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ACHIEVING PEACE AND SUSTAINABLE RECONCILIATION IN NIGERIA: THE MANIFESTATION OF THE EXCLUSIVE MANDATE OF THE CHURCH

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Abstract

Nigeria, as a nation, has suffered setbacks from social, economic, political space which can largely be attributed to the religious upheavals. This situation has adversely affected the multi-cultural, multi-religious, and multi-lingual nature of the country, which makes it uneasy for citizens of the nation to live and act as one. Principal findings revealed that several clashes which have led to the destruction of lives and property are occasioned by religious imbalance in the country. The bruise inflicted by this is observed in the unpatriotic approach to religion. This study, therefore, aims at bringing to the fore the role of the church in achieving reconciliation, enthronement of peace, stability, progress, and unity in Nigeria. Reconciliation, being both physical and spiritual in practice, can be instrumental in directing and re-directing the affairs of the Nigerian nation. The researchers aim at invoking both the spiritual and physical role of the church in fostering peace and unity in Nigeria. The researchers employed the use of primary and secondary sources of data collection in the execution of the research.

Introduction

The need for conflict resolution in Nigeria is crucial. It is imperative because no two people perceive a particular thing exactly the same way. Efforts to curb conflict crisis-situations have often times been unsuccessful; occasioned not only by the complex nature of humanity, but also by the methods and means employed by those on mediation. It is the position of this study that a factor that has not received sufficient attention in this regard is the culture, tradition and biblical frameworks or paradigms is determining the understanding of conflicts, their causes and appropriate tools for reconciliation. This study will locate and explore these necessary basic tools and frameworks on peace initiatives and conflict resolutions as the symbolical rites of procedure. It will argue that all of them have to be taken seriously if we really have to move from rhetorics and good intentions to sustainable behavior change that leads to solid reconciliation and peace that will finally lead to decreased rate of conflict situations and socio-political rascality in Nigeria today.

Desmond Tutu of South Africa is reported to have commented from within the situation of social revolution in South Africa that without reconciliation, there is no future (Wustenberg, 1998). This assertion by the astute cleric underscores the desire of all nations for peace and conflict resolution. Christianity, as a religion of peace, has a significant role in this regard. The church's initiatives in achieving reconciliation among the warring parties rest upon the conviction that aggrieved parties must be committed to achieving peace. They should be ready to accept their mistakes and make amends. They should be made to understand that wrongs and injustices have been committed; but that what is important for progress to be achieved is by amending and establishing harmonious and cordial relations other than revenge and separation. Inadequate consensus about what wrong was done in the past and which future relationships to promote might be a big obstacle.



How would people for instance be motivated to ask for forgiveness when they believe that, according to the norms and values of their community, what they did was not wrong? (Udezo, 2009). Shriver (1995) pointed out that alleged wrong doers are wary of being told that someone forgives them. Even in the home, forgiveness is paramount to ensuring peace in the family.

Mairi (1998) defines peace as freedom from or absence of war, a treaty or agreement ending a war, or freedom from or absence of noise, disturbance or disorder, quietness or calm, freedom from mental agitation, serenity. Iwe (1991) asserts that peace is the resultant effect of balance and harmony among the constituent elements and forces of an organism. For man, as an individual moral being, it is the price of righteous and good will.

In socio-political environment of man, peace building is understood as highest political good which tends to consist in the harmonious operation of the forces of his social life. Peace building remains an empty word except it rests upon that order founded on truth, built upon justice, nurtured and given life by charity and brought into functional effect under the auspices of freedom and love. These social values of man are tools for peace building in the modern world.

Peace precedes conflict and it is the natural state of being. The Webster's Dictionary (1991) says peace is a noun and defines it as:

The condition that exists when nations or other groups are not fighting; the ending of a state of war, the treaty that marks the end of a war, friendly relations between individuals, untroubled by disputes, freedom from noise, worries, troubles, fears, public order and security (p.34).

Peace is not given to fighting, or quarrelling but connotes calm, quite, untroubled, undisturbed, especially by noise, worry, fear, or anxieties. Other related terms to a peace builder include a peace maker who fosters or cements friendly disposition. The peace of God is above all other states of peace, hence pleasing to God.

