STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE AS A BASIS FOR SUSTAINABLE NATIONAL UNITY AND DEVELOPMENT

BY

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Abstract

The emerging issues in educational, social, and psychological spheres in Nigeria today provide the basis for undertaking research in order to combat them. The various ways to mitigate the prevailing issues, among others, is to promote religious tolerance. In this paper, religious tolerance is defined as the acceptance of religious pluralism. Its underlying causes which include illiteracy and ignorance, poverty, over-ambition, exaggerated sense of self-worth and pride, political and territorial ambitions, expressions of bigotry, stereotypes, stigmatization, insults and lack of access to social justice and corruption have been highlighted. The functions of religion as a unifying factor for sustainable development have been analyzed. The paper has also discussed strategies for addressing religious intolerance. They include provision of quality and moral education, interaction with people of different faiths and backgrounds, access to information, personal awareness, enforcement of human rights through legislation and punishments, and local solutions through dialogue and negotiations. The paper suggested establishment of faith or religious agency for inter-religious faiths discussions, dialogue and peaceful coexistence, advocacy and reorientation programmes, and policy direction by government at all levels to monitor and control religious activities, among others.

Key Words: Strategies, Promoting, Religious Tolerance, National Unity and Development

Introduction

The emerging issues in educational, social, and psychological spheres in Nigeria today provide the basis for undertaking research in order to combat them. Theseissues manifest in poverty, unemployment, Boko Haram insurgency, banditry, kidnapping, suicidal, ethno-religious crises, and social injustice with attendant effects on education, peace and sustainable development (Baji & Ugochukwu, 2017; Madumere, et al., 2020;Okolo & Akubo, 2019). The democratic principles and ideas require people to have equal rights and to also respect the rights of other people that have different beliefs, customs, and ethnic backgrounds. However, contrasting ideologies, values and norms have made religious tolerance difficult in our society today; breeding unnecessary crises and hatred and above all, wanton killings of innocent citizens (Jegede, 2019; Okoi, 2020). In other words, the various religious identities and different faiths which are considered as fundamental social norms and pillars for peace and unity have become intolerable and threatening the unity and socio-economic development of our country (Aluko, 2017; Atoi & Babale, 2022). To mitigate the prevailing challenges,it is expedienttherefore,to promote religious tolerancethrough effective strategiesas a means for a successful social interaction, peace andsustainable national development (Eze, 2020; Iteogu, 2020; Omede & Omede, 2015).

Religionis defined in this context as a divineor cultural universal creed that concerns beliefs and rituals about the supernatural beings, powers, forces or God the Almighty (Okoi, 2020). Anthropologically,Edward Burnett Tylor in (Kottak (2018 &2005) posited that religion evolved through stages: beginning with Animism (belief in spiritual beings), Polytheism (belief in multiple gods), and Monotheism (belief in a single, all-powerful deity). Religious tolerance therefore refers to the acceptance of religious pluralism (Kottak, 2018). It

is the belief that all religions are equal and valid within their own origins or culture. Religious tolerance is described as a human right issue, where every person has the freedom to practice any religion even if there is disagreement on the validity of that belief and practice(Hutchings, 2018). Thus, religious freedom means that a person can without oppression or discrimination:

believe, worship and witness any religion as he wishes;

practice freedom from belief, worship and witnessing any religion if he wishes;

change his belief or religious affiliation, and

associate with others to express his belief (Garth, 2007).

Religious intolerance, on the other hand, is the inability of an adherent of a particular religion to acknowledge, accommodate and accept the right of others to live by another faith different from his own (Aluko, 2017; Muhammad, 2018). Religious intolerance is intolerance against another's religious beliefs or practices. Thus, when a group (e.g., a society, religious or non-religious groups) specifically refuses to tolerate practices, persons or beliefs on religious grounds, they are said to be religiously intolerance, or in some cases, fanatic(Phillip, 2017). However, a statement of disagreement with regards to religious practices that are correct and those other ones that are incorrect does not constitute intolerance rather it is called ideological intolerance(Madumere, et al., 2020). In view of this, religious tolerance implies that one would rely on self-restraint, or good grace of majority, and as an act of generosity, whereby the object of tolerance is thankful for being allowed to express his/her identity (Barsky, 2019; Khanam, 2010).Thus, religious tolerance is the act of accommodating and accepting people of other faiths or beliefs in the course of interpersonal or group

relationship. In line with this, Verkuyten, et al.(2019) maintained that to tolerate someone else is an act of power; and to be tolerated is an acceptance of weakness.

