has raised fears about religious conflict, and the spread of it, to a national, even international, level" [6].

In the face of the above negative depictions of the role of broadcasting media on religion, it is crucial to make a proper inquiry into the nature of religious media broadcasting in Nigeria. Conscious of the research design's role in realising the goal above, this paper adopts library research and observation of some religious broadcasts as veritable data sources. Besides, the research population is the entire religion in Nigeria, and the theoretical foundation is the agenda-setting theory, while the analytic method constitutes the research method. For a better focus on the theme of this paper, it is pertinent to begin this discourse with the clarification of concepts.

1.1 Clarification of concepts

1.1.1 Religion

The term religion means different things to diverse people. The way theologians conceive it varies from those of philosophers, anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, atheists, and Marxists, to name but a few. For instance, Karl Marx described it as the sigh of the oppressed (or exploited) creature, the sentiment (or emotion) of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. In sum, he tagged it "...the opium of the people" [7]. Others adopted the reductionists' view of religion. The reductionists consider religion as "any... strong belief in anything" [8]. However, such a notion of religion is erroneous. Even though religion entails belief, it is neither identical to belief nor just any kind of belief. Instead, it involves a particular belief that is quite different from a belief in science. Thus, "...religion is not synonymous with belief even though belief is part of it. It does not begin and end with belief. Besides, religious belief is not just any kind of belief; it is a special kind of belief which is quite different from belief in science, humanism, Marxism, or money" [8]. Religion likewise, is not identical to morality. The reason is simple: one can be moral without being religious, and vice versa. So, vis-à-vis morality, religion is simply a perspective - one of the viewpoints - from which one can evaluate morality [8].

Nevertheless, for a better insight into the term, religion is from the Latin word *religio*, which describes the religious act. Then, from *religio* are derived the three verbs *relegere* ("constantly turn to" or "consciously observe), *religari* (binding oneself back to one's origin and goal), and *reeligere* (to choose again to live religiously by one's origin and goal). The possible derivation from the three verbs thus offers converging perspectives, which are more than an etymology since they describe possibly religious attitudes [9]. From these etymological perspectives, religion is essentially a relationship. It is not just a bipolar phenomenon; at the same time, it is a triangular phenomenon. It implies that religion involves a God-man relationship and a man-man relationship. On the horizontal plane, it is a man-man relationship, whereas the God-man relationship occupies the vertical sphere. In this relational sense, Bouquet defines religion as "a fixed relationship between the human self and some non-human entity, the sacred, the supernatural, the self-existent, absolute or simply, God" [10]. Although it contains some basic features of religion, Bouquet's view of religion is deficient. It lacks the ingredient of belief, which is essential for understanding religion. Hence, there is a need to define religion to integrate all its essential characteristics.

Therefore, in this paper, one can define religion as human beings' response to an ultimate reality they consider superior to their being and owe their existence and sustenance. This definition outlines certain vital elements. First, it underscores that religion involves a response. It means that religion is not just a "feeling of absolute dependence on God," as proposed by Schleiermacher [11]. Such a notion of religion merely conceives man as a passive agent. When human beings are attracted to tremendous and awesome realities, the tendency is to respond either by shying away or by moving closer to understand the nature of the reality: just like Moses in the case of the burning bush (Exodus 3:15). In moving to find out the nature of the object of the awe, human beings begin their primary response to the source of the awe. The next stage is the concrete expression of their acceptance or rejection of the tremendous reality. In acceptance, humans express their loyalty via sacrifices and other worship behaviours. Nevertheless, in the case of rejection, humans also perform certain acts to show their disavowal, such as a quick relapse to their former objects of belief as a protective gesture.

Another aspect of the definition is that the reality in question is not some figment of imagination (*fictio mentis*). "The object of concern must merit and indeed demands man's careful attention" [9]. For it to qualify as warranting worship, the reality should be something which the adherent can in some way demonstrate its existence even if not comprehensively. There must be a way the advocates can argue about "the reality" to buttress their faith in it¹. Again the reality is not deserving of worship just because it is awe-inspiring. The reality, also, ought to be superior to the person in question. This supremacy partially informs the act of worship it provokes in the adherents. Besides, superiority is not enough. The reality worthy of worship should be the source and sustenance of the adherents. This aspect of belief knits the adherents firmly to the reality in question. The adherents now accept the reality as explanatory of their origin, existence, and end. Not the individuals alone; every other reality is explainable in and through this one ultimate reality. Conviction about this ultimate reality makes the take the responsibility of championing its course everywhere.

