

Religious Insurgency - Pathway to Disintegration in Nigeria

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Abstract

Many decades ago, Chinua Achebe (1958) wrote his epoch-making novel titled, “Things Fall Apart”, where he acknowledged that religion formed one of the major tools for the positive transformation as well as the disintegration of the traditional African – especially Igbo-socio-religio-cum cultural society. It brought western education. But its misapplication also led to the gradual disintegration of the traditional cultural values. For a long time, many schools of thought limited the blame to the European colonial and Christian influence on the African Society. Within the African ambience, many scholars also tried to absolve Islam of any wrong-doing, labeling it the peaceful religion destined for Africans. However, the reality of the burden of religious violence and fundamentalism, if not fanaticism, associated with the quest of radical Islam to conquer the whole world for Allah has left much to be desired. The whole world is experiencing the type of uncertainty it has not witnessed for more than a century because of religious violence and uprising, especially in Nigeria and Africa. From Al-Qaeda to Al-Shabab, and currently to Boko Haram, the whole world knows that religion is not always only a vehicle of peace and unity but also a heinous tool for disintegration, depending on its usage and application.

Keywords: Religion, Insurgency, Disintegration, and Nigeria.

Introduction

The paper aims to establish that the true meaning of religion as a medium of sincere interaction and relationship with the Divine for the salvation of humankind has been misused, misplaced, misrepresented, and misdirected to attain selfish greed, destruction, and disruption of organized socio-political order. In Nigeria, otherwise known in many global circles as a highly religious society, religious violence has taken over peaceful co-existence and mutual collaboration of human and political institutions. This is typified in the nearly five-year bloodbath inflicted on the populace by the notorious Islamic Sect called Boko Haram. From what seemed to be a non-organised religious bigotry in 2009, it has won itself an international reputation as a terrible insurgency, not only against Christians but also against every segment of the society – Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

In Boko-Haram as an insurgent group, religion cannot really be said to be always an agent of integration, peace, unity, progress, and development. Again, in Boko Haram, Islam has been highly misrepresented, just as any other religious fanatical or insurgent group cannot be said to represent it correctly.

Religious Insurgency

The *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (7th edition) defines insurgency simply as “an attempt to take control of a country by force” (2006:775). Insurgency is, therefore, synonymous with rebellion against a legally constituted government. Thus, one can classify religious insurgency as a rebellious attempt to take over the leadership of a country by force in the name of religious goal such as Boko Haram is trying to exemplify in the North-eastern part of the Nigeria.

Boko Haram as a fundamentalist Islamic sect is forcing its tenets down the throat of Nigerians – to embrace Islam as the only true religion. In other words, Islam is the only veritable means to attain salvation. With such a religious conviction, one is tempted to ask a series of questions: where is the diversity of Nigeria as an independent nation and country? Where is the freedom worship as enshrined in the Constitution? Why is violence portrayed as the most effective tool for the spread of a particular religious ideology, especially in the 21st century? Is it possible to subject about 50% of the population that is non-Muslim to Islam? Above all, religious insurgency – Christian or Muslim – presents no justifiable argument for the disruption of social order and the desecration of the sanctity of human life.

Religion and religious issues remain very volatile in any society. Even Richard Nixon himself expressed the dismay associated with religious conflict, thus: “In the long term, we can hope that religion will change the nature of man and reduce conflict. But history is not encouraging in this respect. The bloodiest wars in history have been religious wars”. Richard Akinnola (2014:63-64) described Richard Nixon’s statement above as being futuristic and prophetic. In the context of Nigeria, there is no doubt that Boko Haram is replicating the picture presented by Nixon about religion where one can emphatically argue that some of our political actors are actually being supported by their fanatical clerical friends – Christian or Muslim – to fan the embers of religious war.

The truth, however, is that Boko Haram is fundamentally antithetical to the mainstream Islamic teachings just as one can classify Uganda’s Lord’s Resistance Army – globally acclaimed as a terrorist Christian group – cannot be accepted as a true representation of Christianity. No religious ideology based on bloodletting

can convince any rational person to be truly religious or godly.

