

## PHILOSOPHICAL BASIS FOR NIGERIAN RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

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*Nigeria is one of the most religious countries in the world. The major religions are Islam, Christianity, and African traditional religion. Nigeria is also notorious for ethno-religious conflicts, especially in the North eastern part of the country. Many factors have been identified as causes of the conflicts, including religious intolerance, desertification, poverty, cultural differences, foreign influences, and political differences. This paper argues that, although the conflicts were usually triggered by flimsy incidents, the protagonists' exclusivistic attitude as regards value is the root cause of the conflicts. Each of the protagonists in the conflict, the ethnic and religious groups, regards its own worldview as the only true one. Using conceptual analytical method to analyse the Nigerian situation, this paper uses process philosophical concept of truth to propose that differences in value may not necessarily lead to conflicts. In fact, it may lead to deeper religion, beauty, and depth of personality. "Deep" or "Complementary" pluralism is thus recommended for tolerance and peace in Nigeria.*

### INTRODUCTION

The incessant ethnoreligious conflicts in Nigeria, which accelerated from 1999 onwards, had always been triggered, apparently by flimsy events. An instance was the 7 September 2001 ethnoreligious conflicts in Jos. In a neighbourhood comprising Christians and Muslims, the Muslims had blocked the street for Friday Muslim prayer (*Juma'at*). Christians also blocked streets leading to churches on Sundays. On the Friday of this event, a Christian woman angered the Muslims by passing through the Muslim congregation in prayer to her house. Confronting her led to arguments, which in turn led to conflicts. At the end of the conflict, about 1000 people were dead in just six days (Human Rights Watch Report 2001).

Furthermore, the conflicts spread out of the capital, Jos, to other towns of the State in 2002 and 2003, where hundreds were killed. In Yelwa, the Shendam local government of the Plateau State, there was a major outbreak of conflict on 26 June 2002. Allegedly, it was triggered by the stabbing of a security man guarding a Mosque. The attack on the security man provoked the Muslim youths in the town, but the local government chairman

calmed the people. However, in the evening, around 9:00 PM, a masquerade, allegedly to be of the Tarok ethnic group came out, with large followers carrying weapons. They taunted the Muslims, challenging them to come out for a fight. After seeing a Mosque and some other buildings on fire, the Muslims came out. The fight that ensued continued till about 4: 00 AM the following morning, when about a hundred people had been killed (Human Rights Watch Report 2005).

There was another fight in Yelwa on 24 February 2004, which led to the 2-3 May 2004 major conflicts. The conflicts were triggered by a theft of a cattle belonging to Fulani, apparently by the Christians in Langtang South. The particular conflict that ensued from the theft left many Christians and a few Muslims dead. A typical slaughter in the attack was the killing of Christians who were lured into the building of the Church of Christ in a Nigeria (COCIN) compound, located on the road to Langtang South. The peak of the conflicts in Yelwa was that of 2-3 May 2004, when over 600 Muslims were killed. The manner of the attacks was brutal and barbaric. Women and children were also victims, while as many were abducted and raped. Apparently, it was a reprisal killing by Christians against Muslim offences of 24 February (Human Rights Watch Report 2005, 14-20, 34-35).

The Kano riot of 11-12 May 2004 was a Muslim reprisal of the Yelwa event. The attacks by the Muslims on Christians in Kano were evoked by anger for what happened to their fellow Muslims in Yelwa. Human Rights Watch Report (2005a, 58) summarised the cause of the reprisal thus: “Certainly the emotions of Kano Muslims about the Yelwa massacre were heightened after listening to the survivors who spoke in Mosques in Kano soon after their arrival there.” The Muslim community afterwards organised a protest march against the Yelwa attack. It was this that led to attacks against Christians. At the end of the attacks, over 200 were dead.

