



The Role of Religious Textual Interpretation Towards Reducing Insecurity in Nigeria: A Christian Theological Approach

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Abstract

This research stands on the assumption that religion is indispensable to human existence. It is a medium through which God communicates His benevolent intentions for humanity. Given the context of human sinful conditions, religion has always been used either for good or bad objectives. As a critical analysis of the existing textual reference for human actions, this research seeks to acquiesce the negatives in religion by arguing that more attention should be paid to religious texts that promote the greater good of human co-existence. This requires that scholars and practitioners should interpret texts in ways that are constructive rather than destructive. To construct better human relations, Jesus Christ set an exemplary model for the re-interpretation of texts that seem to breed tension and violence in human society, which we can extrapolate in accordance with God's agenda for human existence on his own terms. This direction is very important for scholars and preachers to explore in academics and worship places, and it could be one of the best approaches to remedying the precarious situation in Nigeria.

Keywords: Religion, Justice, Human society, Violence, Textual interpretation, Peace

Introduction

Historical evidence has put religion on both sides of the positives and negatives. Positively, we have seen that religion has brought tremendous development in different societies. Here in Nigeria, Christian missionaries who brought the gospel came along with development projects such as education, health care, agriculture and other important development



concepts. Apart from these, the ethical dimension through catechetical teachings inculcated some enlightenment orientation on personal and collective development. Many great nationalists in Nigeria were products of this missionary enterprise and the impact has continued to grow. Nevertheless, the ugly side of religion has also been witnessed as many people have seen religion as an instrument to destabilize society when various sects within one religion or different religions fight among themselves over doctrinal, economic and political interests. This has led to persistent tension, violence and destruction of lives and property. Most scholars pay more attention to the political, economic, nepotism, and other forms of control as causes of religious violence in Nigeria.

Religion has been a driving force in shaping human society for thousands of years. However, throughout history, certain religious texts have been interpreted in a way that promotes violence and conflict. Jesus Christ, the central figure of Christianity, offers a unique perspective on the interpretation of violent religious texts. His teachings and actions exemplify the true essence of peace, compassion, and love, often contradicting violent interpretations. In examining the interpretation of violent religious texts, it is important to recognize that context plays a crucial role. Many religious texts, including the Bible, contain passages that condone or even promote violence. However, it is essential to consider the historical and cultural context in which these texts were written and understand their intended messages. This research opines that this negative trend can be stemmed by reconsidering an interpretive approach that can harmonize other texts that advocate for the love of humanity.

Is religion an instrument for human destruction?

As we continue to experience violence in our society today, this fundamental question has been begging for answers: “How can men and women live in reasonable peace and security without subordinating themselves to the arbitrary demands of a tyrant?” (Wilson & Herrnstein, 1985: 13-14). Though the authors treat this more from the psychological factors with a sociological slant, which stems from the individual’s constitution, I wish to draw in the religious dimension in dealing with this question to address both the ontic and environmental aspects.

Religion, by its very nature, is supposed to adduce a great difference in criminal tendencies because of the teachings of reward and punishment (Dilulio, 2009). McCain (2014) believes that “religions provide us with the moral framework which provides structure and stability in life” (ix). The promise of reward for violence against humanity should be completely acquiesced. The problem of criminality and religious violence is partly rooted in various factors such as economic, loose laws, family upbringing, abuse of substance and other social influences (Wilson and Herrnstein, 1998). Though religion is supposed to induce good behaviour, the global practical reality shows the reverse which in some instances very deeply religious people precipitate the destruction of lives to please God and attain rewards in heaven (Dilulio, 2009). This is the greatest crime against humanity in the name of God.

However, the question is whether it is intellectually logical for human beings to help God in physical battles so as to inflict pain on other people in his name. Is it not God that should fight for his own people in his own chosen ways? A striking lesson can be drawn in the book of Judges 6:28-31, the worshippers of Baal came to fight against Gideon for violating their god but his father, Joash advised them that if their god is real and living, let him fight for himself. This logic stemmed from the religious tension that these people came fuming with and they withdrew.

