

Fundamentalism and the Study of Religious Conflict: An Evaluation

Asukwo Edet Oko, Ph.D.

Department of Religious and cultural Studies
Akwa Ibom State University, Obio Akpa Campus
revasukwo@yahoo.com

Abstract

This study examines the issue of fundamentalism and religious conflicts in Nigeria which has gone through various trying and threatening situations but yet no solutions to terrible activities of this group. Religious fundamentalism propels people of divergent faith into hostile camp which explains the various inter and intra religious conflicts that have characterized Nigerian's co-operate existence. Every religion claims to be universal religion that preaches salvation to man. In a pluralistic country like Nigeria such claims like Christ is the way to God, only points to Christian uniqueness which fuel religious fundamentalism while Muslims belief that God's punishment awaits those who reject Islam. The study makes use of descriptive survey approach since the objective of this paper is to highlight the problems posed by fundamentalism and religious conflicts in the society. It was discovered that these problems are compounded principally due to poverty, scientific and technological illiteracy, rampant corruption and poor governance, attachment to unproductive superstitious beliefs, unfair global economic and trade agreements and other natural environmental forces. The researcher recommends that periodic orientation of religious teachers/leaders especially on information sharing should be enhanced because when one is not informed, he is deformed. People should be taught and encouraged to live out the genuine doctrines of their religions not in pretence or with ulterior motive but with sincerity of heart.

Key words: Fundamentalism, Religious Conflicts, and Evaluation

Introduction

Religion brings together people with common ideology, belief, faith and value. People feel that by getting closer to God their emotional, spiritual, and material problems are solved. God is a God of love and peace and He does not encourage violence and use of force. He appeals to the conscience and not the imagination of people, yet adherents are ever ready to die for their religions believing that God will reward them eternally for doing his will and being faithful to him. Religion is fundamentally a spiritual issue which demands that God be worshipped in spirit and in truth and but also as part of their out ward expression of faith in God, adherents embark on Puritanism. This puritanical tendency is borne out of their religious conviction that their own religion is the only true religion while other religions are mere deviation from the right path.

Religious conflict is often a major feature of a society with plurality of religious groups. Under this circumstance, followers of a given religion are often ready to fight and defend their religion at all cost. They are sometimes fundamental, unreasonable, fierce and fanatical when their religion is under threat either by force and or disrespect. They value their religion more than their life. Ekwunife (1992) asserts that "religion is a divisive and integrative factor in the society which should be strictly regulated and properly handled; otherwise tension and unrest engulf the society" (p. 3). However, because of the diversity in culture, religious views and understanding, there have been differences or disagreements in fundamental issues about religious beliefs and

practices among religious groups. This informs why these religious groups at one time or the other had to engage themselves in an open conflict which consequently poses serious threats to human existence. Akhaine (2006) observes that:

Nigeria is not new to religious tensions resulting in heavy human and material losses from 1980 beginning with the Maitatsine riot in kano to date, Nigeria has never ceased to witness ethnic-religious conflicts. Infact, it has become an annual ritual with its attendant destruction of human lives and property. (p. 2).

Nevertheless, it could be said that religious conflicts and fundamentalism are not caused by religion itself but rather, it is an emanation from the practical use of the religions by their followers. This paper examines the issue of fundamentalism and religious conflicts. It will expose readers to the harmful effects of religious conflicts and fundamentalism. Therefore, the concept of fundamentalism, basic beliefs of fundamentalist, globalization and fundamentalism and the dangers posed by religious conflict and fundamentalism will be discussed.

