
RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE AND THE QUEST FOR PROGRESSIVE CHANGE IN NIGERIA

Ewere Nelson ATOI

Department of Religious Studies,
Gombe State University, Gombe, Nigeria
nelsonewere.atoi@gmail.com

and

Yakubu Kume BABALE

Department of Religious Studies,
Gombe State University, Gombe, Nigeria
yaksbabale@gmail.com

Abstract

The clamour for change in Nigeria's socio-political terrain in contemporary times is a strong attestation to the fact that this country is embroiled in acute social, political and economic quagmire. One of the issues serving as obstacle to Nigeria's progress as a pluralistic polity is intolerance. There are various categories of intolerance in Nigeria. They include religious, ethnic, political, and gender intolerance, among others. More acute is religious intolerance because the metaphysical nature of religion makes it to be easily manipulated and dragged into other issues of public life. Therefore, this study investigates religious intolerance with a view to underscore how it has encumbered progressive change in Nigeria. Historical, critical, analytical and constructive methods of research were adopted for this study. Leaning on the theory of religious relativism, this paper ascertained that the issue of religious intolerance has indeed encumbered Nigeria's effort towards positive change and development in the areas of security and social stability, economic prosperity, democratic transformation and consolidation, integration of values and national unity. The authors submit that for Nigerians to experience progressive change in public life, religious adherents across religious divides must demonstrate genuine attitude of tolerance towards believers of other faith traditions in the country.

Keywords: Pluralistic Polity, Religious Intolerance, Progressive Change, Public Life, Nigeria

Introduction

Nigeria as a multi-religious and multi-cultural polity is today confronted with myriad social, political and economic challenges, such as religious conflicts, electoral violence, insurgency, human and food insecurity, epidemic diseases, systemic corruption, mass unemployment, and youth restiveness, among others. The clamour for change in Nigeria's socio-political terrain in contemporary times is a strong attestation to the fact that this country is embroiled in acute social, political and economic quagmire. The focal point of issues characterising Nigeria's pluralistic polity is the problem of intolerance. In contemporary Nigeria, intolerance has religious, ethnic, political, and gender dimensions, among others. More acute is the religious dimension because of the metaphysical nature of religious beliefs. Basically, religious intolerance is simply a preconceived and unreasoned notion of religious beliefs and practices which often lead adherents of a particular religion to antagonise their religious neighbours in a multi-faith society. It is pertinent to note that religious intolerance has increasingly confronts adherents of different faith traditions who have friendly disposition and genuine desire for peaceful co-existence with their religious neighbours in Nigeria's pluralistic polity.

It is imperative to state that the religious dimension of intolerance seems to have heated up the polity and contributed immensely to the numerous problems bedeviling the Nigerian state, because religious belief by its very nature can be easily manipulated by the major players in the Nigerian public sphere. Religious intolerance, no doubt has crept into the socio-political and economic space of the Nigerian society. In fact, there is no gainsaying that it has eaten deep into the fabric of the Nigerian state in contemporary times because its manifestation is noticeable in nearly every strata of the country's public life. Inter-religious and socio-political relationships in Nigeria have been soiled with severe religious antagonism, hatred and suspicion because of the issue of religious claims and intolerant attitude of adherents of Islam and Christianity toward other faith traditions. The determination of these two major religious traditions to promote and market their monotheistic

ideology in public life has made the matter worse. Little wonder Mamdani asserts that:

Islam and Christianity have in common a deeply messianic orientation, a sense of mission to civilize the world. Each is convinced that it possesses the sole truth, that the world beyond is a sea of ignorance that needs to be redeemed. In the modern age, this kind of conviction goes beyond the religious to the secular, beyond the domain of doctrine to that of politics... (2000, 768).

