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Religious Pluralism and Tolerance in Nigeria: Pantaleon Iroegbu's Perspective

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Abstract **Original Research Article**

The study examined Religion Pluralism and Tolerance in Nigeria: Pantaleon Iroegbu's Perspective. This study investigates the relevance of Pantaleon Iroegbu's concept of God to the promotion of religious tolerance in Nigeria. Grounded in his Uwa ontology, Iroegbu presents God as the ultimate source, foundation and sustaining principle of all existence. Using expository and hermeneutical methods, the study examines the concept religious tolerance in a pluralistic society. The research connects that religious intolerance is often fueled by exclusivist attitudes, misconceptions and a failure to recognize shared spiritual and moral values and by not recognizing that every worshipper ultimately believes in the ultimate power of supreme Chukwu. By portraying God as the transcendent ground of all existence, Iroegbu's philosophy encourages greater understanding, acceptance and cooperation across religious boundaries. The study concludes that Iroegbu's concept of God offers a valuable framework for advancing religious tolerance in Nigeria. It recommends the promotion of Interfaith dialogue, philosophical reflection and common ethical values as practical strategies for fostering unity and peaceful coexistence.

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Introduction

Nigeria, the most populous nation in West Africa, is characterized by a multiplicity of religions and ethnic groups. Ethnicity plays a central role in the social structure serving as a basis for group identity, security and individual well-being. In Nigeria, there are more than 250 different ethnic groups with vast kingdoms alongside unique customs, traditions and languages. According to Ihua,

> Plurality in beliefs and values, political and social systems as evident in peoples and societies etc, are characteristics of the contemporary Nigeria. However, the most common feature of the Nigerian society of today is differences in religious faith. Torn between the jealousies of Christianity and Islam, and to a little extent, the distinct, but more accommodating values and customs of the indigenous religions of over 250 ethnic nationalities, citizens of Nigeria still find themselves involved together in social, economic and political relationships. [1]

These ethnic groups are spread throughout Nigeria's two main geographical regions which are North and South. Amongst the numerous ethnic groups are three prominent ones namely Hausa / Fulani , Yoruba and Igbo. The Hausa/ Fulani are dominantly in the northern part of Nigeria, while Yoruba people settle in the South-West and the Igbos occupy the South-Eastern part of the country. Ezeanya elaborately asserts:

> The geographical area that is today known as Nigeria was inhabited by peoples of varied and often conflicting traditional settings, cultural dispositions and socio-political and religious orientations prior to the coming of the colonialists. In their respective domain they

[1] A.S.Ihuah. The God Narrative in Nigerian Politics: An existential conversation for religious tolerance in *Philosophy and Praxis. Journal of the Nigerian Philosophical Association,* Vol. 7, 2016, 179.

> cherished what they shared together as a people, and fared well among themselves.[2]

Nigeria is home to diverse religions which makes her a religiously pluralistic nation. As stated earlier, there are multiply religions in Nigeria and the prominent ones are African Indigenous Religion, Islam and Christianity. Nigerians, as with other Africans, are highly religious and this deeply affects every aspect of people's lives. Religion is also a vital component of the nation's development. Mbiti, stressing the place of religion in the life of Africans says "Therefore, to be without religion amounts to a self-excommunication from the entire life of society, and African peoples do not know how to exist without religion"[3]

Religion has evolved alongside humanity, shaping and being reshaped by human culture and society which makes religion a foundational aspect of human culture. Religion is strongly intertwined with culture, as each religion is a product of the specific cultural context in which it developed. Religious doctrines are influenced by the cultural norms, perceptions and ideologies of the time and place in which they emerged. Religion and culture are handed down from one generation to the other with a characteristic intent of self-preservation. Ugwu and Ugwueye state that "Religion is traditional, in the sense that it is an aboriginal and fundamental thing, which is handed down from generation to generation and is still practiced by living people today".[4] Religion has a significant influence on society, extending across spiritual, physical, social and economic domains. No wonder, Madu insists that "religion as it were is the strongest element in man and exerts probably the greatest influence in man. It is made manifest in beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and officiants like the priesthood".[5] The core feature of every religion is the belief and worship of a Divine Being with supernatural powers. This belief varies across cultures and religions. It is known as the concept of God. The concept of God which is core to all religions, is supposed to serve as a unifying force that connects people across different backgrounds and bridges their differences.