Further, it is necessary to underpin here that not all that people acclaim to be the ultimate reality are so. Such could be one of the reasons some people abandon some religions in preference to others; not in the sense of imperialistic dominance of the preferred religion over the others nor in the sense of religion of conquering by violence. Rather, against the backdrop, not all that fascinates awe is worth worship. Also, not all that appears superior at first sight is genuinely superior. Appearance can be very deceptive: as exemplified in the case of parallax, mirage, optic illusion, and the like. Thus, for a system to qualify as a true religion, it has to be a man's response to an ultimate reality whose supremacy is un-substitutable by any other being, and such should account for man's origin and end. Its worship should enhance man's relationship with other humans and realities. Religion should channel harmony and the peaceful coexistence of man and other realities. In a situation where "a religion" fails in this regard, it is either that it has not matured or that it is a false one.

Besides, one can define religion as "a system of beliefs and practices having reference to man's relation with God" [12]. In this sense, religion refers to various religious bodies globally, such as Christianity, African Traditional religion, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, *et cetera*. Therefore, in this paper, religion is taken in two senses: religion as humans' acknowledgement of the reality of a Supreme Being and religion as signifying different faith communities in Nigeria.

1.1.2 Broadcasting

The word broadcasting is a combination of 'broad' and 'casting.' Broad means expansive, large, extensive, wide-range, *et cetera*. On the other hand, the word "casting" could mean "a process of choosing actors for a play, film/movie" or an object made by pouring hot liquid on metal...into a mould" [13]. From this literal interpretation of the term, broadcasting means the act of pouring a thing into an expansive area. When

¹One can also represent the reality above with the pronouns "he" or "she," depending on the gender. So the use of the pronoun "it" in this paper is only a matter of convenience.

considered from information and communication technology, broadcasting means disseminating information at a vast range. The literal understanding of broadcasting synchronises with the agricultural method of seed-planting via casting them at a broad spectrum.

However, strictly speaking, broadcasting is a phenomenon in mass communication that involves the simultaneous transmission of the same radio or television-mediated information to a large, heterogeneous, and anonymous audience. So, "...to broadcast is to disseminate information through mechanical means simultaneously to a wide, diverse, and heterogeneous audience made up of individuals within and outside a society" [14]. Folarin conceives it as "the planned provision of information, education, and entertainment to large and heterogeneous audiences through the medium of radio or television" [15]. In this definition, the large, heterogeneous, and anonymous natures of the audience involved define the broadness of broadcasting. It indicates the expansive nature of the scope of broadcasting. As a result, one can also define broadcasting as "transmissions intended for reception by the general public, either directly or relayed" [16]. Such explains why Peters conceives broadcasting as the dissemination of audio or video content to a broad audience through any electronic mass communications medium, precisely one which employs the electromagnetic spectrum such as radio waves in a one-to-many model [17]. The phrase "one-to-many model" shows that the media broadcast information through one source but to a heterogeneous audience. For instance, the message broadcast from the Nigeria broadcasting station is for the entire recipients of the news. Notably, this development is an improvement on the system, which, at its inception, was on the "one-to-one model." The scope of broadcasting media comprises government and individually controlled broadcasting houses like public and community radio, private commercial radio, public television, and commercial television stations. Nevertheless, to situate religious issues in Nigeria's broadcasting space, it is necessary to shed some light on the broadcasting practice in Nigeria.

2.0 Broadcasting practice in Nigeria

This segment comprises two sections: Nigeria Broadcasting Code and National Broadcasting Commission, and the broadcasting objectives in Nigeria.

