RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM AS A CHALLENGE TO TERTIARY EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

Ikenna L. Umeanolue & kanayo L. Nwadialor

Abstract

Religious extremism is a global issue that raises questions and tensions in many countries. In Nigeria, it is a known fact that religion has been abused in many ways to suit the interests of some groups of people who consider themselves as custodians and defenders of religious values and faith. Apparently the trend of violence in Nigeria is a sign of the need for thorough research and study about religions in tertiary institutions including Universities, Polytechnics and Colleges of Education. Extremists use religion as a shield either for political or economic agenda and manipulate their gullible followers in order to impose their ideology on them. The reality of religious extremism in Nigeria is a challenge to tertiary education to search for a lasting solution that will enable Nigerians overcome the problem and focus on their economic, social and genuine religious progress. The tertiary institutions in Nigeria need to produce people with critical minds that can challenge religious extremism. In this context, thoughts directed towards tackling religious extremism are important. This study, therefore, recommends that tertiary institutions in Nigeria, through General Studies, should educate the youth to be self-reliant so that they are not lured by religious extremists to achieve their political and economic agenda. Publication of well researched papers and books that contribute to the study of religions and cultures should be encouraged by the tertiary institutions. Tertiary institutions should also develop General Studies curriculum in religion to teach students about human convictions on religion and consequently promote religious dialogue for the common good. Hence tertiary education in Nigeria has very crucial role in curbing the problem of religious extremism in the nation.

Introduction

Nigeria is religiously pluralistic and the adherents of these religions are often hostile to one another as a result of religious extremism. The term religious extremism is familiar to many people in the contemporary Africa and Nigeria in particular. It is a tricky and complex phenomenon. It means going to extreme, extending far beyond the norm of the greatest severity, and immoderate expedient (Morris, 1969). An extremist advocates or resorts to extreme measures in religion or politics. It can manifest in different dimensions such as psychological, social, political, economic and religious. It is found almost in all religions although for some the problem is more apparent. The reality of religious extremism in Nigeria is even much more pronounced as the nation is made up of many ethnic groups with various religious affiliations. In order to give religion its due respect, education at the tertiary level could solve this problem through its critical analysis of issues affecting the society.

The tertiary institutions in Nigeria need to produce people with critical minds that challenge religious extremism. Extremists use religion as a shield either for political or economic agenda and manipulate their victims in order to impose their ideology on them. In this context, thinking directed towards solving problems is important. All thinkers ought to be part of the solution, so those who use their thinking destructively are part of the problem. Religious extremism manifests itself through criminal acts such as killing, kidnapping and other forms of attack. The

rapid growth of religious extremism has raised an alarm and is a concern in the globe. On this account, Nigerian tertiary institutions are challenged to take decisive measures against this menace.

It must be noted that static cultural, religious mental attitudes, mindsets and stereotypes are dangerous; hence empowerment of young people with religious knowledge is vital. With the teaching and researches carried out in Nigerian tertiary institutions, a common ground, a meeting point acknowledgement and respect of religions is crucial for promotion of human dignity. When posed, knowledge becomes a powerful tool which can be used to build and liberate people from various oppressive chains. Tertiary education can help the learner to understand religious diversities and what is venerable in other religions. Religion is a powerful motivator for both positive social change and mass violence (Ugwueye and Umeanolue, 2013; Kimaro, 2014). It is an institution that is protected in civil society, but it poses a threat, that is why critical examination and analysis of religious extremism is vital. The present study gives an overview of religious extremism, reality and extremist tendencies in Christianity and Islam that jeopardize peaceful and harmonious life in contemporary Nigeria. The paper discusses the role of Nigerian tertiary institutions in monitoring and curbing religious extremist movements.

