

RELIGIOUS PROVOCATIVE STATEMENTS IN NIGERIA: A THREAT TO HARMONIOUS CO-EXISTENCE

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ABSTRACT

The issues of religious violence in our community will for long remain unresolved should religious provocation be left unaddressed. The magnitude of religious provocation against Islam is enormous that constant conflicts between adherents of the religion and others call for urgent solution. This paper attempts to shed light on the stand of Islam on religious harmony in the society. It delves into the instances of religious crises emanated from hazardous utterances and hostile writings against Islam and the unpalatable responses from such. The paper finally offers some suggestions to check the menace of religious provocation in the society.

Introduction

Peaceful co-existence between the privileged and less privileged, rich and poor, rulers and ruled, Muslims and non-Muslims could only be ensured in an atmosphere of justice and tranquility. Where justice is denied and the less-privileged ones are unduly oppressed; resistance, violence, riot and terrorism quickly follow. Rejection of injustice and oppression by their victims is a major duty of every religion. Jesus declared:

The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight of the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.¹

In the Qur'an, permission is given to the oppressed ones to resist oppression. It says:

To those against whom war is made, permission is given (to fight), because they are wronged:- and verily, Allah is Most powerful for their aid;

(They are) those who have been expelled from their homes in defiance of right, (for no cause) except that they say, "Our Lord is Allah". Did not Allah check one set of people by means of another, there would surely have been pulled down monasteries, churches, synagogues and mosques, in which the name of Allah is commemorated in abundant measure.....²

In human history, attempts made by the oppressed to check excesses of the oppressors were met with bitter opposition by the powers that be. The crucifixion of Jesus was the consequence of his preaching against injustice which they considered a threat to the established authority.³ The Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) and the early Muslims faced severe persecution from the Makkans for preaching against ferocious and mischief-loving people's excesses.⁴ In other words, the objection of the oppressive authority to the rejection of oppression by the oppressed often leads to violence. Oppression and injustice can take various forms. However, in this context, oppression in form of utterances and injustice in form of oppressive writings against Islam are considered. This is considered appropriate, looking at the incessant clashes between Muslims and non-Muslims. Reasons have been advanced as the causes of these conflicts. Such include sectarian differences, leadership tussles as well as factional and doctrinal misunderstandings to mention a few. A crucial factor, which has not been properly given the desired attention, is that of provocation as a cause of religious fracas in our community.

Provocative utterances and writings are common to both Muslims and Christians. A lot has been written on this and other factors. This paper, however, attempts to look at the roles played by some preachers and writers in the spread of hatred of Islam to the world via their provocative utterances and writings and the resultant effects of this on their peaceful co-existence. What can be more

oppressive than wrongly attacking others through writing and public preaching in the name of religion? Unhealthy writing and preaching can hardly bring about the desired peace in any community such as ours.

ISLAM AND THE SANCTITY OF RELIGION: WHAT THE QUR'AN SAYS

From all indications, religion as well as faith should be a matter of personal conviction. Islam realises that mankind is a product of one single soul despite the multifarious languages, colours, races and cultures. All religions preach virtues and frown at vices and Islam in particular is concerned with the protection of life, honour and property of its followers and those of the adherents of other religions. The Qur'an for example observes that thus: "let there be no compulsion in religion; truth stands out clear from error,"⁵ because "if it had been your Lord's will, they would all have believed, all who are on earth. Will you then compel mankind against their will to believe?"⁶ While commenting on this verse, Ali says:

.....Men of faith must not be impatient or angry if they have to contend against unfaith and most important of all, they must guard against the temptation of forcing faith, i.e. imposing it on others by physical compulsion. Forced faith is no faith.⁷

In a situation where some people have failed to accept Islam after all efforts, the Qur'anic statement to be considered is: "to you be your religion and to me mine."⁸

Condemnation and provocation of people of other faith is considered a wrong step that can lead to unhealthy relationship among people who belong to different faiths and it is therefore condemned in Islam. This is attested to in the Qur'an thus:

Revile not ye those whom they call upon besides Allah, lest they out of spite revile Allah in their ignorance. Thus we have made alluring to each people its own doings. In the end will they return to

their Lord and He shall then tell them the truth of all that they did.⁹

It is sad to note that despite all injunctions for harmonious co-existence between people of different faith, inter and intra religious hatred still persist in the society. Many religious preachers who lack essential qualification for effective and positive preaching use offensive and provocative language in their preaching sessions, whereas Allah enjoins use of wisdom and beautiful preaching. He says:

Invite (all) to the way of your Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious. For your Lord knows best those who have strayed from His path and those who receive guidance.¹⁰

In recognition of the sanctity of other people's religion, the Prophet (S.A.W) proposed a *Mubahala* between him and the people of the Book. This was in form of solemn meeting between him and the people of the Book in which both sides came together to discuss their differences. The Qur'an even enjoins this when it says:

Say: O people of the Book! Come to common terms as between us and you: that we worship none but Allah; that we associate no partners with Him, that we erect not from among ourselves, lords and patrons other than Allah. If then they turn back, say you "Bear witness that we (at least) are Muslims (bowing to Allah's will)."¹¹

The Quran injunctions on the sanctity of other people's religion are a strong weapon to ensuring peaceful co-existence among adherents of different religions. Where a religion tends to disrespect the personalities of other religions or decides to step on the toes of others wrongly, violence and chaos are always the end result.

MAGNITUDE OF RELIGIOUS PROVOCATION AGAINST ISLAM: MUSLIMS' REACTION

Provocative statements against Islam could be traced to the time of the Prophet (S.A.W). The Makkans who saw the new religion as a threat to their personalities started ridiculing the Prophet (S.A.W) and denying his prophethood. Poets were employed to attack him in their poetry. The Prophet (S.A.W) was called all sorts of bad names and was asked to perform miracles to prove his prophethood.¹² The provocation later led to persecution and later together with his Companions expelled from their fatherland. With the persistence of this oppression Allah commanded the Muslims to defend themselves saying:

And fight them until there is no more
persecution and the religion becomes Allah's.
But if they cease, let there be no hostility
except to those who practise oppression.¹³

The contact of Islam and non-Muslims was not palatable at all. Series of *jihad* and crusades erupted from such contact. The wars were not limited to swords and gun but extended to the use of more dangerous weapons namely the use of the tongue and pen. The Christians who started distorting the image of Islam and Muslims mainly used these instruments. They depicted the character of the Muslims in such a manner as if they were 'uncivilized, beasts, savages and cruel people who knew only to plunder, kill and make the woman – folk their slaves.'¹⁴ The effect of this provocation is attested to, by an orientalist who says:

The image of Islam created at this time by the
Christian scholars enabled other Christians to
feel that when they fought against Muslims,
they were fighting for light against darkness.
The Muslims might be strong, but the
Christians were now convinced that in religion,
they were superior.¹⁵

In Yorubaland where Islam preceded Christianity, the Christian Missionaries stigmatized the religion as being obstructive to progress. Rev. M.J. Luke, in his sermon at Breadfruit Church, Lagos, on December 1886 was said to have declared Islam as a

religion that “has done no good in our country and has not taught the people anything whatsoever.”¹⁶

Furthermore, some Christian writers despite their little knowledge of Islam embarked on writing on Islam and its personalities. Such writings contain destructive and distorting information about Islam, as well as embarrassing innuendo on Muslim personalities. Haykal cites some of these writings against Islam by Christian writers. Of them is the French Encyclopedie Larousse which stated:

Muhammed remained in his moral corruption and debauchery, a camel thief, a cardinal who failed to reach the throne of the papacy and win it for himself. He therefore invented a new religion with which to avenge himself against his colleagues”.¹⁷

Another scholar Guibert de Nogent is equally quoted to have written that:

Muhammad died through excessive drunkenness and that his corpse was eaten by pigs on a dunghill, explaining why the flesh of this animal and wine are prohibited¹⁸