Religion can be a double-edged sword, promoting peace, love, harmony and tolerance but also potentially being used as a destructive force that fuels disunity and chaos. According to Olaofe and Ishaq, "Religion is a platform of peaceful co-existence, but when religious beliefs are paired with religious intolerance and people act on that intolerance, religion can take a turn towards violence and destruction of lives and properties".[6] In other words, religion could play a crucial or destructive role in the development of any society. Omoregbe portrays the significant role played by religion and the harm it can cause to society:

> Religion is such a prominent feature in human society that it cannot be simply ignored. World history would be incomplete without reference to religion, nor can the history of any nation be written without reference to it…It has aided social progress, educational development, interpersonal and international cooperation as well as mutual understanding among people. On the other hand, religion has been the underlying force behind conflicts, civil as well as international wars, social stagnation or even retrogression, oppression, discrimination, etc. [7]

The intricate history of religion in Nigeria is an indication of the country's cultural diversity with indigenous religions, Islam and Christianity coexisting and shaping the nation's social and political fabric. It is interesting to note that, prior to the arrival of Islam and Christianity in Nigeria, African Traditional Religion was the predominant and solely recognized faith. The three major religions in Nigeria are: Africa Indigenous Religion also known as African Traditional Religion (ATR), Islam and Christianity. African Indigenous Religion or African Traditional Religion (ATR) refers to the indigenous religion of Africans which was the earliest expression of religious practice in Nigeria and bedrock of communities.

The preservation of peace and harmony in traditional African societies was facilitated by strict adherence to community-specific moral codes, which were deeply ingrained in their cultural traditions. Asouzu says "African traditional society recognizes and holds firmly to certain values…identified as necessary for correct functioning of the society and welfare of the individuals."[8] This religion is characterized by its non-documentation of doctrines and principles. It also has no founder, grew out of the culture

[2] C.P. Ezeanya. *Tribe and Tongue in Nigeria.* (Enugu : Professor's Press, 2010),21.
[3] J. Mbiti. *African Religions and Philosophy*. (2nd Edition. Johannesburg : Heinemann, 1969),2.
[4] C.O.T.Ugwu & L.E.Ugwueye. *African traditional religion : A prolegomenon.* (Lagos: Merit International Publications, 2004), 6.
[5] J.E. Madu. *Fundamentals of religious studies.* (Calabar : Franedoh, 1997), 19.
[6] M.A. Olaofe & R. N. Ishaq. Reexamining the Causes and Implications of Religious Intolerance on Social and Political Development in Nigeria. In *International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews*, Vol 5, June 202 4, 508-513.
[7] J.Omoregbe. *COMPARATIVE RELIGION : Christianity and other world religions in dialogue*. (Ikeja : Joja Educational Research and Publishers Limited, 2018), 1.
[8] I.I.Asouzu. False consciousness and moral responsibility in Africa. *Sophia : African Journal of Philosophy.* 1, (1998), 3.

of African people. Each ethnic group had their traditions and beliefs. The worship to God, the Supreme Being is done through messengers or agents like divinities who act as intermediaries between God and man. The interest of this work is limited to the concept of God in Igbo metaphysics. The Igbo people are an ethnic group in Nigeria. Their concept of God is the belief in a Supreme Being called "Chukwu", "Chineke" amongst other names. The Igbos were deeply religious and were practicing their traditional religion before the advent of Western missionaries.

