

PEACE BUILDING IN NIGERIA THROUGH RELIGIOUS ENGINEERING AND EPISTEMIC JUSTICE

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Abstract

Religion is now very prominent in various academic literatures and the connection between religion and epistemic justice is a vital focal point in both social and academic discussions. Religious re-engineering is imperative ever than before to make religion more valuable, relational, transformative and developmental for societal change. Unfortunately, religion and governance are being undermined by socio-political factors with grave implications for the Nigerian society. Peace-building, in recent times, has become herculean task and it seems that the Nigerian government is mesmerised by enigmatic challenges facing the country occasioned by social unrest. The phenomenological approach was used in this study to explore the imperativeness of appropriate perception of religion and its significance. Religious traditions and attitudes need to be more adaptive, contemporaneous, contextual and constructive without losing archetypical intent of respective Holy Writs. Achieving a conflation of religion and epistemic justice is the thrust of this paper.

Keywords: Peace building, Epistemic justice, Religious engineering,

Introduction

Religion, as a primordial world-view and as an aspect of the superstructure of the society, plays both positive and negative roles and very consequential in the struggle for social justice in Nigeria. Religion has catalytic influence on the country, therefore it is imperative to consider religious re-engineering as a strategic issue and complementary mechanism to entrench sustainable peace in Nigeria. Akin to religious re-engineering is epistemic justice as a strategic instrument for healing political, economic, social, technological and legal injustices in Nigeria over which victims are painfully agitating for a respite.

The clamour for a restructure of Nigeria is a good agitation, especially by some notable regions of the country and some concerned individual citizens but unfortunately, even with several hypotheses suggested, there has been no national consensus. The word “restructure”, to some, is nebulous because of the vague concepts of structure upon which the country is founded. The term “restructure” depicts that there had been a structure before. Whereas, it is assumed that there had been a structure before but the question that should be asked is “by who and for whom was the structure made; and whose interest was protected by the so-called colonial structure of 1914?”

Considering the failure of social restructuring attempted through several summits, national conferences, workshops, theories, agitations and dialogues, it is time we have begun to embrace religious engineering and epistemic justice as complementary strategy for a wholesome

restructuring of Nigeria. To this end, religion is considered as a vital factor in the fabric of the country where almost everything is religious and religion is used to interpret everything but except religion is reviewed and justice ensured, there may be no restructure at all. Jean-Jacques Rousseau may have been right with his dictum, “Man was born free, but everywhere he is in chains,”. Rousseau, therefore, opines that humans should have compassion to sanitise their perception in form of what they know and how they relate with other fellow humans to keep themselves free from the chains, including perception chains.

Conceptual Framework

Epistemic Justice: This is a positive ethical conception of what is good differentiated from what is bad. Epistemic justice is preoccupied with healing wounds caused by injustice in the country. Epistemic injustice involves its unjust activities from non-epistemic power inequalities, domination and impunity of leadership which is pronounced in Nigeria. Fricker (2007) coined the term ‘epistemic injustice’ and considers it as a wrong done against someone “specifically in their capacity as a knower” or as an epistemic subject. Such epistemic wrongs are typically moral-epistemic failings and they tend to be intentional and non-structural. In Nigeria, the academia has epistemic power to exert epistemic influence to enable epistemic justice and to disable epistemic injustice but unfortunately; ethno-political and religio-cultural influences becloud the judgement of some people presumed to be knowledgeable even in the citadel of learning.

Epistemic justice is the proper use and allocation of epistemic power to prevent societal wrongs including governance and other institutions in the country. Epistemic justice protects from democratic inequality or injustices, educational dislocations, social imbalance, political insanity and religious challenges such as being experienced in Nigeria. Epistemic justice complements social justice by encouraging citizens to be prudent, smart and dynamic to take and enjoy their basic human rights in the country. Epistemic justice includes freedom of expression and systematic representation of one’s perception or world-view in communicative practices with confidence and trustworthiness. Thus, a society where epistemic justice is accorded its free course, social life and religious harmony and human security will be attainable.

Peace-building: Peace building is a mechanism for peace agenda, peace activism and peace advocacy for reconciling and restoring warring parties. Peace-building includes early warning and response efforts, civilian and military peace-keeping, ceasefire agreements and humanitarian assistance. Peace-building is an intentional, creative channel to foster peace. Peace building involves having positive approach towards a conflict situation because the costliest peace is more effective than the cheapest war. Peace-building aims at pre and post hostility preventive measures and its techniques include negotiation, reconciliation, meditation, and arbitration whether within official or non-official circular flows of efforts for motivational diplomatic system.

