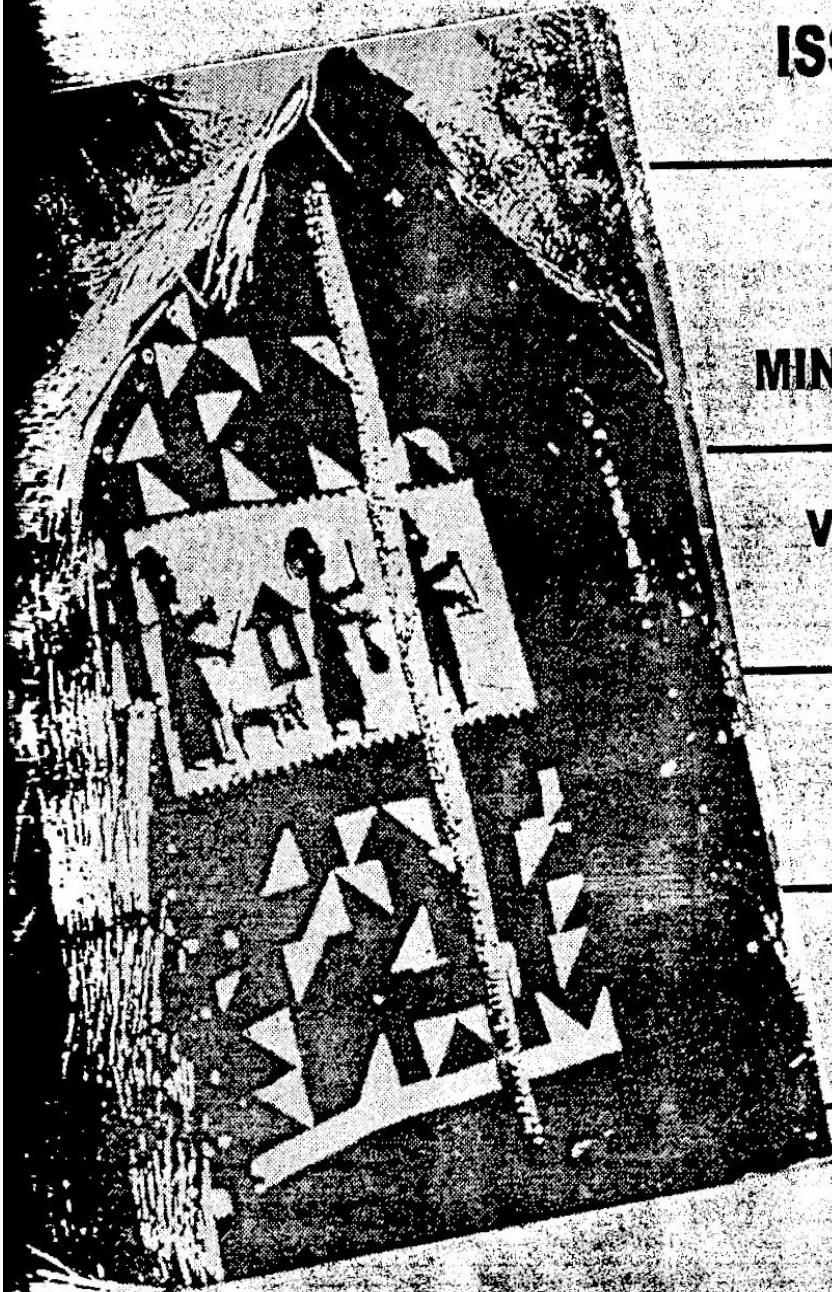


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RELIGION AND NATION BUILDING: THE NIGERIAN CASE.

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Abstract.

Religion has a long history in Nigeria and it is an important factor in the personal and social lives of the people. As an instrument of nation building, religion has over the years mediated and regulated societal tensions arising from socio-economic and political crises that could mar the march on nationhood. Though Nigerians are a very religious people, all of the numerous studies that have analyzed the impact of religion on nation building have painted a divisive role, leaving their audience with the impression that religion is not worth its salt in Nigeria. In opposition to this assessment, this paper highlights the historical threads of unity sewn by religion in the nation building process in Nigeria and argues that it is difficult to see how any account of nation building in Nigeria can be complete without talking of the tremendous role of religion. Religious organizations in Nigeria have been useful in the provision of essential services and have always called their adherents to pray whenever a national disaster is imminent. The paper ends with a clarion call on all Nigerians to sheathe their sword and explore in greater depth God's provision for our challenges of nation building rather than attributing our masked political problems to religion.

