

## Religion in Nigeria from 1900-2013

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### Abstract

The phenomenon of religion is assuming an alarming proportion in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with the three Nigerian cardinal religions competing for pre-eminence and supremacy as seen in the religious behaviours of the various religious adherents in Nigeria. The article is crafted using phenomenological and historical analytical method. It unravels the fact that there is at the moment a very bright prospect for the survival of African Traditional Religion, Islam and Christianity in Nigeria in spite of the rising tide of fundamentalism in the Nigerian recognizable religions. This is anchored on the fact that there are still some compromises among the major religions in Nigeria. The paper submits that it is needful that all the spirited stake holders of the various religions in Nigeria create an avenue for meaningful dialogue in order to checkmate the monster of religious intolerance, insensitivity, self will, and fanaticism to paving way for peaceful coexistence and sustainable national development in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Religion, Christianity, Islam, Nigeria, African Traditional Religion

### 1. Introduction

Religion is an important phenomenon in contemporary Nigeria. It is ever popular and has captured the attention of many Nigerians. Its activities have predominated man's life. Religion has been and is increasingly coming to the fore front in modern scholarship. It is equally a subject for discussion in the daily newspapers, magazines, radio and television. Most Nigerians appear to be interested in religion for its immense benefits.

From all indications, Nigeria is a pluralistic society. By this, it is meant that Nigeria is a country where different religious adherents coexist and mix freely to carry out their day-to-day activity (Hackett & Olupona (n.d.). There are basically three major religions in Nigeria. These include: Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion (ATR). Beside these, other religions exist in Nigeria like Hinduism, Bahai, Judaism, The Grail Message, and The Reformed Ogboni Fraternity but are practiced by either foreigners or negligible few Nigerians (Macquarrie 1971; [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/religion\\_in\\_Nigeria](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/religion_in_Nigeria)). The questions now arise: How have religions fared in Nigeria since their inception? How are they co-existing, influencing and impinging on each other as well as the entire Nigerian society? What exactly is religion showcasing in Nigeria ever since its emergence? This paper is a humble attempt to examine these issues.

The paper employs phenomenological and historical analytical method so as to be able to examine religion as a phenomenon because religion itself has existed in and impacted on the Nigerian society for so long now. According to Parratt in Inyama (2007), phenomenological method has three advantages:

First, the study begins at the right place (the phenomenon). Secondly, the approach is conducive to clarify in the sense that one knows what one is talking about. Third, the phenomenological moves on a more secure ground because it proceeds by description rather than by deduction (p.9).

The phenomenological method generally deals with the true nature of the theme, which in this case is religion, starting from the inside. It is equally held that "The test of a phenomenological description is that the picture given by it is convincing, illuminates other related ideas, makes reality understandable, as they give themselves, without the interference of negative or positive prejudices and interpretations" (Inyama 2007, p.10). The historical method on the other hand helps to trace the origin of the three major religions in Nigeria chronologically. According to Van Derleeuw (1963), there is an affinity between the historical and the phenomenological methods. He reiterates that history goes with phenomenology just as the phenomenologist works with historical materials. Be that as it may, it is concluded that "The historian and the phenomenologist, therefore, work in the closest possible association; they are indeed in the majority of cases combined in the person of a single investigator" (Van Derleeuw 1963, p. 686). This research first and foremost tries to answer the question: What is religion?

### 2. Meaning of Religion

Religion is said to be a reality in human experience which pervades through life. It describes the way man relates with the Supernatural world or the Divine Being. This relationship finds expression in beliefs, worships, creeds and symbols (Uka 1990).

Religion certainly is a difficult word to define. To attempt to define it is to embark on an almost impossible task. This is because there are no two persons or authors with exactly the same concept of God and religion. In other words, as Nwahaghi (1998) puts it “A simple comprehensive definition of religion cannot be attained because of the complex nature of religion” (p.9). He reiterates that the objects that religion deals with are not subjected to empirical observation. These Religious objects are believed to be conceived in different ways by different people. This difficulty apart, Metuh (1987) sustains that “The study of religion attracts people with various interests as theologians, anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, economists, historians etc, each of them sees it from different perspective” (p.13). Added to this is the fact that, the expression of religion always varies from religion to religion as a result of different beliefs and practices. All these put together compounds the problem to achieving a single universally acceptable definition of religion.

However, different opinions hold that religion is an organized system of beliefs, ceremonies, practices and worship that centre on one Supreme Being called God, or the Deity (Watkins & Watkins 1992). Interestingly, it is equally discovered that almost all people who follow some form of religion believe that a divine power created the world and influences their lives. In summary, religion seems to be understood briefly as an expression of faith and belief. It is said to be the conscious and sub-conscious response to the ultimate source of existence referred to as God in whichever name or language (Kitause 2012). To cap it up, Metuh (1992) asserts that “Religion is an institutionalised system of symbols, beliefs, values, and practices focussed on the relationship between God and man, and between men living in society” (p.11).

