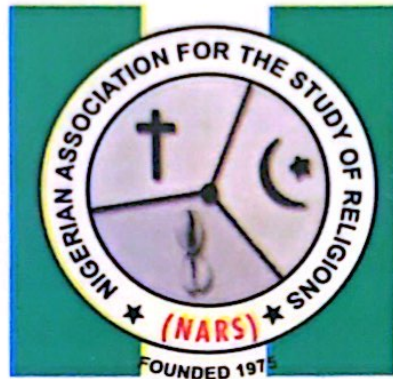


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RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE IN NIGERIA VIS-A-VIS JESUS' TEACHINGS ON VIOLENCE: THE WAY FORWARD

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Abstract

Previous studies have revealed gruesome accounts of horrors in Nigeria arising from religious conflicts between Christians and Muslims, especially from the 1970s onwards. While the scars of these experiences still remain fresh in the memory of many, the killings of Christians and destruction of churches by Boko Haram uprising particularly in the Northern part of Nigeria have worsened the ugly situation. Consequently, some Christian leaders are of the view that there are limits to pacifism and therefore clamour for retaliatory actions by the Church which many are against because they feel it does not conform to the teachings of Jesus Christ on non-violence. This paper, therefore, examined the phenomenon of inter-religious conflicts in Nigeria from 1970 and the teachings of Jesus in the Bible on violence, using historical and empirical research methods. The findings of the study revealed that intolerance, religious extremism and bad governance are the major causes of these conflicts. The central theme of Jesus' teachings is peace and love towards one another including ones enemies which is the opposite of the present problem. In conclusion, the study recommends constant sought for the state protection, continuous inter-faith dialogue, tolerance, avoidance of inflammatory statements and prayers to God for good governance as solutions.

Keywords: Religious Conflicts, Violence, Christians, Muslims, Jesus Teachings

Introduction

In this contemporary society, people of different cultures, backgrounds, religious beliefs, and political inclinations in the past and till now have engaged in war, conflict, threat, violence and bloodshed of various ends in order to get certain differences resolved or to consolidate superiority. There is no gain saying that violence and wars are on the increase in many regions of the world especially in the Middle East and some other parts of Africa like Egypt, Sudan, Chad and Tanzania.¹ Some engaged in war and violence to effect the submission of the opposition to their wishes through compulsion. In Nigeria, religious conflicts and violence have revolved mainly around the activities and relationships between Christians and Muslims for many years. These conflicts have increased in number, frequency and intensity, resulting in loss of lives, destruction of property, fears, suspicion, and displacement of people thereby constituting a major hindrance to the development of the nation.

The most intimidating problem is that of the prevalent religious conflicts and violence especially in the Northern states since 1980's in which Christians in most cases have been at the receiving end. The situation became more worrisome from 2009 with the killings of Christians and bombing of churches by the Boko Haram sect especially in the Northeastern states of Nigeria. It is on record that in addition to the destruction of churches by the sect, Christian schools, homes and businesses are always their favourite targets. In view of the development, the Christian pacifism seems to be challenged. Consequently, the question of self-defense, retaliation and vengeance has become a household discussion among the Nigerian Christians.

Many Christians are of the view that there is a need to respond to these killings by 'an eye for an eye' approach of the Old Testament while some are uncomfortable at the prospect of having to lower themselves down to the perpetrators' level in order to get even and especially considering the teaching of Christ on how to relate with people in love. Therefore, many Christians are faced with the challenge of marrying the experience of conflict, violence and bloodshed with the religious claim of peace. Many have questioned Church leaders in Nigeria, especially the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), on what should be done after 'both cheeks have been slapped'.

Clarifications of some Key Words

Religious Conflicts

There are varying types of conflicts from inter-personal to international. Scholars have categorized conflicts for the purpose of specificity. Some of these categorization are: Land conflicts, Work-related conflicts, Boundary conflicts, Political conflicts, Religious conflicts, International conflicts and many more. But though conflicts are categorized, often times, there could be a mixture of some at a point.

Religious conflict is itself a very vast type of conflict. Located within religious conflict are intra-religious conflicts and inter-religious conflicts. Intra-religious conflicts also varied as some may be between different traditions in the same religious group or even as expressed within specific religious practices.