Concept of Fundamentalism

Fundamentalism is derived from the word “fundamental” which means basic, primary, original, essential, elemental, underlying, deep-seated or important. In a real sense, religious fundamentalism should have been basically a movement of those who want to return to what they considered as the original, essential and the underlying beliefs and practices of their religion but there are some problems considered in defining the term. The term “fundamentalism” was originally used to describe a narrowly defined set of beliefs that developed into a movement within the protestant community of the United States in the early part of the 20th century and had its roots in the fundamentalist – modernist controversy of that time. Giddens (1994) maintains that until 1950, there was no entry for fundamentalism in the oxford English Dictionary. Iwe (1987) cited in Sibani (2014) sees fundamentalism as an irrational attitude to religion which leads the religionist to the practices of religion beyond the bounds of reason and therefore without moderation” (p. 44). This views religious fundamentalism from negative and vicious attitude to religion with characteristics enshrine in exaggeration and moderation, manipulation and exploitation, excesses and violence. Nmah (2012) is of the view that religious fundamentalism denotes religious extremism. This arises from man’s consciousness and practical acknowledgement of his dependence on God. Hornby (2000) defines it as an extreme belief or behavior especially in connection with religion or politics (p. 421). Uche (2013) avows that religious fundamentalism is the manifestation of religious sentiments and emotions which are effectively used by socio-political activist to express their ambitions. Amanambu (2013) sees fundamentalism as a term that could be found in all aspect of people’s life and human institutions such as economics, politics, and law. For him this implies strict observance or following the fundamental, basic, important rules and belief with unrestricted commitment. According to Barnard and Burges (1996), fundamentalism is “the belief in the need to keep to or to return to the original meaning of religious texts particularly associated today with interpretations of Christianity and Islam” (p. 476). Dawkins (2006) used the word to characterize religious advocates as holding on to a stubborn entrenched position that defies reasoned argument or contradictory evidence. Fundamentalism according to Marsden (1980) refers to a belief in a strict adherence to a set of basic principles often religious in nature, sometimes as a reaction to perceived doctrinal compromises with modern social and political life. Noll (1992) avows that:

Fundamentalism as a movement arose in the United States starting among conservative Presbyterian academics and theologians at Princeton theological seminary in the first decade of the twentieth century. It soon spread to conservative among the Baptists and other denominations during and immediately following the First World War. The movement's purpose was to reaffirm orthodox protestant Christianity and zealously defend it against the challenges of liberal theology. (p. 30).

Fundamentalism is used to describe forms of religion that take literally the words of scriptures for instance those of both Christians and Muslims. Fundamentalism is a movement born out of religious ideology but has metamorphosed into ethnic, economic, social, political activities which have brought untold hardship to mankind especially to Nigerians in the last decades.

Basic Beliefs of Religious Fundamentalists

According to Kidd, Czerniawski & Abott (2003), Christian and Islamic fundamentalists share a fear of change, which often results in a non – acceptance of other viewpoints. Ejue (2015) asserts that some religions have more potential for developing fundamentalist groups than others. He maintained that religions that have a single sacred text like Bible or Quran, find it relatively easier to develop fundamentalist groups like Hinduism and African Traditional Religion. Based on this assertion, Richards (1995: 80) opines that “fundamentalists treat the biblical text as though it had been dictated word by the spirit and make no allowance for the individuality of human authors.” For religious fundamentalists, the sacred scripture is the authentic and authoritative word of their God or gods. This may not necessarily require that all portions of scripture be interpreted literally rather than allegorically or metaphorically. Fundamentalist doctrines hinge on the twofold belief that their God or gods revealed their will clearly to the prophets and those adherents also have an accurate and reliable record of that revelation. Since the scripture of each of religions is seen as word from their God or gods, fundamentalists believe that no person has right to change it or disagree with it. This view was supported by Oko & Okoli (2015) when they said that Christian fundamentalist sees the Bible as an echoed message from God; inerrant, infallible, never to be questioned. For Christian fanatic the bible alone is sufficient and adequate to guide and solve all problems of life especially religious ones. Islam fundamentalist sees Christians as infidel and second class citizen in Muslims countries and state. They believe that if persuasion cannot win the people over, then force is legitimate so that Allah's wills can be accomplished. Also the differences among the different fundamentalists shape their beliefs. For instance, many Christian fundamentalists believe in free will that every person is free to make his own choice and will also be responsible for such choices. This point of view is very appealing in that it is very simple. Every person can choose a course of action as much as he is able but his God or gods will bring those who disobey without repentance to justice. This is embedded in the biblical command of Jesus which says “vengeance is mine, says the Lord”. In Judaism, this belief is similar but they do not believe that it is wrong to take vengeance.

The fundamentalist insists on strict observance of the religious laws but this may lead to an accusation of legalism in addition to exclusivism in the interpretation of metaphorical beliefs. Fundamentalist belief tends to be stronger where a group believes it has a common external enemy. Islam fundamentalist believes that at the end of the world, all people will be subjected to

Islam. This mindset has caused other religion especially Christianity, not to worship freely in Muslim cities or states. A good example can be seen on what is happening in the North Eastern part of the country. The new leader of Boko Haram has also issue a threat to all Christians in Nigeria that he will destroy them if they refuse to accept Islam as a true religion.