Other examples of apparently flimsy religious event causing ethnoreligious conflicts can be cited. These examples include the November 2002 “Miss World Riot” in Kaduna, when over 200 people were killed. The student leader of the Fellowship of Christian Students (FCS) was abducted and killed by Muslim students at Abubakar Tafawa Balewa University, Bauchi, for what was reported by Muslim students as insults to Islam; the February 2005 demonstration in Bauchi that turned violent in a secondary school when a Christian teacher was accused of touching the Qur’an and two schools were burnt and twenty Christians killed; the February 2005 threats to a nursing student in Sokoto for having made inappropriate remarks about Islam; and the 28 September 2009 disturbance in Kano when Muslim students of the Government College, Tudun Wada Dankadai claimed that a Christian student had drawn the cartoon of Prophet Muhammad on the school’s Mosque ( Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor 2006; and *Worldwide Religious News* 2007). The ethnoreligious conflicts had now consolidated to Boko Haram attacks in the North Eastern States of Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe. From 2009 to September 2014, the Boko Haram sect had killed about 11,100 people (Nigeria Social Violence Project 2014). The pronounced activity of the sect was the abduction of almost 276 girls from Government Secondary School, Chibok in Borno State on 15 April 2014.

It does not take much thought and research to identify the causes of these conflicts as trivial. Hence, there must be further hidden causes that trivial reasons simply triggered. Indeed, scholars from different fields have suggested other factors and reasons for the conflicts. The approach of this paper is philosophical: the root of the conflicts is the

exclusivistic attitude of the combatants as regards value, each regarding his/her own beliefs/attitudes as the only true, because the only validly revealed, ones, while others are wrong. The thesis of the paper is that a clearly thought out concept of God or truth does not support this exclusivistic attitude; rather, a thorough study supports pluralism. In the second section below, other sociological reasons are discussed, showing them as axiological exclusivism. Following this, in the third section, a philosophical discussion of the concept(s) of God and/Truth, are made, arguing that a clear grasp of the meaning of these terms elicit pluralism. This should lead to tolerance in Nigeria.

### CAUSES OF THE CONFLICTS

It has been suggested by some scholars that the seed for today's ethnoreligious conflicts was sown during the colonial period. For instance, Frank Salamone (1991, 206-07, 213), using Yauri in the modern North East Nigeria to illustrate the "larger process at work during the colonial and pre-colonial periods" writes:

The British inherited a situation that was in a state of flux. It was to their advantage to ignore that fact and to proceed as if matters in Yauri were stable and had always been so arranged. The British accepted the Fulani definition of the North as Muslim. Although that flat assertion stretched the truth generally, it did serve British interests as summed up in the phrase "indirect rule" rather well.

In other words, the British colonial masters ignored the complexity of the situation and imposed their own order on the people; one group was imposed on the others. Similarly, Kwasi Kwarteng (2012) asserts that "The almost random method by which Nigerian borders were fixed underlay many of its subsequent problems. As far as the British were concerned, Nigeria was, like Julius Caesar's Gaul, divisible into three parts." Moses Ochonu also (2014) opines that:

Colonialism did not cause the primordial conditions and identities that have generated tensions and conflicts between Christians and Muslims, but it made them worse. The British colonial policy of indirect rule, a divide-and-rule system that required sharp ethno-religious differentiation among Nigerians, made religion and ethnicity the permanent markers of identity and pushed exclusionary identity politics into the political arena. As a result, in Northern Nigeria, minority ethnic groups, mostly Christians, define and still define themselves, against the Muslim Hausa-Fulani majority, under the political rubric of Middle Belt, which is usually stand-in for "non-Muslim."

In sum, it was the seed of amalgamation of heterogeneous ethnic groups and religions that has grown and borne the current fruits of conflict.

