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Strategies for Preventing Inter-Religious Conflict in Nigerian Universities

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Abstract
Religious intolerance among religious practitioners in Nigeria, can be linked to strong religious belief and religious adherence. Strict adherence to religious values makes people to strongly believe that their religion is the only true, acceptable and tolerable religion that leads to paradise; and that, other religions should not be tolerated because they are assumedly not pure. Muslims believe that Islam is the last religion to be revealed to mankind and Christians believe that Jesus Christ is the only acceptable way and access to God. As a result, religious observers assume that their religious doctrines are germane to the practice of religion. Study was premised on fundamentalism and social identity theories which explain how a group becomes formidable in support of their members against members of an opposing group. Primary data were collected using purposive sampling methods - Indepth Interview (IDIs) and Focus Group Discussion (FGD). Key informants were sampled - 2 Chief Imams, 2 Chaplains, 2 Deans of students and 2 Chief security officers; while 4 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) involving 63 students: 17 male Christians, 18 female Christians at the University of Ibadan, and 13 male Muslims and 15 female Muslims at the University of Ilorin, as well as observation of propagation methods and religious activities were also adopted. Secondary data was collected from memos, bulletins, newspapers and journal articles. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and content analysis. Findings showed that Christian and Muslim students took the propagation of their religions as a compulsory religious duty and as such, they employed methods that have capacity to trigger violent conflicts. The study concluded that, religious activities are on the increase in many higher institutions across Nigeria to the extent that authorities have established rules to regulate and monitor religious practices in their institutions. Some of the offensive religious activities still go on unnoticed or unchecked. Thus, the study recommended that authorities of higher institutions need to constantly regulate policies, monitor compliance and check the excesses of overzealous religious promoters and youthful exuberances in tertiary institutions, with appropriate disciplinary measures.

Keywords: Inter religious conflict, conflict prevention, peacebuilding, youth engagement.

Introduction

The insurgence of religious violence in Nigeria could be traced to the early 1980s when there was upsurge of faith- based violence in the northern part of the country. The popular Maitatsine (Kano) violence claimed over four thousand lives in 1980, leaving behind a sad tale of wounded and internally displaced

persons. In 1982, more religious violence erupted in Kano and Kaduna that also destroyed thousands of innocent lives and properties. The violence later spread to places like Borno and Lagos in 1984 and 1986 respectively. The report of the Tribunal of Inquiry that probed the Maitatsine riot in 1980 reported over thirty religious conflicts in many northern parts of the nation between 1980 and 1982. Since then, religious conflict has spread to other regions of the nation thus undermining the peace and stability of Nigeria (Falola, 1998).

This worrisome religious development in Nigeria is evident in many religious propagation activities that occur all over the country and in our institutions of higher learning. Nigerians are notably highly religious people, considering the manner their religious views and beliefs readily play out in every aspect of their life; including politics, economic, education, social and commercial sectors. Ayantayo in Albert, (2005:56) opines that Africans are notorious with religious practices, by reading religious meaning into everything done by adherents of opposing religion, which often leads to tension as they go about with their daily activities..

Interestingly, religious practitioners in institutions of higher learning in Nigeria, are equally religiously notorious. This has made the relationship between religion and higher education to be 'precarious'. Hence, religious activities in tertiary institutions have been on the increase with its attendant adverse effects. Tertiary institutions have become fertile grounds for propagation of various religious beliefs; thus, Muslim and Christian students compete for dominance in their attempts to win more converts and establish their stronghold on our campuses of higher learning. Perhaps, promoters of religious faiths derive inspiration from the Constitution of the country and their revered holy Books. The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria stipulates freedom of religion, conscience and thought as well as propagation of religion.

