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ISLAMIC RELIGION AND PEACEBUILDING IN NIGERIA

By

Emugh-madighinioye George Oparaka, Ph.D.

Department of History and Diplomatic Studies, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rumuolumeni, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria.

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Abstract

Nigeria, a country with significant Muslim population especially in the northwest, has faced unimaginable challenges in their match to sustainable development and much needed peace in the country. This study explores the role of Islamic religion in peacebuilding in Nigeria, examining the ways in which Islamic teachings and practices especially their lifestyles, can contribute to promoting peace and stability. The study analyzes the Islamic principles of justice, compassion, and forgiveness, and how these principles can be applied to peacebuilding in Nigeria. The research also examines the challenges facing Islamic peacebuilding efforts in Nigeria, including extremism, sectarianism and cultural and traditional practices. The negative stereotyping of adherents especially by non-Muslims have made uninformed people to view Muslims with uncharitable lenses. The study concluded that Islamic religion has played an indispensable role in peacebuilding in Nigeria, and that Islamic teachings and practices can contribute to promoting peace, enthroning good governance, redirect the at-risk youth population to engage in lawful ventures, and above all, reduce the incidences of security challenges which have threatened sustainable development especially in the northern part of the country. In the light of the above, it is recommended that Islamic leaders, scholars and institutions should be overtly involved in peacebuilding processes, while some practices that have portrayed Islam as a religion of blood especially among non-adherents should be properly explained to non-adherents, so that they can be on the same page with the worshippers of the Almighty Allah. Finally, Islamic education and awareness programmes should be promoted to address the obvious challenges and misconceptions facing Islamic religion's efforts aimed at peacebuilding in Nigeria especially in the northern part of the country.

Keywords: *Islam, religion, peacebuilding, justice, Allah.*

Introduction

The word religion is an enigmatic and an elusive concept, thus, difficult to define. This is compounded by the fact that it deals with immaterial objects that cannot be empirically verified which has given scholars the latitude to define religion based on their ideological leanings. As a concept, it is vast and complex, and as such must be approached from a multidimensional viewpoint. Man from creation has been involved in one religious activity or the other and in the process, he has been in deliberate search of his Creator or the Higher Being that he believes rightly or wrongly will punish him for evil acts or reward him for well-doing here on earth and the hereafter (Anthony, 2015, Oparaka & Dressman, 2024). Religion is as old as man who has always been asking; is a higher Being than me? Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I coming from and after this life, could there be another life hereafter? In order to satisfy his curiosity, man tend to finding meaning through religion, hence, the evolution of varieties of religion throughout the world.

Meanwhile, there is speculation that the first religion on earth was a response to human fears. Religion was created to give people a feeling of security and safety in an unsecured world. A feeling of control over the environment where there was little or no control (Uzoho, 2023, Oparaka, 2024). Despite the enigmatic nature of religion, Ekwunife (2012) has defined religion as man's awareness and recognition of his dependent relationship on a transcendent Being the Wholly Other, namable or un-namable, personalized or impersonalized, expressible in human society through beliefs, worship and ethical or moral behaviour. In Nigeria, there are two major religions including Christianity and Islam. The Muslim population is predominantly found in northern Nigeria.

*Corresponding Author: **Emugh-madighinioye George Oparaka, Ph.D.**

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Nigeria, a country that is multi-religious, with diverse cultures and multi-ethnic groupings is believed to have a population of over 200 million people. The country is presently being faced with numerous challenges ranging from self-inflicted to natural hiccups. No part of the country is insulated from the security challenges that have made several peacebuilding efforts from independence in 1960 to date not to yield the expected results. Nigeria's match towards peaceful co-existence among its diverse groups has been the dream of both the government and the govern. Several institutions including religion have been playing crucial roles in promoting harmonious living among citizens in order to build a nation where 'peace and justice' shall reign supreme (Abubakar, 2019). Islam which is the second largest religion in the world arrived Africa through trade routes and migration from North Africa and the Middle East. Merchants from North Africa and Senegalese basin introduced Islam to what is now Nigeria during the 11th century. This marked the beginning of Islamic presence in Nigeria, with the religion spreading gradually throughout northern mostly with parts of Western Nigeria embracing the religion.