2.1 Nigeria Broadcasting Code and National Broadcasting Commission

The Nigeria Broadcasting Code is a benchmark for broadcasting services in Nigeria. It contains the basic rules and principles guiding broadcasting activities in Nigeria. Thus, "...the code represents the minimum standard for broadcasting in the Federal Republic of Nigeria" [18]. It serves as the paradigm for broadcasting with specific reference to Nigeria. As a standard for broadcasting in Nigeria, the code is a roadmap for Nigeria's broadcasting enterprise. It sets the standard and ensures fidelity to the paradigm via the National Broadcasting Commission. The code offers broadcasters the benchmark for their "...right to quality of broadcasting" [18]. One can apply the code in a dual capacity: spirit and the letter of the law, all to sustain the ideal of the broadcasting profession. The code is the agenda-setting mechanism of all the broadcasting practices in Nigeria. It provides the primary platform for evaluating all broadcasting operations in Nigeria. Nigerian broadcasting code gives the template for testing the purity test of every broadcasting service in Nigeria. The code is to the Nigerian broadcasting industry what a meter rule is to a straight line.

Conversely, the National Broadcasting Commission is a regulatory agency responsible for all broadcasting services in Nigeria. The underlying reason for establishing the agency is to serve the public. It sees to the implementation of the content of the broadcasting code. In carrying out this function, it bears the public's interest in mind.

2.2 The objectives of broadcasting in Nigeria

Broadcasting in Nigeria has five main objectives: social, cultural, economic, political, and professional. Nonetheless, the focus of this section is on the religious provisions in the code, which, of course, is part of the cultural objective.

2.2.1 Religious programming and religion

In chapter three of the code, there is an expressed prohibition of hate speech under any guise. Then chapter four shows the vital position religion occupies in people's lives and the reality of religious diversity in Nigeria. As a measure towards ensuring peaceful coexistence amidst this religious diversity, the code asserts that Broadcasters should:

- a. give equal opportunities and equitable airtime to all religious groups in the community it serves;
- b. ensure respectful and accurate presentation of religious programmes;
- c. ensure religious broadcasts, over which content, members of a specific religion exercise control, are presented by responsible representatives of the given religion;
- d. ensure religious broadcast does not contain an attack on or ridicule of another religion or sect;
- e. avoid the careless use of names, words, or symbols considered sacred by believers of a given faith;
- f. limit itself to the content of its creed, and not present in a manner as to mislead the public;
- g. ensure programmes promoting religion in any form present its claims, particularly those concerning miracles, provably and believably.
- h. ensure avoidance of rites or rituals involving cruelty, but where unavoidable, be presented professionally.
- i. notwithstanding the above, religious broadcasts shall not exceed 10% of the total weekly airtime of any broadcaster.
- j. not use the peculiarities of broadcast technology to mislead the audience, and;
- L. ensure that nobody exploits the weakness, handicap(s), shortcomings, or state of the desperation of members of the public [18].

3.0 Religious issues and Nigerian broadcasting space

Religious broadcast in Nigeria is not always faithful to the broadcasting principles above. The reasons for this breach range from the issue of religious protectionism to fanaticism-heresy phobia. Collectively, these are religious issues in Nigeria's broadcasting space. However, for a better insight into these issues, suffice it to analyse each of them in detail.

3.1 Issue of religious protectionism

Religious diversity is a basic fact of Nigerian society. Today, Nigeria has three main religions: African Traditional Religion (ATR), Christianity, and Islam. There are also other minor religions, such as Hinduism and Judaism. Religious diversity finds expression in all spheres of Nigerian life. It is a significant issue in Nigeria today as religion goes with belief, and adherents of each religion would like to protect and propagate the tenets of their faith to subsequent generations. As a result, the adherents of various religions are always conscious of the generational gap between them and their successors. The adherents are also aware of the importance of handing over to the next generations of adherents of their religious belief, rich and unadulterated deposit of their religious faith. Hence, as much as possible, they avoid issues that might threaten their religious faith, which in turn would negatively affect their posterity. It means that the adherents of various religious beliefs consider anything that could temper their faith from the broader spectrum of its implication on generations after them. Consequently, they regard such a destructive virus as requiring stiff resistance and handling with military dispatch.