The same Constitution gives the individual citizen rights to his or her privacy without infringement of any kind. The situation in Nigeria is contrary to the dictates of the Constitution, especially as it relates to religious practice and religious propagation. Religious adherents often disregard the right to privacy and decency of each other without much interference or reaction from the government. The Bible and the Quran also emphasize conversion, propagation and spread of Christianity and Islam as a means of winning converts; and an offer of salvation to the 'lost soul'. Christians and Muslims have adhered to these 'holy' instructions; and have engaged in different conversion activities as well as propagation methods in order to fulfill the mandate. Muslims are equally encouraged to spread and propagate their religion by exerting all means to do so, while Christians are charged by Jesus Christ, on His ascension to heaven, charged the disciples and all Christians to spread the good news of God's love to all mankind.

This conversion assignment, usually takes the form of religious arrogance and supremacy which makes a religious promoter presents his/her religion as better than the other. It also entails encouraging individuals to give up their religious faith and value system in order to embrace the 'true religion' that leads to salvation and life after death. In some other instance, like in the universities of Ibadan and Ilorin in particular, and in other higher institutions across Nigeria, it is common place to see religious banners and posters with welcome messages to new and returning students at the beginning of a new academic session. Some religious groups offer accommodation and registration assistance to new students as a subtle propagation and recruitment method.

Oftentimes, the strategies adopted by religious groups for propagating their religious beliefs leave much to be desired. The Reinhard Bonnke's Revival of 1991 in Kano city, and the attention the promotion attracted is a good example of interpretation and misinterpretation of propagation activities. The revival campaign was premised on the slogan 'Kano for Jesus', which the Muslims considered as an affront in a town like Kano with so much Islamic presence and domination. The riot that broke out when Bonnke arrived Kano on October 13, 1991, claimed several hundreds of people, while properties worth millions of Naira were destroyed (Albert, 2001). Sometimes religious propagation includes confrontation, competition and comparison between Muslims and Christians. This has gradually moved the nation into a near war situation between Muslims and Christians (Olupona, 2014). Ayantayo, (2005:58) appraises the propagation methods often adopted to convert people by describing the mutuality of suspicion among religious followers which makes them to engage in accusation and counter accusation over interpretation of their scriptures

This has the capacity to trigger religious war between Christians and Muslims, especially if one looks at the intensity of religious activities in universities in Nigeria, with its attendant factionalism and territoriality. It has, at times, generated unrest and tension that radiated beyond the boundaries of the educational institutions themselves in some parts of the country. However, the seeming excessive freedom enjoyed by religious practitioners, the 'soft' attitude of government to religious issues and ineffective reaction of government to religious conflicts in the past are matters of deep concern. Hence, the conflict potentials and occurrences, arising from uncontrolled religious practices and activities, have also increased with time.

It is important to stress the fact that the teachings of all religions in the world predispose religion as a factor for national stability and peaceful coexistence (Ekoko and Amadi, 1989). In other words, all religions uphold, encourage and foster peace. The Bible and the Quran admonish Christians and Muslims to seek peace and humility with various notable scriptural references.

All religions also recognize the dignity of man as well as the essence of living. On the contrary, however, religious apostles and missionaries have turned religion to an instrument for exploitation, manipulation and corruption (Eniola, 2007). For instance, (Copey, 1997) argues that nineteenth-century missionaries in India approached other religions in "a spirit of confrontationalism". He further maintains that the Indian Christian missionaries displayed cultural bigotry and arrogance, attitudes of superiority and paternalism.

Considering the Strategies for Preventing Inter-Religious Conflict in selected higher education and the country in general, this study is concerned with Nigerian universities with a foresight of inter religious conflict prevention in the nation at large. The study has sufficient information about the various religious propagation methods adopted by Christian and Muslim students in the selected universities, their conflict provoking potentials and then suggests strategies to adopt for preventing inter religious conflicts that are related to religious propagation.

Research Objectives

The research objectives are stated thus:

(i) To identify religious propagation methods that are capable of causing violent conflict in Nigeria universities.

(ii) To determine strategies for preventing inter-religious conflict in universities in Nigeria?

Study Population

The population of the study comprised all the students of the University of Ibadan, Oyo State and University of Ilorin, Kwara State. The sample population for this study comprised sixty three students and eight key informants. Emphasis was on Christian and Muslim students, as well as relevant key informants - selected principal officers of the two universities.