The teeming youths in the modern age are being confronted with the social vices of trafficking in human persons, prostitution, obnoxious cultural practices, and conflict of cultures owing to the prevalence of social media in the modern day world. Above all, Western civilisation has a corroding influence on Nigerian cultural values and norms. This is based on the fact that western value systems manifest what Nonyelu (2007) described as "Eurocentric cultural arrogance and fall into the trap of western-centered ethnocentrism". (p.159).

Nigeria has witnesses a lot of conflicts over the years because of apparent challenges of the modern age across the ethnic nationalities in Nigeria. The effects of the modern age include an attitudinal change in habits, norms and values. A critical look at the need for social injustice in the face of harmful cultural practices in Nigeria, and the way forward will promote the right to peace which will ensure respect for all other rights, encourage the building of true humanism in Nigeria. It is observed that if the above are religiously adhered to, Nigeria will not only withstand the challenges of the modern age but will be a model for the promotion of peaceful co-existence in the modern world.

This study, therefore, will, among other things, highlight the important role of the church in ensuring peace in society. This is because the Christian religion is the source of meaning in most human societies, especially in notoriously religious-oriented nations, like Nigeria. Generally, it is religion that gives meaning to all the activities of mankind (Opoku, 1978). In African society, for instance, religion colours all the human activities. It becomes

impracticable to separate societal and religious matters (Mbiti, 1976). This study argues, therefore, that for a more effective management of crises and peacebuilding in Nigeria and the modern world, Christianity should play some vital roles.

The Need for Peace and Reconciliation in Nigeria

The genuine desire to end the chaotic life between chaotic parties is through reconciliation. According to Nonyelu (2007), Nigeria has witnessed deep-rooted grievances that have resulted in conflicts and crises. These crises and wars can only be sorted out through reconciliation. Without reconciliation, it is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve sustainable development in Nigeria. The need to do away with enmity brings about good relations, sustainable peace and genuine repentance. Hostility, vigorous opposition, and crises are negative ethical symbols that do not portray repentance's fruits. The way to reconciliation lies through effectively grappling with the root cause of the enmity among people and God. People who have defaulted may apologise for their misconduct, pay the stipulated fine, and make reparation or restitution.

Reconciliation remains an index for promoting and measuring peace in man and society. The consensus among patriotic Nigerians is that it is an ideal requirement for pursuing and sustaining peace. It promotes joy, love, patience, freedom, fairness, and social justice. Reconciliation demands a fruit of repentance. It negates the abuse of fundamental human rights, social injustice and oppression. There is a need to provide in man and his society a fertile, hearty, conducive environment devoid of social vices and pursue other noble goals or moral values.

In a socio-political environment of man, peace-building is achieved through reconciliation, which is understood as the highest political good and tends to consist of the harmonious operation of the forces of his social life. Achieving reconciliation remains an empty word, except it rests upon that order founded on truth, built upon justice, nurtured and given life by charity and brought into functional effect under the auspices of freedom and love, freedom from sin and its enslaving burden on man. These social values of man are tools for peace-building in the modern world.

The Role of Christianity in Fostering Peace in Nigeria

The emergence of a peaceful society is preconditioned or dependent on the willingness of the people to live side by side as a homogenous community. According to scripture, the homogeneity of humanity allows or makes room for lasting peace in society. It helps to lessen the bitterness engendered by societal elements that cause conflict (Nabuhr, 2008). It is part of the church's missiological duty to educate society and create awareness against elements of division and violence that cause great human suffering and hardship. The church needs to educate society to break the yoke of violence in favour of positive relationships, mutual love and respect. This leads one to remember that the inspiration to promote and achieve peace as a Christian comes from the Gospel. It points to the prophetic function of the church to the society it exists in and can be fulfilled by urging everyone to maintain law and order, peace and security. This will allow individual Christians to make the most of every opportunity to promote peace and unity. Through the message and practice of peace, humanity is given a new vision of how order may be restored and other improvements made in their social conditions (Shenk, 2006). In more specific terms, the church can promulgate peace in the following ways.

