NONVIOLENT RELIGIOUS TEACHINGS AS A TOOL FOR MUTUAL COEXISTENCE IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The incessant religious conflicts in Nigeria have proved very difficult to manage. These conflicts have continued to bedevil Nigeria as a nation. Therefore, if there must be sustainable peace in Nigeria, it must begin with religious peace. This study approaches the problem of inter-religious violence from a religious perspective. The concept of nonviolence is a religious conviction based on the principle of love which recognizes the common humanity and brotherhood of all mankind under the Fatherhood of God. This study, drawing from discursive and analytical approaches, proposes the use of nonviolent religious teachings as a viable tool for mutual coexistence in Nigeria. Nonviolence is a religious conviction that recognizes the dignity of human persons, as well as acknowledges and accommodates the beliefs and convictions of adherents of other religions. The paper argues that the culture of violence in Nigeria is not only worrisome and endemic, but also poses a serious threat to mutual coexistence among the adherents of the three major religions (African Traditional Religion, Christianity and Islam) and other citizens in Nigeria. Hence, well-planned modalities for nonviolent religious teachings can serve as a constructive religious management tool for mutual coexistence in the socio-political and religious spheres of Nigeria. The paper recommends the foundational and underlying principle of nonviolence, which is love for God, neighbours and enemies, as a vital tool for addressing the menace of inter-religious violence in Nigeria.

Keywords: Nonviolence, Violence, Religion, Religious Teachings, Mutual Coexistence.

Introduction

Virtually all religions agree on the comm   hical principle that war and violence are immoral. However, religious beliefs and practices generate conflicts more than they promote tolerance in Nigeria. The ethics of religious nonviolence is the personal practice of being harmless to self and others under every condition. It is the belief that hurting people to achieve a desired result is unnecessary and unethical. The philosophy of non-violence is an all-embracing concept that describes a range of methods or approaches for dealing with conflict in any given society. A common factor that characterizes all nonviolent methods is that they all share a common principle that avoids or abhors the use of physical violence against other people.

There is no doubt that nonviolence, as a concept of conflict resolution, has been advocated for and applied by different groups and individuals in different countries of the world (Arinze, 2002). Recent events show that most of the cases of violence in Nigeria revolve around the socio-political and religious settings. In other words, most of the violence in Nigeria emanate from the socio-political setting with a religious undertone. This development is sad and unfortunate. This paper argues for the relevance, adoption and applicability of nonviolent religious teachings in the socio-political and religious contexts, against the backdrop of the culture of violence in the Nigerian society. In order to achieve the objective of this paper, the study discusses the culture of violence in Nigeria, the concept of nonviolence, and the applicability of nonviolent religious teachings in the socio-political and religious contexts of the Nigerian society.

The Culture of Violence in Nigeria

The culture of violence in Nigeria is widespread and manifests in incidences such as kidnappings, ritual killings, political assassinations, armed robbery, ethnic violence and

hostilities, cult related killings and religious violence. The list is not in any way exhaustive. Recently, the culture of violence in Nigeria has assumed an alarming dimension of terrorism and killings by bandits and herdsmen. These have become daily occurrences; and both the news and print media are replete with reports of violence in different parts of Nigeria. Thousands of Nigerian citizens have lost their lives, and some have been injured, maimed or "displaced and have become migrants, victims of violence, even as they flee from their ancestral homelands" (Kalu, 2009). Wariboko (2015) posits that there is a plethora of literatures on religious conflicts in Nigeria (Adebayo, 2010; Salawu, 2010; Ukanah, 2011; Halliru, 2012; Sampson, 2012). One of the manifestations of violence in Nigeria is associated with religious conflicts. This is caused by religious rivalry and intolerance among the adherents of the three major religions in Nigeria, namely, Islam, Christianity and African Traditional Religion. There is also religious intimidation and discrimination in an attempt to dominate certain parts of the country. Boer (2003, 2004) underscores the culture of violence in Nigeria. He states the fact that both individuals and groups expressed their dissatisfaction over the spate and recurrence of religious violence in Nigeria. Boer describes extensively the religious riots, the killings, the violence and animosity, the burning of churches, mosques, homes and business premises. The severity of the culture of violence is further corroborated by Pflanz (2012). He expresses concerns that "Boko Haram may aim to provoke a civil war in Nigeria, with the intention of splitting the majority Muslim North away from the Christian South. Commenting on the culture of violence in Nigeria, Hinshaw (2012) reports a wave of devastating weekend assaults in Nigeria which killed more than 150 people, underlying how religious and economic grievances are coalescing into a dangerous mix that threatens the country's stability. These ugly incidences and terror attacks are inflaming religious and political tensions in the country; and if left unchecked,

