

The Role of Religious Leaders in Interreligious Dialogue- Insights through a Case Study from Kaduna, Nigeria

- *"We need to learn, indeed, from Imam Ashafa and Pastor James and multiply in a thousand places their experiences of healing and reconciliation".*

-Kofi Annan

"Peace cannot be kept by force; it can only be achieved by understanding".

-Albert Einstein

Abstract-

There is less to repudiate on the issue that the role of religion in delegated political affiliations or in its own right has instigated or catalysed violent extremisms at both local and global paradigms, and as it stands today, it is one of the greatest cause of mistrust and fear. The association of religion and violence has now been established that is neither accidental, nor can it be explained arithmetically. Liebman (1983) controversially postulated that extremism is a religious norm- even though outrightly disputed then, has increasingly become a matter of interest and debate in contemporary times. This essay briefly discusses the conflict in Kaduna, Nigeria, and explores the role of religious leaders in conflict reconciliations and Interreligious Dialogue (IRD) by laconically discussing the key dynamics that are documented in the reports of INGOs and the documentaries. Nigeria, for decades now, has been struggling to challenge the plague of inter-communal violence between the Muslim and Christian communities that have put to stake the very values of humanity, and death toll since the outbreak of war has been estimated to range from one million to six million (Quartz Africa, 4th June 2017). Religious leaders are coercive forces adept at maintaining socio-cultural structures, and this essay attempts to examine their role in leading at facilitating interreligious dialogue, and also tries to contemplate on the impaction of the same. This essay will be grounded in the approach of case study that discusses the role of Imam Muhammad Ashafa and Pastor James Wuye who initiated the Muslim Christian Dialogue forum of Kaduna in 1995.

Introduction-

Ethnic and religious unrest have since mid 20th century posed one of the most severe challenges in Nigeria's community development and nation-building. The government of Nigeria has been employing an array of strategies to foster core citizenship values and reduce national ethnic conflicts. The mitigation between the government and its citizens have not been successful owing to practical on-ground issues. It was initially believed that installing the democratic institution would pave way for civilian and administrative coherence, but the explosion of widespread ethno-religious violence has jolted the country's and the region's prosperity and peace. The conflict in Nigeria has wrecked the economic and political systems, rendering de-escalations in growth and developments (Enwerem *et al*, 1999). The first incident recorded was in 1953 that was triggered by the tensions between the Igbo and Muslim communities. And since then, there have been incidents all throughout the country, with its epicentre mostly being in Northern Nigeria. Kaduna in Northern Nigeria has witnessed some of the most serious riots. In Kaduna, the Muslim and Christians have lived segregated lives and have raged bloody clashes over variety of reasons- from the implementation of Sharia laws to inter-religious love affairs (Adebajo, 2002). The spatial seclusion is so conspicuous that there are regions called "for the Muslims", "for the Christians" and "no areas" (Kirk-Greene, 1971). In general, the northern part of Kaduna is dominated by the Muslims, while the Christians mostly inhabit the South. Unfortunately the polarisation has only consolidated and the gulf has widened over time.

Coleman (1956) was one of the first scholars to study religious conflicts, and he elucidated that the very first requisite while discussing this issue is to define the perimeters and characters of religious conflict. Aligning with his views, I must set the scope and limits of this essay. When I refer to religious violence here, it implies the definition offered by Juergensmeyer (2014), whereby he outlined that religious violence comprises any sort of conflict in which religious doctrines are used to sanction and justify violence. He famously cited that in the investigation of the 9/11 incident, the most discussed issue was the association of religion with violence. His thesis is premised on the idea that religious ideologies frame internal and external individual and social behaviours. The 9/11 incident indeed gave momentum to the studies of religious violence, and it brought to the fore both

structured and blatant forms of violence (Juergensmeyer, 2003). While there are several actors, factors, variants, and characteristics of religious violence, this essay focuses on the religious dimensions of the Kaduna conflict that started in 1953, intensified in 1992 where the feud was over a relocation of a market place, where the economy was majorly driven by the Muslim community, and the Christians felt unjustly marginalised. Later, in 1999 when the Sharia was constitutionally introduced in the country the divide consolidated, and it sadly continues even today. The last riot recorded was on the 21st of January, 2018 (Pulse Nigeria, 21st January, 2018). Imam Ashafa and Pastor Wuye are religious and community leaders who have emerged as heroes, and have defined reconciliations and peace-keeping missions globally.

