TOPIC: Religion And World Peace/Conflict In The Twenty-First Century

By

Ven. Jonathan O. Dimobika Ph.D

Lecturer in History of Christianity (Church History),

Department of Religious Studies,

Imo State University, Owerri

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ABSTRACT

Religion by its very essence and nature is thought to be a ready tool for the resolution of conflicts and the attainment of peace in the world. However, instead of being the expected umpire for peace, religion has rather been implicated as a causative agent for conflicts and wars throughout the world, whether implicitly or explicitly. So, why does religion seem to be playing such an ambivalent role and what is the place of religion in the attainment of world peace or otherwise in this present era of the twenty-first century? This research was conducted using the historical, sociological and phenomenological methods, to determine the nature of religion and how and why it plays such an ambivalent role. It was discovered that religion, when well handled and managed, will yield peaceful outcomes. However, if it is mishandled and mismanaged, then it becomes a potential source of conflicts and wars. The negative aspect of religion thus lies in the madness of some so-called religionists who try to convert and win followers by hook and by crook, rather than adhering to proper instructions and guidance. The recommendations are that, in order to reap the benefits of religion as an agent of world peace, interfaith dialogue should be encouraged among the different faith communities to enable them have better understanding of each other and also to be more tolerant of each other. Also religion and peacemaking programmes and bodies should be established by governments and non-governmental organizations to map out programmes in consultation with faith groups for encouraging peaceful co-existence.

Introduction: Scholars, Diplomatic experts and world leaders agree that peace is an essential ingredient for the attainment of any meaningful development and the development of full human potentials in the world. But it is also obvious that, as important and as essential as it is, the attainment of peace is often an elusive phenomenon. Instead of peace, conflicts and wars continue to abound and spread in the world. Then in a bid to resolve these conflicts, one would think that religion by its very essence and nature will be a ready tool for the resolution of the conflicts and the attainment of peace. As Dhammanannda observed in an Internet Article titled, The Role of Religion in promoting World peace:

> Religion has a definite role to play in people's search for world peace. The moral principles and values contained in the teachings of great religious teachers are essential factors for reduction and ultimate eradication of greed, hatred and delusion – which form the root cause of various conflicts and wars both within and without, (www.drbachinese.org).

However, instead of being the expected umpire for peace, religion has also rather been implicated as a causative agent for conflicts and wars throughout the world even up to the contemporary era of the twenty-first century, whether implicitly or explicitly. According to a report from the United State's Institute for Peace, titled; Religion in world affairs: Its role in conflict and peace; it partly states that "throughout the world, no major religion is exempt from complicity in violent conflict" (www.usip.org). A report from War and World Religions agrees to this assertion by noting that "many wars have been fought with religion as their stated cause and with peace as their hoped for end," (www.ppu.org.uk). So, why does religion seem to be playing such ambivalent roles and what is the place of religion in the attainment/achievement of world peace or otherwise in this present era of the twenty-first century when peaceful co-

existence is so much desired among the nations and peoples of the world and the eradication of conflicts also very much desired? These are the poignant questions that this paper investigated.

DEFINITION OF TERMS:

Ugwu (1999:7) defines **Religion** as "the irresistible urge in man (*homo religiosus*) to relate well with his Creator-God and his fellow human beings in order to obtain salvation in the sacred realm." From this definition, we get the phrase 'to relate well' with regards to the meaning of religion, which thus points to that peaceful tendency in religion. Thompson (1996:856) also defines religion as "a particular system of faith and worship."

The term **'World Peace'** is taken as a single term in this paper, though they could initially be defined separately as two distinct words – **'world'** and **'peace.'** According to Thompson (1996:1377), the term 'world' means the earth, with all its countries, peoples and natural features. Thompson also defines 'peace' as a situation or a period of time in which there is no war or violence in a country or an area. Thus the concept of world peace or peace on earth is an envisaged condition of cessation of all forms of violence among the nations of the world leading to the entrenchment of freedom and peaceful co-existence among and within all nations and peoples. The concept and notion of world peace is presently being actively promoted by certain interest groups such as the World Peace Corp and others according to the worldpeace.org website (www.worldpeace.org.uk).

Hornby (2001: 239) defines **conflict** as a situation in which peoples, groups or countries are involved in a serious disagreement or argument. He further explains it as a violent situation or period of fighting between two countries, etc.

The **Twenty-first Century** is the present century or age of existence on earth according to the Gregorian calendar. It commenced from the year 2001 with the ushering in of the new millennium and will last until 2100.

The Ambivalent Role of Religion in Motivating Both Peace and Conflict:

Religion can be likened to a double-edged sword which should be handled carefully. Thus if religion is handled properly and carefully, it will be a potential vehicle for peace and tranquility in the world since all major religions of the world have peace as one of their pillars and watchword. However if religion is mishandled or mismanaged, it becomes a potential source of conflicts and wars. Dhammanannda (cited earlier) expressed both thoughts when he noted that:

> Religion not only inspires and guides people but also provides them with the necessary tools to reduce greed with the practice of charity; to overcome hate and aversion with loving-kindness and to remove ignorance with the development of wisdom and insight in order to understand the true nature of beings and see things as they really are. The negative aspects of religion lie in the madness of some so-called religionists who try to convert and win followers by hook or by crook, rather than adhering to proper instruction and guidance. The purposeful interpretation of scriptural texts for various ulterior motives has led to religious persecutions, inquisitions, and "holy wars." These terribly awful experiences have really marred the very name "religion."