The next religion to be discussed is Islam. The history of Islam in Nigeria began in the 11th century in the Northern part of Nigeria, after their conquest by Usman Dan Fodio in 1804. Before the advent of Islam, Hausa people practiced their traditional religion known as "Bori". Hunwick states that Hausa land before the arrival of Islam was largely a pagan oriented society.[9] Islam is a monotheistic religion founded by Prophet Mohammed, and God is known as "Allah". The North has Islam as the main religion and a unifying force. The last religion to be discussed is Christianity. Christianity is practiced mostly in the South part of Nigeria. Christianity as a monotheistic religion emphasizes the belief in the existence and worship of only one God. The Christian faith is anchored on the doctrine of Trinity, which asserts that one God exists in three persons. This threefold unit is God the Father, God the son and God the Holy Spirit, and these three are one.

By its nature, religion is meant to enlighten, inspire and even unify people within any society. Humanity and religion have developed together, with spiritual beliefs and practices forming an integral part of human society from time immemorial. The multi –cultural and multi- religious nature of Nigeria has also intertwined with the socio-political life of its people. This mix of culture, religion and politics has contributed to various religious crises in Nigeria resulting in religious intolerance of each other. The persistent religio- cultural violence in Nigeria stems from the failure to foster a culture of understanding, acceptance and mutual respect among the different religious and cultural groups. According to Ojong and Oparaji, "As a result of this refusal to understand and accept other culture, that is why we have religio-cultural violence in Nigeria for instance and the world in general. Amongst such violence in the country are insurgency in the north east, militancy in the Niger Delta, kidnapping, hostage taking, cultism and most recently herdsmen attack in Benue, Niger, Taraba, Kaduna, and Plateau states respectively." [10]

These religious crises have negatively impacted the well-being of Nigerians and hindered development. Olawale holds that each of the three main ethnic groups fear the domination of each other and the leaders worsened the fear among the ethnic groups. [11] It should be noted that each ethnic group has unique characteristics which enhances the country's rich cultural heritage.

However, it is ironic that in Nigeria today, religion often fosters strife, intolerance and hatred among religious people. Despite their differences, these religions share a common feature which is the belief in a Supreme Authority also known as God who is peace- loving and each religion encourages tolerance of people. It is pertinent to state that these religious beliefs and practices have their points of divergence as well as convergence. In terms of similarities, they all believe in peace, tolerance, compassion and harmonious living even with people of different faiths. Their differences are mainly in the mode or methods of worship.

Religious intolerance is a major challenge to the stability and unity of Nigeria. It cuts across cultural and religious lines which has led to conflicts among different religions. This division has a historical background that involves factors like colonialism, multicultural differences, politics and economic imbalance in the country. Religious fanatics have kidnapped, killed and destroyed properties of people who belong to different religious groups. These religious fanatics see their actions as acts of worship to God and service to the society. The amalgamation of Northern and Southern Nigeria brought about a union between people of different languages, cultures and religious beliefs and which also brought differences in religious observations and practices. Harmonious coexistence among individuals from diverse ethno-religious backgrounds is the cornerstone of communal progress, growth and advancement in Nigeria today.

Statement of the Problem

Nigeria's diverse population of religious devotees present a significant challenge in promoting religious tolerance

[9] J.O.Hunwick. *The Nineteenth Century Jihads.* In Anene, J.C. and Brown, G.N (eds.), *Africa in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries.* (Ibadan : Ibadan University Press, 1966),294.

[10] L.O. Ojong & E.O. Robert. *The relationship between Religion and Culture: It's implication for Herdsmen attack in Nigeria*. In Philosophy, Security and The challenge of development in Africa. Issues ,Problems and Prospects. (Eds) Alloy S. Ihua, Anthony Idachaba, Mark Imoter Shenge. (Abuja: The Nigeria Philosophical Association, 2019),311.

