

Introduction of Comparative Religion as General Studies in Nigeria Tertiary Institutions' Curriculum: A Panacea to the Rising Intolerance among Religious Groups

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ABSTRACT

Recent events, though different in many ways, have highlighted the misunderstanding and intolerance often generated by expression of religious beliefs. This review is to assess the need for the introduction of comparative religion in general studies curriculum in Nigerian tertiary institutions; considering this act as a panacea for the rising intolerance among religious groups. The aim is to present the comparative religious benefits such as providing adequate and concrete information on the tenets and nature of different faiths and philosophies; transfer such data to others, so that they can complement instead of conflicting each other. Qualitative data on cases of religious violence in Nigeria from 1999 to 2013 were gathered through the secondary source. The study reveals that most violent conflicts today, contain religious elements linked up with ethno-national, inter-state, economic, territorial, cultural, and other issues. Threatening the meaning of life, conflicts based on religion tend to become dogged, tenacious and brutal types of wars. Hence, this work proposes the inclusion of the teaching of comparative religion in general studies so as to remedy the intolerance existing among religious groups thereby reducing or eliminating religious conflicts in the country.

Keywords: *Comparative Religion, Curriculum, Intolerance, Extremism*

INTRODUCTION

The idea of conflict would not have been known to humanity if the first man and woman were able to overcome the political trick of the serpent in the garden of Eden. The serpent first introduced to humanity and conflict of equality when it presented to the woman the idea of God - man equation. Hence, women struggling for gender equality today is not new. This is the genesis of conflict in the world. With this, human life is uncertain. Man struggles for survival amidst the uncertainties, insecurities and dangers. Conflicts are power struggles over differences; differing information or beliefs; differing interests, desires, or values; and abilities to secure needed resources. It takes various shapes and are of different kinds. These anxieties in life challenge and propel man to seek help from powers that are above him. This is where religion comes into play. According to Okai (2008), religion offers explanation to humanity in its recurrent experience of patterns of bane and blessing, woe and glory'. It is religion which consoles and encourages a person in all times of crisis. Religion gives right shelter to an individual, gets him/her mental peace and emotional support and encourages the individual to face his/her life and problems. Religion promotes the major social virtues like truth, honesty, non-violence, service, love, discipline and many

others. A follower of religion internalizes these virtues and becomes disciplined citizen of the society. Religion gives rise to the spirit of brotherhood. It suffices therefore to say that religion has supremely integrating and verifying force in human society. At this junction, it is reasonable to interject with the fact that a people's culture in itself is a religion. The practice of religion is the practice of culture and vice versa. Hence, where a particular group of persons practise religion in isolation of the practise of the people's culture, there is bound to be problem as is prevalent today in the society. It is also true that common belief, common sentiment, common worship, participation in common rituals etc. are the significant cementing factors which strengthen unity and solidarity. In fact there is no doubt that religion plays significant roles in communal harmony; yet it is often an instrument of conflict, and other established interests to the detriment of peace and social harmony.

This study aims at calling for the remodeling of school curriculum in the teaching and learning of religious education, in order to educate Nigerians and create awareness to the fact that understanding other religions and their culture will give room for tolerance and peace.

Religious Intolerance, Fundamentalism, Extremism and Fanaticism

Religious intolerance has been defined as 'hostility towards other religions, as well as the inability of religious adherents to harmonize between the theories and the practical aspect of religion' (Balogun, 1988). It encompasses bigotry, which is the obstinate and intolerant devotion to one's opinions and prejudices, especially the exhibition of intolerance and animosity toward persons of differing beliefs (Baird and Staurt, 1999). Religious intolerance has been identified as the major source of religious conflict/violence in all societies existing as long as the history of mankind, and permeating all forms of human civilizations, with attendant destructive tendencies (Gofwen, 2004).