To really understand the concept of religious conflicts in Nigeria, there may be a need for a clear picture of the place of religion in the country. Religiously, Nigeria is a home to a variety of religions which tend to vary regionally. The prominent place given to religion in the various systems in Nigeria reflects the eagerness of the indigenous people to enhance supernatural authority and sanction at all levels of politics and living. According to Adelowo, the religious composition of Nigeria changed drastically after the arrival of foreign religions- Christianity and Islam. Constitutionally, the Federal Republic of Nigeria is presently a circular state, yet, there are three outstanding religions that are recognized. The main religions are Islam, Christianity and African Traditional Religion. The dominant ones are Christianity and Islam. Adelowo further opined that religion in Nigeria is so powerful that it could affect the political and

economic success of individuals. To him, "most Nigerians are in all things religious".²

In this paper, religious conflict referred to inter-religious conflict in which acts of violence have been perpetrated against adherents of "other" religions on the platform of religion as a social identity maker. In the context of this work, it refers to the violent clashes between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria.

Violence

Violence is in various types from domestic to interpersonal, groups and international. Violence could be informed largely by intolerance, hatred and stereotype. It could also emerge from threats, provocation, domination, marginalization, frustration, oppression and aggression. In the context of this work, violent referred to confrontations, actions or attacks by adherence of one religion against another which involves fighting with the use of weapons, killings and destruction of property.

Jesus' Teachings

Jesus as a teacher was distinguished from the Jewish teachers of his days by the authority with which He spoke. He even claimed superiority over Moses in the contents of his teachings. His teachings may be summarised in two parts: doctrinal and ethical. The two are however closely related to each other. He thought new truths about God, especially in the realm of Fatherhood, which unknown to the Jewish minds.

Also, the ethical teachings of Jesus were distinct and exacting. In the Sermon on the Mount, he deliberately motivated His listeners to actions which went beyond what might normally be expected. Such actions include turning the other cheek to the one who strikes you and even loving our enemies. In the light of the above, some have considered the ethical teachings of Jesus to be too idealistic to be practical. In this paper, the ethical teachings of Jesus which means a new and higher order of living were examined.

Causes and Consequences of Inter-Religious Conflicts in Nigeria from 80's

Nigeria is an embodiment of the tenet of 'unity in diversity'. Although, the country is a federation, it is yet to find an enduring formula for peaceful co-existence of her more than 300 ethnic groups and different religious communities. While religious conflicts between Christians and non-Christians in Nigeria were witnessed prior to 1980's, they were far less compared to what happened from the 1980's and 1990's especially in the Northern states. Series of religious crises across Nigeria were brewed in various cities such as experienced in Zaria 1980; Kano 1980, 1982, 1991, 1995 and 2009; Gongola State 1984; Bauchi State 1985, 1991, 1994, 2000, 2009, 2019 and 2020; Kwara State 1986; Oyo State 1986; Kaduna State 1987, 1988, 1992, 2002, 2000, 2019, 2020 and 2021; Abia State 2000; Adamawa State 2008; Borno State 1982, 2006, 2009, 2019, 2020 and 2021; Plateau State 2008, 2009, 2010 and 2021.³

Dele Omotunde captured the mood aptly when he wrote that:

Either by accident or design, religious unrest has since become the order of the day on a scale never experienced before. A new culture of fear and mutual suspicion seems to have been entrenched unconsciously. At the slightest provocation, churches and mosques have been torched or razed, while brothers have slaughtered brothers all in the name of religion.⁴

Despite common ideals set out for Christians and Muslims such as: all humans are God's creations, the need for preservation of lives, and a common commitment to peace; various societal forces have rendered obstacles to their implementations.

