

# CHAPTER SEVEN

## RELIGION IN THE PAST AND PRESENT IN NIGERIA

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### INTRODUCTION

In Nigeria, religion is very much with us. It is with us at every moment of life. It is discussed daily in the newspapers, through the radio and television and in our conversation. In terms of religion, Nigeria is a pluralistic society. The three main religions are Christianity, Islam and the Traditional Religion/indigenous religion. For peaceful co-existence and religious tolerance in Nigeria, it is necessary that we should be exposed to the fundamental features of the three religions which are practiced in Nigeria. Lack of good knowledge of other religions has been responsible for religious bigotry in Nigeria. Other challenges could be attributed to institutional failures and lack of corporate social responsibilities toward host communities in Nigeria.

### Definition of Religion

It is difficult to define religion. A simple comprehensive definition of religion cannot be attained because of the complex nature of religion. The objects that religions deal with are not subject to empirical observation. They are therefore conceived in different ways by different people. Besides, 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 (Metuh, 1987). Furthermore, religion involves many beliefs and practices, the expression of which varies from one religion to the other.

Let us, therefore, examine a few definitions of religion.

**E. B. Idowu:** According to E. B. Idowu, "Religion in its essence is the means by which God as spirit and man's essential self-communicate..." (Idowu, 1973).

**Yinger:** An American sociologist gives a functional definition of religion. He declares "Religion is a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggles with the ultimate problems of human life. It is a refusal to

capitulate to death, to give up in the face of frustration, to allow hostility to tear apart one's human associations" (Yinger, 1957).

**Eric Waterhouse:** He defined religion as man's attempt to supplement his felt insufficiency by seeking alliance with a higher order of being home-he (man) believes is manifest in the world and be brought into sympathetic relationship with himself if rightly approved (Nigosian, 1975).

**E. B. Tylor:** In his pioneer study titled *Primitive Culture* published in 1871, Tylor put forward what he called the "minimal definition of religion". He says, "Religion is the belief in spiritual beings" (Scharf, 1973).

**Karl Marx:** Marx was an evolutionist in matters of religions and economy. Though he was chiefly interested in religion in class-ridden societies and in the role of religion in expressing or hindering the growth of class consciousness among the exploited, he declared: "religion is the means of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, the sense of senseless conditions..., it is the opium of the people" (Scharf, 1973).

### **Religion in the Past in Nigeria**

Before the planting of Islam and Christianity in Nigeria, the dominant religion was the traditional religion, part of what is popularly known as Africa Traditional Religion, ATR, and the indigenous religion of Africa. The traditional religion of Nigeria is the richest heritage which the forebears of Nigeria have handed down to their children. It is the root of the Nigerian culture. The Nigerians had practiced the traditional religion ever before Islam and Christianity were introduced to Nigeria. E. B. Idowu describes the Africans including the Nigerians as a people who in all things are religious (Idowu, 1966) J. S. Mbiti on his own part says: "where the African is, there is his religion" (Mbiti, 1969). Religion permeates every aspect of Nigerian life. The traditional religion has helped to shape the social, political and economic activities of the people of Nigeria.

The indigenous religion has been succinctly described by Awolalu, (1979), in the following words:

*...it is the religion that has been handed down from generation to generation by the forebears of the present generation of Africans...this is a religion that has no written literature yet it is written everywhere from those who care to see and read, it is largely written in the people's myths and folktales, in their songs and dances, in their liturgies and shrines, their proverbs and myth sayings. It is a religion whose historical founder is neither known nor worshipped, it is a religion that has no real desire for membership drive, yet it offers persistent fascination of Africans, young and old.*

The traditional religion is a vital living force where the Supreme Being who is differently designated (Abasi Ibom, Olodunmare, Chukwu, Onyame, etc) by the different ethnic groups in Africa is ultimate and the divinities; spirits and ancestors are all acting their parts to assist the supreme being in running and maintain the created order.

### **Structure of the Indigenous Religion**

Mboho and Awak (2013) in their study on the traditional power structure of African societies observe that the indigenous religion, especially in West Africa, is structurally made up of the following:

- (a) Belief in and worship of the Supreme Being.
- (b) Belief in the divinities (Ndem, Orisha, Muo) who are believed to be the “commissioners” of the Supreme Being in the theocratic government of the universe.
- (c) Belief in spirits
- (d) A lively belief in the subsistence of the ancestors which has given rise to the ancestral cults.
- (e) Belief in mystical forces as evidenced in the practice of magic and decline, sorcery and witchcraft.