Other factors have been suggested as contributory to the current incessant conflicts. Some of these others include the climactic, the economic, the political and, of course, the religious factors. The climactic factor is the observation that the encroaching desert from

the north is pushing the Fulani herders down south. This in turn generates conflict with the farmers particularly over grazing land. But this also indicates the economic factor, which includes the increase in the poverty rate. It has been noted that the regions that are most prone to conflicts are the poorest—the Northern States generally, but especially the North East States of Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa, the seats of current Boko Haram conflicts. The political factor is the utilization of religions for political end, which in turn intensifies division and conflicts. The reason why religion has been an effective means of mobilization was well stated by Peter Clarke (1991, 219) when he writes:

... whether we are thinking of muslims (sic) or christians (sic) in Nigeria, there are grounds for supposing that religion constitutes an even more decisive and determinative ingredient of political behaviour across the Federation.

Some religious leaders even explicitly and unreservedly affirm this. Clarke (1991, 221) illustrated this with Ibrahim Zakzaky's statement in the 1970s to the effect that

... there are only two ways of being political in the Nigerian context: one was the "Christian" way which espoused the idea of a secular society and the other was the muslim (sic) way which looks to Islam to provide the blue-print of the social order.

Religion has, of course, been an intensifying factor in many of the conflicts in Nigeria. The observation made in the Human Rights Watch Report (2005, 14) about the 2-3 and 11-12 May 2004 conflicts in Jos and Kano, respectively, is applicable to many of the conflicts:

When the fighting began, groups and individuals were targeted on the basis of religion rather than ethnicity. Mosques and Churches were deliberately attacked. Religion was used as a rallying cry to drag other groups into the conflicts, and both sides used explicitly religious language to defend their own position or tarnish their opponents.

However, it should be observed that, technical religious doctrines, such as the concepts of God or Allah in Christianity and Islam, respectively, rarely explicitly trigger conflicts although its undercurrent is always there to be seen. Always accompanying the trivial triggers were conflicting views about morality, law, treatment or authority of Scriptures, authority of religious functionaries, economic system, and, of course, politics.

Since all the aforementioned factors are values, the conflicts can be regarded as due to differences over values. If the conflicts are thus regarded in this manner, then the involvement of religions in the conflicts will not be surprising. As Alfred North Whitehead (2011, 33) writes, the "...peculiar character of religious truth is that it explicitly deals with value." David Ray Griffin (2001, 85) interprets Whitehead's statement to mean that "Religious truths in broad sense is inclusive of all truths derivative from ethical and aesthetic experience."

We conclude this section by stating that the primary and specific cause of the ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria is the exclusivistic attitude as regards value. The idea of value is inclusive of factors suggested by other scholars, such as desertification, politics, and economy. But those values have their roots in religion. Religious truths are inclusive, that is, they include nonsensory truths, religious values, and other forms of values, such as those categorised as morality and aesthetic.

However, should differences in religious values or truths lead to conflicts? The answer being suggested here is “No!” Differences in religious values may not and should not lead to conflict. Rather, like aesthetic values, the more the diversity of values, the more the beauty, richness, and depth of those values become.

### PHILOSOPHICAL ROOT OF NIGERIAN AXIOLOGICAL AND RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

The recurring practice of using religion as a rallying cry by those involved in ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria indicate their awareness of its effectiveness. The involvement of religion, we have seen, intensifies the emotion and passions of the contenders.

Nigerians like religious emotion and passion. Indeed, many religious activities, in the forms of sermons, worship songs, and prayers are contrived to arouse emotion and passion. Religious leaders who can do this effectively are the most accepted and respected.

However, on reflection, it could be seen that emotion and passion are not evidence of the truthfulness of any religion. Emotion and passion are evidences of some vivid experiences, but a correct interpretation of the experiences must go beyond the emotion. It needs conceptual thought, experience, and intellectual justification. As Whitehead (211, lect. 3) puts it,

Religion requires a metaphysical backing; for its authority is endangered by the intensity of emotions which it generates. Such emotions are evidence of some vivid experience, but they are very poor guarantee of its correct interpretation. Thus, dispassionate criticism of religious belief is beyond all things necessary.