Firstly, one of the major causes of religious conflicts between Muslims and non-Muslims in Nigeria is the issue of Sharia. It was the aim of Usman dan Fodio to implement Sharia in the northern emirates in order to reform what was perceived to be lax practice of Islam among the rulers. Kukah opined that the basis of the Jihad of Usman dan Fodio was the establishment of an Islam State based on the Shari.⁵ While the Constituent Assembly was debating the issue, some Muslims sought to enforce their argument by engaging in threats and riots to support the idea that if the Sharia was not accepted, they were going to make the country ungovernable. The Muslim Students Society (MSS) for example, demonstrated at Ahmadu Bello University, pleading with the Assembly men to "stop the opposition of Sharia or take full responsibility of putting the entire nation in chaos". Consequently, in April 1979, protesters took to the streets in Zaria and Kaduna with such banners as: No Sharia, No Peace, No Sharia, No Constitution, No Sharia, No Muslim, No Nigeria.⁶

On the return of democracy to Nigeria in 1999, Sharia was seriously pushed to be instituted as a main body of civil and criminal law at the state level of government by Zamfara State governor, Ahmad Rufai Sani.⁷ As of 2012, 9 states have instituted Sharia and Christians in some of these states have become second class citizens as a result of marginalization, discrimination, harassment, and the likes. Holman submitted that despite the fact that Christians were promised that their fundamental rights would be guaranteed in the nine states churches and Christian schools have been burnt by Muslim youths, land acquisition were deprived for building churches, Christian Religious Knowledge was banned in schools, many Christians have lost their jobs, while some have to relocated their businesses.⁸ We must agree that, when religious plurality gives way to communal tensions, there is the possibility of religious sentiments being misused.

Another cause of inter-religious conflicts in Nigeria is religious fundamentalism as witnessed during the uprising of Mohammed Marwa (Maitatsine) in the early 80's. Fundamentalism is the idea that a particular religion should be practiced in a particular way. Those who do not practice the religion in that way are regarded as outcast or irreligious. Maitatsine as a religious sect was founded by late Malam Muhammadu Marwa alias Alla Ta-Tsine or Maitatsine with an ideology that was opposed to most aspects of modernisation and to all Western

influence. The group unleashed acts of terrorism against the State and propagated its own way of practicing Islam as the only way acceptable to Allah.⁹ The 1980 Maitatsine violence in Kano therefore, shocked many Nigerians for being the first religious crisis that took huge toll on human lives counting about 4,177 and property worth millions of naira destroyed.⁸ Members of the Maitatsine set led by Marwa, shot their way to notoriety when, seven months after the Kano disturbances, they took to the streets of Maiduguri in 1982 declaring their brand of Islam to be superior to every other ones, including Christianity, and the process initiated an orgy of violence that claimed many human lives and property.¹⁰ Nonetheless, the death of Marwa and his sect members in the hands of the military later marked the end of the sect.

Again, the deep economic hardship and social inequality have sharpened inter-religious crises in Nigeria. In spite of the fact that the country is blessed with both human and natural resources, the gap between the haves and the have-nots is ever on the increase and this has led to frustration and disillusion among average Nigerians on the lower side of the economy. While some have turned to outright criminal activities as a result of the abject poverty, others have turned to streets beggars or political thugs. These have also led to the emergence of different individual groups such as Maitatsine and Boko Haram sects redefining and reinventing obnoxious beliefs. According to Egwu, it has become an issue of contention that ethnicity and religion affect the politics of resource allocation because as far as Nigerian politics is concerned, it is organised around the distribution of resources and not production".¹¹

Furthermore, the role of the media has promoted violence in some instances. Through the media, people tend to perceive conflicts in one place as part of conflicts in another area, causing enmities in one part of the world to spill over into other regions. An act of violence in one place is considered prototype of the enemy in another place, or even to provoke revenge elsewhere in the world. A clear example of this phenomenon was the Danish cartoons of Prophet Muhammad in Denmark by a journalist, which was followed by violent and destructive protest across the country, Nigeria especially in Maiduguri. Kano was torn into violence because the United States of America attacked Afghanistan and so on.¹² The media, therefore, helps in exacerbating conflicts by giving a biased account of what is happening during conflicts.

