

A Critical Assessment of the Role of Religion Towards Peaceful Coexistence in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Every human society is pruned to one kind of crisis or the other. Nigeria as a nation is not exempted. In Nigeria since her independence in 1960, it has been bedeviled with one crisis or the other, among which are ethnic, political and religious crisis. To resolve these crises, different methods of conflict resolution have been employed without lasting success. This paper is a critical examination of the functions of religion in ensuring peaceful coexistence in Nigeria. From the earliest time of human existence on earth, humans in every generation have encountered divergence typology of religious experiences which makes man to be pruned to experience more. Looking at it from a sociologically perspective, religion is a complex phenomenon that is mixed with culture yet, constituted by cultic practices of rituals and worship; and also, of a doctrine and an institutional organization. The dogmatic sphere of a given religion is inevitably difficult to ascertain, because it consists of a complicated and expansive system of beliefs that are organized throughout the generations of believers. The findings of this research have shown that the problems of religious disharmony, disunity, intolerance and non-peaceful coexistence among the numerous adherents of religions in Nigeria can be resolved by the positive roles religion plays. The paper concludes that Nigeria as a country has reached a philosophical and historical epoch where it is necessary to abandon the negative and anachronistic aspects of her culture and religion and integrate the positive elements of religion.

Keywords: Role; Religion; Peaceful; Coexistence

INTRODUCTION

One thing that has brought so many crises into Nigeria like any other nations of the world is religion. As a multi-religious and multi-ethnic nation, Nigeria has not known steady peace. It

is either inter-religious crisis or intra-religious crisis in one section of the country or the other. Even among the adherents of one religion, for instance, Christianity, there exist the problem of disharmony, disunity, intolerance, bigotry and their likes. All these have not allowed for peaceful coexistence in the Nigerian society. Most religious leaders in Nigeria have used often time, their sermons as a means of causing disaffection and acrimony among Nigerians. This is contrary to the fact that religion is a unifying factor and most often, a carrier of peace.

Although, religion also functions negatively, its positive roles in society bring about peace, love, inclusiveness, happiness, integration, unity, harmony and tranquility. Nigeria being a religious nation, one would have expected that all the positive dividends of her tri-religions – Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion would have bestow on her all the societal and human values needed for peaceful coexistence. Since the reverse is the case, one is compared to assume that it is either those in charge of religion have manipulated the genuine functions of religion to cause disharmony in the society, or the society itself have under mined the genuine functions of religion. This misunderstanding and counter misunderstanding about the role of religion have often brought about disharmony, bigotry, exclusivism, disintegration, crisis and their likes.

This paper therefore argues that religion has a lot to offer to the Nigerian society, in terms of peace, love, inclusiveness, happiness, integration, unity, harmony and tranquility. It further argues that the positive role of religion if recognized, valued, applied, and lived can inevitably result to sustainable peaceful coexistence in Nigeria.

Conceptualizing Religion

Etymologically, the word “Religion” is derived from three Latin words, “*Ligare*” meaning to bind, “*Relegare*” meaning to unite or to link, and “*Religio*” meaning relationship (Omogbe, 1999). From its etymological meaning, religion is a vital connection between God and human being (Bouquet cited in Omogbe, 1999). The human entity is man, while the divine entity is the Supreme Being who is simply called God in religion. According to Bouquet (cited in Omogbe, 1993), religion is described as a vital union between the supernatural and natural (humans). The Supernatural who is self-existent and absolute is the God of religion that man worships. The above description of religion agrees with that of Echekwube (1984), who defined religion as a vital encounter with the supernatural or divine being to whom human being responds with his/her whole being; it is a special experience by man in depending on a superpower for the purpose of a greater realization of him/herself.