On the contrary, it is God who fights for his people (Exod. 14:14; Deut. 3:22; 20:4) because he says a number of times that the battle is his (1Sam. 17:47; 2Chron. 20:15). And for Christians, Scripture teaches that the battle we are involved in is spiritual rather than physical (Eph. 6:12). This means we are engaging with the mindset by setting the principles of godliness against ungodliness. If God is Spirit and all things pertaining to him are spiritual, it is vain glory to turn his battles into physical ones where human lives and property are destroyed. Humanity are servants of God but there are certain obligations that are exclusively his prerogative such as punishment by death except as the law confers such powers upon the state to fight against crime, rather than individuals or certain groups of religious people.



Those who wish to minimize the value of religion in human well-being opine that comparative studies have shown modern Japan, which is relatively less religious than the Latin-America to have lower crime rates whereas the latter prides itself in high crime rates despite its higher religious practices (Dilulio, 2009). This comparison implies as if Japan is less religious but this is misinformation. Other research works have shown that religion plays a role in the politics and national life of Japan, (Toyoda, 2002; Beyers, 2015) though may not be exactly the same as it does in other countries such as Latin America and even in Africa.

The failure of some countries that are religious is not the failure of religion in itself but that of those who fail to imbibe the positive teachings of religion. God remains good even when people fail to do it and this is the case of religion. Religion is like a mirror that only shows e deficiency upon one's self but does not take it away but for the person to remedy one's appearance. Godly religious principles expose our depraved nature so that we can seek genuine transformation by the power of God and be a new people. Practitioners of Christianity and Islam should therefore promote religious teachings that extol virtues that breed a healthy society and bind humanity together. A number of scholarships (Dilulio, 2009, citing Wilson & Herrnstein, 1985:119) have lamented the disappointing face of religion: "The uncertainty we face in attempting to assess the influence of religion on family life is but a special case of the general problem of understanding the relationship of personal traits, family processes, cultural values, and the development of human character".

Many people have different views about the use of religion. Mastin (2011) explains the Marxist view on this:

Karl Marx saw religion as a political tool utilized by the oppressing ruling classes, arguing that it is in the interests of the ruling classes to instil in the masses the religious conviction that their current suffering will lead to eventual happiness so that they will not attempt to make any genuine effort to understand and overcome the real source of their suffering. It was on this basis that he described religion as 'the opium of the people (para. 5)

This perspective has a huge influence on many people but a lot more other people think otherwise. Much of what Marx said is the ugly reality because the privileged powerful people see religion as an easy tool that can be used to achieve so many gains for themselves. Politicians use religion to achieve their political gains (Gwamna, 2014). The fact that religion and politics mutually inform one another provides room for being used both negatively and positively. Religion has religionized politics and vice versa because all things are viewed from both angles in Nigeria. Politicians have used religion as a strong tool for political control and such a relationship between religion and politics has rather heightened the existing tensions (Oshewolo & Maren, 2015; Beyers, 2015). In the same way, politics has found its space in religion.

God’s Purpose in creating a religious humanity

All human societies need justice and this must be rooted in the plan of God. God’s agenda in a fallen world is “doing righteousness and justice” (Wright, 2006: 363). Again, Wright argues that there is an ethical pedagogy that is founded on the concept of the “The way of the Lord,” which shapes the religious explication of his people with universal implications (363). God’s intention for human society is for it to flourish. The original creation with all its beauty and excellence declares this wonderful intention. This means a comprehensive agenda that takes everyone into account for all the benefits with which God has endowed the earth. From the perspective of God, this is an all-inclusive agenda. “He administers justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the stranger, giving him food and clothing” (Deut. 10:18). This justice derives from the very nature of God. He prescribes this justice system and hands it to us to establish in our societies. “The ethical challenge to God’s people is, first, to recognize the mission of God that provides the heartbeat of their very existence and, then, to respond in ways that express and facilitate it rather than deny and hinder it” (Wright, 2006:357). This means that true worshipers of God must bear his semblance in the world by intent and conduct to mould a better world. God’s intervention in human affairs is to tackle the unjust realities that assail humanity and he commands us to cooperate with him. This intervention and command owe to God’s ownership of the entire universe.