Like ethnicity or language, religion exists in all human societies, and is associated with social divisions within and between societies and nations (Lapsley, 2018). This, by and large, implies that religious beliefs and behaviour can both unite and divide (Ochola, 2018). Precisely,this means that participation in common religious rites can affirm, and maintain the social solidarity of the adherents of a particular religion. On the other hand, religious differences, if not properly handled, it may form a factor for bitter enmity, hatred, and a source for national disintegration with consequences on peaceful coexistence and sustainable development. In view of this, it is therefore, pertinent to state that when studying religions cross-culturally, there is need to pay special attention not only to their social roles but also to the content and nature of the religious acts, events, processes, settings, practitioners and organizations as they affect every particular religion and the overall interest of the nation for peace and national unity.

Religious Intoleranceas an Emerging Issue among Nations

There are various perspectives on contemporary practices found in the constitutions of some countries containing provisions expressly forbidding the state from engaging in certain acts of religious intolerance or preference within its own boarders. Seemann (2018), Khanam (2010), Garth (2007) and International Religious Freedom Act (1998) analyzed examples of such countries to include the first Amendment of the United States Constitution, Article 4 of the Basic Law of Germany, Article 24 of the Constitution of Turkey, and Article 36 of the Constitution of the People’s Republic of China. Some other countries do not contain constitutional provisions directly related to religion; nonetheless, they have provisions

forbidding discrimination on religious grounds. Examples of such countries are Article 1 of the French Constitution, Article 15 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Article 40 of the Constitution of Egypt, and 1999 Nigerian Constitution as Amended. Other countries may allow religious preference through the establishment of one or more state religions, but not for religious intolerance. Finland, which has the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland and Finish Orthodox Church as her official state religion is a good example. However, Article 11 of her constitution still upholds the right of free expression of religion.

There are some other countries that retain laws forbidding defamation of religious belief and all forms of blasphemy (e.g., Germany in 2006 had Manfred Van convicted as a result of blasphemy against Islam). In Pakistan, blasphemy directed against the tenets of the Qur'an or the Prophet Muhammad is punishable by either life imprisonment or death. Similarly, apostasy (the rejection of one's old religion), is also criminalized in a number of countries such as Afghanistan, with Abdul Rahman been the first to face the death penalty for converting to Christianity. Consequent upon these trends, Ezzy, et al. (2020) and UNESCO (1995) maintained that the United Nations upholds the right to free expression of religious belief in Articles 18 and 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, while Article 2 forbids discrimination on the basis of religion. Article 18 also allows for the freedom to change religion. In 1998, the United States passed the International Religious Freedom Act, mandating the United States Government to take action against any country found to violate the religious freedom outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

In a related development, the European Convention on Human Rights passed the Human Rights Act in 1998, which makes it illegal the restriction of the rights of an individual to practice or change his/her religion and discrimination on the basis of religion as contained

in Article 9 and Article 14 respectively. In further analysis, the Advocacy Group Freedom House produced a report entitled 'Religious Freedom in the Worldin 2000' which ranked countries according to their religious freedom.Countries with least respect for religious freedom include Turkmenistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and North Korea while countries with highest level of religious freedom, on the other hand, are Finland, Ireland, Netherlands, Norway and the United States (Garth, 2007). From the forgoing, it is worthy to point out that the concept of religious intolerance is relative, and can best be interpreted within the contextual framework of every society or country.

Factors Responsible for Religious Intolerance

The underlying causes of religious intolerance in our communitieshave been analyzed. These include high level of illiteracy and ignorance,poverty (which leads to abuse of human rights), over-ambition resulting to frustration and crises,exaggerated sense of self-worth and pride,political and territorial struggle resulting to divides among individuals or groups, expressions of bigotry, stereotype, stigmatization, insults and racial jokes,lack of access to justice due to corruption and unjust resource distribution, management and utilization, and .increasing literalism among religious leaders and followers (Atoi (2022; Pierri & Barkindo, 2016; Seemann, 2018).

