

Political and socio-economic convergence of religions in Nigeria: Positive views and interests

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Extensive review of academic writings on the convergence of religions (COR) in Nigeria shows that many online academic papers and related conversations gave more attention to its negative implications. Agreeably, Nigeria is the hotbed of religious crises in Africa. However, with the benefits of hindsight, filling the gap of insufficient capture of the positive impact of COR is considered in this exercise with three questions in view: (1) Where do religions meet? (2) Why do religions meet? (3) What are the positive implications of their convergence in Nigeria? Answers were adequately captured with examples, scenarios, case studies, historical evidence, and concomitant academic literature. Overall, this exercise projected three arguments. Firstly, it posited that commitment to religion is not at the heart of COR in Nigeria, rather, COR is premised on personal or group interests. Secondly, it argued that positive reflections on the COR can promote inter-religious tolerance, peace, and unity. Thirdly, it proposed that the COR has far-reaching positive implications socially, politically, and economically. Lastly, it made brief recommendations for improved co-existence and nation-building.

Contribution: This article contributes to inter-religious dialogue in Africa as it focuses on the social, political and economic value of religion in Nigeria.

Keywords: economic convergence; political convergence; social convergence; syncretistic convergence; interests.

Introduction

Findings on popular academic opinions and conversations on the convergence of religions (COR), show words like tolerance, fundamentalism, dialogue, syncretism, conflict resolution, crises, interventions, ethnoreligious conflicts, and reconciliation, among others as dominant nomenclatures in inter-religious conversations (Amadi-Nche 2022:342–349; Haldun & Opeyemi 2016; Kaiciid Dialogue Centre 2021; United States Department of States 2022). By implication, the intellectual space may have been flooded with academic works on religious tensions and conflicts across the globe. Likewise, the media and religious organisations have lamented and magnified the serious negative implications. This may have led to governmental and non-government agencies forming various intervention groups, especially inter-religious dialogue groups (See NIREC, 2016). However, with the benefit of hindsight, it is important to place a searchlight on the opposite; viewing the COR from a positive perspective. Therefore, the underlying research question is: Has the COR over the years benefited humankind or not? Could the focus on the negative implication hinder the thought process of researchers, community, and religious leaders, and perhaps policy makers from highlighting and promoting the positive role of COR? Where and why do the COR occur? To answer these questions, firstly, conceptual and theoretical frameworks will be delineated. Secondly, where religions meet in Nigeria will be discussed. Thirdly, this paper will address why religions meet and recommend ways to improve the COR for greater cohesion and nation-building.

Conceptual and theoretical frameworks

Admittedly, there are various definitions of religion but the context in view is social. For Africans, religion is a way of life. It is not only about spirituality, but also culture, morals, and communal existence. This perfectly agrees with Beyers' (2015) postulation that in Africa:

There are no boundaries between ordinary existence and religious expressions. Everything in life has a religious undertone. Religion is the overarching dimension encompassing all existence. The concept of culture and religion has become indivisible in an African context. (pp. 153–154)

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Against this background, subsequent sections will look at the 'where and why' of the COR *vis-à-vis* social, economic, and political dimensions. Additionally, as a philosophical framework, the functionalist theory of religion agrees with the definition of religion in the African context. Thus, this paper absorbs Emile Durkheim's social-anthropological position that the real essence of religion 'is something eminently social' (Durkheim 1965:42–43). In other words, alongside transcendentalism, religion is social. And this social dimension informs how social groups form their 'patterns of conscious and articulable we-feeling' which further influence the cohesive quality and social utility (Capps 1995:160–161). Such collective representations, cohesion, and utility then become the 'source and sustainer of moral values, cultural ideals, religious aspirations and all other determinants of prevailing collectivity' (Durkheim 1965:46; cf. Haralambos & Holborn 2008:399). Concomitantly, this paper does not wish to constrain the relevance of religion to the social strata; however, the context demands the view of COR in a social space. Against this background, the next section will look at where religions meet in Nigeria.