The Fundamentalist Interpretation of the Shariah

The Shariah embodies the whole legal code governing the life of every Muslim in an Islamic community/country in accordance with the revealed law (Coulson, 1964:240). Every Muslim is, therefore, obliged to obey its injunctions. However, there are countries where there are many religions and their adherents. In such places, the understanding of the impact of the Shariah on the generality of the people takes a different interpretation. This means that diversity becomes a fundamental factor in the interpretation and application of any law. To maintain harmony, extremism of any sort has to be avoided.

Nigeria and many countries of the world presents a typical example of where religious diversity plays or should play a very significant role in the lives of the people. As already pointed out above, Nigeria as a nation is almost evenly distributed between Adherents of African Traditional Religion, Christians and Muslims. This is why it becomes a herculean task to enforce any religion on any segment of the society.

Although the question of the attempt to make Islam a national religion in Nigeria by instituting Shariah as the national legal system has been a programme meticulously pursued by some fundamentalist Muslims, one can say that the period of military dictatorship, especially between 1984 and 1999 boasted the image of Islam as a supreme and superior religion. In fact, “during the period of military dictatorship, Islam received many privileges” (Orbán, 2005: 234).

In Northern Nigeria, particularly, Christians are terrorized with the attendant destruction of Church buildings and human life. The drama of islamisation that started in Zamfara in 1999 with the implementation of the Shariah has blossomed into a full-scale war against the whole nation. Today, Boko Haram carries the banner of the islamisation programme with every element of violence and brutality attached to it. The handwriting on the wall shows tacit support of the sect by many anonymous powerful groups in the country. This is not a good or positive sign for the desired unity of the nation.

Christians and the Shariah in Nigeria

The forceful introduction and implementation of the Shariah by a dozen states in Northern Nigeria between 1999 and 2000 opened an ominous chapter in the history of inter-religious and inter-cultural relationships in the country. From the enactment of Islamic Laws forbidding taxi drivers from carrying female passengers to the prohibition of the sale of alcohol, the excitement brought about by the seeming triumph of Islam over other religions and the Nigerian Constitution in general, some fanatical Muslims took the law into their hands and started molesting non-Muslims. The event of the massive destruction experienced in Southern Kaduna, a predominant Christian area of the state, during the Miss World Beauty Contest of 2002 cannot be forgotten in a twinkle of an eye. Today, Kaduna is practically divided into the unfortunate Muslim North and Christian South – a designation that has demarcated the state into political and religious camps.

The introduction and institution of the Shariah as state law in some parts of the North also raised the issue of the Welfare of non-Muslims under the same system. According to Orbán (236), “the welfare of a section of the population may improve through the Shariah, but for Christians Islamic Law will be interpreted and applied in such a way that political oppression will increase and religious freedom will come under pressure”. On the basis of such an ugly development in a multi-ethnic and religious society like Nigeria, opposition from Christians cannot be unexpected. Apart from the opposition from Christians, it was observed that some powerful Muslim countries provided financial support to the Muslim cause, which seemed very inimical to the peace of the country. Saudi Arabia and Sudan were foremost in the accusation bordering on interference in the internal affairs of the country. Today, it has blossomed into a full-fledged hatred for Christians, if not for the entire Nigeria society.

Boko Haram and Misrepresentation of Islam

Islam (Al-Islam) teaches peace and total submission to God. Surah 3:19 enjoins, “Surely, the religion with Allah is ISLAM, complete submission”. True Muslims endeavour to propagate it by word and action. Nigeria, itself, has a large percentage of true, honest, and hard-working Muslims who really desire and pursue the unity, development, and progress of Nigeria. But the desire of this percentage of Muslims is not always the reality on ground. This is why Boko Haram has been seen as a camouflage, if not an outright abuse of Islam, religion, and religious worship in general.

This has been the experience of Nigerians, especially in the North-East in the past five years. There, the Christians can narrate their story based on their concrete encounter with Boko Haram whose activities can more or less be termed a distortion of Islam. Clem Aguiyi (2014:29) shares the grief of good Muslims, just like many non-Muslims, each time Islam is negatively portrayed due to the absurdities of extremist Islamists. He, however, adds, “Fact is that the so-called Boko Haram Jihadists are Muslims”(29). Continuing, he substantiates his position, thus: “That they kill Christians and target fellow Muslims and people of other faith do not obliterate

the fact that their faith is Islam and that the deviants are radicalized with extremists ideology in the mosques and by Islamic clerics”(29).