Taken in that sense, it is remarked that the notion of ‘Religion’ is different from that of ‘A Religion’. Uka (1990) in expatiating on this expresses that:

‘Religion’ deals with questions of human existence that is deep and serious such as: why do men suffer? Why does anything exist at all? What lies beyond death?... ‘A Religion’ has to do with what a particular religious group does or believes. For example why do Muslims go on pilgrimage to Mecca? Why do Christians celebrate the Holy Communion?... What we call religion today refers to religions such as Islam, Christianity, African Traditional Religion, Judaism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Shintoism and the like. These religions are a people’s belief system through which they interpret and relate to the visible and invisible world around them (p.149-150).

### **3. Religion in Pre Christian and Pre Islamic Nigeria**

Modern Scholarship now recognises that a concept of God as a Supreme Being and creator is virtually universal in traditional Africa (Olowola 1993, p.11). Africans, particularly Nigerians knew about God long before the advent of Christianity and Islam to Nigeria. In fact, there was in existence an indigenous religion of the native. The facts remain undisputable that these foreign religions did not come to meet a vacuum in Nigeria. There were evidences of already existing culture and philosophies of the aborigines, whose roots are traceable to their religion. How did this happen?

According to Olusegun & Akin (1992) prehistoric religions arose as a result of mysteries and incomprehension that pervaded certain events and aspect of human life. It is believed that pre historic people probably interpreted supernatural occurrences and credited supernatural powers greater than themselves. This made them to have either consciously or unconsciously developed or directed their indigenous religious activities on the most important elements of their existence such as combating their fears and ensuring their corporate existence and prosperity. This equally probably explains the reasons ancient people observed libation by pouring wine and placing foods, ornaments and tools in graves in order to maintain close proximity with the deceased and the unseen world (Kitause 2011; Erivwo 1985).

It is said that “The traditional religion of Nigeria is the richest heritage which the forebears of Nigeria have handed down to their children” (Nwahaghi 1998, p.10). History has it that in the past, in Nigeria, the dominant religion was the traditional religion popularly known as African Traditional Religion. According to Ekeopara (1996), the term African Traditional Religion refers to the religious beliefs and practices of the Africans. It is traditional and indigenous to Africa. It could also be called the native religion of Africa because it originated from Africa and is primarily practiced mostly by Africans. It is a popular opinion that the indigenous religion of the African is not localized. It is also believed not to only restrict itself to Africa and Africans alone, but is said to be opened to all races of the world. The word Africa, it is stressed, merely describes the geographical location where ATR is dominant. This indigenous religion is what Nigerians have been practising long before the advent of Christianity and Islam. It is a religion that has permeated all aspects of their life as Africans.

Speaking about the religiosity of Nigerians especially that of the Igbo, Onwurah (1990) confirms that “The Igbo person is very religious and does not know how to live without religion - he or she eats religiously, drinks religiously, Sneezes religiously. Religion is part of the whole life” (p. 287). This is likely to be what Mbiti (1969) meant when he says that “Where the African is, there is his religion” (p. 3). To Idowu (1966), Africans including

Nigerians are “A people who in all things are religious” (p. 5). As observed by Nwahagi (1998), it is this traditional religion that has helped to shape probably the social, political and economic activities of the people of Nigeria.

#### **4. Arrival of Islam in Nigeria**

Islam penetrated Nigeria through the Northern Part of her borders. It came to Northern Nigeria about five or six hundred years before Christianity (Metuh 1985). History has shown that Islam arrive Nigeria sometime between 1000A.D and 1100 A.D (Enwerem 1995). The first town of contact was Bornu in the North-eastern Nigeria before it overtook the entire Hausa States between 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Centuries (Trimingham 1962).

Initially, Islam was propagated only among City dwellers and was chiefly patronized by the upper class for economic, social and political reasons (Ekeopara, 1996). It was not until the time of Uthman Dan Fodio’s Jihad that Islam spread to every nook and cranny of Northern Nigeria and was forced upon the people. In his studies, Ekeopara (1996) observes that:

From 1750 AD, Islam in Northern Nigeria entered into a new phase. It became militant and intolerant of the Traditional religious system. By this time, Muslims were no more satisfied with receiving tributes. They were now bent on wiping out all associations of pagan custom with Islam. The infidels or unbelievers were forcefully converted by the military might of the Jihadists and not through preaching (p. 12).

Historical evidence shows that upon capturing a place, the Jihadists immediately introduced Islamic system of Law and government in order to cement their stronghold in the region.

#### **5. Emergence of Christianity in Nigeria**

Christianity is one of the major religions in Nigeria. It is said to have entered Nigeria in three phases. In the first phase, Christianity is reported to have made its appearance in Nigeria in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century. Historical facts abound that Benin and Warri in the Niger Delta region were the first cities to witness missionary presence in Nigeria.