Aluko (2019) in the *Readings in Peace and Conflicts in honour of Professor Isaac Olawale Albert* reiterates that cultural value of *omoluabi* philosophy of the Yoruba and sasswood practices (trial by ordeal) of the Liberians are effective peace-building processes than the usual Western fiat system. Peace-building is a continuous process that involves a broad range of

activities that aim at consolidating peace and seeks to address both the root cause of a conflict and method of brokering peace in the aftermath of a conflict situation.

Religion

Various definitions of religion are nebulous and the concepts of religion may not always be strictly applied in real situation. However, some definitions are worthy of consideration for the purpose of analysing and clarifying the concept of religion. Religion is the acknowledgement, belief in, and worship of superhuman controlling power. Religion may also be viewed as a unified system of belief in a sacred being to which the adherents aspire to be conscientiously and scrupulously faithful. For instance, James Martineau (1805-1900), a religious philosopher propagated a thought that religion is the belief in an ever living and this was corroborated by Mbiti (1982). However, Martineau's definition has a particular object such as God, thus making the Theravada Buddhism which has no focus on any Supreme Being or superhuman non-religious. Martineau's definition seems to be monotheistic, therefore may be regarded as an intellectual concept.

A foundational figure in Protestant theology, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1784-1834) considers religion as "a feeling of absolute dependence". However, to some scholars, religion is viewed as a cultural system. In the early 1960s, Wilfred Cantwell Smith argued that, "religion is a concept by modern Western scholars and superimposed upon a variety of phenomena to create an impression that religion is a unified thing. Oyedapo (2022) describes religion as an essential primordial frontline of the human community which permeates almost all we do in the society and it is only based on the philosophy of foundationalism and self-justification of an assimilated world-view which may be contrary to the perception of others.

Religious Engineering: This is a transformational gap that religion has to bridge if it has any human value at all. The *sui generis*, unique concept of religion has to be reviewed. Religion has to be re-engineered to become more relational, transformative and developmental for societal change. Religion and nation building should be connected. This writer is neither talking about anchor partnership of religion and politics nor fusion of the church and the state, but that the church should engage her normative roles of initiating, leading, supporting and implementing all that is good for the land in tandem with the disposition of Jesus Christ in Acts 10:38 which states that Jesus 'went about doing good'. Religion should be complemented by epistemic justice in agreement with 2 Timothy 2:15 which affirms that we should study to portray ourselves as knowledgeable, skilful and shrewd believers and as beacons of light to the dark and dying world. Religious engineering affords religious actors the opportunity to review, reshape, revive and rejuvenate the existing church to be awoken to her responsibility to chart a proactive course for this generation and future generations.

Religion and Human Security in Nigeria

Security of persons, property, rights and other valuable things are fundamental to the achievement of sustainable peace while insecurity undermines societal peace and makes life vulnerable to attacks and loss of lives. A state is said to be secure when its protective mechanism like security architecture is capable of overcoming both internal and external threats and aggression. It is, therefore, necessary to articulate security consciousness, internal and external

mechanisms to confront political threats, religious violence, extensive human suffering, socio-political instability, crises and other social unrest that manifest themselves through non-state armed groups, and ethno-religious extremism.

Nigerian citizens including a broad range of diaspora communities around the world have always clamoured for restructuring of Nigeria. On July 12, 2017, the former speaker of the House of Representatives, Honourable Yakubu Dogara, affirmed on the floor of the House that, “restructuring of Nigeria can only be done through amendment of the 1999 constitution”. This assertion, captured by Premium Times, was graced with no socio-political seriousness. Agitations for restructuring the governance framework for Nigeria are from different regions of the country, especially South-South, South East, South West and North Central where the heat of political injustice is allegedly mostly felt and experienced till moment. However, the generality of people up till this moment are looking at restructuring as a ‘product’ without paying careful attention towards the significance of religion, culture and education as sectors that contribute to either the fall or rise of the country.