As a medium of disseminating information, the media help the adherents of various religions propagate their faith's tenets. At the same time, the media can constitute an organ for engendering religious disharmony and even hatred of a given religion. Often such may result in bloodshed, all because the media set the agenda for what people think about and discuss. The way the media present an episode can influence its subsequent occurrence and its effect on the audience. Cases in point here are the Miss World Beauty Pageant crisis and Danish cartoons-induced religious issues spurred by the publications of *THIS Day* on November 16, 2002, and *Jyllands-Posten* of Flemming Rose in early September 2005, respectively. Muslims considered these two publications as defamatory of their faith. They, consequently, unleashed a series of attacks that received reprisal attacks from Christians. For instance, the Miss World Beauty Pageant crisis led Muslims to burn churches and kill innocent Christians, especially Igbo extraction. There was a reprisal attack on the Hausa and Fulani people living in the southeast, primarily in Onitsha. Unfortunately, some of the broadcasting media did not help the matter. Some of them presented live coverage of the reprisal attacks in a manner that elicited further attacks. Consequently, far from dousing the tension, these broadcasting media deepen and widen it, thereby engendering an atmosphere of fear, hatred, and insecurity of life and prosperity of the presumed enemies.

The incidents above indicate that media broadcasting in Nigeria today requires specific cautions. Such is necessary to avoid creating a situation that jeopardises Nigerians' fragile peace and mutual coexistence. Besides, such caution is all appealing, given the inevitability of interactions that ought to exist among Nigerians. Such regulation is a caveat against unwarranted infringement on the fundamental rights of different religions in Nigeria. It is also a guarantee of the possibility of the continuous existence of Nigeria as one nation. Further, it is a key to the nation's development as it ensures peace without which no meaningful development is possible. Once peace eludes a nation, development goes on holiday.

3.2 Issue of diversity within diversity

Diversity among different religions is not the only religious issue in Nigeria. There is, likewise, the mega problem of disunity within each religion and even within each denomination/sect. For instance, Islam consists of other sects like Sunni and Shiite Muslims. Also, in Christianity, there are many denominations classifiable into Catholics, Protestants, Pentecostals, African Indigenous Churches, and Evangelical Fellowship of West Africa. Besides, one can divide each denomination into conservatives and progressives. Each group, further, has its specific belief system that informs its actions and inactions. However, broadcasting information to the adherents of these religions requires nothing less than a carefully designed general code of conduct. To that effect, broadcasting space in Nigeria requires integration into its system with certain ethics to carry everybody along without fear of faith contamination. Subsequently, this implies certain restraints on the nature of issues broadcast to the public; to avoid another "Tower of Babel experience" (Genesis 6). So, it is vital to ensure proper media broadcasting of religious programmes using the principle of non-religious interference. The broadcasting code required, in this case, is subtle as a result of the complexity of the religious situation.

3.3 Politicisation and commercialisation of religion

Contemporary Nigerian society is where people can do anything for political purposes. As a result, some politician and their allied religious leaders have turned religion into corrupt political instruments. So, today membership in some religions is no longer solely on one's commitment to the belief system of "the religions." Instead, some religious affiliations have political undertones. Admittedly, broadcasting a religious programme of such a religious community is often fraught with problems as each faction has its preferences. Hence, the regulatory role of the National Broadcasting Commission is imperative in this context. The Commission ensures that the broadcasting media embark on cohesive religious programmes.

The commercialisation of religion is another issue that has today plunged religion in Nigeria into a deplorable situation. Contemporary society is one where the emphasis on "having" prevails over "being." Unfortunately, this frame of mind has dovetailed into religion. Today some people practice religion for money. They emphasise and display miracles, not for the love of alleviating the plight of the masses; instead, to attract more people for self-enrichment. In this context, the stress is on wealth, getting rich overnight without suffering of any kind. Those with the above mindset consider 'success through hard work' as a mode of life proper to people of the analogue era. For them, a successful religion guarantees wealth for its adherents. It operates on the Machiavellian principle of the end justifies the means [19] Despite the source and the cost, acquiring wealth matters in such a religion.

Under the above religious circumstances, other religions with different orientations towards wealth and earthly possessions feel threatened. They regard such as a mockery of the identity of Nigeria as a nation whose forefathers believed so much in hard work. Resultantly, broadcasting in such a setting is challenging as each religious group has some interests to defend and protect. Therefore, in the face of such a dilapidating religious system, the best option is to apply precautionary measures. Among other things, it involves moderating religious programmes, especially concerning politics. It implies that the broadcasting media should eventually set the agenda for the species of religious and political issues the public will discuss and think about. Thus, the audience's perceptions of political matters are, to a certain extent, dependent on the broadcasting media project.