The earliest known Christian Mission that first showed up in Nigeria was the Portuguese Roman Catholic Mission which came to Benin in 1485 at the invitation of Oba Uzolua and later in 1514 by Oba Esigie, Kings of Benin (Agha 1999; Tasié 1978). History shows that the initial attempt in planting Christianity in Benin failed because “The Kings of Benin City remained strongly attached to their indigenous religion” (Baur 2009, p.75). It is said that there were enough evidences for such failures in Benin in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century of which the above was but one of them.

The second attempt in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century under Oba Esigie succeeded to a certain extent as the Oba himself and most of his chiefs did submit themselves for baptisms and actually professed and practised Christian religion somewhat in their own terms. Eventually Christian churches were built but unfortunately the Benin Mission appears to have remained confined to the royal court. Much later, it is reported that Some Spanish Capuchins, some Augustinian monks and some missionaries from the Sacred Congregation de propaganda Fidei had their turn in the Benin and Warri Mission field with both positive and negative responses each time. How far this Benin mission expanded is not known. But it is most likely that the crucifixes, mutilated statues of saints and several Catholic emblems that were discovered within the Benin royal court several years later go to prove that some measure of success was recorded in the Benin missionary work.

In the second phase, Christianity is reported to have penetrated Nigeria through Western Nigeria. Lagos as at 1841 had developed into a notorious slave market with its King Kosoko as the Principal promoter of the trade (Dike 1957). Evidence indicates that it was after his deportation by British administration that real missionary enterprise began in Yoruba land. Among the earliest missions that evangelized Yoruba land are the Wesleyan Methodist Mission and the Church Missionary Society (C.M.S) ably represented by the Reverend Thomas Birch Freeman and Catechist Henry Townsend respectively in 1842. Samuel Ajayi Crowther became the first Yoruba man to get converted at Sierra Leone as a freed slave. He became instrumental in reaching his own people with the gospel (Oduyoye 1969).

This was followed by the Calabar Mission in 1846 with the Scottish Presbyterian Mission taking the lead in evangelizing the Efik people. Essien Ukpabio, a native of Greek town emerged the first convert and was baptised by the Reverend Hope Waddle, the first pioneer missionary to Calabar after being to Ethiopia. Other missionaries like Mary Slessor joined later in the missionary work in Calabar. King of Greek town, King Eyo Honesty was one of the main actors that helped missionaries to plant Christianity in Calabar. From Calabar, the Presbyterian Church spread to the other parts of the former Eastern region (Ajayi 1965; Kalu 1978). According to Ajah (1994) “Christian Missions came to Eastern Nigerian mainly through two angles. The first angle was through Lagos area or from Western Nigeria... The second angle was directly to the eastern end of the country through a sea port” (p.40). Ajah fails to mention for clarity purposes the Sea Port in question. He confirms that

the Presbyterian and Qua Iboe Churches penetrated the east through Calabar. With the passage of time,, Christian Missions over spread the whole of Eastern Nigeria.

Furthermore, Nigeria witnessed the third phase of missionaries' entrance into Northern Nigeria as from 1870. This was said to be in three phases too. The first phase 1870-1888 was met with relative success even though there was no single convert won, but the missionaries succeeded in making contact with the north and opening it up for further missionary work. The major players during this enterprise were Samuel Ajayi Crowther, a Nigerian freed slave, Dr. Baike, Archdeacon Henry John and Charles Paul.

The second phase was between 1888 and 1900. During this era, the missionary enterprise was associated with British imperialism which made the people to discredit the missionaries. In 1890, the CMS sponsored what is called the Sudan party and later the Hausa Association with the mandate to evangelize Northern Nigeria and to study and translate the Gospel into Hausa Language as well as establishing a College. Membership of this group comprised of graduates from Cambridge and Oxford Universities, Presidents of the CMS and the Wesleyan Missionary Society among others (Crampton, 1979). At this time, all efforts to convert the Muslim proved abortive, but the missionaries were able to convert some adherents of traditional religion in the north. Gradually, Mission stations were established here and there in the region which became bases for the spread and penetration of the Gospel in Northern Nigeria. Later on, other missionary bodies equally started showing interest in reaching northern Nigeria.

In the third phase 1900-1918, the British administration under Sir Frederick Lugard appeared to be anti missionary by restricting missionary activities in the territory. But generally the initial eagerness shown by some emirs to establish trading links with the Europeans helped to some extent in paving way for the establishment and solidifying of Christianity in the Northern region.

#### **6. Encounter between A.T.R., Islam, and Christianity in Nigeria**

It is axiomatic that Islam and Christianity introduced into Nigeria values, institutions and world views that were at variance with those of the indigenous religion. This, in point of fact appears to create some serious conflicts with the already existing values in Nigeria. According to Danfulani (2001), "Islam and Christianity constituted a threat and a disruptive force to African tradition and custom" (p. 28).