Islamic beliefs are based on the Quran (Holy book equivalent to the Christian Bible or Turah of Judaism) and the Hadith (the sayings and the actions of the Prophet Mohammed). The core Islamic beliefs include; Tawhid (Oneness of God), Angels, Prophets, revealed books, day of judgment, predestination (qadar), resurrection, accountability and forgiveness. These core beliefs form the foundation of Islam and guide and direct the daily lives of Muslims around the world to help in building peace across the world. In the third pillar of Islam, zakat (charity) which is the act of giving a portion of one's wealth to the poor, vulnerable and the needy. This is usually calculated as 2.5% of a Muslim's excess wealth and is given to those who are eligible, such as the poor, orphans and stranded travelers. Providing succour for those who would have otherwise become agents of conflicts in the various rural communities especially in northern Nigeria in particular and the country in general is a means to achieving peace in the country.

Concept of peacebuilding

The concept of peacebuilding has remained a largely nebulous concept, like religion. Therefore, there is no widely accepted definition of peacebuilding among scholars. The concept originated from the works of Johan Galtung, a Norwegian Sociologist in the 1970s, in efforts to promote systems lasting peace among citizens of the world. Galtung in Nwachukwu (2018) defines peacebuilding as the process of creating self-supporting structures that remove causes of wars and offer alternatives to war in situations where wars might occur. Conflict mechanisms according to him should be built into the structure and be present there as a reservoir for the system itself to draw upon, just as a healthy body has the ability to generate its own antibodies and does not need adhoc administration of medicine.

The concept of peacebuilding was however popularized in the international community through the United Nations Secretary-General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali's 1992 report titled, 'An Agenda for Peace'. The report defines peacebuilding as: …an action to identify and support structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid in relapse into conflict… if successful, they strengthen the opportunity for post-conflict peacebuilding, which can prevent the recurrence of violence among nations and peoples… Francis (2008) peacebuilding refers to efforts and interventions aimed at overcoming the root causes of conflict. Peacebuilding is about the attempts to overcome the structural, relational and cultural contradictions which lie at the root of conflict in order to underpin the processes of peacebuilding and peacemaking.

The three dimensions of peacebuilding

S/No.	First dimension	Second dimension	Third dimension
1.	Taking away weapons	Rebuilding basic facilities, transportation and communication networks, utilities	Trauma counseling
2.	Re-integrating former Combatants into civilian society.	Developing rule of law systems and public Administration	Transnational justice and restoration.
3.		Building educational and health infrastructure.	Community dialogue
4.		Providing technical and compact-building assistance for institutions.	Building bridges between different communities.
5.		Encouraging the creation of legitimate (democratic, accountable) State institutions.	Increasing human rights and gender empowerment
6.			Raising environment awareness and promoting economic development.
7.			Developing a civil society and private sector that can represent diverse interests and challenge the state peacefully.

Source: Chidi, 2018.

Arising from the above, therefore, peacebuilding is the totally of actions taken by a state, organizations, groups, individuals, etc. in emplacing structures and programmes that will discourage citizens from engaging in wars or conflicts and making efforts to sensitize, build bridges, promote and encourage the citizens and inhabitants to live harmoniously in the various communities.

Principles of Peacebuilding in Islamic religion

The principles of peace-building in Islam as seen in the pages of the Quran and teachings of the Prophet Mohammad, may ***peace and blessings of Allah be upon him*** are guide and guide Muslims on the daily activities. However, some key principles include; unity, justice, compassion, forgiveness, dialogue, cooperation, non-violence, respect for human lives and promoting social cohesion. Islam is a religion that emphasizes peace, justice and compassion. Islam is a religion which teaches non-violence and does not love '***fasad'*** (violence). Islam is rich with central values that promote peacebuilding and conflict resolution. The Quran, the holy

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book of Islam, encourages Muslims to promote peace among their neighbours and avoid violence.

Despite the widely held notion that Islam is associated with violence, their Prophet abhorred violence among the adherents and their neighbours. The following Quranic verses illustrate the importance of peacebuilding in Islam: '***O ye who believe 'enter into Islam wholeheartedly…' 'And follow not the footsteps Satan for, he's to you, an avowed enemy…***' (Quran 2:208, 8:61). These Quranic verses help the adherents of Islam to live peacefully with one another and even with non-Muslims and therefore, helping in peacebuilding efforts across the length and breadth of the nation.