By “metaphysical backing,” Whitehead (1967, 187) means “...unflinching determination to take the whole evidence into account.” His meaning is almost the opposite of that meant by Immanuel Kant and his followers (see Griffin 2001, 51, note 32) when metaphysics is described as “attempts to talk about things beyond the limits of possible experience.” Rather, Whitehead (1967, 72, note 1) defines metaphysics as “the science which seeks to discover the general ideas which are indispensably relevant to the analysis of everything that happens.” In this sense, the task of metaphysics as paraphrased by Griffin is (2001, 51) “...to discover a scheme of generic notion in terms of which *all* our experiences, including our religious and scientific experiences, can be equally well interpreted.” This enterprise is also called “speculative philosophy,” which Whitehead (1978, 3) defines as “the endeavour to frame a coherent, logical, necessary system of general ideas in terms of which every element of our experience can be interpreted.”

Hence, the vivid experience, which the emotion in Nigerian religions is witnessing to, needs to be integrated with other experiences. This is how it can be correctly interpreted, especially so when the religions themselves claim ultimacy. Therefore, to demonstrate the thesis that the presence of different values and religions in a society does not necessarily lead to conflicts, rather it can lead to beauty and depth, this paper will utilize process philosophy's concept of Truth.

The word "Truth," or its adjectival form "true," is usually used in relation to an agent or a proposition /statement. When used in relation to an agent, a person or a dog, for instance, that it is true to himself/herself or itself, we mean, he/she/it is loyal to somebody else or a master. Our concern here, however, is to the latter form of usage, the reference to a proposition/statement as true. Indeed, the first usage—that in relation to an agent—is reducible to the second. It is in a proposition/sentence\* that we express the loyalty of the agent.

Another conceptual clarification is that in expounding the concept of truth, process philosophy distinguishes *propositions* from *statements*. By *proposition* is meant the *meaning* of a statement, declarative sentences, beliefs, or assertions expressed by the speaker/writer and invoked in the hearer/reader. Paraphrasing Whitehead, David Ray Griffin (2001, 327) defines a proposition as

...the possibility of a definite set of eternal objects being realised in a particular way in a particular nexus of actual entities.... A proposition is, therefore, a theory about particular actual entities, which may, or may not be true.

Bearing these distinctions in mind, it needs to be noted that process philosophy accepts the common sense view of truth as correspondence, and still does not jettison valid objections of coherent and pragmatic theories of truth. Process philosophy's own theory can be diagrammatically represented thus:

**E(vent)** state of affairs/reality/objective/actuality/complex/  
transcendent (i.e., outside us)/exist whether we experience it or not;

**P(roposition)** meaning/abstract/mental image of the event/  
possibility/ true or false/never capture "E" fully;

**S(tatement)** sentences/beliefs/assertions/spoken or  
written/evoked in the hearers or readers/can be ambiguous.

What is meant by this diagram is: "E" represents the objective event as different from words used to express or capture it. It is the reality; it refers to the state of affairs; it is the actuality—objective and exists whether it is perceived or not. It is, in the language of William Alston (1996, 189), a "transcendent" state of affairs. In time and experience, it is encountered first.

Letter "P" in the diagram stands for "proposition." The proposition is the *meaning* that the speaker/writer expresses in his/her statement, and that is evoked in the hearer/

reader. It is abstract or the mental image of “E.” However, although it is the mental image of “E,” it is not the same as “E” and cannot completely capture “E”; again, it is only an “image,” a reflection or representation. Hence, it can be true or false. Indeed, when we are referring to a statement as true or false, what is usually meant is not the verbal expression but the proposition. Because it can be true or false, it is a mere possibility, as contrasted with “E,” which is actuality or the objective event. Calling it an image, a mental picture is also meant to indicate that a proposition is not the “E”(vent) itself. Hence, referring to the notion of truth as correspondence with fact does not mean the proposition is the reality. The relationship of proposition to reality is not that of identity; it is that of representation. It should also be emphasized, because reality is indefinitely complex, it cannot be completely “captured” by our proposition. Propositions expressed are always perspectival, partial, or incomplete, because of several factors necessitating it, such as our perception which “... are inevitably influenced by our conceptions,” our conceptions which are necessarily time and space bound, and our language which are not only multifarious, but also ambiguous and indefinite; hence, the need for complementarity and dialogue (Griffin 2001, 331).

