

TRENDS AND DIMENSIONS OF RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE IN MODERN NIGERIA: Options for Peace Building and Harmonious Co-existence

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Abstract

This paper examines the trends and dimensions of religious violence in Nigeria with emphasis on the lynching of Deborah Yakubu, a Christian and 200 level student of Home Economics Department at the Shehu Shagari College of Education, Sokoto, Nigeria, by some of her classmates for alleged blasphemy. The incidence drew a lot of critical questions regarding the constitutional supremacy and corporeality of the Nigerian state. It also reinforced the persistence of the national question in the country. Using primary and secondary sources embedded in an interdisciplinary methodology; the paper argues that religious violence in Nigeria is a complex phenomenon that has evolved historically and has continued to assume new trends and dimensions in the country's processes of political and cultural socialization. It concludes that the consequences of the phenomenon are severe. Some informed options for viable peace building for the enhancement and sustenance of harmonious co-existence among practitioners of the two orthodox religions in the country are suggested.

Keywords: Religion, Violence, Christianity, Islam, Colonialism

1.0 Introduction

Religious violence has been part of Nigeria's socio-political history since the colonial epoch. In post-colonial Nigeria, particularly in modern times, the phenomenon of religious violence has continued to assume new trends and dimensions owing to many trajectories of the country's social and political dynamics. The sources and causes of religious violence in Nigeria are as complex and complicated as the concomitant consequences. This is a recurrent reality that inspires a proper interrogation for the purposes of generating new perspectives and relating to the real issues at stake in order that viable approaches can be advanced for peace building and harmonious co-existence. Thus, the essence of this intellectual engagement is to elevate the conversations on the disturbing phenomenon of religious violence in modern Nigeria for realistic peace building options in order that harmonious co-existence can be enhanced. The conversational domain is deliberately carved to bring the trends and dimensions of religious violence in the country into a sharp focus. A special attention is given to the specific instance of the recent lynching of Deborah Yakubu, a Christian and 200 level student of Home Economics Department at the Shehu Shagari College of Education, Sokoto, Nigeria, by some of her classmates for alleged blasphemy. This unfortunate occurrence has brought up a lot of critical questions that tend to undermine the constitutional supremacy and

corporeality of the Nigerian state in a manner that reinforces the persistence of the national question in the country.

It is important to note that modern Nigeria is overwhelmed with forces of destabilization such as national security crisis – terrorism and banditry, violent extremism, kidnapping and cyber crimes, etc. Other critical issues such as economic downturn, mass poverty, ethnic cleavages, political agitations, and many more are at the core of the country's trending national discourses. It is within this suffocating scenario that religious violence has continued to assume new trends and frightening dimensions with a lot of horrendous consequences for the survivability of the country's nationhood and corporate existence as a geopolitical sovereignty. The essence of this conversation is principally to identify the right way to follow in diminishing the latitude of emerging trends and dimensions of religious violence in modern Nigeria for peace building and harmonious co-existence. To achieve this, a number of issues must be raised and addressed thus: What is religious violence? When did religious violence come into lime light in Nigeria? Is religion a determinant of Nigeria's socio-political trajectory? What led to the lynching of Deborah Yakubu? What are the policy options for stemming the tide/peace building? The remainder of the paper attempts to proffer solutions to the above posers.

1.2 Religious Violence: A Conceptual Architecture

It is important to first and foremost understand the meanings of *religion* and *violence* before shifting further to situate the concept of religious violence in a proper perspective. From a commonsense appreciation, religion entails a relationship between the human and superhuman. Such a relationship dwells on a belief system that defines the ethics, morality and conscience of the human in the relationship with fellow humans as enunciated by the superhuman, usually referred to as God or god. Given its fluidity of meaning, there is scarcely a commonly agreed definition of religion by scholars. However, there seems to be a consensus among scholars that the concept represents a designated system of socio-cultural behavioral patterns and practices that are defined by ethics and morality, beliefs and sanctity as regulated by supernatural and spiritual elements. There are many religions in human societies such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Confucianism, African Traditional Religions, etc. The various religions have their adherents who subscribe to the teachings and doctrines provided by the supernatural realm according to their established belief systems.

