

RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN NIGERIA'S PUBLIC DOMAIN: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract

Religious pluralism can serve as an instrument for peace, stability and development especially where its role in public life is properly defined. On the contrary, it can become a dangerous phenomenon, where this role in public life appears not to be clearly stated. The latter is particularly true in Nigeria, where there are evidence of abuses of it at the public domain. Therefore, this paper examined various ways in which religious pluralism is being abused in Nigeria's public space and the danger that these portend for peace, stability and development of the country. To achieve this, the paper relied heavily on data gathered through literature review and personal observation while a discursive and analytical approach was used in the entire discussion. The study revealed blocking of public roads and highways during worship services; carrying out open worship services in residential, market, and business areas; unfair treatment of religious minorities during academic gatherings / conferences; and government's discriminatory patronage of religion as prevalent abuses of religious pluralism in Nigeria's public space by religious people, businessmen and women, academics, and public office holders. It also argues strongly that these violate in entirety the basic principles of neutrality, equal recognition, respect for individual human right and freedom of religion, which are central to promoting genuine national consciousness, cohesion, consensus, and stability in religiously pluralistic nations. Thus, it recommends responsible religious pluralism that neither subscribes to secularism nor irresponsible religious practices on the one hand, and reciting of the Nigerian national anthem and pledge at public gatherings as ways to addressing these abuses.

Key Words: Religious pluralism, Nigeria's public domain, abuses, prospects, and responsible religious pluralism.

Introduction:

Religious pluralism can serve as an instrument for peace, development and national integration in modern societies when properly managed (Atowaju, 2012:200). On the contrary, it can also serve as an instrument for violence, disunity and destruction of lives and property if not properly managed

especially with respect to what obtains at the public space. This justifies the position of some scholars who termed religion as a “double-edged sword” (Ekanem & Ekefre, 2013:303; Okebukola, 2012:2; Sampson, 2012:104). Nigeria appears to stand out as one foremost example of a state in which this truism is much projected. As a religiously pluralistic nation, Nigeria consists of three constitutionally recognized religions namely: African Traditional Religion (ATR), Islam and Christianity. Islam dominates the northern region of the country. Christianity is predominant in the southern region while ATR is fairly distributed in the north and south. Ordinarily, this form of religious configuration should serve as an added advantage for Nigeria following the rich moral and ethical teachings of these religions (Babs, 2012:126-127). Regrettably, current abuses associated with religious pluralism in Nigeria’s public domain have the potential of making it a crises- ridden factor that can impact negatively on the socio-economic and political development of the country (Gwamna, 2010:1; Best, 2001:63). These abuses are most noticeable in public places such as markets, academic gatherings, government functions, business gatherings, civil society fora, Church gatherings, etc. Unlike other climes where the roles of religion both at the private and public spheres have been clearly defined; in Nigeria such roles appear not to have been properly spelt out. This explains in part the persistence of the unhealthy rivalry existing between adherents of the two major religions in Nigeria’s public space. This has the tendency of further aggravating the already existing religious, socio-economic and political tensions currently bedeviling the country. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to examine the abuses of religious pluralism by businessmen, religious people, academics and public office holders in Nigeria’s public domain and the danger that these portend for the nation. It is important to state that the essence is not to relegate religion to the background or give it undue emphasis but to present better ways on how to manage it at the public domain. The paper relies heavily on data gathered through literature review and personal observation while a discursive and analytical approach is used in the entire discussion. However, to arrive at a decisive conclusion, it is appropriate to begin by providing extant scholarly views on religious pluralism and the public domain. Also, for purpose of clarity, the term: “public domain” shall be used interchangeably with “public space” and “public square”.

Scholarly Views on Religious Pluralism and the Public Domain

It is not misleading to state that theories concerning religious pluralism and public domain are not entirely new in the academia. There are various scholarly

views that espoused these concepts. Therefore, it is appropriate to begin the paper by considering some of these extant views.