Where do religions converge in Nigeria

The positive impact of the COR is viewed in four areas. These include political, social, economic and syncretistic areas of convergence. While the author does not claim to have exhausted the list, some scholars have reservations about the positive influence of COR (Contra. Amadi-Nche 2020:347). Each convergence point will now be discussed below.

POLITICAL CONVERGENCE

According to Beyers, 'Religion and politics have had a long history of reciprocal collaboration and/or disagreement' (Beyers 2015:145). Likewise, since the sacred has an appreciable presence in social institutions, religion and political governance can be integrated (Moyser 1991:12). In the Nigerian context, Christianity and Islam are more politically active compared with African traditional religion (ATR), even though many politicians consult ATR for spiritual power to consolidate political influence (see Osaghae & Suberu 2005:11). Indeed, Nigerian politicians use religion as a tool to promote political games; they use religion to appeal to the emotions of electorates. More so, the COR helps better collaboration, choice of candidates, and the support of religious institutions during elections.

A case study of Lagos politics

In the report of Ojo (1999), Christianity dominates 84% of the media space while Islam has about 16%. Moreso, in the Southwest where Lagos is located, has more concentrated Christian missionary activities. Thus, Lagos has a more Christian population and awareness. Against this background, the godfather of Lagos politics, Senator Bola Ahmed Tinubu, leveraged the media and population pedigree of Lagos Christians to endorse Christian gubernatorial candidates in

the last three elections (12 years). Moreso, there is always a political leadership rotation between Muslims and Christians. For example, Governor Tinubu, a Muslim is not only married to a practising Christian woman but also chose Femi Pedro, a Christian deputy between 2003 and 2007; Governor Babatunde Fashola, a Muslim chose Sarah Adebisi, a Christian as deputy from 2007 to 2015; Governor Akinwunmi Ambode chose a Muslim deputy, Idiat Oluranti Adebule from 2015 to 2019. Currently, Governor Babajide Sanwo-Olu, a Christian is working with a Muslim deputy called Obafemi Hamsat. Besides Lagos, inter-religious convergence in political leadership cuts across many states in Nigeria. These include: Kwara, Nassarawa, Kogi, Kaduna, Oyo, and Gombe States where the office of the governors and deputies are rotated between the two religions. It is noteworthy that political offices are rotated consciously between the two faiths as politicians use such rotation to appeal to the religious sentiment of Nigerians who are naturally sensitive to religious affiliation. The rotation is like a political strategy to win more votes. Contrarily, it is not the case in Muslim-dominated states and Christian-dominated states alike.

A case study of presidential politics

In 1999, Olusegun Obasanjo picked Atiku Abubakar as his vice president; Goodluck Jonathan served as a deputy to President Yaradua, a Northern Muslim. Afterwards, Jonathan became the president in 2011 with Namadi Sambo, a Muslim, as his deputy. Furthermore, from 2015 to May 2023, Pastor Osinbajo served as the vice president to Muhammadu Buhari. Meanwhile, Obasanjo has been praised internationally for allowing the COR in politics to build peace and unity in Nigeria (Reckhow 2000). Contrarily, president-elect, Ahmed Tinubu ran with a Muslim-Muslim ticket in 2023 and the resistance of Christians across Nigeria revealed how Nigerians embraced the COR in the political space as a tool for political justice and fairness in a multicultural and multi-religious space (see Komolafe 2023).

One final important political practice to note is how Muslim politicians attend church services during elections as a campaign strategy. For example, President Buhari, a staunch Muslim attends Christian services for political gains. Likewise, Governor Nasir El-Rufai and many other Muslim politicians attend churches for the same purpose (see Daily Post 2015). Christian leaders have also been seen visiting Islamic scholars and heads of Islamic organisations for political gains (Agba & Oladeji 2011). These case studies and examples show the importance of COR in the political terrain. Moreso, it creates a level of acceptance among electorates of different religions in Nigeria.

