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## RELIGION AND PREJUDICE: THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM IN NIGERIA

Akiti Glory Alamu

Department of Religions, University of Ilorin, P.M.B.1515, Ilorin, Ilorin,  
Nigeria.

agalamufreelance2004@yahoo.com

### Abstract

*The paper focuses on the issue of religion and prejudice with emphasis on the role of religion fundamentalism in Nigeria. It traces the history of Islamic religious fundamentalism to the 19<sup>th</sup> century jihad while Christian fundamentalism was traced to the 1980s and 1990s the period which witnessed the general increase in bad feeling between many Muslims and Christians. The paper concludes that religious fundamentalism represents an irrational behaviour caused by insufficient knowledge of different religious values and doctrines.*

**Keywords:** Prejudice; Religion; Fundamentalism; Society.

### Introduction

Religion is an embodiment of peace in the very sense of the world. Religion is life itself. Every human existence and understanding is suffused in religion. Practically speaking, religion is a unifying factor as well as social mechanism for national development. No doubt, the tenets of religion provide individuals with shared values, roles, altruism and responsibilities. Relatively, peace is the central message of virtually all the world's living religions. However, in the developing countries where Nigeria features, religion has become a weapon of war and a militantly anti-modernist organization. Suffice it to say that an unfounded hatred, inordinate fear, unestablished suspicion and mistrust have crept into religion so much so that the basis for religion is defeated. Often times, this unfavourable prejudice is based on insufficient knowledge, irrational thinking and inaccurate

stereotypes. Religious peace in a functionalist interpretation means social progress, integration, development and order. As such, for a religious society and the state to function properly they need peace, otherwise there would be a lot of stress and breakdown of order on the social and political systems, thus undermining the peaceful, pristine state of nature. Therefore, it is the intention of this paper to take a cursory look at religion *per se*, and the rise of prejudice and fundamentalism in both Christianity and Islam with a sociological eye bird's view.

### Religion: An Overview

In all ages, religion has come to grips with the existence of all human endeavours. Religion at all times plays pivotal role in shaping the thought, perception, approach, feeling and history of humankind. Thus, religion embraces all aspects of life and it represents wholeness of all existence and as well is life itself. Apparently, religion is the keystone or cornerstone of the people's lives and cultures. Religion is far more than a believing way of life in the Nigerian context, where a distinction or separation is not made between religion and other areas of human existence. It serves the aim of building and maintaining human society. No doubt, with its consciousness and sensitivity, there is no known society exists without religion. Dopamu (2005) is apposite when he states that there is no known society without the existence of religion. In line with the above position, Abe (2004) argues that religion is the provenance and consummation of all things. According to him, in the beginning, it was religion; and in the end it shall be religion. In fact, religion has explained the world and human understanding of it. Without equivocation, religion has been explained by gamut of scholars. However, the explanation seems to defy the satisfactory quest for a universally acceptable definition.

Gifford (1998) asserts that religion provides meanings, principles, power and history to human existence. According to him:

Religion provides definitions, principles of judgement and criteria of perception. It offers a reading of the world, history, society, space, power, authority, justice and of ultimate truth. Religion limits or increases the conceptual tools available, restricts or enlarges emotional responses, or channels them and withdraws certain issues from inquiry. It inculcates a particular ways of perceiving, experiencing and



responding to reality. It can legitimize new aspirations, new forms of organisation, new relations and a new social order. Every religion involves struggles to conquer, monopolize or transform the symbolic structures which order reality (p.26).

Kenny as quoted by Ayantayo (2002) aptly describes Religion "as any system which relates men to ultimate values, whether God or something else and which embodies a creed, a code and a cult." In another development, Keqley as cited by Ayantayo (2002) distinguishes three basic features of religion as belief, feeling and action. It is imperative to note that what is pivotal to religion is belief in God or gods, the nature and destiny of the meaning of history and the end. On the basis of this, we come to appreciate the fact that religion does not only command loyalty but also gives its adherents something they are glad to live for and if need be, die for (Ayantayo, 2002). In the same vein, (Ejiofor, 1974) also attests to the fact that:

Religion is the complex of beliefs and behaviour of men in the supernatural sphere and realities and in the dynamic linkage of supernatural with the natural... Religion is one major drives behind human behaviour. Religion has had an important disciplinary effect on the whole social order in any given civilization (p. 63).

The above shows that religion is a very deep factor in the lives of men. In point of fact, religion identifies itself with the first instinct for self-preservation. Ejiofor (1974) further buttresses that religion is:

The pride of the mind, the strength of the will, the relish of human emotions, coveted object of delicate sentimentality... In short, it is the comprehensive resume of man's spiritual, rational and corporate existence (p. 63).