In this regard, religion also involves a set of beliefs that are enacted through rituals (Yinger, 1957), involving supernatural forces or entities and natural entities or forces with an attempt to influence these forces so as to provide understanding of our existence and the world, and meaning for our actions (Westra, 1999). Man's many complex life-questions need rational answers which are believed that only religion can provide. For example, questions, such as man's origin, man's purpose on earth and man's ultimate destiny cannot be provided answers to by technology or science but religion. In this sense, no human society can function effectively without religion. Religion therefore, is the heart of society. From different fields of studies, several arguments have been developed as regard the historical origin of religion. While several arguments have been propounded as regard how religion originated, still, there is no general harmonious view as to its historical origin. Religion is as old as man and the created order. For instance, no one can tell factually as to when and how African Traditional Religion started. It has been the way of life, cultures, traditions, norms and values of the African people from time immemorial- passing from generation to generation (Yta 2020).

While religions differ from one another in principles and practice, all religions have one area of convergence, that is, the belief in the supernatural. The God of religion is the God that is conceived differently by different religion. The God of religion is the worshipped being, the cosmic power which is designated by different names in different religions, cultures, beliefs, and languages. The God of religion is conceived by various religions as an anthropomorphic deity - a deity that is conceived in the image and likeness of man, having all human attributes. Religion, simply defined is a social institution that is concerned with the beliefs, action and inactions of members of a given community or a social organization in the process of which the values, norms, ethics and traditions are defined and expressed within the cosmology of the people (Alumuna et al., 2017; Edet 2017; Udoudom et al., 2018). In Radcliff-Brown's (1952) hypothesis on religion, from its social functions, religion is considered independent of its truth or falsity including the fact that religion which we think to be erroneous or absurd and repulsive may be vital and effective parts of the social mechanism of society.

Religions in Nigeria

Three prominent religions in Nigeria are Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion. African Traditional Religion (ATR) is the indigenous religion of the Nigerian people like other Africans. It is a religion that is original to the people. It is a religion that has a utilitarian content by providing amelioration to the people in terms of their fears and aspirations. Given some anthropological standpoints, there is a good reason to admit that without culture, there can be religion. In this wise, ATR is rooted in the culture and traditions of the people. It also represents the experience and way of life of the people (Awolalu, 1976; Udoh 2017). African Traditional Religion is the religion that has been handed down from generation to generation by the forbearers of the present generations of Africans. It is not a fossil religion (a thing of the past) but a religion that Africans today have made their by leaving it and preaching it. This is a religion that has no written literature, yet it is 'written' everywhere for those who care to see and read. It is largely written in the peoples' myths and folktales, in their songs and dances, in their liturgies and shrines and in their proverbs and pithy sayings. It is a religion whose historical founder is neither known nor worshipped, it is a religion that has no seal for membership drive, yet, it offers persistence fascination for Africans young and old.

Islam on the other hand, first gained its place in West Africa including Nigeria because it accommodated some of the traditional practices such as polygamy. By the end of the 18th century the religion was practiced with traditional religion. In an attempt to revive, purify and spread Islam further, the Jihad of Uthman Dan Fodio took the movement from the North to as far as the Yoruba land (Western region of Nigeria) where it was halted by the British missionaries and traders. Christianity on the other hand, came into what it is now known as Nigeria through Badagry where missionaries first established their presence in the mid-19th century. From there the mission spread to places like Lagos, Ibadan, Abeokuta, and Oyo between 1852 and 1856. Other Christian missionaries recorded various successes and by 1900 both Christianity and Islam were firmly rooted in Nigeria.

An Overview Meaning of Peace

Peace is from the French word, *pes* (also *pais*) (Latin version is *pax*) which also connotes reconciliation, among others (Miller, 2004). Peace in its English usage arose from different forms greeting as in the Hebrew verb, *shalom*, which means to be whole (Faleti, 2006). He also explained that the above translation of peace does not describe it completely. The reason is that the term, *shalom* that has similarity with the word, *salaam* (peace) in Arabic, also possesses several other meanings such as good neighbourliness and friendliness. In his book, Miller (2004) traced the different meanings of peace to various languages in the nations of the world.

He also grouped the various conceptions of peace into five families of peace which include: energetic and harmony; moral and justice; modern and security; postmodern and truth; and trans-rational.