In another scenario, religions can converge to form pressure groups, to speak truth to power and demand good governance. Stakeholders of different religions can converge to address social and political issues (Agyeman et al. 2016:321–340; Rotimi, Mala & Aiyegboyin 1999:33–41). In the past, COR contributed to restraining and containing government conduct, consistently criticised bad governmental policies and joined the civil society

to condemn the dubious and circuitous nature of both the civilian and military leaders (Ayorinde 2007). For example, the Save Nigeria Group (SNG) led by Pastor Tunde Bakare, had as frontliners the likes of Professor Wole Soyinka who believes in ATR and Western Modernism, and Jinatu Mohammed, a Muslim, among others. This group consisting of the three religions in Nigeria led major protests that engendered a change in political leadership (Ekundayo, 2010).

SOCIAL CONVERGENCE

This subsection looks at how religions converge in marriages, extended family relationships, education and healthcare sectors, and sports. Firstly, starting with sports, Jona and Okou (2023) allude that the Durkhemian functionary theory of religion with regard to the social role of sports is 'akin to the sacred, but it also highlights the role of the profane' (pp. 46–54). Thus, sports bring people of different religions together to pray for victory on the pitch. For example, the Nigerian Super Eagles are of different religions, yet, during the African Cup of Nations or World Cup, they always unite in prayers; one person leads the Islamic prayer while another takes the Christian prayer. The multi-religious spiritual engagement was always for a common interest; to win the trophy.

Secondly, in the health and education sectors, the common interests are well-being and academic success. In this regard, when evangelists and pastors visit hospitals to support patients, rarely will patients of other faiths reject prayer support. This is because an average Nigerian sees spiritual support as a means of help and healing. Likewise, hospitals and schools built by churches or mosques are open to people of all religions. Gbadegesin and Adeyemi-Adejulo agree no less when they state that 'Christianity and Islam have contributed immensely in the areas of building social institutions such as schools and hospitals in Nigeria' (2016:27). These religions may not converge in the same location of worship, but social circumstances like well-being and education allow convergence without friction.

Thirdly, in extended family relationships, COR supports some form of tolerance and respect. For example, the Yoruba nation holds on to shared social customs like tolerance and respect irrespective of religious affiliation. Thus, regardless of individuals' affiliation, whether Islam, Christianity, or ATR, the Yorubas believe that all creations come from Olodumare and as such everyone must be tolerated and respected (see Nolte, Ancarno & Jones 2018:52–53). From the Northeast axis, Olatunji (2017) reports the testimony of the chairman of the Christian Association of Nigeria in Borno State, Bishop Naga, Williams Mohammed who states that:

In Southern Borno generally, it is common to see a family mixed with both Muslims and Christians. My father was a Muslim and my mother was a dedicated Christian. We were living in the same house, eating the same food and sharing the same culture. When it is Christmas, my mum would give money to my dad to buy whatever animal for us to slaughter. The same thing when it was time for Sallah, he would buy a ram for us to slaughter (Olatunji, 2017).

Clearly, Bishop Naga was raised in an inter-religious family where festive celebrations are merged.

Lastly, COR is common in marriages. According to Calkins (2000), COR can create harmony with human reason to pursue humanity and sensitivity. Although COR in marriages varies among ethnic groups, Rev Fr. Ajana (2012) reports that inter-religious marriages and harmony are more pronounced in Southern Nigeria while resistance to interreligious marriages among the Hausa-Fulani is constantly challenged by Northern educated women.

