Religious Extremism and Moral Evil in North-Eastern Nigeria: Implications of Violent Extremism in the Nigerian Society

Ewere Nelson Atoi*

Abstract

The various categories of moral evil associated with some contemporary extremists' religious ideologies have continued to raise fundamental questions about the purpose of religion in human life the world over. In Nigeria, the Northeastern region has recorded the worst form of moral evil in recent years due to religious extremism. Therefore, this essay explored the phenomenon of religious extremism to underscore how it has occasioned large-scale moral evil in North-eastern Nigeria. Data were obtained from existing literature, media reports and observation of the contemporary religious situation in the Northeastern region. Historical, content, critical and constructive methods of analysis were utilized for data interpretation. Two major religious extremist sects (Boko Haram and ISWAP) are largely responsible for most of the moral evil in north-eastern Nigeria. These two extremist groups have continued to abduct, dehumanize, displace and kill innocent people across the northeastern region in the name of God. This paper submits that religious extremists should eschew violent extremism and embrace the philosophy of peace, love and tolerance in the practice of their religious beliefs for the common good of all.

Keywords: Religious Extremism, Moral Evil, Extremists, Human Life, North-eastern Region

Introduction

The extreme and unreasoned approaches to religious beliefs and practices and the various categories of moral evil associated with some contemporary extremists' religious ideologies have continued to raise fundamental questions about the nature and purpose of religion in human life. The world over, religious extremists have continued to perpetrate different kinds of moral evil such as suicide bombing in places of worship, abduction, dehumanization and killing of people who do not share the same extreme religious ideologies with them, among others. The recent upsurge of cold-blooded terrorism, violent conflict in the name of fighting for God and other forms of organised crimes bedevilling the peace, security, and safety of human lives in many nations of the world have been largely attributed to extreme approaches to religious beliefs and practices by fanatics in the global socio-religious space (Atoi, 47). There is no gainsaying that numerous cases of man's wickedness against fellow man resulting from religious extremism are noticeable in every nook and cranny of the world because such cases have continued to make headlines in different news media platforms almost on daily basis in contemporary times.

In Nigeria, the Northeastern region is always making news headlines for man's inhumanity against fellow man because of religious extremism. The region has recorded the worst form of moral evil in recent years due to the extreme religiosity of some fanatical sects such as Boko Haram and other groups with similar extreme religious ideologies. The religious situation of the region keeps getting worse on daily basis in some states such as Borno, Adamawa and Yobe, as splitter extreme religious sects with violent tendencies and other evil motives keep emerging at regular

intervals. Most of these extremist religious groups utilize deadly arms and ammunitions of mass destruction readily available at their disposal to unleash mayhem on innocent citizens and non-citizens alike in the name of religion, making life a living hell for everyone in north-eastern Nigeria (Atoi and Ogunrinade, 20-21). Therefore, this paper explored the phenomenon of religious extremism to underscore how it has occasioned large-scale moral evil in North-eastern Nigeria. Data were obtained from existing literature, media reports and careful observation of the contemporary religious situation in North-eastern Nigeria. Historical, content, critical and constructive methods of analysis were employed for data interpretation.

The Concept of Extremism
Extremism is a social belief or act which is perceived to violate the common norm, especially in religion and politics. It can also be said to be measures, acts or actions beyond what is considered the norm or what is generally accepted as being normal. The concept may sometimes be associated with the person(s) who have a different view(s) which is not consistent with the existing norm(s) (Ogbonnaya, 60). Hina and Kashmeeri delineate extremism as the theory or mindset which is based upon uncompromising policies which are in favour of one but against the other (80). According to Jaafar and Akhmetova, extremism is usually defined as the holding of extreme political or religious views, and the noun, extremist, is a person who holds extreme political or religious views, especially one who advocates illegal, violent, or other extreme action. Extremism exists in many shapes and at different levels. Some individuals who are identified as extremists could be directly involved in violence, while some others only hold extremist ideologies, without being directly involved in any type of violence

or aggression (105). It is pertinent to note that some scholars alternate extremism with fundamentalism. Davies opines that extremism is a derivative of fundamentalism, and that "the extremist's mindset revolves around an absolutist claim to an authentic truth, coupled with the steady rejection of opposing opinions and beliefs" (cited in Atoi, 49). However, Pratt contends that there is an important distinction between the two concepts. He argues that extremism suggests fanaticism, while fundamentalism relates to the religiopolitical perspective found in many, if not all major religions in the contemporary world (441).

