

John Rawls' Theory of Justice: Relevance to Nigeria Ethno-Religious Challenges

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Abstract— Since gaining independence in 1960, Nigeria has struggled with ethnic and religious tensions that hinder national development. With over 250 ethnic groups and a nearly equal Muslim-Christian population, historical grievances, economic disparities, and political exploitation fuel conflicts that threaten stability. Ethnic rivalries, particularly among the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo, intersect with religious divisions, often leading to violence. Politicians frequently manipulate these divisions to gain power, exacerbating instability. This study applies John Rawls' principles of justice—equal basic liberties and the difference principle—to assess how ethnicity and religion create “unjust inequalities” in Nigeria's governance. It explores key questions: How do ethnic and religious affiliations shape political and economic inequalities? Why do politicians exploit these divisions? What constitutes secularity in a multi-religious society? Using an analytical approach, the research argues that a secular framework, which separates religion from politics, is essential for ensuring justice and equal rights for all citizens. Drawing insights from Rwanda's post-genocide reconciliation and other global cases, the study proposes strategies for fostering unity and reducing conflict. While advocating for inclusive governance, it also considers separation as a last resort, referencing historical examples such as India-Pakistan, Yugoslavia, Sudan, and Cyprus. Ultimately, the research highlights the urgent need for policies that transcend ethnic and religious affiliations to promote stability, economic growth, and national cohesion.

Keywords: Theory of Justice; Liberty Principle; Difference Principle; Social Contract.

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INTRODUCTION

From the dawn of humanity, people have been drawn to communal living, fostering the development of societies that strive for fairness and equality (Ahmad & Islam, 2024). Because of man's Gregorian nature, Aristotle said: "A man who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god" (Adler, 1997, p. 64). As human societies evolve, so too does the concept of justice, adapting to the shifting needs and aspirations of members of the society. Today, justice is about ensuring that individuals enjoy the rights and protections promised by the law, striking a balance between personal freedoms and the greater good (Feinberg, 2014). It is about creating a level playing field, where everyone has access to the same opportunities and is treated with dignity and respect. In this pursuit of justice, the principles of liberty, equality, and solidarity serve as the foundation upon which fair and just societies are built (Berebon, 2023a; Berebon, 2024a). However, the meaning of justice can vary depending on cultural, social, and personal perspectives, highlighting the need for a dynamic and inclusive approach to justice.

John Rawls, a renowned political philosopher, proposed a ground-breaking theory of justice that addresses the complexities of modern societies. His vision of justice prioritizes the well-being of all individuals, regardless of their background, race, gender, or beliefs (Capeheart & Milovanovic, 2020). This paper explores how Rawls' theory can be applied to address the religious tensions in Nigeria, examining how his ideas can inform a fair and equitable approach to resolving conflicts and promoting social cohesion.

JOHN RAWLS' THEORY OF JUSTICE

John Rawls' theory of justice, articulated in his seminal work *A Theory of Justice*, is a cornerstone of contemporary political philosophy (Das, et al., 2024). Rawls sought to establish a framework for a just society, grounding his theory in a sound philosophical anthropology by emphasizing the rational and moral capacities of humans. He ensures that principles of justice are chosen impartially, reflecting humans' inherent rationality and sense of fairness. Rawls' focus on equality and reciprocity acknowledges the equal moral worth of all individuals, while his idea of public reason underscores the cooperative and communicative nature of humans (Mazzone, 2001). His ideas have significantly influenced debates on justice, rights, and equality.

Rawls introduces the concept of "justice as fairness" (Rawls, 1991), which suggests that the principles of justice should be agreed upon in an initial situation that is fair. He constructs a thought experiment called the "original position," where individuals choose principles of justice from behind a "veil of ignorance" (Maurer, 2020). In the original position, parties are stripped of all knowledge about their personal characteristics and social and economic statuses. This ensures that decisions are made impartially, as no one can design principles to advantage themselves unfairly (Berebon, 2024c; Berebon & Eluke, 2024). The veil of ignorance prevents biases, compelling individuals to choose rules that benefit all fairly.