Similarly, Fahmi, et al. (2021); Kottak (2018); and Muhammad (2018) have consideredpersonal whims and caprices for self-aggrandizement, misinterpretation of religious laws and teachings (due to stereotype and half-bake knowledge), multiculturalism(characterized with various political and social policies), and outward

practices of religion, ideological differences (which causes dispute and enmity) as determinants of religious intolerance in the society.

Functions of Religion as a Unifying Factor

Religion has been described as a unifying factor among communities (Agigun, 2013; Atoi & Babale, 2022; Baehr, 2017; Baji, 2015; Lindebaum, 2017); Muhammad, 2018; Okoi,2020).

First and foremost, religion has meaning for people. Religion helps people to cope with adversity and tragedy. It offers hope that things will get better. Hence, religion becomes a powerful means of controlling peoples' beliefs, behaviour, socialization, and the schooling process (Lapsley, 2018).

Secondly, religion can get inside people and mobilize their emotions such as joy, righteousness, and wrath. With religion, people feel a deep sense of shared joy, meaningful experience, communion, belonging, and commitment (Lickona, 1991).

Thirdly, when various religions meet, they can co-exist peacefully. However, if there is no tolerance, differences based on religion can be a source for enmity and disharmonyas well as wars or battles. For instance, religious fervour has inspired Christians on crusades against the infidel and has led Muslims to wage Jihad (Holy wars) against non-Islamic people (Johnson, 2006).

Religion is a means that help to maintain social order through strict adherence to purportedly traditional standards, beliefs, rules and customs (Garth, 2007).

Furthermore, religion is not only an instrument of change but also for revolution. Revitalization movements (social movement) occur in terms of changes in which religious leaders emerge and undertake to alter or revitalize a society. In an Islamic Revolution, for example, Iranian Ayatollah marshaled religious fervour (an intense emotion) to create

national solidarity and social change. Christianity through Jesus originated as a revitalization movement. Jesus preached new religious doctrines while the Middle East was under the Roman rule (Kottak, 2005).

Also, religion serves the social function of creating temporary or permanent solidarity among people; forming a social community. The unity of human social order is enhanced by symbolic association of religious adherents and imitation of the natural order. Therefore, one role of religious rites and beliefs is to affirm, and thus maintain the unity of religious adherents. People gather to honour and perform religious rites and rituals, thus, providing them social oneness and unity of purpose as symbolized by many religions (Ochola, 2018).

In another development, religion as a social act can reduce anxiety and allay fears. Many people engage in religious activities because prayers are answered and actions are efficacious. Ironically, beliefs and rituals can also create anxiety and a sense of insecurity, danger, and stress.

There is also social aspect of collective responsibility, community spirit, equality and togetherness which are derived through religion. Religion can make the social distinctions that exist among people to be temporarily forgotten through love, fraternity, brotherhood and humanitarian services.

Strategies for Promoting Religious Tolerance for National Unity and Development

The following are various perspectives that involve some basic assumption as ways for promoting religious tolerance to achieve sustainable national unity and development.

1. **Provision of quality and moral education**: Fighting religious intolerance requires a greater effort of educating the society beginning at the primary school (Fahmi, et al., 2021; Muhtar, et al., 2020). Children at their early stages should be taught the moral

principles of religion, human rights, the socialization of other people, and be encouraged to be open-mindedat homes, work places, and schools.Hence, Baehr (2017) maintained thatreligious education should teach children and young adults to cultivate in their own character such attributes as piety, compassion, tolerance, justice, righteousness, loyalty, truthfulness, wisdom and humility. These virtues, put together, will assist to build a peaceful and morally-minded society for sustainable development.

2. **Building inclusive institutions and egalitarian citizenship**: Building egalitarian society and setting of norms for tolerance through social justice, exemplary life, and corrupt-free system and bureaucracy would stimulate willingness and ability to disagree and put up differences for peace and psychological well-being of the people (Asadu, et al., 2020; Barsky, 2019). A society built upon social justice will provide enabling environment for competitive and productive efforts by all and sundry; leading to everlasting peace and sustainable development.
3. **Understanding individual differences**: The principle of individual differences implies that two people are not exactly the same. The implication of this psychological phenomenon is that people differ in their origins, growth and development and socialization patterns. This applies to even identical twins who are from the same genetically composed elements talk less of non-identical twins or people from different family or ethnic backgrounds (Lapsley, 2018). Understanding individual differences therefore, will enable one to accommodate, tolerate and manage people of diverse social groups, family backgrounds and religious affiliations for peace and unity.