It is observed that at the beginning, the propagators of both Christianity and Islam saw every aspect of African Culture with sore eyes. They despised out rightly the traditional religious practices which Nigerians have guarded zealously from birth. The Christian Missionaries, particularly condemned polygamy and other cultural custom of the Africans as akin to idolatry. They frowned at human sacrifice, the killing of twins, blood bath and other cruel aspects of African Culture (Iwe, 1979). This posture of the missionaries has some implications on the life of the African Christians who eventually became dissatisfied with the Europeanised Christian traditions, culminating in the founding of the historic African Independent Churches (AIC).

As it happened at the initial stage, Islam and Christianity really suppressed ATR, almost to the point of strangulation. But as time went on, there were some kind of give and take from each of the religions in Nigeria. For instance, in the predominantly Muslim area in Northern Nigeria, the Muslims' ways of dressing have influenced the general mode of dressing in a way which seems to be the general culture of the Northerners. Islam has equally been infected with the traditional belief and practice of magic and medicine. Christianity too has borrowed heavily from some of the traditions of the Africans.

#### **7. Religion in the Present Nigeria**

Religion is a relevant phenomenon that has been firmly consolidated in Nigeria in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century which entered into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century on a rising tide of fundamentalism. Twentieth Century as a matter of fact is very significant in several ways. According to Schreck (2011) globally: "In 1900, automobiles were novelties, owned only by a few, airplanes and television did not exist; and there were few of the modern conveniences, like telephone service, that many people enjoy today" (p. 107). It was not until the mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century that great advancement in technology and science occurred. The era presents Christianity, Islam and ATR with the greatest challenges and the greatest opportunities (Townes, 1971). Using modern technology and methods of evangelism, most religions especially Christianity advanced forcibly and over spread the whole globe.

In Nigeria for instance, 20<sup>th</sup> Century was an epoch of fruitfulness for the Catholics and the Protestant Missions. They became interdenominational in character and aimed at setting up indigenous churches everywhere in Nigeria. According to Hanks (1998), in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, different mission bodies seriously evangelised and "Founded schools and colleges, opened clinics and hospitals, introduced more advanced methods of farming, reduced the native language to writing and began translating the Bible" (p. 280).

Nigeria certainly is a large nation, populated perhaps, with over 400 different multi-ethnic nationalities (Salawu, 2010). According to Onaiyekan (2012), Nigerians take their religion seriously. This is because African indigenous religion had been part of them from birth. This is self evident in the way Nigerian Muslims,



Christians and devotees of ATR go about their religiosity in the present Nigeria. Religious activities are on the rise by the day in Nigeria; it is not abating. The questions now arise: What are the points of attraction or interest in these religions in Nigeria that worth examination in the period under review? What generally is the state of religion in Nigeria today? Religion at the present day Nigeria is both a major source of joy and concern. It is no doubt playing a transformative and integrative function in Nigeria at the moment. It is also generating lots of tensions, fears and upheavals among the people.

Historical records abound to demonstrate that at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, most Nigerians were followers of traditional religion. But at the time of Independence in 1960, the great majority of the people in Nigeria were classified and lumped as Muslims and Christians as a matter of policy by the Colonial administration (Falola, 2011). That apart, the indirect rule adopted by the Colonial administration did favour the expansion of Islam in the north against Christianity (Crampton, 1979). To his mind, Odeh (2012) observes that “Ethno-religious issues have plunged Nigeria into a bedlam of problems and challenges which have had dire consequences for the country” (p. 52). It is observed too that since the amalgamation of 1914 troubles started brewing seriously in Nigeria especially between the dominant Christian South and the dominant Muslim north. In actual facts, since 1980 to date, ethno religious conflicts have become a permanent feature of Nigeria as a nation. Salawu (2010) remarks that “The phenomena of ethnicity and religious intolerance have led to incessant recurrence of ethno-religious conflicts which have given birth to so many ethnic militias” in the country (p. 345). As noted, the violent nature of ethno-religious conflict takes the form of riots, sabotage, assassination, struggles, guerrilla warfare and secession. At the present, Boko Haram is employing suicide terrorist tactics in their attacks, which are seriously stirring fears within Nigerian Christian Community. It must be noted quickly that opinions seem to be divided as to the main causes for the emergence of ethnic militias and ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria. From the point of view of religious conflicts, some analysts in Nigeria, think that most of the conflicts experienced in the country stem more from anger and frustration than from religious beliefs (ploughshare.Ca/plamed conflict/Nigeria – 1990). It is further held that the rise of especially radical Islamic movements like the maitatsine, and Boko Haram among several others has been attributed partly to the poor socio economic infrastructures and poor governance in Nigeria ([en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion\\_in\\_Nigeria](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_in_Nigeria)). However the real root causes of religious crisis in Nigeria, according to Tasié (2001) are that:

Whenever we have so-called religious clashes in Nigeria, I would dare to posit that it is either because of bad Christianity and bad Islam, bad Christians and bad Muslims or all of the above; or because religion has become an ass over the year, and more so now, particularly for Nigerians with inordinate ambitions - and especially the political Class. They are the main riders; they ride the religious ass, and manipulate it to suit their own purposes and agenda (often times hidden); and even when they cite the holy books and doctrines (whether it is in crusade, jihad or other) as they often do, it is more often than not, manipulative (p. 9).

