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Faith-Based Organisations and Conflict Resolution in Nigeria: The Case of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN)

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With so much emphasis on religion as a source of conflict, the role of religion and by extension religious actors as strong forces in conflict resolution is usually overlooked. For a long time, research in the Conflict Resolution field failed to focus on the role religion plays in conflict resolution (as opposed to its role in making conflicts intractable) or specifically to the unique features and strengths of faith-based actors in conflict resolution. In Nigeria, as well as in Africa and other parts of the world, faith-based organizations (FBOs) have been increasingly involved in attempts to end conflicts and make peace. This study examines the role of FBOs in conflict resolution through a case study of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) since its establishment. It examines how (meaning through which mechanisms), and how successfully FBOs and the techniques they use for peace contribute to conflict resolution. CAN claims that since its inception, it has embraced dialogue as the primary form of resolution to disruptions in general and religious crises in particular. CAN is also interested in championing the interests of Nigeria's Christians against what it sees as an "islamicization" of Nigeria's polity and the question is to what extent are the goals of conflict resolution compatible with a partisan approach to Nigeria's social issues. The study suggests that if the CAN must play a pivotal role in conflict resolution in Nigeria, it must develop a robust approach and step up its operations.

Introduction

Religion and in turn religious actors are playing an increasingly relevant role in conflict resolution. Mennonites, Catholic Leaders, and the Quakers have successfully intervened in Asian, African, and Latin American conflicts as have other religious actors like Desmond Tutu from South Africa, Maha Gosananda from Cambodia, and Thich Nhat Han from Vietnam. But conflict resolution is not as simple. While some religious adherents clearly integrate spiritual principles in conflict resolution, others engage in the destabilizing violence facing the world today. All through the long era of human history, religion has been a consistent contribution to bloodshed, hatred, war, and intolerance. Yet, religion has also developed ideas and concepts that have offered the world with a commitment to peace related ventures (Gopin, 1997, pp. 1-2).

Recently, research in the conflict resolution field has paid more attention to the role religion plays in conflict resolution, as opposed to its former focus on the role it plays in making conflict intractable (Bercovitch & Kadayifci-Orellana, 2009, p. 177). During the last 15 years, scholars of conflict resolution have produced massive studies on the relationship between religion and conflict resolution (Appleby & Little, 2004; Gopin, 2000; Johnston & Sampson, 1994; Kadayifci-Orellana, 2002, 2005; Lederach 1997; Smock,

2006, among others). Thus, the importance of religion and by extension, faith-based actors in conflict resolution and the strengths they possess are gradually coming to the fore.

Faith-based organizations like CAN can help encourage inter-faith relations, manage crisis, negotiate and mediate in conflict situations, serve as a communication link between opposing parties, and provide training in peace making schemes (Sulaiman & Ojo, 2012, p. 1). As Sampson (1997) stated, religious actors are increasingly playing an active and effective role in conflict resolution as educators, advocates, intermediaries, and pursuers of transnational justice. They can function as a powerful warrant for social tolerance, for democratic pluralism, and for conflict management. They are peace-makers and peace-builders (Reychler, 1997). Appleby (2000, p. 211) also provides a list of faith-based actors involved in conflict resolution. They include: NGOs, national and transnational religious hierarchies, ecumenical (like CAN) and interreligious bodies, and local religious communities.

While there is a vast body of literature on religious peacebuilding and conflict resolution in some parts of the world, there is a growing body of literature specifically on religion and conflict resolution in Nigeria. This study has a primary purpose, which is to create more scholarly interest on religious conflict resolution and inter-faith relations in Nigeria and by extension, Africa. To achieve its aim, the study argues that FBOs have the potential to resolve conflicts. It further posits that a lot needs to be put in place for FBOs like CAN to actually help to create progress in conflict resolution endeavours. It states that if CAN is to play a pivotal role in conflict resolution in Nigeria, it has to build a robust approach. The study is divided into the following sections: Conflict Resolution in Theory and Practice, which takes a broad look at the conflict resolution field; The CAN: Background and Origins, which sheds more light on the emergence of CAN, the context of its operations, the goals and make-up of the FBO; The CAN and Conflict Resolution in Nigeria, which examines the nature, roles, and techniques used by CAN in conflict resolution in Nigeria; and Conclusion, which sums up the arguments of the paper and provides recommendations on religious conflict resolution in Nigeria.