These above definitions reveal certain essential elements as relating to Religion in Nigeria. Thus, the concept of God, gods, relationship of man to ultimate values, a creed, a code, a cult, belief, action, feeling, super sensible world, law and social order, the relish of human emotions, and the pride of the mind are indispensable to religion in Nigeria. Perhaps, in all things, Nigerians are religious (Idowu 1996:).

As sensitive as religion is, it is worth living for, a pride of place for people as they subsequently derive satisfaction from it as well as sense of security. In Nigeria, there is the practice of triadic religions of African Religion, Islam and Christianity. Thus, the history of African Religion or Indigenous Religion is as old as the people themselves. It is a religion handed down by our forbears from the yore, and it is orally transmitted from one generation to another. It does not possess sacred scriptures, yet, it is thus written in memory of the very world we live and transmit orally as the occasion demands. This is not proselytizing religion, nor does it have a drive for membership, yet it is tolerant, it accommodates and remains autochthonous. Therefore, we are born into it, live in it and die in it (Awolalu and Dopamu 2005). Commenting on the overview of African Religion, Dopamu (2005) says:

This is clearly seen in African Religion, which encompasses all aspects of life. Africans do not know how to live without religion. They celebrate life religiously and they never embark on anything without bringing in religion. Thus at birth, marriage, death, warfare, healing, the foundation of any project, planting, harvesting, enthronement of chiefs and kings and other areas of human endeavour, Arel plays important roles (p.3).

Islam and Christianity are the proselytizing religions, which had been imported into Nigeria. Thus, Islam was introduced into Nigeria in the 11<sup>th</sup> century by the Timbuktu traders who had contact or encounter with the Northerners. It was in the 16<sup>th</sup> century that Islam spread to the south-west. While Christianity penetrated into Nigeria in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. However, this attempt to Christianize Nigeria failed due to many factors. Be that as it may, Christianity came to be planted permanently in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They have had disproportionate size. Interestingly therefore, Nigeria is secular and pluralistic state without any particular religion being a state religion. There is no gainsaying the fact that Nigeria is a country of diverse cultures, traditions and beliefs. But of the entire diverse elements, religion has proved to be most sensitive agent of legality in the society. It is this fact about religion that has made it an instrument of legality, unifying factor as well as social mechanism for national development. Of a truth, the tenets of religion provide individuals with shared values, roles and incumbents, altruism and responsibilities. Religion as a way of life is aimed at transformation of individual life. This individual life is a means of microcosmic structure in the overall macrocosmic structure of the society. Apart from this, "each of the



patterns of life and practice presupposes a structure of shared beliefs. When the credibility of central religious beliefs is questioned other aspects of religion are also challenged (Dopamu, 2005). Religion is therefore recognised as a channel for human and national development as well as legal instrument. Idowu (1996) states that religion is the keynote of the people's lives. According to him:

Religion forms the foundation and all-governing principle of life for them. As far as they are concerned, the full responsibility of all the affairs of life belongs to the Deity; their own part in the matter is to do as they are ordered through the priests and diviners whom they believe to be interpreters of the will of the deity. Through all the circumstances of life, through all its changing scenes, its joys and troubles, it is the Deity who is in control (p.4).

Religion has all-governing principles of life and infuses discipline and social order. It is a cord that binds people together in order to promote social cohesion and communal well-being. As the rule of law is machinery set in place to guide the conduct of the people likewise religion is both social and legal mechanism for harmonious living and co-existence. Besides, religion is a divine law or mechanism that regulates human conduct and as well institutionalises social norms in human society. Religion has the knack of bringing people together where they can experience presently what it means to live the full human life. It is also a major instrument of transforming any human society into a community that acts justly. To this end, Religion becomes the law of life, pathway to God-realization, absolute value truth, living power, justice, and morality.

### The Concept of Prejudice

According to *Encarta Dictionary Microsoft* (2009), prejudice is a performed opinion, usually an unfavourable one, based on insufficient knowledge, irrational feelings, or inaccurate stereotypes. It is an unfounded hatred, fear, or mistrust of a person or group, especially one of a particular religion, ethnicity nationality, sexual preference, or social status. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (1995) defines prejudice to mean a dislike or distrust of a person, group, custom etc that is based on fear or false information rather than on reason or experience and that influences one's attitude and behaviour towards them. From all indications, prejudice

represents un-established hatred shown by a person or group of people, a particular religion or nationality towards a person, group of people or a particular faith, based on lack of knowledge, ill-feelings and un-established opinion about such a person, group of people or a particular faith.