Similarly, Manus (2006) posits that the place and role of religion and politics must be seen in the light of the socio-political and economic environment in which Islam and Christianity aggressively compete as missionary religions in Nigeria. Falola (2008) contends that in countries where Islam and Christianity compete as the case of Sudan and Nigeria, the problem of stability and identity have been compounded by rivalries for religious ascendancy resulting in the desire for religious contest or even the turning of the state into a theocracy and imposition of religious ideology. It is apposite to state here that religious intolerance is a force that has packaged the thought pattern of many Nigerian Muslims and Christians not to think outside what they believe in, and anything that appears to contradict their belief systems, they tend to oppose vehemently. Consequently, this has been a major source of social turbulence and violent conflicts among adherents of Christianity and Islam in Nigeria (Lenshie and Inalegwu 2014). Religious intolerance has continued to pose serious threat to peaceful co-existence of adherents of the various faith traditions in Nigeria, especially this period that weapons of mass destruction are readily available in the hands of extremists. In this regard, Gofwen (2004) asserts that religious intolerance has been identified as the major source of religious violent conflict in all societies on the surface of the earth, and permeating all forms of human civilisations, with attendant destructive tendencies. It is pertinent to state at this juncture that this problem of religious intolerance has continued to polarize Nigerian citizens along two major opposing camps, creating the cliché of ‘we versus them’ with hatred and violent tendencies toward each other.

This essay therefore, investigates religious intolerance with a view to underscore how it has encumbered progressive change and advocates a philosophy for addressing the issue in the Nigerian public sphere. This study being a socio-religious research which has socio-political and economic implications, adopted the historical, critical, analytical and constructive methods of research to achieve the above set objective.

Theoretical Background: Religious Relativism

This study is anchored on the theory of religious relativism. The relativist religious philosophy emphasizes the equality of all religious traditions and the need for tolerance and empathy among religious adherents in a multi-faith milieu. The motivation behind this philosophy is premised on the fact that all beliefs are proportionate to particular circumstances and as such, no belief can claim to be universally valid. This is so because beliefs are coloured by individual culture and worldviews. The criterion set out by most religionists to authenticate religious truth is only relative to individual cultural heritage and worldviews. There are no generally agreed standards for ascertaining the truth of religious beliefs (Kirk 2004). The relativists approach either takes the form of all religious faiths as relative truths, which are thus equal or specific religious belief being right and appropriate for certain individuals or group. For example, Christianity may be right for Christians and Islam right for Muslims, but there is no ultimate religion for everybody in the universe. According to the relativists, all religious faiths are equal because they all arise from one object of religious veneration (God), which the native culture then colours (Netland 1987; Atoi 2018).

The equality of faiths espoused by the proponents of relativism is clearly seen in the perennial philosophy postulated by Schuon in 1975 and the commonality of faith expressed by W.C. Smith in 1976 (Netland 1987). However, Joseph Runzo is perhaps the most prominent advocate of relativism. Runzo presented a version of religious relativism which he calls “heno fideism” – derived from the Greek word *heno* which means one and the Latin term *fide* meaning *faith*, whereby the correctness of a religion is relative to the worldview of its community of adherents (Meister 2009). In this light, it is understood that a person’s worldview determines how one understands and experiences the Ultimate Reality

(Atoi 2018). Additionally, corresponding to differences of worldview, there are mutually incompatible, yet individually adequate sets of conceptual-schema-relative truths. In other words, the truth and authenticity of a religion is determined by its adequacy to correspond appropriately to the worldview or cultural background of which it is a part (Meister 2009). The relativist religious philosophy discourages absolute claim to truth by a particular group of religious believers at the expense of others groups of believers in a multi-faith polity. Hence, relativists contend that tolerance should naturally be the guiding principle of religious practices in a multi-religious environment. Quintessentially, tolerance is regarded as the utmost importance in the ambience of relativism (Neill 1984). It is imperative to state at this point that the relativists' advocacy is a very good approach for addressing the phenomenon of religious intolerance in public life in any multi-faith polity the world over. This is the reason why religious relativism is adopted as the theoretical background for this study, which essentially focuses on the question of religious intolerance in Nigeria's public space.