Another brand of provocation arose in the attempts by some Christian writers to translate Islamic books into different languages. In this way they pretended as if they were translating the actual works of Muslims, whereas useful information were either distorted or withheld. An example of this is the “Maliki Law” of Dr. Perron, which is the translation of the Mukhtasar of Sidi Khalil, where he deliberately added to the actual text of the book. Same is the translation of the same book by Ruxton where vital facts were deliberately omitted.¹⁹ Rev. M.S. Cole equally embarked upon the translation of the Qur’an to Yoruba. This Christian-translated Yoruba Qur’an contained a number of erroneous and prejudiced assertions as asserted by Gbadamosi.²⁰

The Christian leaders in Nigeria in their pioneering roles in the development of Yoruba language also used the opportunity in favour of their religion to provoke the Muslims whom they saw as a threat

to their religion. A confirmation of this is the translation of the days in the week to Yoruba where “Sunday” is translated as “*Ojo Aiku*” (Resurrection day), “Monday” as “*Ojo Aje*” (Day of Marketing), “Wednesday” as “*Ojo Eeru*” (Day of Ashes – Ash Wednesday) and “Friday” as “*Ojo Eti*” (Day of retardation).²¹ What a great injustice! Little wonder then, that the lateness of Muslims in Yorubaland to accept Western type of education was attributed to the various provocative acts by the early Christian missionaries. They thus remained adamant and the missionaries’ attempts to get them educated in western schools were like planting a corn on a rock.

In addition to the above, blasphemous statements against Islam are contained in texts written on various subjects. Here good image of Christian names and personalities is created while an unwarranted provocative expression on Islam, Islamic names, places and practices are made. In Yorubaland, “*Iyawo Alarede*,” “*Owo Eje*” and a host of others are few examples of Yoruba literature prescribed for secondary school students to prosecute ethnic and religious disharmony. It has equally been identified that some pages of the Macmillan English Course Books Four and Five contain intellectual distortion of Islam. A consideration of one of these revealed as follows:

The story of Alade

Alade* was a beautiful woman, and her husband, Olu, was a Prince. They had a son whom they named Dele. In a nearby village there lived a wicked magician named Ali. Ali already had many wives but not contented. When he heard about Alade he wanted her to be his wife, too. He dressed himself as a holy man, and went to her house. He told her to follow him. Alade was afraid to disobey a holy man. So, she went with him. Ali quickly changed her into a dog, and carried her away to his village. When Ali got to his home in the village of Ifon, he changed the dog back to Alade.²²

From the above, it is observed that Ali, a Muslim name and the name of the fourth caliph for that matter, is described as a wicked man, a magician and a woman snatcher who is never contented with his wives. In order to convince the innocent pupils further, and to paint Islam black in their minds, they are expected to answer the following questions correctly:

- a. Was Olu a magician?
- b. Who was Ali?
- c. Why was Ali not contented?
- d. Why did Ali dress himself as a holy man?

The above and many other statements like this are proofs of the various atrocities perpetrated against Islam through the hostile pens of some scholars in the name of secularism. The aim of this troubling practice against Islam is to create hatred of the religion in the minds of the young ones. Indirectly, the minds of conscious Muslims are prepared against the writers of such books and so a strong excuse for them to react negatively.

Many are aware of the response of Imam Ayatullah Khomeini and other Iranians to the “Satanic Verses” of Salman Rushdie. The “Who is this Allah” of G.J.O. Moshay equally led to unhealthy responses from Muslims for his blasphemy against Islam. The Katsina riot of 1991 was the result of the reaction of the Muslims to the blasphemy against the Prophet of Islam when one Orlando Atanda of Fun Times and Lolly Magazine came out with a caption titled “*Will you Marry a known prostitute turned born-again?*” in which he accused Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) and called one of his wives a prostitute. The recent article of one Isioma Daniel, published by *ThisDay* Newspaper in respect of Miss World Beauty Contest hosted by Nigeria, contained blasphemous statements about the Prophet of Islam. This was not taken kindly by the Kaduna and Abuja Muslims who reacted violently to the publication. Several lives and properties were lost in these riots. Thus, rather than using the news media for the promotion of religious unity in a multi-religious society like Nigeria, some dailies in their editorial, news reports, column and captions, contain derogatory, defamatory and

provocative remarks on Islam. A good example of this is a write-up of one Lana Balogun, who in the *Sunday Standard* under the caption “*Master of Yesteryears Ahmed the Camel Driver*” described Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) as an epileptic prophet.²³ Again, how can there be peace in a multi-religious nation where one Adelowo made a provocative statement against the Muslims sayings:

The Yoruba Muslims’ priests maintained themselves by deceits and charm making. Their religion was the greatest obstacle to the progress of civilization and to all that is pure, holy..... Islam was as stagnant as it was obstructive to progress. It discourages free labour.²⁴

The question is who is to be blamed for these crises - the Muslims who cherished their Prophet more than their parents or the wicked writer who decided to provoke the Muslims through his hostile writing?

As if people have not learnt a lesson from the past, it is amazing to note that in this millennium where awareness has risen to a greater height, and in an institution where the siting of the Christian cross virtually generated religious unrest between the Muslims and Christians of that community;²⁵ a Christian lecturer could still go to the extent of showing his hatred for Islam by setting some questions capable of causing religious violence in the institution. Oloyede has properly documented an extract of the question paper. However, for clarity sake, a recapitulation of it becomes necessary.

UNIVERSITY OF IBADAN

FACULTY OF LAW

LPB 402: LAND LAW II
SESSION

2ND SEMESTER EXAM. 1998/ 99

DATE: APRIL 15, 2000

TIME ALLOWED : 3 HOURS

INSTRUCTION: ANSWER ANY FOUR QUESTIONS.

1. Alhaji Looter took loans from four creditors, i.e. WEMA, OWENA, CO-OPERATIVE AND UBA PLC respectively. Looter conveyed legal mortgages of his mansions at Bodija and Eleyele-Ibadan to both WEMA and UBA. Looter contracted the second legal mortgage before conveying the legal mortgage of his indebtedness to OWENA Bank Plc. Looter has now defaulted payment to all his creditors. All his properties mortgage had been sold to liquidate his debt.
 - (a) You have been appointed a Receiver as well as the liquidator. Set out the modes of paying the creditors
 - (b) Discuss critically but briefly the distinctions between a mortgage and a pledge.

2. Mohammed Kill-and –Go, known as the Megaphone in the inauguration of Sharia Law in Lafenwa where he has remained a customary tenant of Oluwo of Lafenwa family, a traditionalist to the core. Kill – and –Go has persuaded Oluwo family to become Moslem but without success. He contacted the money – bags amongst the Moslems at Ibadan who sponsored him to destabilize Oluwo family. He had succeeded in seducing Oluwo’s younger wife. He sponsored some hoodlums to pull down the ancestral shrine of Oluwo family and has also refused to pay Ishakole to the family for the past three years. Oluwo family has taken Kill-and – Go to court. His defenses are as follows:

- (a) That the Governor of Ogun State is now the owner of the lands in the State and Oluwo family is no longer entitled to receive Ishakole.
- (b) That Nigerian Constitution having prohibited discrimination, he is entitled to marry anywhere.
- (c) That since there are big mosques in Egbaland with many Imams, Sharia Law must be introduced to Egbaland and that Oluwo should now forfeit his tenancy on the ground of his religion.²⁶

From the question paper the following observations are made:

- i. Alhaji - a Muslim title is used and the Alhaji's surname is a "Looter" who defaulted and was liquidated.
- ii. Mohammed – the messenger of Islam's namesake, is referred to as the "Kill-and –Go" and megaphone of Shari'ah.
- iii. Muslims are regarded as agents of destabilization, adultery and fanaticism.

Should the Muslims in the institution react to this blasphemy, they would be given various names – fanatics, fundamentalists, terrorists, and what have you; whereas the cause of the problem will not be prosecuted. This provocation is not limited to our academic institutions alone. Some films and video productions reflect denigration of Islam and Muslims. Such films and video production include "*Agbara N la*" and "*Amina Eleha*" to mention but a few.