Conflict Resolution in Theory and Practice

Before examining in more details the role of CAN, it is useful to establish what conflict resolution is and what it is not in order to locate conflict resolution efforts in an appropriate framework. The first thing to note is that conflict resolution is a comprehensive term. It implies that the "deep-rooted sources of conflicts are addressed and transformed" (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, & Miall, 2011, p. 31). Transformation in this context involves non-violent behaviors, non-hostile attitudes, and changes in the structure of the conflict. Secondly, conflict resolution is a process – a process which births changes in conflict situations. Nevertheless, there are meeting points in the two spheres of the description. In this field, theory and practice are closely linked. Whether the focus is religious, internal, international, or communal what we know about conflict affects how we approach it. Therefore, theories and ideas are readily available to influence actors in conflict resolution endeavours (Bercovitch, Kremenyuk, & Zartman, 2008).

Conflict resolution is a vibrant field of enquiry. It involves three cardinal areas: trying to resolve conflicts that already exist, trying to find ways to prevent new ones in the future,

and trying to manage what cannot be fully resolved (Bercovitch et al., 2008). According to Ramsbotham et al. (2011) conflict resolution has to be:

- Multilevel: Analysis and resolution must embrace all layers of conflict: interpersonal intra-personal, intergroup (families, neighborhoods, affiliations), international, regional, global, and the complex interplays between them;
- Multidisciplinary: In order to learn how to address complex conflict systems adequately, conflict resolution must draw on many disciplines, including development studies, politics, international relations, strategic studies, and individual and social psychology, among others;
- Analytic and Normative: The foundation of the study of conflict must involve a systematic analysis and interpretation of the "statistics of deadly quarrels," but this must be combined from the outset with the normative aim of learning how better thereby to transform actually or potentially violent conflict into non-violent actions of social, political, and other forms of change;
- Theoretical and practical: The conflict resolution field must be constituted by a constant mutual interplay between theory and practice. Only when theoretical understanding and practical experience of what works and what does not work are connected can properly informed experience develop. (p. 8)

In sum, conflict resolution focuses on the deep-rooted causes of conflict, including structural, behavioral, and above all, attitudinal aspects. There are many different understandings of resolution, which practitioners and scholars have long been at pains to distinguish. Generally speaking, conflict resolution aims to help parties explore, analyze, question, and reframe their positions and interests as a way of transcending conflict (Berghof Foundation, 2012).

CAN: Background and Origins

There are various accounts regarding the emergence of CAN, depending on the regional and faith background of the sources. According to Enwerem (1995, pp. 75-100), some facts emerge from all the accounts. First, there was a successful control of power at the top by the Hausa-Fulani Islamic ruling class in Nigeria when CAN emerged. Second, there was the self-imposed mission on the part of the Christians to kick against the islamicization of Nigeria and protect the interests of Christians. Akpan (1980) sums up the situation when he said that "…by the time the CAN was formed, there were already religious tensions sprouting up in Nigeria and Christians were psychologically ready to work together to protect their interests" (p. 60). It is therefore within the complex interplay of these realities that the emergence of CAN can be located. The important stages and turning points that led to the emergence of CAN and in turn her peacebuilding efforts are summed up through the following timelines.

The 1960s

Shortly after Nigeria's independence in 1960, President Ahmadu Bello's politics at the international level involved the forging of politico-religious links with Islamic countries across the world, especially in the Middle East and Asia. In particular were the Arab

countries like Saudi Arabia, whose generosity to Nigerian Muslims was so great that by 1961, the Saudi Arabian monarch was asked to visit Nigeria to strengthen the already strong relationship between the two countries.[1] Bello's "primary interest" in international politics "becomes the international Muslim community (the *ultima*)," while he was mindful "of the need for peaceful and co-operative mutual interdependence within larger political contexts" like his "continentally-based Pan-Africanism rather than one racially-based" (Enwerem, 1995. p 45).

Although one may be accused of advancing a reductionist argument on the rationale concerning the first military coup staged in Nigeria, writings have shown that religion and the Christian/Muslim frictions played a major role in the 1966 coup that shattered the first republic in Nigeria (Onapajo, 2012, p. 49). Abubakar Gumi, a close associate of Ahmadu Bello, writes in his autobiography:

> The plotters who carried out the January 1966 massacre should have had the courage at the time of the coup to admit their hatred for Islam as the real motive for their action. Actually, I was told afterwards that they had originally included my name on the list of those to be assassinated together with the Sardauna [Ahmadu Bello]; they changed their mind because they could not agree about the explanation to give to the public, since I was not a politician. Other leaders were more forthright later in celebrating the fact that Igbo land was the only place in the country 'not tainted' by Islam…." (Gumi &Tsiga, 1994, p. 123)