Moreso, among the Yorubas, religion is more attached to the social vocation than religious fundamentalism. Convergence of religions in marriages is mostly between a Christian female and a Muslim male. Fair enough, the Christian female retains her religion. Likewise, there are marriages between a Muslim female and a Christian male, and most times the woman converts to Christianity (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2012). For example, the popular Nigerian style blogger Ella Mo, a daughter of a Christian marriage counsellor in the Catholic church married a Muslim. Subsequently, she attends NASFAT Islamic meetings on Sundays and CLAM Christian meetings on Wednesdays. Identifying both religions in her words she states that 'I'm a proud ChrisMus ... After all, we serve same God ... I call Allah and Jesus fluently! Whichever comes to my mouth when I pray is from my lips to His hears!' (Ella 2017).

In another scenario, before ethnic and religious crises in Jos Plateau state, COR was common in marriages. Maram (2014) reports the inter-religious and interethnic union between Alhaji Abdulaziz and Augustina. Religious tolerance greets the marriage as Abdulaziz drives Augustina to church on Sundays. Irrespective of the religious and ethnic crises, they have lived together and raised five children. With these examples and scenarios, it can be inferred that the continuous liberalisation of marriages by the Nigerian government aided such COR in marriages. As of 2022, the government had increased the federal marriage centres from 6 to 20 across the country with the hope to increase unity and peace (News Agency of Nigeria 2022).

ECONOMIC CONVERGENCE

Since religious practices unite people irrespective of colour, race, or tribe, religious ethics may influence business rules to improve organisational practices. Likewise, COR can promote institutional structures and business networks among entrepreneurs and industries (see Henley 2017:597–617; cf. Van Buren 2020:799–822). Moreso, staff of business organisations do not drop their religions at the gate; they carry their religious values of loyalty, accountability, tolerance, and submission to authority into the workspace. These values which are promoted by the three religions in Nigeria can improve business activities and productivity, and increase economic advantage. Likewise, the convergence of multi-religious staff and C-suite members impacts organisational ethics especially anti-discrimination rules covering religion,

race, and gender. There are also mutual benefits when one religious rule provides certain incentives in the workspace. For example, the benefit of the blue laws which restrict retail trading on Sundays covers all staff irrespective of their religion (see Khan 2018:960–984). Additionally, religions converge with a prophetic responsibility in the business environment as they call for corporate social responsibility (CSR). As the conscience of society, COR brings the attention of industries to issues like environmental protection and related injustices (see Van Buren 2020:810–811).

Case studies

Nigeria has seen the rise of business owners like Aliko Dangote, Femi Otedola, Mike Adenuga, Jim Ovia, and Isyaku Rabi, among others. This group of industry giants contributes immensely to the economic development of Nigeria. Yet, they run their businesses in a multireligious ecosystem. All staff members are from the three Nigerian religions. The economic contributions of these business owners cut across regions and ethnic divides thereby improving the economy of all employed Nigerians irrespective of their religions.

Another scenario is the convergence of Nigerian entrepreneurs in business networking and associations without religious tensions. Christians, Muslims, and ATR entrepreneurs converge in the marketplace. Meetup (2023) provides data on the largest entrepreneurship groups in Nigeria with 21 groups and 41 336 members; people from all religions in technology, education, oil and gas, real estate, and related industries. Nigerian Entrepreneurship Forum (NEF) also has above 1000 companies listed with chief executive officers (CEOs) from all religions, providing millions of jobs to Nigerians irrespective of religious affiliation;¹ ditto the Association of Nigeria Women Business Network (2022). A particular case in point is the KPMG (2017:12) report on Family Business in Nigeria. Among the challenges inhibiting family business growth, religion is not one of them. By inference, the sustenance of family business may not be hampered by different religious affiliations.