could lead to increased insecurity and instability in the nation. For instance, when kidnappings, banditry and bombings are carried out, they may be directed against some specific targets, but the collateral damage usually affects non targets. When violence is directed indiscriminately against the larger society, it is tantamount to ruthlessness. This explains why in all cases of such violence, there have been both incidental and accidental victims. Political violence is another serious bane in the Nigerian society. There is no doubt that political activities have always featured a notable degree of violence in Nigeria. This is so much that there seems to be a kinship between political activities and violence. There is no gainsaying that almost all the political processes in Nigeria have been characterized by violence. The reason for this is not far-fetched; many of our politicians do not play the game of politics according to the rules specified by the Constitution and the Electoral Act. As a result, political campaigns, rallies and even elections are often characterized by violence and wanton killings. Closely related to this inordinate ambition is the struggle for the control of power and the wealth of the nation. As a result, some intolerant politicians have engaged in political assassination of their opponents or rivals. With a sense of powerlessness in the face of political and economic exploitation by the political class and their allies or supporters, the youths, most of whom are unemployed, have developed the conviction that there is no effective alternative to violence as a way of expressing their displeasure and frustration. Consequently, these youths resort to violence as a way of redress in changing the corrupt system of leadership. The resultant effect is the rise of militant groups in different parts of the country, which has now assumed an alarming dimension of terrorism and banditry. In most cases, government forces have responded to these violent agitations with commensurate or greater violence which has further escalated or compounded the culture of violence in Nigeria. Even the most recent elections that took place in Nigeria in February and March

2019 were characterized and marred by violence and loss of lives. Thus, political violence has resulted in bloodbath, instability and retrogression in Nigeria. It constitutes a national problem and is consequential to the unity and stability of Nigeria.

Another feature of the culture of violence in Nigeria is evidenced in inter-ethnic clashes and conflicts. These eruptions of violence have constituted serious national problem which is threatening the peaceful coexistence of Nigerian citizens. Undoubtedly, Nigeria has experienced political, ethnic and religious violence in recent years. Accord. Hinshaw, Moore and Mcgroarty (2012), posits that political and economic marginalization is gaining religious and ethnic undertones and the other way around. Suffice it to say that Nigeria has experienced enormous incidences of violence over the years. Remarkably, this discussion or review of the culture of violence in Nigeria is not in any way intended to discredit the nation or to undermine its integrity as a sovereign nation. On the contrary, it is done to underscore or establish the relevance and the dire need for nonviolence in the socio-political and religious contexts of the Nigerian society.

The Concept of Nonviolence

The term, "nonviolence," according to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, is "the practice of refusing to respond to anything with violence; it is also the avoidance or abstention from violence as a matter of principle." Weber and Burrowes (2011) posit that nonviolence is an umbrella term which describes a range of methods for dealing with conflict, which share the common principle that physical violence, at least against other people, is not used. However, it is evident that there is a considerable debate on the precise meaning of nonviolence. There are some who consider nonviolent action as an expedient technique for dealing with conflict or bringing about social change, while others consider nonviolence as a moral imperative or even a way of life (Sharp, 1973). Sharp (1973:46) makes a very significant statement about non-violent action:

> Nonviolent action is a technique by which people who reject passivity and submission, and who see struggle as essential, can wage their conflict without violence. Nonviolent action is not an attempt to avoid or ignore conflict. It is one response to the problem of how to act effectively in politics, especially how to wield powers effectively.

In essence, nonviolent religious teachings serve to teach adherents of the three major religions in Nigeria to live peacefully together and to accommodate people of other faiths and work for social changes without resorting to violence. Thus, nonviolent religious teachings impart a principle, a personal value system and a way of life on the adherents; and it is often linked with or used as a panacea for violence, bloodshed and destruction of properties amidst conflict or crises. Weber and Burrowes (2011) opine that nonviolence consists of acts of protest and persuasion, nonviolent intervention designed to undermine the source of power of the opponent in order to bring about change. This concept of nonviolence is very significant and foundational for religious leaders who are entrusted with the responsibility of teaching their members about the importance and necessity of nonviolence and most importantly, the sanctity of human life. Such nonviolent religious teachings will reduce violence and bloodshed, promote the stance that life is sacred and in the long run, result in mutual coexistence in Nigeria.