Research Method

The research adopted qualitative method, using in-depth interviews and focus group discussion. Data was analysed with simple description. For the focus group discussions, the researcher interacted with a total of sixty-three students in the two selected universities: seventeen male Christians, eighteen female Christians, thirteen male Muslims and fifteen female Muslims, all in eight different homogenous groups. Two Principal Officers (Chief Imam, Chaplain, Dean of students and Chief security officer) from the two universities were engaged for in depth interviews.

Concept of Conflict

Bagshaw (1988) considers conflict as a creative force for the business and the individual, because if we regard differences of opinion as valuable sources of cross-fertilization they begin to enrich our experience. In other words, conflict presents exciting possibilities about the future (if managed in a positive, constructive fashion), because difficult situations and relationships are said to be the ones that make people grow Vokic and Sontor, (2009). These assertions showcase the fact that conflict can be viewed from a negative or positive perspective. At the center of the occurrence of any of the outcome is the management pattern adopted. Chen and Tjosvold (2002) aver that constructive conflict management means that the protagonists benefit from dealing with the incompatible activities in that they develop a quality solution and strengthen their relationship more than they incur cost. The point is that if not managed, conflicts can result in bad feelings, high turnover of resources and costly litigation Hirschman, (2001). It is quite the opposite when conflict is recognized, acknowledged and managed in a proper manner. Personal and organizational benefits accrue, Darling and Fogliasso (1999). Based on the foregoing, conflict can be negatively or positively defined, depending on how it is perceived and managed by the parties concerned. One thing that characterizes conflict is that it is a natural, every day phenomenon in all private and working spheres Vokic and Santor, (2009); hence, it is an unavoidable component of human activity Brahnam, Margavio, Hignite, Barrier, and Chin (2005).

Based on this, conflict can occur in the school, church, workplace; and can also manifest in politics, ethnicity and religion. This is an indication that conflict is a phenomenon that can occur anywhere and in or from any human activity. Ayantayo (2005) posits that conflicts are inter-related because they occur between or among connected individuals such as teachers and students, employers and employees, neighbours, religious associates, religious bodies or other persons whose interests within the same space and whose positions or stance influence others. Conflicts occurring within a religious association are known as intra religious conflicts while those occurring between religious bodies such as the church and the mosque are called inter-religious conflicts.

Religious conflict is disagreement arising from differences in faith and belief (Abdulrahman, 2000). Ayantayo (2005) stresses that at the religious level, conflict arises when each of two different religious persons in the same religious space claims monopoly of religious truth. He submits:

> inter-religious conflict is a state of disagreement between two religious persons regarding who is or who is not

holding absolute religious truth.

It occurs when members of different religions are engaged in argument which often goes with bickering, controversy, demonstration, debate or squabble over religious beliefs and practices. Religious conflict emerges in a situation where religious symbols are wrongly interpreted, conceived and perceived (Alimba, 2010). Orhunghur's (2008) view of religion is illuminating:

> religious conflict occurrs over different religious beliefs, doctrines, practices and propagation or interpretation of holy books.

Also, (Whitehead cited in Oshitelu 2010:18) supports this viewpoint,

> …people have accused religion of bringing division and acrimony into the society as a result of schism, consequent upon different interpretations given to doctrines and ideas of other religions.

Religious conflict has become a major phenomenon ravaging the achievement of peace and stability in the world today. This is because it is often being used as instrument of oppression. In the opinion of (Gotan, 2008), several reasons have been advanced for inter religious conflict in Nigeria. They include, socio-economic disparities, unequal political appointments, claims of superiority, unequal employment opportunities among others. According to (Eniola, 2007), religious conflicts in Nigeria are caused by many factors: political factor, economic factor, social factor, wrong religious orientation, influence of religious leaders, intolerance, and unnecessary/lopsided government involvement. Besides, poverty and unemployment appear to be good instruments for escalation of many religious conflicts because unemployed people have become easy recruits as mercenary fighters in the hands of exploitative and manipulative religious and political leaders in the country. This is the reason a large number of people especially the youth, turn out to fight each time there is an outbreak of religious violence. Such violence usually takes the forms of armed struggle, guerilla warfare, sabotage, assassination and secession attempts like the Boko Haram experience.