Chiluwa, Chimuanya and Ajiboye contend that extremism is often associated with religion and has in recent years been used exclusively in the context of religion due to the activities of religious extremists and terrorists who explain their actions as an expression of religious obligation (1). Citing Mason and James, Jaafar and Akhmetova observe that the term religious extremism is an "anti-social behaviour that is based on religious beliefs. They maintain that acts of religious extremism are often justified based on literal interpretations of religious tenets while rejecting responses to modern developments through reasoning and logical interpretations. Jaafar and Akhmetova further assert that extremism is always associated with the agenda of the ruling elite and with the infiltration and combination of strict understanding of religious doctrines or tenets as a political instrument for the fear-based obedient masses (105-106). Chiluwa, Chimuanya and Ajiboye define religious extremism as the expression of extreme or violent actions or jihad based on particular interpretations or understanding of religious teaching or scripture (2). Citing Liebman, Chiluwa, Chimuanya and Ajiboye further explain that religious extremism is

the desire to expand the scope, details and strictness of religious law; social isolation; and the rejection of the surrounding culture. To them, religious extremism includes the formation of violent religious movements and the expression of extreme and unjust positions or actions in the name of religious faith (7).

The Concept of Evil

The term evil has been a very difficult concept to delineate right from antiquity to contemporary times. Although a lot of explanations of the concept of evil have been offered over the years, arguments on how it should be delineated are incessant. Whereas some scholars attempt to provide a formal or systematized definition of evil, others try to give concrete examples of what evil looks like. Meister in his famous book titled Introducing Philosophy of Religion chooses not to border himself with a formal or systematized definition of evil but rather presents concrete examples to paint a picture of what can be regarded as evil in the universe. According to him, some common examples of evil are: natural catastrophes such as earthquakes, hurricanes, and forest fires in which innocent life is killed; intense suffering and pain such as a child being beaten to death by a barbaric tribal enemy, a pregnant woman dying from cancer, or a zebra being eaten alive by a lion; physical, mental, or emotional impairments such as being born with a cleft pallet, or having a borderline personality disorder, or experiencing weakness of will at a crucial moment, and so on (129).

It is imperative to state categorically at this juncture that the phenomenon called evil in the philosophical and theological lexicon comes in different forms, shapes and sizes. Some come in the form of immoral behaviours in society through the intentional actions and inactions of moral agents, and others in the form of

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occurrences of natural disasters or catastrophes in the universe such as floods, earthquakes, tornados, and tsunamis, among others. Fundamentally, evil is classified into two basic forms or kinds, which are natural evil and moral evil. Natural evil is the kind of evil that originates without human actions. These include earthquakes, storms, droughts, and tornadoes, among others. Moral evil is the kind of evil whose occurrence is dependent on intentional human actions and inactions (Hick, 12). It has to do with the misbehaviours of moral agents in society. Moral evil is usually caused by man's misuse of free will. Typical examples of moral evil include acts of terrorism, murder, rape, adultery, stealing, and all other categories of human wickedness against a fellow human being. Moral evil includes all wrong acts of omission and commission. It is imperative to note that the kind of evil that is emphasized in this study is a moral evil, as it relates to the inhuman acts against fellow human beings perpetuated by religious extremists in northeastern Nigeria.

A Brief History of Religious Extremism in Northern Nigeria
Religious extremism in northern Nigeria dates back to the activities of the 1804 Islamic Jihadist movement of Uthman Dan Fodio that invaded and conquered the fourteen indigenous independent Hausa Kingdoms. Having subjugated the indigenous people of the fourteen independent Hausa Kingdoms, the jihadists obliterated the Hausa indigenous religious beliefs and practices and imposed Islam on the people as the exclusive religion that has the authentic truth about God. Afterwards, they established the Sokoto Caliphate—an Islamic emirate system built to regulate the religious and political affairs of Muslims through the principle of sharia law in northern

