RELIGION, MORALITY, AND THE REALITIES OF THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE

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INTRODUCTION

Nigerians are highly religious. This may be the least controversial claim anyone could make about the nature and practice of religion in Nigeria. But the truth of the claim is reflected in the fact that Nigerians usually attribute the religious *motif* to almost everything that they do. Whether in the mundane issues of their existence, or in the very serious matters of their being, religion usually plays a very significant role in the way Nigerians lead their lives. Everywhere in the country, religious temples and houses of worship dot the nation's landscape. This hankering for the paranormal or the spiritual is reflected not only in the way the people respond to the daily issues of their existence but also in the way they perceive reality or the world around them. On a much more general note, however, scholars argue that religions usually have a controlling power over religious adherents or worshippers. This force of religion over people is reflected on occasions when believers are ready to give up their lives and possessions for the sake of their religious beliefs or convictions. According to Joseph Omoregbe, all through history, believers have been willing to give up their lives in defense of their religious convictions or as a mark of honour for what is perceived as the object of their religious allegiance or worship.[1]

Long ago, John Mbiti made the now famous statement that: "Africans are notoriously religious."[2] Perhaps not only Africans but humanity as a whole is taken in by this overt interest in religion. With particular reference to Nigeria, it is sometimes amazing, if not bewildering, when one notices the fervor with which the country's over 130 million strong population hankers after the supernatural or *that which lies beyond them*. The worry, however, is that there appears to be no correlation between the people's religious avowals and their moral life. The reason is that the more religious Nigerians are, the more immoral they seem to become.

THE MEANING OF RELIGION

From the introductory remarks above, it is clear that religion is pervasive and invasive in nature; its hold over adherents is strong and powerful. Historically, religion has contributed in helping create conditions for social order and human wellbeing in society. Perhaps, this explains why Tunde Famoriti defines religion as "a systematic indoctrination of people aimed at moderating their mode of behaviour towards

responsible interaction and societal growth."[3] What is illustrated by the above definition is that religion is not merely concerned with the supernatural; rather, it is also concerned with how people can organize their lives to realize the conditions of peace and harmony in the human society. Clearly, not only is religion an important aspect of human social life, but it also has a close link with morality. If religion has a close link with morality, what is the nature of that relationship? This is a question that philosophers and other scholars have grappled with over time. While some scholars argue that the province of morality is different from that of religion, others argue that this idea of a difference between religion and morality is very often exaggerated. Scholars who posit the former claim see morality as an "autonomous discipline" that should not be shackled with religious considerations. For scholars who posit the latter claim, the value of religion lies in its helping adherents to live morally worthy lives in society. This is the point Joseph Omoregbe makes when he avers that religion must *fulfill* a moral condition before it can be accepted as meaningful.[4]

The issues adumbrated above shall form the basis of the discussions in this paper. However, the paper's particular emphasis will be placed on finding out whether the practice of religion has made Nigerians better human beings or, otherwise, has helped dismember the social fabric that held the people together. In pursuing these goals highlighted above, the paper takes a critical look at religious resurgence among Nigerians to find out whether such awakening is complemented by a life of virtue among believers. The conclusion I reach in the paper can be summed up as follows: the growth of religions in the country would only make meaning if they (the religions) could help evolve in Nigeria a human community in which individuals act towards one another in a spirit of love and brotherhood. Outside of such a community, the interest that Nigerians have in religion would have been misplaced.

A FRIGHTENING REALITY

In my introductory remarks above, I did suggest that the more religious Nigerians are, the more immoral they seem to become. The reason is that rather than help moderate the social life of Nigerians, religion remains a source of division, strife and internecine conflict. The picture is both frightening and scary. Nigeria is a country caught up in a moral quagmire where people find it difficult to free themselves. The high level of corruption and the abandonment of traditional values are characteristic of life in the nation. Reflecting on this oddity, Joseph Kenny argues that, in one breath, Nigeria is regarded as "the most religious countries in the world, in terms of belief and practice," and in another vein, as "one of the most corrupt countries in the world."[5] The issue here concerns how a people can be so deeply religious and yet be bogged down by a life of vileness and indecent behavior at the same time. In discussing this issue, I attempt an analysis of this seeming dilemma to clarify its nature and significance. Meanwhile, I want to align myself with the opinion expressed in some quarters that religion need not be a source of dissolution or social breakdown but a veritable tool for social progress and development if properly managed.

