RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE: THE BANE OF PEACE, EDUCATION AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

By

JURJI NENGAK GOMOS
Department of Sociology,
Plateau State University,
Bokkos,
Plateau State.

Abstract
Northerners have dominated the political leadership of Nigeria since its independence from the British in 1960. In spite of this dominance, the North is one of the most underdeveloped regions of the country in terms of education or economic development. In addition, the region remains one of the most volatile; it has suffered the worst ethno-religious conflicts in the history of the country. The methodology used in this research is secondary data source. The conflict theory is used in the exploration and analysis of the research work. The thrust of the paper is to investigate why there is incessant eruption of ethno-religious conflicts in the region. It argues that the manipulation of religion by the Northern elites is largely responsible for these conflicts which they use as an instrument of gaining access to power and control of material resources. The paper also posits that these corrupt political elites create situations of conflicts as convenient avenues for diverting the electorate’s attention from themselves, especially as they fail to deliver on their electoral promises/ bordering on issues that will advance the interest of the poor majority in the society. Religious intolerance has therefore led to the disruption of peace, education and economic development of the region. In conclusion, the paper recommends among other things, that government should hands off all religious affairs which have become the conduit pipe for siphoning government’s scarce resources. Government should also go beyond lip service to legislate on the controversial issue of indigene/settler question as a way of engendering development, peace and stability in the region.

Keywords: Religion, conflict, crisis and social class.
To understand this paper, it will be worthwhile to define the concept religion. According to Durkheim(1912) religion is defined as a unified system of belief and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden-beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a church, all those who adhere to them.” Whereas, Wallac defined religion as “a kind of human behavior which can be classified as belief and ritual concern with supernatural beings, powers and forces.”

The two definitions given above accept that religion has two distinct parts namely beliefs and rituals and that it brings people who share the same belief together, a sort of integration and unity not minding race, ethnic group, colour, size, high and social status of the believers.

Weber (1930) argues that religion can have a positive or negative force on the economic development of any society depending on how such society uses it. Religion can encourage economic development by promoting positive attitudes such as honesty, trust, accountability, hard work, sincerity and reduce high levels of corruption within the society. Also any religion that welcomes strangers, such society tends to gain from the knowledge of such new members of the society who are coming from different cultural backgrounds with new initiatives and technologies from their home countries to the new country. Osaghae (1995) argued that religion can be used positively to mobilize identity that can complement the activities of the state. For instance, the provision of basic social development such as education, medical health and agricultural facilities which are means of producing surplus food and amenities to meet the demands of many citizens especially the rural neglected majority. In his report on the prevention of armed conflict, Kofi Annan (2002) argued that “Religious organizations can play a role in preventing armed conflict because of the moral authority that they carry in many communities. He went further to stress that certain religious groups and leaders “possess a culturally- based comparative advantage in conflict prevention” and thereby help to “emphasize the common humanity of all parties and mobilize non-violent alternative ways of expressing dissent prior to the outbreak of conflict” (Cf.Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding Program on Religion and Conflict Resolution, 2007).

Even though Christianity and Islam have contributed greatly toward the growth and development of the country, they have equally created history of conflict and its attendant religious intolerance in the country (Falola, 1998). Available literatures such as Egwu (2010), Gwamna (2010), Usman (1987) and Kukah (1994), have argued that religion has been a divisive issue which poses great danger to peace, stability and the corporate existence of Nigeria as one indivisible country. Because of its dual role,
some scholars such as Maregere (2011) and Obasi (2009) have described religion as a “double-edged sword”.

The concentration of this paper on northern Nigeria is due to the fact that statistics on religious conflicts across the country shows that at least 95% of them occurred in the northern part of the country (Ezeanokwasa, 2009). The paper argues that the dominant group is able to throw religious conflict as a spanner among the subordinate groups because of the high rate of poverty and illiteracy which the group has consciously created among the subordinate group. The dominant group use religious conflict as a strategy to access scarce and valued resources from government and always avoid being punished when indicted by panel reports on religious conflicts.

