THE MIGHTY TEMPLE OF THE GODS:

A FESTSCHRIFT FOR PROFESSOR (BISHOP THEOLOGIAN)

DAPO F. ASAJU

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St. Augustine's Strategy of Religious Coercion and its Implications for Human Rights in Nigerian Pluralistic Society

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Introduction

From time immemorial, some governments had been using state machineries to clamp down on some sects or movements whose religious activities were considered inimical to peaceful existence of the citizenry. This action is exemplified in different measures made by both the Jewish and Roman authorities against the Christians in the ancient times. In recent years, Indian government used many repressive measures against some religions, most especially Sikhism. The concern of this paper is to articulate the fact that though the actions stated are not strange to human history, but it is totally surprising to have ecclesial authorities collaborating with external forces to persecute some Christians in minority group because of ideological differences. Therefore the paper seeks to re-examine St. Augustine's conviction that to achieve ecclesiastical unity, the Donatists should be forced back to the Catholic fold through government machinery. This exercise becomes imperative with a view to determining the level of unity and peace that such strategy has achieved and to showcase how freedom to practise one's religion, one of the fundamental human rights declared by the United Nations has been trampled upon in ecclesiastical history. This work is anchored on Bertrand Russell's concept that religion should be recognized for maintaining order and security in the society. Historical and phenomenological approaches were employed for the collection of data.

Indeed, it has been established that religion has a motivating and controlling influence in human existence and relationship (Alamu 2006:80). In social sciences, there is no specific or generally accepted definition of the word religion. However, the sociologists generally agree on the definition of religion based on two concepts: supernatural being

and sacred phenomenon. Hence religion is defined as the basis of man's behavioural attitude in the society, it is described as a recognition on the part of man, of a controlling super human power entitled to obedience, reverence and worship; the feeling or the spiritual attitude of those recognizing such a controlling power with manifestation of such feeling in conduct (Oderinde 2014:71). *The Encyclopaedia Americana* (1981) defines it as the pattern of belief and practice through which man communicates with or hopes to gain experience of that which lies behind the world of their ordinary experience. In sum, religion is a unified system of beliefs, idea and practices which have spiritual and moralistic orientation. It is a system or set of philosophies relative to sacred things- things set apart or forbidden, beliefs and practices which unite into a single community call (Adelowo 2001 : 3).

The term pluralism, as a concept has gained prominence in social sciences tends to replace dualism in sociological discourse. Literally, pluralism derives from the word "plural" meaning more than one (Ngele 2008:41). Hornby sees pluralism as depicting the existence of a number of groups that belong to different races of different political or religious belief within a society (Ngele 2008:88). Kalu throws more light on the indices of a pluralistic society when he alludes to the fact that pluralism has many dimensions viz.: the sociological level, the cultural values, so that the consistent part of the nation-state may have competing visions about life and the good of the nation. (Kalu 2000:133) Pluralistic society is a society where more than one ideology exists. It is a situation in which people of diverse persuasions co-exist and explore the richness of their different traditions for the benefit of the larger society of which they are members. Thomas postulates that pluralistic society is a society characterized by expressive or active diversity, it is a society in which citizens can legally and publicly hold multiple competing ethical views and are allowed to choose for themselves what ethical beliefs they wish to hold.

This does not by any means negate the socially approved code of conduct that is generally accepted by such society, it however gives individual the privilege to express his idea or opinion under the generally accepted code of conduct (Thomas 1989). Nigeria is a typical example of pluralistic society. The heterogeneous nature of Nigeria in terms of diverse religious,

ethnic and political affinity had made her a veritable pluralistic society. The challenges of religious pluralism are manifested in various ways and varying degrees and in all parts of Nigeria. These are manifested in political instability, disunity, distribution and participation in the political process.

Going by expressive diversity through individualistic idea or opinion that manifests in a pluralistic society, one cannot shy away from the beauty or advantages of such situation despite the challenges it poses. However, St Augustine saw more of the damaging effects that the separation of the Donatist had on the Roman Catholic Church, hence the need to stop the disunity. Likewise some religious and secular leaders try to impose some doctrinal or ideological ideas on others and this often leads to conflict in a pluralistic society.