X-Ray of Religious Intolerance in Nigeria

Religious intolerance in Nigeria is a foreign missionaries' legacy. The emergence of the two missionary religions (Islam and Christianity) in Nigeria ushered in intolerance and antagonism into the socio-religious landscape of the various communities that constitute the Nigerian state (Atoi 2016; Atoi 2019). According to Uzoma (2004), the advent of Islam and Christianity brought religious antagonism and social upheaval into Nigeria. This unpleasant religious development in Nigeria was set in motion when the foreign missionaries started describing the religious thought forms of the African people with derogatory terminologies such as primitive, savage, paganism, heathenism, idolatry, fetishism, among others. In the light of the foregoing, adherents of Christianity and Islam demonised the African religious thought patterns, which culminated into the destruction and burning of the sacred vessels, vestments, altars and shrines of the practitioners of African indigenous religion (Atoi 2019; Atoi et al 2019). Commenting on this unpleasant religious development, Idowu (1973) contends that it is wrong to speak of the religion of any living people with such derogatory terminologies. He further argues that it is not only inappropriate but also offensive to describe African

religious belief system in such manner. In a related manner, Ubrurhe (2000) observes that Christians and Muslims are contemptuous of African traditional religious beliefs and practices since they have developed the habit of destroying the images and symbols of African indigenous religion.

It is imperative to state that religious intolerance in Nigeria occurs both at inter and intra faith levels. That is, between one religious tradition and another, and between sects or denominations within the same religion. According to Ubrurhe (2000), Christian denominations and sects have often derided each other through songs, indoctrination of members and emphasis on their weakness. The history of Christianity in Urhoboland indicates that Catholicism that came later to the area condemned the doctrines of the Anglican Church. The rivalry between Catholic and protestant missionaries among the Igbo from 1857-1914 had negative effects which produced religious intolerance. A new twist was added to the occurrence of religious intolerance within the Nigerian Christian Churches with the emergence of neo-Pentecostalism. The neo-Pentecostal churches are characterised by their radical approach to Christian doctrines. They are more militant in their evangelistic and proselytizing movements, particularly with respect to their aggressive style of witnessing and their intolerant approach to all those they classified as “unbelievers.” It is pertinent to note that in Islam, the case is not different. Many fundamentalist sects have also sprung up among the Muslims, and these Islamic sects are in most cases intolerant of other Islamic groups as well (Uzoma 2004). The intolerant attitude between the Islamic fundamentalists and the orthodox stained their relationship. Thus, in the 1980s, the Maitatsine Muslim sect waged war against other Muslims whom they considered as unbelievers (Ubrurhe 2000). The Maitatsine was an Islamic fundamentalist sect that was very intolerant of other religious groups in the country, especially in the ancient city of Kano, in the 1980s. The leader of this Islamic group, Muhammadu Marwa was a radical Qur’anic teacher and preacher. He was very forceful, persuasive, charismatic and radical in his approach to Islamic doctrines. Marwa rebelled against many popular opinions among Kano Islamic circles, denouncing certain parts of the Holy Qur’an and even criticising Prophet Muhammad. He was opposed to most aspects of modernization and to all Western influences. He decried such

technological commonplace as radios, wristwatches, automobiles, motorcycles, and even bicycles. Those who use these items or who read books other than the Holy Qur'an were regarded as hell-bound 'pagans' (Falola 1998).

Moreover, there have been series of reported cases of religious intolerance in Nigeria's tertiary institutions since 1980s. Remarkable among them is the violent clash between Christian and Muslim students in Kafanchan. Kukah (1993) points out that the issue which started among Muslim and Christian students of College of Education, Kafanchan, Kaduna state, on 6th march, 1987, as a little misunderstanding, escalated into large-scale destruction of lives and property and went beyond the four walls of the institution to other parts of the country. This was allegedly caused by a Christian preacher, who purportedly used verses from the Qur'an to delegitimize Islam, while justifying the exclusive existence of salvation within the ambience of Christianity (Gofwen 2004).