Rawls proposes two fundamental principles of justice that he believes would be chosen in the original position. The first principle, known as the Liberty Principle (Umotong, 2015; Buchanan, 2017), asserts that each person has an equal right to the most extensive basic liberties compatible with similar liberties for others. This principle prioritizes basic rights and freedoms such as freedom of speech, assembly, and conscience. The second principle, known as the Difference Principle⁶ and Fair Equality of Opportunity (Kanwel, et al., 2024), states that social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged members of society and that offices and positions must be open to everyone under conditions of fair equality of opportunity.

Rawls' approach is rooted in the social contract tradition, drawing from thinkers like John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Immanuel Kant. However, Rawls diverges by using the original position as a hypothetical device to derive principles of justice rather than as a historical or actual agreement (Umotong, 2020). His theory is influenced by Kantian ethics, particularly the emphasis on treating individuals as ends in themselves and respecting their autonomy. The original position mirrors Kant's categorical imperative by ensuring that principles chosen could be universally applied.

Rawls focuses on the "basic structure" of society, which includes its fundamental political, social, and economic institutions. He argues that justice should be the first virtue of social institutions, and thus they should be arranged to uphold the principles of justice (Strauss, 2008; Umotong, 2021). The Difference Principle allows for inequalities, but only if they benefit the least advantaged. This principle has profound implications for social and economic policies, suggesting a form of egalitarianism that allows for wealth and income disparities only when they improve the situation of the most vulnerable. Additionally, Fair Equality of Opportunity emphasizes that positions of advantage should be accessible to all, advocating for measures to ensure that individuals have an equal start in life (Roemer & Trannoy, 2015; Umotong, 2023). This can imply robust public education systems, anti-discrimination laws, and policies aimed at reducing socioeconomic barriers.

Critiques of Rawls' theory come from various perspectives. Utilitarians argue that Rawls' theory does not sufficiently consider the overall welfare or happiness of society, focusing instead on the distribution of resources and opportunities. Libertarians, such as Robert Nozick, challenge Rawls' principles, particularly the Difference Principle, arguing that it infringes on individual freedoms and property rights (Hattingh, 2016). Nozick's "entitlement theory" emphasizes the just acquisition and transfer of holdings, opposing redistributive justice (Asuquo, et al., 2022; Abbood, 2023). Communitarians criticize Rawls for abstracting individuals from their social and cultural contexts, arguing that the original position ignores the way people's identities and values are shaped by their communities and traditions. Feminists have critiqued Rawls for not sufficiently addressing issues of gender inequality, arguing that his framework does not fully consider how social structures and institutions perpetuate gender biases and inequalities (Okin, 2017).

In his later work, particularly in *Political Liberalism*, Rawls addresses some of the criticisms and refines his theory. He shifts focus to how a stable and just society can be maintained amid reasonable pluralism (Dombrowski 2001). Rawls introduces the idea of an “overlapping consensus,” where different moral or philosophical doctrines can agree on political principles of justice for the basic structure of society, even if they differ on other issues (Umotong & Udofia, 2021). John Rawls’ theory of justice provides a powerful and influential framework for thinking about fairness, equality, and the principles that should govern a just society. By emphasizing the importance of fairness and proposing a method to derive just principles through the original position and veil of ignorance, Rawls offers a compelling vision of a society where institutions are arranged to benefit all, particularly the least advantaged. Despite various critiques, his work remains a foundational text in contemporary political philosophy, continuing to inspire and challenge scholars and policymakers in the quest for a just society.