Thus religion itself which may mean either "belief in a superhuman controlling power, especially in a personal God entitled to obedience and worship" or "a particular system of faith and worship" (Thompson 1996), could be seen as a good thing in itself. This is because adherence to religion or worship of God requires conformity to a prescribed or 'godly' way of life since God

4

is thought to be holy and peace-loving and the adherents are expected to follow suit. However the negative side of religion arises from the misapplication of religious sentiments resulting to religious fanaticism, extremism and fundamentalism. These then precipitate religious wars, conflicts and even terrorism.

Furthermore, instead of a decreasing influence of religion in human and world affairs as earlier erroneously predicted by experts, religion is rather having an increasing influence. According to Smock (2008) of the United States' Institute for peace, it was observed in their report that "in recent decades, religion has assumed unusual prominence in international affairs." The report cites a recent article in *The Economist* which asserts that if ever there was a global drift toward secularism, it has been reversed. In the article, Philip Jenkins, a noted Scholar from Pennsylvania State University predicts that when historians look back at the century they will see religion as "the prime animating and destructive force in human affairs, guiding attitudes to political liberty and obligation, concepts of nationhood and of course conflicts and wars." (www.usip.org). The report finally points out that several violent world events emanating from religious conflicts only serve to confirm in the popular mind that religion lies behind much of contemporary international conflicts.

The Rising Tide of Religiously motivated Conflicts around the World

All around the world, the spate of religiously motivated violence has continued to increase in recent years. Some Scholars are of the view that almost all the major world religions are implicated in the spate of conflicts. Smock (2008) cited earlier, points out that, all over the world, no major religion is exempt from complicity in violent conflict. He thus noted that:

Religious conviction certainly was one of the motivations for the September 11 attacks and other violent actions by Muslim extremists in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Some Buddhist monks assert an exclusively Buddhist identity in Sri Lanka, fanning the flames of conflict there. Some Christians and Muslim leaders from Yugoslavia saw themselves as protecting their faiths when they defended violence against the opposing faith communities in the Balkan war.

Furthermore, the Middle East crises which is a recurring decimal in world affairs and which seem to hold a major key to world crises or peace is also fuelled and instigated by religious sentiments and struggle between Jews, Muslims and Christians. One major bone of contention there is who controls the 'holy' city of Jerusalem which all the three lay claim to with historical evidence.

Presently militant Islamic groups and sects are spearheading religious conflicts, wars and terrorism around the world. According to a report by the United States' Department of State (2015), cited by Punch newsonline, many fundamentalist Islamic groups which have degenerated to terrorist groups around the world were cited with statistics for the killings they perpetrated in 2013 and 2014. It noted that the Boko haram group operating in Northern Nigeria killed the highest number of people during the period, causing about 8,239 deaths. The Islamic State (ISIS) operating in both Iraq and Syria killed about 8,038 people, while the Taliban group in Afghanistan caused 5,848 deaths. The Al-Shabab group in Somalia killed about 1,539 people in the period while the Maoist/communist party of India killed 188, (The Nigerian Punch Newspaper, 27/6/2015). These mostly religiously instigated killings, conflicts, violence, wars and terrorist attacks have greatly affected the situation of people in the affected parts of the

world, causing agony and displacing people from their homes and forcing them to become refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs).

Religion And World Peace: What Hope in our Contemporary World and Age?

Despite all the misgivings and negative portrayals of religion by extremists and fundamentalists as potential cause of conflicts, many experts as well as true practitioners of religion acknowledge religion as a potential source of peace and peacemaking. Iruonagbe (2009: 153) notes that "Religion, ideally is not an arena of conflict. Rather, it is man's attempt to find and maintain peaceful relations with the supernatural and his fellow human beings." He however notes that, the unfortunate thing is that the management of religion and organization of different bodies of believers and worshippers have given rise to conflicts. Thus the problem is not with religion itself but with the managers and handlers of religion. In the same vein, Smock (2008) of the United States' Institute for Peace notes that "with so much emphasis on religion as a source of conflict, the role of religion as a force in peace building is usually overlooked." It then points to religious affiliation and conviction as often motivating religious communities to advocate particular peace-related government policies. Religious communities also directly oppose repression and promote peace and reconciliation. Thus religious leaders and institutions can mediate in conflict situations, serve as a communication link between opposing sides and provide training in peace making negotiations.

Thus when genuine efforts are made to put these strategies into action, the positive potentials of religion as an agent and harbinger of peace will be realized while the negative connotations will be diminished considerably. Religion will then truly be serving and fulfilling part of its purpose

of helping to make the world a better place to live in while also preparing people for life in the other world.

Conclusion And Recommendations

Given the potential prospect of religion for both peace and conflict, it should therefore be better channeled and exploited to achieve the much desired peace and to minimize conflicts. This should be done by strongly discouraging the negative aspects of religion such as fanaticism, fundamentalism and extremism, through regular training and enlightenment of the adherents by religious leader and even State officials.

- Similar bodies like the United States Institute for peace should be established by nations where Religion and peacemaking programmes should be experimented with and encouraged.
- Furthermore, inter-religious and inter-faith dialogue should be encouraged among the different faith groups to enable them have more understanding of each other and also be more tolerant of each other. Thus if religion could be more carefully handled and harnessed, it could yield more dividends for world peace instead of the present escalation of conflicts and wars around the world.

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