Nonviolence in the Nigerian Socio-political Context

The campaign for the application of nonviolence in the socio-political context should begin from the individual homes that make up the Nigerian society. There is a form of violence which Kunhiyop (2008) identifies as "domestic violence," that is prevalent in many homes in Nigeria, Such violence includes wife battering, destruction of property in the home, and unfair treatment of children. These forms of violence in the homes appear to be foundational to societal violence. Accordingly, Kunhiyop (2008) opines that domestic violence must be dealt with as an illegal and immoral practice. Children who

are raised in such homes are prone to be violent and abusive in their relationship with others. To inculcate nonviolence in the society, both parents and teachers must assume their responsibilities of teaching their children and pupils the virtue of non-violence. Children and youths should be taught to be tolerant, accommodative and considerate in their relationships as a way of promoting love and friendships. The popular adage that "charity begins at home" can also be applied to nonviolence. That is, non-violence should begin in the homes and extend to the entire society. Nigerian youths must learn to work together in peaceful coexistence, irrespective of their ethnic, political or religious affiliations. To ensure non-violence, they must imbibe the culture of tolerance and peace which are essential ingredients for mutual coexistence and nation building. Therefore, the onus lies on them to build strong ties of friendship and brotherhood which are foundational for a united and peaceful Nigeria. They should shun nursing and fanning the embers of disunity, hatred, acrimony and disharmony, and not allowing themselves to be used as agents of violence and destruction by insensitive and self-seeking politicians. Nigerian citizens must come to the realization and awareness that settling differences or expressing grievances with violence is unjust and unacceptable. The act of destroying and maiming other human beings with dangerous weapons of mass destruction is barbaric and unethical. These acts of militancy, banditry and terrorism which result in loss of innocent lives, with the attendant consequences of flooding the nation with orphans, widows and internally displaced persons, do not depict wisdom, justice and love which the major religions in Nigeria preach. Any nation that continues to spend huge amounts of money from year to year for security, rather than for developmental programs and poverty alleviation, is at the verge of collapse or disintegration (Dede, 2012). There is, therefore, the need for the practice of nonviolence in the socio-political spheres of the Nigerian society. Nigerian citizens have the obligation to uphold and preserve a legacy of

nonviolence for both present and future generations. Politicians should develop the spirit of sportsmanship to accept victory or defeat in good faith. Aggrieved politicians, after elections, should seek redress through constitutional means instead of resorting to violence and acrimony. Violence is an evil wind that blows nobody any good. Thus, nonviolent orientations and campaigns should characterize the socio-political atmosphere of Nigeria. All aggrieved individuals and groups should employ non-violent and constitutional means to seek redress. Nonviolent groups could be formed to address other socio-political issues and injustices. One effective nonviolent tool for addressing socio-political issues is civil disobedience. Nigerian citizens should recognize and apply civil disobedience as "an effective tactical weapon against a majority who are perceived to be instruments of social control" (Coleman, 1985:31). Sometimes, civil disobedience takes the form of conscientious defiance of laws, as a deliberate and influential feature of civil rights activity. Coleman (1985:31) underscores the essence of civil disobedience as follows:

> Civil disobedience is a public, nonviolent, and conscientious act contrary to law usually done with the intent to bring about a change in the policies or laws of the government. As a public act, then, the dissenter believes that his or her act is addressing the sense of justice of the majority in order to urge reconsideration of the measures protested and to warn, in the sincere opinion of the dissenters, that the conditions of social co-operation are not being honored.

Coleman (1985:31-32) explained further that "civil disobedience 'properly carried out,' supposes, then, that the normal political appeals have been made in good faith and that the standard means of redress have been tried". The fact underscored in the use of civil disobedience is that, it is a vital tool for social change. It involves a rejection of a moral demand of society, while at the same time admitting the legal right of society to govern (Coleman, 1985). According to Coleman (1985:37), some essential components for civil

disobedience include: "Direct action against a perceived injustice, done nonviolently and openly, performed in order to persuade, as a form of protest after words have failed, with a willingness to accept the sufferings and penalty of the activity". By implication, civil disobedience aims at effecting change in policies or laws through nonviolent means. However, because the pressure of civil disobedience exerts force on the authority by public embarrassment, there are attendant consequences. Notwithstanding, because civil disobedience is rooted in moral reason, and it is nonviolent in nature, it should be applied to the socio-political context of the Nigerian society, when and where necessary. As a measure to forestall further violence, there must be forgiveness and reconciliation. However, before genuine reconciliation can take place, there must be an exposure of the problem and the perpetrators of violence. This may generate more tension; but this is the import and essence of nonviolent resistance. According to Buttry (1994), nonviolent action exposes the injustices at the root of a conflict, but in a way that opens the possibility for resolution and restoration of the relationship. This means that whatever injustices that are aggravating violence in Nigeria must be brought to the surface through nonviolent actions and acknowledged by the parties involved if there must be a genuine reconciliation. The practice of nonviolence in the socio-political context may seem to be a formidable task. It may even sound like wild optimism to think that there would be a sudden transformation in Nigeria which is violence-infested. Be that as it may, a deliberate effort and orientation towards nonviolence holds a future for Nigerians, and will serve as a safeguard against further destruction of lives and property. Albert (1985) corroborates the idea when he says that socio-political nonviolence involves a variety of techniques and strategies (strikes, peaceful demonstration, rally, etc) through which groups of people can wield their social power effectively. According to Albert, this should be done with the purpose of effecting social or political changes in areas believed