The sharia conundrum is another issue that has generated so much religious intolerance in Nigeria since the topic was raised in the Constituent Assembly (C.A.) of 1978. The re-introduction of the sharia into the socio-political landscape of the Nigerian state by some northern state governors starting from Zamfara State in 1999, to regulate the social conduct of citizens has heightened the level of intolerance in the country. Gellar (2007) observes that in the predominantly Muslim states in Northern Nigeria, containing Christians and adherents of African traditional religion, movement towards adopting an extreme majority model imposing sharia law on all citizens has been a major source of growing inter-religious conflicts in the country.

The newest form of religious intolerance in Nigeria is the activities of Boko Haram Islamic fundamentalist sect that is currently threatening the co-operate existence of the Nigerian state. This sect has demonstrated high level of intolerance in the country by unleashing terror on both Muslims and non-Muslims alike. According to Onuoha (2010), the group seeks political and religious reform within the Nigerian state, specifically, the adoption of the Sharia law with beliefs based on the practice of Orthodox Islam. The sect has been so vocal in questioning the secular arrangement of the Nigerian society in favour of full sharia

implementation, and has a very strong hatred for secular education and government establishment (Alkali et al 2012).

Religious Intolerance as Encumbrance to Progressive Change in Nigeria

The contemporary religious situation in Nigeria has left us no option but to consider the thesis of those who describe religion as a double-edge sword that can mar or make any given society. Howbeit, a careful scrutiny of the phenomenon called religion shows that in itself, it is not a double-edge sword because the transcendental reality, which is the object of religious veneration in all the major world religions, is a single transcendental figure that transcends the entire cosmos. In this light, religion can only be described with the appellation ‘a double-edge sword’ when viewed against the background of religious intolerance, which has become pervasive in most pluralistic polity the world over. It must be admitted that religious intolerance has negatively affected the Nigerian society. In fact, the phenomenon has encumbered the country’s effort towards positive change and development in the areas of security and social stability, socio-economic prosperity, democratic transformation and consolidation, integration of values and national unity, among others.

Evidences abound that insecurity and social instability emanating from intolerance has created so much problems in the Nigerian social space to the extent that it has continued to hinder all efforts channel toward meaningful growth and development in the country’s national life. A very good case in point is the Boko Haram enigma, which has continued to overwhelm the Nigerian security agencies since 2009 when it came to the front banner of Nigeria’s public sphere. According to Adesoji:

The outbreak of the Boko Haram uprising in Nigeria in July 2009 marked yet another phase in the recurring pattern that violent uprisings, riots and disturbances have become in Nigeria. Given the heterogeneous nature of Nigerian society and the religious sensitivity of Nigerians, the situation could perhaps not have been different. But what is alarming is the forceful attempt by Islamic

fundamentalists to impose a religious ideology on a constitutionally recognized secular society (2010, 96).

This group threatens Nigeria's sovereignty, territorial integrity, peace and stability by targeting symbols of authority within Nigeria as well as committing a broad range of violent crimes such as robberies, kidnapping, raping, intimidation, molestation, detonation of bombs and other acts of vandalism (Nmah 2012). The intolerant attitudes of most religious fundamentalists and fanatics in Nigeria have led to widespread cold-blooded terrorism and virulent ideological struggle, which has continually threatened social stability and public order. Social insecurity and instability has become so alarming in present day Nigeria to the point that there is no more suitable word to describe the situation but to say that the country is experiencing the most turbulent time in history (Atoi 2013). This is a period in Nigerian history when social stability has given way to violent conflict and unfavourable ideological battle.

This country has continued to witness endemic destruction of lives and property in contemporary times as a result of religion motivated violence. In this light, one has no option but to ask some pertinent questions: Is the God religious fundamentalists claimed to be fighting for actually the author of peace? If the answer is in the affirmative, why has anarchy and insecurity become colossal in the Nigerian social space in the name of religion? Why have some followers of religion of peace become so violent to the point that they show very little or no respect for the dignity and sanctity of human life? On the other hand, can it be said that the God of peace has denounced his title and opted for a new title such as the author of violence, and gave his adherents a new mission of causing violence and social unrest in the Nigerian public space? When these poised questions are logically scrutinized, it becomes obvious that something has gone wrong somewhere in matters of religious beliefs and practices in Nigeria and beyond.