God owns everything that humanity possesses, including culture. This means all humanity can only move and have its being in God, which is the essence of true religion (Acts 17:28). This means our attitude, culture, and social relationships all derive from the providential character of God so that apart from him, we can do nothing (Jn. 15:5). We should understand culture as “what human beings do with God’s creation. The marks of the fall permeate it. We see cruelty in human government, nihilism in human art, lies in human journalism. But redemption changes people comprehensively so that they carry God’s wisdom into their workplaces: compassion and justice into government, meaning into art, truth and journalism” (Frame, 2010, Foreword, X). The redemptive work of Christ is an expression of the highest care and concerns that God has for the entire creation, both for humanity and nature, so that as he seeks to reconcile the world to himself, so also should we be reconciled with one another and strive to live peacefully (2Cor. 5:19; Rom. 8:19-22). On this note, “The gospel has motivated God’s people to care for widows and orphans, to build hospitals, to paint and sculpt, to oppose tyranny, to take God’s Word to the ends of the world” (Frame, 2010, Foreword, XI).

Religion is not supposed to be against the people and their well-being. It is supposed to stand with the people and fight against the evil forces and systems that work against the good of humanity. This fight is not necessarily violent but working to effect changes in the interest of the best against the worst. Bavinck (2008) argues that “If the Christian religion of today wants to regain its lost influence and become a blessing to society, its attitude will have to change radically” (120). While this is addressed primarily to Christianity, it is also applicable to other religions that claim to be worshipping the one true God. In other words, the dividing wall between the high class and low class should be brought down so that the resources of the wealthy would seek to address the plight of the downtrodden. This stands on the premise that the gospel of Jesus was focused on the poor (Bavinck, 2008). While God allows human freedom in human society, he does not institute imbalances in it such that the privileged are not supposed to lord over the less privileged ones. Rather the law that God gave to his people in the Old Testament was to invigorate piety, morality and civility in

the society which could be summed up as “all power in Israel had a servant character...” (Bavinck, 2008:124).

Bavinck however, seems to be in self-conflict when he asserts that Jesus “never stood up directly for the poor and oppressed, the widows and orphans, the slaves and the day labourers as such” but “accepts social conditions as he finds them and never tries to bring about a change or improvement in them” (Bavinck, 2008:130). This position of Bavinck is in sharp contradiction to the proclamation of Christ in Luke 4: 18: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed.” This is much too plain to state the case for Jesus standing for the downtrodden except for any exegesis that seeks to turn this upside down. And we cannot over-spiritualize this at the expense of the physical and social needs of the whole person. The whole person needs a comprehensive redemptive package which God has provided in Christ and our sinful human agenda should not stand in the way of God. Rather, we are required to obediently join God in bringing healing and justice to the fallen world. And even if Christ did not lay down an explicit doctrine for social transformation in several passages of Scripture, he condemned the social structures that held many to perpetual injustice. Though his work was primarily spiritual redemption, he never ignored the physical negative forces against humanity and practically changed a number of situations.

The best of religious teaching can be judged by the positive impact that it throws out into society. Though Calvin had his lapses, he adopted an approach to draw out the best of religious teaching that would bring transformation to society. His doctrine of predestination excited great responses from believers whose positive attitudes towards work resulted in the birth of capitalism. The doctrine teaches that God, from eternity, has chosen people for salvation, and such people must demonstrate practically in their personal lives in all their social and vocational engagements that they are truly heavenly citizens. Religion is not supposed to diminish humanity but to exact the best in them for the common good and divine glory.



Both Luther and Calvin taught that labour, which is construed in social relations is for the glory of God (Weber, 2004). Weber has extensively provided great insights to support the religious agenda for the good of humanity as he says:

The world exists to serve the glorification of God and for that purpose alone. The elected Christian is in the world only to increase this glory of God by fulfilling His commandments to the best of his ability. But God requires the social achievement of the Christian because He wills that social life shall be organized according to His commandments, in accordance with that purpose (64).