The outcome of bad governance in Nigeria includes social unrest and militancy, ethnic rivalries, assassination, gross insecurity, unemployment, illiteracy, poverty, corruption, weak social structure and vulnerabilities and without mincing words, bad governance has grave implications for the citizenry. In the same vein, activities that constitute different challenges to human security are violent crime, religious crisis, ethnic conflicts, social agitations, micro-nationalism, insurrection, terrorism, extremism, subversion, workers’ revolts, sabotage and banditry but it is appalling that religion has been implicated in all of these. Residents of urban centres face grave social conflicts as frequently experienced in Lagos megapolis, Ibadan, Abuja, Kano, Jos and Kaduna. Many of the social conflicts are volatile and are linked to underdevelopment and deprivation of means of livelihood. Religious adversity, multi-cultural and multi-ethnic nature of Nigerians are a veritable cause of religious and communal conflicts. Worse still is the political inability to evolve sustainable transformational structural system and managerial skill for sustainable peace in Nigeria.

The Eisegesis of the Writ and its Implications for Nigeria

Hermeneutic challenges that characterise dominant religions in Nigeria need to be re-examined and revised. Religious practices in Nigeria are intertwined with culture and both come as world-views that are incurably assimilated for existential relationships. It may be easy to neglect the building blocks of religion when considering restructuring but without religion, the restructuring may not yield the desired result. The gap between the received faith in its textual and social forms and the religious experiences and impulses being witnessed in the contemporary world is heart-breaking. There is a wide epistemic gap between the “prophet” (those who found the religions) and the legalists (those who regulate, implement and organise religious behaviour in institutional forms). Quarrels are common over doctrines, lifestyle, and conduct through rites, rituals and ethical norms. No aspect, whether experiential, mystical, ritual, ethical, doctrinal or institutional of the world’s religion escapes some social conditioning, hence sectarian and schismatic movements in an attempt to recapture the original spirit of religion and the respective religious founder’s intent.

The case of Deborah Samuel, an Economist Student of Shehu Shagari College of Education, Sokoto who was gruesomely burnt to death on May 15, 2022 on grounds of blasphemy against holy Prophet Muhammad has triggered reactions from different people in Nigeria and across the world. Where is the human value in a religion that supports the killing of fellow humans? Why should religious actors facilitate the untimely death of another human being? Is religion no longer protective, forbearing, forgiving and comforting? Did Prophet Muhammad actually say that the culprit of blasphemy be killed without recourse to investigation and consideration of thought implied in the victim's heart? What motivates interpretation of the Holy Writ? Preachers should not be spurious in the handling of the holy Writ when using contemporary meanings for its interpretation. There is no doubt that religion has human values but at the same time, religion has often been used by fundamentalists to radicalise their purposes without due diligence. Today, Nigeria is almost in a comatose with several dimensions of ungoverned spaces that are so consequential for country's political, socio-economic and environmental security.

Apostle Paul's concern and passion for knowledge has a central place in religious engineering and epistemic justice by aspiring to know Christ and the power of his resurrection... thus, passion for knowledge is inevitable in religious engineering and epistemic justice. This is equally affirmed when Paul was admonishing his protégé, Timothy, a future leader and bishop, to be approved for private and public assignments, rightly appropriating the word of life.

Yagboyaju and Akinola (2019) posit that governance and political leadership in Nigeria have been driven by self interest and other primordial considerations which take priority over that of public good. Thus, the incapacity of political leadership to sustain enduring public good corroborates the position of Yagboyaju and Akinola. Nepotism, religious bigotry, institutional weakness, infantile leadership, ethno-religious crisis, economic stagnation, large scale corruption, insurgency and terrorism have negatively contributed to the stigmatisation of Nigeria among committees of states.

Infantile political leadership has triggered social protests including strikes of Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), Non-Academic Staff Union (NASU), Academic Staff Union of Polytechnics (ASUP) and other allied academic and non-academic unions. History has shown that no country can grow and enjoy steady development without due process and due diligence paid to epistemic justice. Political leadership that fails to embrace post-modern leadership style which is less bureaucratic and less hierarchical concept of leadership cannot satisfy the aspirations of the citizenry. Worse still is the absence of true federalism in Nigeria which has made the president to be too powerful at the centre while the six geo-political regions are institutionally weak and helpless. The fiat system of governance has negatively impacted almost every fabric of the country including the church. The unholy romance between the state and religion seems to be a calculated attempt to weaken religious actors so that they can always be manipulated by the state.

Ayantayo (2019) opines that religion calls for understanding to know the motivation behind the principles and practice of each religion. Religion still serves several purposes and can be used to transform the society but the opportunity it offers has been sub-optimally utilised. Likewise, Bamiloye, (2020) in his contribution to *Contemporary Issues in African Missions* extended this

body of knowledge by suggesting that drama and film are effective weapons of revival and evangelism directed towards both religious engineering and epistemic justice to foster peace in Africa and consequently in Nigeria.