Another area that have suffered serious setback due to conflicts emanating from religious intolerance in Nigeria is the economic life of the country. Religious violence and insecurity resulting from intolerance have continued to hinder the economic prosperity of the Nigerian state.

The various activities of religious fundamentalists and insurgents have continued to rob off negatively on economic and business activities in most parts of the country, especially the northern part of Nigeria. It is imperative to note that most parts of the northeast that are mostly affected by the activities of religious bigots and terrorists are agrarian communities whose agricultural products are transported to other parts of Nigeria for sale and consumption. Hence, most economic and business activities in many parts of the country have been badly affected due to the fact that many traders and farmers have fled from their places of business and farms due to act of terrorism orchestrated by religious bigots. Many shops have been looted and agricultural farmlands destroyed by religious fanatics and insurgents who are bent on destroying everything belonging to everyone that refuses to accept their religious ideology. Some traders and farmers who summoned courage to continue doing their trading and farming were slaughtered in their shops and farmlands. A very good case in point is the killing of more than 43 farmers at Zabarmari, Borno state (BBC News, 29 November, 2020). Moreover, both local and foreign investors are afraid to invest in many parts of the country that is experiencing religious violence because no investor will want to locate his/her investment in a violent prone area where it would be destroyed or looted. The activities of religious bigots and insurgents no doubt have drastically reduced income and gross domestic product accruing to the nation, thereby affecting the economic growth and development of the Nigerian state.

One other area where religious intolerance has manifested greatly in Nigeria's national life is the country's democratic governance. Nigerian citizens have always desired positive changes that will lead to drastic transformation and consolidation of the country's democratic enterprise since the return of the Nigerian state to civil rule in 1999. However, such desire is yet to metamorphous into reality, because so many religious fanatics have allowed religious intolerance and sentiment to becloud their sense of reasoning, especially during electioneering. This situation and other similar ones have called to question the authenticity of the Nigeria's democratic culture. Little wonder, Ogundiya (2010) contends that the Nigerian press should stop drumming into our ears that Nigeria is a democratic country. He states categorically that neither during colonial rule nor since independence has Nigeria being a democratic

country. This submission was made by Ogundiya based on his believe that what we have today in Nigeria is a democracy without social, economic and political development. It must be said that every rational mind that has peruse the Nigerian political history and observed the large scale underdevelopment in the country's socio-political and economic space will have no choice but to share the sentiment of Ogundiya.

Reflecting on the issue of religious intolerance and violence in Nigeria's democratic governance, Nwaka (2012) observes that the expectation of a peaceful and stable Nigeria with a democratic experimentation was dashed when at the down of the 21st century democratization, the country began to witness a resurgence of violent uprising particularly of religious character. It is pertinent to state that the Nigerian state is witnessing increasing religionisation of politics and politicization of religion due to the resolve of some political elite to use religion as a vehicle to facilitate their political agenda. Odeh (2010) citing Kukah, argues that Nigeria had barely settled down to enjoy the fruits of its return to democratic rule when Alhaji Ahmed Sani Yerima of Zamfara State, announced that his state would formally adopt Sharia as its state law. The declaration opened the door of anxiety for the non-Muslim population in the country and the international community. The anxiety arose as people began to question the constitutional powers of the states involved to enact such laws. Citing international IDEA, Nwaka made the following observation:

The transition to democratic rule in Nigeria was followed by a resurgence of sharia question in the country. Some states in northern Nigeria adopted the sharia legal system in the wake of the fourth republic. This generated tension between Christians and Muslims particularly in the north. The basis of the tension was fear among Christians that the sharia would be made to apply to non-Muslims. The assurances from northern governors that sharia would be strictly for Muslims were denounced by Christians. Consequently, the sharia issue pitted Christians and Muslims against one another. The

plan by the Kaduna State House of Assembly to pass the sharia bill into law received a Christian peaceful mass protest, which resulted into bloody clashes that claimed hundreds of lives on 21st and 22nd February 2000 (2012, 130-131).