St. Augustine's Background

St. Augustine, a renowned theologian, church father and sage was the African bishop of the church at Hippo Regius, in the present-day Algeria, who left indelible footprints in the sand of Church history. This man of Berber descent was born as the only son of his parents at Thagaste or Tagaste (Souk-Abras, Algeria) a small town in North Africa on the 13th November 354 AD. His father Patrick was a minor Roman official who followed the traditional pagan religion, while his mother, Monica, was a fervent Christian (Fatokun 2011:205) who became devout under a circumstance that made her to give up drunkenness and later exhibited Godly living and faithfulness in prayer (Geoffrey 1992:50).

At the age of eleven, Augustine was sent to school at Madaurus, a small Numidian city about nineteen miles South of Tagaste and at the age of seventeen, he went to Carthage to continue his education in Rhetoric. Although raised as a Catholic, Augustine left the church to follow the controversial Manichaean religion, much to the despair of his mother. As a youth, he lived a hedonistic lifestyle for a time and, in Carthage, developed a relationship with a young woman who was his concubine for over fifteen years. The relationship with the woman produced a son, Adeodatus, which means "a gift from God" (Augustine of Hippo. New World Encyclopaedia: 2019). Augustine's parents were quite contrasting

personalities and both of them exercised a deep influence on the young boy, causing conflict and unease in the family. His father, Patrick, was a hot-tempered man, often unfaithful to his wife and his wayward example no doubt might have contributed to his son's errant behavior (Geoffrey 1992:50).

Education and Career

Despite his moral bankruptcy, Augustine's father gave his intelligent son a decent education at a local school. Their home in Thagaste, (modem Algeria), North Africa, was not many miles to the west of Carthage, so his upbringing and education were completely Roman. Though his school days were not happy ones, Augustine developed a passion for books and read many of the Latin authors; he later learned Greek, and despite the fact that he did not enjoy the course, he reached a high level of competence (Geoffrey 1992:50). Anxious to further his education, Augustine at Carthage studied at a school of Rhetoric with a view to becoming a lawyer. This happened through the generosity of a neighbour. But contrary to his father's expectation, he diverted to literary pursuits (Fatokun 2011:205). He studied philosophy from the writings of the Greek thinker Plato and was greatly influenced by the works of the Latin author, Cicero (Geoffrey 1992:50). The works of Cicero influenced Augustine's thinking about ethics and religion to an extent that he rejected the Bible and imbibed the concepts of Manichaeism, a religious sect with which he stayed for ten years before finally becoming dissatisfied with its teachings.

Augustine's combination of philosophy and rhetoric resulted in his mastery of the art of persuasion and public speaking. In 383 he moved to Rome, where he believed the best and brightest rhetoricians practiced. However, he was disappointed with the Roman schools, which he found apathetic. Manichaean friends introduced him to the Prefect of the city of Rome, Symmachus, who had been asked to provide a professor of rhetoric for the imperial court at Milan. The young Augustine won the job and headed north to take up his position in late 384. At age 30, he had won the most visible academic chair in the Latin world, at a time when such posts gave ready access to political careers. However, he felt the tensions of life at an imperial court, lamenting one day as he rode in his carriage to

deliver a grand speech before the emperor, that a drunken beggar he passed on the street had a less careworn existence than he did (*New World Encyclopedia*).

Rise to the Episcopacy of Hippo

Augustine's journey to the episcopacy of Hippo Regius started in Milan with his conversion to Christianity in 386 AD. While still in Carthage, he had begun to move away from Manichaeism, in part because of a disappointing meeting with a key exponent of Manichaean theology. All the while, Monica had been mounting pressure on him to become a Catholic, but it was the bishop of Milan, Ambrose, who had most influence over Augustine. Ambrose was a master of rhetoric like Augustine himself, but older and more experienced. Prompted in part by Ambrose's sermons, and partly by his own studies, in which he steadfastly pursued a quest for ultimate truth, Augustine renounced Manichaeism. After a flirtation with skepticism, he then became an enthusiastic student of Neo-Platonism, and for a time believed he was making real progress in his quest (*New World Encyclopedia*).