Interreligious Dialogue and the role of Religious Leaders

The Bible is famously quoted as, “And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who know to make peace with others” (James 3: 18); and in the Quran, it is found that, “Humanity is but a single Brotherhood; So make peace with your brethren” (49: 10). There is no denying that all religions hold to their core the essence and virtues of love and peace, yet unrest continues in the name of religious identities. Studies have recurrently established that the great Ottoman Empire (1490-1916) survived for over three centuries because the political and religious leaders utilised religious values to develop the social fabric of a community. In the 1933 Parliament of World Religions, Hans Kung defined religion as an individual and social relationship that transcends all realities, is suspended in variety of situations, and is subjected to several pressures from time to time. In declaring The Global World Ethics, he outlined that all the religions must realise that they share common values and features with all other traditions, yet there are ontological differences that need to be understood and respected. In what was later going to be called the “1953 Peace Charter”, Kung categorically mentioned the role of religious leaders as agents of positive change who could engineer a “public theology” of “pluralistic societies” (Kung, 1998). This has been a changing point in the discourse of Interreligious Dialogue (IRD). From studying a special report (2004) published by United States Institute of Peace (USIP), Garfinkel (2008) analysed that lack of diplomatic efforts on the parts of religious leaders has

been a key force in driving and perpetuating religious violent extremisms. The document narrates that religious leaders are viewed as the people the communities look up to and reach out to in times of need, therefore, their roles in facilitating interfaith conversations, and their abilities to provide neutral opinions when required are foundations of a peaceful community.

The religious leaders have unique knowledge and access and authority to interpret and manoeuvre both theological underpinnings and social norms. Smith (2007) argued that the position the religiously revered figures enjoy in a society should be capitalised to make peace. This is echoed by Abu-Nimer *et al* (2007) and Miller (2013) when they wrote that the religious leaders revel in a position of legitimacy and are respected by every member of the community to varying degrees, irrespective of their faith backgrounds. “When examining the impact of religious leaders on peace, it becomes clear that the religious nonviolent resistance teachings, movements, and leaders were highly effective in gaining moral authority for their causes of liberation, especially in violent contexts” (Abu-Nimer *et al* 2007: 230). Taylor (1979) was of the view that the means and willingness to engage in sustained conversations with people of other faiths is the hallmark of interfaith dialogue, but this can only be realised when the religious leaders lead the path of respecting mutual exclusions and differences. Theologian Paul Knitter is of the view that interfaith dialogue is only possible when the religious leaders, who he refers to as the “architect” of a “theoretical agreement” whereby the society is encouraged to follow an “ethical inclusive worldview” of religion (Knitter 1995: 12).

The Case Study

Drawing from Foucault’s works, Pinto (2003) put forth that there is no part of the world that is not religiously pluralistic in nature, and with time, people have become more and more aware of the essence and differences between religions, yet there is erosion of peace and the quantity and magnitude of conflicts is on the rise. The case study here centres around two men who despite their harsh past and personal losses chose to opt for the path to reconciliation and urge their communities too to do so. Imam Muhammad Ashafa and Pastor James Wuye are religious leaders who live in Kaduna, and have joined

hands to educate people about peace-building and especially train the youth to resolve violent extremisms and (re)build their war-torn community. But they have not always the same- they turned into peacemakers only some years ago. A decade ago, “Imam Ashafa and Pastor James were mortal enemies, intent on killing one another in the name of religion” (tanenbaum.org). During the fierce 1992 violent outbreak Christians and Muslims broke into a bloody riot where they burnt each others’ properties and crops, brutally attacked one another’s families, and destroyed the regular lives of Kaduna. In the course of the civil war, the Imam and the Pastor too ignited reasons for communal enmity, and ended up paying grave prices for their participation — Imam Ashafa lost two of brothers and his spiritual mentor, whereas Pastor James lost his right hand.

The period between 1992 and 1995 was difficult yet transformative as it took a common friend who was a journalist to bring these two religious leaders together in conversation. The journalist apparently told them that they had the potential to keep the Kaduna state from falling apart. In the report documented by Initiatives of Change (www.iofc.org), it reads that the transition was not only slow, but faced extreme reluctance by both the leaders. They both hesitated to have conversations with each other, let alone making peace. The agenda of competing militia and the burden of the past kept drawing them away from each other until when they finally decided to give the other a chance to explain, and themselves an opportunity to understand. This took the shape of the Inter-faith Mediation Centre that was established in 1995 that USIP calls an ideal and inspiring example of grass-root level initiative of interfaith dialogue (www.usip.org). The primary objective of this institution is to exhort Muslim-Christian collaborations for peace.

One of the most telling accounts of their works has been made into a short documentary called ‘Nigeria’s Imam and Pastor: Faith at the Front’ that continues to be a contrivance for religious leaders and peace practitioners in the field of interfaith dialogue. Pastor James Wuye is heard telling the audience that, “As a Christian activist, I volunteered myself into the group that defended the Church against the Muslim onslaught”. Imam Ashafa reflects upon similar experiences and says that, “Most of us Muslims went wild for vengeance and we took revenges on innocent Christians who are living in our own communities”. They both go on to recollect how they once thought they had nothing to do with one another other than fight, instead today, they bring the warring communities

together to discuss their grievances and resolve their differences, and chart the ways forward. Drawing on Tracy's (1990) work, interfaith dialogue tables should almost always comprise religious leaders because they can theologically implicate and inspire people to view the "other" in the light of fellow citizen and brethren. Tracy rightly suggests that the religious leaders can lead religious visions that commit to ethical values of peaceful coexistence and mutual understanding (Tracy 1996: 101).