### **The Basic Characteristic of the Indigenous Religion**

The basic characteristic or genius for which any religion is known is that which marks it out from other forms of religion. The genius of Christianity is agape (unconditional love) as enshrined in the sermon on the mount, that of Islam is obedience or submission to the will of Allah and that of traditional religion is tolerance, that is, live and let live.

### **Religion in the Present Nigeria**

In the present Nigeria, three main religions are practiced namely Islam, Christianity and the traditional religion.

**Islam:** Islam is the youngest of the great religions of the world. It is the religion founded and preached in Arabia by Mohammad. It made its appearance in the 7th century A. D. and since then, it has developed with astonishing speed into a great cohesive civilization. The birth place of Islam is Mecca in Arabia. The word “Islam” means “submission” and a Muslim is one who submits to the will of Allah or God. Before Muhammed founded Islam in Arabia, the religion of the Arabs was very primitive. The Arabs worshiped many deities. Mecca, the birth place of Muhammad was the religion centre of Arabia. In it, stood a great shrine called Ka’aba, was a square building which had a black meteorite stone set in its side. It was believed that the stone was brought down to Abraham by angel Gabriel. The stone had been

generated many years ago. Each year, people came from all parts of Arabia to Mecca on pilgrimage to worship at Ka'aba. The Hajj or pilgrimage to Mecca was an accepted Meccan religious practice before Muhammed.

When Muhammed received the divine call to prophet-hood, he preached his new religion which was and is still based on absolute monotheism. The Meccans mounted a strong opposition against him. When his life became insecure in Mecca, he left Mecca in 622 A.D. for Yathrib which was renamed Medina, the city of the prophet. This flight of Muhammed to Yathrib is called Hegirah. The Islamic calendar dates form the Hegirah.

Later from Yathrib Muhammed, after some series of encounter with the people of Mecca, conquered Mecca and spread Islam not only to Mecca but also to all Arabia. When Muhammed died in 632 A. D. his successors known as Caliphs carried out great work of expansion of Islam to Egypt and other parts of North Africa. From North Africa through the activities of the almoravids and the trans-saharan traders, Islam spread to the Sudan and eventually to Nigeria. Islam took root in the Kanem Borno in the late 11th century. Kanem (in Chad) absorbed Bornu, the north east of Nigeria in the 13th century. Islam spread to the Hausa states in the late 15th century brought by Malian missionaries. Malian or "wangara" traders and missionaries also helped to spread Islam to Yoruba land (Nigosian, 1975).

### **The Qur'an**

The sacred scripture of Islam is the Qur'an. The Arabic word Qur'an means recitation. The Qur'an is regarded as the word of God transmitted to Muhammed through angel Gabriel from an original preserved in heaven. All its one hundred and fourteen chapters, called Suras, are believed to be eternal and uncreated. In Islam, there is no distinction between religion and civil affairs. Religion regulates every aspect of human life. The major sources of Islamic doctrine are the Qur'an and the Hadith (words and deeds of Muhammed).

### **The Pillars of Islam**

Muhammed did not institute either an organized priesthood or any sacraments, but he did prescribe several practical religious duties. These observances are usually known as "the five pillars of Islam".

#### **1. Shahadah (Creed)**

The Shahadah or confession of faith consists of declaring "There is no other God but Allah (and) Muhammed is the Prophet of Allah". In Arabic, the Shahadah is: La ilaha illa 'llah muhammadun rasulu 'llah. Much importance is attached to the Shahadah by the Muslims and to say this with sincerity makes a person a Muslim.

#### **2. Salat (Prayer)**

Prayer is very significant in Islam. A faithful Muslim shows his gratitude to Allah by praying five times a day: at day break (1) (Salat alsubh), at noon (2) (Salat al-zuhr), midafternoon (3) (Salat al-asr), after sunset (4) (salat al-maghrib) and before retiring to bed (5) (Salat al-isha). The night prayer must not last later than

mid-night. Friday prayer (Salat al-jumah): it is customary that every Friday, Muslims within a community perform the noon prayers in a mosque and hear a sermon from Qur'an. While Saturday is for Judaism and Sunday for Christianity, Friday is for Islam.

