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RELIGIOUS FANATICISM: A THREAT TO INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN NIGERIA

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Abstract
Nigeria, a multi-religious and multi-lingua nation within the past decades, has witnessed myriads of uncontrolled exercise of religious faith among some officially recognized religious groups in Nigeria. The uncontrolled exercise of faith often results into communication gaps between religious groups, unprecedented conflict, crisis, killing of innocent lives and destructions of properties. Besides, it has brought about the establishment of many internally displaced persons' camps (IDP's). Consequently, the effects of the internally displaced persons' camps (IDP's) are exposure of human lives to poor climatic conditions, fears, stress, insecurity, hunger and drought. Why can't two or more religious groups mutually co-operate in Nigeria? What is the rationale behind all the nefarious acts perpetuated by adherents of one religion on others? What can religious leaders of each religion do to redress the problem? This is the focus of this paper with respect to Christianity and Islam. The paper employs phenomenological and historical approach and argues that religious fanaticism is one major reason religious adherents do not mutually co-operate in Nigeria and in the global world. The paper recommends that religious leaders teach and preach religious tolerance and mutual understanding to their adherents and live exemplary lives with one another while appreciating the plural nature of Nigeria.

Keywords: Religious Fanaticism, Inter-religious Dialogue, Fundamentalism, Christianity, Islam.

Introduction

There are three officially recognized religions practiced in Nigeria. The religions are namely Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion. Each of these religions have made significant and extraordinary contributions to the spiritual, cultural and educational development of the Nigerian nation. But in recent times, these religions have also been accused of being the machinery through which it's religious adherents perpetuate unethical and noxious activities like destruction of lives and properties, violent religious crisis and conflicts on other religious attendants within Nigeria nation. The implication of this assertion is that these religions do not co-exist regardless of their religious teachings. This may sound fallacious because the two religions preach peace, love and unity to their followers but the reality subsist. The negative contributions of these religions has made modern scholars to suspect and accuse religion of being "anti-peace, anti-family, anti-progress and generally anti-humanity" (Kingsley N. Okoro, 105). Revealing the driving force and basis for accusing religion of been responsible of most anti-social activities, N.S.S. Iwe refers to such acts as a result of religious fanaticism or extremism (10). This paper seeks to examine religious fanaticism which has posed a threat to inter-religious dialogue in Nigeria with respect to

Christianity and Islam. The paper employs the phenomenological approach to the study of religion and is descriptive in nature. Phenomenology is a composite word from two Greek nouns; *phenomenon* meaning something seen and *logos* meaning word/study/enquiry. Phenomenology refers primarily to the study of that which is seen thus, the paper will explore and examine certain religious fanatical exercises in Nigeria between Christianity and Islam, the causes and effects of religious fanaticism in Nigeria and recommendations to redress the problem of religious fanaticism.

Clarification of key Terms

The operative terms in this paper are "religious fanaticism", "threat", "inter religious dialogue" and "dialogue". Religious fanaticism is the outcome of extreme fundamentalism. Therefore, religious fanaticism is "an irrational attitude to religion which leads the religionist to the practice of religion beyond the bounds of reason and, therefore, without moderation" (Iwe 11). Religious fanaticism has also been described as "the blind belief that an idea or doctrine is absolutely true, and that it is acceptable or even right to force others to share that particular idea" (Dogara J. Gwamna 46). Religious fanaticism can be "direct or indirect and manifests at the personal, group and institutional levels at varying degrees having negative action which affect human relation" (Ngozi N. Iheanacho 111). In the context of this paper, Religious fanaticism connotes the idea of practising one's religious beliefs and doctrines to the extreme especially to the detriment of other religious attendants. Threat according to Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary implies "an expression of intention to inflict evil, injury or damage". It also means "an indication of something impending" (1302). Inter religious dialogue is "a type of dialogue which concerns the meeting of two religions in a reasoned interactive setting to collectively review the differences and similarities of their religious convictions and practices towards insightful understanding, appreciation and tolerance of one another's faith" (Iheanacho, 120-121). Inter religious dialogue is about people of different faiths coming to a mutual understanding and respect that allows them to live and cooperate with each other in spite of their differences. The term will also be referred to cooperative and positive interaction between people of different religious traditions at both the individual and institutional level. Each party remaining true to their own belief and practices while respecting the rights of the other party to practice their faith freely. Dialogue is derived from two Greek words "*dia* and *logos*" meaning through and word/speech respectively. Dialogue implies "a conversation and discussion or exchange of ideas between two or more people or groups" (Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary 344). In the context of this paper, dialogue is a formal discussion or exchange of words or issues of common interest, between two people of different religious faith on religious matters.