Harping on this position, Segun Matanmi avers that religion can provide instrumentation for the social acculturation of positive attitudes, values, morals and

behavioral action tendencies that could positively leverage the Nigerian society and the moral tone of the populace.[6] All that is required to realize this ideal is for religious groups in Nigeria (including the leadership and membership) to influence character formation of the people in line with sound socio-cultural ideals of morality and probity.

THE GROWTH OF RELIGIONS IN NIGERIA

To return to a point I made in a slightly different way earlier in the paper, religion is without doubt the fastest growing industry in Nigeria. Apart from the traditional religious groups that have had a longer existence, splinter groups emerge or multiply by the day. Unlike in Europe or America where most live a purely secular life, the case is quite different in Nigeria; in the country, almost every individual is a believer in one form of religious faith or the other. Those not professing faith in Christianity or Islam subscribe to other forms of religious beliefs such as the traditional religions of the pristine African world; or the mystico-religious movements that have their origins in Oriental culture, such as the Ba'hai, Rosicrucian or Eckankar movements, etc. But far from being a purely Nigerian pastime, Africans are generally passionate about religion. John Mbiti agrees this much; as he argues in his world popular book, *African Religions and Philosophy*, "Africans are notoriously religious."[7] Elaborating further on the matter Mbiti states that religion permeates every facet of the life of Africans such that it is almost impossible to isolate it from whatever they do as a people. Whether this opinion is true or not is beside the point; what the argument simply underscores is that religion is pervasive and invasive in its impact and significance. It is for this reason that H. Delubac had to abandon the time-honoured depiction of humans as "homo sapiens," describing them instead as "homo religious."[8] The point, then, is that religion is a potent weapon, which if well-used could serve as catalyst for social transformation but in the hands of dilettantes could be employed for social anarchy and disintegration.

The point is worth repeating: the growth of religions in Nigeria is not matched by a life of rectitude among practitioners. It is befuddling that in a country that boasts of over 90% of its population professing faith in one form of religion or the other (less than 1% of Nigerians would claim to be atheists or agnostics), the level of moral degeneracy is bewildering to say the least. The evident truth is that the Nigerian nation is one of the most morally bankrupt in the whole wide world today. Not only has religion not been able to influence the behaviors of the populace, but it also appears that the more religious Nigerians are the more corrupt and insensitive they become. The craving for spiritual perfection is hardly matched by a life of decency and uprightness among believers. Hardly can anyone deny the pervasiveness of corruption, nepotism and wickedness in the Nigerian nation. Moral turpitude and vileness have become so insidious in the country that they have become part of the "normal" life among citizens. Kola Owolabi captures the matter when he argues that "moral bankruptcy has pervaded every section of the [Nigerian] society to the extent that one may be forced to reach the conclusion that immorality is a cultural trait of the people."[9]

Owolabi's assessment may appear a little bit and harsh, but one can hardly accuse him of being uncharitable in his claims. Indeed, one who takes a critical look at the issue under consideration will find it difficult to reconcile the eagerness with which Nigerians

embrace religion and the level of moral depravity that one notices among them. Therefore, were we to score the various religions in the country on the level of their impact on the behaviour and moral lives of their members and the society at large, they will score an overall low in the moral score sheet.

Here, two questions are of immediate interest to assess the role and impact of religion on the social life of Nigerians. The first: "What are the *core objectives* of religion?" The second, "Have Nigerians been able to fulfill those "core objectives" that define the raison d'être of religions- whatever those objectives may be? The answer to the first question is simple, straightforward and matter-of-factly. The answer to the second question will emerge in the course of the discussions that follow hereunder. To the first question posed above, Olusegun Oladipo identifies what he considers two "core objectives" of religion; these are "self-realization" and "social harmony."[10] As regards the first of these two *core objectives*, "self-realization" is not to be understood as referring merely to a state of economic, social or cultural well-being (as important as these are); rather, it refers to a condition of existence or a state of being, which is guided by a longing or a desire for the discovery of what S. Radhakrshman calls *the ideal possibilities of human life*, that is, "a quest for emancipation from the immediate compulsions of vain and petty mood."[11] On its part, "social harmony" refers to that element in the make-up of the individual that enables him or her act towards other individuals in a spirit of care, brotherhood and love.