**Ablution:** Before a Muslim prays, he performs ablution. Tradition records that prophet Muhammed said "Ritual purity is the half of faith and key of prayer". Ablution involves washing the head, hands and feet with water. If no water is available hands and face may be wiped with fine clean sand.

**The Call to Prayer (Al-Adhan):** The call to prayer is given by the muezzin from the top of the minaret of the mosque. In modern times, he uses the loud speaker attached to the mosque.

3. **Almsgiving (Zakat):**

Zakat is the ritual almsgiving or tax which a well-to-do Muslim is expected to pay for the maintenance of the poor, the needy, orphans and beggars. The rate of payment of the zakat is 2½ of one's annual income.

4. **The Fasting in Ramadan (Saum)**

Fasting during the month of Ramadan is compulsory for every Muslim man and woman. Fasting during the month of Ramadan is very important for Muslims for it was during this month that the whole revealed book of Allah was sent for the guidance of mankind. The revealed books are:

- (i) The Qur'an revealed to Muhammed
- (ii) The Psalms (Zabur), revealed to David (Daud)
- (iii) The Torah (Torat), revealed to Moses (Musa)
- (iv) The Gospels (Injil), revealed to Jesus (Isa)

5. **Hajj (Pilgrimage to Mecca)**

It is obvious for every Muslim who is healthy in body and mind and who can afford to go, to go on pilgrimage to Mecca, at least, once in his/her life time. The Hajj is a popular mean of securing Allah's favour. A man who has performed the Hajj acquires the title, Alhaji while a woman acquires the title Alhaja (Doi, 1972).

## **Christianity**

At the centre of Christianity is Jesus Christ who is believed by the Christians to be both human and divine. Jesus grew up in Nazareth where he also learnt to read and write at the local village school in synagogue. Like his earthly father, Joseph, he did the work of a carpenter and like other Jews; he worshipped in the synagogue on the Sabbath day. At the age of thirty, he began to proclaim the kingly rule of God and gathered together a group of disciples to himself. He showed God's power in action by healing those who were sick and by setting free those who were in the grip

of evil. On some occasions, Jesus restored to life to people who had died. In storms on the lake of Galilee his words calmed tempests of wind and waves.

At the time of Jesus, the Jews were looking for the coming of a deliverer, a Messiah. Most Jews expected that the coming Messiah would be a warrior king like the great David. This king, they thought would expel the Romans and other foreign rulers from the land of Israel. He would restore a Jewish kingdom and would dominate the world. Instead, he chose to act as the servant of God in the way which some of the prophets had followed. This was the way of suffering and of humble service. Because Jesus chose this way of bringing deliverance, there was conflict between himself and many other Jews about God's will for the nation.

The Jewish religious authorities were hostile to Jesus. They resented teaching which Jesus gave the people. They claimed that he was not an authorized teacher, but only a village carpenter from the Northern Province of Galilee, but he gave his own interpretation of the law. Jesus criticized the religious teachers because of the great importance which they attached to the oral traditions. The oral traditions were detailed regulations which the Jewish teachers added to the written law of the scriptures in order to ensure that the laws were strictly observed. Jesus made friends with the tax collectors and outcasts. He differed from the religious authorities in what he thought about the observance of the Jewish holy day, the Sabbath. The final conflict took place in Jerusalem when one of Jesus' disciples betrayed him to the Jewish authorities who handed him to the Roman governor on a charge of blasphemy, and when that failed, they accused him of treason. He was executed as a criminal on a cross outside Jerusalem with two others.

### **The Holy Scriptures of Christianity**

The Holy scriptures of Christianity comprise the sacred books of Judaism (called by the Christians as the Old Testament and the New Testament), meaning, the New "Covenant". The two books are commonly referred to as the Holy Bible or the Holy Book.

### **The Main Teachings of Jesus**

The teachings of Jesus centred around two concepts: the fatherhood of all men. Just as the father loves all men even so must man love this fellow man. He proclaimed that the father's love for man is so great and boundless that it is not governed by man's goodness or wickedness. God manifests his love and mercy to all men both good and bad without regard of need or merit. Christianity is a religion of peace (Brown, 1977; Nigosian, 1975).

### **Spread of Christianity**

#### **First Century Christianity in North Africa**

Christianity came to North Africa shortly after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Thus, Africa North of the Sahara was the earliest zone in Africa to receive Christianity. As Islam entered Egypt in the 7th century, it continued to

spread westwards. At last Christianity was finally eliminated as a serious competitor of Islam in the 7th century. It is unfortunate that the church in this period lost it chance in Africa.