To cap it all is the current disturbing issue in the country now which is that of rustic and barbaric group called Boko Haram with the official name *Jamaatu Ahli is-Sunnah lid-Da watiwal-Jihad*, meaning "People Committed to the Prophets Teachings For Propagation and Jihad".¹⁰ Its leader, Mohammed Yusuf, was a charismatic and popular Malam (Quranic scholar) who spoke widely throughout the north. His literal interpretation of the Quran led him to advocate that some aspects of Western education, should be forbidden: in Hausa "Boko Haram".¹³

Boko Haram opposes the westernization of the Nigerian society and its principal goal is to create a script Islamic State in the north with its belief that it would address the ills of society, including corruption and bad governance. The

sect's core beliefs are strict adherence to the Quran and Hadith (sayings of the Prophet Mohammed), and their interpretations as sanctioned by Ibn Taymiyyah (the preferred scholar of Mohammed Yusuf, the sect's leader).¹² While in Bauchi police custody, Yusuf was killed in 2009 but a new leader (Abubakar Shekau, a former deputy to Yusuf) emerged and the sect carried out its first terrorist attack in Borno in July 2009 which resulted in the killing of four people.¹⁴ Since then, the violence has only escalated in terms of both frequency and intensity. It is a truism that some Islamic clerics were killed and few mosques were destroyed by the sect, the Christians were much at the receiving end as can be seen in the chart below.

Selected Massacres by the Boko Haram Sect in North eastern States from 2009 to 2020.

Name	Date	Location	Deaths	Notes
2009 Boko Haram Uprising	July, 2009	Maiduguri, Bauchi, Potikum, Wudil	1,000	Islamic militants killed over a thousand people between 26 and 29 July; particularly Christians for refusing to convert to Islam
Religious Violence	29 December, 2010	Bauchi	38	Religious violence unleashed by the Katakato sect. Over 38 persons killed: and over 1000 people internally displaced
2011 Damaturu attacks	November 2011	Damaturu	100-150	Boko Haram attacked police stations, churches and banks
December 2011 Nigeria Bombings	25 December, 2011	Madalla	41	73 injured; Muslim militants bombed a Catholic church during a Christmas mass
January 5-6, 2012 Nigeria Attacks	January, 2012	Mubi, Yola, Gombi and Maiduguri	37	Islamic terrorists attacked churches and Christian businesses; Boko Haram claimed responsibility
December 2012 shootings in Nigeria	25 December 2012	Maiduguri, Potiskum	27	Islamic militants attacked a church on Christmas Day; afterwards, the church was set on fire.
Baga Massacre	19-20 April, 2013	Baga, Borno	228	Some blamed the Nigerian military while others blamed the Islamic terrorist group Boko Haram

Yobe State School Shooting	6 July, 2013	Mamudo Government Secondary School	30	Some suspected Boko Haram terrorists killed at least 41 children and one teacher
2012 Boko Haram Suicide Bomber	3 June, 2014	Bauchi	15	15 church-goers were killed and several injured in a church bombing in Bauchi state. Boko Haram claimed responsibility through spokesperson Abu Qaqa
The Attack of some Catholic Clerics	24 March 2015	Maiduguri	5,000	Catholic Diocese in Maiduguri laments as over 5,000 clerics have been attacked by Boko Haram
Madagali, Adamawa	9 December, 2016	Adamawa State	57	Another attack by Boko Haram was witnessed in Madagali, Adamawa State claiming many lives.
Maiduguri	22 March, 2017	Maiduguri	18	2 Churches attacked in Maiduguri claiming 4 lives and leaving 18 wounded
Dapchi, Yobe State	12 July, 2018	Yobe State	110	School Girls kidnapped at Government Technical Girls College, Dapchi
Nganzai, funeral Attack	27 July, 2019	Borno State	6	Christians returning from burial were attacked.
Pemi Attack	24 December, 2020	Borno State	11	Boko Haram killed at least 11 people, burnt churches and kidnapped a Priest at Pemi, Borno State

Source: J.I. Eliagwu, (cited by Gofwen, 2021: 65-67)¹⁵

On 15 April, 2014, Boko Haram abducted about 276 female students from a college in a Christian dominated community called Chibok in Borno State. This kidnapping raised public protests, with some protesters holding placards bearing the tag #bringbackourgirls which later caught the international attention.¹⁶ Several countries pledged support to the Nigerian government and also volunteered to help Nigerian military with intelligence gathering on the whereabouts of the girls and the operational camps of Boko Haram. By June 2014,

the group was also responsible for 2,000 deaths and above.