Boko Haram propagates a dangerous ideology rooted in the wrong and bizarre interpretation of Islam. In Boko Haramism, Islam becomes an ideology, not really a religion. In this lopsided projection of Islam, the hitherto orchestrated Muslim Brotherhood ideology, Al-Qaeda ideology, Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, ISIS/ISIL ideology, or even Boko Haram ideology disappear into thin air. All of them tend towards a common explanation – an Islamic ideology whose singular goal is to islamise the four corners of the Globe. With the kind of picture, which these ideologies are spreading like virus about Islam, the onus lies on the “good” Muslims to teach the “bad” ones that Islam is not just a wild goose laying contaminated eggs. It sounds hard and severe. But the challenge cannot be overlooked without dangerous consequences for both non-Muslims and “good” Muslims. The adjective, “good” appears more than 300 times in the Holy Qur’an, advising and enjoining on all to be true and sincere believers. In Surah 5:100, it is clearly stated that the bad and the good are not equal. Surah 11:114 becomes more emphatic when it advises that good deeds take away evil deeds, which is a reminder to the mindful (believers). The “good” Muslim in Nigeria has the moral responsibility to promote justice like any other good citizen irrespective of religious affiliation. Surah 6: 152 enjoins: “when you speak, then be just though it be (against) a relative”. Going further, Surah 38: 26 says, “so judge between men with justice and do not follow desire”.

From the foregoing, it becomes imperative on all the good Muslims of our nation to join forces with the good non-Muslims, of whatever religious inclination and denomination, to condemn honestly the bloodshed which Boko Haram is perpetrating in the name of Islam. If all the good men and women of Nigeria should cooperate in this venture, Boko Haram would become history in a short time despite the damage already caused by it.

The language of inclusion regarding the need for “all good men and women” in Nigeria to work together to give religion a positive image also formed the basis of the teaching of Jesus Christ. Jesus made it clear that a good tree cannot bring forth evil (Mtt. 7:18; Lk. 6:43). In fact, Christianity teaches that the good man gives out of his good treasure (Mtt. 12:35). In this case, the good men from all the religions in Nigeria should give Nigeria peace, tranquility, progress, and development. On the contrary, the great Latin adage, ‘Nemo dat quod non habet’ (no one gives what he does not have) becomes imperative.

Boko Haram and Brutal Attack on Society: Fives Incidents within a Month

In order not to appear merely speculative, there is need to present a few instances/cases that occurred within a month to buttress the evils of religious extremism by Boko Haram. These are however a few of the cases reported by the Media.

Case 1: “14 feared killed in Bauchi blast, ...” (The Guardian, Friday, October 24, 2014)

Reporting the horrible loss of life and property from Bauchi, Ali Garba writes: “The relative peace enjoyed in Bauchi state was on Wednesday night punctured as a bomb blast rocked the popular Azare motor park, killing 10 persons and injuring several others” (2014:3). In the same vein, Njadvara Musa writes from Maiduguri narrating how Boko Haram insurgents attack churches and kill Christians. He narrates how Boko Haram militants attacked Pelachroma village in Hawul Council killing four persons and torching several churches and houses. The killing was preceded by the one carried out in Dzur village where 10 people were murdered in the same Hawul Council, three days earlier.

To corroborate their religious leaning, one Buba narrates: ‘As I am talking to now, we have all deserted the village as the insurgents who were chanting God is great in Arabic, vowed to eliminate Christians in Hawul Local Government Area of Borno state” (3).