From a philosophical perspective, peace is described as a presumption condition of silence in the earth based on the manner in which God had founded it from time immemorial. In this sense, it implies a complete divine situation of perfection. Furthermore, it also means an earthly expression of God's kingdom which is believed is in the future uncorrupted. This why, St. Augustine distinctively differentiated between two kinds of cities which he called, the city of God and earthly city of humans. According to him, the city of God has been founded on perfect heavenly peace and spiritual salvation while the earthly city of man is established on appetitive and possessive impulses characterized by corruption and thorns (cited in Miller, 2004; Ushie 2018). Faleti (2006) from another perspective, explained that peaceful emanates from a condition of human existence, a situation whereby the personal desires are intrinsically absent. In such condition, human beings exist as free and gentle savaged beings.

Hence, it could be interpreted that in this peace condition, humans are naturally good. Notably, human beings were born as free rational agents having but, few desires and needs. Unfortunately, this peaceful state subsequently was corrupted most probably by human moral choices, desires and greed which led to undermining the peaceful that previously characterized nature. However, while these philosophical postulations relate peace to the original ambitions and needs of human beings, the social aspect of peace has not been address especially as it relate to societal network. Sociologically, peace addresses the social sphere of human society. While from a normative context, philosophy addressed what ought to be, the sociologist explains peace to refer to a situation of social cooperation and happy without social hindrances (Faleti, 2006).

From this explanation, peace means a state whereby social conflicts are absent, thus, aiding the individual persons and groups in the society to be able to meet their desires and goals. To achieve this state of peace, two broad stylized sociological responses are involved. They are: structural-functionalist and dialectical materialist responses.

Structural functionalism as a tradition sees every human society accumulation of organized tasks and structures. For instance, for the survival of a society, there is need the education of children in that society; produce (or render) needed services and goods; provide good governance and leadership; and provide good security. To structure here means a group of interrelated roles that is necessary for performing a specific function. Thus, there is orderliness and social stability when structures carry out their duties. Peace according to this group is achieved where structures perform their roles effectively with the support of existing and requisite cultural norms and values.

There is also the notion that asserts that there is an old ideology that postulates that peace is synonymous with stability and equilibrium. Such perception of peace can also be called internal conditions of humans – that is, the person who is at peace with himself or herself. This kind peace extends its meaning to include the notion of law and order. Generally, this notion of peace does not explain away violence, because a warrior for example, who is on the war front, has peace within himself/herself on the battlefield even though there is war. There is also the notion of peace that postulates explain away the existence of violence in groups; particularly nations. However, the first notion of peace does not sound valid for the purpose of discussion because it does not include the absence of conflicts and violence, but includes an equilibrium assumption which probably is shared by very few groups or nations today.

Religion and Peace

All most every religion in the world preaches peace. It is generally agreed that religion is beneficial to society because it promotes peace and peaceful coexistence, although there are several ways of explaining this claim. Some scholars have posited that there are three approaches through which religion promotes peace in human society. This includes:

1. Devotion to a particular religion through which world peace can be achieved. Critics of this approach emphasize that this approach to world peace is capable of encouraging religious exclusivism and intolerance.
2. The second method is attaining peace in the absence of religion. This approach under minds the peace potentials of religion. However, this approach to peace without religion also under minds the fact that religion is capable of causing crisis and breaching societal peace. The exclusion of religion from societal affairs may lead to religious extremism and fundamentalism.
3. Peace with religion is another approach. In this method, the significance of dialogue and peaceful coexistence are highly emphasized. Worth noting here is the fact that there is no inherent good or bad in religion for peace. That is why religion can be peace-destructing or peace-building. In this sense, the impact of religion on peace is undeniable. Common principles of peace is therefore, found in every religion. For example, the post-September 11 world came with the fears of religious extremism and crisis between religious groups, for example, between Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. People have always tried to look down on the influences of religion in their entirety. This is very dangerous.

There is need to explore and research into the role which religion can perform to peace building. To mention few instances, in the past, religious leaders and faith-based groups mediated in peace agreements between nations. Examples are the cases of Sudan and South Africa during the apartheid and democratic transition periods. In this sense, religion is capable of contributing to societal peace in the following ways:

1. Through moral warrants for the opposition of injustice on the part of governments.
2. Through unique leverage in the promotion of reconciliation among conflicting groups, including the capability to re-humanize conditions that have become dehumanized as a result of protracted conflict.
3. Through the mobilization of local, national, and international support for peace initiatives.
4. Capability to follow through locally in the wake of a political settlement.