Globalisation and Fundamentalism

Some religions especially the Abrahamic based (Islam and Christianity) are seen as major contributors to the process of globalization with their emphasis on the conversion of non-believers. They have both become world religions stretching across traditional geographical and cultural areas. Lechner (1990: 129) asserts that “fundamentalist forms of religion are seen as providing answers to the chaos of the post modernization of the globe and in doing so they thrive well under such global conditions.” As waters (1995: 130) put it:

Contemporary global life is not much a new world order as a new world disorder, increasing levels of globalization produce chaos, lack of meaning, infact too much of diversity of meaning, this is because globalization involves the unification of many diverse ideas, ideologies, beliefs, faith and other cultural practices into a chaotic shared culture to which everyone is exposed.

Lecher (1990: 130) observes that fundamentalist religions are value-oriented, anti-modern, de-differentiating form of collective action, a socio-cultural movement aimed at reorganizing all spheres of life in terms of a particular set of absolute values.” He saw fundamentalism as a response to this global chaos. To him, religions such as Islam seek to unite together back into a common and shared set of meanings, they are alienated by and anxious about the diverse array of cultural ideas they have suddenly become exposed to.

Religious Conflict and Fundamentalism

Gwamna (2010) asserts that religious conflicts are differing religious opinions, interest, and viewpoints between contesting religions which have often times resulted into situations of hatred, bitterness and even war. Otite (1999) has noted that conflict is natural in plural societies and Nigeria provides fertile ground for breeding conflict including religious conflicts. He maintains that it is inherent in all kinds of social, economic, or political settings and in business management, job and so on, characterized by ethnic religious and other forms of pluralism. Apart from being the opium of the people, religion can often be employed as a force for radical and political social actions and social change. Since the sixteenth century, Shiism has been the form of religion in Iran. For Water (1995), the Iranian revolution of 1978-9 is often interpreted as an example of a traditional religion in Islam being used to combat western economic and cultural expansion in the Middle East.

Although western capitalist ideas were adopted by Shah Mohammed Reza in Iran, Muslims saw it as a threat to traditional Islamic ideas and therefore something which should be stopped from spreading in Iran. Fundamentalists who were against the Westernization of Iran such as Ayatollah Khomeini reinterpreted Islamic ideas as a fundamental rejection of western values especially western attitudes to sexuality. This spread of Islamic fundamentalism which is return to radical and revolutionary interpretations of traditional ideas from the Quran has led to a political rejection of western expansion in these societies. This ideological standoff has given rise to terrorist organization one of which objectives is to combat westernization and what they

consider enemies of Islam in the Middle East. They also consider western culture a menace to Islam. Whenever they are in conflict with the west over an issue, the situation is usually turned into a religious conflict or Holy war or what they call Jihad. Under this circumstance, any attack on them is usually considered an attack on Islam. This is why the Jihadists or fundamentalists launched several terrorist attacks on the west including the September 11, 2001 attacks on the pentagon (i.e. America Defense Headquarters and the twin towers of the world trade centre) killing so many people. This attack was found to have been orchestrated by the Al-Qaeda terrorist network led by Osama Bin Laden. The Taliban's are another group of Muslim fundamentalists in Afghanistan who aided terrorist attacks on the United States and supported Osama Bin Laden. The fundamentalists have even gone as far as carrying out suicide attacks on installations belonging to United States and Britain. All these are in retaliation to the western belligerence against them which goes to support the fact that fundamentalist ideas are ways of rejecting modern society. According to Emesowum (2008) the perpetrators of September 11, 2001 attacks saw it as "martyrdom operation" as they were going to sacrifice their own lives in the duty of faith (p. 39).

In the opinion of Islamic fundamentalists, every Muslim believes in Al-Qaeda, which is a divine predestination of happenings in life. To this understanding, whatever takes place in life whether good or bad, right or wrong is allowed by God, because what God does not allow does not happen. Thus, what he does not want to happen, he prevents from happening. Emesowum (2008) asserts that "if God does not want a thing to happen he will not allow the perpetrator to accomplish it and for them to accomplish it means that God allows it to happen."