Nigeria (Atoi, 51; Onakuse and Jatula, 7). This development marks a significant phase in the history of religious extremism in the northern region, as it prepared the ground for different Islamic extremist sects to carry out violent Jihadist attacks in Nigeria. Over the years, many extremist sects have continued to emerge with the principal aim of implementing the Jihadist agenda of Islamizing the country, beginning with northern Nigeria. The most famous ones among them are Maitasine, Boko Haram, and Islamic State West African Province (ISWAP). These three extremist groups in northern Nigeria have continued to anchor their religious extremism on the belief in orthodox Islam, which advocates for full implementation of sharia and the eradication of all forms of modernity in the practice of the Islamic faith, and the abandonment of western form of democracy for the Islamic system of governance in northern Nigeria. It is imperative to briefly discuss each of the three aforementioned extremist groups (Maitasine, Boko Haram, and ISWAP) for a better understanding of the history of religious extremism in northern Nigeria.

Maitatsine was a religious extremist sect established by an Islamic scholar known as Muhammadu Marwa (nicknamed 'Maitatsine'– that is, 'the one who curses'). Marwa migrated from Cameroon to Nigeria in 1945 and settled in the ancient city of Kano. Maitatsine uprising became an issue of great concern in Kano in the 1980s when Marwa started the purification of Islam, which he believed had come under the corrupting influence of western civilization. His purification ideology led him to rebel against many popular opinions in the Kano Islamic circle. Marwa denounced certain parts of the Holy Qur'an and even criticized Prophet Muhammad. Maitatsine was opposed to most aspects of westernization and the formation of modern states and demanded the establishment of an Islamic state with sharia as the guiding legal

philosophy. Marwa admonished members of this group to decry such technological commonplace as radios, wrist watches, automobiles, motorcycles, and even bicycles. Those who use these things or who read books other than the Qur'an were regarded as hell-bound 'pagans' (Falola, 146; Pham, 2; Atoi and Babale, 235-236). Marwa attracted the poor and uneducated in the city of Kano with his preaching because he attacked the elites. Maitatsine raised a banner of revolt against secular authorities by mobilizing the less privileged members of the society while competing against the appropriation of their demands. Through this category of people, the group was able to execute violent attacks against their perceived enemies (Christians, moderate Muslims, and secular authorities) in a large proportion (Roberts cited in Singh, 26; Atoi, 54).

Boko Haram (a nomenclature which means 'western education/values are forbidden' in the Hausa language) is an Islamic extremist sect currently causing major havoc in northern Nigeria. The official name of Boko Haram is Jama'atu Ahlus-Sunnah Lidda'Awati Wal Jihad, which translates as 'People Committed to the Prophet's Teachings for Propagation and Jihad' (American Foreign Policy Council, 1; Atoi, 72). It is believed that the group has been in existence since 2002. Howbeit, Boko Haram terrorist attacks came to the fore in 2009, when it propagated the sectarian violence that primarily engulfed Bauchi and Maiduguri, resulting in the death of over 1000 people (Paris Model United Nations, 4). This group is based in Borno state but is also prominent in other northeastern states such as Yobe, Adamawa and Bauchi through records of terrorist attacks attributed to them. The first widely known leader of Boko Haram is Mohammed Yusuf, a Wahabbist scholar who seeks to replace secular laws with Islamic

law known as sharia (Atoi, 73). Boko Haram extremists have consistently rejected the Nigerian secular arrangement and insisted on the creation of an independent Islamic State in Northern Nigeria, strictly governed by Sharia law. Hence, the constant attack on government institutions and agencies. They have also been attacking Churches, Christians, Mosques and moderate Muslims accused of compromising Islamic teachings (Chiluwa, Chimuanya and Ajiboye, 7). It is imperative to note at this juncture that Abubakar Shekau was deputy to Mohammed Yusuf. Shekau became the leader of Boko Haram after the death of Mohammed Yusuf in 2009 (Atoi, 74). On 7 March 2015, Shekau pledged allegiance to the Islamic State under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and renamed Boko Haram Islamic State West African Province (ISWAP), and in 2016, the group split into two factions (Foucher, 3; Stanicek and Betant-Rasmussen, 5).