First, the term “religious pluralism” is better described than defined. For example, in defining the word “religious”, the Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary (1960:715) rather describes it as “the act of manifesting devotion to, or to have the influence of religion or to be godly.” From the above, a religious person may be said to be one who believes strongly in the existence of a god or gods; committed to what he or she believes; and is strongly influenced by it. Similarly, “pluralism” is defined by the Webster’s New World Dictionary of the American Language (1972:1097) as “coexistence of two to more distinctive religious or cultural groups within a given society” This implies that pluralism is not only about “manyness” or “plurality” but distinctiveness as well. In other words, religious pluralism implies the co-existence of two to more distinct religions in a given society. Thomas (1976:25) captures this clearly that “a pluralist society presents a person living in it with a series of live options as to which religious faith he is to accept”. He notes for example that in Ghana, there is a choice of Christianity, Islam or Traditional Religion. Clearly, it is this distinctive aspect of religious pluralism that calls for its proper management at the public space. This is because a group that sees itself as distinct will most likely resist any form of ascendancy, compromise and shedding off of its identity marker. Thus, Sproul et al. (1984:6) bluntly describes it as a “harmful ideology”. Mouw & Griffioen (1993:13-14) also hypothesize that “a pluralism is an “ism” about a plurality and that not all pluralities get “ism” attached to them”. Pluralisms take place only “when specific pluralities take on a special significance”. In this sense a pluralistic account emerges when someone is convinced that there is something substantive to articulate about a given “manyness”. It is conjecturable then from this description of pluralism that not all forms of “manyness” are evil. Of course, plurality, be it religious, cultural, moral, sexual, or ethnic is desirable.

But more than that, the Encyclopedia Britannica, Vol. 18 (1972:66) equates the terms “pluralism” and “monism” to “many” and “one” respectively. For example, pluralism asks the question, how many things are there in the world? While, monism asks the question, how many kinds of things are there in the world? Whether this explanation is valid or not, one thing is clear from this description; it is the fact that pluralism immediately suggests the phenomenon of “manyness” while monism insinuates oneness. In addition to this, Netland (2001) describes it as the undeniable fact of religious diversity. He also explains that

pluralism can refer to a particular view about the relations among the major religions concerning religious truth. However, in a more specific sense, Istifanus (1995:50) equivocally defines it as the “principle that people of different religious groups could coexist in harmony”. This implies tolerating other religious confessions. For sure, not everyone will embrace this seemingly naive description. First, because coexistence of diverse religious groups is not a guarantee that they will live in harmony, especially if there are abuses associated with it. Second, there is no guarantee also that these different groups would be willing to tolerate opposite views especially when such views contradict their own views. However, one thing is very clear from his description; this is the fact that religious pluralism implies the co-existence of two to more distinct religious confessions. In this study, the term refers to the coexistence of both the constitutionally recognized religions namely: African Traditional Religion, Islam and Christianity and the non-constitutionally recognized ones.

The nexus between religious pluralism and the public square has been variously theorized by different scholars. For example, Rawls (1993;1997; 1999) has argued that citizens in a society of conflicting religious, moral and philosophical ideologies must treat their fellow citizens simply as citizens without recourse to religion, bearing in mind that individuals are free to hold on to what they consider as valuable and important. But while this is so, they must conduct their daily affairs within the purview of what he terms “public reason” (Rawls, 1997:765-768). Such reason is considered public for three main reasons: one, because all free and equal citizens hold in common; two, because it is primarily concerned about political justice; third, because it meets the principle of mutuality, i.e. the belief that the reasons we would offer for our political actions are sufficient and reasonable not only to us but also to others (Rawls, 1999:574-578). Also, public reason neither attacks nor imposes religious doctrines on others. Public reason applies to discourse of judges especially of a supreme court; discourse of government officials, especially chief executives and legislators; and discourse of public officers and their campaign managers, especially in their public oratory, party platforms, and political statements. Citizens are also required to heed to public reason when exercising their civic responsibility especially during voting (Rawls, 1997:767-768). However, they are not bound by it if they are involved in other private activities such as religious worship, carrying out research, performing on stage and so on (Rawls, 1993:13-14). Therefore, for Rawls, religious ideologies should not be introduced at the public space at all, instead citizens should simply treat themselves as citizens without recourse to religious affiliations when relating with each other at the public