However, Osama Bin Laden in his fundamentalist ideology probably decided to name his Al-Qaeda network after this belief which means "camp" or "base" for accomplishing what God allows or predestined to happen. But this is rather a wrong perception of the belief because Islamic theologians say that Divine predestination known as Al-Qaeda does not mean that one should go ahead and perpetrate evil or terminate people's lives with idea that since God did not stop him from accomplishing such evil intention, God definitely wished it to happen. Emesowum (2008) avows that Islamic theologians are of the opinion that God gives everybody the free will to choose either to do right or evil that whichever choice one makes in life, he is held accountable by God on the Day of Judgment.

In Nigeria situation, religious conflict has been recurrent issue, which has often posed unimaginable threat to national unity, political stability and religious harmony. The latest in the series is the Boko Haram religious uprising which is considered by many as the most barbaric in the history of northern Nigeria. According to Nwankwo (2009) an Islamic fundamentalist and extreme reformist called Mallam Muhammed Yusuf was the brain behind the religious upheaval, which rocked the foundations of northern Nigeria as the members of his group launched attacks on the states and security operatives in most parts of northern Nigeria to advance their hatred for western education and government. This attack is significant in that it was a replica of what the people of Afghanistan and Somalia experienced. Garba (2009) opines that Boko Haram sect is reported to have links with Al-Qaeda and the Talibans of Pakistan who are suspected to be its major financiers. They have a lot of followers in Borno, Yobe, Kano, Bauchi, Gombe, Adamawa, Taraba, Plateau States and few others spread across the country.

The adoption and attempt to spread or implement the doctrines of Yusufiyya by Islamic fundamentalist Muhammed Yusuf and his followers under the aegis of Boko Haram led to the religious violence in Maiduguri. Their objectives were probably to Islamize Nigeria, stop western education and cause instability in the name of religion.

Ironically, the sect forbids anything western, yet its leader has an array of western materials in his possession including mobile phones, 17 sport utility vehicles otherwise known as Jeep. This makes their intention suspicious. According to Oshanugor (2008: 40):

It is regrettable that here in Nigeria, groups of individuals either in pursuit of some religious doctrine or ethno-political ambition would wake up to unleash mayhem on the land snuffing life out of innocent and helpless citizens at the least provocation.

Religious conflicts are not new in the world and Nigeria in particular. These conflicts with pivotal events in history reveal to us the folly of religious controversies at any fresh perusal. History has shown that when conflicts are religious, people simply take leave of their reasons and fight for causes they do not even understand. According to Fatuase (2007), it is a pity that religion which should unite the people is always used as a fuel to ignite violence. The unfortunate trends is that, this fountain of anarchy (ethno-religious conflicts) often leaves in its wake enormous human and material losses of immense proportion each time it occurs and its stems from violent religious fundamentalism. This according to Iwe (1991) is a type of religious extremism usually associated with mass mysteria and mob action. It often results in destruction and gross violation of the principle of justice and religious liberty.

According to Lawal (2009) ethno-religious conflicts which engulfed Jos after similar ones in 2001 and 2004 brings the number of sectarian conflagration in Northern Nigeria to 33 including the latest Boko Haram sectarian crisis which claimed over 20,000 lives and displaced 2.6 million people since Nigeria returned to civil rule in 1999. Some of the previous ones include Kano, Kaduna Sharia riots, Numan- Dutse riots as well as the mayhem in Maiduguri, Bauchi, Potiskum Ningi and Yelwa Kagadama in Bauchi state over a certain carton of prophet Muhammed published by Danish newspaper.

According to Iwe (1991: 44)

Christian and Muslim theologians, African traditional religion and all atheists over the centuries and all over the world are of the consensus that there is only one supreme God and that there can be only one with this theological constant, it is highly embarrassing to all men and women of good will and peace to note that proclaimed believers in God do still dissipate their energy in socially dangerous religious irrelevancies, trivialities and fanatical discriminations, instead of focusing on the immensity of the bonds of their spiritual unity under one God.