Religious Extremism in Global Perspective

It is a known fact that religion has been abused in many ways to suit the interests of some groups of people who consider themselves as custodians and defenders of religious values and faith. Apparently the trends of suicide bombing, for instance in Pakistan, India, Iraq and Afghanistan, to mention a few, is a sign of the time that calls for deep and thorough research and study about religions in tertiary institutions. The situation in Pakistan for instance, is worrisome as Askari (2011) reports:

> Pakistan now faces a serious internal war, something its official circles denied in the past, spearheaded by religious militants that are attempting to overwhelm the Pakistani state, government and society. These extremists use religion to cover up their actual agenda of establishing a territorial domain to pursue their international religious-ideological plans.

It is such state of affairs that has made the lives of many people miserable, and this remains a fundamental obstacle to social, political and economic progress. In addition, religious Islamic militants linked with Al-Qaeda killed the only Christian minister in Pakistan on March 2, 2011 after challenging a law on blasphemy toward Islam. Many now fear a strain of violent religious conservatism which is becoming more and more mainstream in society. The killing is a result of negative attitude against other religions and lack of intolerance; that also caused the killing of the provincial governor in January. At this juncture politicizing religion or using religion to achieve political objectives is very obvious but remains a paradox to many people.

In this 21st century world dominated by technological developments, religious extremism is an obstacle to individual progress; and poses threats to human freedom and growth. Its conservatism is clearly confirmed by Talibans in Pakistan who forced the closure of 400 Christian schools due to threats and climate of terror. In these schools both Muslims and Christians study, but the frequent attacks make the schools a hell. The Talibans want to reduce education for girls. Apart from religion being a contentious issue where eternal salvation is at stake, in this case it is being used for wrong motives. So religion has impact on political life and raises national and

international debates on its role to establish systems and structures that respect human freedom, life and dignity.

Further, antagonism towards non-Muslims is evident, especially questions on where Islam should be applied as a complete code which provides for all areas of life, spiritual, intellectual, political, social and economic. Religious extremism is one of the most disturbing problems that make humankind of the present century very uncomfortable, hence the need for contributions from tertiary institutions.

From a different context, evangelical Christian extremists have wrought mayhem in some parts of the world. A good example is Pastor Jerry Jones from an evangelical Church in Florida, USA, who vowed to burn the copies of Quran to mark the anniversary of September 11th when the twin towers were attacked. According to him the values that Qur'an stands for propagate insurgency; hence he wanted to send message to the radical Muslim world. Nevertheless, all moderate Christians were against this move since it was against Christian morals and would trigger outrage in Islamic world.

In addition, this would incite violence and animosity between Christians and Muslims in the world, because religious books must be treated with respect. Furthermore worship and symbols have to be appreciated and protected. The fact that the world is overwhelmed by so many challenges, environmental, diseases, to mention a few, it is a matter of tertiary institutions and homes of scholars to carry out researches and disseminate knowledge about religion in order to reduce ignorance linked to religious extremism and violence (Kimaro, 2014). Similarly, some Christians in the world support Israel against the Palestinians; because they are followers of Jesus Christ who is a Jew. The emphasis is more on Jesus as a Jew not Jesus who loves justice. Consequently, for some Christian evangelical preachers, support for Israel is a religious duty, and America itself is God's chosen instrument to protect Israel (Fox, 2006). This is an outrageous form of religious extremism. Jesus Christ never supported injustice. To tackle these issues adequately, one needs not only learning but also a change of heart.

Christian and Islamic Religious Extremism in Nigeria
Nigeria cannot separate herself from global predicaments. It is a fact that religious extremism is a growing threat that jeopardizes human societal activities. As seen in some other parts Africa, in Nigeria religion is abused in order to achieve political goals. It is a fact that religion has become a tool of many individuals, groups and associations especially these last two decades. It is obvious that most of the destructive conflicts have been fueled by faith in Nigeria. This corresponds to Huxley (2009) observation that "The religious intolerance, caused mostly by fanatics, militants and fundamentalists, which sometimes explodes into violence and hostilities is rampant ...."(p. 223). This is contrary to the nature of religion which is supposed to bring people closer together instead it splits people into hostile groups. In this case majority of religious institutions have simply failed to uphold their prophetic role.