Case 2: “26 killed in Yobe suicide bomb attack” (Daily Sun, Tuesday, November 4, 2014)

Yobe is a state in the North-east of Nigeria like Borno and Adamawa states. Muslims and Christians are not spared in the Boko Haram inhumanity to man in this part of the world. Timothy Olanrewaju (2014:42) reports, “At least, 26 people were killed and 82 others injured when a suicide bomber believed to be Boko Haram detonated explosive devises amid members of an Islamic group in Yobe state yesterday”. In a pretended act of religiosity, a murderer had joined members of the Shi’a Muslim Brotherhood to commemorate the Ashurah, one of the important days in the month of Muharram, the first month of the Islamic calendar, which according to history also marks the death of the grandson of Prophet, Husseini (see also Zepp, 1992: 151-152).

Case 3: “Sect Kills 45 in Borno” (Saturday Sun, November 22, 2014:5)

According to Timothy Olanrewaju (2014:5), “No fewer than 45 villagers have been killed in a reprisal attack by Boko Haram in a remote community in Borno”. This is a gory picture of how religious fanaticism can push some people to lose sight of the sanctity of human life, damning the consequences of rendering so many men and

women widows and widowers. The experience of the villagers at Azaya-Kura, Mafa Local Government in central part of Borno is just one out of myriads of violent and horrendous inhuman acts against civilians.

Case 4: “45 Villagers killed in fresh Boko Haram Attack” (Daily Sun, Monday, November 24, 2014)

Two days after the horrendous killing of some villagers in the central part of Borno, Timothy Olanrewaju reports again from Maiduguri (2014:5), thus: “No fewer than 45 villagers were at the weekend in a fishing community in northern part of Borno State by Boko Haram”. Like in Azaya-Kura, Doro Baga in Kukawa Local Government had the experience of religious violence in the hands of religious extremists.

Case 5: ‘We saw hell in the house of God’ (Sunday Vanguard, November 30, 2014)

The Friday afternoon prayer or Juma’at in Kano Central Mosque was turned into a mourning session both for survivors and the whole nation as suicide bombers found their way into the mosque and killed so many Muslims. Narrating the horrible incident, Sunday Vanguard of 30th November, 2014:5 reports: “For the first time in the 400-year history of the Kano Central Mosque, Muslim faithful abandoned prayers mid-way”. Most of the survivors described their situation and condition with the short but touching statement above, ‘we saw hell in the house of God’.

But the great question should be and is, really: why is Boko Haram thriving?

WHY BOKO HARAM IS THRIVING: A HOUSE DIVIDED AGAINST ITSELF

Delivering the acceptance speech on behalf of recipients of honorary doctorate degrees at the 2014 Convocation ceremony of the University of Benin (UNIBEN), Sam Igbe, the Iyase of Benin Kingdom, said inter alia:

In our dear Country, we are veritably oppressed by the shackles
and manacles of injustice, corruption, greed, graft, pervading
impunity, consequent disorderliness and purveyors (*Daily Sun, 2014:50*).

There is no better description for the successful bloody enterprise undertaken by terrorist in a country that has everything possible to contain and suppress such a menace. Terrorism and insurgency are creating waves in Nigeria because of greed, corruption, and impunity. It would not be out of the ordinary to add that terrorism is gaining ground and destroying the very basis of the nation because the majority of the leaders have no real sense of shame.

Boko Haram is thriving because the house is divided against itself – the members of the household are at each other’s throat. Issues are overlooked in preference to flimsy political excuses of who should control the centre of governance. Boko Haram is thriving because morality is stamped underfoot and the politics of manipulation is the order of the day. According to Ralph Egbu (*Sunday Sun, 2014:45*), “the reigning confusion and disagreement between the different arms of government has given terrorism the strength to manoeuvre and assault the defenseless civilians, especially in the North-East”. Continuing he argues, “Issues surrounding the personality of our leaders have always been there since we got independence in 1960...The question in some of the debates has been whether we lack capable leaders or that the right visions are not there” (45).

On November 21, 2014, the National Assembly was a theatre of disorder. The Nigeria Police defended its action of cordoning the Parliamentary Premises in the face of the shameless confusion, thus:

Following an intelligence report of a likely invasion of the House
of Representatives by hoodlums and thugs, the Nigeria Police Force
promptly deployed its personnel to the premises to prevent a breakdown
of law and order (*Verbatim, 2014:38*).