Nigeria has become a killing field of defenseless Christians. Reliable sources shows that between 11,500 and 12,000 Christians, have been massacred since June 2015 when the Buhari led government of Nigeria came to power. This statistics is based on careful records kept by church groups that include the names of victims and dates of their murders. Jihadist Fulani herdsmen accounted for 7,400 murders of Christians. Boko Haram committed 4000 killings of Christians. 'Highway Bandits' who separated Christians from Muslims on buses and then killed the Christians committed over 200 murders.¹⁷

Since 2009, Boko Haram has murdered 27,000 people, more murders than ISIS in Syria and Iraq, making the sect the deadliest terrorist group in the world. Between June 2015 and December 2018, the Boko Haram sect was responsible for over 2,800 Christian deaths.¹⁸ The Fulani Jihadists have replaced Boko Haram as the deadliest terrorist group in the world. The Nigerian military and police have accounted for 1,050 Christian deaths by the Jihadists since June 2015. These included the killing of 480 Christian Igbo citizens, 236 Christian IDPs, over 50 Adamawa rural Christians, an estimated 70 Northeast Christian children and some 120 Christian detainees who Amnesty International says were among the 240 detainees starved to death at the Giwa Military Barracks in Borno State in 2016. The Jihadist Fulani militias killed 525 Christians between June and December 2015, 1,300 in 2016, 1,700 in 2017 and 2,400 in 2018.¹⁹

Also in 2019, the Jihadist Fulani militias killed between 1000 and 1200 Christians. The anti-Christian attacks by Boko Haram since January 2020 have also intensified in Borno, Adamawa and Taraba States. They claimed between 50 and 70 Christian lives and destroyed scores of churches and other buildings belonging to Christians. "Highway Bandits/Kidnappers" raided and looted Christian villages and ambushed and kidnapped Christian travelers. By the account of the Vanguard Newspaper of 8 February, "320 persons were killed in Nigeria in the month of January 2020" and according to Sahara Reporters of 15 March, "223 persons died in Nigeria in the month of February 2020".²⁰

Consequences of Inter –Religious Conflicts in Nigeria

Socially, inter-religious conflicts have continued to threaten the peace, unity and stability of Nigeria. While, it has strained relationship between the Muslim dominated Hausa/Fulani of Northern Nigeria and the Christian dominated Southern Nigeria, it has also escalated ethnic rivalry in Nigeria. The fact is that religious conflicts have increased ethnic consciousness among Nigerians and hence, has brought mutual and persistent suspicions between the two dominated religions. Arnucheazi observed that road construction; school project; electricity, water; maternity homes and other projects were either frustrated by religious conflicts or sited in wrong places where utilities are near zero.²¹ The prevalence of religious conflicts sets in frustration, feeling of deprivation and breed enmity and hatred among adherents of the two dominant religions (Christians and Muslims).

Economically, a religious conflict always claims the lives of many able bodied men and women who would have engaged in productive ventures and

contribute to the economic development of the country. The cost of rehabilitating and reconstructing destroyed buildings after each religious conflict is so high and could be channeled to more useful direction for further development of our productive forces. Therefore, religious conflicts retard economic progress, hampers economic activities and consequently breeds unemployment, poverty and starvation. Largely, these conflicts persist because some religious elites utilize their opportunities to enrich themselves. Sometimes, these religious elites appeal to adherents of the same religion outside the country to support their move violently, therefore, giving room for infiltration of illegal arms into the country.²² Thus, religious conflicts have become the means through which few alienated segment of the ruling class assert their economic power with primitive accumulation by dealing in arms.

Politically, no doubt, Nigerian political system is seriously overheated with religious conflicts and even threatened with disintegration. This becomes more intense as each of the two dominant religions in Nigeria (Islam and Christianity) tries to control government activities or to shape activities of government following the tenets of her religion. The question now becomes, is he a Muslim or Christian President, Minister, Governor or even Local Government Chairman? The consequent abuse of human rights following these religious conflicts cannot also go unnoticed. Such rights as freedom of speech, life, association, religion and movement are no longer properly observed.