Some religious communities have, at one time served as a source of peace and violence at the same time. Such reality has tempted a number of critics to claim that we need to conduct an audit of how religious communities have been responding to destructive conflicts in Africa. It is only logical to question the extent to which tertiary institutions have responded to this problem. In

relation to this, Tarimo (2009) argues: "The model of a single religion for single state cannot fit in the modern world. The idea of imposing one religion on everybody ...advocated by those who believe that tough measures are required to restore the model of theocratic state" (p. 387) is outdated. It must be noted that religion is an ambivalent truth containing within itself, the power to liberate or destroy as clearly demonstrated by extremists. The time has come when governments and universities should respond adequately to these challenges. In some states, Government policies discourage inter-faith activities and widen the gap between state and religious institutions.

Christian Religious Extremism and Its Implications
For Christian extremists the Bible is not only their holy book which conveys the true religion of Jesus Christ, but also non-Christians will go to hell. Christianity is seen as the only religion that has the religious truth about God. Christian extremists use the Bible to criticize non-Christians and other Churches that are not theirs. Accordingly, the Bible is the only source of faith. For instance, some Churches use Old Testament texts to criticize Catholicism, quote text out of context and ignore other related texts. The Catholics are accused by some Churches for adoring images based in Exod. 20:4-5 where God seems to forbid images. But this is clarified in Exod. 25:18-20, and 2 Chr. 3:7-10 also where God ordains the construction of images. They do not attack true Catholicism as it is but a caricature they have made of it. Distortions are created by their preconceived ideas out of ignorance or bad faith. A typical case is their claim that Catholics adore the Virgin Mary, the Saints, but any Catholic knows that this is not so: Mary and Saints are merely venerated but not adored.

There is enough evidence to substantiate the fact that various Christian extremist preachers in Nigeria tend to use the media, abuse other Churches even the Bible in order to get members in their Churches. The growing religiosity among Nigerian undergraduates is appalling; where every morning and evening at about 7am and 5pm respectively student groups congregate in various class rooms to study the Bible and other devotional materials for about two hours, which sometimes extend up to lecture hours. Interpretation of the Bible in this case is literal, since they do not have a Biblical expert to analyze for them the themes in an academic manner. However, at times students brandish a university degree but have no knowledge of some of the most basic fundamental precepts of logic. They take a literalistic interpretation of their various religious texts which is an embarrassment to graduates of higher institutions. Tarimo (2009) asserts that literal reading of the scripture is not the right way to understand the Scripture; instead it encourages fatalism and poverty. Religion should enable people to transcend both themselves and those conditions that hinder human growth and fulfillment.

The Kanungu incident in Uganda where the members of the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God perished on 17th March 2000 is another negative form of religion. Kibwetere, a Christian extremist, managed to manipulate many people by telling them that few chosen people had seen visions, they had communicated with God through the visions which were the warnings that the world was about to end.

In Nigeria, Derrick (2009) observes a situation whereby the Church tortures children because of witchcraft. Some of the churches pretend to use oil to try and remove witchcraft from children. So far 165 children, some of them not up to 9 months old, have been thrown away by their

parents because the church said "those children will bring them misfortune". This is unbelievable state of affairs and very scaring face of Christian extremism. Poverty and ignorance have forced many Christians to look for abrupt solutions. They eventually end up being deceived to throw away their children. Certainly, this is another massive challenge to the tertiary education in Nigeria to carry out more research projects on how religion is affecting people negatively as it also appears in the following discussion.

Islamic Religious Extremism and Its Implications
Islam remains an enigma to many people since it attempts to impose religion on people of other faiths. In relation to this Magesa (2007) argues "Christians tend to feel embattled and threatened by what they perceive as Muslim religious fundamentalism" (p. 171). At times some Muslim scholars and teachers with limited knowledge about Christian beliefs give lectures, and have been very vocal in attacking Christian belief, to the extent of saying that Jesus is not God. Although it is perfectly legitimate for Muslims to claim this on the basis of their belief in the oneness of God, it is religiously 'undiplomatic'. Islamic extremists are part of the modern political movements which have conservative ideas, mostly oppositional, which seek to establish, in one sense or another, an Islamic state. The model for an Islamic state is sought by these movements in a 'sacred history' of the original political community of the faithful established by the Prophet Muhammad in Medina in the seventh century and maintained under his four successors.