to be unjust, oppressive or exploitative. Thus, in a social struggle, nonviolent action becomes the art of limiting the opponent's source of power, instead of resorting to violence (Albert 1985). The untold hardship, insecurity and loss of lives in the past and present, and the future threat to further loss of lives and property should compel Nigerians to adopt nonviolent alternatives in the socio-political context of the Nigerian society (Dede, 2012).

Nonviolence in the Nigerian Religious Context

It will be difficult to speak meaningfully about nonviolence in the Nigerian society, especially in the religious context, without approaching it from a theological perspective. The three major religions in Nigeria, Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion, all talk about love, peace and submission to God (or other deities). Wariboko (2015) observed that there are pacifistic elements in both Islam and Christianity. She averred that both Islam and Christianity have nonviolent teachings in their sacred texts that could be explored to promote mutual coexistence in Nigeria. These ethical teachings must be brought from the realm of theory to practical religious virtues. This is where the role of religious leaders becomes very prominent. Even though Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion claim that they exist for peace and well-being of humankind, there is always a variance between the fundamental principles or teachings and what takes place in actual practice. Ayokunle (2006:109) notes that "the past twenty years has witnessed a dramatic increase in the number of conflicts in which religion was the major factor". It may not be possible to point accusing fingers to one particular religion as the perpetrator of these violent acts because there are a number of cases of violence and counter-violence going on all over Nigeria. However, the claim that these religions exist for peace is not

far from the truth because in principle, almost all religions in the world aim at peace and love among all humankind. Unfortunately, some religious leaders assure those who fight and perpetrate violence in the name of religion eternal rewards (Ayokunle, 2006). The resultant effect is that even though these religions preach peace either directly or indirectly, there is a provision for violence in their theology which looks ambiguous and is, therefore, subject to misinterpretation by the adherents of such religion which results to violence.

Practical Ways of Applying Religious Nonviolence in Nigeria

As a way of ensuring and promoting nonviolence in the religious context, adherents and demagogues of Islam, Christianity and African Traditional Religion must be vanguards of peace. They should be involved in practical peacemaking initiatives. In other words, adherents of the three major religions must practicalize peace and love in both words (utterances) and deeds (actions). They must not trivialize violence or condone the escalating destruction of innocent lives in the guise of religion. One undeniable fact is that any violence done in the name of religion discredits such religion(s) and reduces the morale and witness of such religion(s). Thus, adherents of religions should imbibe the culture of nonviolence and adhere strictly to nonviolent religious teachings by resisting and protesting against all forms of violence. Stott (1990) posits that peace must not only preached, but it must also be embodied. Religion has been used to fuel violence in Nigeria. This has been done in two ways. In the first place, some religious texts make an open-ended provision for the fighting of religious or spiritual wars which those who want to foment violence can capitalize upon to achieve their devilish objective (Ayokunle, 2006). Secondly, some self-seeking politicians use religion to achieve their political ends using economic or ethnic considerations (Ayokunle, 2006:128). This use of religion for violence is contrary to the public image of religion as an institution that promotes love

and peace in the society. To salvage and restore this public image of religion, the leaders and priests of these three major religions in Nigeria have a vital role to play in teaching their followers to desist from acts of violence. They should discourage the use of violence as a guise of working or fighting for God or the deities. It should be underscored here that no religious group or individuals have the right to terminate human life which is made or created in the image of God. Every human being, irrespective of his religion or ethnicity, has a right to life, and to hold religious convictions. These rights to life and religious beliefs must be respected by all Nigerians.