The Church as an Agent of Peace and Reconciliation

The church is a reconciled community of God; that is, it is the community of people who, through his grace, have been reconciled with him. The church has been reconciled to God through the blood of Jesus and has received peace in his heart. To this effect, it has to preserve the bestowed ministry of reconciliation and serve humanity in a spirit of brotherly love and peace. This means that the spirit of reconciliation, peace and love should characterize the church of God. It can further be explained that the church is simply forbidden by its doctrine to promote violence, condone it and justify the causes of conflict (Thirdway, 1981). Douglas (1963) states thus:

Christ died to put away our sins. In this way, He dealt with the enmity between man and God. He put it out of the way; He made the Way open for men to come back to God. This is described by the term Reconciliation (p.1077).

There is a substance in appreciating that man needs to be reconciled with his neighbour and God. This is because man's sin has caused the enmity within, between himself and God. It should be dealt with in order to promote social justice. The genuine desire to end the chaotic life between chaotic parties is through reconciliation.

Through the Legitimacy of Church Doctrine of Love

The church's call for peace and unity is built on the legitimacy of its doctrine as a social institution with transcendental powers to promote social change. (Clifton, p.2009). The spiral of violence in the world calls for the church to face and tackle the fundamental source of the violence by emphasising its doctrine of love over one another. This is something that the church leaders should see as a vital part of the church's role. As reflected in the Bible, the task of ensuring peace amongst people is by preaching love across barriers.

The Church Should Provide Moral Guidance

The church is looked up to by the populace amid a crisis for moral guidance. It is responsible for taking these circumstances seriously and, at times, confronting the root causes of conflict (Rogers, 2008). In order to provide this, the church must challenge the world's political leadership to uphold justice and the rule of law. It should preach the message of truth that inspires and motivates people to have a sound moral life, the truth which it can also use to challenge abusive regimes. It must use its message of hope to challenge the citizens to wake up and stand against oppression (Cone, 1997). It should advocate for the rule of law and accountability. One of the significant advantages of the rule of law and accountability is that it makes it easier and possible to effect changes without violent upheaval. The changing of King Saul did not only affect the structure of his office and its public administration. True democracy cannot survive by merely perpetuating a ritual of voting but needs a set of precedence that holds leadership accountable for their actions. There is a general agreement in ecumenical circles that the church cannot align itself with any political party. However, it has the responsibility and duty to stand for the norms and rules that mitigate politically induced violence or ferocity. This responsibility is manifested in the word of God, which says that no one is above the law.

The church is at the centre of promoting sound moral principles. It cannot transform society's ills or be genuinely the salt of the earth and the light of the world if it is lacking in moral authority. The preaching on holiness and purity of life should be intensified. The church is expected to show itself in positive, active involvement in the world around us.

Jesus calls his disciples to be a light in the darkness, salt of the earth, and leaven of goodness in our corrupt society.

In Nigeria, for example, we have in many states a neo-dictatorship entrenched by the civilian government. Most of them have failed the country in many aspects of leadership. Their leadership brand is extortion and siphoning off the government treasury for their private pockets and their few friends and relations in the name of contracts. The life they live while in office is a contradiction of their manifestos during election campaigns. There are stories of institutionalised violence and thuggery. The church should intensify its preaching on morality and exemplary personal conduct to sanitise this unfortunate situation.

The Church Should Maintain Transparency

In order to check the power of officials, the church shall maintain a transparent life in its dealings with the people. The church shall live by example by ensuring transparency and fairness to all. This ethical teaching of transparency is aligned with the Christian norms of truth elaborated in the Bible (Wilcock, 2013). In this God-given role, the church will tackle social vices that could kindle conflict and breed corruption. Transparency means rendering an account of the resources entrusted to one's care. When transparency is maintained, it helps curtail mismanagement and changes the spirit of self of self-enrichment into the spirit of solidarity and commitment. Transparency enhances the relationship between citizens within the country and facilitates discussions on burning issues to find a long-lasting solution. The essence of distinctive leadership within a community, society or country is to guide and lead the people towards a common goal (Philips, 2008).

The Old and New Testaments profile personality traits that people should observe when selecting leaders. Interestingly, the scriptures clearly distinguish between the inability to lead and a person's outward appearance. Leaders in the Bible are selected from all walks of life, family pedigree, educational backgrounds and job descriptions ranging from warriors to farmers and doctors. The biblical leaders are responsible, reliable, committed and unified with their followers. They work towards a common interest, serve the people and rarely abuse their position or authority (Blackbaby, 2004). These leadership traits arguably keep the people together in peace and unity. This argument is not that the leaders are infallible but that their flaws do not affect the fundamental living conditions of the people and do not plunge the community into self-destructive war.