A wave of extremism is really in Nigeria and a dangerous one in Northern Nigeria due to the activities of *Boko Haram* and Fulani Herdsmen. As a matter of fact extremism is dragging Nigeria into the dark ages contrary to developments in the modern world. It is unfortunate that young Muslims are urged to volunteer for terrorist training. The issue of extremism should be tackled not just at the point it translates into violence. People have to be sensitive to the ideologies of prejudice and dogmatism that permeate a range of issues that are confused with what is good. As a matter of fact, faith is not static as it requires ongoing voices and actions to give it meaning, to pull it back from the clutches of hateful ideologies.

Most of the violent conflicts in the contemporary Nigeria have been as much ideological as economically motivated and usually framed and fought in ethnic, cultural, or political terms (Ugwueye and Umeanolue, 2013). In most of the conflicts in the northern Nigeria, Churches were burned and many Christians were killed, hence, following these attacks Christians are living in fear. Islamic extremists are on the increase and the spirit of intolerance seems to be taking control. It is unfortunate that murderers are made heroes by religious zealots, and this gives a religion a black eye when the original message is corrupted by zealots or extremists who perfect or hijack the faith from its original goodness for the sake of politics or greed or power. This is in line with Tarimo's (2009) argument that religion is a two-edged sword: it could be destructive when manipulated, or constructive when taken as a source of divine inspiration that nourishes human life.

Similarly, Shorter (1998) states, "Religion all too often enslaves, rather than liberates the human spirit, limits the horizon of faith, makes people fearful and adventurous, inculcates prejudice, intolerance and even active persecution of outsides; it can instill a spirit of fatalism into the minds of its adherents, rendering them passive and impervious to innovation" (p. 42).

Most of the religious extremist groups are formed by young people majority of whom are graduates of higher institutions. Couldn't there be another alternative in life for these youths? They could be instrumental to meaningful development, engaging in innovative activities that could rescue Nigeria from poverty and environmental disasters. Such groups have people with potential talents and skills that can be used to work for true revolution, hence brightening Nigeria's future. Such dream could only be realized if tertiary institutions as academic communities could quest for the truth and the good about diverse religions through research.

In Nigeria, Nwosu (2009) speaks of a religious crisis which cost lives of many people. It was a:

> violent campaign by a fringe group of extremists which started in Bauchi , like wild fire, had quickly spread to neighbouring States such as Yobe, Bomo and Kano claiming lives of innocent Nigerians including security personnel. The resolute determination by this group of social miscreants known as *Boko Haram* (Western Education is sin), to subjugate the nation and impose their own brand of Islamic religion on the country, is a move that is not only worrisome but calls for concerted national action... *Boko Haram* sect led by a 39-year old fundamentalist, Ustaz Mohammed Yusuf is a threat for peace.

It is incredible to have such a campaign in the twenty first century when many people are craving for formal education at various levels. This shows that there is much need for the raising of awareness to open peoples' minds especially about where the world has reached. Extremism is really a threat to Nigerian nation since it may force investors to flee hence commerce will atrophy. Extremists are millions and millions of miles behind the time. It is unfortunate that such caricature exposes the magnitude of ignorance that is still in the minds of many people. What should be done by Nigerian tertiary institutions to put a permanent stop to these provocative acts?

The Role of Nigerian Tertiary Institutions in Monitoring Religious Extremist Movements
Tertiary institutions have a special role to play in serving the public interest through higher education and research. They are essential for the free expression of cultural diversity, which enriches the spiritual, moral, social and economic life of students. John Paul II (1989) states: "They are committed to the promotion of solidarity and its meaning in society and the world. Therefore they have the full right to expect that civil society and public authorities will recognize and defend their institutional autonomy and academic freedom..." (p. 39). In this perspective, discussions of all kinds that are geared at freeing the society from certain problems including religious extremism are welcome in tertiary institutions. A Nigerian higher institution of learning has to provide common ground for the growth of ideas that capture the attention of the human mind and shape the human being. This is a challenge to the Nigerian tertiary education to form and transform the minds of young people who are ready to debate and free themselves and society from the shackles of religious fundamentalism.