[11] A .Olawale. *Federalism, inter-ethnic conflicts and the Northernisation Policy of 1950s and 1960s* in Kunle Amuno et al (ed) Federalism and Political restricting in Nigeria. (Ibadan : Spectrum Books, 2000),50.

among its large and devoted religious communities. The country is home to three major religions namely; African traditional religion, Christianity and Islam, which often intersect and sometimes lead to interfaith conflicts. This diversity, while enriching the cultural landscape has also contributed to tensions and conflicts stressing the need for greater understanding and tolerance among different faith communities. Religion which should be a beacon of hope and unity has been manipulated in Nigeria to ignite conflict. Alana states that "Today, religion has become one of the important weapons which selfish leaders use in manipulating and dividing the people. Their misuse of religion has led to ugly riots and loss of lives and properties." [12] Using religion for political purposes has widened the divide and deepened mistrust between adherents of different faith. The exploitation of religious sentiments by politicians and elites to reinforce their power bases, often at the expense of social unity. In a similar vein, certain religious leaders promote doctrines to contribute to a climate of suspicion and hostility towards other faiths.

As a secular state and in the 1999 constitution, there is a guarantee of freedom of religion where it states that "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." [13] Although the constitution guarantees freedom of religion, interfaith relations frequently are characterized by suspicion, mistrust, intolerance and outright aggression. This intolerance often takes the form of verbal insults, violent confrontations and destruction of worship centers. Furthermore, the intertwining of religion and ethnic identity has transformed disputes into full-blown ethno-religious crises, thereby eroding national unity and peaceful coexistence.

Nigeria has a history of religious conflicts, including the Maitasine uprisings in the 1980s which resulted in thousands of deaths in Kano, Kaduna and Yola states, as extremist beliefs were used to rationalize violence. The introduction of 1999 Sharia laws in Northern Nigeria sparked tensions and violence across multiple states of the Federation between 1999 and 2000. This interfaith tensions intensified divisions between Christians and Muslims. The Jos crises of 2001, 2008 and 2010 clearly illustrates how religion and ethnicity can be used to spark widespread violence resulting in mass violence and destruction of property. In recent times, the Boko Haram insurgency has brutally showcased the most deadly expression of religious intolerance, with the group using radical religious ideology to justify brutal acts of terrorism, kidnapping and destruction of entire communities. The 2014 abduction of the Chibok schoolgirls by Boko Haram is a tragic reminder of the dangers of religious intolerance in Nigeria. Religion in Nigeria, rather than serving its intended purpose as a unifying force, has been distorted into a divisive instrument of manipulation, intolerance and violence. The persistent misapplication of religion, weakens interfaith relations and the prospects for democratic stability and sustainable growth.

This study aims to explore the causes and consequences of religious intolerance in Nigeria with the goal to identify strategies for building interfaith harmony and fostering a peaceful coexistence.

Aim and objectives of the study

The aim of this research is to examine religious pluralism and tolerance in Nigeria with the following specific objective:

i) To find out the relationship between Religious Pluralism and Religious Tolerance in Nigeria.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

This study is adopts the theory of religious pluralism which serves provides the for understanding and interpreting religious diversity, coexistence and interfaith relations in Nigeria. Religious pluralism refers to the recognition of diverse religious traditions within a society. According to Banchoff, "Religious Pluralism often advocate convergence, harmony and compatibility between different religious traditions".[14] Religious pluralism has been significantly shaped by the contributions of John Hick and Diana L. Eck, whose perspectives, though related, differ in emphasis. John Hick (1922- 2012), a British philosopher of religion advanced a theological model of pluralism, arguing that the world's major religions are valid responses to a shared ultimate reality he termed "the Real". Hick is widely regarded as the father of modern religious pluralism, having laid the theoretical foundation for understanding the diversity of religious belief. According to Hick, ultimate truth does not

[12] O.E. Alana. *The Relationship between Christians , Muslims and Afrelists in History with particular reference to Nigeria.* In Abubakre, R.D.(Ed). Studies in Religious Understanding in Nigeria. (Ilorin : NARS,1993),210.

[13] Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. (1999). Chapter IV- Fundamental Rights : Section 38,(Abuja: Federal Government Press),22.