Tasié reiterates that religion per se does not create problems, particularly the three main religions of Nigeria – Traditional African Religion, Christianity and Islam. To his thinking, each of these religions evidently teaches love in its own way and may not discourage peaceful co-existence, mutual respect and tolerance.

In more recent times, there has been an increased in gun battles between the members of these sects and security forces in Nigeria with loss of lives on both sides. The recent massacre of over 60 policemen in Nassarawa State, betray this very facts. As observed by Soyinka (2012), the Islamic militant group Boko Haram has carried out a string of deadly attacks mainly against Christians in the north east. This has provoked more tension between the Christians and the Muslims, making each militant group more radicalized. As if to substantiate this fact,, McCain (1999) remarks that the recent militant attitude of Christians towards Muslims during the recent religious crisis in Northern Nigeria reflects more of a tribal warfare mentality than the non-violent teachings of Jesus. It is probably on the basis of this that Soyinka (2012) warns that Nigeria could descend into civil war as a ‘faceless army’ of people if nothing is done quickly to checkmate the present happenings in the country.

Another important issue in the present Nigeria is the syncretistic behaviours of Nigerian Muslims and Christians. Islam and Christianity seem to have incorporated some traditional religious practices into their belief system. Christianity has officially disallowed polygamy while Islam has allowed men to marry up to four wives. In the 1980s there were attempts by Independent African Churches to indigenize Christianity in Africa. The Cherubim and Seraphim in Nigeria for instance initiated this move by importing into the church several cultural elements such as polygamy, healing, drumming, dancing somewhat acrobatics, singing, clapping, seeing visions and prophetic utterances among others. Today, a growing number of breakaway Christian churches embrace different indigenous cultural traditions and are gaining popularity in Nigeria (Beyer 1997; Obiora 1999; Enang 2012). This development seems to be a serious threat to the older established churches like the Roman Catholic churches and the Anglican churches. According to Walls (1996) the indigenization drive as thought out by the African Independent Churches was to enable them “To live as a Christian and yet as a member of one’s own society to make the church a place to feel at home” (p. 7). It is said that apart from the Aladura churches, the

likes of Presbyterian, Evangelical churches of West Africa (ECWA), and Methodist churches equally changed their rigid and stereotyped liturgy for a lively, free and noisier styles of worship; much more like the indigenous religions.

Incidentally too, Nigeria at this era also witnessed the secularization of African societies and cultural revivalism. So by combination of these factors, many of those professing to be Muslims and Christians were seen openly performing certain rites of traditional religion, something very uncommon and unheard of during the colonial period. Both Muslims and Christians now seem to mix African traditional ideas and practices with those of Islam and Christianity (Mbiti, 1978). Muslims adopted traditional practice of rituals, magic and medicine. In order to suit their social environment too, both Muslims and Christians freely accommodate traditional practices with their new found religious practices. Christian churches have borrowed the traditional second burial and coined it a memorial thanksgiving service for their departed loved ones. According to Eke (2008) the way Africans venerate their ancestors is similar to the way Christian of today venerate their saints whom they take to be intermediaries between man and their object of worship. As it happened, many Christians during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century took traditional titles and observed all the intricacies of the rituals involved without qualm.

Furthermore, the development of media industry at the wake of Pentecostalism and Islamic fundamentalism is another land mark of the major religions in Nigeria. According to Enwerem (1995) "Post-war Nigeria saw the emergence of many religious movements, most of which were oriented towards fundamentalism" (p. 89). In the same vein, Kalu in Achunike (1995) clarifies that:

The end of the war was followed by an avalanche of spiritual forms - Christian and non-Christian. For instance, there is evidence that the Grail message, AMORC, Eckankar, Free Masonry and such-like grew rapidly from 1970... Among Christians, it is known that radical charismatic movements have proliferated" (p. ix).

Nigerian Christians have experienced a rapid progress in the media industry with the emergence of Pentecostalism. According to Obilom (2003):

The end of the Civil war saw a measure of proliferation of indigenous cassettes, video films and other electronic materials in the Nigerian markets. In fact, they were so many and centred in Onitsha that one would not be wrong to label them Onitsha market electronic media (p. 2).