Sharia has become a problematic issue that has been threatening the survival of democracy in the country. Ever since the Sharia controversy re-emerged in 1999, it has created two major polemics: those in support of Sharia and those against its introduction. According to Odeh (2010), these two opposing positions have deeply polarized the country and caused a considerable stir in both socio-economic and political spheres of Nigeria. Moreover, the different Islamic fundamentalist sects such as the Boko Haram have continued to anchor their arguments against the Nigerian secular ideology on the sharia, which they regard as the best political ideology because of its religious character. This ideological controversy has constituted a great challenge to the Nigerian democratic governance to the extent that the governing authorities at all levels of government are sometimes handicap with regards to policy formulation and execution.

In a similar manner, Olupona (2014) opines that a major challenge facing the Nigerian state is how the practice of religion in the country increasingly inhibits the democratic process and governance. According to him, the most central issue today is how religious differences are affecting governance and public life. The politics of representation, which used to be dominated by ethnic affiliation, is today dominated by religious identity, a situation that influences public discourse concerning the survival of the country's democracy. There has been a drastic shift of religious intolerance from the religious assembly to the civil assembly and this has become a recurring decimal in successive regimes. In this case, political struggle has continued to maintain religious character and sentiment in the Nigerian public space. Evidences abound in the country's political space that religious intolerance has become a veritable tool in the hands of most Nigerian politicians both at the federal and state levels to manipulate the electorate and maintain hegemony of political power or to reclaim political power from opponents (Tar and Shettima 2010; Atoi 2016).

Also, religious intolerance has negatively affected the Nigerian value system and national unity. The ideals of social solidarity, social justice, patriotism, nationalism, honesty, truthfulness, good neighbourliness, public peace and social order that are inherent in the Nigerian indigenous value system has given way to social injustice, hatred, egocentricism, sectional consciousness, insecurity and social disorder. It is a factual truth that the effect of this unpleasant development has continually encumbered Nigeria's quest for positive change in nearly every facet of the country's public life. For any society to experience progressive change, its value system must be developed to align with the ethical orientations of the various groups within its social space, which in turn becomes the basis of man's social behaviour. The ethical values inherent in the Nigerian triple religious heritage, that is, African Traditional Religion, Islam and Christianity that would have been harmonized to form the basis of Nigeria's principles of social conduct and national conscience has been crucified at the altar of intolerance by religious fanatics and fundamentalists in the country. In this connection, Ubrurhe (2000) was right when he asserts that the tenet of faith and religious ethics of the three main religions in Nigeria are not at variance in the development of ethical values in Nigeria. It could be said that Nigeria is experiencing myriad social vices and moral decadence in contemporary times because religious intolerance have continually hinders all possible avenue for harmonious social relations that would have created ample opportunities for the harmonization and integration of the hallowed values of the country's triple religious heritage for a better and progressive nation-state. It is pertinent to state here that Nigeria's yearnings for national unity can only be achieved through the integration of the socio-religious values in the country to align with certain consistent principles, which could form the basis of national value orientation. Such integration of values has the capacity of strengthening the national unity emphasized in the country's national motto, which is "Unity and Faith." This same national unity was also emphasized in the 1999 constitution of the federal republic of Nigeria thus:

We the people of the Federal Republic of Nigeria,
having firmly and solemnly resolved, to live in
unity and harmony as one indivisible and

indissoluble sovereign nation under God, dedicated to the promotion of inter-African solidarity, world peace, international co-operation and understanding and to provide a Constitution for the purpose of promoting the good government and welfare of all persons in our country, on the principles of freedom, equality and justice, and for the purpose of consolidating the unity of our people, do hereby make, enact and give to ourselves the following Constitution (Constitution of the federal republic of Nigeria, 1999, 15).