Introduction

During the thousands of years of mankind's history, various efforts have been made to secure and promote peace and good neighbourliness. One unmistakable phenomenon in mankind's search for the Supreme Being has been the inextricable connection between society and religion. Religion according to Nothingham is a cultural tool by means of which man has been able to accommodate himself to his experience in his total environment including his fellow group members, the sacred and world of nature (Nothingham, 1954:31). In essence, religion enfolds the whole of life and promotes public welfare and well being. The religious disposition of nationals can make or mar a nation. The former manifests among a people who insist that there is no religion of war but of peace with God and neighbour. Such a religion puts a high premium on social harmony and aims at the reconstruction of society, and above all emphasizes a spirit of understanding and more voices of moderation and reason rather than those of bigotry and destruction. Religion was the way of life in the traditional African society. Apart from giving the Africans a sense of security and identity, it

showed them how to act in different situations and provided a complex of patterned mental configuration of dos and don'ts that placed communalism above individualism.

That the so-called primitive man in Nigeria recognized the existence of a supreme being who created the world around him, including himself deserving of reverence and worship is no longer in doubt. Like his other African brothers, he therefore, had to devise a means to reach the supreme being whom he saw in creation-in the sun, moon, water (river), hills, stones, trees, animals and in fact in all creation, animate and inanimate. He saw the Supreme Being in all these and revered Him variously in such names as Abasi-in Efik/Ibibio; Allah-among the Hausa. Still in Nigeria, the Bini call Him Osanobua (Creator of the world, sky and earth, and of life and death); the Igbo call Him Chineke (Creator), Chukwu (Great spirit); the Isoko refer to him as Oghene (Lord of all, the creator, merciful Being); the Yoruba call him Olodumare (Almighty, Supreme), Olorun (Owner or Lord of Heaven), Eleda (the creator) (Fatokun, 2005:132). A common index to these names is the conception of God as the Almighty creator. In other words, our ancestors recognised the existence of a supreme being as the vital and sole power behind all creations. This, in a way, provided the background for the smooth take off the African Traditional Religion which emphasized the worship of this Supreme Being through one lesser god or the other. With the introduction of Islam and Christianity by the Arabs and European missionaries respectively, and the gradual distribution of the two religions in Nigeria, however, the traditional religion gradually dwindled giving way to both Islam and Christianity as the two dominant religions in the country. The role played by these religions in nation building has over the years remained a neglected theme.

More than this neglect, some commentators on national issues out rightly refute that there is no sense talking about the role of religion in nation building in Nigeria since all around us are overwhelming evidences of angst, anger, frustration, despair, despondency and indeed precipitous decline of religion as an instrument of statecraft. Some go to extreme by insisting that church buildings and mosques should either be burnt or converted to other purposes. These views which are neither possible nor desirable represent the inability of their authors to decipher the historic threads of unity sewn by religion in our nation building process. That Nigeria has continued to exist as indivisible country despite the various prophecies about its disintegration is in part a tribute to the three prominent religions in the land which have domineering influence over their adherents. Scholars of culture and religion make no exaggeration when they assert that the indispensable role of religion in society is to:

Sanctify the values and norms strategic to the continuation of the social order and to provide the ultimate grouping for a definition of man and his situation that renders human life meaningful and human effort worth-while. (O'Dea, 1970:55)

Scholars of this persuasion singled out religion as a prime force in the creation and maintenance of social integration. In view of this, the object of this paper is to examine the impact of religion on nation building in Nigeria.

And to effectively do this, we divide the paper into two parts. Part one examines African traditional religion and its implications for nation building. Preceded by a brief background on their introduction, part two focuses on the role played by Christianity and Islam in building of the Nigerian nation and its citizenry.

AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

African Traditional religion, as Mbiti has observed extends to every area of African life and its influence on a person begins before his birth, continues throughout his life and even after his death (Mbiti, 1978:14). Africans have been variously described as "notoriously religious" or incurably religious" (Quarcoopome, 1987:11) because all activities in the society, whether farming, hunting marketing, social relations, and even recreation were governed by religious laws and taboos, and all blend inextricable in a complicated ritual (Talbot, 1912:13). It was basically through religion that human relations were regulated for the realization of the good life. Perhaps, the words of Emile Durkheim on religion as an instrument for promoting cooperative attitude, faith, hope and charity among people best drives home the functions of traditional religion in Nigeria. O.E. Uya lends credence to this position by asserting that "African peoples were intensively religious and regarded religion as the basis of reconciliation of individual man, families, clans and whole nations to the universe" (Uya: 2005, 49). In the quest for the good life and neighbourliness, most Nigerian groups bought or borrowed gods of their neighbours whose efficacy in certain spheres of life was pronounced.

Central to African religious belief was the existence of a Great Omnipotent, Omniscient and all powerful God who manifested himself through smaller deities, regarded as agents and dispensers of his blessings. Outwardly, it could appear as if many gods were involved but when viewed in the context of its evolution, the Yoruba clichés, such as: *Ona kan o woja* (Numerous) roads lead to the same market); *mee foluwa wi* (many, says the lord) become quite revealing and informative. Any wonder, then as N. Osundare argues, that the Yoruba among other Nigerian groups' spiritual world is populated by a pantheon of deities, useful, secular, anthropomorphic, existing in keen and intricate complementarity among themselves and close communion with human beings (see Daily sun, Monday, March 20, 2006). The difference among the various deities is just a matter of emphasis and development and not of essence. Laurenti Magesa explains further:

The varieties in African religion must not be taken to mean a diversity of fundamental belief. The varieties are more those of expression than basic belief. They are much like the varieties of expression we find in major religions such as Christianity or Islam, for instance, "They may be referred to by different names such as Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, Presbyterian, or Baptist in Christianity, or Shai, Suni, or Sufi in Islam. Nonetheless, they remain Christian or Muslim (Magesa, 1997:16&17).

The significance of a pantheon of deities in the traditional Nigerian society has been stressed in several quarters. To Niyi Osundare, "the availability of alternatives, the possibility of preference, the matrix of choice, are all vital aspects of life and living". Any god that tended to destroy rather than build; to kill rather than save, to be crises escalator rather than crises damper, was abandoned without much ado. It was left to each deity to sell itself across borders. Among the people of the present Cross River State of Nigeria, for example, the deities were expected to fight their cause and defend their realms. No one arrogated to himself the duty of fighting or defending the deities. Within this scenario, there was no religious intolerance, religious conflicts, religious crises or riots. The intra and inter religious relations among the various Nigerian groups were accommodating and receptive (Turaki, 1995:51). Lamenting recently on this lost glorious era of our nation building experiment, Osundare regrets that:

Through a sustained and vicious process of deliberate misapprehension and misrepresentation, both Islam and Christianity demonized the liberal, accommodationist ethos of traditional religions and used their enormous military and political powers to suppress their pluralist philosophy, then imposed their own civilized (?) mythology of the one and only(?), the jealous sole – supreme....To the best of my knowledge, there were no religious wars in Africa prior to the momentous advent on the continent of these rival juggernauts from the Middle East (See Daily Sun, Monday, March 20, 2006).

If we support the assertion that "Nation building is the process of creating unity and a sense of belonging among heterogeneous groups in a state, involving attempts to integrating the various groups in order to build a nation out of the state, then it will need no laborious argument to establish the fact that traditional religion with its qualities as justice, fairness, equality, "live and-let – live; believe and-let-doubt, have over the years been a formidable tool in the nation building process in Nigeria. In traditional religion, groups and individuals could participate in ritual sacrifice for deities other than their own. This practice promoted religious cohabitation among the various groups in Nigeria for many centuries before the monsters from the Middle East began to point out how anti-Christ and anti-Mohammed it is to intermingle with adherents of other religions. Researchers will forever remain frustrated in their attempts to uncover any war fought on the basis of religious differences when external religious views were yet to be introduced. The traditional religion and its society were calm, peaceful, tolerant and

accommodating. Sporadic wars fought over other causes, such as the struggle for land ownership, were mediated through the religious orientation of the people which forbade the shedding of blood.