These, it is said were followed with the availability of radio, television, laptops, DVD, palm-tops, cell phones, microphone, loud speakers and the likes in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The Pentecostals, history attests maximized the advantage of the electronic media to the full and propagated Pentecostalism in Nigeria. The impacts of this are overwhelming. The Nigerian society was so easily reached that Pentecostal churches have proliferated so considerably in Nigeria in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (Achunike 2009). There is now more religious language in use in Nigeria than ever before. Religion has so permeated the Nigerian society that it is now being carried into various aspects of the people's national life. Islam equally utilized the media by promoting Islamic preaching and call for prayer everywhere in Nigeria. Nigerian traditional healers are keying into it by using the same medium to advertise and publicise their activities and medicines freely almost on a daily basis at the moment.

Religious festivals and pilgrimages are relevant features of religion in the contemporary Nigeria. Before 1966, only the Christian festivals of Easter and Christmas were celebrated with public holidays in Nigeria. It was not until the military regime of 1966 that the declaration of Muslims festivals of id el-Adha, and id el-fitri among others as public holidays happened.

Added to this is the fact that pilgrimage to the holy lands of Israel and Mecca by both Christians and Muslims was until the 1900 remained individual pilgrim's self sponsored but now enjoy government sponsorship with each group having their separate Pilgrim Welfare Board (Mala 1996). There seems to be no such board for ATR adherents. This, of course is a clear evidence of government discrimination against ATR.

It equally seems convincing that religion is probably widening its scope and horizon more in Nigeria nowadays. There equally seems to be increasing numbers of Junior and Higher Islamic Schools and Colleges in Nigeria. There are over 400 Seminaries/Bible Colleges, and Christian Universities established by the Catholic, Protestant and the Pentecostals in the present Nigeria (McCain 1999). There are also numerous shrines, covens and perhaps prayer houses where apprentices are being taught the traditions of the Africans. These institutions have produced more clerics, Priests, Bishops, priest-healers, Imams and the likes in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Nigerians are now less dependent upon Western Institutions, missionaries, books and academic research. More Nigerians are becoming lecturers in Colleges and Universities' Religious departments across the nation with specialization in Islamic Studies, Christian Religious Studies, ATR, Theology and Interaction of Religions or Comparative Religion.

Nigeria as at the period 1900s and 2000s witnessed the ordinations of women clerics in the Presbyterian and Methodist Churches. In the Pentecostal circles, quite a few women have been ordained Bishops beginning from the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The ordination of Mrs. Margaret Idahosa of the Church of God Mission, Benin, is a case in

point. It is informative too to know that up to now, the Roman Catholic Church resist ordination of women as Priests. Equally, in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, more and more Pentecostals are being elected into the leadership positions of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) at the Local, State and National levels which had not been the case before now. From all indications, it is quite revealing that Nigeria is a very fertile soil for religion. There is so much religiosity in Nigeria in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. There seems to be so much church activities, conferences, conventions, retreats, crusades, pilgrimages, night vigils, picnics, evangelistic campaigns, without much corresponding spiritualities and moral growth (McCain 1999). In Nigeria today, cases of immorality, homosexuality, lesbianism, incest, rape, armed robbery, terrorism, assassination, kidnapping, divorce, abortion, examination malpractices, *god-fatherism*, intolerant, tribalism, corruption, religious crisis and the like abound with Christians and Muslims topping the lists as culprits.

In his observation, Imosem (2012) declares that:

It appears that many Nigerians are religious without being righteous. We observed all the prayers, fasting and attendance of services, but do not reflect the true teachings of our religions in our day to day interaction with our fellow citizen. We compartmentalize our lives such that what is taught in our Churches or Mosques stay there (p. 2).

From the foregoing assertion, it can easily be deduced that there seems to be no direct correlation between increase in Nigerians' religiosity and crime rate in Nigeria.

In another development, the way miracle campaigns are being publicised by means of early morning street preaching, posters, radios, televisions, newspapers, and magazines in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, probably portray miracle as something that could be dished out at will at any given moment of the day by those Pentecostal pastors and Prayers House operators. This, in the scrutiny of many may eventually lead to sheer hypocrisy or manipulated miracles. It is observed too that most of these so called pastors and practitioners of prayer houses are under 40 years of age who find the exercise of binding and casting of demons a worthy one thereby demonstrating their youthful exuberance and fanaticism.

### **8. The Future of Religion in Nigeria**

Given the above, it may not be an over statement to forecast that, the three dominant religions in Nigeria will outlive the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The future of ATR, Islam and Christianity appears to be very bright in Nigeria. The Pentecostal churches are really proliferating in Nigeria. For instance the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) has vouchsafed to plant churches within five minutes walking distance in every city and town of developing countries, and within five minutes driving distance in every city and town of developed countries ([http://mainrccg.org/church\\_ministry/mission\\_statement\\_main/htm](http://mainrccg.org/church_ministry/mission_statement_main/htm)).