This understanding and teaching influenced believers to strive for a work ethic that would be pleasing to God with bountiful fruits for their enjoyment. This brought a spontaneous and unprecedented economic boost in the West. Furthermore, the wonderfully purposeful organization and arrangement of this world is, according to both the revelation of the Bible and natural intuition, evidently created by God to serve the utility of mankind (Weber, 2004:64). Believers' actions are evidence of the good God that they serve. Thus "their action originated from the faith caused by God's grace, and this faith in turn justified itself by the quality of that action" (Weber, 2004: 68). This teaching forged a life system that is not just for the private life of the Christian but collectively for the economic and social structures as a comprehensive whole (Weber, 2004:71). People have made use of religion in various ways, some in unhelpful ways while others in great ways. There is so much to be applauded in religion for its positive contributions which is the goal of this work to advance.

God has revealed all that is good for humanity to know and practice. This knowledge of the good is not merely the rituals that are to be done directly to God in order to appease him. The good pertains to our ethical conduct. God is indeed concerned with what we do to one another than what we think we are doing directly to him. True love of God begins with love of fellow human beings (1Jn. 3:10-18; Jas. 1:27). What God calls good is good and that is what God has revealed to humanity to exemplify. In the prophetic

proclamation of Micah God has shown humanity three fundamental things justice, mercy and humility. These three virtues constitute a strong dosage for human society to be healthy. God requires justice because it flows from his character. Injustice is the cradle of all evil because it deprives vulnerable people of the quality of life that they should enjoy.

The success of this justice agenda in human society stands on the human virtues of justice, mercy and humility. One of the key texts is Micah 6:8: “He has shown you, O man, what *is* good; And what does the LORD require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?” The prophet cried out against injustice in the old Israeli society in the 8th century BCE. The society was thoroughly evil spanning from wicked religious practices involving human sacrifice to social evil such as corruption, indiscriminate murders, economic imbalances which steeped the poverty of the poor, bribery and corruption, etc (Mic. 3:1-3; Isa. 1:17). The rulers reconstructed the practical antithesis between good and evil by normalizing and promoting evil over good. Those who controlled society never felt conscientious about how they deliberately dehumanized their own citizens. Though Israel was a theocratic nation under God, they were not bothered about their accountability to him. The people became weary of God’s demands upon them and probably sought autonomy (Mic. 6:3; Isa. 43:22; Mal. 1:13; 3:14). They rather thought that they could “bribe” him with big sacrifices so that he could overlook their crimes (Mic. 6:6-7). How then do we stem the tide of insecurity that is framed through religious preaching and keep with the good purpose of religion as a reformatory instrument?

The problem of violent texts: Christ’s interpretive method

There is a plethora of writings on religious violence in Nigeria but surprisingly, there is almost nothing linking to the interpretation of texts from which violence is incited. Perhaps, the fundamentalist attitude that easily combusts violently is presumed in certain texts but no explicit mention of that is the case. Sampson (2012) comes close to hitting right on the issue of texts where religious fundamentalism erupts when he references “critical preaching” and “monopoly of salvation and truth” that disparages another religion (120). Sulaiman (2016) also concurs with this causal factor



where provocative preaching arises from either “misinterpretation” or outright “mischief” when “scriptural texts have been given whimsical and capricious interpretations towards predetermined ends” (91).

In the Old Testament, the Mosaic tradition of retribution renders: “But if any harm follows, then thou shalt give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe” (Exod. 21:23-25; cf. Lev. 24:17-22). This law seems to warrant individuals to adjudicate justice by themselves and does not allow for tolerance, which on the one hand might appear to rid the society of criminal offense by fear of retribution. But this has not been proven to always achieve its results. In Jesus’ teachings, which are called Sermons on the Mount or the Beatitudes, he addressed this issue. It is interesting that no one particularly had issues with some of these teachings but Jesus knew how important they were in human society as they were reoccurring issues in human relationships.