The Dangers of Fundamentalism and Religious Conflicts in Nigeria

Religious fundamentalism has posed a lot of challenges to Nigeria state in that it propels people of divergent faith into hostile camps. Uche (2010) avows that there is a strong manifestation of transferred aggression, which led to loss of live and property, as Al-magriri are used as destructive acts. Adherents whose religion is the synonymous with love and peace embrace persecution, hatred and other negative tendencies in the name of God. For Uche (2010) there is a strong implication that religious adherents are not positive in promoting mutual love, peace and care for one another resulting in distrust and fear. Manipulation of religious sentiments are causes of vandalism, riot which breeds genocide and economic waste. The jihad of 1804 by

Utman Dan Fio in the Hausa land left unforgettable marks on the psyche of the people even to the extent that small tribes were forced to accept Islam as a way of survival. Religious fundamentalism silence conscience, breed series of persecution, denies Human Rights and inflicts pitiable injustice on the poor and innocent citizens.

Another danger of religious fundamentalism in Nigeria is that, it structures bitterness, unforgiveness and rancor among the populace. According to Amanambu (2013) religious hostilities arising from religious fundamentalism often give birth to tribal and communal conflicts resulting in barbaric activities that are threatening to Nigeria unity and stability as a nation. According to Uche (2010) these rising wave of deaths, destruction of private and public property, arrests, molestations and prolonged detention adversely affect the socio-political development in Nigeria. The security of the nation is threatened and the life of Nigerians irrespective of political, religious and other cultural affiliations. The successive governments of Nigeria lack the political will to deal decisively with insecurity, fear and corruption. This was clearly seen in the recent clashes between Nigeria Army and Shittes group of Islamic sect in Kaduna state.

Religious fundamentalism is fast becoming the chief threat to global peace and security. The bombing of world Trade centre in USA in 2001, London attacked in 7th July, 2005, Herald square bomb plot of 28th August 2004, Madrid Train bombing in 11th march 2004 and Lackawana six plot of 14th Sept. 2002 are good examples. Fundamentalism creates bad international image in the country and this was clearly seen when Boko Haram suicide bombing of the United Nation's Headquarters in Abuja on 26th August 2011 claimed more than twenty lives and many others with various injuries. The activity of the Boko Haram especially with the bombing of the United Nation's Headquarters, Nigeria has consolidated its position as the fourteenth out of one hundred and seventy seven countries in the fail state index. An attempt by Abdumutallab to bomb a plane in Detroit USA put Nigeria under security watch list across the world in 1st August 2011, though America reluctantly removed their names after series of intense diplomatic struggles. According to Amanambu (2013), this activity by religious fundamentalism put a country at the risk of international isolation. Britain had made it more shocking when it warned its citizens in Nigeria to stay away from North eastern part of country where Boko Haram have threatened to attack and abduct nationals from western countries.

The danger of this sect has disrupts social cohesion. The dangers associated with religious fundamentalism could be physical, psychological, spiritual and economical. Many people have been brutally wounded and rendered physically challenged occasioned by uprisings experienced in the name of religion. The traumatic experiences because of the activity of Boko Haram are unimaginable. Maiduguri which was the headquarters has been deserted because of the activity of this dreaded sect. Gwamna (2010) avows that these crises have assumed unprecedented violent and ferocious propensities that pose serious security and national threats to the cooperate entity of Nigeria. Oko (2015) supported this view when he said that Nigeria political system is seriously overheated with religious conflicts. This becomes more intense as each of the two dominant religions in Nigeria (Christianity and Islam) tries to control government activities or to shape the activities of government following the tenets of her religion. These conflicts further breed enmity and hatred among adherents of the two dominant religions- Muslims and Christianity. Sibani and Ayika (2014) obliged with this view when they said that religious conflicts have weakened patriotic commitment to national ideals and true nationhood, giving rise to parochialism, ethnicity and other cleavages which ethno- religious jingoist for their interest and advantage.

Conclusion

It has been seen that most religious conflict that occur are as the result of fundamentalism. The fundamentalists insist on the strict observance of the religious laws. They behave as if these laws were dictated word for word by God without provisions or accommodation for human failings. This fundamentalist idea has therefore led to several unmitigated terrorist attacks and uncountable religious riots which have resulted in wanton destruction of lives and property. The sects employed fundamentalism to advance their socio-economic and ethno-political ambitions as in the case of Nigeria where political miscreants hide under the cloak of religion to unleash mayhem on religious and political opponents. Fundamentalism has even assumed global dimension.

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