[14] T. Banchoff. *Religious Pluralism, Globalization, and World Politics.* (New York : Oxford University Press, 2008), 4.

belong exclusively to any single faith, instead, the world's religions offer unique intellectual and spiritual perspectives on the same transcendent reality. His framework provides a valuable lens for examining interfaith coexistence, dialogue and mutual respect, making it particularly relevant to studies of multi-religious societies like Nigeria. In essence, Hick's approach highlights that while religious traditions differ in expression and worldview, they all reflect humanity's engagement with a common ultimate reality. In his words, he says :

> The great world faiths embody different perspectives and conceptions of and correspondingly different responses to, the Real form within the major variant cultural ways of being human. These traditions are accordingly to be regarded as alternative soteriological 'spaces' within which, or 'ways' along which , men and women can find salvation/liberation/ultimate fulfilment. [15]

Another prominent scholar in the field of religious studies is Diana L. Eck, who is widely recognized for her distinctive interpretation of religious pluralism. Building on John Hick's foundational ideas, Eck argues that authentic engagement with religious diversity goes beyond mere acknowledgment of differences. Instead, it calls for mutual understanding, active participation and respectful dialogue among adherents of various faiths. She emphasizes that religious pluralism involves a shared quest for ultimate meaning, here individuals from different traditions engage one another with openness and a willingness to learn. In this regard, Eck's perspective represents a significant shift from passive tolerance of religious differences to a more dynamic and interactive model that encourages meaningful encounter and cooperation among religious communities. Eck, puts it thus, "Pluralism is not diversity alone, but the energetic engagement with diversity. Pluralism is not just tolerance, but the active seeking of understanding across lines of difference. Pluralism is not relativism, but the encounter of commitments. Pluralism is based on dialogue: the language of pluralism is that of dialogue and encounter, give and take, criticism and self-criticism."[16] It is important to note that Diane L. Eck's conception of religious pluralism represents a significant shift from the mere tolerance of religious differences to their active and meaningful engagement. Her approach emphasizes practical interaction, dialogue and lived experience within diverse societies. In contrast, Eck's perspective differs from John Hick's more theologically oriented model of pluralism. While Eck's framework is rooted in social relationships and interreligious dialogue, Hick's approach is primarily concerned with theological inclusiveness.

Hick posits that major world religions are all valid ways of experiencing and responding to a shared ultimate reality, which he refers to as "the Real". His theory seeks to uncover a deeper, metaphysical unity underlying apparent religious differences, suggesting that the various world's faiths are culturally distinct expressions of humanity's engagement with the same transcendent reality. In this way, whereas Eck emphasizes practical engagement and dialogue, Hick focuses on the philosophical and theological foundations of religious unity.

This study draws on the distinctive contributions of John Hick and Diana L.Eck to offer a comprehensive framework for understanding religious pluralism. As a theoretical foundation, religious pluralism is particularly suitable for this research, providing guidance for promoting tolerance and peaceful coexistence in Nigeria by:

a) Encouraging open and constructive dialogue among different faith communities.

b) Fostering mutual respect while honouring beliefs of each religion.

c) Emphasizing shared ethical values like justice, peace and compassion.

d) Demonstrating how unity within diversity can serve as a model for Nigeria's stability and development.

Religious pluralism is a theoretical framework that aligns with Nigeria's reality as it promotes religious tolerance by recognizing and respecting the diversity of religious beliefs within a society. As a country plagued by religious conflicts, Nigeria can greatly benefit from adopting John Hick's and Diana L. Eck's Religious Pluralism. This approach would promote tolerance, understanding , peaceful coexistence and dialogue among different religious groups.

In conclusion, religious pluralism promotes the harmonious coexistence of diverse faiths within a society, fostering mutual respect and appreciation for the unique value and truth of each tradition. Religious pluralism goes beyond mere religious diversity, which is simply the presence of multiple faiths. It involves actively valuing, engaging with and learning from religious differences. Religious pluralism promotes tolerance, cooperation and constructive dialogue among communities. This study

[15] J. Hick. *An Interpretation of Religion : Human Responses to the Transcendent* . (London: Macmillan, 1989), 240.