Though Christ came to fulfill the OT, his goal was not to enforce an interpretive tradition that would induce violence. Even in dealing with enemies, Christ introduced a new understanding that intends a smooth societal co-existence.

Ye have heard that it was said, an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: but I say unto you, resist not him that is evil: but whosoever smiteth thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man would go to law with thee, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away. Ye have heard that it was said, Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy: but I say unto you, love your enemies, and pray for them that persecute you (Matt. 5:38-44; cf. Lk. 6:27-36).

Calvin (1999) explained in this text that the judicial application was the prerogative of the state, not individuals or groups of persons as the Jews of Jesus’ time misunderstood as much as some people in our time would. And Jesus’ teaching is to further create emotional stability despite any offense

(Calvin, 1999). Though it is quite challenging for anyone in his or her natural volition to let go of any injury unjustly inflicted upon one, it seems that Christ's unique interpretation of this law that "believers should learn to forget the wrongs that have been done them, — that they should not, when injured, break out into hatred or ill-will, or wish to commit an injury on their part, — but that, the more the obstinacy and rage of wicked men was excited and inflamed, they should be the more fully disposed to exercise patience" (p. Calvin, 1999, 197). This new dimension of responding to offense may not be natural to human experience except by learning to adapt to it.

Those who seek the consistency of the rule of God in our society hold that believers "must expend their energy in faithfully proclaiming the gospel and bringing the peaceful, reconciliation-seeking way of life to bear within the church community" (VanDrunen, 2009: 334). This text is a component of Jesus' sermons on the Mount, which present a comprehensive picture of what God wants us to do in his own world. The human relational aspect of the teaching is unique such as non-retaliation on a personal note as well as loving even an enemy which is not ordinary for anyone.

On another occasion, a woman was caught in adultery and by Jewish tradition, she was to be stoned (Jn. 8:3-11). What was curious about this scenario was the fact that it takes two people to commit adultery but the Jews saw nothing wrong in holding only one person responsible for breaking the Mosaic Law. Where was the man? This is the unanswered question but they insisted on killing this woman by stoning. Jesus tactically showed them how skewed their understanding of religious legal applications sometimes manifested. When he allowed that the one who has never sinned before should be the first to cast a stone, their conscience condemned them and exposed them before the divine light to which they all fell short and they all dispersed. Christ wants us to be humane in our mentality and understanding of God's intention for our co-existence.

Jesus' approach was like a shocker to the conservative Jewish authorities whose pride would not allow an enemy to see them as weak people. In his book, Neusner (2000) presents a Jewish reaction against Jesus on a number of grounds, and he shows why Christians would follow Jesus but Jews



would rather follow the Mosaic Torah. Jesus thought that as the world progressed and advanced in civilization, certain changes were necessary while not deleting the old traditions. The Jews thought that the world was static and so also were their traditions. However, Jesus' approach introduces a dimension in human religious practice that seeks to bring humanity together in harmonious existence despite the possibilities of conflicts and offences that are inevitable in all human relationships. It shows that not all scriptural givens must be practised the way they are scripted. The necessary dynamism in religious practice requires that we extract the best of the teachings in religion that are constructive to human prosperity.

Jesus challenged the violent interpretations of religious texts prevalent during his time. He consistently emphasized love, forgiveness, and peace as central tenets of his teachings. In Matthew 5:38-39, Jesus counters the Old Testament's "eye for an eye" principle by saying, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also." Furthermore, Jesus' actions often contradicted violent interpretations. When confronted with violence, Jesus responded with nonviolent resistance, such as when he stopped his disciples from using force to defend him during his arrest. Jesus' final act, the crucifixion, is a powerful testament to his commitment to nonviolence. Despite being unjustly persecuted, he chose not to retaliate, instead offering forgiveness and salvation to his oppressors.