The fact that religious extremists are dangerous even when they are leaders in the community should be a concern for African tertiary institutions. A good example is from Ireland where Muslim parents accompanied by the councilor who is Muslim disrupted school mass four times. The Catholic priest who was officiating at the mass was surprised that a councilor would

associate himself with a cohort of unrepresentative extremists (Hugh, 2006). Similarly, ignorance is very costly since people might even use religion to destroy themselves. For instance, Nwosu (2009) reports that students in 'Star of the Sea School' in Mombasa took down the Crucifix in their classroom, stepped on it and broke it, then burnt it because they were told by their parents that their prayers could not ascend to heaven as long as a Crucifix was on their classroom wall, and that they would fail their exams. This belief obstructs academic and social progress of pupils. Due to this fact, Theuri (2002) says that when religion is not well supervised by experts it can inhibit growth, stunt economic, social and political development, and prevent people from enjoying the fullness of life that they are capable of, and therefore, Nigerian tertiary education have the mandate to arrest such situations. Nigeria tertiary institutions should establish programmes that offer studies on religions and, thus, give necessary clarifications on very strong and fundamental religious issues.

Tertiary Education and Religious Dialogue
Education is the best solution to many religious conflicts, and tertiary institutions have a key role to play in this. John Paul II (1989) affirms this truth that:

> By its very nature, a University develops culture through its research, helps to transmit the local culture to each succeeding generation through its teaching, and assists cultural activities through its educational services. It is open to all human experience and ready to dialogue with and learn from any culture. (p. 35).

This is a picture of how tertiary education should be. Fundamental to any nation building is education. If extremism may be easily implemented in the Nigerian soil, with the dire consequences; Nigerians should find ways to nip it in the bud. It implies that tertiary education will reduce situation where Muslims and Christians are suspicious of each other and label each other as unbelievers. Tele-evangelists have insulted Muslims and made a mockery of Muslims and Islam. It shows that in all religions there is a hidden tendency to become fanatical in order to maintain one's limited perspective and understanding of faith.

However, education in Nigerian higher institutions should empower learners to have the capacity and skills for dialogue with other religions and cultures to avoid religious conflicts. Acceptance of the other, especially in the wake of extremism, evangelism and fundamentalism, should move beyond the superficial and the unconscious to the conscious. Christian and Muslim leaders should acquire enough religious skill to be able to touch people's hearts through their teachings, sermons presentations. In the same way, tertiary institutions should contribute by emphasizing the worth and dignity of humans their common humanity, the ecumenical nature of the respective faiths, our duties as stewards of God, and our decisive accountability to God through education. Eventually, comprehensive education about religions will help Christians and Muslims to deal with extremism and fanaticism which can easily be imported from outside.

Although Christians and Muslims rub shoulders in Nigeria but when it comes to the strictly religious domain, their knowledge of each other scarcely goes beyond the external details of religious practice often seen as the 'essential differences'. Religious ignorance has brought a lot of harm to Nigeria, and is truly the mother of mistrust, prejudice and ultimately violence (Ugwueye and Umeanolue, 2013). The religious knowledge is the most important aspect of dialogue which enhances the fruitful co-existence between people of different religious traditions. In Nigeria, for instance, Christians and Muslims have no way out except cherishing

the mutual understanding among themselves because they need combined energies to combat underdevelopment, epidemics, corruption, unemployment, drought and environmental degradation to mention a few.

If it happened in our diversities that a person who does not belong to my religion is an enemy, such situation dehumanizes and mistreats the other. There is a need to see those who are different from us as persons, human beings and children of God like ourselves, we need them and they need us. Consequently, a paradigm shift from the mindset of a tertiary educational theory that enslaves to that which liberates is indispensable in the contemporary Nigeria.