Letter “S” in our diagram refers to verbal statements, which can also be beliefs or assertions. It can be spoken or written. But as stated above, it is ambiguous. For instance, the same proposition can be expressed in different languages, and a statement in a language can mean different things to different people, in different contexts.

By truth, therefore, in the process perspective is meant “... the same state of affairs is in the proposition and in reality. This state of affairs exists in the proposition *as a mere possibility*, whereas in reality it exists as actualized” (Griffin 2001, 93).

As applicable to the Nigerian situation, what this means is that, the different religious values which underlay the conflicts could rather be considered as different perspectives of the Truth, the Reality, which no human conception, language and even perception could completely reflectively capture. Equating a particular perspective—morality, law, scripture, theology, etc.—with complete or full truth is idolatrous; that is, in the word of Paul Tillich (I: 1988, 13), “Something essentially conditioned is taken as unconditional, something essentially partial is boosted into universality, and something essentially finite is given infinite significance.” The partial truth as proposition may truly represent the Truth, our “Ultimate Concern,” and in that way are “holy objects”; but they are not the genuine “Ultimate Concern.” As Tillich (I: 1988, 216; see 1957, 12-16) says:

Holiness cannot become actual except through holy “objects.” But holy objects are not holy in and of themselves. They are holy only by negating themselves in pointing to the divine of which they are the mediums. If they establish themselves as the holy, they become demonic.... The representations of man’s ultimate concern—holy objects—tend to become his ultimate concern. They are transformed into idols. Holiness provokes idolatry.

If, elevating a preliminary concern, a partial truth to the ultimate concern, is idolatrous, then, the reason Nigeria experiences ethnoreligious conflicts becomes obvious. That is, the demonic is by nature destructive. Tillich (1957, 16 and 115) is right: a religious concern that elevates itself to the ultimate is idolatrous. It is by “necessity fanatical” and is “ultimately destructive.”

The destructiveness of an idolatrous faith does not refer just to the type of ethnoreligious conflicts that Nigeria is witnessing. It also, and primarily, refers to the psychological destruction of the religious subject. It is an internal experience before it expresses itself externally. The external destructions, such as the ethnoreligious conflicts, are outcome of the internal destruction, that idolatrous faith has wrought in the life of individuals. Indeed, idolatrous faith begins by being integrative and therapeutic. Tillich (1957, 109) remarks:

Idolatrous faith has a definite dynamic: it can be extremely passionate and exercise a *preliminary* integrating power. But the basis of the integration is too narrow. Idolatrous faith breaks down sooner or later and the disease is worse than before.... The mind is split, even if each of these elements represents a high value. The fulfilment of the unconscious does not last; they are repressed and explode chaotically. [Emphasis mine.]

The particular element that idolatrous or demonic faith destroys in human personality is explicitly stated in Tillich's (I: 1988, 114) *magnus opus*, and he compares this with true faith: "...demonic possession destroys the rational structure of the mind; divine ecstasy preserves and elevates it, although transcending it. Demonic possession destroys the ethical and logical principles of reason; divine ecstasy affirms them." Charles Hartshorne (1989, 4f.), a major process philosopher, agrees with Tillich on the integrating power of true faith or worship:

Worship is the integrating of all one's thoughts and purposes, all valuations and meanings, all perceptions and conceptions... Worship is a consciously unitary response to life. It lifts to the level of explicit awareness, the integrity of an individual responding to reality. Or, worship is individual wholeness flooded with consciousness. This is the ideal towards which actual worship may tend.