Without any historical founder, zeal for membership drive, a written sacred text like the Christian Holy Bible and the Muslim Al-Quran, African religious heritage evolved over the centuries through thoughts and experiences of the forefathers, and informally transmitted to subsequent generations through conversations, stories, proverbs, riddles, myths, ceremonies, festival ritual, et al (Fatokun, 2005:130), achieved an admirable height in nation building yet unrivaled. What else does one expects of a religion that stressed that judgment, reward and retribution are in this present world as against others that shift it to an unknown world ruled by a merciful God? This emphasis on judgment in this life, served as a deterrent to the perpetrators of evil in traditional society. It compels everybody to be his brother's keeper as well as assist the poor who are not responsible for their misfortune. This caring attitude, driven by passion for empathy and distaste for killing others, encouraged the people to live in harmony. Nigeria has more problems of nation building today because contemporary Nigerians know only the God of compassion who forgives a multitude of sins, not the awesome God, of the consuming fire, the great implacable God that condemns to hell. Many Christians/Muslims who will gladly swear by the Bible/Quran and go on to perjure themselves would have refused to swear on the cutlass or gun if they had lived in the days of our forebears' innocence due to immediacy of the wrath of the gods.

All in all, it is difficult to see how any account of nation building in Nigeria can be complete without talking of the tremendous role of African Traditional Religion. In spite of the influences from the Western world, African traditional religion and belief systems still have a lot to offer in the current crusade of redeeming Nigeria from retrogression and catastrophe. Since their introduction, Christianity and Islam have continued to complement and compensate the short comings of traditional religion in the nation building process in Nigeria. To these two religions, we now turn attention.

CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM IN NIGERIA.

Christianity and Islam – are alien to the country. They both had their birth in the Middle East, Christianity in Palestine and Islam in Arabia. Although for more than one thousand years the two monotheistic religions have been rivals yet they have many things in common. They possess each a book which their votaries regard as holy and the guide of all mankind, a revelation of God in time (Anene Ed., 1977:11); both believe in the one God, the creator and sustainer of the world, who is All-knowing, All-wise, most merciful and Benevolent; they also share the believe in the last Day of Judgment

When the deeds of men will save or condemn them eternally. These two alien faiths largely succeeded in displacing traditional Africa religion. Statistically, the Christians and Muslims populations in Nigeria stand at 46% and 40% respectively while adherent of other religions make up the remaining 14% (Anglican Laity Council Stand on O.I.C Question, 1986:11).

Christianity was introduced into Nigeria in the second half of the nineteenth century by European missionaries through the influence of traders. The task of replacing the traditional values of the people with the Christian ways of life was undertaken by different Christian missions who came in quick succession. Notable among them are the Presbyterian, Qua Iboe, Roman Catholic, Methodist, Anglican, and Lutheran. Though these missions among others that were to follow justified their coming purely on evangelical and humanitarian grounds, political and economic motives were discernible. Soon after its introduction, Christianity became so strongly rooted in several parts of southern Nigeria due to its eradication of such practices as *ibrahim* by ordeal, immolation and burial of slaves with their master, twin-killing and ostracization of twin mothers (Noah, 1980:112). They also made significant, positive contributions particularly in the fields of education, health-care, and social welfare that have largely formed the basis of the modern economic and social development in Nigeria.