It can be argued,then, that although morality is not the only objective or goal of religion, it is nevertheless a *necessary condition* without which the values of religion would hardly be realized. For this reason, some scholars argue that morality should be the standard or yardstick for determining whether a particular religion is to be adjudged as true or false. This is the type of argument Joseph Omoregbe makes when he opines as follows:

> Morality is the yardstick with which true religion is distinguished from false religion … If anybody claims that God commanded him to perform an action that is immoral, he reveals himself to be under an illusion, for God can never command or demand anything that is immoral.[12]

But what does it mean to say that morality is the *judge* of religion? It simply means that morality is a *necessary* condition for true worship. L. P. Pojman captures the point succinctly when he argues that morality is "a desideratum without which society cannot function."[13] "[T]he people who truly have faith in God are those who live with moral integrity within their lights."[14] To live with moral integrity *within* one's "lights" would mean joining in the important task of helping to create the conditions for a decent life for oneself and for other members of society. It would mean, says Olusegun Oladipo, to be engaged in the crucial task of helping human beings enhance the "capacity for self-action and social transformation."[15] This point needs emphasizing because all over the world, religion has remained a major cause of violence, destructive conflicts as well as social anarchy. What is suggested here, then, is that a religion that encourages intolerance and discord among fellow humans is to be accounted as a false religion- and those

believers who adhere to the doctrines of a false religion are misguided. This point begins to jell especially when we consider that believers usually ascribe to the Deity such attributes or qualities as kindness, mercifulness and Omni-benevolence, etc. Without doubt, a Deity who possesses such lofty attributes would repine if *his* followers act in ways that put the lives of their fellow human beings in jeopardy.

So far, I have argued that one of the core objectives of religion- apart from its *salvific* role (to adopt a phrase employed by Eddie Babor) - is that of helping create the conditions for the realization of the good life for members of society.[16] By way of analysis, the adjective "salvific" or "salvifical" as used here is a derivative of the noun *salvation*, which simply means *having the purpose or intention of saving*. However, in the quest for salvation people are not merely concerned with being rescued from the penalty of sin as with being hurdled from the thralldom of disease, injustice and social inequity. Here, it is important to mention that *salvation* is a heterogeneous expression that can give in to a wide variety of interpretations. Babor explains that in Buddhist thought salvation means to be idea *free* from ignorance. In its Latin usage, salvation derives from the word *salus*, meaning health. In this context, therefore, salvation is to be understood as "something that has to do with the healing or wholeness of the total human person."[17] The connection here is that religion aims at *saving* us- but not just from sin and iniquity. It should as well help make us better and more responsible individuals, conscientious, and more loving towards our fellow human beings. In helping us acquire such nobility of character, religion would have succeeded in fulfilling its core objective of saving us from evil. Having made this point, I will situate religion within its appropriate social context. I am convinced that this failure to situate religion within its proper social context accounts for all the schisms that are so common among religious people.

THE SOCIAL NATURE OF RELIGION

One simple way to characterize religion is to see it as a *search* for the meaning and purpose of life. This is perhaps what Olusegun Oladipo had in mind when describes religion as a *belief* as well as an *attitude*.[18] According to this opinion, religion is the belief that God or the gods created (or made) the world and everything in it and that it is on Him (or them) that human beings are dependent for their being and substance. As an attitude, religion is *devotional*, and is used to express our sense of dependence on God or whatever is regarded as the ultimate reality in terms of which human existence can be explained.[19] Similarly, as an *attitude* religion expresses a relationship, namely, the relationship between persons and God or the gods. But apart from these two dimensions, religion also possesses a "this-worldly" as well as an "other-worldly" nature. In its "this-worldly" context, religion is concerned with social processes, character formation, attitudinal transformation and value development in believers. In its "other-worldly" content, religion is concerned with the spiritual perfection of believers or their quest for eventual access into the celestial realm, or what Wole Soyinka refers to as the *chthonian world* of preternatural forces or spirits.[20]