Religious fundamentalism and extremism are similar to, and indeed, manifestations of religious intolerance. Komonchak, Collins and Lane (1993) view religious fundamentalism from three perspectives: from a cognitive understanding where the word is associated with a closed personality type that expresses exclusivity, particularity, literality and moral rigour; from a cultural theological viewpoint, where the word expresses opposition to religious and cultural liberalism in defense of orthodoxy and religious traditions; and from a social movement perspective, where it denotes organizational and ideological uniqueness from other types of religious movements. Ultimately therefore, religious fundamentalism is a religious movement that promotes the literal interpretation of, and strict adherence to religious doctrine, especially as a return to orthodox scriptural prescriptions and doctrinal originality.

It seeks strict adherence to the orthodox principles of particular faiths – in the case of Nigeria, Christianity and Islam – and abhors modernism with its propensity to adulterating or diminishing original doctrinal principles. Religious fundamentalists, therefore, place great emphasis 'on right doctrine and the necessity of organized warfare against the forces of modernism' (Komonchak, Collins and Lane, 1993). Religious intolerance and fundamentalism may not necessarily entail violence. However, it is the extreme manifestation of intolerance and fundamentalist ideals that embraces violence. Religious extremists are therefore religious fundamentalists, who take religious conservatism and intolerance to an

unreasonable extent, by manifesting violence against those who hold contrary religious views. Religious extremists take the position that if others do not follow their ways, they will be damned (Religious Extremism, 2011). They abhor the preaching of other faiths and resort to violence to stop it. They insist that their religious doctrines must be universally entrenched by brute force, while the political, social and economic systems must conform to their religious tenets. Religious extremism does not admit any form of compromise with social change, particularly that which contradicts religious orthodoxy. In terms of hierarchy, therefore, religious extremism is the farthest and most lethal form of religious intolerance. Religious fanaticism according to Iwe (2000), is an irrational attitude to religion which leads the religionist to the practice of religion beyond the bounds of reason and therefore, without moderation. This means that religious fanaticism is essentially an evil to the society as it is characterized by exaggeration and immoderation, manipulation and exploitation, excesses and violence. Among the many fundamental causes of religious fanaticism is religious ignorance. This consists not so much in intellectual incapacity to grasp complex religious issues, but lack of the necessary religious knowledge where it ought to exist. It is a case of insensitive ignorance in religious matters which has, more often than not, its sources in religious indifferentism. This ignorant religious indifference had "...often left the otherwise highly educated men in state of perpetual catechistic and doctrinal infancy as they adhere sheepishly to their churches, for they know not the way and perhaps would not want to know (Iwe, 2000).

THE MANAGEMENT OF RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA

According to Sampson (2011), since the early 1980's to date, the Nigerian state has taken a number of constitutional, legislative and policy measures to manage the incidence of religious conflict and violence. These measures include:

- (i) The exclusion of religion as an index in the design, conduct and reporting of national population census;
- (ii) The promotion of inter-faith cooperation and dialogue through the establishment of the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) in 2000;
- (iii) The constitutional establishment of the Federal Character Commission (FCC) to prevent the predominance of one religious group in all government institutions;
- (iv) The political application of the principle of power sharing between the north and south as well as Christians and Muslims;
- (v) Non-registration of political parties with ethnic or religious colourations (Kwaja, 2009); and
- (vi) Prohibition of registration of banks with religious appellations.

One important area that has not received much attention is that of giving the citizens especially the youth the right religious knowledge or education of all religions in the country. That is making frantic effort to relate adequate knowledge of other people's beliefs or religious tradition. For it is a general statement that 'knowledge is power'. This means that if one has a lot of knowledge about things, such person will easily adapt to any situation, and that will make him never to be caught unaware.