Islam ("Submission to God") was founded through the agency of the "last or best" of the prophets, Mohammed. It entered the great Sudanese empires of Ghana, Mali and Songhai by Muslim traders, scholars and simple laymen. After the collapse of these empires local Islamic movements which did not want the religion to be obliterated began to spread the Islamic religion in Western and Central Sudan. Subsequently, Islam penetrated Nigeria through Kanem-Bornu in the eleventh century during the reign of Mai Hume (Trimingham, 1962:167). In the second half of the fourteenth century, Islam was introduced in Hausa land by Wangarawa merchants (Hunwick, 1965:124). It was introduced into Kano in the reign of Ali Yaji (1349-85). However, it was during the reign of Muhammed Rumfa (1463-99) that active Islamic policies including the building of mosques and the observance of festival prayers were pursued aggressively (125). Muslim scholars became his advisers and when Al-Maghili visited Kano towards the end of his reign he asked him to write a treatise on Islamic government for him. Al-Maghili cut down the sacred tree in Kano (*ardeb*), marking a clear and official break with the non-Islamic past. From Kano, Muslim traders and nomadic groups spread Islam peacefully to other neighbouring Hausa groups, spreading to the Yoruba region and beyond. In Northern Nigeria the traditional customs and institutions of the people have been displaced by Islamic culture and institution. The Sharia (Islamic law) has

been adopted for marriage, inheritance, property and day-to-day life and Muslim festival now call for public holidays.

CHRISTIANITY, ISLAM AND NATION BUILDING

Christianity and Islam which control a great number of Nigeria's men of religion have had profound and far-reaching impact on nation building. These impacts vary in pattern and in intensity over time and space. We shall precede this section by attempting a definition and an explanation of Nation building before using the latter's definition as a yardstick to measure how the two dominant Nigerian religions – Christianity and Islam complement the traditional African Religion in the nation building process.

Nation and Nation building are two concepts that scholars find difficult to define successfully without criticisms. For the purpose of this work, we will adopt the definition by Rupert Emerson on Nation and S. P.I. Agi's on nation building. According to the former, the nation is a community of people who feel that they belong together in the double sense that they share deeply significant element of a common heritage and that that they have a common destiny for the future (Emerson, 1962:90). This definition is all encompassing and views the nation as a unifying factor for groups of people, who though, may come from different ethnic, political or religious backgrounds, are bonded together by a common goal. Nation building, therefore, as S.P.I. Agi avers, is the process of creating unity and a sense of belonging among heterogeneous groups in a state, involving attempts at integrating the various groups in order to build a "nation" out of the state (Agi, 1999:112). From these definitions, therefore, virtues like tolerance, obedience to constituted authority, adaptation, an accommodating spirit, selflessness, discipline and nationalism are essential ingredients for Nation building. The process, however, requires a lot of sacrifice on the part of its nationals, to ensure an indivisible and unified entity. Michael Curtis included one of the factors that enhance Nation building to be an effective ruling group that is able to overcome aggressive self destructive forces and internal civil dissensions and can provide protection against external states (Curtis, 1978: 42). Others as given by S.P.I. Agi include the presence of common values, beliefs and attitude among the people, economic wellbeing which enables individuals and groups to have a satisfying standard of life and health (Agi, 1999:112-113). He sums it up by saying, "there must be a willingness among the people to live together as a nation".

Christianity and Islam are two major religions that have influenced world affairs for more than two thousand years now. Both religions have their roots in present day Middle Eastern region of South Asia, far from the western sub-region of Africa and yet their influence in building and shaping the Nigerian nation cannot be denied. In West

Africa and in Nigeria in particular, Christianity and Islam almost equally share the entire population of the country between themselves leaving a significantly small percentage to traditional and any other religions. The two religions have come to be seen as a way of life in the country in both private and public affairs and have created the much needed balance in the country. As an individual, one must belong to either a Christian sect or to Islam. One's name easily identifies one's religion, and in some cases the exact sect. In public life and especially during public functions, the two religions dominate. For instance, during public functions, prayers are offered to reflect both religions. The Nigerian government has officially recognized the two religions even to the extent of helping to erect two befitting places of worship in Abuja, the Federal Capital for both religions, close to one another. These two places of worship, the National Ecumenical Centre and the National Mosque are indeed outstanding landmarks in the Federal capital, Abuja, finished in the best architectural design. Indeed, Nigeria's national interest must of necessity reflect the interest of these two religions with the result that it appears to balance on them. Nigeria's politics, policies and entire social activities tend to be cast in both Christianity and Islam. For instance, in politics it has become a tradition that if the President is a Muslim, then the Vice president has to be of the Christian faith and vice versa. In 1979, President Shehu Shagari, a Muslim, had Dr. Alex Ekwueme, a Christian as his Vice-president. Between 2003 to date, President Olusegun Obasanjo, a Christian has Alhaji Atiku Abubakar as his Vice-president. Similarly, states that have both Christian and Muslim population almost on an equal percentage follow this trend. Where the Governor is a Christian, the Deputy has to be a Muslim. The states of Lagos, Ogun, Kaduna, Taraba and Adamawa adhere to this tradition. Furthermore, Nigeria's public holidays are reflective of both religions. Id - El-Maulud, Id-El-Fitri and id-El-kabir are Islamic festivals while Good Friday, Easter Sunday and Christmas day are all recognized, as public holidays in Nigeria. This gives a sense of belonging to every Nigerian and encourages a peaceful co-existence which enhances national development. But officially, Nigeria is a secular state, that is, the denial of one official religion for the whole country. It is the simultaneous recognition of these two major religions and the denial of any one of them being the state religion that has to a large extent maintained the much needed balance and unity in the country more than any conscious efforts on the parts of the leaders.