Clarifying the above statement, W.P. Alston explains that one of the characteristic features of religion is *belief* in supernatural beings, otherwise known as *spirits* or *gods*. But beyond the belief in spiritual realities, religion, says Alston, is also "a world-view

containing plan and purpose and the place of the individual in it."[21] The point which Alston makes here is quite important. The reason is that believers often fall into conceiving religion as a purely transcendental affair to the neglect of its social dimension and content. It is this failure to properly situate religion within its appropriate social context that explains the reason for the mutually destructive tendencies found among believers. With particular reference to Nigeria, this failure accounts for the wild fanaticism that threatens to tear the nation apart. But when religion is conceived in this narrow way, believers tend to accept the existing order as a *fait accompli-* without as much questioning its relevance or the justice of it.

When believers accept without question the existing order, they unwittingly make themselves "unconscious collaborators in their own oppression."[22] When this happens, a believer easily acquiesces to social injustice; accepting the unjust social order, he or she pays no attention to any kind of commitment to the struggle for freedom, equality, justice and fair play - as values worth-pursuing for their own sakes. Consciously or unconsciously, the ingratiating believer enters into what Oladipo describes as a "covenant of silence" with the established order.[23] Usually the quest for spiritual excellence at the expense of the ideals of freedom and equality easily translates to indifference to human suffering and social injustice. It is for the reason that religion has often been used to justify corrupt social systems that made Karl Marx describe it as the "opium of the people." But religion need not be the "opiate" of the masses except when it is used to prop up iniquitous social systems and unless believers remain silent in the face of evil and injustice. Long ago, Edmund Burke made the world popular statement that all that it takes for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing in the face of evil. To do *nothing* when we could have done *something* is to make ourselves part of the very evil we condemn!

In the paper I have argued inter alia that in Nigeria the practice of religion has had no salutary effect either on the people or on the nation itself. Theoretically, Nigeria's public policy allows for freedom of religion and worship- a situation which has led to an explosion of religious movements and organizations. But rather than engender harmony among the people, this flare-up in religious movements has been frenzied, chaotic and socially disruptive. The antinomy of the religious life in Nigeria can be captured as follows: here is a nation so given to such religious fizz yet with a system of public morality that is abysmally low! It is this dearth of morality in the public life of the nation that has led to the country being tagged as one of the most corrupt countries in the world. This absence of public morality in the country is also the reason for the many social ills besetting it at the moment. Having made this point, in the next segment of the discussion below, I undertake a brief scrutiny of the nature of the relationship that exists between religion and morality.

A COMMENT ON THE INTERFACE BETWEEN RELIGION AND MORALITY

In its general usage, morality is basically concerned with society, with relations among humans, and with how individuals treat one another in their day to day interactions. As an ethical philosophy concept, however, the term "morality" specifically is concerned with the nature of good and bad, right and wrong, duty and obligation,

justice and injustice, and, of course, moral responsibility. Expressed differently, morality refers to a set of rules or codes of conduct that governs a people's way of life. Morality is concerned as well with general rules governing relations between humans and rules of the society they ought to adopt. For this reason, Thomas Hobbes argues that "the province of morality is limited to those qualities of mankind that concern their living in peace and unity."[24]

To make a précis of the discussion above, morality entails human principles of right and wrong. Morality, according to one opinion, deals with "how humans treat themselves in order to promote mutual welfare, growth, creativity and meaning in a striving for what is good over what is bad, and what is right over what is wrong."[25] In conceiving morality this way, we see that the goals of religion and morality coalesce at certain levels of interaction. For example, both aim at enhancing the *good* of the whole of society; not just the private interests of a few members or individuals in society. With particular emphasis on religion, apart from its celestial concerns, its other aim is to promote order and harmony in the society. This it does by inculcating in believers the value of civility as well as the desirable quality of human amity or camaraderie.