It is common knowledge that this, among other things, contributed greatly to the largely Igbo-speaking Southern Region (largely Christians) declaring itself the sovereign Nation of Biafra on May 30, 1967, which subsequently led to the 1967-1970 civil war.[2]

So because of these prevailing circumstances, some Christian leaders in the north at that time thought it wise to come together and find ways and means by which they can challenge these moves by the Islamic majority to forcefully make people Muslims. That gave birth to what was called in those days the Northern Christian Association (NCA), later changed to the Christian Association of the North. The organization's operations were limited majorly to the north at that time. It continued until the time the Sardauna was killed. After the Sardauna's death, Christians in the North decided to continue to meet from time to time (Enwerem, 1995). The emergence of the Christian Association of the North in Northern Nigeria suggests that there was willingness on the part of the Christians to react and reject Islamic hegemony. This is in line with Fox's assertion that upon perceived discrimination or threat to the survival of a religion, religious organizations can "play important role in mobilization for both protest and rebellion" (Fox, 1999, p. 135).

1970s and 1980s

For this era, two points need to be made. First, in terms of its standing before the federal government as a result of its support for the federal cause, Christians supported the federal cause in a weak and hesitant manner while Islamic religious leaders supported it fully.[3]

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[1] J. N. Paden, in Enwerem, I. (1995).

[2] Nigerian Citizen Newspaper, (Kaduna), 1961-65.

[3] See A. Doi, *Islam in Nigeria* (Zaria: Gaskiya Corporation, 1984), p. 349.

Muslim religious leaders, through their prayers, were said to have capably turned the political tide of the war in favor of the federal cause, and people like Shaikh Ibrahim Niass, used their mediatory role among the Muslim factions in the North during the war. That was a major positive contribution towards the war effort (C. O. Ojukwu, personal communications in Enwerem, 1991). It was only to be expected that Muslims, rather than Christians, stood to receive favours from an appreciative and victorious federal government.

Series of activities followed this. The takeover of Christian mission schools and hospitals, Nigeria's entry into the spell this out here (OIC) (albeit as an observer), the introduction of a *federal character* in the civil service, and "restrictions by the government on Christian evangelism without, in CAN's opinion, placing similar restrictions on Islam" (Enwerem, 1995), the setting up of Pilgrims' Boards exclusively for Muslims and the introduction of Shari'a also known as Islamic law. Members of the Islamic ruling class from the North argued that "the application of the Shari'a in *all* its aspects," in opposition to what they described as the man-made English law currently operating in Nigeria, "will go a long way in bringing discipline, morality and unity in [the] country" (Enwerem, 1995, p. 45). All these would soon be some of the issues upon which the churches would base their charge of Islamicization attempts by the Muslims and undue favoritism towards Islam in Nigeria.

For the Christians, the heightened point came in 1973 when the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (SCIA) was set up "as an umbrella for the unity of all Muslim groups in Nigeria" (McGarvey, 2009, p. 120). In this capacity, the SCIA became the representative of Muslim interests in the country and demands before the Nigerian government. All this strengthened the view, rightly perceived by some analysts that the Hausa-Fulani elite was unwilling to give up its fundamental objective of control of power at the center (Enwerem, 1995).

As a reaction to this probably, there was a phenomenal emergence and rise of the "new generation" Pentecostal churches of the "born again" doctrine during this era as well. The 1970s and 80s became a significant watershed in the history of Christianity in Nigeria. The emergence of the churches strengthened the political might of Christianity in the Nigerian political space. The "born again" Pentecostals and traditionalist Christians who had earlier stiffly opposed each other over doctrinal matters had to bury the hatchet and unite to create a national body (hereafter named as the CAN) that would serve as a voice for all Christians in the country and give a stronger political weight to the organization, with the principal objective of challenging an "Islamic oligarchy" (Kukah & Falola, 1996, p. 239). In addition, the emergence of SCIA must have also motivated the Christians to create a similar body that would bring all Christians together and protect their interests in the "'oil rich" and "Muslim-controlled" Nigerian polity. Thus, around 1975-76, during the Obasanjo regime, Christians in Nigeria reacted and thought it would be a good thing for them as a body to have an association that would unite them nationally to discuss and see in what way they can ensure that their rights are respected. Christian leaders called up series of meetings in Lagos. During such meetings, people began to ask what kind of name to give this kind of association. Those who went from the north to represent the northern states had an association. It was called the Christian Association of the North. The northern delegates agreed to suggest that the name of the new organization be Christian Association of Nigeria since it's a country-wide organization. The name was brought forward and it

was accepted and that gave birth to the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) in 1976 (Enwerem, 1995, p. 85).