Another form of religious provocation against Islam comes through public condemnation. This is clearly manifested in the adoption of *Shari'ah* by some States in the northern part of the country. Various provocative captions and cartoons greeted this step by some dailies in the south – western part of the country. It is not that these people are ignorant of the rule of democracy and Federalism, which allows any state "to enact its laws for the good governance of the State as long as the law is passed by the House of

Assembly and signed into law by the Governor.”²⁷ Immediately, the *Shari’ah* was adopted by these States, several captions in our dailies described it as barbaric and of Stone Age. Reference is made to amputation of the hand of a robber as if this is the only penalty making *Shari’ah*. Such people have never spoken of the act of burning to ash of acclaimed robbers as barbaric and they see nothing wrong in public executions and hanging.

Preaching in public transport buses is another forum where Muslims receive public assault and their religion is relegated to public condemnation. One wonders why undue chances are used by some Christian preachers to preach their doctrines in buses boarded by both Muslims and Christians. Because of the conflicts arisen from this attitude, the inscription “No Preaching, avoid religious conflict” is always pasted in government commercial vehicles. The case is more than this in some instances. Some religious sects have gone to the extent of praying for destruction, calamity and all sorts of evils against others who do not belong to them and that their problems remain unsolved until they come to their congregation.

Still on religious provocation, a Muslim/Christian riot erupted within the city of Kano in 1991 when the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) organised a crusade in Kano with Evangelist Reihnard Bonnke from Germany as the guest preacher. The Muslims in the city protested to the government who allowed this Evangelist to come to the city after it had initially sent back a South African Muslim preacher-Ahmed Deedat from Kano. This injustice in dealing with the affairs related to religion on the part of government provokes religious crises that may not be contained easily.

On the issue of the Muslims/traditionalists conflicts, the constant restriction of movement of women as well as illegal curfew imposed upon Nigerians by traditionalists during their festivals are also provocative and have been causing problems between the Muslims and traditionalists. The conflict between Alhaji Jamiyu Kewuyemi, a Muslim preacher in Ila – Orangun and masqueraders of the town, the Oloolu and Alhaji Jagbe-mo-Keferi’s episode of Ibadan²⁸, the confrontation between

Alhaji Faya and the Irele traditionalists of Ikirun, Osun State, were based on this factor. The 1999 conflict between the Hausa Community of Shagamu and the Oro cult traditionalists is still fresh in our memory. The unconstitutional imposition of curfew from unauthorised authority, and maltreatment of those who violated such curfew no doubt were provocative and such consequently have led to religious violence in our community. If others could bear this, it might be intolerable to the Muslims who have a large percentage of their women in the market and who are supposed to move freely to their place of worship at interval.

One cannot exhaust the list of provocative actions against Islam in our community not to talk of the ones operated at global level. We nevertheless feel that religious conflicts arisen from provocation could be averted if good steps are taken some of which are as follows:

- (a) Imposition of curfew by traditionalists should be stopped. If people are not supposed to see anything or any ritual practice, that thing should be made hidden rather than compelling people to hide for such a thing. What women should not see should be taken away from them, instead of forcing women to hide for it.
- (b) Preaching of a particular religion inside public buses that are used by people of divergent religions should be prohibited as it will not go down with others who belong to other faiths.
- (c) The call for the formation of a Religious Council comprising the representatives of all the religions in this country is a right step in the right direction. However, the body should be empowered more by extending their terms of reference to include the following for it to accomplish the task before it, namely:
 - (i) Consideration of what role religion should be playing in our society and mapping out how this role could be accomplished.
 - (ii) Chart-out the areas of compatibility and incompatibility of these religions especially Islam and Christianity especially on

moral values such as righteousness, faithfulness, patriotism, peaceful co-existence and such vices as corruptions of all forms, fornication, adultery murder, prostitution, drunkenness, laxity and other anti-social behaviours.

- (iii) Identify more causes of religious unrest with a view to finding lasting solution to them.
- (d) Government should create a column in the National I.D. Card for religion professed by individual so that whenever he/she violates any of the laid-down rules, he/she will face the wrath of the law as stipulated in the religion he/she professes.
- (e) Obnoxious writings against any religion should be discouraged by apportioning appropriate penalty for such offence.
- (f) Government must deal justly with adherents of different religions in matters that affect them.