Thus, the practice of enemy-love by Christians will set them aside as imitators and children of God. This enemy-love and forgiveness are paramount in achieving nonviolence in the religious context. The unending chain of violence and counter-violence, with their attendant colossal destruction of lives can only be terminated by nonviolent alternatives. There is no doubt that nonviolent religious teachings have produced results, and thus, can be a potent force in solving ethnic, political and religious conflicts or problems. Accordingly, the propagation and practice of nonviolent religious teachings will serve as an alternative to the culture of violence in Nigeria. Kolawole (2006:97) corroborates this fact when he says:

> As alternatives, nonviolence encourages dialogue and working together in resolving conflicts. Dialogue entails a willingness to resolve issues, classify positions, and explore alternatives. The fact that the parties would engage in it is a victory over breakdown of communication between them. In addition, the sharing will facilitate the healing of emotions. Working together provides avenue to interact, thus reducing the level of hostility among parties.

There is a basic assumption of nonviolence which Nigerians must understand and adopt as a tool for mutual coexistence. It has to do with a "complete appreciation and assimilation of the doctrine in all its implications by the people as a whole with consequent control over one's natural instincts for resort to violence, either in revenge or as a measure of self-defense. This means that Nigerians must learn not to meet hate with

retaliatory hate, or violence with counter-violence. To achieve nonviolence in the religious context of the Nigerian society requires a greater moral power, but the energy used in violence can be redirected towards nonviolence (Kolawole, 2006). Adherents and demagogues of Christianity, Islam and African Traditional religion in Nigeria should test the limits and possibilities of nonviolent resistance to injustice and oppression as a tool for mutual coexistence. This should be done in a sustained, carefully organized and solidly financed way. In order to actualize and promote mutual co-existence in Nigeria, there must be deliberate and concerted efforts to adopt nonviolent religious teachings in all spheres of the Nigerian society. As a practical measure towards peaceful coexistence, all Nigerian citizens should develop a national perspective. That is, their loyalties, as Nigerians, must be ecumenical or national rather than sectional. This means that their loyalties must transcend tribes or ethnic groups, as well as religions and political affiliations. This is the import and essence of mutual coexistence. Another way of ensuring mutual coexistence in Nigeria is to bring speedy justice on the perpetrators and sponsors of violence among the religious and political classes. This will be a pragmatic way to forestall further perpetuation and escalation of violence. One wonders how Nigerian youths, many of whom are unemployed, are able to purchase sophisticated and dangerous weapons of mass destruction which cost fabulous amount of money. It is, therefore, glaringly evident that some rich Nigerian politicians and religious leaders are directly or indirectly patronizing and sponsoring violence in Nigeria. Therefore, to forestall this ugly development, these faceless sponsors must be fished out and made to face the full wrath of the law. The peaceful coexistence of Nigerian citizens cannot afford to be sacrificed on the altar of impunity and so-called "immunity" of some political and religious sadists who are considered as "sacred cows" or "untouchables."

Conclusion

The practice and propagation of nonviolent religious teachings is an indispensable tool for the sustenance of democracy and mutual coexistence in Nigeria. The escalating and incessant spate of violence in Nigeria calls for an advocacy and adoption of nonviolent religious teachings. The unity of Nigeria and the peaceful coexistence of Nigerian citizens are greater than any individual or group interests. One vital principle of nonviolence which is relevant for mutual coexistence is the principle of love. Every

human being ought to be loved, irrespective of their likeability or traits. Such love is purely based on God's love for humanity and God's behest to love one another which is enshrined in the core teachings of Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion. It is quite difficult to love people who are violent and those who threaten lives. Nevertheless, peaceful ends must be pursued through peaceful means. In other words, destructive means cannot bring about constructive ends. Thus, the use of violence, even in self-defense, creates more problems than it solves. Only a refusal to hate or kill can put an end to the chain of violence in Nigeria, and by extension lead toward a united nation where all citizens can live together without fear or intimidation. In this sense, it is better not to be inflictor of violence. When violence is returned for violence, it multiplies the existence of violence and bitterness in the country. On the other hand, a refusal to resort to violence may develop a sense of shame in the opponents or the perpetrators of violence, and thereby bring about a transformation or a change of heart. It is futile to use violence to eradicate violence. Only the love of God in human hearts which expresses itself in nonviolence can break the chain reaction of violence. The propagation and practice of nonviolence is an indispensable tool for the sustenance of democracy and mutual coexistence in Nigeria. Nonviolence is both an ethical and a religious virtue. Accordingly, there must be a massive commitment to nonviolent religious teachings by all Nigerian citizens; and there is no better time to do that than now. The only justification for the use of violence as a last resort is when all religious, ethnic and political groups in Nigeria have committed themselves to apply and sustain the possibilities of nonviolent alternatives, but to no avail. By implication, all Nigerians must work together to achieve mutual coexistence through non-violent means and methods. Thus, nonviolent religious teachings should not be used merely as a tool for advocacy,

but as a philosophy of life and sacrosanct religious injunction for the promotion of peaceful coexistence.

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