Augustine's mother, Monica, had followed him to Milan, and he allowed her to arrange a society marriage, for which he abandoned his concubine. But he had to wait two years until his fiancée came of age. So, he promptly took up in the meantime with another woman. It was during this time that he uttered his famous prayer, "Grant me chastity and continence, but not yet" (Augustine, *The Confessions*, Book 8, Chap. 7, Sec. 17).

In the summer of 386, after reading an account of the life of Saint Anthony of the Desert, the founder of solitary monasticism, which greatly inspired him, Augustine underwent a profound personal crisis and decided to convert to Christianity. He abandoned his career in rhetoric, quit his teaching position in Milan, gave up any idea of marriage and devoted himself entirely to serving God and the practices of priesthood, which included celibacy. According to him, key to his conversion was the voice of an unseen child he heard while in his garden in Milan telling him in a singsong voice to *tollelege* which means "take up and read" the Bible, at which point he opened the Bible at random and fell upon Romans 13:13 which reads: "Let us walk honestly, as in the day; not in rioting and

drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying" (KJV). In the later years, he detailed his spiritual journey in his famous "Confessions", which became a classic of both Christian theology and world literature (Augustine, *The Confessions*, Book 8, Chap. 7, Sec. 17). Ambrose baptized Augustine along with his son, Adeodatus, on Easter eve in 387 in Milan, and soon thereafter in 388 he returned to Africa. On his way back to Africa his mother died, as did his son soon after, leaving him alone in the world without family. (Augustine, *The Confessions*, Book 8, Chap. 7, Sec. 17).

Upon his return to North Africa, Augustine created a monastic foundation called *Servi Dei* (Servants of God) at Tagaste for himself and a group of friends with the goal of devotion, study and meditation. In 391 he was ordained a priest in Hippo Regius, became a famous preacher (having more than 350 preserved sermons credited to him), and was noted for combating the Manichaean heresy, to which he had formerly adhered. In 396 he was made coadjutor bishop of Hippo (assistant with the right of succession on the death of the current bishop), and remained as bishop in Hippo until his death in 430. During the period as bishop of Hippo, he combated the Donatist and Pelagian heresies, among others. Although he left his monastery, he continued to lead a monastic life in the Episcopal residence. He left a 'Rule' (Latin, Regula) for his monastery that had made him to be designated the "patron saint of regular clergy", that is, clergy who live by a monastic rule. (Augustine, *The Confessions*, Book 8, Chap. 7, Sec. 17).

The Significance of Augustine in Christianity

Augustine remains a central figure and most influential, both within Christianity and in the history of Western thought. With much influence by Platonism and Neo-Platonism, particularly by Plotinus, Augustine was important to the "baptism" of Greek thought and its entrance into the Christian, and subsequently the European intellectual tradition. Also important was his early and influential writing on human-will, a central topic in ethics, and one which became a focus for later philosophers such as Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. It is largely due to Augustine's influence that Western Christianity subscribes to the doctrine of original sin, and the Roman Catholic holds that baptisms and ordinations done outside of

the Roman Catholic Church cannot be valid (the Roman Catholic Church recognizes ordinations done in Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Churches, but not in Protestant churches, and recognizes baptisms done in nearly all Christian churches). Catholic theologians generally subscribe to Augustine's belief that God exists outside of time in the "eternal present" time existing only within the created universe (*The Confessions*, Book 8, Chap. 7, Sec. 17).