2. **Interaction with people of different faiths and backgrounds**:According to Ochola (2018), wide interaction with people of different backgrounds can help every individual to lift the veil of cultural differences and to appreciate the diverse religious traditions. In this case, taking the perspective of others and intercultural interactions will promote a better understanding of the specific reasons behind dissenting practices and beliefs.

3. **Access to information**: Policies and programmes on press freedom and pluralism should be developed in communities to provide the public with necessary information which will clear misinformation, prejudice and fallacious arguments based on religious grounds. This should bring into consideration factors such as legal, historical, political, and educational contexts of the citizenry for social inclusion and cohesion (Hutchings, 2018).

4. **Personal awareness:**Creating personal awarenessthrough conferences, seminars, workshops, and inter-religious discourse to share about ill-behaviour and the vicious cycle of violence in the society cannot be overemphasized. The idea of personal awareness will make people to understand that tolerance is not a global construct but depend on whom, what, and when people are required to tolerate different beliefs, practices, and principled reasons than prejudicial attitudes that could cause non-acceptanceand violence in the society (Verkuyten, Yoqeeswaran, & Adelman, 2019).

5. **Enforcement of human rights through legislation and punishment:** Enactment of laws and punishment for offenders can suppress both the act of religious persecutions, attitude of intolerance, and religious extremism (Jegede, 2019). Also, equal access to justice will alleviate the problem of hatred, discrimination against minorities and

chances of people to take justice into their hands or resort to violent to settle their disputes.

6. **Local solutions**: Solutions to some global problems demand local approaches and remedies. When there are cases of crises and escalationof ethno-religious intolerance, members of the community must not wait for government and non-governmentalinstitutions to act alone. Individuals and neighbourhoods should consider themselves as part of the solution through dialogue and conflict resolution. This strategy justifies the saying that 'peace and security is the responsibility of everyone.

Educational Implications of Religious Tolerance

The educational implicationsof religious tolerance include the following, among others:

1. Peaceful learning environment which may lead to improved academic performance, retention, and completion rates.
2. Reduction in violence which will remedy drop-out rates, wanton killings and destruction of school properties.
3. Reduction in injustice and discrimination due to differences in beliefs. This will lead to justice and equity in providing educational services.
4. Positive impacts on the economic growth; thereby increasing enrolment and completion rates as well as quality education delivery.
5. Promotion of well-being of individuals, families, and the community which will lead to development and attainment of educational goals.
6. Reduction in the incidence of domestic abuse, crime rates, substance abuse and addiction among school leavers.

7. Sustainable growth of individuals that will enhance productivity in the education sector.

Conclusion

The diversity of world's religions, languages,culture, and ethnicity is not a pretext for conflict, but is a treasure that enriches the society intellectually, socially, morally and psychologically. This paper has discussed religious tolerance as a phenomenon thatrecognizes the universal human rights and fundamental freedom of others. People are naturally diverse, and there are individual differences across all the developmental spheres. But through the principle ofreligious tolerance,people can ensure the survival of multi-cultural and religious society. In line with the discussions of this paper, it is required that people can develop capacities of critical thinking, ethical reasoning and independent judgments about religious differences to achieve unity, love and peaceful co-existence and sustainable development.

Recommendations

The following suggestions have been offered in order to foster religious tolerance in our communities for sustainable national unity and development:

1. Establishment of faith or religious agency by governments at all levels for inter-religious faiths discussions, dialogue and peaceful coexistence. The membership of this agency should cut across all religious faithsand legal practitioners in communities for fair representation.
2. Advocacy and reorientation by governments at all levels, religious and tradition leaders, teachers, counselors, psychologists as well as non-governmental

organizations to sensitize members of our communities through programme activities on the need for freedom of religion, religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence.

3. Legislation and policy direction by government at all levels to monitor and control religious bodies in our communities, and to issue license for religious activitiesas well as to sanction the erring ones where necessary.
4. Financial interventions to religious bodies and faith organizations by government at all levels, voluntary organizations and individual philanthropists to curb poverty and alleviate sufferings which culminate into criminality and extremisms among some members of religious followers.

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