As noted earlier, one of the greatest impacts of the Christian Missionaries was the introduction of Western education. M. Duverger has demonstrated two major ways by which education can enhance integration. They include creating awareness on the part of the citizens on the need to belittle the antagonisms which divide them while emphasizing the links that unify them. Furthermore, education develops in people a sense of community (Duverger, 1978:182). Although Western education was a tool

used in propagating Christianity, its role in the spread of literacy cannot be ignored. Through missionary (Christian) established schools, education was disseminated to various parts of the country. St. Gregory College Lagos, St. Finbarrs College Oron, Hope Waddell Training Institution Calabar, St Louis College Jos and Kano amongst others are Christian founded institutions that combine spiritual development, learning and character building for good citizenship. These schools embrace diverse people from distant lands, and through their boarding facilities, promote good inter-ethnic interaction. By this integration, virtues like tolerance, patience, adaptation, acceptance and accommodation are developed. E.U. Aye noted that one of the earliest missionary founded institution (Hope Waddle Training Institution) embraced people from Nigeria and beyond (Aye, 1986:3). Similarly, the St. Louis College Kano, a Christian (Catholic) founded institution, has over the years accommodated both Christians and Muslims alike. In these Christian founded institutions subjects like Social Studies, History and Government form part of their curricula. These subjects are useful in recounting Nigeria's collective experience in the hands of the British colonialists as a tool for unifying the country in spite of its religious and ethnic diversity. Prof. Isawa Elai gwu vividly stated that "we must accommodate others and accept one another as we experience our bitter and sweet moments" (Elaigwu, 2004:66). In effect, these Christian established institutions not only play major roles in spiritual development but enthrone nation building as demonstrated.

With regard to the Islamic religion, Western education was encouraged by mainly Muslims in Southern Nigeria through associations like the Ijebu Muslim Friendly Society, the Ansar – Ud-deen, the Ahmaiyya, the Muslim Literary Society and the Nawair – Ud-Deen which arose in the early decades of the Twentieth century (Gbadamosi, 1978:216). These organizations have contributed towards the development of Western education and national development by encouraging parents to educate their children and later established schools modeled along Western pattern (Quardri, 1985:237). In the face of moral decadence among Nigerian youths, they have encouraged Muslim Youths to desist from immoral acts, and using the Sharia law as a base discouraged acts that would be a bane to Nation building. Alcoholism, prostitution, stealing are being tackled by the Sharia Islamic law. However, the Sharia law has its merits and demerits.