Jesus' message of love and peace fundamentally challenges the interpretation of religious texts that promote violence. He summons his followers to "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). This radical commandment challenges the notion of vengeance and encourages believers to transcend their natural inclination towards violence. Additionally, Jesus demonstrated compassion and empathy towards the marginalized and outcasts of society. He continually upheld the dignity and worth of every human being, nurturing a spirit of inclusivity rather than exclusion. This

inclusive approach stands in stark contrast to violent interpretations of religious texts that seek to divide and discriminate.

The apostolic tradition follows the interpretive method of Christ. The apostle Paul says that we can and should overcome evil with good, not evil with evil (Rom. 12:21). This is the hallmark of the Christian life, which is exemplary, exclusive and distinctive, and the return of good over evil is the melting point for the true gospel. Henry (2004) comments on Rom. 12:21 thus: “Recompense to no man evil for evil. That is a brutish recompense, befitting only animals, which are not conscious of any being above them, or of any existence hereafter. And not only do, but study and take care to do, that which is amiable and creditable, and recommends religion to all with whom you converse” (1803). Notably, repaying evil with evil can only double the magnitude and effect of evil, just as responding to evil with good both reduces its tally and increases the sum of good (Stott, 2012). Our human dignity and respect for one another are anchored on a constant quest for peaceful co-existence irrespective of our differences.

This perspective of changing the interpretive principle can effectively tame the tide of religious violence because “the charismatic nature of the authority of preachers and religious scholars... may be expected to facilitate their influence over the worldviews and discursive frames employed by their followers” (Ehrhardt, 2016: 340). Furthermore, “Together, high trust in religious leaders and the intimate interactions between religious leaders and their followers suggest that these leaders can have a considerable impact on what their followers think (their ‘discursive frames’)” (Ehrhardt, 2016: 341).

Religious scholars in Nigeria owe those who are not well taught in religious matters a good sense of direction that would make their followers more responsible towards one another. Good religious teachers should be concerned about developing the country in healthy ways rather than indoctrinating attitudes that would breed more destruction. For the Christian scripture, it is important the OT war texts be harmonized with the NT texts, following the teachings of Christ and the apostolic traditions. While the apostolic tradition was not ignorant of the OT war contexts, it completely



emphasized love, patience, forgiveness, tolerance, doing good to one another, and spiritual battles through prayers rather than physical assault. This development followed the principle of reconciliation that God initiated in Christ to bring humanity back to him and also improve relationships among humanity. This explains why Christ emphasized that the commandments of God hinged on the love of God and the love of neighbour (Matt. 22:36-40).

A fundamental misconception in Islamic theology which probably becomes an impediment in Muslim-Christian relations is what (Byimui, 2013) calls the principle of abrogation as “some Muslim scholars argue that Islam abrogation of Judaism and Christianity is obvious since Islam is the last in the series of God’s revelation of the Divine Will” (111). With this conviction, the difficulty in resolving this is challenging. As we slowly progress towards civilization in Nigeria, religious scholars and preachers should consciously see the task of religion mainly as accelerating better life and development as a way of worshipping God. This can be achieved through re-interpreting violent texts in the religious scriptures by eliminating the call to violence in the name of God as Christ has exemplified. While we cannot re-write those texts, we can replace their old meaning with new meaning in keeping with our growing civility.

Human criminality is an inherent problem in human nature that the law alone can only address externally. Therefore, it requires a combined effort of religion which deals with the internal character of human nature and the law to achieve a complete result. A refined religious orientation is the best antidote for human criminality. The focus of religion is upon the heart to seek its repentance. Several punishments could not change the obstinate idolatrous behaviour of Israel and God decided to introduce another method: “And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh” (Ezek. 36:26-27; cf. Ezek. 11:19, Jer. 31:33; 32:39-40, Heb. 8:10). While the law can make one to be convicted, regretful and remorseful of crime or sin (Rom. 7:7-8), religion indulges repentance, which relates to the deep intellectual and emotional recesses of the whole person. This underscores the essentiality of religion in dealing with the grave impact of

the sinful human condition. Research has shown how the incarceration of criminals only puts temporary restrictions on them but a real change of heart from the crime comes from religious and other psychological approaches.