**Theoretical Perspective of Conflict**

In this research work, the paper is adopting the conflict theory to explain and analyse the situation in Northern Nigeria. According to Ferrante (2011), conflict theory focuses on conflict over scarce and valued resources and the strategies the dominant groups use to create and protect social arrangements that give them an advantage over the subordinate groups. It asks questions such as who benefits from a particular social arrangement and at whose expense. In answering such questions, the author tries to identify the dominant and the subordinate groups as well as the various tactics or tricks that the dominant groups have adopted either consciously or unconsciously to promote and protect their interest. This school of thought seems to answer the serious question of class competition between dominant groups and the subordinate groups within the society. On each occasion the groups develop new strategies of survival to meet their interests. In the process, they create tension, competition, disagreements, frictions, conflicts and sometimes outright war.

**Poverty and Illiteracy**

The high rate of poverty and illiteracy brought about by members of the dominant group in the North has resulted in the poor living standard of the people thereby making them helpless and hopeless. As observed by Shamsudeen in Ujah and Binniyat (2011),

*Northern Nigeria remains and represents the only place in the world that has the highest number of children that are not going to school. The highest number of children that are not going to school in the world are in Northern Nigeria.*

This terrible situation of poverty and illiteracy in the North attracted the attention and comments of the late President of Nigeria Alhaji Musa Yar Adua when he stated that;
In some of these states, there is equally high unemployment rate, near total collapse of infrastructure, virtual absence of new investments, while practically all the states depend essentially on revenues accruing from the federation account. (Ujah and Binniyat, 2011).

It is difficult to have infrastructural facilities where there are constant religious conflicts, as the few that existed are destroyed each time there is religious conflict. It is also difficult to have new investments since conflicts scare away potential investors both indigenous and foreign. Nobody would want to invest his/her hard earned resources in conflict prone areas. The essence of investment is to generate profit and profit cannot be obtained where there are constant cases of violent religious conflicts. It is only where there is peace that investors would be attracted to invest their money and get back profit.

The terrible and alarming condition of poverty and illiteracy in northern states also attracted comments of the fearless and erudite priest and scholar Bishop Mathew Kukah when he said:

In the last few years, the standard of living in Nigeria has continued to fall dramatically. Rather interestingly, this fall in the human condition seems to have created a very fertile environment for the emergence of the kind of deep spirituality that has simultaneously and ironically placed the nation at the top of both the most religious and corrupt nations of the world (Kukah, 2011:422).

The high level of poverty and illiteracy in Northern Nigeria is quite pathetic and lamentable. One tends to wonder as to what is responsible for the situation since Northerners have been in position of power in the country for almost four decades. This situation is created by members of the dominant group in order to perpetuate themselves in power, thereby preventing members of the lower class from having any chance to climb the ladder of success. The paper argues that the high level of poverty and illiteracy in Northern Nigeria are artificially created by members of the dominant group through religious intolerance. This is achieved through poisoning the minds of the subordinate group within the Islamic circle with hatred for Western oriented education seen as an aberration (Boko Haram). This sentiment accounts for low school enrolment under the Western school system compared to enrolment in Qur’anic Schools.

Gomos (2012) is quick to observe that the low school enrolment under the Western school system is only noticeable with members of the subordinate groups. Hence, he argues that this could be another strategy by members of the dominant group to have an exclusive advantage of the Western oriented education for their wards to the
detriment of the subordinate group. This view is corroborated by Feinstein (1987:50) when he state that;

Very few people went through the schooling process in Northern Nigeria in the 1930’s. Such education was generally restricted to the children of royalty and occasionally extended to those of the aristocracy and the related Mallam class... a training ground for princes, similar to those set up by the British in India.

Based on the theory of incompatibility of Islamic values and Western oriented education members of the subordinate group are worse hit with the negative effects while this does not affect members of the dominant group as most of their children both boys and girls are educated abroad hence exposed to Western education.

The high rate of poverty and illiteracy places members of the subordinate group at a disadvantaged position in terms of access to economic, educational and political benefits. As a result they are easily manipulated by members of the dominant group at every given opportunity to suit their interest, not minding the consequences on the people and the general society.