THE PROBLEM OF INTER-RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS IN NIGERIA

Religion, if properly engaged, could serve a potent weapon for character transformation, value re-orientation, and the promotion of the virtues of public morality in the human community. On the issue of "public morality" (which is akin to what Aristotle refers to as the institutions set up to enhance the achievement of "the good life" for individuals), Kola Owolabi says it is "the norms meant to moderate the conduct of people so that their private interests will be maximally realized."[26] Although there is some merit in the way Owolabi conceives of public morality, his conception is, however, limited because morality is not merely concerned to help individuals achieve their *private* interests as with promoting the public good of all the members of society. If this opinion is anything to go by, if follows that there is a sense in which the idea of "public interest" and that of "public good" concatenate or commix. And by extension, it follows as well that the success or failure of any government is to be adjudged on the extent to which it is able to promote the "public good" of the whole of society and not just of a few members.

Furthermore, to demand that religions fulfill the requirements of morality is to ask that they be at the vanguard of those institutions that help create an environment conducive to the achievement of the legitimate desires of all members of society. But in the case of Nigeria, religions have failed to live up to this ideal of promoting order in the social setting. Rather than doing this, they (that is, religions in Nigeria) have often been manipulative instruments in the hands of self-serving miscreants who are out to serve their own self-interest. All the fanaticism and killings, a regular feature in many parts of the country, are usually the handiwork of demagogues who hide behind the scene of religion to perpetrate their evil intentions.

It is for reasons such as the above that Oladipo declares that "there has been no correlation between the growth of religions in Nigeria and the extent to which Nigerians have been able to realize their human potentials."[27] In all honesty, it appears that the more religious Nigerians are, the more debauched and vile they become! The moral

condition of the country is not only disgusting and reeking; it is also sickening and appalling. Every shape of evil imaginable to the mind is to be found in Nigeria- be it greed, rapaciousness or injustice. Indeed, it is lamentable that in a country so blessed with both natural and human resources, corruption and vileness have served to hinder the people from achieving socially worthy goals in life. What gets heard everyday in the country are the sobs of a people battered by decades of military misrule, the moans of the aggrieved and deprived, the whimper of the homeless, and the curses of young men and women dehumanized by a lifetime of unemployment, social injustice, disease and poverty.

Everywhere in Nigeria, immorality and recklessness exemplify the people's way of life. Corroborating this opinion, Kola Owolabi remarks as follows: "moral bankruptcy has pervaded every section of the [Nigerian] society to the extent that one may be forced to reach the conclusion that immortality is a cultural trait of the people."[28] Moral depravity, social injustice and wantonness are a common feature of life in Nigeria. Reflecting on this state of affairs, one Nigerian clergy, Anthony Akinwale admonishes us not to "get used" to Nigeria. In Akinwale's words:

> The greatest harm we can do to ourselves right now is to get used to Nigeria as chaotic as she is. For to get used to Nigeria as she is, is to get used to the potholes and craters in her history and on her once beautiful roads; … it is to get used to the paradox of the 'poorest oil-rich nation on earth'. It is to get used to a country where it takes either the most fraudulent rigger or the sharpest shooter to be president. In short, to get used to this country as it is right now is to get used to evil.[29]

The words in the admonition above are poignant and trenchant but they are truly reflective of the moral situation of Nigerians. Without gainsaying the truth, Nigeria is one big example of a nation where wrongdoing and crass stupidity reign supreme. Other evils that juggle for a place in the country's public life include political oppression, ethnic irredentism, unfair government policies as well as religious intolerance and fanaticism. Nigeria is an example of a country where ignorant religious numskulls would kill or maim fellow citizens without blinking an eye, and without the government caring a hoot. And usually, such killings are done in the name of God! As I punch these lines on my computer, another religious carnage is going on Jos, in the northern part of Nigeria. Just a few months earlier, a similar carnage and act of brigandage took place in Bauchi State- still in the restive north of Nigeria. In these riots, thousands of innocent citizens have been killed or rendered homeless in their own country by ignorant and deluded religious hoodlums who have been indoctrinated into believing that *Paradise* holds some special reward for those who are quick at shedding the blood of their fellow humans. These religious tumults that have become a regular feature in the northern part of Nigeria are neither a bolt from the blue nor a once-for-all event that occurs on the spur of the moment. On the contrary, such religious upheavals by restive zealots have become the defining feature of that region of the country.