The Nigerian state has not been able to achieve the national unity which our founding fathers long foresaw as the key to the country's progress because most religious adherents in the country are not always able to march the tenets of faith and religious principles with practices. In this regard, Ubrurhe (2000) argues that the latent and manifest functions of religion are in most cases at variance. Nigerians are unable to experience unity and progress in national life because intolerance has blinded so many fanatics to understand that unity in the context of a plurality society implies unity in spite of one's religious affinity, unity in spite of cultural differences, unity in spite of geographical location and unity in spite of political differences which in essence is unity in diversity.

Towards a Philosophy of Tolerance for Progressive change in Nigeria

The philosophy of tolerance is socially and religiously required for harmonious human relationships in any multi-religious and multi-cultural society. It is a fundamental truth that religiously pluralistic nation states can only experience positive change in national life in an ambience of genuine attitude of tolerance towards people across religious and socio-cultural divides in public sphere. This is so because toleration is an essential socio-philosophical tool that navigates pluralistic polity towards national growth and development. It is imperative to reiterate at this juncture that by all standards, Nigeria is a pluralistic nation state. The presence of the three main religions in the country indicates that Nigeria is a multi-religious and multi-cultural society (Atoi and Ogunrinade 2017). In such a society, there are certain

features that naturally exist and citizens are expected to understand that such characteristics are meant to be there and should learn to live with it. According to Ubrurhe, a pluralistic state involves:

- The existence of more than one religion and philosophy, which are conflicting in relation;
- Some degree of awareness by all the parties involved that a fundamental disagreement between them exists;
- Some degree of awareness that these incompatibilities have positive values not only to the community but also to each of the religions themselves (2000, 239).

In the light of the foregoing, it could be said that what we are experiencing in Nigeria today is the lack of the philosophy of tolerance, which ought to be the life wire of a pluralistic society. If such philosophy had been given its rightful place in the Nigerian state, adherents of the different religions would have understood and learn to tolerate the fundamental differences that exist between their religion and others. Religious adherents in Nigeria, especially Christians and Muslims must be aware of the existing differences in the conception of the ultimate reality, cultural behaviour and philosophy of life. The realisation that the ultimate reality and the meaning of life can be viewed from different perspectives and that human beings have found many versions of the interpretation of the nature of things and values in life, should naturally sets tolerance and understanding in place of intolerance, impatience, disdain and lack of understanding in religious, socio-political and economic relations in Nigeria (Atoi 2016). Religious adherents across all faith traditions must have the willingness to be open to the beliefs of others. In fact, there is no reason why all religious believers should not be open to the beliefs of others in a pluralistic society when it is arguable that no particular belief is substantially more justifiable than others based on the available evidences (Igboin 2016).

Moreover, the differences in religions are man-made for their deliberate recognition and preference given to one prophet or the other and such other factors as worldly motives, ancestral customs and social conventions (Adebayo 2010). It must be reiterated that the various

interpretations of the nature and character of the divine reality by the different faith tradition we have in Nigeria are based on the cultural orientations and worldviews available to the individual religious traditions. Realizing this basic truth about religious devotion, simple logic requires that religious adherents from all traditions should naturally see the legitimacy of believers from other faiths to practice their chosen religious beliefs without any form of molestation or victimization from anyone. In this light, what religionists should regard as a true worship of God should be the demonstration of practical morality that would lead to the reinforcement of values and consolidation of social norms that could be used to initiate positive change for the much needed socio-political and economic development of the Nigerian state.

It is pertinent to note at this point that the position articulated above is derived completely from a philosophical thought pattern after a critical reflection on the Nigerian situation and not from any religious dogma or doctrine. The purpose of this discourse is not to esteem any religious tradition, neither is it to downplay the doctrine of any religion, rather to chart a new course for the co-operate existence of the Nigerian state. It is imperative to state that the economic, social, political and religious values of the Nigerian society are in dire need of developmental stride that would bring about positive change in the life of Nigerian citizens.