The Roman Catholic Church and the Baptist Church are experiencing exponential growth in Northern Nigerian which has not been the case in the 1960s (McCain 1999). There is the likelihood too that Islam will blossom in Nigeria. The greatest concentration of Muslims is in the Northern States, forming about three fourths of the entire northern population, but today Islam is the dominant faith in a few of the Southern States, which equally is gradually penetrating the eastern States (Falola 2011). The reason for this spread of Islam may not be far-fetched. Islam adopts a very simple way of life and most of its propagators are traders who usually spread their tentacles everywhere. Again, Islam has successfully mixed substantial portion of its belief with indigenous beliefs especially belief in magic and medicine for protection which seems appealing to most people in this crisis prone Nigeria (Danfulani 2002). The question of whether ATR will survive in Nigeria or not is in the affirmative. According to Mbiti (1978) "In matters of deeper things of life such as birth, marriage and death, they (both Christians and Muslims) have remained largely followers of African Religion" (p. 189). There is also an upsurge of interest in traditional medicines in Nigeria. People in Nigeria are zealously patronizing traditional medicine healers for obvious reasons. Sicknesses are all around us today in Nigeria. Some of them have defied medical sciences or orthodox medication and consequently people find relief in the application of native herbs. Today, there is a registered body of Traditional Medicine Practitioners in Nigeria who from time to time, organize trade fair for traditional medicine with so much clientele (Akueshi 1999). Civil, ethnic and religious crisis in Nigeria have always pushed most people to seeking protection from native doctors which in a way help in expanding the trade. It may probably be right also to say that, most of the practitioners of prayer houses in Nigeria are essentially native doctors that have recently learnt the Pentecostal styles of administering healing and, who probably have incorporated and injected Pentecostals' prayer methods into their practice. Added to this is the fact that some so-called Pentecostal pastors are beginning to patronize native doctors in order to obtain power to grow large followership in their churches. This helps in no small way to brightening the future of ATR in Nigeria (Akiode in Iheanochacho 2009).

### **9. The Role Religion should play in Nigeria**

Following the trend of this discussion, it is easily discernible that religion is absurdly occupying the Central

stage in the private and national life of Nigerians. It has become the major preoccupation of every life in Nigeria. Therefore, for religion to be properly managed and harnessed in Nigeria it must of necessity strive towards achieving the under listed:

- i. Brings crime rates and corruption to the barest minimum in Nigeria.
- ii. Promotes the tenets of integrity, hard work, fairness, justice and respect for constituted spiritual and temporal authority.
- iii. Seeks to tackle unemployment problems, improves the lot of people and their general living conditions.
- iv. It should be used as a tool for greater progress in the welfare of people as well as the general development of the society (Imosem 2012).
- v. Ensures and promotes peaceful co-existence of the Nigerian Citizens irrespective of their tribal and religious leanings (Nwahaghi 1998).
- vi. It should be used as a tool for the promotion of the moral and social well being of the Nigerian citizens.
- vii. Endeavours to eradicate social evils which have plagued the Nigerian nation.
- viii. It should be used as an effective instrument for nation building and national development (Adeyemi 2010)
- ix. Promotes and Sustains proper religious cum moral upbringing of children in Nigerian Schools, Colleges and Universities.
- x. Helps to inculcate the fear of God in the Citizenry so that people will keep up the virtue of human values and shun acts of fanaticism. This will subdue the tide of religious conflicts in Nigeria.

#### **10. Achievements of Religion in Nigeria**

Religion is probably the most popular phenomenon in contemporary Nigeria. Religion has achieved this pre-eminence due to its overwhelming impacts and contributions in the Nigerian society. As a notable agent of change, religion has undeniably exerted a great deal of influence positively and negatively on the Nigerian people in many ways.

Even though, it is on record that religion in Nigeria has fuelled and generated a lot of tensions and conflicts (Agi 1998), it is no doubt a great force of peace and unity in Nigeria (Turaki 2010). Religious affiliation has been a binding force in Nigeria. It is a known fact that religion whether it is Christianity, Islam or ATR has been able to successfully unite the different ethnic groups together and make them to coexist peacefully along religious lines in Nigeria. According to Omoregbe (1996):

It can hardly be denied that religion has been the source of a lot of intolerance, feud, discrimination and devastating wars in different parts of the world, both in the past and at present...It has also done a lot of good to mankind. It has produced saints in every part of the world; it has helped to inculcate in many people worldwide the spirit of self-discipline and dedicated service to one's fellow men. It has enabled many people to see some meaning and purpose in their lives. By providing man with a worldview and describing man's place within the scheme of things, religion enables many people (who believe in it) to see human life as meaningful and purposeful, thus providing them with a sense of direction in life (p. 298, 301).