## **Second Attempt to Plant Christianity in Africa**

### **(First in West Africa) in the 15th Century**

A second attempt was made in the 15th century to propagate Christianity in Africa, the first in West Africa through the initiative of Prince Henry the Navigator of Portugal who wanted to reach India through the coast of West Africa. The first brand of Christianity which the Portuguese wanted to propagate was the Catholic variety developed in the culture of Western Europe. Meanwhile missionaries were first sent by Portugal to her trading stations in West Africa. In August 1515 the missionaries reached Benin. Although some churches were built in Benin, Christianity remained a minority religion in Benin. Portuguese missionaries reached Warri in 1570s. the most successful of all the missions then in West Africa was that of Warri. For a century and a half (1733-1970) the Warri rulers became well-known as professing Christians. But the European religion did not spread beyond the court; even at court it was shaky. After 1733, Christianity declined. At the beginning of the 19th century Christianity had completely disappeared in Warri. Why?

- (i) Confining of Christianity almost entirely to king and the prince.
- (ii) Lack of regular supply of clergy to administer the sacrament.
- (iii) Failure of Christianity to displace the traditional religion.
- (iv) High mortality rate among the missionaries who came to the kingdom of Warri due to unaccustomed tropical diseases like malaria.

### **19th Century Missionary Effort in Nigeria**

The next attempt in Christianizing West Africa was in the 19th century. Before then the Abolition Act of 1807 had been enacted and forced; consequently the liberated slaves were in West Africa when they were settled in Freetown in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Gambia, most Nigerians settled in Freetown. It was among the freed slaves that Christian Gospel reached most of the people in West Africa for the Church Missionary work among the “uprooted people”. Having been saved from death and slavery, they were beginning life a new, on new ground, far from their ancestral gods.

### **Yoruba Mission 1842**

Among the settlers in Sierra Leone, the Yoruba speaking people of Nigeria became the largest and most cohesive group; organized socially along the Yoruba traditional lines. Sierra Leone, therefore, became a sort of nursery from which Christianity was introduced to many tribal groups in Nigeria like the Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa etc. The first Yoruba to become Christians were freed slaves converted in Sierra Leone e.g. Samuel Ajai Crowther who later became a Bishop. On their return



to Yoruba land, the freed slaves asked for missionaries who would help them to continue their Christian faith.

### **Wesleyan Methodist Mission**

In response to the invitation of James Ferguson, a liberated emigrant to Badagry Rev. Thomas Birch Freeman, the first Methodist Missionary to set foot in Nigeria, came to Badagry on 24th September 1842. He established the Wesleyan Methodist Missions at Badagry and Abeokuta.

### **The C.M.S. Yoruba mission**

Catechist Henry Townsend in company of other missionaries including Rev. Crowther arrived Badagry on Dec. 17, 1842. The missionaries went to Badagry in response to the request of the Sierra Leonian Christians who were anxious over the spiritual well-being of their Christian friends in Badagry who in their turn were writing back for help. On December 25, 1842 Townsend set out for Abeokuta. After the feasibility survey Townsend returned to Badagry on January 17, 1842. By the end of 1917 the C.M.S. Yoruba Mission had established churches at Abeokuta, Owu, Itoku, and Ikeja and at Igbein where Rev. Crowther was in charge. Day schools were also opened for the children (Mbiti, 1975).

The CMS established a printing press and taught the trade. Henry Townsend began the publication of the first newspaper (Iwe Irohin) in 1859. In 1841 Crowther published the first Yoruba premier; he also translated the Bible into Yoruba. The missionaries were part of a threefold programme called the three C's Christianity, Commerce and Civilization. Calabar mission 1846 (Scottish Presbyterian Mission) Calabar had long standing trade relations with the overseas countries because of its maritime position. Through the traders the Efiks made repeated appeals for help in educating their people. A formal letter from King Eyamba V. of Duke Town and King Eyo Honesty of Creek Town to Lieutenant Raymond incorporating their request reached Liverpool through the palm oil merchants in 1846, a team of Scottish Presbyterian Missionaries led by Hope Waddell arrived Calabar. The missionaries later met king Eyo of Creek Town who was well-disposed towards them. In 1847 Presbyterian Church was established at Creek Town with a Waddell Institute was established by the Scottish Presbyterian Mission.