### The Role of Religious Fundamentalism in Nigeria

Religious fundamentalism is a religious movement based on literal interpretation of and strict adherence to doctrine especially as a return to former principles. In other words, it is the belief that religious doctrine should be implemented literally, not interpreted or adapted (*Encarta Dictionary Microsoft*, 2009). Similarly, religious fundamentalism is a usually religious movement or point of view characterised by a return to fundamental principles by rigid adherence to those principles often by intolerance of other views and opposition to secularism. In addition, it also describes the practice of following very strictly the basic rules and teachings of any religion; the belief that everything that is written in the Bible and the Quran is completely true.

Ryerson (2005) described fundamentalism as a "bastard child." Igboin (2010) tries to unearth the undercurrent of a bastard child in the context Ryerson related it. According to him, naturally, a bastard child is always demanding to know his father. He creates troubles out of peace, problem out of solution, disorder from order, sadness from happiness, and fear from security in search of his father. He is emotive and easily provoked. Fundamentalism is thus the product of the modernising process, it is anti-modernist. Marsden (1996) describes it as a militantly anti-modernist Protestantism made up of a loose organization of different groups united by their fierce opposition to modernist attempts to bring Christianity in line with modern thought. In addition, fundamentalism is characterised by five elements:

- (i) religious texts are central, interpreted literally and held factually
- (ii) the ancient leaders and founders of religions, even mythical ones are regarded as historical personae. Myth automatically becomes history. However, Oke (2002) argues that in conflictual moment there is the tendency to have recourse to mythical nature to shield them from being perceptibly grasped.
- (iii) the world is strictly divided into two: believers and infidels
- (iv) uncompromising opposition to secularism and



- (v) a passionate appeal for newly or poorly educated persons with which to carry out its operations (Blaufuss 2000).

As it is grasped by fundamentalists, the feeling is that there is always a challenge to the accepted ultimate authority. To them, the perceived challenge cannot be compromised. They are suitable to re-affirm, even virulently the ultimacy of the challenged authority. In the process of time, those who are believed to have stood against the truth or compromised it are singled out. All these elements may lead to the use of political means to achieve their goals. Haynes (2000) affirms the essence of religious fundamentalism to connote a set of strategies by which beleaguered believers attempt to preserve their distinct identity as a people or group in response to a real or imagined attack from those who apparently threaten to draw away into a syncretistic areligious, or irreligious cultural milieu.

The paradox of fundamentalism is its extant crisis between Christians and Muslims as an artificial creation of the military ruling class with its moral deficit (Kukah, 1996). It is also apparent that religious fundamentalism has created or portrayed the evidence of the review of Sharia law in some of the North, which also shows that the problems obviously go much deeper as fundamentalism than just a matter of differences in belief. Religious fundamentalism has ironically produced many contradictions that have shaken the confidence of Nigerians in democracy. As observed elsewhere, both Muslims and Christians are guilty of this phenomenon of fundamentalism. It is believed by them that adherents of a particular faith cannot sit on the fence, it is either he belongs to a particular religion with all sensitivity or not.

### Muslim Fundamentalism in Nigeria

Muslim fundamentalism is pioneered by the ideal of jihad in 19th century conventionally translated as 'holy war' by Uthman Dan Fodio in the North (Shiner, 1950). Haynes (2000) observes that Nigerian Islamic reformists are usually influenced by Muslim Idealists such as Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb. For them, it is essential to effect a sharp return to the holy writ beyond the tradition (that is Sufism) which has dulled and deformed them. Thus, the enemy is not modernity but tradition; or rather in the Muslim context all that is not in the tradition of the Prophet (Gaiya, 2004). The Nigerian Islamic fundamentalists claim Sharia to be the paradigm for running a modern society. However, this ranges from two political poles,

the conservative and liberal believers. According to Gaiya (2004) the conservatives or core have general hostility to any innovations since Prophet Mohammed's era; contacts with the West; strong opposition to women's rights; the imposition of Islamic education; and discrimination against religious or ethnic minorities. In addition, their vision involves the establishment of an egalitarian society, even redistribution of wealth and land, honest corrupt-free government and the reform of the Islamic organisation. The conservatives are the radicals who see Iran's theocratic state as a model for Nigeria. The liberal or rightist are the members of the pro-Saudi, conservative Izala who see Sharia as the first stage in a gradual process of building a more virile Nigerian Islamic state (Gaiya, 2004).