3.4 Religion-culture/tradition dichotomy

Another religious issue of significant concern in Nigeria's broadcasting industry is the dichotomy between religion and culture. The culture of a people is their way of life. It is the totality of what constitutes a people as a distinct entity within the comity of nations. It is the fundamental defining attribute of a nation/people. On the other hand, the tradition of a people is the customs handed down from generation to generation. It informs their cultural practices and gives impetus to them. Often, there is tension between these traditional practices and religious beliefs, especially religions of Western origin. The tension, in some cases, results in direct or indirect confrontation. For instance, the issue surrounding masquerades has caused problems in specific communities. The problem may arise from the proponents of the traditional religion either intervening in the programme of the Western religious group or vice versa. In some other situations, some religious groups have invaded the religious cult of other religions without their consent. Situations as above have precipitated and continue to ferment untold problems that, if left unchecked, may metamorphose into uncontrollable situations. Broadcasting religious programmes in such an environment requires caution and should be inclusive in outlook. For this reason, it is crucial to apply the religious broadcasting code to forestall religion-culture/tradition harmony. So, the broadcast media code determines what to broadcast and the manner and time of airing them.

3.5 Fanaticism-heresy phobia

One of the problems various religions contend with is the issue of fanaticism and heresy. Fanaticism is overzealousness in religious matters. It is an act of taking religious beliefs to an extreme. Hence, a fanatic is a religious extremist. Similarly, heresy is either an exaggeration of religious truth or a diminution. Somebody falls prey to heresy by presenting the truth about religion either in an overblown manner or in a condensed and corrupted version.

As a people entrusted with purity and preservation of their various tenets of faith, each religious group tries as much as possible to protect things handed over to them. Each tries to shield the said religious beliefs from any faith virus. Such explains why the broadcast in various media is always a matter of great concern, as media constitutes effective channels for disseminating information. Again, some of the things children learn are from the media. Then, for fear of corrupting and corroding the minds of the future generations who are considered the possible beneficiaries of the religious faith, adherents of each religion do not trifle with the tenets of their faith.

As a result, broadcasting media avoid disseminating information that contradicts or runs down their belief system. Instead, what it disseminates to the public is often a treated religious piece. This final product ends up constituting the religious agenda for media users.

4.0 Conclusion

Nigeria is a multi-religious nation. This religious pluralism is evident in the multiplicity of religions in Nigeria. Besides religious diversity, religions in Nigeria confront other issues. However, this work admitted the apparent effects of the above issues and the roles broadcasting media play in orchestrating/balancing or diminishing/eliminating their effects. Of course, this is in tandem with Klapper's view that media reinforce attitudes [20]. However, it is good to remark that Klapper did not enthrone the media as the only opinion and attitude moulder. Instead, the media perform an agenda-setting role by influencing the religious issues that constitute the focal point of public thinking and discourse. So, to ensure the responsible broadcasting of religious issues, National Broadcasting Commission is relevant. Its primary role is to enforce and maintain fidelity to the National Broadcasting Code among all the media broadcasting houses in Nigeria.

4.1 Recommendations

The "media broadcasting of religion issues" in Nigeria is a situation that warrants urgent attention to achieve peaceful coexistence among the citizens of the nation. So, to reduce this tension, it is necessary to adopt the ethics of the media profession through:

- i. Responsible broadcasting of religious programmes by avoiding content that adds new elements to the country's existing religious tension.
- ii. Substituting hatred and pathological lies with love as part of broadcasting-religion advocacy.
- iii. Striking a balance between ethnic feelings and patriotism using broadcasting space and time.
- iv. Maintaining the equilibrium between deregulation/freedom of broadcasting and social responsibility.
- v. Integrating the multi-step flow theory as some of the audience not only operate based on what they know but preferably on what others tell them.
- vi. On the part of children, it is crucial to censor what the media broadcast to the public to ensure that it does not corrupt the original and authentic deposit of faith that each religion passes to posterity. Where such is not possible, they can air the programme at night when children are sleeping, or cautions are written on the body of the message to forewarn parents about the danger of exposing their kids to such.

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