Aliko Dangote's case study

The economic boom of the richest man in Africa, Aliko Dangote was connected to an inter-religious relationship. Although some critics have debunked the claim that Dangote gave a tithe to Idahosa, Pentecostal historians report that Dangote gave up his seat in an aeroplane for Archbishop Idahosa, and as a result, Idahosa prayed over his business. Subsequently, he became the richest businessman in Africa (Joshdbrain 2021). This establishes the convergence of an Islamic businessman and a Christian Archbishop in prayers. It has become a household narrative used by clergies and business owners to create inter-religious rituals for economic booms in the marketplace. Subsequently, some business owners and companies, irrespective of religious affiliations, invite religious leaders to pray over their businesses. Besides,

1.NEF website is readily available, but information can be obtained from the presidents LinkedIn page. See <https://www.linkedin.com/in/nigeria-entrepreneurs-forum-5ba87120a/?originalSubdomain=ng>

the syncretic nature of the Nigerian socio-religious culture encourages business owners to seek spiritual help from ATR, Christian prosperity prophets and imams to boost economic activities. Most interesting is the fact that some companies pay tithe to churches, others give *zakat* to the mosque, while some take sacrifices to the ATR priest for business blessings.

SYNCRETISTIC CONVERGENCE

Osaghae and Suberu (2005:11) sustain that there are three major religious identities: Christianity, Islam, and traditional religions in Nigeria. Nweke (2020:44) adds that ATR is not idolatry as its adherents also worship the Supreme Being just like Christianity and Islam claim. He added that in Nigeria these three religions cohabit because of similarities in values and moral teachings, such as encouragement of circumcision, written and unwritten scriptures, roles in protection, marriages, and monotheism (Nweke 2020:46–47). A synonym for such cohabitation may be syncretism. Meanwhile, the word 'syncretism' which is *synkretismos* in Greek and translated as [to combine] has a positive connotation in the ancient Island of Crete where internal enemies temporarily combine efforts to defend their territory from external forces (Ezenweke & Kanu 2012:73). Metaphorically, in the Nigerian context, the three religions are combined to enjoy well-being, protection, and prosperity.

For example, the Maguzawas in the Northwest are heavily influenced by Islam, yet they sustain their pre-Islamic ATR practices; they spray wine and animal blood on altars [stones], and invoke ancestral spirits for protection and prosperity (see Joshua Project 2023). Likewise, the Gbagyi people in the North Central devote themselves to appeasing deities. Before Islamic and Christian conversion, they were fully committed to indigenous religion called Knunu; they offered fowl and beer as a sacrifice to a special tree in the deep forest. Although they have embraced Islam and Christianity, some still commit themselves to ATR (see Onyeakagbu 2022). In the Southwest, the KEO survey shows that while most Yorubas practise Islam or Christianity, some still resort to ATR for family prosperity and well-being. A total of 56.1% of KEO survey respondents agreed they had a family tradition, 19.3% contribute money to family deities and sacrifices, and 48.2% subscribe to traditional medicine (Nolte et al. 2018:43–46; cf. Gifford 2015).

Overall, this section has provided examples and case studies to support the argument that the convergence of the three popular religions in Nigeria finds expression in the political, social, economic, and spiritual terrains. Thus, this section provides answers as to where religions meet in Nigeria and the advantages thereof. The next section will now focus on answering the question – why do religions converge in Nigeria?

Interests and the convergence of religions

From the previous section, it is clear that religions meet for political, social, and economic interests. This serves as the

first and positive reason why religions converge from the perspective of the citizens' interests. But this section will look at a second reason from the perspective of the ruling elites. Meanwhile, a brief history will be intermittently infused in this section.

As background, earlier in the introduction, it was noted that many academic authors focused on the negative implications of inter-religious interactions *vis-à-vis* ethno-religious crises. Against such submissions, this section holds that most of the crises in Nigeria are largely motivated by internal and external interests, not religion! Politicians and religious leaders alongside their pre- and post-colonial masters use religion to divide the people. These schemes and skills are deployed mostly for political and economic interests. Thus, the COR from the elites' perspective was not in the interest of the masses. Convergence of religions would have had very little negative impact without the selfish schemes, and skills of the political and economic elites for their acquisitive venality.