Review of Literature

Abdullahi **(2014)** in his study on the role of Islamic religion in peacebuilding in Sokoto metropolis, Sokoto State observed that leaders of Islamic faith encourage interfaith dialogue and strengthen Islamic education in the area. They do these by promoting regular interfaith dialogue sessions between Islamic leaders and scholars and their Christian counterparts to foster mutual understanding and respect for one another thereby encouraging peace and sustainable development. They also emphasize the importance of Islamic education that promotes peace, tolerance and resolution. He also found out that these efforts are hampered by several challenges including; extremism within Islamic teachings among non-Muslims. The presence of Boko Haram and other sects which claims to be Islamic but promotes a distorted version of the religion, undermines peace-building efforts create a negative perception of Islam. Majority of the non-adherents' Islamic teachings as violence-based. He recommended that the Islamic Education Trust (IET), the Muslim-Christian Dialogue Forum (MCDF) and the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) should be strengthened and sufficiently financed to perform optimally.

Ismailla (2021) investigated the role of Islamic religion and conflict management in Kano State and averred that religion plays important role in managing conflicts and enhancing peacebuilding in the area. He opined that the Muslim Mediators' Association of Nigeria (MUMMAN) and the Zakat and Sadaqat Foundation (ZSF) played important role in ensuring conflicts are managed impeccably. He found out that there are challenges confronting the effective management of conflicts. He averred that the ethnic and tribal tensions, poverty and economic inequality are the main challenges negatively affecting their desire for effective peacebuilding. He recommended that the Muslim women should be empowered to mediate on conflicts especially affecting women and foster community engagement in peacebuilding.

Usman (2022) in his study on the role of Islamic religion and its role in South-Sudan. He found out that religion generally plays inevitable role in managing conflicts among the rural Abua/Odual people of Rivers State.

Islamic practices for peacebuilding

There are several Islamic practices being undertaken by Muslims adherents that effectively contribute to peacebuilding in Nigeria. These include:

i. **Justice (*adl*)**: Islam emphasizes the importance of justice, equity and fairness in all

aspects of human endeavours. In the context of peacebuilding, justice can be achieved through the promotion of equality, accountable leadership and responsive followership. Both the Quran and Hadith enjoined Muslim believers to be true worshippers of Allah who they believe loves peaceful co-existence among and believers and unbelievers.

Specific actions of Islam in peacebuilding in Nigeria

Islamic religion, though globally misunderstood, is not only about engaging in religious activities only, but most importantly, involves in peacebuilding processes in Nigeria. Islamic religion teaches their adherents to live in peace with fellow Muslims and even others who are not in the faith. In course of doing so, the leaders evolve processes that help them in peacebuilding within their neighbourhood. These specific actions include:

i. **Interfaith dialogue and cooperation:** Islamic leaders and organizations have engaged in interfaith dialogue and cooperation with Christian leaders and adherents of other religions including the irreligious people to promote peace, understanding and cooperation among different religious groups. There are three of such groups in Nigeria including:

   a. **Nigeria inter-religious council (NREC):** A voluntary association of 50 members comprising 25 Muslims and 25 Christians, formed to promote greater interaction and understanding among religious leaders and their followers. NREC is currently co-chaired by His Eminence, Alhaji Mohammed Sa'ad Abubakar, Sultan of Sokoto and His Eminence, Archbishop Daniel Okoh, President, Christian Association of Nigeria.

   b. Inter-faith dialogue forum for peace (IDFP). A national inter-faith and intercultural dialogue forum recognized by all religious groups in Nigeria. The IDFP was established in February, 2016 and is facilitated by the International Dialogue Group in partnership with Interfaith Mediation Centre, the Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution and the Kukah Centre.

   c. Women interfaith Council (WIC): A forum uniting Muslim and Christian women's associations, established in Kaduna, Nigeria, to promote peace and stability especially in northern Nigeria.

