

SINCE today is Easter Monday, the end of the Christian celebration of the death and resurrection of Jesus, the founder of Christianity, it is appropriate for this column to reflect on religions. Christianity is one of the three monotheistic scriptural religions: in chronological order—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. They share a common historical and geographical background as well as belief in one God.

Each of the three religions has a variety of names to denote God and his attributes such as: "The Most High One," "Infinite One," "The Creator Of The Universe".

Why do monotheists have such elaborate nomenclature? Perhaps, it is the psychological need to extend, prolong and embellish veneration by citing holy attributes with fervor and attenuating the time used therein.

However, despite these profound commonalities, the theological, political, territorial, and cultural conflicts between these three religions have been deep, destructive and deadly throughout history and show little sign of abatement in the foreseeable future.

This time last year though, there was a positive move made by the Pope, from the altar of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, when, on behalf of the Catholic Church, he sought forgiveness for sins committed against Jews, heretics, women, gypsies, and native peoples. The Pope elaborated on the persecution of the Jews. "We are deeply saddened by the behavior of those who in the course of history have caused these children of yours to suffer and asking for your forgiveness, we wish to commit ourselves to genuine brotherhood." (Guardian March 19, 2000).

Five Vatican cardinals confessed sins on behalf of the church--Nigerian Cardinal Francis Arinze confessed the sins, which had broken Christian unity. Another Cardinal recalled the sufferings of the people of Israel and asked divine pardon for the sins committed against the people of the covenant.

Only a small step because the Pope failed to include Muslims by name and omitted reference to the Crusades, the Inquisition (both of which involved terrible suffering for Muslims and Jews at the hands of Catholics) and the Catholic Church's silence and passivity during the holocaust. Moreover, it may be argued that the Pope should have asked forgiveness of the people victimized as well as of God.

The earliest conflict between Judaism and Christianity was over the death of the Jewish founder of the new religion. For almost two millennia, the Christian church and its adherents held the Jews responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus.

The practice of crucifixion has been traced back to the Phoenicians and was commonly used by the Roman to punish slaves, criminals, foreigners - but not Roman citizens. That was why Paul was beheaded, not crucified by the Romans.

The Jews in ancient Palestine were most severely treated by the Romans - thousands were crucified. The Jews never crucified anyone nor ever demanded it of the political authorities; in all the Old Testament there is no case of a living person being crucified. The four forms of sanctioned execution did not include crucifixion.

Along with that historically unfounded accusation was the even more primitive charge that during the Jewish festival, Pesach, (Passover) when the Jews drank wine, they were drinking the blood of Christians. This led to Jews being slaughtered, so in many places, during the night of Pesach, Jews left open the doors of their houses to allay suspicion that anything surreptitious was happening. The Pesach festival celebrates the Jews' dramatic deliverance from enslavement in Egypt over 3200 years ago, that is, God passed over or spared the houses of the Jews throughout the ten plagues (as recounted in Exodus).

The food eaten at Pesach dinner is symbolic: the *matzo* (unleavened bread) to remind the Jews of the haste with which they left Egypt without waiting for the bread, to rise the charoseth, (mixture of nuts, apples and cinnamon) to recall the clay bricks made by the Jewish slaves and the bitterness of slavery. According to the words of the ancient litany: "Now we are in Israel. Now we are slaves: in the years ahead may we be free

Nina' Mba's Insider / Outsider's Account



The three Rs and religious harmony

men." It took hundreds of years, but these hopes have been realized.

Historically, the three religions also shared a common political ideology of identification of religion and state. In ancient Judea, the Jewish religion was that of the state and the law of Judaism. In the state of Israel, there is theoretically a separation of Judaism from the state but the power of the religious political parties has resulted in the imposition of strict Jewish laws and customs on a population of which only a minority of the Jews adhere to orthodox Judaism, let alone those Israelis who are Christians and Muslims.

In many countries in Europe, Christianity was the state religion until the end of the 19th century. It was over the vexed issue of state control of the church that the reformation in Europe led to the division between Catholicism and Protestantism.

In the 21st century, there are no countries except the Vatican in which Christianity is the state religion. Constitutionally, there is a separation of church and state. On the other hand, there are some nations, which have Islam as the religion of the state such as Afghanistan, Libya, Morocco, Mauritania, Algeria (but in a state of near civil war over that), Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq.