It has been said that Augustine, due to his influence, was the father both of Medieval Catholicism and of Modern Protestantism, and that the Reformation represents a revolt of his doctrine of grace against his doctrine of the church. While this contention bears an element of truth, it is not to be taken at face value. He developed his doctrine of grace partly as a result of his own conversion experience and partly in response to teaching of the heretic Pelagius, a British monk in Rome, who taught that man was basically good and could lead a good life if only he made the effort. He (Pelagius) rejected the need for God's grace (Geoffrey 1992:53)

During his thirty-five years as a bishop, Augustine wrote over one hundred treatises and opposed five different heretics. His teaching has been described as the "highest attainment of religion since apostolic times", and the church is indebted for his defense of the gospel. While many passages in his writings are leveraged upon by Roman Catholics to support their doctrines, Protestants can rejoice in his stalwart defense of the gospel of grace (Geoffrey 1992:54).

Augustine's Strategy of Religious Coercion

On assumption of the episcopacy of Hippo Regius, Augustine met a church that was being threatened with schismatic challenges on one hand and heretical problem on the other hand. Augustine wanted to maintain church unity and, in his bid, to achieve this, he firstly appealed to the conscience of the schismatic group, the Donatist, with the strategy of persuasion. As a rhetorician, he pleaded with the Donatist to return to the Catholic Church but when this failed, Augustine made use of the opportunity at his disposal then by using his friend Emperor Honorius to clamp down on the Donatist. State machinery was deployed to ban the group and their services prohibited (Ositelu 2002:88).

The usage of the strategy of religious coercion employed by Augustine has been subjected to various criticisms but Augustine justified it with different analogies and passages from the Bible. Beside the argument that coercion was needed to bring the deviants back to the Catholic fold, and that the involvement of the Emperor had a divine backing as espoused in Romans 13: 1-4, Augustine premised his action on Luke 14:23 where the master instructed his servants "to compel people to come for a banquet so that the house may be full". For him, in making moral choice, men are not really free, hence religious coercion might be required in helping men to exercise free-will in a reasonable manner. The ultimate as far as Augustine was concerned was to maintain the sanctity and unity of the church.

Augustine believed that, given Jesus Christ's call for his followers to be peacemakers (Matthew 5:9) using no violence (Matthew 5:38-42), war is a lamentable sin taking place in the earthly world, and that it can never establish eternal peace. He, however, also believed from a practical point of view, violence may be used if the aim is to defend the innocent against evil. This constituted his theory of "just war" where Augustine suggested at least two requirements for just war: proper cause and proper authority. The first requirement means that wars be waged only for the purpose of establishing peace, although that peace may be temporal here on the earth. The second requirement is that wars be waged by governing authorities, because they are established by God in the natural world for a providential reason (Quinlan & Guthrie 2007:11-15).

Furthermore, Quinlan and Guthriel quote Augustine to have asserted that Christians should be pacifists as a personal, philosophical stance. However, peacefulness in the face of a grave wrong that could only be stopped by violence would be a sin. Defense of oneself or others could be a necessity, especially when authorized by a legitimate authority. From the above discussion, one could view Augustine as someone who validated the use of force as a matter of necessity.

The Implications of Augustine Strategy of Religious Coercion on Fundamental Human Rights

Having established so far the argument of St Augustine in respect of validating coercion as a necessary tool to achieve a just cause, this paper at

this juncture intends to assess the implications of the choice of force on human rights from various dimensions.

Theological/Religious Implication

The rights of human persons according to article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights was quoted thus, "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance" (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 18). This is corroborated by United Nations in their Treaty Collection which argues against state-sponsored torture and violence among others in order to protect the lives of the citizens. Placing this right side by side with Augustine's strategy of religious coercion will leave one with the fact that Augustine had, in a way, tampered with the religious rights of the Donatist.

Although, Augustine gave reasons for using such strategy based on the strength of Biblical interpretation, yet a closer look at the ill-treatment meted out on the Donatist will remain a question that is so germane in the parlance of religion and the rights of human person. After all, his (Augustine) own conversion to Christianity was not premised on force or any strategy from anyone. It was God through the instrumentality of his mother and conviction under the influence of Ambrose's speech at Milan coupled with the strange stories of the conversion of some great men which really led him to that decision. The good example of Monica should have been followed who did not force his son into Christianity but prayed tirelessly and vigorously until she witnessed the conversion of her son before she died.