domain. However, they are free to hold to their religious ideologies at the private sphere. The most important goal of Rawls' theory as it were, is to promote a religiously pluralistic society in which citizens are undifferentiated when it concerns issues of public domain. This theory has wield strong influence in the policies of governments of nations like U.S, UK, France, Netherlands, Indonesia, among others.

In addition to the above, Mouw & Griffioen (1993) in their work have identified three general types of pluralities that are important to public life. These include "directional pluralism", which refers to the different religious ideologies; "associational pluralism" which has to do with the various political and socio-economic institutions of society; and "contextual pluralism" which deals with cultural differences. They argue that these three play a prominent role in contemporary discussion of the challenge of pluralism in public life. They also define "public life" to mean a "realm comprising all that pertains to the common good, ranging from public services rendered by the government to many of the activities associated with universities, corporations, churches, charitable foundations, and so on (1993:13-19).

Novak (1983), on his part, argues that the public space of any pluralistic society should not be dominated by a unitary moral order because this will inadvertently give rise to a unitary political power that will seek to impose its concept of the good on all citizens and this is capable of breeding instability. Hence, a free pluralistic society wherein public virtues depend only upon the cooperation of free individuals is much projected as an alternative (Novak, 1983:49, 60, 69). What comes to the fore then is the "empty shrine" paradigm. This emptiness is the respect for "transcendence" and not the usual skeptical attitude of liberal thinkers regarding matters of ultimate concern. However, there is usually no one world, image or symbol representing a particular religious ideology for which all are to seek in a genuinely pluralistic society. Instead, the public space is usually empty and its emptiness represents the transcendence, which all free consciences are to approach from virtually infinite number of directions (Novak, 1983:53, 68). The implication of this is that the public space of any religious nation should not be saturated with a particular religious ideology or divergent religious ideologies as the case may be. But this is not the case in Nigeria, where religious ideologies dominate all facets of public life.

Contrary to scholarly views seeking to expunge religious ideologies from the public space Neuhaus (1984) argues that such a project may rather create public

persons that are anonymous and irrational and who only define justice behind a “veil of ignorance” instead of promoting genuine pluralism. This position gains strength in Newbigin (1986) who argues that the dichotomy between public and private spheres with respect to religious practices is inimical to public morality. In this light, the hypothesis for an empty shrine is conceived as an ideological stand that is completely misleading. In fact, this explains why Eliade (1959), likens such a dichotomy between the private and public spheres with respect to religious practices as that between cosmos and chaos. This is so because it is believed that religion plays a significant role in promoting order and peace in any given society and as such should not be expunged from public life.

Stressing the debate further, Romus (1998) observes that efforts towards creating a mono-identity based on religion or otherwise is an ideological manipulation and oppression of the plural identities of the people. Also, that religion can provoke the worst type of bigotry, fanaticism, violence and oppression especially in contexts where there is a clash of political interests. This is so because it is customary for politicians to employ religious groups and communities in their power struggle. Therefore, sustainable harmony and national solidarity among citizens in a religiously pluralistic society is only achievable through values that can regulate and protect the human persons. This view is in consonance with Kalami (1976) who outrightly rejects the secularist tendency of undermining the importance of religion in modern society. Perhaps, a seemingly contradictory position is forwarded by Nickles (1976) who conceives a “pluralistic society” as one in which “there are more than one religion co-existing on a relationship of conflict” but in which this co-existence of incompatibility is of positive value, both to the community as a whole, and to each of them.