In the face of political instability following these conflicts, many Southern (Christians) no longer settle in the Northern (Muslim) area of Nigeria for fear of lost of life and property and vice versa. Remarkably, Baum summed it up and argued that bad religion promotes structures of domination in human history²² while Nwachukwu, further buttressing this point noted that:

Policies are carried by emotional sentiments rooted in ethnicity or religion. The religious and political elites (class) prey upon the masses and use them as satellite to achieve their socio-political and economic objectives. This is done through orientation, indoctrination or violence using the masses on the already conceived stereotypes against their political and religious opponents. Thus religious conflicts have chartered the routine of political process in Nigeria.²³

Finally, Egwu, also observed that, where devastating religious uprisings and conflicts have become major issues for media coverage, religious conflicts vis-à-vis terrorism often lead to the breakdown of law and order, weaken government resolve and ability to govern effectively, discourages investors both domestic and foreign and as well threatens national productivity.²⁴

Some Teachings of Jesus on Violence

In the New Testament, while there are some acts and teachings by Jesus which seems to justify violence and war, there are also several passages which condemn such. We shall examine some of these and draws out messages from them.

(a) Actions and Teachings of Jesus which seems to Justify Violence

In some Christian quarters today, Jesus is said to have justified violence in declaring that His coming would bring dissension. "Don't imagine that I came to bring peace to the earth. No rather, a sword. I have come to set a man against his father and a daughter against her mother and a daughter in-law against her mother in-law" (Matt.10:34-36). This passage has been taken literally by some Christians to justify war. But, it actually speaks of diverse disagreement that would come in to families in the course of one accepting Christ and the other not accepting Him. Acceptance of Christ is a personal experience and not family based. It is therefore possible for a wife to accept Christ before her husband, children before their parents and vice versa. Logically, during these experiences, family may have misunderstandings.

Also, the rejection of the unholy activities carried out in the temple is usually referenced by some Christians as supporting violence. As written in Luke 19:45 and Matthew 21:13, Christ drove out all who were buying and selling and overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves saying "It is written, My house will be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of robbers". Many argued that should those people refused to obey, or even wanted to destroy or turn the temple to other uses, with Jesus at the opposite end, the result may be war.

Again, Jesus' statements in Luke 22:35-8 and Matthew 10:34, with reference to the use of the sword are taken literally by some. Marshal Layman argued that the way in which Jesus replied ironically to the suggestion that the disciples already have swords indicated that they have misunderstood Him and this should not to be taken literally.²⁵ According to him, we must understand that Jesus and His disciples often traveled by feet and perhaps needed a sword to protect themselves from animals. Jesus' statement and action when Peter drew the sword and cut off the right ear of Malchus (one of the high priest's servants) just at the point Jesus was arrested, shows that He was against violence and expected His followers to follow His principles (Jn. 18:10.11; Lk.22:49-51).

(b) Actions and Teachings of Jesus that clearly condemn Violence

The New Testament does not only contain a law of love which condemns the passion that incites aggression, but also a law of meekness expressed in non-violent way which suffers the aggressor to work his own evil will. Jesus' teachings which condemn violence are such statements as:

You have heard it was said, 'an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth'. But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic let him have your cloak as well (Mt. 5:38-40).

This idea is equally buttressed in: "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy but I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be the sons of your Father in heaven'".

Also, Jesus rejected the law demanding the execution of an adulterous woman for the benefit of the society. They alleged "this woman was caught in the very act of adultery and Moses law says she must be killed. They asked Him; what do you say to it?" They were trying to trap Him into saying something they could use against Him. But Jesus stooped down and wrote in the dust with His finger "whosoever has never committed a sin should first throw a stone? In a short while, no one could throw a stone. Then Jesus stood up and said to the woman, 'where are your accusers'? Did not even one of them condemn you?' 'No Sir,' she replied. "And Jesus said, 'Neither do I, Go and sin no more'. (Jh. 8: 5-6, 10-11).

Again, in the Beatitudes, Jesus taught his disciples saying: "Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called sons of God" (Mat. 5:9). This teaching of non-violence and a flare for peace was upheld by the disciples of Jesus. For example, Apostle Paul when expounded this theory said: "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay, says the Lord". He went further by saying:

"If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom. 12:18-21).