In the past three decades or so, Nigeria has witnessed all forms of religious uproars that have taken their toll on human life and property. A few examples of such

upheavals include the Maitasine riots of the 1980s, the Kafanchan religious carnage of 1987, as well as the religious riots and massacres in Bauchi, Katsina, Kaduna and Kano States- all in the Northern part of Nigeria. The cases highlighted here are just a few of the many instances of religious extremism that have arisen from intolerance and bigotry among believers. These mutinous actions and constant interregnums in the nation's progressive order are a constant reminder of the great danger that could result through unrestrained religious zeal and fervor. Many well-meaning and peace loving Moslems in Nigeria have been embarrassed by these internecine conflicts that have portrayed some aspects of their religion in bad lights. A number of others have spoken out against such violent acts saying that they often result from a misreading of the injunctions of the Holy Koran, which neither supports violent behaviours nor sadism among the faithful. In personal interactions with some Moslem scholars and clerics I have been assured that Islam is a religion of peace, that it eschews aggression, violence and bigotry, and that Islam requires that Moslems live at peace with non-Moslems as well as people of other faiths.

But until that happens we will be justified to maintain skeptical outlook to the assurances given. In reality, religious hostilities belie the claim that religions promote peace or that they are relevant to a nation's social life. And as Fr. Kenny, the American Catholic scholar reminds us, the chief argument for the counter-relevance of religion in public morals in Nigeria is the constant recurrence of inter-religious battles, especially in the northern part of the country.[30] Kenny should be in the know not only because he has lived all his life in Nigeria and has been witness to these riots; he is also without doubt, one of the greatest Islamic scholars that the country boasts of. Elaborating on the issue of religious affrays in Nigeria, Kenny states that when they ensue, both religious and moral principles are usually thrown to the wind as believers unleash havoc against one another. What is worrisome, however, is that these fights are usually for the most bizarre or unjustified reasons. Imagine, for instance, when one religious group (in Nigeria) attacks another because a Danish cartoonist made a caricature painting of a religious founder; or because Americans launched an attack against Afghanistan; or again, because a Dutch politician made denigrating remarks about a particular religion! At other times, religious wars have been fought "by those who never suffered an attack and upon those who never launched an attack, such as when Kaduna Muslims attacked Kaduna Christians over an editorial in a Lagos magazine about [the hosting of] Miss World" pageant in Nigeria.[31] No matter how we view the matter, I doubt if we can ever justify violence and the killing of the innocent by any moral or religious standard - even when those who perpetrate these evil acts claim to be do so in defense of their faith or as service to their god. In my thinking, religious fanaticism verges on the puerile and is a sign of infantile radicalism, which can never be justified by the claim that it is a jihâd or crusade in defense of one's belief!

In these discussions, no attempt has been made to quiddle with the facts. However, religious fanaticism is not peculiar to Nigeria. On the contrary, the problem is almost universal to all countries of the world. For example, in countries like Sudan, Cote d' Ivoire, Algeria, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, etc., religious extremism and bigotry have been the cause of devastating wars, massacres, benumbing despair, suffering and death. The carnage in places like Afghanistan, Iraq and Sudan are all traceable to cases of

religious fanaticism and intolerance among believers. The barely literate religious nincompoop by his or her actions and misguided zeal often portrays God as a blood-thirsty cannibal that takes delight in bloodshed and mayhem!

A SAD COMMENTARY

To back tract on the Nigerian situation a little, one is often surprised when one realizes that all the roguery and stealing that go on in the country are usually the handiwork of people who profess faith in God. Corruption, nepotism and greed that have made Nigeria a pariah-nation in the comity of nations are usually the actions of people who profess faith in a God said to be holy and that abhors evil. In retrospect, apart from the problem of inter-religious conflict, one other challenge to social order and harmony in Nigeria is ethno-centrism. Religious conflicts in the country are often exacerbated by the primitive feeling that one's culture is of a superior order than those of other people. Similarly, the incidences of ethno-religious clashes in Nigeria have political dimensions to them. For instance, during the bitter era of military dictatorships in Nigeria, the various military juntas that ruled the country helped fan the embers of religious differences as a ploy to undermine democratic ethos and freedoms. Religious skirmishes were also encouraged by the military cabal as a way to divert the people's attention from seeking a social order that was based on constitutionalism, the rule of law and respect for citizens' right. The civil rulers that came in the heels of the military juntas have also been adept at employing ethnicity and religious differences as weapons for social deceit and perversion. Through their ineptitude and demagoguery, Nigerian leaders hold the unenviable record of having helped turn their country into one of the most economically backward and beggarly nations in the world today. The irony in the whole matter is that these same political leaders are usually men and women who are highly adulated as leading lights in their different religions.