Four main elements are contained in religion. These elements are the resources at the disposal of religion in the task of peace building. These elements are: religious ideologies also referred to as beliefs; religious rites and sacrifices; social organization discoverable in religious community; and religious experience or religiosity. Furthermore, empathy, value and compassion are also key players in task of peace building or making by religion.

Perceived Positive Role of Religion

Anything that exists that performs no function has no business existing. Hence religion exists because it performs useful functions. Therefore, religion is a living organism that exists in the abstract. Religion performs several unique functions both to the society and humanity (Okafor & Stella 2018). Several functional theories have been advanced by scholars as regard religion. Although, Emile Durkheim was not primarily interested in individual phenomena of religious experience, he however, did recognize the supportive role of religion for the believers because religion gives the believers “the impressions of comfort and dependence” (Durkheim, 1915 p.44). We will now proceed to discuss the overall positive functions of religion to include its supportive, preservative, protective, and prophetic functions.

1. Supportive Function

Human's world is full of complex uncertainties coupled with several existential problems. In this regard therefore, religion plays a very vital role by providing emotional aids and encouragement to man. In this sense, religion provides consolation and reconciliation to human society. When confronted with disappointments religion provides consolation, and when alienated from societal goals, norms, and values religion provides reconciliation between man and his society. Also, in times of defeats, distress, and impossibilities religion provides emotional support for revival and survival. Religion provides support by establishing values and goals, reinforces morale, and at the same time, provides immunization against disaffections in human society (Isiramen and Donatus, 1998; Giyekye, 1996). In this sense, religion supports and encourages growth and maturation of the individuals in the society and provides the ingredients for development, autonomy and self- direction.

2. Preservative Function

Religion does not only socialize and support the norms and values of society, but also helps to preserve them in an established human society. The dos and don'ts of any society are highly controlled by religion in that society. Those things approved by the society are the ones approved by religion, and what the society forbids is also forbidden by their religion (Westra, 1999). Hence, under its preservative function, social control, order, peace, and stability in any society are attained and maintained. In this regard, religion does not only preserve, it also offers a guide to conduct and right behavior.

3. Protective Function

Religion being an essential relationship between God and human, offers a transcendental relationship through cults and ceremonies of worship including rituals, thereby providing the emotional ground for a new security and firmer identity through which man finds an escape from his numerous life complexities, uncertainties and fears (Herbarg, 1955; Ottuh, 2012). Religion provides free access to power especially for the powerless and the marginalized in an unfriendly and hostile society. Religion, according to Herberg (1955), gives the individuals a sense of identity with the distant past and the limitless future. In periods of rapid social changes, and large-scales mobility, the role of religion in providing identity is very paramount. Religion therefore, preserves, protects and promotes the cultures and traditions of people.

4. Prophetic Function

This function of religion however, is capable of contradicting the other functions of religion. For example, in a situation where theocracy abounds, certain institutionalized norms and values can be attacked by religion. This is the case of the Hebrew prophets in Biblical history. The prophetic function of religion is often a source of vital social crises in an established society. Religion performs the prophetic roles of salvation and redemption. It is religion that provides reassurance in a failing society. In other word, it is religion that provides explanations and explications to human life, the created order, human's existence and human's ultimate destiny.

Religious Exclusivism in Nigeria

As earlier noted, the major religions in Nigeria include Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion. All of them share the same characteristic of monotheism, yet they disagree in several areas. The most persistent problem confronting religious life in Nigeria today is that of religion exclusiveness - an absolute claim to religious truth by a particular religion. Exclusivism is the by-product of religious intolerance. Most guilty of this practice are Christianity and Islam.