The resulting sound individual is correlated with God, the wholeness of the world: "God is the wholeness of the world correlative to the wholeness of every sound individual dealing with the world" (Hartshorne 1989, 6).

Thus, it can be seen that the more perspectives there are, with each reflecting the truth from its own context, the richer the picture, the closer we are to reality. Therefore, the apparent contradictory religious values of Muslims, Christians, and even the religious traditionalists in Nigeria may be expressions of contrast that can point to the same Ultimate Concern, which can lead to depth, richness, and beauty. Hence, these differences should be treated and accepted with the greatest tolerance of each other's faiths.

Whitehead (1978, 3) advises us to go further than just integrating our religious perspectives. Even, and more importantly, the sciences should also be integrated. The integration of religious truths with scientific truths to "frame a coherent, logical, and necessary system of general ideas in terms of which every element of our experience can be interpreted" is the function of philosophy. In the attempt to do this, there will be a



clash of doctrines, not only among the religions, but with science, especially. In such a situation,

We should wait; but we should not wait passively, or in despair. The clash is a sign that there are wider truths and finer perspectives within which a reconciliation of a deeper religion and a more subtle science will be found. . . . A clash of doctrines is not a disaster—it is an opportunity. (Whitehead 1967, 264 and 266)

## CONCLUSION

The thesis of this essay is that plurality of values, religions, and even truths may not necessarily be contradictions; the apparent contradictions may be complementary, thus a contrast. The plurality leads to a form of pluralism called “Deep pluralism” or “Complementary pluralism,” a form embedded in process philosophical thought. Adopting this philosophy by Nigeria and Nigerians will lead to deeper religion and religiously sane individuals.

Perhaps, it should be added as a conclusion that this philosophical attitude is not so foreign as it sounds. It is very African. This could be illustrated with a Yoruba method of reconciling conflicts and contradictions. It is pictorially expressed in the proverb, “*Ogbon logbon ni kii je ki a pe agba ni were,*” meaning, “an elder is regarded as ‘not foolish’ (wise) because, he/she integrates the wisdom of others with his or hers.” The imagery behind this is that of a conflict or fight in a family compound. Such a compound belongs to an extended family, thus consisting of many nuclear families. Each nuclear family—consisting of the husband, wife or wives and the children—is headed by the husband. The extended family compound also consists of uncles, aunts, nieces, etc. The communal nature of Yoruba society does not allow them to have terms like uncles, aunts, nieces, cousins, etc. Everybody in the extended family is either a father, mother, brother, sister, or wife. The extended family is headed by an elder, the *Baale*.

Should there be conflict in such a compound, the elder would call the protagonists together, with other elders—men and women in the compound. The youngest of the protagonists will state his/her case first; he or she will be followed by the other protagonists. Then, the presiding elder will ask other elders seated, to express their opinion of the situation at hand, starting again from the youngest. It is the elder himself that will conclude and express the final judgement. His job is not only to summarise what has been said by others, but also to integrate their wisdom into a seamless whole. This will be done by stating the agreements and disagreements among the partisans, pinpointing where each of the protagonists is wrong and where he/she is right, and conclude with advice, gleaned from other elders’ contributions, suggesting how each should always behave. He may also ask one or both of the protagonists to apologise to each other on specific issues. Hence, “*Ogbon logbon ni kii je ki a pe agba ni were.*”

It is thus, that the wise, the philosophers, should integrate the apparently contradictory plurality of values to “Deep” or “Complementary” pluralism. Such pluralism will result in deeper religion, in a diverse society, a rich and prosperous country.

## NOTE

\*Rolando M. Gripaldo (2011, 67-75) has rejected the logical term “proposition” as meaningless. Apparently, it refers to a sentence (its general logical form is the “constative”), which when used in a given context will refer to a specific logical utterance, such as a statement, assertion, description, or the like. A “constative,” being abstract, can represent a mental image of a particular event. A “theory,” for Gripaldo, is a set of sentences which collectively can express a particular point or argument that can be validated or falsified.

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