(Chitando 2005), a Zimbabwean religion academic, reports that Christianity came to most of sub-Saharan Africa through missionaries from Western Europe and North America, especially in the nineteenth century. These missionaries generally tried to set up local congregations and church organisations among those that were familiar with their foreign countries. However, by the end of the nineteenth century many African Christians had formed independent denominations as a form of reaction against the racism that came to the fore in the age of the new imperialism between 1870 and the beginning of the First World War. According to Ogunbible (2015), this was the foundation of independent Indigenous and African Churches. Africans, by the 1920s had taken it upon themselves to couch the Christian message in African idiom. Rejecting the verdict of most foreign missionaries that African culture was heathen and in need of cleansing by the gospel, many founders of African Indigenous Churches (AICs) actively sought to appropriate indigenous traditions in their movements. Despite the fact that most of the founders had little or no formal education, they succeeded in creative adaptation of 'Africanness' in religion, and the Christian message was contextually transformed and interpreted. Some of these founders included Oshitelu, Orimolade (Cherubim and Seraphim), Joseph Ayo Babalola and the Precious Stone Society (Christ Apostolic Church), and Ijo Orilede Adulawo ti Kristi (National Church of Christ) founded in 1919 by the Reverend Adeniran Oke in Ibadan.

Ogunbible (2015) agrees that these founders, cropped up, as a natural development of the meeting of Christian message with the cultures of the African people. Their message was basically on two themes: complete saving faith and undiluted reliance on God in the context of "Africanness" in Christendom. Islam also has a multiplicity of groups including Islamic intellectuals (Neo-Libertarian). Others are the Sunni Islam, the Wahhabism (Salafism), the Shi'i Islam, the Alawis, Khariji Nigeria: Tijanniya and Qadariyyah, although the Qadariyyah has more elitist adherents who are predominantly among the aristocratic Fulani ruling houses and the privileged members of their society. Unfortunately, with the multiplicity of religious activities, even in contextualised manner in Nigeria, human values are still daily eroded. For instance, the Tijaniyyas are mostly common and poor people *talakawa* among northern Muslims and these less privileged people are used to foment religious and ethnic trouble in Northern Nigeria. Solagberu (2018) alludes to the fact that these Tijaniyyas are always at the beck and call of the aristocratic Qadariyyah group who engage and finance violent conflicts in Nigeria. The impact of faith organisations is yet to be well felt even with many churches hewn out here and there in Nigeria because the motive for establishing churches may not, in many cases, be to serve God but rather, for economic purposes. For this reason, religious engineering, and epistemic justice, are both important and urgent mechanisms to save Nigeria from total collapse.

Conflation of Religion, Politics and Ethnicity in Nigeria and its Challenges

Religion, politics and ethnicity are intrinsic denominators of conflict in Nigeria. It is paradoxical that religion is classified among conflict drivers at the local and state levels while at the same time, religion is manipulated in both the political and ethnic spaces. Protracted social conflicts are characterised by parochial, incompetent, fragile and insensitive government that fails to

provide basic human needs. The trilogy of religion, politics and ethnicity are like a Siamese twin, hardly separable, thereby eroding objectivity, integrity and independence of thought among leaders and concerned stakeholders in Nigeria. The consequence of this social trend has been severe for the citizenry and with no relief in sight. In Nigeria, religion has been politicised to the extent that the Courts of justice have been suspected in both religious and political matters . The choice of former Borno state Governor, Senator Kashim Shettima as the All Progressive Congress Party (APC) Vice-Presidential candidate or running mate of Asiwaju Bola Tinubu, has sparked a lot debate among Nigerians. This also places a task on our perception of religion and politics which has to be restructured to move the country forward. For instance, the former Secretary to the Government of the Federation (SGF), Engineer Babachir Lawal, has rejected Senator Kashim Shettima as the running mate of Tinubu, in the Presidential 2023 election.

According to him, the following contraption in the APC structure will have great implication for the party. He further analysed the contraption as follows: Muslim President (Lagos); Muslim Vice Presidential candidate (Borno); Muslim National Chairman (Borno); Muslim President (Katsina); Muslim Senate President (Yobe); Muslim Speaker (Lagos); and Muslim Deputy Speaker (Plateau). However, from another perspective, a chieftain of the same All Progressive Party (APC) in Akwa Ibom state, Esemey Eyiboh on 11 July, 2022 has said that the challenges plaguing Nigeria ranging from insecurity, poverty, to dwindling fortunes is not as a result of religion, stressing that Nigerians should remove the issue of religion in the country's governance and embrace transformational leadership.