Table 1: Some Cases of Religious Violence in Nigeria, 1999 – 2013

Date	States	Nature	Remarks
1st July 1999	Ogun	Violent clashes between Yoruba traditional worshippers and Hausa groups in Sagamu	The crisis originated from the killing of a Hausa woman by the Oro Masqueraders for violating traditional rites.
6th Nov. 2002	Kaduna	The <i>Miss World</i> crisis in which Muslims attacked Christians and churches.	The crisis was triggered by an article authored by Isioma Daniel in <i>This Day</i> newspaper, alleging that Prophet Mohammed would have loved to have the girls. Over 250 people were killed and several churches destroyed.
8th Jun. 2004	Adamawa	Religious conflict between Christians and Muslims in Numan town.	Caused by the location of the town's Central Mosque close to Bachama paramount ruler's palace. Over 17 persons killed.
18th Feb. 2006	Borno	Religious conflict between Christians and Muslims in Maiduguri.	The riot was caused by the Danish cartoon on Prophet Mohammed, in <i>Jyllands-Posten</i> newspaper. Over 50 persons killed and 30 churches destroyed; over 200 shops, 50 houses and 100 vehicles vandalized.
22th Mar. 2007	Gombe	Muslim pupils killed their Christian teacher, Mrs. Oluwatoyin Olusesan.	The pupils claimed that their teacher desecrated the Qur'an while attempting to stop a student from cheating in an examination hall.
28th Nov. 2008	Plateau	Religious violence between Muslims and Christians in the city of Jos.	The crisis which was triggered by the controversial results of a local election later turned religious. Over 700 people killed and thousands internally displaced
26–30th July 2009	Bauchi Borno Kano Yobe	Religious violence unleashed by the radical <i>Boko Haram</i> sect on Christians.	Over 700 persons killed, 3500 persons internally displaced, 1,264 children orphaned, over 392 women widowed, and several properties destroyed.
22th May 2010	Plateau	Attack on some Christians, who were returning from their place of worship along Bauchi road in Jos.	Reprisal attack by Muslims over the killing of 3 Fulani Muslims. At least 1 person died while many were injured.
29th Aug. 2011	Plateau	Clashes between Muslims and Christians at Rukuba road and Farin Gada in Jos during the Ramadan prayers.	No less than 20 persons were killed, 50 injured, over 50 motor vehicles and 100 motor cycles were torched.
5–6th Jan. 2012	Mubi, Adamawa State	Suspected Boko Haram militants stormed a gathering of Igbo Christians and shot sporadically, killing over a dozen and injuring others in apparent execution of an ultimatum given by the <i>BokoHaram</i> Islamist sect to Southern Christians living in the North to leave.	22 persons were reportedly killed; a dozen others were injured.
9 Sept 2013	Borno	A gruesome attack by Boko Haram Islamists.	87 persons lost their lives.

Source: Adapted from Onuoha 2010 with additions and modifications by the author. The data are by no means exhaustive.

Knowledge is human faculty resulting from interpreted information; understanding that germinates from a combination of data, information, experience, and individual interpretation. Indeed the sure knowledge of other people's beliefs or religious tradition leads to understanding, and understanding then leads to tolerance of people with different religious backgrounds. It is in pursuance of the above fact that this work is proposing to the policy maker of Nigeria Tertiary Institutions to include the teaching of comparative religion in General Studies so as to remedy the intolerance existing among religious groups

thereby reducing or possibly eliminating religious conflicts in the country. The table above shows some cases of religious violence in Nigeria, 1999–2013. A close look at the table shows that these conflicts were triggered by four key elements - religious intolerance, fundamentalism, extremism and fanaticism. They form the base upon which other sources of religious violence rest.

THE GOAL AND OBJECTIVES OF GENERAL STUDIES

According to National Universities Commission (2004), the goal of general studies programme is to produce a well-rounded morally and intellectually capable graduates with vision and entrepreneurial skills in an environment of peace and social cohesiveness. While the objectives of the programme consist of the following:

- a) Acquisition, development and inculcation of the proper value-orientation for the survival of the individual and society.
- b) The development of intellectual capacities of individuals to understand, appreciate and promote peaceful co-existence.
- c) Producing graduates with broad knowledge of the Nigerian Nation and people with a view to inculcating in them mutual understanding and patriotism.
- d) Exposing graduates of Nigerian Universities to the rudiments of ICT for computer literacy and ability to live usefully in this ICT age.
- e) Preparing students for a post university life with opportunities for job creation and entrepreneurial skills.
- f) Production of graduates capable of communicating effectively (both oral and written).