The Concept of Religion

There is no consensus on the definition of religion. All that tried the definition of religion did so in the perspective of their discipline. Thus, the Anthropologist definition of religion is different from the psychologist; sociologist; theologian and Marxist definition of the word religion. In all the definitions given by scholars from these disciplines, none of the scholars have ever claimed that their own definition is the best or last resort, rather they tend to bring up the idea of what they feel religion is within the context of what they are discussing (E.S.Akama 1). The word religion is derived from three Latin words; *religare*, *religio* and *religere*. The words present a notion of a binding constraint from which no man can either

ignore or escape. Peter Berger defines religion as "the human attitude towards a sacred order that includes within it all being-human or otherwise. In order words, religion is the belief in a cosmos, the meaning of which both transcends and includes man" (qtd. in Basil N. Akpan 30). James Martineau defines religion as "the belief in an ever-living God that is, in a divine mind and will ruling the universe and holding moral relations with mankind" (qtd. in Akpan 30). Paul Tillich remarks that religion is not a special function of man's spiritual life, but it is the dimension of depth in all of its function. Tillich posits that religion points to that which is ultimate, infinite and unconditional in man's spiritual life. Religion, in the largest and most basic sense of the word, is ultimate concern. Religion therefore is that which "is being ultimately concerned about that which is and should be ultimate concern (qtd. in Akpan 30). However, from anthropological and sociological points of view, religion could be described as man's response to the exigency of the human condition, in which he is driven to seek security, status and permanence by identifying himself with a reality greater, more worthy and more durable than himself (Gloria C. Anyanwu 214). Therefore, religion as a universal phenomenon is man's response to God. In this context religion would mean devotion to God in the form of outward expression of worship that is liturgy, ceremonies, rituals and creeds of established religions with less emphasis on righteousness. It could be called a mere Christianity, a ritualistic attitude towards worship without commitment to word of God about sin and repentance. Religion has great and important value for people; hence some people are prepared to die for it or give so much for its sake. This is why many religious people make great sacrifices and offerings of the best they have for the sake of religion; and in some instances, even in modern times, the offering of human beings for the sake of religion. To some religious people, religious pursuit is even more valuable to them than their lives and property. This accounts for the reason why followers of a given religion are often ready to fight and defend it, and in the words of W.O. Wotogbe-Weneka they are sometimes considered by others as unreasonable, fierce and fanatical, if their religion is threatened by force or disrespected (7).

Causes of Religious Fanaticism

Globalization-Globalization is a worldwide process of change. The process aims at making the world into one large global village/neighbourhood so that events, decisions and activities in one part can come to have significant consequences for people and communities in quite distant part. In other words, globalization is a process in which every day experiences becomes standardized all over the world. Globalization allows the free flow of humans, goods and information in different part of the world. With the free flow of information due to high technological advancement and the movement of people across regions, globalization helps not only to increase religious tolerance but to trigger protest, tension among religious adherents thereby increasing the level of extremism, fundamentalism and terror tendency in the world. Globalization has significant military, political, legal, social and cultural dimensions hence, through globalization a blasphemous cartoon on prophet Muhammed that was published by a Danish newspaper, *Tyllandsposten*in September 2005 sparked off a religious riot in Nigeria in February 2006. In Kano precisely, it led to the revoke of a three million five hundred-thousand-naira contract awarded them to a Danish company by the Kano State Government for the purchase of buses and another for the installation of power plant. Similar religious riot occurred in countries like Libya, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Indonesia, Somalia, Lebanon and Iran with less fatalities (Gwamna 59-61). In the same way, the

September 11th 2001 terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre in New York City which was masterminded by Osama Bin Laden and his *Al-Qa'eda* group triggered a religious violence in Nigeria in October 2001 when the then president George W. Bush embarked on aerial bombardment of Afghanistan to flush out the perpetrator and his gangster in their hiding. The violence in Nigeria were carried out by supporters and faithful of Osama Bin Laden in mostly the Northern part of Nigeria.

Poor Spiritual Leadership- This is one of the strongest causes of religious fanaticism. Iwe remarks that "A deficient and inadequate, ignorant, prejudiced and unenlightened religious leadership is invariably the most prolific facilitator of religious fanaticism" he adds that "such poor religious leadership is often too conservative and too theologically and socially impotent to be able to reconcile and adapt its creed and practice to the legitimate imperative and values of modern times" (29-30). Religious leaders can inspire their adherents to practice their faith beyond limits. This could be as a result of poor theological formation, unguarded and sentimental religious utterances. Kalu Eme consenting to this view remarks that "in May 1986, inter-religious conflict occurred when the Muslims clashed against the Christians over the Christians symbol of the Risen Christ in the chapel of Resurrection at the University of Ibadan" (92). Similarly, the Maitasine religious killings of the 1980s (though an intra-religious conflict) in Kano ensured serious religious outbreaks between the Muslims and Christians in Kafanchan in Southern Kaduna State in a border area between the two religions (Friday I. Imaekhai 57).