The function exercised by the tertiary educational institution in society has no substitute, as it is the most important institution in society and, ultimately, structures the life of the society. In this case, Nigerian tertiary education should defend human rights, respect ideological differences, and encourage mutual respect which should lead to the constructive dialogue. Education should promote human dignity and genuine human relationship, and prepare the way for opening oneself to the truth. Since the tertiary institution is an important place for human formation and transformation, knowledge of peoples' religions should be taken as an integral part of this formation.

Recommendations
The following recommendations will go a long way to control religious extremism in Nigeria:

Various religions in Nigeria and their adherents should have respect for one another's views. There are inter-faith diversities in African Traditional Religion, Christianity and Islam. There is the need to acknowledge these differences. To do so, effort needs to be made to understand one another and what each group stands for. It is necessary for adherents of these different religions in Nigeria to open their hearts to the way of life of others so as to understand themselves better. It is only when we respect one another in our differences that peace can be ensured. Respect does not mean accepting what the other believes or says. But it means respecting the other's freedom to follow whatever religion he proposes for himself/herself. In addition 38 (1) of the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria states:

> Every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom either alone or in community with others and in public or in private, to manifest and propagate this religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance.

The above legal provision is made in order to ensure that citizens enjoy religious freedom and that the state or government does not affiliate itself or show preference for one religion (Umeanolue and Mgbemena, 2011).

Tertiary institutions in Nigeria should help young people to overcome the obstacles thwarting their development, including illiteracy, idleness, hunger, drugs. The youth should be helped to be self-reliant so that they are not lured by religious extremists to achieve their political and economic agenda in Nigeria.

Nigerian Tertiary institutions should also develop General Studies curriculum in religion to teach students about human convictions on religion and consequently promote religious dialogue for

the common good. They should also organize public forums and encourage the publication of many books that contribute to the study of human cultures and religions.

Nigerian tertiary education should put more emphasis on learning about other religions through their programmes of study. This would be a powerful step toward communicating in the spirit of humility and engaging in self-criticism which is helpful for mutual growth. But it needs to be pointed out that being educated about other religions does not mean conversion, rather it facilitates understanding and respect for other faiths.

Nigerian tertiary education should help the Muslim communities and institutions to study Islam analytically and critically at different levels of society, both formally and informally. The curricula or syllabi of Islamic educational institutions should address how the sharia can be made intelligible, meaningful and relevant in both content and application in the modern democratic situation, bearing in mind the pluralistic nature of the society.

Nigerian tertiary institutions should help Evangelical Churches to review their programmes so that they can be more inclusive. Proper education is needed not only to control some of these fanatical and extremist tendencies, which are inimical to the personal development in the contemporary world, but also to enhance the quest for the continuous and sustained peaceful co-existence with others. Universities should also emphasize peace studies and inculcate more values of love, tolerance, forgiveness and simple manners.

Special emphasis should also be put on the role of education in the fight against religious extremism. Religion based approach of political and social engagement should transcend the differences, focus more on human centered values. Religion should not be hijacked by religious political leaders with personal interests/agendas. In this case, the state should provide enabling environment for institutions to ensure equal access to the resources of life and freedom of expression.

Conclusion

Religious extremism is a challenging that raises questions and tensions in many countries. The reality of religious extremism in Nigeria is a challenge to every Nigerian tertiary institution to search for a lasting solution that will enable the people of Nigeria overcome the problem and focus on their economic, social and genuine religious progress. Better solution can be found through education concerning diversities of cultures and religions in the nation. Schools of General Studies and Research centers in Universities are very crucial in enabling members of the public to get comprehensive knowledge about religions. Nigeria would like to see universities that encourage peaceful co-existence between people of different religions. We must find a way in Nigeria to encourage our institutions of learning to strive hard to give young people necessary skills for religious dialogue. Tertiary institutions should encourage self-confidence and self-reliance in order to keep young people busy, hence, not to join such religious extremists. Suffice it to say that Nigerian tertiary institutions have a great role to play in helping students and civil society to develop and think critically on matters concerning religion and society.

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