While the APC controversy rages on, the People's Democratic Party (PDP) is equally criticised over both its presidential candidate and chairman coming from the northern part of the country. This, to some of the party loyalists, is political marginalization or exclusion. The antagonistic posture of five southern governors of PDP attests the lopsidedness of the presidential candidate and the chairman of the party both coming from one ethnic group in the country. Thus, the question of both religion and ethnicity in Nigeria is enigmatic.

However, perception engineering could solve the problem of distrust if political integrity that has been bastardised is restored. The polity has been heated up and religion politicised, hence the palpable fear that the Muslim-Muslim ticket was described by Lawal as a 'disastrous error and a grave injustice'. To resolve the imbroglio, Olawepo-Hashim, an active APC stalwart, opined that there is no need to divide Nigeria over religion, instead the electorates should, at the polls, with their votes, judge insensitive political parties and politicians. This view was corroborated by Peter Obi, a presidential aspirant under the Labour Party, saying that the electorates should not trust any tribe or religion but rather, they should consider an informed conscience or free vote as a principal motivating factor when voting.

Religious violent conflict is often caused by latent socio-cultural, ethnic or economic factors. These latent sources of conflict are often expressed in form of grievances, strife, bitterness, offences and animosity against other particular religious groups. When a conflict reaches a dangerous momentum, the extremists take over and have the upper hand. At this point, religious conflict becomes violent and intractable. Religion is at the core of much of the crises around the globe; hence religion is a contentious issue. Since religion promises eternal salvation to

adherents, it has become a central part of many individual's identities which, if threatened, the adherent may go to any length to protect his religion and this is a primary motivation for ethno-religious nationalists. Some aspects of each religion make it susceptible to being a latent source of conflict. All religions have their accepted articles of belief, dogma that followers must accept without question. This often leads to intolerance and inflexibility in relation to other beliefs and it is this intolerance or non-compromise that triggers religious violent conflict.

Extremists are particular about their own interpretation of their religious scripture and would do anything to force their opinion on others, whereas this is often times, against moderate views. Extremists resort to radicalism to impose their own religious views on liberal co-adherents and non-adherents. Fundamentalists of any religion tend to take a Machiavellian view of the world. For instance, Abbott (1957) comments on America's new Christian right and Jama'at-i-Islami of Pakistan, which have operated largely through constitutional means to pursue intolerant ends. Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine have engaged in violence, though in pursuit of selfish ends. Radical Jewish cells in Israel and Hindu nationalists and Sikh extremists in India are other examples of fundamentalist movement driven by perceived threat to faith. Thus, religious revivalism is powerful and it can provide a sense of purpose and pride but in places such as Srilanka and Sudan it has produced a strong form of radicalism that has periodically led to discrimination, intolerance and violent conflicts. Fundamentalists see themselves as divinely directed, hence they resort to violence and do all they can to crush obstacles in their way to achieve "eternal salvation".

Conclusion

Nigeria has not been freed from religious constraints since religion has not ceased to dominate our social space even though it is metaphysical and non-scientific. It is obvious that religion has dominated our thoughts, politics, geography and behaviour. Sequel to this, religion in Nigeria has definitely been devalued owing to social, political, ethnic and epistemic factors. However, epistemic justice and religion have to interface smoothly for the common good of all Nigerians and this is achievable if Nigerian citizens as well as religious leaders can consider and reflect on their religious motives and goals. Thus, it is imperative that our perception in the modern world has to be re-engineered to entrench human security and peaceful co-existence with people of other living faiths through dialogic endeavours.

The three monotheistic and linear religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam sourced from Abraham are the culprits of religious intolerance and social unrest, going by their observable testimonial and hermeneutic injustices in their practices and dimensions of injustice involving prejudices, social background, ethnicity, gender, and interpretation of respective scriptures. It is therefore, recommended that religious actors take advantage of current knowledge-economy to facilitate and promote peace-building and peacemaking among the traumatized and vulnerable citizenry. It is also recommended that religious actors, political gladiators and peace activists engage evaluation capacity development (ECD) to evolve a new Nigeria where authority, responsibility and accountability are mutually reinforced to transform individuals, organisations and Nigeria.

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