The Church Should Ensure that Justice Prevails at all Times

Social justice should be at the centre of the church's interventions in ensuring global peace. The word justice provokes a comprehensive response of interest by scholars. A wide range of definitions, their modifications by scholars and the controversies they generate explain the various opinions. As a catalyst of peace and reconciliation, social justice is approached by looking at social justice exclusively. Social relates to human society, living in communities enjoyed or taken in company, relating to or designed for social activities and relating to rank in the community. Ademola (2007) maintains that "social relations are sets of expectations which define rights and obligations, as well as status and roles" (p.40). According to Nzomiwu (1999), justice applies to whatever tends to produce and preserve the community's happiness. Justice explains the quality of any human society. Rawls (1971) explains justice as fairness. This means fair opportunities for all citizens, maximally directing inequalities in wealth and social positions to benefit the least disadvantaged. The

insight from the points above indicates that social justice will go a long way in entrenching peace and controlling war in society.

Gender Discrimination Should be Discouraged by the Church

Discrimination based on gender has denied the rights of many in the society. Gender discrimination has made it difficult to achieve the rights of women in Africa. Their spiritual life seems denied and ridiculed; others have a long history of social injustice. Discrimination is associated with a history of cultural ignorance, misunderstanding over the value and practice of traditions and customs, and foul play in interpreting cultural norms and values. Uche (2009) says discrimination is relational to harmful cultural practices such as widowhood that call for equity and fairness. The call for equity and fairness should target racist assumptions of an ingrained sense of superiority by unbridled capitalists who exploit minorities and women. Environmental despoliation, justifiable reliance on private property rights, and a lack of charity for the poor, the weak and the less privileged also call for social justice in Nigeria and the world.

These handicapping conditions call for urgent concern for the church to serve as watchdogs in preserving the rights of women and vulnerable members of society. Above all, the promotion of academic freedom, university autonomy, the right to pursue knowledge with an open mind, work to abolish traditional slavery, promote mutual interdependency, win voting rights for women and champion the needs of the poor and the needy. To create a continent where each nation can flourish based on equality of the human persons.

The Masses Should Be Encouraged to Rise to the Responsibility of Choosing their Leaders

In our present dispensation, the church should admonish the masses to be always conscious that sovereignty lies with the people. It is their right to choose or change their leaders in a free and fair election, which is the hallmark of a true democracy. The church needs to stress that Christians cannot afford to be indifferent to their civic responsibility in responsibly voting in political elections. To do otherwise would mean approving the prevailing political situation, no matter how bad or allowing corrupt, incompetent or inept politicians to be elected into power. Following the dictates of conscience, Christians are to vote for their right persons without being swayed by corrupt politicians through intimidation, bribes or promises of gratification. The masses should not allow unscrupulous politicians to use them as political thugs to intimidate their opponents or serve as corrupt agents who buy off ballot papers from the poor and the ignorant. There is no sitting at the fence or allowing others or oneself to be locked up in a conspiracy of silence. All hands should be on deck.

Conclusion

In a globalised emerging scientific and technological advancements, the church should not relent in ensuring that peace always prevails. They should create awareness and enlighten the people to accept that peace will restore broken relationships by ushering in harmony, which inspires hope for a better or progressive society. This will mitigate strength with wisdom, which foxes the tide of pervasion of justice, denial of inalienable human rights and oppression of the poor. The world's political leadership should be encouraged to provide top security, which will discourage poverty, unemployment and hunger across the globe, particularly in Nigeria. There is every need to institutionalise measures to reward

excellence, hard work, filial piety, patriotism and new social order amplified in open government, respect the rule of law, human rights, equity in revenue formulation and investment in human resources. Hopefully, these measures will strengthen peace and reconciliation as hallmarks of social justice in the world. Prayer for the nations of the world should also be intensified in churches as the motive force for genuine peace in the world. It is hoped that the fervent prayers will make the world leaders rule or lead on the basis of the legitimacy of a government and for political stability in the world, especially in Nigeria.

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