Weak Secular Leadership- The duty of government is to protect the fundamental human rights and liberties of its citizens. This include freedom of thought, religion, freedom of movement, association and expression. However, when secular leaders fail to exercise the statutory duty of protecting life and property and guaranteeing religious freedom and liberty, fanatically vulnerable religious groups and individuals capitalize on the situation to operate. This is more so when the government show interest and prejudiced support for a particular belief system, without balanced neutrality in the religious tradition of its citizens (Iheanacho 115). Matthew H. Kukah opines that "the destruction of the twin towers on September 11, 2001 was not evidence that the perpetrators merely hated world trade nor did the British people think that the bombing of the underground was a sign that the terrorists detested the railway or transport system. Rather, the miscreants do not respect law. They thrive in lawlessness of the weak state and this is why anything can serve as a trigger for their destruction. He added that when states lose its authority to enforce laws, it leaves the society vulnerable" (15-16). The weak secular leadership in Nigeria has necessitated the crescendo in terrorist attacks such as the Boko Haram in the Northern part of Nigeria, Militancy in the Southern and Fulani-Herdsmen in the middle belt.The vacuum created by the weak secular leadership enables some religious adherents to exploit their followers by encouraging them to take laws into their hands. In the case of Islam, the vacuum encourages false teaching such as believing that killing others who do not think like them is jihad a noble act to be rewarded.

Misinterpretation of the Scriptures

This is one of the major challenges of religious fanaticism. When those bequeathed with the responsibility to transmit and interpret the scripture to their religious attendants are half baked the resultant effect is that their products will be religiously idiots. Misinterpretation of

the scripture is common among the religions of the book such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. Ogbuehi quoting Iwe attributes fanaticism in Islam to misinterpretation of Qur'an when he insisted that Islamic fanatics and fundamentalist interpreted Jihad to stand for physical combat against non-Muslim instead of spiritual attack against evil and demons. Heremarks that these misguided Islamic fanatics and fundamentalist have caused terror to the people in the society (70). Okoro quoting Linda and Smoker avers that "religious fanatics or fundamentalist adopts purely a literal as opposed to metaphorical or mythical interpretations of their holy scripture and deny the validity of interpretations of other religious traditions and assume that religious truth resides with their own perspective thus, creating a lopsided message to their adherents and the society." (108). Literal interpretation of the scriptures could lead to false doctrine. Ogbuehi quoting Ukastates that "false doctrine could lead members to puff up with the sense of superiority in revelation, making the one in error unteachable, and placing emphasis upon fleshly activities as a gateway to the spiritual, as in asceticism and vegetarianism" (71-72).

Religious Conflicts

Religious conflicts between the religions are other effects of religious fanaticism. Religious conflicts could be intra or inter-religious conflicts. The former is the conflict that occurs within a religious group while the latter is the conflict that occurs between attendants of two religions. For instance, the Boko Haram Islamist terrorist onslaught against Christians and the Nigerian State since 2009 which has become the worst in the annals of Nigeria's religious conflict is an inter-religious conflict. The inter-religious conflict has claimed several Christian lives while churches, hospitals, schools and properties in unprecedented magnitude has been destroyed.

Social Maladjustment- This according to Iwe is the "net result of improper upbringing and deficient socialization" (23). When a person is socially untrained, he may tend to see everything from the negative perspective thereby find it difficult to get on with the masses. The person socially untrained may also find it difficult to welcome the religious ideology of others persons hence, he is always antagonistic to saying against his religious beliefs and practices and can go extra miles in silencing the person involved in the matter. This reason is not far from the incessant killings orchestrated by the Islamic sect, Boko Haram in the Nigerian nation. Iheanacho maintains that "Boko Haram nurtures and propagate segregative ideology rooted in the philosophy of hate, discrimination and bigotry against other cultures and traditions that are at variance with their variety of Islam and sect" (117)

Effects of Religious Fanaticism in Nigeria

The aftermath of religious fanaticism is enormous. The consequences can be felt in all spheres of human endeavour be it political, social, economic as well as religious. The under listed are the copious effects of religious fanaticism in Nigeria and her citizens.