In Nigeria, the Secretary-General, Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, Dr. Lateef Adegbite's comments that "Christianity has accepted the separation of state and religion. Islam rejects that dichotomy." (Comet March 28, 2001: cited by Professor Nwabueze)

However, there are countries with an enormous majority of Muslim populations which are not Islamic states. For instance, Indonesia is the world's largest Muslim nation with ninety per cent of its 210 million people following the Islamic state, nor is Egypt both of which are secular countries that guarantee religious freedom. Their argument against involving the state in religion is that such involvement would distort religious practices and politicize religion. This is the view also of Professor Nwabueze in his brilliant lecture on Sharia and Religious Neutrality of Nigeria (Comet March 28, 2001): "The lesson of 1 ½ millennia of world history--that freedom of religion for the individuals loses much of its meaning and value unless the state can be kept away from involvement in religion."

Currently, Nigeria has introduced a new dimension to the issue of religion and state. The Federal Republic of Nigeria is a secular state which guarantees religious freedom and fundamental human rights.

The Nigerian constitution prohibits the adoption by government, federal or state of any religion as a state religion. However, five states

in the Federal Republic of Nigeria have adopted Islam as the state religion: Zamfara, Kano, Sokoto, Niger and Katsina thus challenging the national constitution.

"...in a multi-religious country (like Nigeria) the maintenance of equality between the different religions and the neutrality of the state in matters of religion is of greater practical importance than the religious form of the state."

In Nigeria, religious conflicts are,

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generally, between Christians and animists: Muslims and animists and between Christians and Muslims. Recently, a conflict involving all the three Rs flared up in Gombe State. Based on my careful reading of the media coverage, the facts appear as follows.

On the 22nd February 2001, the Israeli ambassador, Ariel Avidor, and the first secretary of the Israeli embassy, Sharon Polishuk, visited Gombe, the capital of Gombe State. They were invited to a function held by the Shalom Club, Gombe branch. This is an association for Nigerians who have studied, worked or visited Israel with branches in many states in Nigeria. The Shalom Club function went well. The Israeli diplomats paid a cordial courtesy call on Governor Abubakar Hashidu. They left Gombe peacefully on 24th February.

The following day, riots broke out in Gombe in which four or more persons were killed (press reports vary). Some persons, including six policemen, were injured and two Baptist churches burnt and vandalized. At a press conference convened on 26th February, the governor defended his right to receive anyone from anywhere.

He related that the riot was purely political and not religious as it was a fall-out of the protest against the visit of the Israeli Ambassador. A

Muslim religious leader also declared it had nothing to do with religion as none of the religious leaders was aware of the riots. However, the secretary of the Gombe State branch of the Christian Association of Nigeria objected that the incident cannot be explained from a political angle since it involved the vandalism of churches. The police blamed the disturbance on Shiite Muslims who protested after they were refused police permission to hold a demonstration against the visit of the Israeli ambassador.

Given these facts, what interpretations may be inferred?

The *Post Express* speculates that the disturbances might be linked to frustration by various Muslim groups over the delay in the implementation. On the other hand, it provides additional information that last year, Christians in Bamba town in Gombe state violently protested against the planned introduction of Sharia.

Chidi Uzor, of *THIS DAY* Business world, favors a more international interpretation and speculated that the rioters were expressing solidarity with their "Palestinian brothers." Uzor criticizes this approach to the conflict in the Middle East as inimical to the interests of Nigeria which stands to benefit from Israeli expertise in agriculture

irrigation etc. But then he focuses on the religious dimension. He is the only journalist I read to pick up the inherent contradictions of the incident.

Which one concerns the churches? To put the experts straight, Israel is not a Christian nation. Yes, Jesus is their brother. Yes, Jesus is the founder of the Christian church, but Israel is not a Christian state in the sense of Palestine being a Muslim state. So why burn the churches and send wrong signals to the international community.

In my column of February 26, I had, *interalia* criticized Christian churches claiming to incorporate elements of Judaism. Ironically, two days earlier (but unknown to me at the time of writing), the Gombe rioters, by their actions, yoked Christianity and Judaism together in a fiery embrace.

However, this is not the kind of religious brotherhood the Pope called for. Yet in Nigeria, since the end of the Jihad, there has been peaceful co-existence between the three Nigerian Rs: Muslims, Animists and Christians living side-by-side within family units and communities. The overarching state was religiously neutral in the plural society. Attempts to political ends can only lead to increased fragmentation of the state and society. Nigeria should be allowed to remain a model of interreligious cooperation between its three RS.