Concluding Remarks

Having established the fact that religious intolerance is serving as a colossal obstacle to Nigeria's quest for progressive change in socio-political and economic development, the authors submit that all Nigerian citizens are mandated to have attitudinal change towards the practice of their faith because of the nature of religious beliefs in the country. There is no gainsaying that the context of the Nigerian religious geography is essentially pluralistic because this is clearly pictured in the country's tripartite religious heritage. This religious situation demands that the belief systems and doctrines of the different faith traditions are respected and accommodated, and that the adherents of the various groups are given equal rights and opportunities in the Nigerian public sphere. This is so because evidences abound in the doctrinal stand points of the different religions in Nigeria that God is the central object of venerations

in all the religious groups. Considering the religious understanding of the origin of the universe and the human race, which categorically attributes the existence of all things to God, religious adherents across all faith traditions, should naturally see every human being on the surface of the earth as members of one global family that originated from a single source (God). It is only in this light that Nigerians would be able to promote the ideology of the brotherhood of all and the fatherhood of God which is one of the core religious creeds of the three major religions in Nigeria.

From the foregoing, there is an urgent national need for Nigerians to eschew intolerance, accept religious diversity as a basic social reality of the country, and learn to live with it by accepting the fact that it is the absolute constitutional right of fellow citizens to practice any religious faith they so desire. This is because the freedom of religious beliefs and practices as stipulated in the 1999 constitution of the federal republic of Nigeria as amended, grants all citizens the fundamental right to pursue their belief without discrimination and intimidation. Manus (2006) contends that once pluralism is accepted as a basic reality of our world and its attendant historical processes at all levels, it becomes much easier for Nigerians, especially the religious and political leaders, to see the very legitimacy of the other parties to exist and to operate at all levels of life. In this light, Nigerians from all walks of life need to demonstrate genuine attitude of tolerance toward their religious neighbours in order to bring about the much-needed understanding and unity. In contemporary religious studies scholarship, true tolerance is seen as a virtue that can be aligned with other virtues such as humility, respect and courtesy to enhance mutual understanding among the various practitioners of the three main religions in the country (Igboin 2016). This would afford Nigerians the opportunity to harmonise the virtues of love, peace and justice inherent in our tripartite religious heritage and value system for socio-political and economic advancement of the country. Such virtues no doubt, would form the basis of social conduct and national conscience to address the endemic problems of socio-political injustices, insecurity, unemployment, corruption and youth restiveness prevalent in the Nigerian public space (Atoi et al 2020). It must be emphasised here that socio-political and economic development as well as societal wellbeing can only be achieved in an

atmosphere where there is genuine tolerance and understanding among the inhabitants of multi-religious and multi-cultural society. In the light of the above, all hands must be on deck in the business of promoting tolerance in Nigerian pluralistic polity. Both the state and individual religious practitioners must play their part to ensure that there is genuine religious tolerance in the Nigerian public space. According to Igboin:

The state has the responsibility of fostering genuine tolerance by being completely religiously neutral, thus providing a level playground for all religions. For the individuals, it is required that they should reciprocate the act of tolerance shown them by others. Mutuality of tolerance does not necessarily imply that one is weak or stupid as some have suggested (2016, 299).

On a final note, as a way of promoting genuine attitude of tolerance, religious leaders must encourage sincere and unpretentious inter-faith dialogue to reevaluate basic social issues and the current state of the Nigerian nation. Igboin (2016) was right when he asserts that genuine dialogue should entail a reassessment of the real life issues that confront the people. In this light, religious leaders should engage in dialogues that will enable them mobilise Christians and Muslims to collaborate with other stakeholders in Nigeria and collectively fight the common enemies of the masses, such as corruption, poverty, ignorance, epidemic diseases, insurgency, unemployment, and others.

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