Haynes (2000) again asserts that the impact of tapping into a wider Islamic network was reflected in 1978 by the establishment of a Saudi-Arabian-influenced government, Izalatul-Bida wa Iqamat al Sunna Izala (those who reject innovation) a loosely incorporated reformist organisation with headquarters in Kaduna led by Sheik Abubakar Gumi, a former Grand Khadi of Northern Nigeria during the first Republic (1960-1966). This movement is geared towards eradicating innovation and promoting an Islam based on the Qu'ran and Sunna. And again, this movement is sharply against the Iranian style of Islamic state.

The compatriots of the Iranian style of Islamic state led by Mallam Ibrahim El-Zak-Zaky are more radical than the Izala group. El-Zak-Zaky rejects the idea of a secular state constitution for Nigeria, and further argues that the battle for an Islamic state must start with the destruction of the secular state, and claims that a jihad is imminent until Sharia becomes Nigerian national law (Haynes, 2000). As earlier observed; El-Zak-Zaky contends that anonymous Muslims cannot operate an Islamic law and legal system. In which case, non-Muslims cannot operate the Sharia in an Islamic state. He avers that Sharia is the law of God and it has to be above the law of man. Thus, the whole laws of Nigeria constitution inclusive must be subjected to the sharia (TELL Magazine, 1999).

Besides, the Muslim Students Society (MSS) established in 1954 is patterned along the Iranian lines. Thus, their leaders are fond of sharing Iranian propaganda against the Nigerian secular state. The members have always been antagonistic of other religions and they mastermind the various religious clashes in Nigeria higher institutions of learning. Abubakar Umar as quoted by Gaiya (2004) attests to the fact that:



The conflict between Iran and the United States, which was purely political, became a war between Islam and Christianity all over the world. This was because religion was employed by the new Iranian Islamic revolutionaries intent on revising Western influence to topple Shah Mohammad Rezas United States backed government. Having succeeded in establishing what they regarded as an ideal Islamic State structure they decided to export their models to countries with large Muslim populations. Nigeria was one of the countries that received such Iranian influence in the early 1980s. A new wave of Islamic fundamentalism swept into the country (p. 216).

With this background, Muslim militants put other Muslim sects and Christians on the defensive thereby leading to violence that has resulted in the loss of thousands of lives and proper in the past two decades. This informs why Nigerian Christians have been suspicious of Muslim activities.

Gaiya (2004) again posits that in Ahmadu Bello University Zaria, the Centre for Islamic Studies was established in 1990 to work out Islamic political programme for the country. The centre therefore came up with the following: Disallowing prostitution, gambling and the sales and consumption of alcohol beverages, a Zakat (poor tax) to be institutionalised and made mandatory; the confiscation of land from multinational corporations to be given back to the peasants; economy reform for an appropriately Islamic variety; and Islamic based courses of instruction in Economics and Banking, Political Science in the country's higher education establishments. All these fundamentalists' programmes are meant to explain the recent developments by the declaration of Sharia law in the states. This development explains why Kukah (2001) opines that the introduction of the political Sharia law has brought the country to the brink of self destruction than at any time in our history is one of the illegitimate children of military rule that is coming of age now.

The consequence of the political Sharia law introduced in some northern states was the mass exodus of Christians and their business empires. Gaiya (2004) buttresses further that a handful of Christians had to leave Kano as a result of the attacks on their people following the so-called retaliation of the Jos crises which saw many Christians massacred. Many Christians in their thousands were executed after receiving the blessings of

the Governor of Kano the previous day. This informs the fact that some leaders are religious fanatics instead of being Chief Security Officers of the state. Gaiya (2004) says:

Governor Shekarau no doubt invited the riot in Kano when he visited both Yelwa and Bauchi and brought some of the refugees to Kano. The Muslims came to him for a demonstration of their support the previous day despite warning from well meaning Citizens, and instead of him to disallowed (sic) it, he gave his approval and the result was mass massacre of Christians. What kind of leaders do we have?(p.44).

### Christian Fundamentalism

In the words of Haynes (2000), the general increase in bad feeling between many Muslims and Christians in the 1980's and 1990's, conflict between the religious communities led to the emergence of an organizational body for the country's fundamentalist Christians. Along this line, Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria was established with sole aim of commenting on both religious and political issues in the country. The Pentecostal evangelisation of "outside the church, no salvation" and "Jesus is the only way syndrome" has brought about religious riots in the Muslims dominated areas in the North. For example, the invitation of a renowned German evangelist Reinhard Bonke to Kano for a crusade provoked Muslim fundamentalists to react, and this of course resulted in indiscriminate massive killings of Christians in the dominant Muslim city (Gaiya, 2004). Also, in 2004 the same Evangelist Reinhard Bonnke was also invited to Ilorin, Kwara state and he only spent barely two days when Muslim fundamentalists coupled with the government's approval abruptly stopped the crusade.