Banjo (2000) indicates that religious conflicts between conservative Protestants and Jews, Muslims or Christians everywhere tend to be about increasing the political and economic power of marginalized groups or communities in Third World politics, rather than about religious issues per se. Juergenmeyer (2000) states that in the past two decades, religion has been at the center of most violent conflicts around the world, thereby gaining notoriety as one of the prime security challenges conflicting the world in the wake of the Cold War.

Inter-Religious Conflict in Nigerian Universities

Manschreck (1974) avers that religious controversies and schisms in Christianity originated from disagreement over scriptures, doctrines, sacraments or practices. Leadership in religious institutions has often been a source of conflict. Hence, leadership conflict occurs in Islam, African Traditional Religion, Christianity and other religions groups (Butterfield, 1960). Dzurgba (2006) posits that religious conflicts arise from acquisition and use of power by religious leaders or religious groups. He states further that fundamentalism, fanaticism and bigotry are also sources of religious conflict. These are the types of people who are willing to die for their religious faith if need be. They are the ones who form militant religious organizations aimed at destruction of life and property.

Religious conflict scholars have given divergent opinions with regards to how incessant religious conflict should be tamed in

Nigeria, so as to curb the upsurge of destructions and killing in the name of God, in the country. Thus, ranking high in their suggestions was that the country should practice one religion based on "Artificial Construct" which was in line with the doctrines of Soviet Union and China for us to nip the menace of continual religious conflict in the bud. Thus, (Wasteland, 1992) suggests the use of symbols such as flags, pledges, and a national anthem to build an independent Nigeria State, whose power would be superior to the discordance of religion and ethnic convictions. This position is very narrow owing to the fact that in a country like Nigeria where government has failed the people, the use of symbols such as flags, pledges, and a national anthem to build an independent Nigeria State would not work. The people have, over the years, relied on religion as the only way out of a bleak future.

Some other religious conflict literature known as "The purification school of thought" also suggested that Nigerians should be converted to one Religion State in order to put behind us religious hostilities which is gradually becoming a way of life in the society. According to this school of thought, this can be actualized through the 'Assimilation plan' by inculcating from primary schools down to the tertiary institutions and all facets of Nigeria one national religion deliberately and slowly. This school of thought is counterproductive. Nigeria is a country of multi-religious people who are emotionally attached to their religions, (Atanda, 1989). To impose or forsake any religion will definitely force people to forsake their religion and to adopt the religion of other people and culture. This will violate a basic human right, freedom of religion, which is embedded in the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. It will also lead to commotion, lack of cooperation and confusion. In addition, this school of thought negates the fact that the bane of Nigeria's problems today is frustration as a result of the fact that many people are facing intense challenges to eke a living, coupled with deplorable social amenities; especially erratic electricity supply which has crippled completely the middle and the lower classes in Nigeria.

Sampson (2012), reveals that there are several causal diagnoses of religious conflicts in Nigeria, but much of the literature in this area pay premium attention to the underlying socio-political, economic and governance factors. Alimba (2010) highlights the causes of ethno-religious conflicts in the country as competition over scarce resources; marginalization and discrimination against access to and distribution of resources; mismanagement and distortion of information for group's interest; religious intolerance; fanaticism and bigotry; colonialism, hatred and wrong perception of others outside one's group, inequality and injustice and political will and policy of government.