It should however, be noted, that the claim to 'possess' all the truth by a particular religion has been a dichotomizing drive for the Christian and Islamic religions in Nigeria. They claim to offer the sole way to salvation. As for the Moslems, they claim that all non-Moslems are infidels; therefore, to fight the infidels is considered a holy duty. No religion can claim to possess the whole truth of religion. A religion which sees itself as absolute takes other religions to be *pseudo* religions - that is, false religion (Smith, 1987).

Christianity and Islam are the two religions which have always insisted on particularity and superiority not only over each other but also over other religions. Religions particularity as defined by Kateregga and Shank (1980), is the belief that one's religion is the only religion that is ordained by and acceptable to God to the total exclusion of others. But the fact remains that all religions which have claimed monopoly of truth to the exclusion of others and which have claimed the scheme of salvation as being solely for themselves have been doing so for their own interests, for instance, for the protection of their bigotted positions and not in defense of God.

Moreover, it is difficult to find an acceptable parameter with which religions can be compared so as to arrive at the conclusion of being the best religion. This is where Jung's observation is apposite when he opined that:

Every religion is a cycle of completion and perfection in its entirety. Though not consciously yet in fact, they start with a quest which they more or less achieve. Religions are really incomparable. At any rate, we have no principles reasonable or acceptable which can be applied to evolve a calculus of religions (p.141).

Another point to be noted touches on the nature of God of religion. Both Christianity and Islam as well as other living faiths proclaim God's mercies, justice and monistic fatherhood of humankind. They see God as the Creator of all human beings, sustainer, protector, and provider and as mysterious and powerful. Worthy of note too, is the historical fact that millions of people lived before Jesus Christ was born, millions lived in His time who did not know anything about Him and many more millions have lived after Him who never knew anything about Him. If all such people are condemned to hell-fire simply because they did not belong to one religion or the other, then the attributes given to God by the various religions, will no more be justifiable and valid.

Towards Ensuring Peaceful Coexistence in Nigeria

In recent times, religious conflicts especially between adherents of Christianity and Islam have reached a dimension whereby each group enthusiastically calls on God to annihilate the other group even though, the two religions have a common ancestral origin. The negative sense of conceptual decolonization by Wiredu (1995) and Bassey et al., (2019) provides some useful clues regarding religion and developmental crisis in Nigeria in terms of the extinction of her culture and premier religion. If Nigeria's developmental crisis is directly link to foreign religions (in the case of Christianity and Islam), it is necessary to ask, and perhaps, ponder over some metaphysical questions. Sogolo (1989), as with other exponents of cultural renewal have indicated that it would be an exercise in futility to attempt to recapture our past in terms of playing the good son with the gods of traditional religion that is discarded in place of the God or

Allah of Christianity and Islam respectively. According to Sogolo, Nigeria like other African people is already too assimilated into foreign culture to wish for the past glory. He remarked further, that vital historical events such as colonialism and Christianity have cut deep into the fabrics of our society. Sogolo proffers that a conscious process of integration whereby the people needs to demonstrate the Christian religion by reformulating its major doctrinal schemes to reflect African experience. Indeed, such proposal sounds very reasonable, but it should be an integration in which we must be jealously and carefully guided. To achieve this, we need to look at the underlying assumptions that have brought us to this point. This task will be an easy one given the fact that we are already too conscious and critical of the damage done to some cherished aspects of the Nigerian culture and religion. Religion in my opinion here implies one more powerful tool than any other conceivable weapon in doing this. Nigeria has a country has reached a philosophical and historical epoch where it is necessary to abandon the negative and anachronistic aspects of our culture and religion and integrate the positive elements of our culture and that of religion.