Based on the rights to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, one would want to say that the Donatist had the right to seek for a purer form of church if they so choose and that they can hold their meetings without fear of molestation or ill-treatment. However, reverse was the case here, they were subjected to harsh treatment, although they themselves did not help matters at the initial stage by taking laws into their hands by destroying churches and attacking the clergy, most especially around

Hippo Regius (Geoffrey 1992:53) Nevertheless, right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion must be seriously protected, no matter how, if peace would be given chance to reign in the community of humans that is becoming religiously pluralistic on daily basis.

Social Implication

The adoption of the strategy of religious coercion by Augustine had in every sense denied the Donatist their civil responsibilities and societal privileges. Due to the employment of force, the members of the sect were ostracized from the society and labeled heretics, a situation that led to further infringement on some other vital and fundamental human rights such as right to freedom of movement, right to freedom of speech, right to freedom of association, right to freedom to own properties, right to freedom of assembly and private meetings, among others (United Nations Treaty Collection, United Nations. Retrieved January 7, 2019). Looking at this from social-legal point of view, one will want to conclude that the employment of the strategy of religious coercion by Augustine did more havoc than good to the social lives of the Donatist who are human beings like others and were entitled to certain rights and privileges which must be protected and guarded jealously but were denied of these.

According to Jack Donnelly, in the ancient world, traditional societies typically had elaborate systems of duties, conceptions of justice, political legitimacy and human flourishing that sought to realize human social dignity or well-being entirely independent of human rights. These institutions and practices are alternative to, rather than different formulations of social human rights which must be protected (Donnelly 2003:71). Therefore, anything that will affect the social life of people in the global society must be fought to a stand-still.

Moral Implication

Morally speaking, the treatment of the Donatist by Augustine with the strategy of religious coercion that led to their suppression cannot be said to be the best and godly strategy that the church should use in bringing back the seemingly straying Donatist. This is so because a critical examination of this from moral stand reveals the fact that morality forbids

destructions, molestations, humiliation, torture and what have you that followed the Donatist' defiant action to return to the Catholic fold on persuasion. But be it as it may, on the moral ground, they should not have been subjected to harsh treatment through the instrumentality of the strategy of coercion. Even, throughout the Biblical history of God's dealing with men, God never change his moral ground in persuading men to come to repentance and be saved. He (God) did not coerce anyone to come but rather pleaded with them to choose life in place of death.

The Bill of Rights lays down limits on the powers of the monarch and sets out the rights of parliament, including the requirements for regular parliaments, free elections and freedom of speech in Parliament. It sets out certain rights of individuals on moral ground including the prohibition of cruel and unusual punishment and re-establishment of the liberty of protestants to have arms for their defense within the rule of law. From the foregoing, it is crystal clear that, on moral ground, there is a limit to which a good and godly leader will use the power at his/her disposal to achieve whatever aim in his/her pursuit.

A reflection of the use of force by the present administration in Nigeria to clamp down on some members of opposition parties, human rights groups and media is seen as an aberration of justice more so that hate-speech is undergoing consideration by the Senate to attract penalties like imprisonment and death. Nigeria is a country with ethnic contrasts, economic independence and religious diversity. She is blessed with a triple religious heritage namely: Indigenous (African) religion, Christianity and Islam. Each of these religions relates to the Nigerian society differently and they likewise fulfill different roles which are deeply rooted in the nature of each of the religion (Akanmidu 1993:80). In order to surmount its myriads of problems as a pluralistic society, principles of dialogue must be imbibed and practiced.

Conclusion

From this discussion so far, this paper concludes that the use of religious coercion by Augustine to achieve church unity has in a way, tampered with religious right and freedom of a particular sect. If love was the basis of the usage of that strategy as Augustine claimed, then ill-treatment,

molestation, confiscation, destruction of lives and properties of the sect should not have come to the scene as far as religious beliefs, principles and practices are concerned.