In schools, most especially in tertiary institutions, religious conflict has been experienced for reasons like discrimination and exploitation. Along this line, Hackett (2001) reveals that the actual incidents of religious discrimination in the schools of colonial and post-colonial Nigeria need to be seen against a background of general fears of domination and exploitation. Based on this, discrimination, domination, and exploitation are some of the issues that underlie the causes of religious conflict in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Fatile and Adejuwon (2011), report that Christians and Muslims see the campus itself as a social space to be conquered and brought under their spiritual superintendence. This, therefore, indicates a struggle for domination. Domination is one of the main factors that often triggers conflict in institutions of learning. They posit that compulsive territoriality might be one of the remote reasons behind the increasing incidence of religious violence on the campuses. Another contributing factor to religious crisis in tertiary institutions in

Nigeria, according to Fatile and Adejuwon (2011), is religious fundamentalism. Membership of one or the other of the various religious denominations entails a fierce sense of territory, sometimes physical, but unfailingly spiritual. Yilmaz (2006) points out that one of the most visible form of "ism" pathology in today's world appears to be religious fundamentalism, as the phenomenon has frequently become related to conflict and violence. The latter assertion gives credence to the fact that religious fundamentalism is a volatile phenomenon that can easily give room for the manifestations of violent conflict not only in the society but also in the ivory tower.

In addition, appointment into offices, characterized by religious considerations, is yet another cause of religious conflict in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. In other words, staff appointments, promotions, debates, students' union elections and other sensitive activities on campuses are considered along religious (Muslim/Christian) divisions. For instance, during the appointment of a Deputy Vice Chancellor in Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria in 1988, where two qualified candidates were in contention, religious sentiments became very evident. (Fatile and Adejuwon 2011).

Equally, religious propaganda and slogans by religious adventurers and fanatics through the press may make religious problems greater than they would have been (Dzurgba, 2006). These developments are conspicuously present in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. In support of this argument, (Hackett 2001) reports that Nigeria's schools have long been targeted by non-denominational soulwinning propaganda. (Kukah and Falola 1996) paint a picture of what happened in College of Education in Kafanchan, Kaduna state in 1987, during a Christian revival week entitled "Mission 87". Prior to the serious incident, the Muslim Students Society (MSS), had already been angered by the protestant students' display of a banner with a caption, "WELCOME TO JESUS' CAMPUS." The college authorities asked for the provocative banner to be removed. But the real trouble began when Muslim students invaded the meeting and attacked the speaker and some of the Christian leaders.

Findings and Conclusion

The findings of this study revealed that adherents of the two religions believe that their religion is the only true religion that must be tolerated and propagated; and that the other religion must be defeated in the propagation battle. Hence, practitioners propagate their religion as a compulsory religious duty and thus, employ propagation methods that could precipitate violence. They use words, slogans, phrases and imagery that connote supremacy of their religion to the detriment of the other; or words and phrases that denigrate the other religion. The various religious propagation strategies employed by Christian and Muslims faithfuls in the two universities have some clear indications for authorities of the universities and by extension other tertiary institutions, religious leaders, religious followers and political leaders at all levels of government in the country, as well as students and scholars interested in inter faith harmony and inter religious conflict prevention.

This is because tertiary institutions have become avenues to recruit future religious leaders to be brainwashed and indoctrinated in preparation for the onslaught against any opposing religion. Every religious body in the larger society is replicated in all tertiary institutions. Apart from the major two religious groups, there are numerous sub groups within each of the groups on the university campus. It can be concluded based on extant literature and field work that religious activities are on the increase in higher institutions across Nigeria such that authorities have established rules to regulate and monitor religious practices in their institutions. The authorities have shown appreciable interest and have deployed

appropriate intervention measures in extreme cases, but have not paid sufficient attention to latent activities that have capacity to provoke conflict, perhaps because of the subtle support for their religious beliefs. Hence, some of these nefarious religious activities still go on unnoticed or unchecked.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusion, the study recommends that university management needs to constantly regulate and check the excesses of non-challant and overzealous religious promoters in tertiary institutions; they should adopt early warning and early response strategies to prevent escalation of potential conflict situations; they should employ intelligence gathering on religious activities that are inimical to the growth of peace and peaceful coexistence on campus; they should develop activities that will promote inter religious harmony between different religious adherents; they should take appropriate decisions and sanctions on all defaulters of rules and regulations irrespective of their religious leaning and they should endeavour to be neutral and fair in their intervention in cases that invlove members of their religious group.

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