The first baptized convert to be received into the church was Essien Ukpabio, a native of Creek Town. He was the first African teacher in the area. He was later ordained into the ministry. From Calabar, the Presbyterian Church spread to other parts of the former Eastern Region. Mary Slessor later joined the Missionary group at Calabar. Her chief mandate was the safety of babies and the elevation of the status of women. She got Ekpe to pass law against ostracizing the mother of twins. Her medical attention was directed to everyone especially the little ones. She was empowered to act as vice-consul in 1892, presiding at native courts, establishing just laws. Among other things, she spread the gospel to many places. She later settled at Itu, and then regarded as "the largest slave market in the Ibo and Ibibio country".



She paid visits to Arochukwu and towns along the Creek. She died on January 13, 1915 (Onyeidu, 1998).

### **The Roman Catholic Mission in Nigeria**

The Roman Catholic Mission came back to Nigeria via Dahomey in the 19th century after the Protestant Mission had taken root. The pioneer of the Roman Catholic Mission in Lagos was Fr. Borghero who visited Lagos in 1860. Father Borghero was a member of the society of the African Mission (SAM) formed with a view to spreading Catholic influence in West Africa.

Before the advent of the Catholic Mission to Nigeria there were some Catholics in Nigeria especially from among the enslaves from Brazil and Cuba who became members of that church while in Southern America and had learnt to speak Portuguese. Fr. Borghero, therefore met a large number of Catholic freed slaves from Brazil who had settled in Lagos. They formed the nucleus of the Catholic Church in Lagos. In 1868 Fr. Bouch arrived in Lagos as the first resident Priest of the Roman Catholic Mission in Nigeria. By 1869 two Irish Brothers started a school in Lagos. The work of the Catholic Mission in the Western part of Nigeria was assigned to SAM priests, while that of the Eastern Region was assigned to the Holy Ghost Fathers. From Lagos, the Roman Catholic Church spread to many parts of Nigeria.

**Other Christian Missions:** Apart from the Christian Missions discussed above, there are many others operating in Nigeria. Because of the nature of this course, we shall not be able to discuss them here.

**African Independent Churches:** A recent development in Christianity in Nigeria is the emergence of African Independent Churches. A few examples of these are:

- (i) Christ Apostolic Church
- (ii) Cherubim and Saraphim (Babalola).

### **Traditional Religion in the Present Nigeria**

The traditional religion in Nigeria today has been greatly affected by Christianity and Islam and in more recent years by modernization or scientific technology. The arrival of Islam and Christianity in Nigeria meant introduction into the alternative views of the world, rival cosmologies and a different way of understanding the place of man in the universe. In response to the proselytizing activities of Christian and Muslim missionaries, majority of Nigerians have abandoned the indigenous religion and go to embrace either Islam or Christianity. The number of traditionists in Nigeria has been reduced. Christianity and Islam have displaced the indigenous religion in its organized form, but the impact of traditional beliefs is still discernable in the beliefs and practices of many Nigerians. It is alleged that some Christians and Muslims “Nicodemously” practice the traditional religion especially when their future is bleak. In some parts of Nigeria today, efforts have

been made to revive the traditional religion. This effort can be seen in the activities of Godianism and Orumiluism among the Igbo and Yoruba respectively.

### **The Role Religion Should Play in Nigeria**

Religion in the Nigerian Nation should:

- a) Ensure and promote peaceful existence of the Nigerian citizens irrespective of their religious leanings.
- b) Be as a tool for the promotion of the moral and social well-being of the Nigerian citizens.
- c) Help to inculcate the fear of God – Allah, Abasi Ibom, Chukwu – in our leaders so that they may be guided by the principles of justice and fair play in their administration of this country.
- d) Help to eradicate the social evils which have plagued the Nigerian Nation – corruption, moral decadence, tribalism, materialism etc.
- e) Promote proper religious – cum moral upbringing of our children in schools and continue to sustain that moral upbringing in their lives.
- f) Be used as an effective instrument for nation building and national development.
- g) All the three religions in Nigeria should work together to foster unity, peace and progress in Nigeria. This can only be achieved if cordial relationship exists among the Christians, Muslims and Traditionalists.

The intra and inter-religious crises in Nigeria portray the low level of religious tolerance in Nigeria. There should be religious tolerance among the adherents of the three religions in Nigeria.

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