Religion is also a big business in Nigeria; any keen observer of events in country will be quick to notice this. Social misfits and charlatans who have failed in business find religion an easy route for wealth acquisition. And since the emotional element plays a key role in religion, wily preachers easily play on the credulity of their congregations by using religion as a quick way for self-enrichment. A unique dimension to Nigeria's religious saga is the emergence of a new generation of clerics derisively dubbed the *prosperity preachers*. These are mostly wayfarers who have jettisoned the old-time religious preachments which exhorted believers to pursue a life of blessedness and godliness; in its stead, the emphasis now is on how believers can live in material comfort in the here-and-now. The result of this new emphasis is that the debauched life is extolled over one of virtue and honesty; and the gaudy lifestyle is preferred over a life of modesty and sobriety. For while one is not a Cynic that is totally averse to all forms of material comfort, I nevertheless believe that the unbridled pursuit of material gain is in part, responsible for the high level of moral dissoluteness found among Nigerians. But when believers emphasize social or material survival over spiritual perfection, the impression one gets is that religion is solely out to satisfy the believers' social needs- and not their spiritual needs as well.

A SOMBER TRUTH

From the foregoing, it is clear that Nigeria is a country caught up in deep moral quagmire. This is the somber truth. It is disheartening and distressing at the same time. Indubitable and undeniable. Here, one can assert without any fear of being contradicted that rather than serve as agents of moral reformation or reconstruction, religions in Nigeria have been used to preserve and legitimize a decaying social order instead. The question many well-meaning individuals are never tired of asking is why the situation is so with respect to the practice of religion in the country. Others have wondered why religions have fared so badly in their goal of helping create a reasonable social order in which the people can live a life of peace and social well-being.

The questions are numerous and unending. Why have the religions fared so badly in their goal of being agents of moral re-awakening and social reconstruction among Nigerians? In answering this question, there are those who contend that in the real sense of the word, most of what go by the name of *religion* in the country are baroque pictures of what religions *should* be. Others contend that in reality Nigerians are not truly committed to worship or the pursuit of God but that they have only taken to religion as a means for emotional release or a way of escape form the crushing economic hardship and poverty that is currently ravaging the land! Yet, there is the totally different opinion which has it that the failure of religions in the country is due largely to the fact that the values the religions advocate or propagate are hackneyed and out of harmony with modern ways or methods of living. Here, it is needless interrogating whether these views are right or totally off the mark. There is the opinion canvassed in some quarters that the growth of religions in Nigeria (nay, Africa as a whole) is nothing but another form of cultural imperialism imposed on the continent by its erstwhile conquerors and subjugators. With particular reference to Nigeria, it is argued, for example, that some of the bizarre things that go on in Christian assemblies- particularly the new generation assemblies- have their origins in the outlandish and perverted lifestyles of the West.

In the case of Islam, the argument holds that the wild fanaticism and bloodletting that is a regular feature of life in the Moslem parts of Nigeria are reactions to the mass poverty that the people suffer. Other reasons are the economic deprivation of the vast majority of the people in that area: the denial of basic rights to citizens and the oppression of the masses by a feudal class that is bent on keeping the people in ignorance and perpetual servitude. Again, there is the matter of some religiously volatile foreign countries fueling these violent and destructive conflicts all in the name of trying to promote some particular religious view of life. Such religiously volatile countries include Libya, Sudan and Syria, to mention but these.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that the highest value as well as achievement of religion is to help enhance in believers the capacity to flourish. This it can do by helping create in people the capacity for freedom and self-realization. Similarly, it falls within the purview of religion to help promote among people the values of the moral life. Omoregbe renders this point so beautifully when he argues that "religion is the servant of morality, and it would have no reason to exist if it fails to promote the cause of morality."[32] Arguing in the same vein, Oladipo calls on different religious organizations in Nigeria to