Another documentary titled 'The Nigerian Reconciliation That Offers A Roadmap Back From Extremism' provides a chilling narration of the destructive communal history and how Kaduna has been the flash point in the country's violence. It opens with a conversation of the Iman and Pastor who meet at a massive grave to see the tens of thousands of lives that were buried there. The two religious leaders grieve the loss of each other's communities, and emphasise on the need to hear each other and empathise. One of the most important aspects this documentary highlights is the need to initiate and perpetuate conversations. They reflect on how deriving assumptions is core to prejudice, and people can continue killing without knowing the reality of the other. Therefore, they exhort communities to engage in interfaith dialogue that inculcates the value of keeping conversations alive. One of the most special moments Pastor Wuye shares is that once he reluctantly happened to attend Imam Ashafa's preaching in a gathering full of Muslims, and even not very willingly, he decided to stay on. He recounts how he felt that the Imam's words felt like it was addressed to him, and how the Quran spoke of similar things that he read from the Bible. It is then that he realised that he needed to change and urge his Christian mates to do the same. Similarly, Imam Ashafa reflects on how he grew up in a family that the community revered as the custodian of Muslim heritage, and they did not think the need to look beyond their traditions. Once the civil war broke out, he decided to study the Bible by himself, and was amazed to learn of the shared principles between these two religions. In addressing a gathering at the Intercultural Innovation Award organised by the United Nations in 2017, both of them convincingly and retrospectively shared the need for leaders to initiate the responsibility of peace.

Nigeria's Christians and Muslims, whose population is almost of the same ratio, last lived in peace in the last quarter of the 20th century. Colonial rule, economic decline, religious polarity and political turmoil rendered the state it is in today. Several factors

combined to strain communal relations that finally led to a breaking point. With the rise in the Boko-Haram militia, the ethno-religious clashes in Nigeria has taken the casualties and internal displacements to an increased level, and there is an urgent need for State and non-State actors and leaders to collaborate and work for peace to say the least. USIP special report (2004) on interfaith activities verily outline that localised and community-led grass-root level activities are the heart of peaceful transformation, but that too requires the support and monitoring of the people involved. Grass-root changes are vital in a conflict-prone region but it should be complemented by effective governance and navigated by religious and community leaders.

Conclusions

Religion has been the central institution in human societies across th globe. Weaving a cosmology, religious beliefs shape the very worldview of life and its meaning for billions of people. Also, religion lends an identity to the self, visible to everyone within and outside a community. These formative identities aid in the congregation of communities enmeshed within a religio-political sphere informing ethics and moral of an ideal life. Conflicts, sociologically speaking, are natural components of every community and emerge when these cosmologies tend to interact but not integrate within the theological narratives of ones beliefs system, posing a challenge to what they comprehend as “the Truth” and challenges their epistemologically and spiritual understanding of the world within and outside them. . These conflicts further become easily personalised through the use of “the sacred” (Juergensmeyer, 2003) because religion is intimate to one’s existential identity. Therefore, religious conflicts are both personal and communal. The notion of “us versus they” operates smoothly under the religious realm because religion is conventionally exclusive in its definition (Tracy, 1990). Religious conflicts, in many ways, occur as a response to transgressing one’s identity. The fact that religious identify is intricately associated with the self, it is often used as a powerful political tool to channelize and manoeuvre political discourses. More often than not, religious conflicts have been fuelled by ethno-political regimes to consolidate and widen the fissures of disparaged communities.

Though the causes for conflict vary greatly across contexts, there is less to disagree with the idea that the religious leaders have an important role to play in its resolutions. When conflicts are bolstered by the political and religious leaders, it sanctions blatant violence and wages an outright attack on the sans power of a community. Religions have been focal to conflicts throughout human history, and even in contemporary times, we see resurgence in the politics of prejudice and extremism over religious issues. During such tensed situations, the role of religious leaders can potentially lend a sane voice in the chaotic and indiscriminate violence, and practice the promise of every religion- the values of peace, love, and brotherhood. This essay is a preliminary write-up on a case that needs to be studied in depth, and it attests to the hypothesis that religious and community leaders are key figures in fostering peace. However, it also raises questions on the dearth of material in interfaith scholarship with regards to the role of religious leaders, and the need for refined methodological and sociological interpretations of the discourse of leadership in peacebuilding initiatives.

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