According to Ajoloore, these teachings are hard to embrace, but they were the legacy when Jesus left for his followers in every age as a step to future peace. This philosophy of Jesus is in sharp contrast to those of his contemporary Jewish groups who were prepared to be violent and wage war against their enemies. Jesus taught a meekly principle of attaining trophy over an enemy without necessarily going to battle against the enemy. These precepts were enforced by him when they hurled their insults at Him, He did not retaliate; when He suffered, He made no threats. Instead, He entrusted Himself to Him who Judges justly (I Pet. 2:21-23). On the cross, He prayed for His persecutors "forgive them Father, for they know not what they are doing".²⁶

The New Testament continued and expanded the Old Testament theory of judgement. This is, however, contrasted to the Old Testament's view of divine judgement realisable in the life-time in violence and war as retribution and above all that evil doing was swiftly dealt with. During the New Testament period, the ideas of the resurrection of the body and immortality were well developed. God's definitive judgement was viewed as the beginning of the New or Messianic Age and will therefore take place at a specific time in the future, the day of Judgement.²⁷ Alana puts it concisely thus:

It is clear that the Biblical concept of God as Judge started among the Jews as a conception that viewed divine Judgement as a phenomenon occurring in the Life-time of the individual in the form of retribution but was expanded in the New Testament times with the development of the ideas of the resurrection and

immorality into an eschatological event, taking place at the end of this age, though the possibility of divine Judgement being experienced in this life by the wicked is not denied.²⁸

Therefore, the New Testament does not view war precisely as divine judgement; but an eschatological event wherein God judges.

It is in the light of the above that Christians must understand the concept of loving their enemies and not to take revenge, but rather leave the matter to the hands of God who judges righteously (Rom. 12:17-21; 13:8-10; Phil. 2:4 Jas. 1:19; 1 Pet. 2:19). However, there is a need to consider the Key passage in Romans 13:1-7. "The evildoer must fear the magistrate because he does not bear the sword in vain".

Way Forward for the Nigerian Christian Community

As a way forward on the approach of inter-religious conflicts in Nigeria, the following steps are recommended for Nigerian Christian leaders and communities.

(i) Inter-Faith Dialogue and Cooperation

According to the immediate past Chairman of Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), Kwara State Chapter (Evangelist (Prof.) T. Opoola), much work needs to be done to educate the public on the need for tolerance and peaceful coexistence in the multi-religious society such as Nigeria. He opined that Nigeria is part and parcel of a changing world, and that the process is a continuous one from which fresh and exacting challenge will emanate periodically, and that should be a matter of national discourse and understanding".²⁹ To curb religious violence therefore, Christian leaders will have to engage themselves and enter into continuous dialogue with other religious leaders in order to understand each other and develop mutual respect, tolerance and harmony that will lead to a peaceful co-existence. In another interview, Ajolore agreed that inter-religious or interfaith co-operation should be encouraged citing Matthew. 9:11-12 where Jesus even wined and dined with the unbelievers (Lk. 11:37).³⁰

(ii) Teaching the Biblical Truth and Avoid Inflammatory Statements

A careful study of the relationship between Christians and Muslims shows that there are areas of common interest between them to foster better understanding. It is unfortunately that the leadership of the two religions particularly the intellectuals use considerable amount of their efforts in terms of literatures and sermons to incite or create a sense of hatred and enmity among the followers. Folaranmi in his comments said "many books have been written not to bring about reconciliation and understanding but in order to present "ugly side" of the other faith, even if this so-called "ugly side" may even be deliberately falsified. The scholars, though knowing quite well that only tolerance and the spirit of give and take can bring about peaceful co-existence, refuse to recognize and accept the

right of other faiths to exist in the first place, and even less of giving other rights that make existence meaningful.³¹

(iii) **Stopping Indiscriminate Construction and Inflammatory Statements**

In his own contribution, Ibitoye submitted that the activities of the new generation churches in terms of aggressive preaching and indiscriminate constructions of churches in residential areas that are dominated by Non-Christians often cause conflicts. We must preach Christ as done by the apostles (Acts 4:19) but in fulfilling the great commission of Christ in soul winning, Christians must desist from the use of inflammatory statements against other religions. The Bible should be allowed to speak for itself in conversations and discussions with Non-Christians. There is the need to preach the biblical truth without the application of human wisdom. Christians should try as much as possible to refrain from unnecessary arguments that could generate chaos.³² If the religious leaders will avoid foul language, it will encourage other members of their religion to follow suit and this will in turn promote good neighbourliness and strengthen the unity of Nigeria.