"be actively and collectively involved in the struggle for the establishment of a humane society."[33] This is a society, according to Bernard Cricks, in which "every man would see every other man as a brother, of equal worth and potential, a genuinely fraternal society with no conceit or constraint of class to limit fraternity."[34]

The need for a "humane" and just society requires that believers in Nigeria be actively involved in fashioning out ways to putting an end to the life of pettiness, viciousness and immoral living that is so rampant among Nigerians. To achieve this ideal of what Bernard Cricks describes above as "a genuinely fraternal society," there is need for a dialogue among believers – a dialogue which will enable them to do a re-appraisal of the role religions ought to play in the life of a nation and its people. In doing this, religions in Nigeria would have lost nothing "except their progressive drift towards social irrelevance."[35]

A postscript

In the paper, the point has been made that religion should help set the moral tone of society. Religion should help promote the value of the moral life over a life of dissipation or debauchery. This opinion that social activities should aim at promoting moral order in the human community finds support in some views canvassed by Babor. And although Babor writes in the context of education as having redeeming features, what he says has implications for religion as a social engagement. We are told that education should be at the vanguard of those activities that help promote human well-being and solidarity: it should aim not merely at saving us from ignorance, poverty or the feeling of inferiority. Rather, it should do this and much more; it should help make us better citizens of the *republic*, that is, of the human community.[36] This insight- that the salvific role of education extends beyond ethereal concerns to the mundane- is quite on target. I find the opinion germane to the core concern in this paper, which is that like education, religion should also not merely aim at saving us from sin and its consequences. It should do this and much more: it should help transform us to become *better* children of God by making us *better* brother, sister, neighbor and friend; or to use a Bible phrase, it should show us how we can become *our* brother or sister's keeper.[37] Outside of this goal of helping create a community of *better* believers or responsible citizens, religious admonitions and preachments will remain otiose and effete.

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Endnotes

[1]Omoregbe, *A Philosophical Look at Religion*, 1993, xiii.

[2]Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 1977, 1.

[3]Famoriti, "The Nexus between education, religion and moral transformation: the Nigerian experience," 48.

[4]Omoregbe, 2-3.

[5]Kenny, "The Role of Religion in the Moral Life of Nigerians," 2007, 114.

[6]Matanmi. "Socio-cultural Drivers of Holistic Development," 2007, 7.

[7]Mbiti, 1977, 1.

[8]Delubac, "The Origin of Religion," 1966, 161.

[9]Owolabi, "The Dearth of Public Morality in Africa: Towards Restoration and Restitution," 1995, 6.

[10]Oladipo, "Religion and Human Rights: the Nigerian Experience," 1995, 83.

[11]Radhakrshman as quoted by Oladipo, 1995, 83-84.

[12]Omoregbe, 1993, 6.

[13]Pojman, 2008, 15.

[14]Ibid, 24.

[15]Oladipo, 2001, 32.

[16]Babor, 2009, 8.

[17]Ibid.

[18] Oladipo, 1995, 83.

[19]Ibid.

[20]Soyinka, 1979, 38.

[21]Alston, 1967, 141.

[22]Oladipo, 2001, 31.

[23]Oladipo, 1995, 88.

[24]Hobbes as quoted by Sabine, 1969, 28.

[25]Thiroux, 1986, 7-8.

[26]Owolabi, 1995, 3.

[27]Oladipo, 1995, 88.

[28]Owolabi, 1995, 6.

[29]Akinwale, 1997, 2.

[30]Kenny, 2007, 115.

[31]Ibid.

[32]Omoregbe, 1993, 303.

[33]Oladipo, 1995.

[34]Cricks, 1982, 218.

[35]Oladipo, 1995.

[36]Babor, 2009.

[37]In this account we find the story of Cain who demurred, saying that he was not his brother's *keeper* when accused of slaying his sibling Abel. This Bible story can be found in Genesis 4: 10.

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