A clearer consideration of the goal and objectives of the commission shows great emphasises on peaceful environment and co-existence. In other words, the goal and objective of education is to produce understanding, tolerance, and eventually develop a society that is devoid of violence. This is where the relevance or benefits of comparative religion come to bear. First, is to provide adequate and concrete information or knowledge on the tenets and nature of different faiths and philosophies that are practised in Nigeria and indeed in the world. Secondly, to transfer such data to others, so that they can complement instead of conflicting each other.

COMPARATIVE RELIGION

According to Jordan (1905), comparative religion is that science which compares the origin, structure and characteristics of the various Religions of the world, with the views of determining their genuine agreements and differences, the measure of relation in which they stand one to another, and their relative superiority and inferiority when regarded as types. This means as Baryton (2012) puts it the study of different religions and how they relate to each other. It examines similarities, differences and the way in which different religions interact and complement each other.

Comparative religion plays an important role in modern discourse because various religious groups have found themselves coming into closer contact with one another on both personal and social levels. It is because of this that Emmanuel (2010) stresses that by

and large, one would discover that the knowledge of comparative religion would to a large extent help in reducing religious crisis. This is because with a sound understanding of comparative religion, the perspective of Nigerians would undergo a fundamental revolution. They will then be able to distinguish between moral and immoral act such as killing of innocent lives and burning of worship centres. Thus, there would be religious peace which is a recipe for rapid national development.

It is very possible that religious groups could learn to tolerate the other. Most of what occurs in religious conflicts lies in a fear of the unknown. When students learn from an early age that other religious groups have very similar interests and goals as them, these future generations will not begin conflict with a group they disagree with because of ignorance. Wotogbe-Wenaka (2005) on his part summarizes the importance of Comparative Religion as follows:

- a. For religious understanding of man as a religious being. For instance, we would like to know and appreciate how and why man behaves in a particular way he does, given the suppositions (or prescriptions) of their beliefs and practices and religious traditions.
- b. Again, it is to find out the answers that man has been trying to give to the ultimate questions of human existence. Such questions may not necessarily be found, but they offer answers that give man some sense of hope, thereby giving meaning to his existence.
- c. It enables one to know everything about the religion under study thereby helping the student to present unbiased or value judgment. It helps the student in taking an “agnostic neutral Standpoint”. He never condemns any religion nor believes in any religion. Comparative religion is approached from an unbiased approach. This implies that in the attempt to discuss religious issue, bias that is taking side or side taking or narrow-minded presentation is against the rule in the approach of doing comparative analysis of religions.

Wotogbe-Weneka (2005) further admonishes all comparative religionists on the importance of adhering to the above significance because of the following reasons:

Avoiding Myopic Opinion: In this regard sentimentalism and subjectivity will be reduced to the barest minimum, when either representing a religious belief or analyzing a religious belief.

Critical Socialization: Religion provides the framework for human society to socialize. It is a platform for social interactions between people of a group or with people in diverse settings or different religions basis. It is for understanding. For religious interactions to be healthy the principles of critical analysis and practices of religious beliefs should be observed. The reason behind the action taken there is deeper. You can only understand when you have in-depth knowledge and critical socialization on that religious belief and practice. Socialization is built on the principle of give and take. Critical socialization removes permissivity and being queer in a wider society. Comparative Religion is the heart of Religious study.

The Right of Individuals: Principle of Comparative Religion ensures that the right of the individual is preserved. Religion permits that its practice should be either ‘devotional’ ‘individual’ or ‘collective’ or ‘congregational’. By devotional, it implies God for me where by the term ‘congregational’ it means God for us. You can practice religion as an individual because there is freedom of worship. A group that holds the same view about religion is congregational, so that this view becomes a bond of the fellowship. Because their collective view that Jesus is Lord and upon that they come to express that conviction from time to time. It is a mark of identity. Your right ends where the other man’s begins. Your right does not deprive me from my right as per religion and their doings will not stop my own.