Through this drive, CAN became a major instrument of the Christians to channel their political demands and also checkmate the supposed increasing political influence of their Muslim counterparts. In other words, CAN became a religious organization fighting for the interests of Christians in Nigeria. For instance, its voice was most audible in the Sharia debate in the politics of the 1970s and 1980s, and the tense Organization of Islamic Conference brouhaha of the 1980s (Onapajo, 2012, p. 50). Also, CAN was on ground as a principal voice during the "petro-naira" or "oil boom" years as it fought for the share of Christians (by clamoring for Christians to be appointed for political positions and all) out of the "national cake" and also clamored for respect for Christians in the Nigerian polity.

What is glaring in all the eras till date is that Nigeria features an interesting context—a situation where there is a consistent "rivalry" and campaign for who gets what between the Christian-dominated South and the Muslim-dominated North. Thus, when CAN emerged, it emerged as a religious interest group, seeking to speak for Christians, make them relevant politically, stand against Islamic hegemony in Nigeria, and ensure that the rights of Christians are respected within the Nigerian polity.

It is interesting to see that the motivation for the birth of CAN and rhetoric at the outset of CAN channelled along the lines of interest protection and a "fight against Islam" now seems to be laden with other activities as well, such as conflict resolution. CAN has recently made it clear that one of its key objectives is to be a strong stakeholder in conflict resolution in Nigeria is "to promote understanding, peace and unity among the various peoples and strata of society in Nigeria…" (CAN, 2013, p 1). The question here is, if indeed CAN is now a faith-based organization actively involved in resolution of conflicts in Nigeria, what is the nature of CAN's conflict resolution effort, what roles has it played and what techniques has it used in conflict resolution in Nigeria?

The CAN has claimed that it has embraced dialogue as a tool for inter-faith relations, peacebuilding in general, and resolution of religious conflicts in particular. CAN asserts that it "has taken its stand at the forefront of the platforms of religious dialogue to promote peaceful conflict resolution from the inception of the nation" (CAN, 2013, p 1).

The CAN and Conflict Resolution in Nigeria: Robust Approach?

As highlighted in the section on the background of the CAN, originally CAN's principal focus was to fight for and defend the rights of Christians in a polity gradually tilting towards "islamicization." However, largely based on recent rhetoric, CAN has claimed that it is principally and actively involved in conflict resolution and peacebuilding in Nigeria. Recently, the CAN stated that one of its mediums of achieving this is through dialogue, recently upgraded to a technique called "progressive religious dialogue." Through this medium, CAN engages other religious leaders from Islam, individuals, and faith-based organizations from a variety of religious backgrounds and affiliations.

FBOs like the CAN can help to create progress in conflict resolution endeavours if resources are channelled along the right lines. The CAN currently has a specific department saddled with the responsibility of building peace and resolving conflicts – the Department of Inter-Faith and Ecumenism. What the CAN does is slightly unusual in Africa and globally – it brings all Christian bodies in the country together under one umbrella. In

addition, the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria (CSN), one of the components of the CAN, also has a department with a major focus on dialogue and peacebuilding. The department, known as the Department of Mission and Dialogue, has created a forum for dialogue between Catholic women and Muslim women. The department has also initiated dialogue between Catholic and Muslim youths (*Omonokhua, 2013, p. 2).*

CAN claims that one of its key objectives is "to promote understanding, peace, and unity among the various peoples and strata of society in Nigeria…" (CAN, 2013, p 1. Riruwai and Ukiwo (2012, p. 5) listed CAN as an upcoming FBO in conflict resolution in Nigeria when they tried to answer the question, "Who is keeping the peace now – and how?" CAN maintains its presence in conflict resolution in Nigeria through a technique recently upgraded to "progressive religious dialogue."