Islamic State West African Province (ISWAP) is currently one of the splitter factions of Boko Haram. The infighting in the Boko Haram group as a result of the leadership style of Shekau gave rise to discontentment among members, which eventually led to the splitting of the group. Some members of Boko Haram claim that Shekau has become power-drunk and despotic, unguarded, religiously uncompromising, killing or maiming innocent Muslim civilians, and burning down mosques over inconsequential issues relating to disloyalty to him by civilians in areas once under the control of the group. Other issues raised include the use of women and girls for suicide bombings, and the recapturing of the self-proclaimed capital of Boko Haram, Gwoza by the Nigerian army because of Shekau's poor and arrogant leadership style (Foucher, 3; Salihu, 39). After the split of Boko Haram, Abu Musab al-Barnawi became the leader of the faction which retains the name ISWAP. The relationship between ISIS and the new ISWAP

leadership remained very cordial after the split and the group keeps receiving both financial, technical and leadership support from al-Baghdadi and his team (Foucher, 7; Stanicek and Betant-Rasmussen, 5). While al-Barnawi's faction continue to operate as ISWAP, Shekau's faction returned to the use of Boko Haram's formal name Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad. According to Salihu, since it broke away, the new ISWAP has engaged in massive propaganda which portrays the Shekau-led Boko Haram as perverted and a lost cause, citing his ill-treatment of Muslim civilians and the use of females in warfare, while advancing rhetoric which paints ISWAP as a lesser evil. However, Salihu contends that the new ISWAP's opposition to Shekau's tactics and leadership style does not make it any less cruel, like its adopted parent organization, the Islamic State, ISWAP also depend on violence and coercion (39). Since 2016, ISWAP has launched more attacks and has caused far more casualties than Shekau's Boko Haram (Foucher, 7). According to the 2020 Global Terrorism Index, ISWAP was rated the second-deadliest terrorist group globally, and the deadliest in sub-Saharan Africa in 2019 (Stanicek and Betant-Rasmussen, 5).

Moral Evil in the Light of Religious Extremism in North-eastern Nigeria
The various activities of religious extremist sects such as Boko Haram and ISWAP have continued to occasion different degrees of moral evil in northeastern Nigeria. The different categories of moral evil that are usually perpetuated by the aforementioned religious extremist groups in the north-east include the killing of innocent people who do not share the same religious views as them,

suicide bombings in places of worship and government institutions, kidnapping people for ransom, abduction and dehumanization of innocent school girls and humanitarian aid workers, forced marriages and sex slavery, destruction of sources of livelihood of farmers and business owners, displacement of people from their homes, among others. It is pertinent to note that the above-mentioned acts of inhumanity being perpetuated against residents of the north-east did not originate from the activities of spiritual or metaphysical forces but rather from the misuse of freewill by free moral agents (members of Boko Haram and ISWAP) who are trying to promote extreme ideologies of the Islamic faith.

These religious extremist sects (Boko Haram and ISWAP) are well known for their dogmatic and fanatical religious ideologies which they insist everyone in the region must accept, and vow to make whoever refuses to adhere to their warnings pay the ultimate price of death. These groups have continued to carry out their threat without any iota of mercy for their victims in different states of the northeast since their violent extremism came to the limelight in 2009. Boko Haram and ISWAP extremists are usually willing to murder anyone against their faith by embracing ideologies that consent to violence in the service of God. Non-members of their religion are generally viewed as infidels and enemies of God (Chiluwa, Chimuanya and Ajiboye, 7). It is no longer news that many Nigerians and foreigners in the north-east have lost their lives to bombs detonated in churches, mosques, government institutions and agencies by Boko Haram and ISWAP suicide bombers. These religious extremist sects have continued to threaten the peace and stability of the Nigerian state by targeting symbols of authority and committing a broad range of violent crimes against innocent citizens (Atoi and Babale, 238). According to Onakuse and Jatula, extremist groups have caused immense destruction of lives and

property across the northeastern region. Citing the United Nations Refugee Agency report of 2018, Onakuse and Jatula observe that the Boko Haram insurgency has claimed the lives of over a million people in the northeast (4).