Historically, the use of religion and ethnic sentiments begins with colonial schemes. According to Turaki (1993:29–30), religious and social inequality was institutionalised by the colonial administration as the British placed non-Muslim groups under the political control of the Hausa-Fulani Muslims and clerics. This was easy because on arrival the British met a strong traditional administration and Islamic institution. The colonialists took advantage of the structure to consolidate their imperialistic agenda. They created artificial superiority of the Hausa Fulani over the aboriginal Hausa people and extended the same to Southern Nigeria (see Flora 1904:574). Although the Fulani dominance was largely tolerant despite the Islamic framework embedded in political governance, Spencer (1969:24) notes that halfway into the 18th century the Islamic clerics started manifesting a new Islamic spirit that was exclusive, legalistic, intolerant, and militant. They began threatening the liberty and expansion of ATR and Christianity. Subsequently, counter-resistance from those affected in their quest for freedom of religious expression and ethnic equality formed the basis for ethno-religious crises in Nigeria. While this was ongoing, Reckhow (2022) records that the colonisers disregarded the country's religious and tribal divisions, rather they inflamed the crises to maintain British control. The crises then erupted into a 30-month civil war. Afterwards, Nigeria came under military rulers who sustained the British system thereby inflaming ethnic and religious crises to maintain power. Thus, the argument so far is that religion itself is not the cause of crises in Nigeria. Religion is an elitist tool of division, to distract the people and remain in power.

In the submission of the president of the Institute of Governance and Social Research (IGSR), Jos, he concludes that 'Religion is more a *vehicle of expression than a cause* because it mobilises people and it is easier to express' (Maram 2014). More recently, the weaponisation of religion by the political class shows no difference from the political and economic interest-based incitement of religious crises by the British colonialists. As Elaigwu (in Olayiwola) observes:

There are instances when politicians, traditional and religious leaders deliberately manipulate ethnic and religious identities of groups. There is enough evidence to show that quite a number of ethno-religious conflicts are caused by politicians and political leaders. (Olayiwola 2019:28)

Furthermore, the elites symbolically identified with churches and mosques as their theatres in the daytime and sneaked to the shrines of the ATR priests at night. Olayiwola (2019) further states that they 'pollute the minds of young children with their bigotry and copiously exhibit ethnocentric arrogance' (p. 28), and that many of the ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria, particularly in the North are engendered by the political elites. Sadly, they sustain these activities not because they are sincerely religious, but because such practices remain their lifeline for political survival. One major scenario is the case of ethnic crises in Zamfara state. Yes, there are cases of cattle rustling, but the underlying factor of the crisis is economic interests; the Zamfara gold-digging (see McCaslin 2019). One is then tempted to ask – why are Muslims killing Muslims (Hausa versus Fulani) in Zamfara, if the COR is at the root of crises in Nigeria?

Finally, looking at the purpose of religious interactions both from the masses' and elites' perspectives, they serve as social, economic and political tools. Individuals and groups engage in inter-religious interactions to express their interests and transact accordingly. The British colonialists, Nigerian politicians, Christian, Muslim and ATR leaders, traditional rulers, ethnic groups, syncretistic worshippers, religious fundamentalists, prosperity gospel preachers, families and marriages, among others, express their interests through religion either positively or negatively. The common denominator is 'interest'. Therefore, religion is a secondary factor in the Nigerian ethno-religious crises.

Brief recommendation and conclusion

Improving religious cohesion for nation-building demands that threats to convergence must be addressed. However, focusing on the by-products of ethno-religious crises like religious fundamentalism or remedies like interfaith dialogue might not be as effective as dealing with the root which is 'interests'. Once the masses and elites all place higher premiums on the positive interests of the COR, peaceful co-existence and development will be easily achievable. In conclusion, the positive interest in inter-religious interaction needs to take a large chunk of inter-religious conversations in academia, religious institutions, and government to achieve a more positive impact of religion in society.

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