Progressive Religious Dialogue

CAN, the largest faith-based organization in Nigeria, has over the years been a stakeholder in inter-faith relations and conflict resolution in Nigeria. It has embraced dialogue as the primary form of resolution to disruptions and religious crises in particular. CAN retorts that its,

> consistent policy of religious dialogue was based upon the fundamentals of our [Christian] faith which exhort us to 'follow peace with all men' and also we unequivocally subscribe to Article 18 of the United Nations' Universal Declaration on Human Rights which states that, 'Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance. (CAN, 2013, p1)

However, in line with the incessant religious conflicts in Nigeria, CAN recently did an "upgrade" from its "religious dialogue" technique to what it calls "progressive religious dialogue". This move was made in a bid to actively respond to the incessant religious conflicts in Nigeria. The difference between CAN's "dialogue" and the recently introduced "progressive religious dialogue" is that "the overall effects of CAN's conflict resolution efforts and dialogue with conflicting parties in general conflicts and religious conflicts in Nigeria are monitored both locally and internationally with the inclusion of seasoned arbitrators if need be" (CAN 2013, p.1). CAN claims that this shift is in accordance with biblical injunction—"the truth makes free" (Ibid).

The elements of CAN's progressive religious dialogue are in line with what Appleby (2006, pp. 1-2) believes must be in conflict resolution endeavours for them to be successful. Appleby opines that conflict resolution efforts must: have an international or transnational reach, must consistently emphasise peace and avoidance of the use of force in resolving conflict, and must have good relations between different religions in a conflict situation, as this will be the key to a positive input from them. The progressive religious dialogue is also in accordance with the "multilevel" characteristic of conflict resolution described by Ramsbotham et al. (2011)—"Since human conflict is a worldwide phenomenon within an increasingly intricate and interconnected local/global cultural web, this has to be a truly cooperative international enterprise, in terms of both the geographical locations where

conflict is encountered and the conflict resolution initiatives deployed to address them" (p. 8). CAN has therefore called on religious bodies, international governments, and organizations to partner with them to find a lasting and peaceful solution to the real and present conflicts in Nigeria.

Potentials

The role of faith-based organizations like CAN in helping to resolve conflicts and build peace is a crucial component in helping to achieve human development more generally. This is relevant especially in a Nigerian polity where it is believed that Nigerians are highly religious and in fact see themselves first and principally as Christians or Muslims before identifying themselves as Nigerians (Ruby & Shah, 2007). This is seen in the way the Christians for instance throng the Redemption Camp in millions during the monthly meetings of the largest church in the world, The Redeemed Christian Church of God. This is a pointer to the fact that in Nigeria, religious actors are well-respected in certain situations than political leaders. Therefore, when channelled along the right lines and maximized, religious actors and faith-based organizations like CAN can help create progress in conflict resolution efforts in Nigeria. However, CAN has a lot to do if it must play this pivotal role in Nigeria. At the moment, CAN's conflict resolution efforts are not robust enough.

Whilst it is commendable that CAN's efforts are currently geared towards conflict resolution, a lot still needs to be done if CAN must play this pivotal role in a country laden with diverse challenges. For instance, CAN does not have enough trained personnel and adequate capacity. It also does not have an emphatic presence in conflict resolution like the Inter-Faith Mediation Centre (IMC), a FBO with a strong record of involvement in conflict resolution in Nigeria. IMC has successfully intervened in conflicts in Jos, facilitated, mediated, and trained local and traditional rulers on conflict resolution (USIP, 2008).

Conclusion and Recommendations

As rightly stated by Enwerem (1999, p. 121), a paramount imperative in conflict resolution is not only a clear cut understanding of the problem behind the conflict but also the people. CAN needs to create a holistic and non-partisan approach to religious conflicts in Nigeria, one which involves a clear-cut understanding of the problems involved in the relationship between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria and also the needs and wants of Muslims. In other words, there is a need for CAN to understand the problems and causes of religious conflicts in Nigeria and much more the agents behind it. Even though CAN has made several efforts to aid peacebuilding in Nigeria, it is right to say that CAN's conflict resolution efforts are not yet holistic.

CAN can play a special role in the Nigerian polity but its conflict resolution programs do not need to be confined to addressing religious conflict only. CAN's conflict resolution role should be diverse, ranging from high level mediation to training and peacebuilding through development at the grassroots. As stated by Smock (2001, p. 1; also see Smock, 2006), peace can be often promoted most efficiently by introducing conflict resolution components into more traditional relief and development activities.

Finally, to build a robust conflict resolution unit, especially in religious conflicts in Nigeria, CAN needs to develop it manpower, professionalize what its Department of Faith and Ecumenism does and move beyond war of words as a conflict resolution mechanism to rock solid actions which seek to tackle root causes of conflicts in Nigeria. No doubt, in line with its motto, "that they all may be one," CAN as the largest faith-based organization in Nigeria has a role to play for peace, unity, and tranquillity to reign in Nigeria.

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