Usman (1987) argued that for the past twenty-eight years the religious intolerance sweeping throughout the country has forcefully made Nigerians to come face-to-face with the harsh reality that religion is being systematically manipulated, for specific purposes that are detrimental to the peace and unity of Nigeria. He laments the deployment of religion by the elites in creating confusion amongst the citizenry in Nigeria. It is the manipulation of religion by the political elites that always resulted in religious conflicts. According to Ibrahim and Kazah-Toure (2003), it is this intense struggle by the elites in search for power and state resources and its constant changing pattern of domination that always result into fears and anxiety which underlie increasing conflict and intolerance. Stanley Samartha in Gwamna (2010) concluded that traditionally, religions have been moats of separation rather than bridges of understanding between people. Though religious intolerance is used as a weapon to enhance the political and socio-economic positions of members of the dominant group, it has devastating effects on members of the subordinate group in the society because it further marginalize, oppress and pauperize them.

Whenever there are religious conflicts, members of the dominant group benefit from it, for they usually receive relief materials from the Federal, State or Voluntary Agencies. After receiving the relief materials, they sit and decide on how it will be shared. In most cases they end up taking the lion share including fiscal money even though they do not have casualties, they cart away materials such as wrappers, blankets, mats, buckets meant for the poor majority as relief materials received. At the point of
sharing the resources they will be laughing and there will be no sign of disagreement to indicate that they belong to different religious groups. The dominant group will be invited for peace dialogue as community leaders, religious leaders or political leaders. On the other hand, members of the subordinate group will not be invited though they are the people who suffer the negative consequences of religious conflicts. At the meeting they will eat and take brown envelops in the name of transport money. If they claim they do not know something about the cause of the religious conflict why are they invited to the peace meeting?

**Government’s Involvement in Religious Matters**

In spite of the constitutional provisions of Section 38 (1) and 10 of the Nigerian Constitution which guarantees freedom of religion and prohibits the adoption of any religion as a state religion, little is done to control the frequent religious conflicts between the two dominant religious groups which to a greater extent, has helped to heighten the underlying tensions and rivalry in Nigeria. This view is backed up by Lawuyi (1980) who says the state appeared as an innocent bystander in religious conflicts while in actual sense it is partisan in its approach to religious issues. The reality of the issue is that the deep involvement of the state into religious matters does not show the religiosity of members of the ruling class. The ruling class has a hidden agenda which at all times they would want to achieve by all means. As observed by Kukah (2010: 151):

> It is the privileges that accrue to them (members of the ruling class) that are being protected. If people’s mobility in the bureaucracy, politics and economics of the country are dependent on their religious and ethnic persuasions, then they must defend those platforms.

Based on the above observation, the involvement of Government in religious matters is because of the benefits members of the dominant group will get within the society as well as legitimacy. The partisan position of Government in religious matters can be seen through the followings: during Ramadan periods, both the Federal and State Governments spend millions of Naira in organizing breaking of fast at state houses, yet during Christmas and Lent, the same Government will not spend a kobo for the Christian groups. In some of the Northern States, millions of Naira were spent during Ramadan period to prepare food for members of the Muslim community to break their fast. The surprising issue is that even in Christian dominated state like Plateau; such hypocrisy is perpetrated by the Government. For example, during the Sallah festival of 2012, the Government doled out twenty-three million Naira (₦23,000,000.00) for purchase of food items and other assorted goods for the Muslim community in the State. On the other hand, nothing was done for the Christian majority during the Christmas celebration. Even their salaries were not paid to enable them buy
Christmas items for their family members. During the Ramadan of year 2013 the PRTVC, an agent of the Plateau State Government, went ahead to organize breaking of fast for the Muslim community. The Plateau State Government is obviously trying to please the minority Muslim community against the majority Christian group, or is it a direct way of sharing public fund by members of the dominant group found within the Christian group and Muslim group? Or is the Government promoting Islam over Christianity? The paper argues that this practice will only aggravate tensions and conflicts as this gesture does not obtain in Muslim dominated states. This position is also challenged by Sampson (2012:122) when he states that:

At the Federal and State Government levels, public officials manifestly patronize particular religions at the expense of others. In many states of Northern Nigeria, public funds are used in the purchase and distribution of food items and other valuables for Muslim faithful during the Ramadan fast; however, Government does not extend the same gesture to Christians during Christmas or traditional religious worshippers during their traditional ceremonies.