Certainly, it is not clear how religions can co-exist on a relationship of incompatibility and yet promote positive values for individuals and the community. One thing is however clear, the fact that the latter is only achievable in situations where the former is properly managed. As Nottingham (1954) rightly notes that though pluralism is a natural and indisputable phenomenon in all human societies, it can become a dilemma in a society where human behaviour is designed to follow a particular religious, ethical or political pattern that undermines the pluralistic nature of such a society. The implication of this argument is that abuses of religious pluralism especially with respect to the public domain is capable of posing a serious danger to the general welfare of a religious state. Though, scholars such as Livingston (2005) may not subscribe to the separation between religion and politics on the ground of promoting a

healthy freedom in society which allows individuals and communities to practice their religions based on their own consciences, as well as give them a free voice in the community's civic life or the public square. Also, Shupe (1990) in acknowledging the persistent influences of religion on politics at the global arena resonates that rather than think that religion has lost its influence in the global area; it should be given the same attention as the economy, the polity and the community.

A stronger position is even projected by Tocqueville (2004), who unapologetically argues that social and democratic order is impossible in a religiously pluralistic society without reference to religious faith. Therefore, introduction of religious ideologies whether at the private or public domain should be encouraged because religion is the basis of morality. This view also gains support in Habermas (2003;2006), who reverberates that religion plays a vital role at the public space and as such secularism is not a sufficient condition to guaranteeing equal religious freedom for everybody. Consequently, the "deliberative mode of democratic will formation" which allows for all parties concerned to reach agreement on the kind of liberty they desire as the solution to abuses of religious pluralism at the public space is then proposed by him. But like others, his view has also attracted several criticisms from scholars such as Braeckman (2009), Sheedy (2009:4), Cooke (2006:195) and Cliteur (2007:119) who correctly observe that the scholarly views to retain religion at the center has the tendency of elevating religion beyond its proper place.

It is pertinent to state based on the above that there is a general consensus among scholars that religion plays very significant role in human society and that the attempt to project a superior religion over others is inconsistent with the principle of religious pluralism. However, there is lack of convergence among scholars on whether the public space should be kept empty of religious ideologies or not. Considering the obvious abuses of religious pluralism in Nigeria's public space and the potential danger it poses on the socio-economic and political development of the country, it becomes crucial to consider the Nigerian situation.

Problems and Prospect of Religious Pluralism in Nigeria's Public Space

It is not misleading to state that Nigeria's public space is saturated with religious practices that violate the basic principles of religious pluralism- equal recognition, neutrality and respect for individual's human rights. Clearly, the right to manifest, propagate, teach, practice and observe religious practices

whether in public or in private has a constitutional backing in Nigeria. For example, section 38 (1) of the 1999 Constitution expressly puts as follows:

Every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom (either alone or in community with others, and in public or in private) to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance.

However, the problem with the above constitutional provision is that it does not clearly define the limits of this freedom. As a result, recent events indicate a high level of abuses of this freedom not only by religious adherents as Sampson (2012:119) observes, but also by public office holders, market women, business men, and academics.

One noticeable example of these abuses of freedom of religion is the frequent blocking of public roads and high ways by religious people during their worship services or conferences. Obviously, religious people are known for blocking of public roads during worship services or religious conferences in Nigeria. Both Christians and Muslims are culpable of this. For example, it has become a norm for Christians to hold their religious crusades close to public highways as Ehigiator & Akinbaani (2002) observe. The same can be said of Muslims who usually block public roads during their Friday Jum'at prayers (Ehigiator & Akinbaani, 2002). Regrettably, this act of blocking public roads does not only disrupt public order but infringes on the legal right of other road users as well (Sampson, 2012:119). The danger is that it can potentially generate inter-religious crisis. For example, on September 10, 2001 in Jos, a religious violence erupted as a result of road blockade by Muslims during Jum'at prayers. It started following an attempt by a Christian lady to use a public road blocked by Muslims during their Friday Jum'at prayers. The insistence of the woman to have her right of way resulted into a devastating inter-religious crisis (Adebayo, 2010:216; Sampson, 2012:119). This could have been averted if religious practices were not allowed to invade the public space.