The positive impact of religion on human development is evident in many human societies, including Nigeria, and the indispensability of religion for human stability is cogent as Hubbard (2014) argues:

When religion is not influential in a society or has ceased to be, the state inherits the entire burden of public morality, crime and intolerance. It then must use punishment and police. Yet this is unsuccessful as morality, integrity and self-respect not already inherent in the individual, cannot be enforced with any great success. Only by a spiritual awareness and inculcation of the spiritual value of these attributes can they come about. There must be more reason and more emotional motivation to be moral, etc., than the threat of human discipline (para. 25).

We definitely have a big challenge when we come face to face with some of the passages in the OT that spewed violence. However, we can note that the OT was a peculiar context, in which under a theocratic rule, the national identity of the Jewish people inevitably erupted in political struggles against the surrounding nations. Nevertheless, we are not required to take all those violent moments as general paradigms for replication by all people at all times (Ford, 2020; Collins, 2004).

Drawing on the Positive Teachings of Scripture

A number of scholars have affirmed the transformational power of religion when properly harnessed (Lederach, 1996, 1997; Appleby, 2000; Smock, 2006). If religious education should be focused on the positive aspects of religion (Silvestri and Mayall, 2015), then the textual interpretation and preaching are even more critical. The problem however is that religious followers do not understand the exact meaning of certain texts which might not be necessarily understood literally and they depend on the interpretation of religious leaders. Therefore, such interpreters should lay more emphasis



on “humane concepts” that would help both Christian and Islamic religions in Nigeria to develop a more non-violent attitude (Abu-Nimer, 2003). This stance should help in generating narratives that underscore “human dignity and reconciliation” (Silvestri and Mayall, 2015:71).

In discussing the best teachings in religions that should be advanced for the good of Nigerian society, I have chosen some OT texts as the basis for this discourse because Christians and Muslims agree on some basic OT ideas, though with some variations, having emerged from the Abrahamic faith. The OT contains both positive and negative texts which religious adherents try to draw from in exacerbating crisis. The point of this writing is to argue that adherents of these two religions should learn to bring out the best of their positive teachings that can harmonize and develop a healthy society. But before delving into what those best teachings are, the question is: what is the basis for selecting those teachings? Who determines how the society should be managed, the Creator or the creature? These questions are very important because humanity has perpetrated moral evil in the world in alarming ways and the question of human origin and accountability is important for re-orienting our minds.

The secular scientific view does not recognize the creation trajectory but elevates the evolutionary framework. And if there is no creation, then there is no creator to be accountable to. However, the case for scientific evolution has failed to answer many critical questions about the complexity and organic functional universe. Several attempts to argue God out of existence have also failed as some world-acclaimed atheists surrendered their views to theism (Flew & Varghese, 2007; Marsh, 2012; Blanchard, 2016). Therefore, we rest with the Creator-creature framework which pushes us to consider that as the Creator it must be God who determines the worth and sanctity of the creation. The worth and sanctity of the creation proceeds from the character of the Creator who bestows all the benevolent values upon it. There must be a purpose for any act of God and this includes our world.

The OT portrays God as the creator and owner of the universe. God invested goodness in the creation which makes it intrinsically good. This goodness flows from the goodness of God. The earth belongs to the Lord and its fullness (Ps. 24:1). By virtue of being the Creator, God is the landlord and title holder while human beings are tenants, which places us in a subservient position to him (Wright, 2006). As tenants, we are required to treat our estate well as part of our worship and honour to God, our landlord. God conferred a cultural mandate to humanity to take control of the cosmos (Gen.1:26-29). Control of the universe is an act of worship and true worship of God requires that our “strong motivation is the compassionate response to the reality of human need – all the physical, mental, emotional and social dimensions of our fractured human condition. So we are motivated to tackle the destructive effects of sin in all those areas too, through medical, social, educational and economic action” (Wright, 2006: 416).