It was funny that the National Assembly billed to meet and discuss the security situation in some parts of the country ended up perpetrating and perpetuating insecurity by fighting openly to the amusement of global video coverage. There is no doubt that such a game of shameless dancing in the public must have sent wrong, negative, and discouraging signals to the international community – economically, politically, and culturally.

Personal ego is ruining the chances of Nigeria to develop and progress like many other countries in the world. It is difficult to find a real sense of patriotism in the handling of affairs in the country. At a time when everyone should contribute useful ideas towards the eradication of the religious insurgency in Nigeria, many supposed key-players in government are supporting the disintegration of the country because their own will is not steering the political and economic affairs in the country.

THE SANCTITY OF HUMAN LIFE: the transgression of Boko Haram

Islamic theology emphasises the value of human life in unequivocal terms. In fact, Abdulfatah Oladeinde (*Daily Sun, 2014:56*) cites from the *Open Letter from 126 World Muslim Leaders to ISIS*: “Slaying a soul, any soul is haram”. In other words, one can argue that Boko Haram and its heinous actions against humanity is itself “haram”. In the same report, Oladeinde (56) goes further to buttress the condemnation of the indiscriminate wasting of life by Boko Haram by citing relevant Qur’anic verses:

1. The Killing of Innocents: God says in the Qur'an, 'And do not slay the soul (whose life) God has made inviolable, except with due cause...' (Al-Isra', 17:35; Al-An'am, 6:151). Islamic Law, therefore, make the slaying of a soul one of the most abominable sins (mubiqat).
2. Whoever slays a soul shall be as if he had slain mankind altogether; and whoever saves the life of one, shall be as if he had saved the life of all mankind (Al-Ma'idah, 5:32).

Based on these important Qur'anic revelations on the sanctity of human life, one can hardly agree with whatever reasons the Boko Haram sect is giving for killing Journalists, Social Workers, Emissaries or those engaged in reconciliation works. The cases of James Foley and Steven Scotloff (journalists) who were murdered by other Muslim terrorists called ISIL (Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant), David Haines (aid worker), etc.

The truth is that whether evil is perpetrated in Nigeria or elsewhere, it is fundamentally evil and wrong. No religion can justify its involvement in the perpetration of evil, especially the desecration of the sanctity of human life. With Boko Haram, one can agree with Tola Adeniyi (Sunday Sun, 2014:45): "The problem of evil is so wide, so encompassing, and so gargantuan that it has engaged the thoughts of scholars, researchers, theologians, and ordinary men and women in all cultures and in all regions throughout the ages". Continuing he argues, "one is compelled to wonder how any human being could ever be have conceived the idea of inflicting such horrendous act of cruelty and wickedness on a fellow human being" (45).

UNITY AND PEACE: THE BASIC PRINCIPLES OF STABILITY

The lingering conflict and war of attrition among the various ethnic and religious groups in Nigeria since independence in 1960 cannot bring Nigeria any sustainable progress and development. In the last 54 years, various means – political, military, economic, and cultural – have been used to destabilize the polity to no avail. Today, religion has been deployed as full-fledged *modus operandi* to disintegrate Nigeria as a united Nation.

Boko Haram claims to be neutral, objective, and patriotic in her cleansing religious radicalism and ruthlessness. However, it looks very pathetic that any religion should make blood-letting the sole avenue of restoring sanity and religiosity in a land. From the foregoing, we have learnt that true Islam condemns in its entirety the desecration of human life, the spilling of human blood, and by implication, the disintegration of society, etc.

The events of history have shown that there can be no meaningful development in the atmosphere of violence and acrimony. Nigeria is a special case in all its ramifications – diversity and size. Based on these two peculiar features, it becomes imperative on all stakeholders to work tirelessly to promote harmony. Tolerance and mutual acceptance are qualities of co-existence. In a country like Nigeria no particular person or group should live with the illusion of dominating the other. It is an uphill, or rather, an inscrutable task. The only solution is unity and peace. In other words, religious violence can only breathe counter-violence and apathy. Therefore, the current effort by Boko Haram – whichever guise it takes - to convert everyone to Islam as a panacea for peace, unity, and development in Nigeria is far from the solution to the problem of Nigeria. It can only lead to disorder and disintegration, which we are not hoping for.

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