RELIGIOUS AND ETHNIC CHALLENGES IN NIGERIA

Some countries around the world are heterogeneous in terms of religion and ethnicity. In some nations, this diversity, when well-managed, becomes a source of growth and development. The United States of America is a prime example, serving as a melting pot for numerous cultures. Despite their diversity, they have made significant progress by harnessing their differences into a positive force for growth. The United Kingdom similarly comprises ethnically diverse people but consciously strives to promote equality. By emphasizing merit above tribe and religion, the USA elected a black man as president, and today, an Indian serves as the Prime Minister of Britain. In both countries, Nigerians have risen to various governmental positions through hard work and merit. A good example is Kemi Badenoch who serves as the member of parliament of Saffron Walden in the UK. She has held various positions, including serving as the Minister for Equalities in the UK Government (Cowley, et al., 2018). In Rwanda, especially after the genocide, deliberate policies have been implemented to unify the country with regard to ethnic consciousness (Buckley-Zistel, 2009). In contrast, Nigeria presents a different scenario. The country’s diversity of over 250 ethnic groups has often been a source of conflict and instability, hindering its development. Nigeria’s history of colonialism, resource competition, and political struggles has exacerbated these divisions, leading to social unrest, political instability, and economic disparities.

The aforementioned crises have left lasting scars on the nation, resulting in the loss of countless lives, displacement of people, and destruction of property. Some notable instances include the 1966 Northern Counter-Coup, which was ethnically motivated by the perception that Igbos dominated the first coup. The Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970) was triggered by ethnic tensions, especially between the Igbos and the Nigerian state (Thomas, 2022). The Maitatsine Uprising (1980) was religiously driven by a radical Islamic sect opposing orthodox Islam and the Nigerian state. The 1992 Zangon Kataf Crisis involved ethnic and religious disputes over land between the Christian Kataf and Muslim Hausa communities.¹⁹ The 2000 Kaduna Riots were sparked by the

introduction of Sharia law, leading to clashes between Christians and Muslims (Ladan-Baki, 2015). The 2002 Miss World Riots were caused by religious outrage among Muslims over perceived blasphemy linked to the beauty pageant. The 2008 Jos Crisis was an ethno-religious conflict between Christian and Muslim communities over political control, which renewed in the 2010 Jos Crisis (Krause, 2011). The 2011 Post-Election Violence was political and ethnic violence following disputed presidential election results (Campbell, 2022).

The 2013 Boko Haram Attacks were a religiously motivated insurgency by an extremist Islamic group aiming to establish an Islamic state. The 2016 Agatu Massacre involved ethnic conflict over land between Fulani herders and Agatu farmers (Nwankwo, 2023). The 2018 Herder-Farmer Clashes were ethnic and resource-based conflicts between predominantly Muslim Fulani herders and Christian farmers. The 2019 Kaduna Crisis saw ethno-religious violence between Christian and Muslim communities (Nwankwo, 2023). The 2020 Southern Kaduna Killings involved continued ethnic and religious violence targeting Christian communities. The 2021 South-eastern Nigeria Unrest involved ethno-political tensions with the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) seeking secession. These crises have been fuelled by ethnic and religious tensions, disputes over land and resources, and political grievances (Kwazema, 2021).

Sometimes, religious crises taking place outside the country reverberate within. Several international religious crises have had resonance in Nigeria, sparking protests and demonstrations across the country. Among them are the 2005 Danish Muhammad cartoons controversy, where Nigerian Muslims protested against the publication of blasphemous cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad by a Danish newspaper. The 2012 anti-Islam film protests saw Nigerians expressing outrage over the controversial film "Innocence of Muslims," which depicted the Prophet Muhammad disrespectfully (Klausen, 2015). The 2015 Charlie Hebdo attacks and subsequent cartoon controversy prompted protests in Nigeria against the publication of cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad by the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo. Additionally, the 2017 Jerusalem embassy decision by the United States, which recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital, triggered protests in Nigeria, with Muslims condemning the decision and expressing solidarity with the Palestinian cause (Klausen, 2015). Even in the ongoing war between the Israelites and Palestinians, pockets of support for Palestine were witnessed in the North. Most Christians, on Facebook, sided with Israel and even called for the total annihilation of the Palestinians. These instances underscore the interconnectedness of global events with local religious sentiments and the potential for international crises to incite tensions within Nigeria.