Challenges of Islamic religion to peacebuilding efforts

The concerted efforts by practitioners, leadership and Islamic groups whose desires is singularly to contribute their quotas in peacebuilding in Nigeria, are being hampered by a myriad of

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challenges that have seem to dwarf their efforts. These challenges include:

i. **Extremist ideologies:** The Boko Haram and Fulani herdsmen's ideology is rooted in a radical interpretation of Islam, which emphasizes the need to establish an Islamic state and reject western influence including their education, culture, and their laws. This has not situated well with Nigeria which is a circular state with varied religious practices across the length and breadth of the nation. Nigerians in the parts of the country that are threatening the establishment of Islamic state feel insecure and see Islamic religion not as agent of peace as provided in their Holy books, but as modern day jihadists who are out to continue the Usman Dan Fodio jihad of the 9th century. He founded the Sokoto Caliphate, a powerful Islamic state that lasted for over a century (Okoli, 2013). In doing so, have perpetuated violence and terrorism in Nigeria. Therefore, forcing non-Moslems to be administered with Islamic like Iran Saudi-Arabia, Afghanistan, among others will make the genuine efforts of the leadership in peacebuilding to be unacceptable to them.

ii. **Lack of unified Islamic leadership**: Scholars have argued that the lack of unified Islamic leadership in Nigeria has hindered the peacebuilding efforts of Islamic religious adherents over the years. Different Islamic groups and leaders often have competing interests and interpretations, which can lead to divisions and conflicts even among Moslems.

iii. **Cultural and religious factors:** Historical and cultural factors, such as the legacy of colonialism and the role of Islamic law (Sharia) in some northern states, have contributed to tensions between Moslems and Christians over the years.

iv. **Poverty and socio-economic factors**: Poverty and unemployment have largely contributed to social unrest and extremist activities in some part of northern part of the country. As a result of these, 69% of Nigeria's out of school children are in the north. To put this into perspective, Nigeria currently has 18.3million children not attending school or acquiring any skill, meaning the north accounts for 12, 627,000million out of school children. According to UNICEF (2023) report, Nigeria has the highest number of out-of-school children in the world. These have preoccupied the minds of the Islamic leaders that they are left with little or no time to emplace initiatives for peacebuilding efforts.

v. **Misunderstanding and stereotyping:** Misunderstanding and stereotyping about Islam and Muslims have contributed to interfaith tensions and conflicts in Nigeria (Korieh, 2013). Many people mistakenly associate Islam with violence and terrorism, which can lead to Islamophobia and mistrust of Muslims. This perception can hinder their peacebuilding efforts by creating an 'us versus them' mentality.

Stereotypes about Muslims can lead to oversimplification and misrepresentation of the diverse experiences and perspectives within the Muslim world. This can result to misunderstanding and mistrust between Muslims and non-Muslims and hamper their peacebuilding processes.

Conclusion

The article examined the complex relationship between Islamic religion and peacebuilding in Nigeria. While Islamic religion has been a significant factor in promoting peace and stability especially in the northern part of the country, extremist ideologies and skewed interpretations of the Qur'an and teachings of the Holy Prophet Mohammad SAW (***Alayhi wa-salam),*** and non-adherents have contributed to the continuous wanton destruction of lives and properties worth billions of naira and caused religious disharmony among Moslems and others who are non-Moslems nationally. Highlights the importance of importance of promoting moderate and inclusive interpretations of Islam, as well as addressing the socio-economic and cultural factors that contribute to extremisms. Ultimately, peacebuilding in Nigeria requires a multifaceted approach that involves Islamic leaders, civil society organizations, and government agencies working together to promote understanding, tolerance and cooperation.

In conclusion, Islamic religion can play a significant role in promoting peace and stability in Nigeria, but it requires a nuanced understanding of the complex factors at play. By promoting moderate interpretations of Islam, addressing socio-economic and cultural factors, and fostering interfaith dialogue and cooperation, Nigeria can work towards a more peaceful and stable future.

Recommendations

Based on the above findings, the following recommendations were made:

i. Islamic leaders and scholars should promote moderate and inclusive interpretations of Islam that emphasize peace, tolerance and cooperation especially with non-adherents who work and live with them.

ii. Government and civil society organizations should address the socio-economic factors (poverty, illiteracy, non-inclusivity, poor governance among others) that contribute to extremism especially in norther Nigeria.

iii. Islamic leaders should encourage those whom Allah has blessed with the riches of this world to empower the Moslem youth through education and economic opportunities to

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promote peace and stability in their respective communities.

iv. Islamic leaders and organizations should engage in interfaith dialogue and cooperation with Christian leaders and even traditional African religion believers and irreligious people to promote understanding and cooperation, and

v. The federal and state governments in conjunction Islamic leaders should emplace peacebuilding initiatives that will take into account the unique cultural, social and economic context of Nigeria. By implementing the above recommendations, Nigeria can work towards a more peaceful and stable future, and Islamic religion can play a significant role in promoting peace and understanding in the country.

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