(iii) **To Forgive and Not Revenge**

Forgiveness is a prerequisite for peaceful coexistence while reconciliation is the bedrock to lasting peace. In her own comments, Adimabua said "Christian must desist from having the mind or plan of taking revenge. Revenge and fantasies of revenge are among the strongest emotions of humanity, presenting them as almost universal, irresistible and often deeply troubling. Retaliation is against the basic teachings of the Bible whether it serves as a means of forestalling violence or not. Moreover, retaliation will not end violence; on the contrary, it only fuels it."³³ Paul in Roman 12:19 reiterated this when he said "Do not take revenge my friends but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written, it is mine to revenge, I will repay says the Lord".

(iv) **Inculcating Secularism and the practice of Good Governance**

One way religious violence can be reduced or eliminated in Nigeria is for persons in positions of political and religious power not to be partial in handling any religious conflict that may occur in the future. For, it has been correctly stated that "the increasing state of religious conflicts in the country is not so much a result of cut-throat competition between Christians and non-Christians, but more as a result of increasing government involvement in and regulation of religious affairs".³⁴ Therefore, there is the need to inculcate secularist principle. Secularism, as a state policy, is the philosophy and practice of separating the affairs of governance from religion. This is not an anti-religion policy but it is the refusal to grant more favours to one religion over others.

(v) Seeking for State Protection and Engaging in Prayers for Divine Directive

During conflicts, according to Fawenu, it is expected that Christians should not take laws into their hands. Government must be called upon by Christian leaders to make prompt response to quell any conflicts. Christian leaders must first appeal to the State for protection just as Paul appealed to his Roman citizenship (Acts 22:25-29). Keeping guns, explosives, bows or poisoned arrows at home or unguarded places (under the guise of pray and watch with physical weapons) are highly dangerous. Any overzealous member of the family could misuse such weapons.³⁵

He further opined that where state protection fails, Christian leaders must seek divine intervention through prayers to know exactly what to do in conflicts situations. Christians are not called to fight carnal warfare, but a spiritual warfare and Paul has given the methodology on how to fight this type of war in Eph. 6: 16-18. However, if any Christian finds out that there is no safety from an imminent furious crowd of opponents, he or she can employ any means to defend himself or herself as a last result. Hornus avers that "to permit murder when one could have prevented it is morally wrong. To allow a rape when one could have hindered it is evil. In brief, not resisting evil when one can do so, is an evil of omission and an evil omission can be an evil of commission."³⁶ Sometimes, one may look for ways of escape if so led by the Holy Spirit, for Jesus escaped at a point because it was not yet time for him to be killed (Mk. 11:19).

Conclusion

Conflicts and violence always breed greater conflicts and sometimes war and no enduring legacy has been built through terror and intimidation. The virtues Nigerians need in the bid for peaceful co-existence are those of tolerance, understanding and spirit of forgiveness. Where people have learnt to forget the past and face the future in a new spirit, the results have been beneficial to everyone. South Africa is a case in point. If any man had predicted many years back before their freedom that blacks, white and coloured would co-exist in a peaceful atmosphere, such would have been dismissed as a dreamer. But that dream has been turned into a reality through the effort of outstanding individual who themselves had suffered great injustice, but chose to chart the path of peace. The call therefore, keeps going out to Christians to emulate the peaceful embodiment of Christ.

However, it is advised that Christians should not be passive onlookers in Nigeria's political dispensation. There are those who can and have chosen to be active participants in the fledgling political arena. The Christian community must support those who wish to be active in politics with prayers because they can be regarded as "sheep in the midst of wolves", so that they neither falter nor fall prey to the enemy. The words of this hymn are more relevant now than ever before: "Christians seek not yet repose, hear thy guardian angel say, thou art in the midst of woes, Watch and pray".

Endnotes

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