These crises, religious and ethnic, have significant and wide-ranging impacts on Nigeria, affecting various aspects of society, the economy, and governance. These crises result in the loss of lives, injuries, and displacement of communities, causing immense suffering and humanitarian crises. They erode social cohesion and trust among different

religious and ethnic groups, fuelling animosity and hindering efforts to build a united and inclusive society.

Additionally, religious and ethnic conflicts disrupt economic activities, leading to the loss of livelihoods, economic instability, and hindering economic growth and development. These tensions often spill over into politics, exacerbating instability and undermining democratic governance. Human rights violations, such as arbitrary arrests and discrimination, occur during these times, particularly affecting minority groups and vulnerable populations. Furthermore, religious and ethnic conflicts disrupt access to education and healthcare services, contributing to internal displacement and refugee flows, both within Nigeria and across international borders (Eme, et al., 2018). Internationally, these crises tarnish Nigeria's reputation and affect its diplomatic relations with other countries, leading to concerns about stability and security in the region.

Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive approach that includes addressing underlying grievances, promoting inter-communal dialogue, and fostering socio-economic development in affected areas. It is crucial for Nigeria to learn from its past and work towards building a more inclusive and peaceful society to prevent future conflicts.

EFFORTS TOWARDS SOLVING NIGERIA RELIGIOUS AND ETHNIC CHALLENGES

Efforts to address and solve the crises in Nigeria have been diverse, involving government policies, civil society initiatives, and international support. These efforts aim to mitigate ethnic and religious tensions, promote peace, and foster national unity. The government has implemented various national policies and established commissions to address these issues. The Federal Character Principle ensures equitable representation of different ethnic groups in federal appointments and resource distribution to prevent dominance by any single group. The National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) mandates that graduates serve in regions different from their own to foster cross-cultural understanding and national unity (Onyishi & Ezeibe, 2014). Additionally, the National Orientation Agency (NOA2) works to promote national unity and harmonious coexistence among Nigeria's diverse populations.

Legal and security measures have also been put in place. Anti-discrimination laws are designed to protect individuals from ethnic and religious discrimination, promoting equality and justice. The government has launched military and police operations to curb violence and terrorism, particularly against groups like Boko Haram and various armed ethnic militias. Civil society efforts have played a crucial role in addressing these crises. Interfaith dialogues, such as those facilitated by the Interfaith Mediation Centre, bring together Christian and Muslim leaders to promote dialogue and understanding, reducing religious tensions. Religious leaders and traditional rulers often mediate conflicts and advocate for peace within their communities. Peace building and advocacy organizations like Search for Common Ground work extensively in Nigeria to bridge

ethnic and religious divides. The Kukah Centre, founded by Bishop Matthew Kukah, promotes dialogue and understanding among different Nigerian communities (Oluwadare & Ojo, 2017).

International support has also been significant. Various United Nations initiatives and programmes aim to promote peace, security, and development in Nigeria. Foreign aid and development programmes from countries like the United States and the United Kingdom, through agencies like USAID and DFID, support peace building, education, and economic development programmes to address underlying causes of conflict.

Community-based approaches have been essential in promoting peace at the local level. Many communities have formed peace committees that include representatives from different ethnic and religious groups to resolve local disputes. Grassroots education programmes educate communities on the importance of peace and the dangers of ethnic and religious conflict. Youth engagement initiatives provide economic opportunities and education for young people to reduce their susceptibility to radicalization and ethnic violence. Sports and cultural exchanges are used to promote interaction and understanding among young people from different backgrounds.