PRACTITIONERS VIEWPOINT APPROACH

Another significant approach in the study of Comparative Religion is to examine religion from a perspective that seems to describe ones’ stance. This is so, because Religious Practitioners around the world have their fundamental or source belief, which they can be associated with. When there is an understanding of the fundamental or source of a particular belief one will now create or establish Religious limits or boundary. Different religious beliefs cannot agree at any time on one and the same fundamental or source of belief. The scripture is doctrinal not practitioners viewpoint while the fundamental or source of belief in Comparative Religion is practitioners viewpoint not doctrinal. The advantages of approaching religion from practitioners’ viewpoint include the following:

Religious Tolerance: When approaching religion from ones’ perspective it provides the ground for tolerating other religious groups. This is because protagonists of religion have varied religious experiences with the divide that has sharpened their religious thinking. In this regard, the imposition of your religious experience and idea cannot be imposed on every other religion significantly. When religion is approached from a viewpoint, it helps to establish religious limits and boundary of operation.

Religious Affiliation: This implies identification with a religious group. Often times, humanity is faced with the question of religious identity. This provided answer to the religious perspective one projects. However, this places a high demand on the individual, because of the challenges inherent with the religion of his/her identification. It also places a responsibility on the individual to justify his claim and his affiliation as in the following:

- i. Contribute to the existence of that religion.
- ii. Defend its doctrine.
- iii. Measurement of contribution of religious adherent.

The implication of 2 Timothy 2:1 – 2 in relation to contribution of religious adherent is that the continuous existence of religious group is determined to the extent by which one generation is able to bequeath the knowledge of that religion to successive generation. If a vision does not outlive the visionary, he has not gotten a vision. If one does not have the provision to sustain it or the resources to sustain a vision, it is better not to initial it.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Before now Religious education was used to get people to embrace Christianity or Islam, rather than being a process or formation for religious tolerance and dialogue. Consequently, most children and youths are educated within this framework and thus inclined to a blinded faith. Religious intolerance is thus to a great extent the outcome of the way in which religious education is taught. It is therefore not surprising when children growing up very intolerant, aggressive and exclusive, with lack of openness to dialogue. Once students are made religiously and ideologically aware of the questions and different interpretations that break open their implicit world-view, openness is created to illuminate and interpret these experiences of reality from their own or other religious or ideological frameworks. It consist in a rediscovering of religious education as a cross fertilization of knowledge by way of conversation, dialogue and even interaction by various religious communities with the hope, amidst others, of deepening one's knowledge of his or her religion, and that of others, without necessarily aiming at conversion.

This study calls for a paradigm shift in the teaching and learning of religious education, in order to enable Nigerians to strive for a culture of tolerance and peace. In the cause of this presentation it is exposed that teaching of comparative religion to all who pass through all the levels of education in Nigeria is the way out of the religious crisis that had bedeviled the nation. By and large, one would discover that the knowledge of comparative religion would to a large extent help in reducing religious crisis. This is because with a sound understanding of comparative religion, the perceptions of Nigerians especially on the three major religions (Christianity, Islam, and Africa Traditional Religion) would undergo a fundamental revolution. They will then be able to distinguish between moral and immoral act such as killing of innocent lives and burning of worship centres.

Thus, there would be religious peace which is a recipe for rapid national development. It should not be forgotten that everyone is aspiring to the knowledge of one, the creator of the universe God. That is why this work totally agrees with the remarks of Adeniyi (2008) that religions appear in the presence of God as a bunch of beautiful flowers of diverse colours and fragrances, each religion using its own mode of liturgy and spiritual gifts in uplifting the glory of God. Even when one flower is more beautiful than the other, it is still part of the bouquet that constitutes the ultimate beauty.

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