Death of Humans and Destruction of Properties

This is one major effect of religious fanaticism. Death of the unborn, young and old and more excruciatingly the death of innocent persons occurs during the excessive demonstration of fanatic beliefs and practices. Besides the death of humans, there is loss of hard earned resources and properties worth millions of naira like church building, mosques, hospitals and

schools. These properties are overtly desecrated and vandalized. Jegede O. Paul in his analysis of a religious crisis in Nigeria opines that in Nigeria between 1980-1992, a total of twenty-six religious riots between the Muslims and Christians was recorded and death toll put at 6,775, also between May 29-June 2, 1999, the violent religious clash in Warri, Delta state led to loss of more than 200 lives (64). Currently, the Boko Haram war which the federal government of Nigeria has not been able to arrest has taken more lives than estimated. Heladuwa John William in reporting the aftermath of the disastrous effect of religious fanaticism as perpetuated by Boko Haram in Maiduguri in 2009 remarks that "the exact number of lives lost during the five days of exchange of gunfire in Maiduguri metropolis from 26th July – 30th July 2009 is difficult to ascertain since there was no formal procedure for recording deaths. However, people are of the view that between 1,500 and 3,000 persons lost their lives during the unfortunate incident" (128). This has been a recurring decimal in the Nigeria history. Recently, on the 20 January, 2020 the chairman of the Christian Association of Nigeria in Adamawa State who was abducted on the 2 January, 2020 was executed at the command of Abubakar Shekau the leader of the Boko Haram sect. Similarly, on the 3July, 2020 five aid workers abducted in June 2020 in the north-east Nigeria's Borno state were also killed on the instruction of the sect leader.It is important to note that the total numbers of death presented by the media houses are just a minute figure of what have transpired in the locality where crisis have ravaged.

Socio-Political and Economic Activities are Hampered

This is another effect of religious fanaticism. When fanatic want their religious doctrines to get sway by all means without creating allowance for the other religious bodies, it brings about crisis. When crisis emanate, social activities become comatose as no one can be seen relating with each other any longer. Besides, movements of people in and out of the vicinity and other tourist activities are put off. The economic activities of the people like buying and selling of goods and perishable products go into extinction. The ability of the people to cultivate or sell farm produce is never realized hence Hunger**,** drought and starvation becomes the order of the day which eventually leads to death. Iwe remarking on the political consequence opines that "religious fanaticism with its divisive and destructive propensities and consequences is the greatest danger to political stability" (39). Political activities and governance sway through in peaceful and stable environment. When there is chaos in the society, governance and political activities becomes unachievable.

Displacement of people from Homes

Whenever there is war arising from the activities of religious fanatic, one ugly trend that seems to occur is the displacement of both the young and old from their homes as a result of burnt down buildings. Often times the displaced persons are gathered in camps ideally known as internally displaced persons camps (IDPS). Because of the excessive manifestation of one religious group doctrinal practices and beliefs and the consequent resistant of the same by the other religious group, battle is ignited and whenever there is battle, people will always flee for their lives thereby leaving their homes to seek refuge in other places. The comfort of their homes are usually forfeited just to ensure that their lives are protected. Worthy of note is the fact that when people are displaced from the comfort of their homes, their wills and wishes are usually forgotten and the wills and wishes of the persons accommodating them is imbibed.

If it is the government, whatever they provide at such moments will be made use of without complaint.

Conclusion

This paper has examined in concise manner some causes and effects of religious fanaticism in Nigeria using Christianity and Islam as a case study. The paper shows that religious fanaticism impacts negatively on humanity and the society at large. It encourages destruction of lives and properties, hatred, and promotes unhealthy altercation and retrogression on socio-political and economic activities of mankind. Moreover, through the activities of religious fanatics, the relationship between Christianity and Islam suffers a great deal thereby making mutual co-existence of the two religions seem impossible.

Recommendations

Based on the discourse, the researcher recommends the following:

1. That religious leaders teach and preach religious tolerance and mutual understanding to their adherents and learn to live exemplary lives with one another.
2. That religious leaders be not involved in triggering religious acrimony and rancour between two or more religious organizations.
3. That inter-faith interaction among religious teachers be encouraged and sustained towards peace building and confidence creation.
4. That religious organizations such as the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) an umbrella body for the entire Christians and the Jama'atu Nasir Islam (JNI) act as check agents to the excesses of fanatical teachings by religious teachers and preachers to avoid conflicts among these two dominant religious bodies in Nigeria
5. That Nigerians should learn to encourage peaceful co-existence in order to reduce tendencies that promote crisis.
6. That religious leaders needs to be trained and re-trained to appreciate the plural nature of Nigeria as a nation and also trained and re-trained their members to understand their holy books and the rudiments of their religions.
7. That government live up to their demands to maintaining peace and harmony in the Nigeria nation especially when there is religious chaos.

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