Unfortunately, the story is not different at market places and business environment. In fact, it is commonplace to see businessmen and market women in Nigeria carry out full blown religious worship services during business and market hours. In most cases, such open air worship services at business and market environment are carried out using public address systems that have high sound magnifying tendencies without considering the implication for public

health and peace. This practice is most dominant among Christian business men and traders. Certainly, some may argue that such practices are in order considering the fact that the Nigerian Constitution guarantees freedom of religion. However, the fact that such freedom as Sampson (2012:120) notes, does not include the right to constitute nuisance and cause discomfort for others, makes such practices problematic. Undoubtedly, such practices violate the right of privacy of other religious individuals. At least, the right of privacy of other religious individuals should be respected at all cost in the exercise of our freedom of religion. This is crucial because beyond religion lies our humanness which all individuals must endeavour to protect at the public space. Sadly, in Nigeria, religious activities have been allowed to override our humanness. And this is not healthy for the nation.

Surprisingly, the situation has not fared better among academics who possibly have not considered it essential to protect Nigeria's public space from invasion of religious activities. Thus, they either consciously or unconsciously promote this invasion of public space with their religious activities as well. For example, it is commonplace for some academics in Nigeria to start academic conferences and other related activities with religious prayers which in most cases would favour a particular religion over others, depending on which divide the coordinators or organizers of such conferences belong. This does not in any way imply that prayers should not be said in the public domain. Arguably, there is nothing wrong in starting academic conferences, faculty and departmental meetings and other academic fora with prayers. Certainly, public prayers should be encouraged as much as possible especially if all religious groups present in such academic gatherings are given equal recognition to offer prayers. Moreover, the fact that religious people have a right to pray whenever and wherever they want should make the issue of no consequence. Regrettably, this is not always the case because experience has shown that religious prayers during academic conferences, faculty, departmental and other academic fora in Nigeria are usually discriminatory- tilting towards favouring either Christians or Muslims depending on which religion constitutes majority at the instance of such academic gatherings. Other religious groups- African Traditional Religionists, Hindus, Buddhists, and even atheists have always been relegated to the background. And this is a serious violation of the basic principles of religious pluralism which place maximum priority on equal recognition, neutrality, and respect for other religions. At least, a more patriotic practice such as the reciting of national anthem and pledge could suffice in such academic gatherings.

Perhaps, the most pronounced abuse of religion in Nigeria's public space is manifestly seen among public office holders who usually deploy it as a bait to win favour from the masses. This is common among Christians and Muslims public office holders. One of such manifestations is government's patronage of religion. First, political leaders are known for sponsoring religious programmes such as pilgrimages to Mecca and Jerusalem with public money in favour of Islam and Christianity. They are also known for buying food items and other valuable gifts for Christians and Muslims during their religious festivities, donate huge sums of money to Islamic and Christian bodies and also build worship centers for them. Unfortunately, such favours are not usually extended to religious minorities as scholars have rightly observe (Sampson, 2012:122-123; Eme, 2012:191-192). And this is not healthy for the nation.

Aside that, public officials and particularly politicians are also well known for deploying religion as a tool for political campaign. In fact, Fatokun (2012:23) and Osivwi (2011:67) have observed that beginning from the process of selecting parties' flagbearers to voting proper, religion plays a major role for who to vote and be voted for. One strategy that politicians normally adopt is the use of religious prayers and songs to woo supporters during political campaigns. In some instances, top religious leaders are usually employed to front their campaigns. Moreover, politicians are also known for erecting large billboards bearing bold religious inscriptions of a particular religion in support of their claims in order to win the support of the masses. Regrettably, as Agbiboa (2013:21) has noted, this is inconsistent with promoting a true spirit of nationalism. Rather, it has the tendency of stirring up religious sentiments, which in turn could generate inter-religious crisis. Consequently, elections have turned out to be religious contests instead of avenues through which qualified candidates are elected to lead the nation. Osivwi (2011:67) and Alamu (2004) are then perfectly in order to observe that politicization of religion is the brain behind all religion-related violence in the country. This is because it can create suspicion and distrust among religious adherents (Adogame, 2005:125; Agbiboa, 2013:21). Similarly, the use of religious speeches, inscriptions, and images of a particular religion during political campaigns directly contravene some provisions of the Electoral Act (2010) as amended. For example, section 95, subsections 1, 2, & 3 of the Electoral Act (2010:64-65), clearly states that:

A political campaign or slogan shall not be tainted with abusive language directly or indirectly likely to injure religious, ethnic, conduct etc. at political tribal or sectional feelings. Abusive, intemperate, slanderous or base language or insinuations or

innuendoes designed or likely to provoke violent reaction or emotions shall not be employed or used in political campaigns. Places designated for religious worship...shall not be used for political campaigns, rallies and processions.

Sadly, these practices by public and political office holders clearly violate in all its ramifications this particular provision. Most importantly, it contradicts the principles of neutrality, equal recognition and respect for all religions especially as it affects the public domain. The danger is that it can polarize Nigerians along religious lines and further aggravate the already existing tensions in the country. Where this happens, religious conflicts would be inevitable thereby making national cohesion, consensus, peace and stability difficult to achieve. This is not good for a country like Nigeria, which is already suffocating from numerous security challenges. In this light, there are two strategic steps that are required to address these abuses at the public space in Nigeria.

The first is what I have indirectly been discussing all along in this paper and which may now be fittingly termed 'responsible religious pluralism.' That is, a phenomenon in which religious practices within a multi-religious state are not allowed to override public order, collective interest and individuals' human rights and freedom. In other words, in the context of responsible religious pluralism, religious people, business men and women, academics and public officials, in the exercise of their religious freedom adhere strictly to the principles of neutrality, equal recognition of all religions and respect for public order, collective interest and individuals' human rights and freedom. It is crucial to note that responsible religious pluralism neither subscribes to irresponsible and discriminatory religious practices nor tilts towards absolute secularists' tendencies.

The second and final strategy is for citizens to adopt the reciting of the national anthem and pledge in all political, academic and civil society gatherings. Certainly, as an alternative to the abuses associated with the practices of religion in Nigeria's public space by public officials and academics, reciting of the national anthem and pledge in public gatherings has become very crucial. This is because the public domain of any nation ought not to be invaded for the purpose of exercising our religious freedom. Therefore, one way to avoid this, is to enact laws and make policies that can encourage citizens to adopt reciting of the Nigerian national anthem and pledge during public gatherings- academic, political and civil society. One benefit of this, is that it can spur national

consensus, cohesion, consciousness, peace and stability. These strategic recommendations are crucial in contemplating possible models that can reposition the nation on the path of national unity, peace, stability and sustainable development.

Conclusion

Religious pluralism is an important phenomenon that requires special treatment at the public domain of any given nation considering its fragile nature. This special treatment means that its basic principles of neutrality, equal recognition, respect for individual human right and value for all religions, should be strictly adhered to when dealing with matters of religious practices at the public domain. Unfortunately, the Nigerian experience has shown that these basic principles have often been neglected by religious practitioners, businessmen and women, academics and public office holders. Hence, Nigeria's public space is undoubtedly saturated with religious practices such as blocking of public roads and highways during worship services; carrying out open worship services in residential, market, and business areas; unfair treatment of religious minorities during academic gatherings / conferences and government's discriminatory patronage of religion, which are detrimental to promoting genuine national consciousness, cohesion, consensus, and stability. The paper argues that these are clear abuses of the principles of religious pluralism in Nigeria's public domain. Therefore, it recommends responsible religious pluralism that neither subscribes to secularism nor irresponsible religious practices on the one hand, and reciting of the Nigerian national anthem and pledge as ways to addressing these abuses.

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