Finally, media and communication efforts have focused on peace journalism. Journalists are trained to report on conflict responsibly and avoid inciting tensions. Public campaigns promote national unity and the celebration of Nigeria's diversity. Constitutional conferences have played a significant role in addressing Nigeria's religious and ethnic challenges by providing a platform for dialogue and negotiation among the country's diverse groups. These conferences aim to develop constitutional frameworks that promote national unity, equitable representation, and peaceful coexistence.

One of the earliest efforts was the series of constitutional conferences held in the lead-up to Nigeria's independence in 1960 (Wapmuk, 2014). These conferences involved discussions among various ethnic and regional leaders to create a federal structure that would accommodate Nigeria's diversity. The resulting independence constitution sought to balance the interests of the major ethnic groups and regions, although tensions and conflicts persisted. In the post-independence period, several constitutional conferences were convened to address on-going political and ethnic crises. The 1978 Constituent Assembly, for example, was tasked with drafting a new constitution to replace the military decrees that had governed the country since the civil war (Loveman, 1994). This effort resulted in the 1979 Constitution, which aimed to strengthen federalism and provide checks and balances among the different branches of government.

The most notable recent effort was the 1994-1995 Constitutional Conference, which was convened by General Sani Abacha's military regime. This conference brought together representatives from across Nigeria to discuss key issues such as federalism, resource control, and minority rights. Although the recommendations of the conference were not fully implemented, it set the stage for the 1999 Constitution, which remains the foundation of Nigeria's current political system (Njoku, 2001). In 2014, President

Goodluck Jonathan convened another National Conference to address persistent ethnic, religious, and political challenges. The conference included delegates from various ethnic groups, civil society organizations, and professional bodies. Key issues discussed included devolution of powers, resource control, state creation, and mechanisms to ensure more inclusive governance. While the conference produced a comprehensive report with numerous recommendations, many of these proposals have yet to be implemented.

These constitutional conferences have been critical in providing a forum for dialogue and negotiation among Nigeria's diverse groups. They have aimed to create frameworks that promote equitable representation, address grievances, and enhance national unity. While the implementation of their recommendations has been inconsistent, these conferences represent important efforts to address the complex religious and ethnic challenges facing Nigeria. The efforts to address Nigeria's religious and ethnic challenges through constitutional conferences have often failed to yield lasting solutions, largely because they were not grounded in sound philosophical anthropology. Philosophical anthropology, which examines the nature of humanity and the fundamental aspects of human existence, is crucial for understanding and addressing the deep-rooted issues within a diverse society like Nigeria.

A key shortcoming of these conferences has been their tendency to focus on political and structural reforms without adequately considering the human and cultural dimensions of the problems. For instance, the independence constitutional conferences primarily aimed to create a federal structure to manage Nigeria's ethnic diversity. However, they did not sufficiently address the underlying human elements, such as the historical grievances, identities, and aspirations of the various ethnic groups.

Similarly, the 1978 Constituent Assembly focused on drafting a new constitution to replace military rule (Read, 1979). While it sought to strengthen federalism and checks and balances, it did not deeply engage with the philosophical underpinnings of human coexistence and community. The lack of a shared understanding of human dignity, mutual respect, and the common good meant that the constitution could not fully address the interpersonal and intergroup conflicts that continued to plague the nation.

The 1994-1995 Constitutional Conference under General Sani Abacha's regime and the 2014 National Conference under President Goodluck Jonathan also fell short in this regard (Ekweremadu, 2019). Both conferences brought together representatives from various ethnic groups and sectors of society to discuss critical issues such as resource control and federalism. However, these discussions were often framed in terms of political power and resource allocation, rather than a deeper exploration of what it means to live together as a diverse yet unified human community.

By not grounding their deliberations and recommendations on a sound philosophical anthropology, these efforts failed to foster a genuine understanding and appreciation of Nigeria's complex human issues. Issues such as identity, justice, and the intrinsic worth of every individual and community were not adequately addressed. This oversight has

meant that proposed solutions often lacked the depth and resilience needed to withstand the pressures of Nigeria's diverse and dynamic society.