As a matter of fact, history has shown that religion does foster national growth and development. In Nigeria, religion has greatly assisted in wiping out mass illiteracy (Ugwu 2002; Ayandele 1966). Indeed, the outstanding contributions of Christianity and Islam in the enlightenment and education of Nigerians cannot just be overlooked. Both religions have played significant roles in the evolvement of a literate culture in Nigeria. This was through the establishments of the various missionary and quoranic schools in Nigeria (Lemu 2002; Mkpa 2010).

In his observation, Schumacher (1975) maintains that development does not start with goods; it starts with people and their education, organization and discipline. This is a fact. It is people who are knowledgeable, competent, honest and skilful that builds a nation. Schumacher (1975) expatiates that:

The work of nation building solidly hinges on the way the state enjoys true goodness. The building of the nation is first and foremost the building of the people that make up the nation, which in effect boils down to the building up of the individuals themselves – justice, love and peace, which are essential ingredients for nation building, and are products of the human heart; these cannot be imposed by the force of arms (p. 140).

Christianity for instance, in the opinion of Mbachirin (2011) has made great achievements in the areas of education, healthcare, and rural development since its inception in Nigeria. The education that religion gives influence people's moral life; thereby making them perhaps to be responsible in all areas of life in the society. This implies that religion encourages people to live moral lives by providing them with the incentives to do so.

According to Omoregbe (1996), one of the virtues taught by religion is the virtues of humility. This, in a way provides man with a new dimension to the concepts of leadership and greatness. By inference, therefore, it is reasoned that religion nurtures good governance, as is self evidenced in Nigeria. This is premised on the very



fact of the various religious teaching of the founders of religions. The teaching and practical example of Jesus Christ, the founder of Christianity on humility, for instance gives the Nigerian Christians the impetus to imbibe and inculcate that style of leadership in Nigeria. This is buttressed better in the following words:

Leadership should manifest itself in selfless service rather than in the exercise of authority. Greatness reveals itself in humility, for it is the humble that is great. A leader should therefore distinguish himself by selfless service; anyone who aspires to greatness must be humble, for it is humility that leads to greatness (Omeregbe 1996, p. 304).

Religion has over the years produced great leaders in Nigeria. The three major religions in Nigeria have contributed immensely in the political development of the country. They all produced competent individuals who championed the cause of leadership in Nigeria (Dike 1957). True to its teachings, religion nourished individuals who understood the concept of leadership as selfless service to the nation. Beginning from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Nigeria started witnessing the emergence of nationalities with seasoned leadership qualities like Chief Obafemi Awolowo, Dr Nnamdi Azikwe, Sir Ahmadu Bello, General Yakubu Gowon, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, General Muhammadu Buhari, Prof Jerry Gana, Prof Dora Akunyili, Alhaji Shehu Shagari, General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida, Dr Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Alhaji Umaru Musa Yar'adua and Dr Goodluck Ebele Jonathan among several others (Musa 2009). Though, some of them perceived leadership as exercise of authority and as an avenue to amass wealth for themselves, but majority of them did creditably well and improved the lot of the people tremendously in Nigeria.

Furthermore, religion in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century has achieved some measures of incarnation in Nigeria. In trying to respond to the yearnings of the people, both Christianity and Islam in their individual ways attempt to incarnate religion in Nigeria. During this epoch, religion especially Christianity assumed its true African nature by putting off all foreign regalia and clothed itself with African cultural garbs. Islam and especially Christianity borrowed heavily some cultural elements by adopting local drums, vestments, singing in local languages, hand clapping and dancing with African rhythm and the likes. There were obviously ostensible signs for the recovery of Nigerian cultural values, which further aided more development of Nigerian indigenous languages. There was equally great expansion in the traditional, Islamic and Christian education in Nigeria. All of these culminated in the fight against all forms of corruption, injustice, molestation of the girl child and the advocacy for women empowerment to enhance the dignity of the human person in Nigeria.

## 11. Conclusion

Nigeria is a very fertile soil for religion. It is discovered that at the present time the three dominant religions in Nigeria are full of life and will likely survive any threat of extinction in the future. The 20<sup>th</sup> Century has been noted as the most decisive years of religiosity in Nigeria. It saw the expansion and consolidation of religion in the areas of education, agriculture, healthcare, politics and economy of the nation. As it happened, the collective efforts and initiatives of the various religious adherents in Nigeria turned same into a strong base for religious and socio-economic development.

In this 21<sup>st</sup> Century, religion is seen to be showcasing its true African nature with so many signs of gains and losses for the practitioner. In spite of tensions here and there in the country, arising from the interaction of the various religions in Nigeria, religion still remains the most desired in Nigeria. It is most probable in view of this that Nigerian major religions will outlive the 21<sup>st</sup> century in a competitive manner in terms of structural and numerical explosion. Having said this, it is recommended that all the stake holders in the Nigerian cardinal religions should come together and form a common forum to urgently address the monster of religious intolerance, insensitivity, self interest and fanaticism in the interest of peaceful co-existence, nation building and Nigerian brotherhood.

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