Evidently, Christian fundamentalists in their evangelisation drive to convert Muslims to the faith by arguing that Christianity brought medicine, education and wealth to the country, so it is quite sensible for those who wished to benefit from those to join the Christian faith (Gaiya, 2004). The Christian fundamentalists do not only have a problem with Muslims, but also with mainstream Christians whom they believed are apostates for having boycotted the fundamentals of the Christian belief while their leaders set themselves up as individuals whose power challenges that of God. However,



their claims of born-again within the Christian milieu have not resulted in violence like the case with Muslims.

### A Sociological Quest for Solution

The scientific study of the society is the pre-occupation of sociologists of all times. Claude Henri de Saint- Simon, Auguste Comte, among others taxed themselves of the responsibility of inventing science of society geared towards eliminating societal problems in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Auguste Comte was joined by Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, Fernand Tonnies, Marx Weber and Herbert Spencer- all foundation sociologists. Sociologists such as Auguste Comte, Talcott Parson and Durkheim studied systems of ideas such as functionalism which later helped the mainstream of religion. For instance, Comte (in Haralambos et. al., 1980) articulated his social creed which is the necessary recipe in a religious society. According to him, love is the principle, order is the basis, progress is the end. Comte believed that for a people to achieve social progress, love should replace hatred, bitterness and violence, while order replaces disorder, lawlessness and anarchy (Dzurgba, 2003). In a religious society such as ours where fundamentalism is a common place rehearsal, peace and love are required to put the society in the pedestal of social progress. Sociologically, peace refers to a condition of social harmony in which there is no social antagonisms. It is interesting to note that sociological response as styled by structural-functionalists unequivocally assert that it is the tradition of the society to experience social progress and human development. Best (2009) notes that structural-functionalism is a condition of social analysis that sees society as a mosaic of functions and structures that perform them. For example, in order to survive; a society needs to educate its children, produce goods, govern its affairs and provide security for its members. These are functions and they necessitate a number of structures such as schools, industries, parliaments, courts, among others.

Structure means a set of interrelated roles necessary for performing a specific function. When structures perform their functions properly, there is order in society and in fact, society inherently moves in the direction of order and stability. As a result, from the structural-functionalist perspective, peace is achieved where existing social structures perform their functions adequately, supported by the requisite culture, norms and values (Best, 2009).

To this end, religious functionalists such as Omar (2007), McTermman (2003) and Knitter (1995) have collectively leaned their voices on the need for peaceful society by using religions as recipe. Omar (2007) takes a critical look at the extent which spiritual value, mutual respect and acceptance of the legitimacy and authenticity of the religious tradition can go. As an attitude of scientific study of religion, he argues that mutual acceptance must not stop at recognising and even, accepting, the existence of the other as a fellow human being and a good neighbour. Rather, Muslims and Christians must accept each other as friends and partners (pilgrims) in the quest for social and political justice, theological harmony, and spiritual progress on the way of God, who is their Ultimate goal.

McTermman (2003) on the other hand assesses the real trend of religion by exploring the Talmud law of "Seek peace and pursue it." He leans his voice with the understanding that the rabbinic traditions focus mainly on the importance of mercy and condemn of all wanton destruction. The Jewish rabbis acknowledged the interconnectedness or essentially unity of humans and conclude from that fact that peace is God's original intent for all human beings. The obligation to promote peace is universal, which is constitutive peace with paradigm.

Knitter (1995) uses correlational model as a prerequisite to overcome religious fundamentalism in contemporary society. In its dynamic relatedness, the model holds vision of togetherness, common ground or basic unity with the understanding of other traditions and their uniqueness as well as the same common essence that radiates like a hidden diamond with the heart of every religion.

### Conclusion

The foregoing reveals that religious prejudice is the brain child of irrationality and insufficient knowledge of different religious values and doctrines. These inaccurate stereotypes have brought religious clashes between Muslims and Christians based on their fundamental principles and beliefs. Therefore, the churches and Mosques should avoid using abusive and offensive language, vitriolic statement, inciting advertisement and unguided sermons, while maintaining the integrity of their rituals, doctrines, ethics and vision in a way that will promote humanity of each individual. To achieve a just and peaceful society, all and sundry needs a rediscovery of the values, spiritual cultures and mutual respect of various traditions which are basic and



embedded in all religions. Religion can serve to remind us that the most vital elements of life are rootedly linked up to something greater than this world. Irrespective of the nomenclatures given to the Supreme Being, whether God or Allah, there is something people share in common that transcends them. It is worthy of note that this deeper reality would create a solid base for a humane and germane Nigerian society that acts justly by respecting individual differences.

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