Religion is the heart of society. Religion is a key player in enhancing national peace. It is obvious that, every home in Nigeria belongs to one religion or the other. In some cases, members of the same family may be adherents of different religions as the case may be. In this sense, religion can play a vital function in enhancing peace and harmony in Nigeria which is characterized by multi-ethnic groups and traditions. Some of the ways through which religion can contribute to peaceful coexistence in Nigeria are as follow:

1. Religious Tolerance

Despite the fact that the *Nigerian 1999 Constitution* provides for religious harmony and peace, religious intolerance still abounds. The ‘father’ of religious intolerance is religious exclusivism and bigotry including religious fundamentalism and fanaticism (Abel & Uket 2016; Duke & Osim 2020). Most of the religious crises that have erupted in Nigeria today are based on the unwillingness of religious adherents of divergent faiths to accommodate the point of view or belief of one another. This has often resulted in religious crisis. According to Ekpu (1986 in Isiraman and Donatus, 1998), such crises are like “an ill wind that blows no one any good” (p.206). For instance, in March, 1987 there was a religion riot in Kafanchan that erupted between the adherents of Islam and Christianity (Babarinea, 1987). In this riot many lives and properties were lost. All these happened as a result of religious intolerance. The current religious crisis in Nigeria resulting from Boko Haram insurgency is another good example.

For Nigeria to move forward and for Nigerian to coexist peacefully, all religions in Nigeria must understand, embrace and tolerate one another. The adherents of religions should practice religious inclusiveness. Adherents of religions should appreciate and recognize one another in good faith. It should be noted however, that people who fight for their religion are ignorant of religion. In other word, they cannot claim to know God who can fight for Himself.

2. Religious Dialogue

Nigeria as a pluralistic nation is a multi- religious society, and at the same time, characterized by diversity of cultures and traditions that are very complex. One of the strongest instruments to be used in achieving religious tolerance, peace and harmony is dialogue. Dialogue promotes peaceful coexistence. Dialogue, according to Chuwulezie (2011), is the contact that is established between people of different and sometimes opposed positions who are attempting to overcome their mutual prejudices and broaden as far as possible their areas of

mutual agreement whether this takes place on the plain of human relations or that of a quest for the truth or of collaboration to attain ends of practical nature.

The function and efficacy of religious dialogue cannot be over emphasized. It provides an enabling platform for adherents of divergent religious groups or sects to come together and discuss their problems in a common platform. In dialogue, every party is considered important. View and opinions are respected and given careful and respectful consideration. The ultimate goal of dialogue is peace and harmony. Future religious crises in Nigeria can be averted if Christians and Muslims close ranks by entering into or engaging in mutual dialogue.

The Council for Inter-religious Dialogue established by the Federal Republic of Nigeria should not be given lip-service. This Council should be replicated in all the States and Local government Areas of the federation. For genuine dialogue to attain its ultimate goal in Nigeria, religious adherents must avoid all provocative utterances, be quick to hear and understand, but must be slow to speak and react. For dialogue to be useful and resourceful in the promotion of religious peace in Nigeria, religious stakeholders must practice love and forgiveness since all religions teach and emphasize love for the Divine and humanity.

3. Brotherhood of Humanity

The value of African communalism which is based on the ethical model of humanocentricism if upheld to its fullest can lead to the realization of peaceful relations among all in Nigeria. The philosophy of communalism is "All for one, one for all, and all for God." Religion expects and encourages its adherents to help one another. The Africans place value on humanity (Giyekye, 1996). The Africans believe that humanity is a creation of God; therefore, all human beings are the children of God. In this sense, the Africans believe that all human beings irrespective of their ethnic affiliations belong to one universal human family. For Giyekye (1996), "Everybody" in the African concept of humanity is related to "everybody else" (p.24). The Muslims should regard the Christians as brothers and sisters and vice versa. True religious brotherhood transcends ethnicity and religiosity. Both Christians and Muslims should live the exemplary lives of Jesus Christ and Prophet Muhammad respectively.

4. Inter-Religious Marriage

Nigeria being a pluralistic society, one powerful instrument that can enhance peaceful coexistence among her citizens is the instrument of inter-religious marriage. When marriages are contracted between adherents of different religious sects, such marriages cutting across ethnicity and faith helps to encourage and promote peace and harmony in the Nigerian society. It also helps to promote and solidify brotherhood and understanding among adherents of different religions. All these will in turn promote peaceful co-existence. It is glad to note, that this type of marriage called "mixed marriage" is already being practiced in the Catholic and Baptist Churches. It should be emulated by other Christian denominations and even, by Muslims. There are examples of such marriages between Muslims and Catholics in rear cases.