[16] D. L. Eck. *A New Religious America : How a "Christian Country Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2001),69.

seeks to deepen understanding of religious pluralism and explore its potential to enhance peaceful coexistence, strengthen interfaith dialogue and contribute to social cohesion in multi-religious contexts such as Nigeria

Religious pluralism

Religious pluralism refers to peaceful interactions between different religious beliefs in a multi- religious society. Nigeria is an example of a religious pluralistic country as it is endowed with different religious sects. Ele says that "Religious pluralism implies a diverse variety and multiplicity of faiths found to exist simultaneously in a given society". [17] In other words as explained by Onah, religious pluralism implies "the existence of many religions in a particular society". [18]

Religious Tolerance

Okeregbe in tracing the root word that forms "tolerance" says that "Its Latin root *Tolerare* brings to light both meanings – 'to forebear' and 'to support'. [19] Toleration is the ability to accept and respect the beliefs and opinions of others that differ from one's own. Religious tolerance is the ability to appreciate the spiritual values and beliefs of people who hold different religious views. Oyetoro & Talabi state that " Religious tolerance is the capacity of people to respect the faith and belief of another without any sign of prejudice and discrimination. It is the ability of people of different religions, beliefs and culture to co-exist peacefully". [20]

Christianity is practiced mostly in the South part of Nigeria. Christianity as a monotheistic religion emphasizes the belief in the existence and worship of only one God. The Christian faith is anchored on the doctrine of Trinity, which asserts that one God exists in three persons. This threefold unit is God the Father, God the son and God the Holy Spirit, and these three are one.

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Method of study

This study adopts a qualitative research design. It employs expository and hermeneutical methods. The expository method is used to present Iroegbu's understanding of God within Igbo metaphysics. The Hermeneutical method enables the study to interpret Iroegbu's ideas within the rich context of their historical, cultural and socio-religious background. This will entail interpreting Iroegbu's Igbo metaphysical concepts including *Chukwu, Uwa and Chi* with attention to their implications for religious diversity in Nigeria. This study relies on Pantaleon Iroegbu's works as its primary sources supported by secondary sources that offer insights into Igbo metaphysics, African philosophy and religious tolerance.

Conclusion

The study examined Religion as a Tool for Peace, Harmony and Tolerance in Nigeria: Pantaleon Iroegbu's Perspective. . In Nigeria's religiously diverse society, which is frequently divided by the strictness of religious exclusivism, Iroegbu's thought provides a culturally rooted alternative perspective. His philosophy rejects the extremes of fervent bias, and in its place presents a balanced framework for coexistence. When carefully applied, it offers a workable path toward peaceful interreligious harmony rooted in African metaphysical consciousness. It calls on Nigerians to adopt tolerance not as a form of compromise, but as a lived reality, a way of existence that respects differences while upholding shared

[17] C. Ele. Religious Pluralism and Sustainable Development in Nigeria. In *African Research Review.* 13(1), (2019), 26.
[18] N.G.Onah. Religious Pluralism and Sustainable Development : The Nigerian Experience. In *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*. Vol.3, Issue 1, 2014 ,2.
[19] A. Okeregbe. Phenomenology and Ethics of Tolerance. In *The Nigerian Journal of Philosophy.* Vol. 24, No. 1&2, The Department of Philosophy, University of Lagos. (2010/2011), 87.
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sense of existence. In this way, religious harmony is presented as both achievable and necessary, and as something already rooted in the very structure of reality as Iroegbu conceives it. Thus, his relational metaphysics ultimately reframes religious coexistence as both possible and necessary. It envisions a Nigeria where diverse religious traditions live side by side without domination or suppression, but in mutual recognition and respect. In this perspective, tolerance goes beyond social policy and becomes a fundamental condition for human flourishing and societal stability, pointing toward a future of authentic and sustained interreligious coexistence.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusion of the study, the following recommendations have been made:

1. Different religious groups in Nigeria learn to live together in peace and harmony.
2. Religious groups in Nigeria should form a general body that comprises all known religious practices in Nigeria to foster unity, peace and tolearance.

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