Though it is imperative for church leaders to strive to achieve church unity, however, compulsion must be avoided since almost all religions of the world preach against coercion but are in favour of persuasion.

Secondly, on rational ground, there should be a limit to the use of violence and coercion in the contemporary world that has become pluralistic in nature. In the light of the above, adherents of religions in Nigeria should exercise caution in employing force in bringing people to their religious beliefs. To this end, it is dangerous, fragile and offensive to presume that as Christians, Muslims or adherents of Traditional Religion, we have the absolute power to coerce people into our religious faith.

Therefore, the religious right of other people must be respected in order not to fall victim of the violation of human rights which in a sane society is punishable under the law. There should be respect and tolerance for individual religious faith as this will go a long way in curtailing the menace of religious crises that have become so alarming today not only in Nigeria but in some parts of the world. As posited by Emmanuel, tolerance depicts the mutual understanding and cooperation between groups with different ethnicities, religions, political ideologies and economic status. It is seen as the basis for longer and deeper process of developing a culture of peace, it is the minimal essential quality of social relations that eliminates violence and coercion (Emmanuel 2003:11).

This simply affirms that tolerance is the pathway to peaceful life in any society, without which national development cannot be attained. Religious tolerance however can be said to be ability of a religious group to appreciate and accept other religions' beliefs and practices without necessarily involving in or practicing it. It is respecting and relating with other peoples' religious beliefs and values (which is quite different from personal faith and beliefs), without enforcing personal interested religion on others who are not adherents (Alao 2017).

Recommendations

In the light of this, it becomes imperative for all and sundry to be educated on their rights and how such right could be protected. Churches, schools and society at large should be enlightened and educated on daily basis so as to avoid the error of infringement on the rights, most especially religious right of others.

Secondly, the use of state machinery should be geared towards positive end and not for one's selfish and inordinate ambition. It is therefore recommended that the use of state machinery for whatsoever reason should be well defined in our constitution as this will go a long way in avoiding obnoxious use of the state machinery to achieve selfish desires.

Thirdly, it has also be discovered that the Donatist had been treated for long as heretics whereas they were a schismatic group who only broke away from the Catholic church based on the stand of discipline and not necessarily on the basis of doctrinal beliefs. Therefore, there is a need to critically examine an error found and filter it very well before meting out untoward treatments to such an error as this will save the error of fighting unjust cause.

Furthermore, just as St. Cyprian in the fourth century articulated the indivisibility of the church despite its many branches, religious practitioners must face the reality that the global society is becoming pluralistic on daily basis and religious pluralism remains a trend. The existence of different religious faiths should not bring chaos but inspire curiosity to learn about other religions through tolerance and love in order to realize the beauty and understand the lessons embedded in different religions of the world.

Finally, religious dialogue would be very useful in a pluralistic society like Nigeria because according to Mukti, it is an invitation to reject ignorance, arrogance and pride. It is an invitation to break through our isolation, our self-centeredness and our self-sufficiency. It is an invitation to recognize and accept the other. It is an invitation to live life responsibly, which implies being in dialogue with my neighbors, with the creation and with God. This is an essential element of every religion (Mukti 2002:19).

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About the Book

This festschrift draws critical attention to the ambivalent nature of religion, and how such ambivalence has become an instrument in the hands of manipulators of religions, particularly in Nigeria, to cause violence. It brings to bear deep insight into how such ambivalence has been interpreted, sometimes in defence of religion against the backdrop of Nigeria's controversial secularity. Religion resists corruption, and yet has corruption within its kitty. One G(g)od that traverses the remits and boundaries of ethnicity, religion, profession, politics and so on is the god of corruption, which Professor (Bishop Theologian) Dapo F. Asaju has continuously fought in all ramifications. The need to engage religion in a more nuanced form in Nigeria has never been as urgent as contemporary happenings in the country have instantiated. This is the focal thrust of the contributors to this volume.

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