To achieve lasting peace and stability, future efforts must incorporate a sound philosophical anthropology. This involves recognizing and addressing the fundamental aspects of human existence, such as the need for respect, dignity, justice, and communal solidarity. Only by understanding and valuing the human dimension of Nigeria's religious and ethnic challenges can meaningful and enduring solutions be worked out. This holistic approach would provide a stronger foundation for unity, peace, and sustainable development in Nigeria.

THE RELEVANCE RAWLS' THEORY OF JUSTICE TO NIGERIA'S ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS CHALLENGES

Rawls' theory of justice is deeply rooted in sound philosophical anthropology, as it reflects a profound understanding of human nature, dignity, and the conditions necessary for just social arrangements. Rawls begins with the premise that individuals possess inherent dignity and autonomy, which must be respected in any just society. By placing individuals behind the veil of ignorance, Rawls acknowledges their inherent worth and the importance of their agency in determining principles of justice.

Rawls' theory of justice offers valuable insights into addressing Nigeria's ethnic and religious challenges by providing a framework for designing fair and equitable social institutions. Rawls emphasises the importance of fairness and equality in the distribution of rights, opportunities, and resources. In Nigeria, where ethnic and religious diversity often leads to inequalities and discrimination, Rawls' principles of justice can guide policymakers in ensuring that all citizens, regardless of their ethnic or religious background, have equal access to basic liberties and opportunities.

The original position and veil of ignorance concept can help address Nigeria's ethnic and religious tensions by encouraging decision-makers to deliberate impartially, without bias towards any particular group. By imagining themselves behind the veil of ignorance, policymakers can design laws, policies, and institutions that are fair and just, taking into account the interests of all ethnic and religious communities.

Rawls' Difference Principle, which prioritizes the well-being of the least advantaged members of society, is particularly relevant in Nigeria, where certain ethnic and religious groups may face marginalization and socio-economic disparities. Policies aimed at reducing inequalities and improving the lives of the most vulnerable can help promote social cohesion and reduce inter-group tensions.

Ensuring fair equality of opportunity is essential in addressing Nigeria's ethnic and religious challenges. By providing equal access to education, employment, and political participation, policymakers can mitigate the effects of historical discrimination and empower marginalized groups to participate fully in society.

Rawls' focus on the basic structure of society highlights the importance of designing political, social, and economic institutions that promote justice and equality. In Nigeria, efforts to reform institutions such as the judiciary, electoral system, and public

administration can help build trust and confidence among diverse ethnic and religious communities.

Rawls' concept of an overlapping consensus offers a way to reconcile differences among Nigeria's diverse ethnic and religious groups. By seeking agreement on basic principles of justice that are compatible with different moral and religious doctrines, policymakers can foster a sense of unity and shared purpose among citizens.

Rawls' theory of justice is built on sound philosophical anthropology by recognizing the inherent dignity and autonomy of individuals, emphasizing equality and fairness, seeking universalizable principles, respecting pluralism, promoting human flourishing, fostering social cooperation, and acknowledging empirical realities. By grounding his theory in these foundational principles of human nature and society, Rawls offers a comprehensive framework for understanding and promoting justice in diverse and complex societies like Nigeria.

CONCLUSION

John Rawls' Theory of Justice offers a valuable framework for addressing Nigeria's ethnic and religious challenges. By emphasizing equal basic liberties, the difference principle, and the social contract, Rawls' theory can help promote a more just and equitable society, fostering a more inclusive and stable Nigeria. As Nigeria continues to grapple with its ethnic and religious divisions, Rawls' theory offers a powerful tool for addressing these challenges and promoting a more just and prosperous society for all.

But if at the end, after we have tried all possible solutions and the problem persists, we may have to consider moving apart gradually. Countries such as India/Pakistan, Yugoslavia (then), Sudan (then), and Cyprus are specimens in the laboratory of history.

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