Just as the Islamic religion possess organizations that aid spiritual development and curb moral decadence, the Christian faith also consists of inter-church associations with similar goals. Both the Boy's Brigade and Girls Brigade are inter-church organizations aimed at spiritual growth of its members and provide citizenship education for its youths with a view to enhancing Nation building. According to Ozumba and Eteng, citizenship education enhances human development and promotes

reasonable self assurance among citizens through the teaching of good values and morals in order to become a responsible people of the state (Ozumba and Eteng, 1999:5). Accordingly, the Boy's Brigade and Girls Brigade which cut across many orthodox churches like the Anglican, Presbyterian, and Methodist churches teach the development of character. The Boy's Brigade which was established in Nigeria in 1908 has as one of its objectives to train boys to become loyal and responsible citizens (Inside the BB, 2006:3). For the Girls Brigade, its four cardinal programme include spiritual, physical, educational and service (The Girls Brigade: 5). Through its educational programme, it encourages literacy (The Girls Brigade: 6) by educating young girls on different subjects and enlighten members on Nigeria's National History. Using Christ as its foundation, the organization trains members to establish good Christian homes and serve the nation and humanity through lecture on first Aid and life saving from fire etc. Furthermore; it focuses on instilling good behaviour, self control, honesty, discipline, team-work, good leadership, fairness and punctuality. These qualities are not only marks of good citizenship, but factors that aid Nation building. As Elaig-wu will not agree less. He comments, "50% patriotism and discipline among leaders and followers, we would be able to transform this country into an industrialized power" (Elaigwu, 2004:65). Both the Boys and Girls Brigade discourage ill becoming of a good citizen. Such acts as immorality, alcoholism gambling, smoking, drug abuse and indiscipline are frowned upon as they militate against the Nation building process (See Inside the BB, 2006:6; The Girls Brigade Handbook for officers, 2006: 9 - 11).

The two organizations also encourage leadership training for youths, in a bid to prepare them for greater responsibility with a view to serving the church, community and nation. Accordingly, the Girls Brigade Handbook for officers stresses that: Leadership training needs to be planned in such a way that the girl is increasingly prepared to take her place in life as a mature, useful person. Character, ability, conduct, relationships with other people as well as past service should be considered when choosing girls as young leaders (Girls Brigade Handbook for Officers, n.d:62).

Apart from establishing inter- church organizations as examined above the contribution of Christian to National development through the establishment of hospitals, orphanages, disabled homes and the likes cannot be ignored. From the Pade School of the Blind in Lagos, to the Good Samaritan Home in Calabar, Christian organizations, particularly the Catholic Church have provided succour to the sick, old and challenged persons and given them a sense of belonging in the Nigerian society.

Indeed, African Traditional Religion, Christianity and Islam have played a major role in encouraging Nation building. It is not common to hear of inter-religious clashes between adherents at the different religions. Recently, also, the upper class

Muslims have begun to admire and adopt Christian styled weddings complete with all its trappings – English outfit, bridal couples are Muslims and Islam does not encourage such display of public entertainment. Some past and present Muslim leaders have consented to their children getting married with all the paraphernalia of Christian typed wedding. This clearly illustrates the adaptive and accommodating attitude of the upper Muslim class which is a necessary factor in Nation building. Above all, Christians and Muslims do turn back to Traditional Religion for answers to certain difficult situations, including oath taking.

In spite of the role played by Christianity and Islam in Nation building, however, much is still left to be done. Both religions need to intensify their efforts in quelling youth restiveness. This has contributed to the incessant Niger Delta fracas and recently the reprisal attacks on 18th of February in some parts of the country caused by the cartooning of Prophet Mohammed in far away Denmark.

CONCLUSION

One incontrovertible fact deductible from the foregoing analysis is that religion is the product of man's effort to be in peace with God and fellow man, without which no nation can progress. In Nigeria, African traditional religion, Christianity and Islam have been harnessed for national development, nation building as well as in the provision of answers to the social upheavals taking place in the country over the years, the three religions have in various degrees imbibed Nigerians with a capacity to tolerate and accommodate others as well as a strong forgiving spirit. What cannot be over-stressed is that religion has been and is still vital in the continuous efforts of building a just and equitable Nigerian nation. ATR, Christianity and Islam are not bereft of teachings that awaken basic values which persuade Nigerians to transcend parochial interest and embrace peace for the good of all. The religious conflicts that Nigeria has experienced over the years merely represent challenges of nation building and not the failure of religion as an instrument of statecraft. Indeed, when a balance sheet of the impact of religion on nation building in Nigeria is drawn, the credit side will hopelessly overshadow the debit side. However, religions fundamentalists should sheathe their swords for the achievement of full nationhood in Nigeria.

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