Like Christian theology, Islamic theology too acknowledges God’s ownership of the universe, which was placed under the dominion of humanity through its vested “moral and rational powers” and turns it “in the service of good ends” (Rahman, 1967:8, 17). Sadr (2011), expatiates the role of humanity in God’s world: “Man’s God-given nature and colour are like seeds and potentials which are hidden in him at the beginning of creation and will flourish when man follows the right path” (para.7). Therefore, the original purpose and meaning of the existence of the world cannot be determined by humanity but God who created it. God who sets the foundational principles for governance called humanity into partnership with him in governing the world.

However, since the fall, humanity has been responsible for all moral evils. The principles of sin are antithetical to the things of God. The noetic influence of sin has misled humanity into becoming the centre of all things with devastating consequences. The Bible laments the depravity of the human heart. Gen. 6:5 describes the gravity of the sinful heart thus: “Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man *was* great in the earth



and *that* every intent of the thoughts of his heart *was* only evil continually.” This underscores the magnitude, all-inclusive, extensive and intensive nature of sin as it affects the mind in all its thoughts. Jer. 17:9 further attests to this terrifying condition: “The heart *is* deceitful above all *things* and desperately wicked; Who can know it?”

These passages underscore human wickedness that is expressive in selfishness, envy, arrogance and the propensity for destruction. This is why the powerful in the society do not care so much about justice and fairness which the weak and vulnerable suffer social evils of varying magnitude. Human crime has been interpreted by sociologists and psychologists on many factors, some genetic and environmental. Some argue that just as intelligence is genetic, so also are some criminal behaviours (Wilson & Herrnstein 1985; Gibbs, 1985). However, environmental conditions also add up to the negative tendencies. It is in this context that evil people inculcate wicked attitudes in others and the Bible clearly warns about that (Prov. 1:10; 1Cor. 15:33).

And the sad aspect of this is when such evils are exacerbated in the name of religion. While religion has contributed positively to certain developments, it has also demonstrated its negative aspects by the acts of terrorism of different qualifications. Many religious adherents and in this context, Christians and Muslims have inflicted so much pain on humanity for the sake of godliness. Christianity has self-inflicted torture as does Islam and both against each other. But is true godliness exuded through human destruction? Why is it more expedient to show godliness by advocating the negative aspects of religion rather than the positive? Why can't Christianity and Islam draw from the positive teachings that build up humanity? It is this concern that this work seeks to pursue, namely to elevate those virtuous qualities that bring harmony and peace to human co-existence above the vices that destroy.

Conclusion

The whole world is in dire need of better human social relations for a better world. Some of these ways include political and economic harmony in the global setting. However, in Nigeria, social and ethnic polarization with its attendant tensions are on the increase and religion is the vehicle through which they are exacerbated. This research argues that, in the same way, that religion is used negatively, we can also overturn that tide and use it positively through interpreting religious texts in the manner that Christ exemplifies with a deliberate intention to construct our co-existence on the foundation of love for one another and social justice. We can seek to understand what God requires of all humanity which are justice, humility and mercy. While religion has the potential to entrench human goodness in society, its limitation cannot be underestimated either because of the sinful condition of humanity. This research believes strongly that if religious interpreters deliberately adopt a positive and constructive approach to textual interpretations in the manner that Christ did, we will harvest bountiful elements in religion.

Ultimately, Jesus offers a transformative lens through which to interpret violent religious texts. His teachings and actions exemplify a higher moral imperative, emphasizing the importance of love, forgiveness, and nonviolence. By following his example, individuals and communities can reinterpret violent religious texts in a way that promotes peace, understanding, and mutual respect. In conclusion, Jesus challenges violent interpretations of religious texts through his teachings and actions. His emphasis on love, forgiveness, and nonviolence provides a framework for reevaluating and reinterpreting violent passages in religious texts. By contextualizing these texts and striving to emulate Jesus' message of peace, individuals can contribute to a more compassionate and harmonious world. The true essence of religion lies not in violence, but in our ability to transcend it and embrace the transformative power of love.



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