5. Religious Inclusiveness

In a pluralistic society like Nigeria, no religion or religious group should claim absoluteness of religious truth. All religions should deemphasize doctrinal differences and establish common areas of cooperation for the purpose of peace and harmony. All religious adherents should be considered one another as important, and see themselves as partners in

progress, in a society that has been corrupted with materialism, nepotism, bribery and corruption. All these can be done without one compromising his or her faith.

6. Government Neutrality

The pluralistic nature of the Nigeria society, coupled with the presence of multiple religious practices call for absolute neutrality on the part of the Nigerian government at all levels. In this sense, the government should not use any government apparatus to propagate any one religion to the negligence of the others. Any religious principle to be incorporated by the government should be beneficiary to all the religions that exist in the country (Nwanaju, 2005). If this is done religious peace and order will be promoted. Partiality on the part of government in religious affairs can only lead to the break-down of laws and order. It is advisable therefore, that in religious matters, government should play the role of an umpire this is because, religion itself is a moderating agent.

7. Maintaining the Secularity of the Nigerian State

A rigid adherence to the secularity of the Nigerian state is a *sin-qua-non* to the attainment of peaceful coexistence in Nigeria. By the provisions of the Nigeria constitution of 1999, Nigeria is presumed to be a secular state (Isokun, 1998), although this provision has been interpreted valiantly. By secularity in the constitution, it means a situation where although there may be several religions in a state none of them is adopted by the state as the official religion. Thus, the adoption of sharia legal system by some states in Nigeria is no doubt a flagrant contravention of the Nigerian Constitution. It is therefore a complete nullity *ab initio* according to Ejro's expression (Isiramen and Donatus, 1998). The Nigerian Constitution recognizes the fact that Nigeria is a multi- religious state where all religions are to be tolerated. Even some of the Muslims who are in support of the sharia operating in some states of Nigeria would agree that it is not compatible to peaceful coexistence in Nigeria. For peace and harmony to be achieved in the Nigerian nation the secularity of the Nigerian state should be upheld in its totality according to the provisions of the Nigeria constitution. Sharia or any religious laws should be restricted only to their religious sects, and not to be state laws (Ottuh, 2012). Any religious law should have no business in the Nigerian polity.

CONCLUSION

In order to achieve peace and harmony in the Nigeria society, religious tolerance and harmony is a *sine qua non*. This means, religious adherents should use the instrument of dialogue to create an atmosphere of friendship and fellowship with one another. Government must play an impartial role in religious matters. The values of love, humanity, meekness, prudence, moderation, hospitality, contentment, faith, hope, kindness, patience, which are taught in all religions, should be upheld for peaceful coexistence among Nigerians. It will be pertinent to conclude this discussion with the words of Durkheim (1915), who says: "religion is a unified system of beliefs and practice... beliefs and practices which unite into one single community all those who adhere to them" (p.47). And in the words of Isokun (1998), he says: "religion promotes cohesion and collective actions among members ... an instrument of social activities, an anti- crime agency and machinery for social control (in human society)" (p.154).

It should be noted, that the fact that God appears to people of different races, at different times and in environments suited to their culture makes it impossible for all humankind to be of one faith. It is therefore absolutely unacceptable for one religion adherent to use his or her own

culture and historical background to condemn and seek to destroy other religions. Pope John Paul II (1982), addressing Muslim leaders in Kaduna, Nigeria in 1982, reminded the Muslims of their common grounds with the Christians when he said that: All of us, Christians and Muslims, live under the sun of the one merciful God who is the Creator of man [human being]. We acclaim God's sovereignty and we defend human's dignity as God's servants. We adore God and profess total submission to Him (p.42).

The above address, no doubt, clearly shows that Christianity and Islam have many things in common. Apart from the fundamental law of love of God and of one's neighbour, the two religions have the privilege of prayer, the duty of justice accompanied by compassion and almsgiving and above all, a sacred respect for humanity. Thus, in the true sense of it, Christians and Muslims can call one another brothers and sisters in faith in the name of one God. Adherents of religions in Nigeria should cooperate to promote a peaceful and progressive society.

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