Conclusion

This paper attempted to default the association of religious conflicts with religious intolerance in our community as no one can continuously tolerate injustice in the name of peace whereas the unjust writers are not checked. To drive home this point, instances of provocative writings and utterances against Islam and Muslims were cited. Based on that, the need for adherents of different religions to ruminate on the need to give religion its proper position in the society was stressed. The unpalatable experiences resulted from religious violence engineered by provocative statements and writings have marred the progress of religion in Nigeria; as instead of serving as a coherent factor, it has disintegrated the society. In order to salvage the situation, some suggestions have been advanced. It is our submission that the cause of a problem is addressed before fighting the course.

Endnotes

1. *The Holy Bible* – Revised Standard Version, Luke 4:18-19.
2. Qur'an 22:39-40.
3. See the preaching of Jesus and the reaction of his people to it as contained in the Books of Mathew, Luke, John and Mark.
4. M.H. Haykal, *The Life of Muhammad*; Lagos, Islamic Publications Bureau. 1982.
5. Qur'an 2: 256.
6. Qur'an 11: 99.
7. Y. Ali, *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary*, Maryland, Amana Corporation. n.d. P. 577.
8. Qur'an 109: 6.
9. Qur'an 6: 108.
10. Qur'an 16: 125.
11. Qur'an 3: 64.
12. See Qur'an 17: 90-96 as well as M.H. Haykal, P. 86.
13. Qur'an 2: 193.
14. See the *Islamic Future* A Publication of the World Assembly of Muslim Youths. Riyadh. Vol. XI. NO. 48. June-July.1995. Pp. 9ff.
15. W.M. Watt, *The Influence of Islam on Medieval Europe*; Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press. 1972. P.83.
16. T.G.O. Gbadamosi, *The Growth of Islam Among the Yoruba, 1841 – 1908*. London, Longman Group Ltd. 1978. P. 155.
17. Haykal, P.xliii.
18. Ibid, p. xliii.
19. See the whole text of F.X. Ruxton, *Maliki Law (Being a Summary from French Translations of the Mukhtasar of Sidi Khalil)*, London, n.p. 1914.
20. See T.G.O. Gbadamosi, PP 155ff.
21. I.O. Oloyede, "The Imperative for Reshaping and Re-Orientating the Modern Disciplines in the Islamic Perspective". Being a paper delivered at a National Conference on Islamization of

Knowledge organised by IIIT Nigeria Office and Usmanu Dan Fodiyo University, Sokoto. (May 2000). P.17.

22. O. Taiwo (et al), *Macmillan Primary English Course Pupils Book Four*; Unit 11. 1998. Pp.53-54.
23. S.O. Lana Balogun, “Master of Yesteryears Ahmed the Camel Driver”; *Sunday Standard*; February 28, 1998. P. 4.
24. E.D. Adelowo, “Islam and Christian Church in Yorubaland in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century: A Critical Study of Interplay of religions” in Mala, S.B. Boluade, E.B; Balogun, I.A.B.; (et.al) (eds) *Religions, A Journal of the Nigerian Association for the Study of Religions (NASR)*, (Ibadan Vol. 4. 1979). Pp. 48-49.
25. A. Ekwenife, “Politics and Religious Intolerance: The Nigeria situation” R.D. (Ed) *Religion and Politics in Nigeria*; Nigeria, NASRED.1993. p.117.
26. I.O. Oloyede, P. 15.
27. Y.A. Quadri, *Shari'ah: The Islamic Way of Life*. Ijebu-Ode, Shebiotimo Publications. 2002. P.28.
28. K.A. Balogun, “Religious Intolerance as a Cause of National Disintegration”. Mala S.B. (Ed) *Religion and National Unity*; Ibadan, Orita Publications. 1988. p. 34.

* Alade as used here may be a surname of the supposed woman in question. This is because no woman bears the name among Yoruba but men do.