Other ways in which the Government has dabbled into religious affairs are in the areas of pilgrimages where on a yearly basis, the Federal and State Governments spend millions of Naira to sponsor both Christian and Muslim groups to the holy land of Jerusalem and Mecca (tourism) with neither economic nor spiritual value and to the detriment of followers of traditional religion and other religious sect. Under the guise of this tourism the Government ends up draining the scarce resource of the country in order to enrich the people of Israel and Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, the issue of building churches and mosques as well as the introduction of Shariah law with public funds shows Government dabbling into religion. Thus, the dominant religions deny other religious groups access to state funds and the use of public facilities such as the Television and Radio stations for the transmission of their religious messages. Registering his complaint over this discriminatory practice, Yusuf (1995:84), argues that:

Christians have been denied access to electronic media in 16 Northern states, while Islam monopolizes 24 hours for its broadcast in the same area...every hour the Muslims broadcast provocative statements about Christianity. It means nothing, they proclaim that people attend church on Sunday only to dance and to listen to songs.

Non-Implementation of Panels Reports on Religious Conflicts by Government

Another area in which Government has promoted religious intolerance in the country and by extension, in Northern Nigeria is its constant refusal to implement reports and recommendations of panels set up either by the Federal or State Governments: especially when such reports do not favour members of the dominant
group. For example, according to Polang (2010) the Jos crisis commission of inquiry into the 12th April 1994 crisis led by Hon. Justice J. Aribition Fiberesima; the Justice Niki Tobi chaired Judicial commission into the 2001 civil disturbances in Jos; and that of November 2008 commissions of inquiry headed by Prince Bola Ajibola, indicted Sale Hassan, Saleh Bayeri, Yahaya Jengre, Mantu, Nakande and the Hausa Community. Both Tobi and Ajibola shared this belief when they argued that the non-implementation by government of the reports of previous commissions of inquiry particularly that of 12th April, 1994 in Jos Metropolis which had similar features with that of the September, 2001 civil disturbances, is a sure recipe for a repeat performance of future disturbances.

But report which favour the sacred cows or members of the ruling class are normally implemented without waste of time. For example, the Sheikh Shehu Lemu Presidential Commission report on the post election crises that rocked the Northern part of the country during the 2011 general elections. If the Government was just, honest and upright, it would have prosecuted those identified as having hands in the religious conflicts as reported by the panels and commissions of inquiry. This would have gone a long way in serving as a deterrent to future culprits. But alas, the issue on ground is the opposite. The untouchables or sacred cows are thereby encouraged to go deeper and deeper into using religion as a smokescreen to perpetrate their devilish acts as a business enterprise by employing the services of foreign mercenaries to help them achieve their hidden agenda against the unity, peace and economic development of the Nigerian state.

**Effects of Religious Intolerance**

It is on record that religious intolerance has led to the destruction of many public facilities, utilities and services which could have helped in improving the living standard of the people. According to Ooi and Phud (2007), religious intolerance has led to many people competing for basic social services, facilities, rooms, for placement in schools, medical treatment, access to clean drinking water and the few available jobs. It is also a known fact that violent religious conflicts have led to the destruction of some infrastructures put in place by successive Governments such as the burning of shops, petrol stations, markets, schools, houses, closure of schools. All of this amount to interfering with the day to day economic activities of the society. It has also made people in the Northern part of the country to live in inadequate houses and neighborhoods as a result of lack of essential commodities. As correctly observed by Gofwen (2004:9):

*Violent religious conflicts lead to wanton destruction of lives and property. During the course of religious riots, many people have been killed, wounded*

and maimed. There have also been widespread disruptions of economic activities with negative effects on productivity.

If quantified in monetary terms, the cost of damages will run into trillions of naira. This is apart from trillions of Naira wasted in the name of reconstruction, replacement and compensation to victims for damaged property. This was also corroborated by Government White Paper (2009:10), when it says that the Commission identified the Jos Main Market and the Gada Biyu Market as the major property destroyed. This ugly situation is inimical to the economic growth and development of the north and that explains why the region has remained underdeveloped in terms of inadequate human resources, infrastructural facilities, educational advancement and industrial development.