The categories of moral evil committed by religious extremists in the north-east gradually went from the detonation of lightweight explosive devices in public places, to the abduction and use of female suicide bombers to cause a large-scale massacre, usually in places of worship (Salihu, 38). Boko Haram extremist sect deployed its first female suicide bomber in 2013. According to Campbell, conservative estimates suggest that about 468 women and girls have been involved in or arrested for 240 suicide-related attacks, the most by any terrorist movement in the world (Cited in Salihu, 39). This extremist group became so interested in females that they decided to abduct school girls for ransom, forced marriages and sexual exploitations. Good cases in point include the abduction of 276 girls from a government secondary school, in Chibok, Borno State in April 2014 and 110 girls from a government secondary school, in Dapchi, Yobe State in February 2018. Other cases of morally evil acts against females in the north-east are the widely reported ISWAP's abduction and killing of two midwives working for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Hauwa Liman and Saifura Khorsa, and taking one person working for UNICEF, Alice Ngaddah into captivity in 2018. Boko Haram and ISWAP extremist sects have claimed responsibility for many acts of terror targeted at innocent civilians across north-eastern Nigeria (Salihu, 40).

Moreover, many residents of the northeast have been displaced from their legitimate homes. According to the United

Nation Refuge Agency, the Boko Haram insurgency has displaced nearly 3.3 million inhabitants of the Lake Chad Basin and dislocated over 2.5 million persons across north-eastern Nigeria (cited in Onakuse and Jatula, 4). Also, many people have continued to lose their sources of livelihood to the activities of religious extremists. Many shops have been looted and crops destroyed. Few farmers who summoned the courage to continue their farming business did not live to tell their stories as they were slaughtered in their farmlands. A very good case in point is the killing of more than 43 farmers at Zabarmari village in Borno state (BBC News, 29 November 2020 cited in Atoi and Babale, 239). The extreme religious tendency and terrorism of the two Islamic extremist groups in the northeast have added a large portion to the loss of human lives and the ever-growing fear and animosities that have continued to bedevil northern Nigeria over the years.

A recent development in the issues of moral evil resulting from the violent extremism of Boko Haram and ISWAP extremists is the alleged immoral behaviour of some security agents and the officials of Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) Camps against women and girls. According to Imwalomhe, there are several reports of sexual abuse, including rape and exploitation of women and girls living in many IDP camps in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa states. Citing Legal Defense and Assistance Project (LEDAP), he observes that women and girls displaced by Boko Haram in the northeast are randomly raped in exchange for food and water (n.p). To solve the problem of religious extremism and moral evil in the northeastern region, the government and other stakeholders should sincerely address certain factors promoting the issue. These include violent religious teachings by some clerics, issues of poverty, high rate of illiteracy, unemployment, social injustice, inequality, the politicization of religion, corruption and maladministration. It is

pertinent to note that many residents of the northeast are dissatisfied with the socio-economic and political situation of the region as well as the unpleasant living condition of many families across all the states in the northeast.

Conclusion

It is crystal clear that religious extremist groups in north-eastern Nigeria believe so much in the use of violence, ruthless aggression, spilling of blood, dehumanization of their fellow human beings and other forms of moral evil as better means of achieving their religious goals and aspirations. The extremely violent ideology of Boko Haram and ISWAP has made them have no regard and value for human life. The ways and manners members of these extremist sects kill human beings or treat people under their captivity make one wonder whether there is any element of conscience left in them. They have continued to crucify the dignity and sanctity of human life at the altar of extremism in the name of fighting for God. Unknown to them, the sovereignty of God is intertwined with the dignity and sanctity of human life because life is sacred in the thought of the creator. Hence, the lack of value for human life is a total disregard for the sovereignty of God. Considering the energy and resources that religious extremists in the north-east invest in their terrorist activities in the name of God, one is left with no option but to ask this pertinent question; how does killing or subjecting one's fellow human beings to torture add any value to God and his creation? The answer is simple, no value is added to God; rather, such action contradicts the plan of God for humanity. Therefore, religious extremists are advised to eschew violent extremism and all the paraphernalia that go with it and embrace the

philosophy of peace, love and tolerance in the practice of their religious beliefs for the common good of all.

* Ewere Nelson ATOI, PhD
Department of Religious Studies,
Gombe State University,
nelsonewere.atoi@gmail.com

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