Religious conflicts have created an atmosphere of hostility, fear, suspicion and general insecurity which makes movements difficult for the citizenry. The North Eastern part of the country is directly affected. This situation has serious implication for the smooth running of schools because it affects both teachers and the students. Without security people cannot go to work. There is no gain saying the fact that a situation where, Boko Haram hold sway in states such as Borno, Adamawa and Yobe, means these people cannot but stay indoors. This situation obviously affects educational and economic as well as other aspects of the people’s social life. Religious intolerance has also destroyed the educational system in northern Nigeria as thousands of students were forced to abandon classes during the crisis period while some of the schools were forced to close down in order to save the lives of both the students and the teachers. For example;

As reported by Daily Trust and The Nation Newspapers of July, 2013, secondary schools in Yobe State had to be shut because of the attack on students and teachers by the Boko Haram group. By this closure the school calendar has been interrupted, hence, covering the syllabus would tend to be difficult. This did not come as a surprise, since the group sees Western education as a means of entrenching Western culture which they consider as bad. There was also series of attacks on students of the Yobe State College of Agriculture, Gujba (50 kilometres from the State capital) where several students were killed and wounded in their sleep as reported by Matazu (2013). This view has its root from the theory of incompatibility of Western-oriented education with Islamic values/culture. The North is now a battle ground for the clash of Western civilization and Middle East or Arab civilization. This issue of insecurity has forced people to relocate to other places which they see as safe havens. Such movements automatically lead to the citizens abandoning schools and other socio-economic activities. The escalation of such terrible situations in the North East region made the Federal Government to declare a state of emergency on Borno, Adamawa and Yobe on
the 7th May 2013 to check the excesses of the Boko Haram group which had taken control of some parts of these States.

Conclusions and Recommendations

From the above discourse, it is very obvious that the activities of the dominant group have had serious negative consequences on peace, education and economic development in Northern Nigeria. From the explanation and analysis, the introduction of religious sentiments on the peace loving subordinate group, is a strategy of survival of the fittest that is, the dominant group, while to the subordinate group who carry out the directive it is a means of further denying them the societal development that will improve their living standards. Religious conflicts are therefore deliberately created by the unpatriotic members of the dominant group who do not wish the society well rather than their personal interests.

The paper noted that poverty and illiteracy, the involvement of Government in religious matters and the non-implementation of panel reports are the engine rooms for the promotion of religious conflicts in Northern Nigeria. The members of the dominant group use religious conflict as a business enterprise which means that stopping religious conflicts will amount to pushing them out of business and closing their shops. To keep them alive in business, Government has paid lukewarm attitude to this unpatriotic parasitic dominant group. This can be a sign of weakness on the side of Government. Since religion is the opium of the masses, the Government uses it to keep the followers in a situation of delusion while other things they ought to question continue unabated. The activities of members of the dominant group have given raise to high corruption, misappropriation, embezzlement of fund through inflation and over-invoicing of contracts in order for this tiny group of people to survive. Funds meant for development are often diverted for the maintenance of peace, payment of compensation; replacement of destroyed properties, personal pockets; and relocation of victims or displaced people. These expenses account for Government’s inability to provide basic social amenities, infrastructures, schools and hospitals that will promote socio-economic activities that will ultimately lead to the development of the region. In addition the few infrastructures, basic social facilities provided by government and those owned by individuals are being destroyed. Despite the fact that the Northern Region has produced nine former Heads of state religious intolerance has made it impossible for them to eradicate poverty, illiteracy and crises in the North. The situation has caused serious setback to peace, education and economic development in Northern Nigeria.

The paper recommends that for peace to reign, Government must be bold, courageous and firm in dealing with unscrupulous members of the dominant group as was the case in Ghana during the reign of Jerry Rawlings Government. As a matter of
urgency Government must hands off from religious affairs and play a neutral role in running the Government as stipulated in the constitution of the country. When this is done, the huge sums of money or funds kept aside for religious activities can be used to establish industries, build and maintain basic infrastructure which can motivate both local and foreign investors to come and invest in the North as is the case with the southern part of the country. This will pave way for security, confidence in the minds of strangers and less tension between indigenes and settlers. What is required of Government is good governance which cannot be achieved when it is playing a partisan role.

References