Violence, on the other hand, is a manifestation of conflict at its destructive stage. Generally, conflicts are potential aspects of violence (Orngu, 2014:12). This explains why some scholars place the two phenomena side by side and sometimes use them interchangeably in their analysis. Thus, for violence to erupt, there must be a real or imagined conflict of interest and contestation over values arising from ill-feelings among groups (Anifowose, 1982:1). When this conflict of interest and contestation over values involve religion and eventually assumes violent dimensions, religious violence is said to have occurred. It is important to note that religious violence can take the forms of intra-religious violence and inter-religious violence. Intra-religious violence occurs between different sects or denominations of the same religion while inter-religious violence involves adherents of opposing religions. Religious violence is, therefore, the manifestation of destructive disharmony between and among religious faithful. In the main, for violence to be tagged religious, it must have religion as its object of motivation.

1.3 Foundations of Religious Violence in Nigeria

In Nigeria, there are three dominant religions – Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religions. There is hardly a tangible inter-religious harmony between and among the adherents of these dominant religions in the country probably because of the disposition of their forebears in the past. For instance, the forebears of the Christian religion outrightly condemned the African Traditional Religions and situated them in the contexts of barbarism and paganism. This can be better understood when the country's colonial history is brought into focus.

It is common knowledge that the entrenchment of colonialism set in motion a lot of critical changes in Nigeria, part of which was/is the de-legitimization of traditional religions (Ibrahim, 1991:115). What followed this religious orientation was an identity consciousness that tended to drive the feelings of supremacy or superiority of the newly found Christian religion over and above other religions.

Closely related to the above is the fact that the forebears of Islam had, in the 18th and 19th centuries, embarked on their campaign of spreading their religion in pre-colonial Nigeria through conquests of territories, the establishment of the emirate and theocratic system of rulership and the forceful conversion of followership by means of the Jihads (Siollun, 2021:30-31). For instance, Dan Fodio had accused the Hausa states in pre-colonial northern Nigeria of idolatry and of contaminating Islam with animist rituals, following which, in 1804, he declared a jihad to purify Islam (Siollun, 2021:31). As a corollary, Dan Fodio charged his followers with the relevant instruments of authority to wage a holy war and establish Islam throughout Hausaland and beyond (Siollun, 2021:31). This Islamization process was hinged on Islamic fundamentalism and fanaticism both of which inadvertently came to promote intolerance in terms of religious socialization with adherents of other religions in the country. Therefore, the foundational difference lies in the fact that, while the Christian religion adopted the evangelization method for winning converts, the Islamic religion deployed the Jihad campaign with a forceful method of conversion.

Ironically, it is the above historical experiences of Christianity and Islam that have, in part, led to the evolution of socio-political strains and conflicts between the proponents of the two rival religions that the Middle East extended to the world (Ibrahim, 1991:116). Thus, as Ekeh (1983:11) succinctly argues, the moral and social order that encased the pre-colonial institutions in Nigeria is burst by the social forces of the colonial process as they seek new anchors in the altered colonial milieu. This, therefore, indicates that the processes of altering the social and moral order in pre-colonial and colonial Nigeria through the facility of religion had inadvertently created a primordial public with a lot of negative consequences for peaceful coexistence in postcolonial Nigeria. In recent times, the manipulation of religion as an important marker of group identity for political agitations has increasingly led to deep-seated animosities among adherents of the two orthodox religions – Christianity and Islam – in the country.

1.4 Religion as a Determinant of Nigeria's Socio-Political Trajectory

The seismic changes brought about by the two orthodox religions in pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial Nigeria can be best contextualized within the membranes of interactions between and among opposing adherents. The point has been made that before the coming of Christianity in Nigeria, Islam had already been well established as a popular and state religion by the 15th century.

Therefore, at independence, Islam and Christianity became the two orthodox religions of the post-colonial state in terms of followership (Orngu, 2014:126).

The main functions of religion are to stabilize the individual and provide the basis for group identity among adherents (Orngu, 2014:127). Very importantly, religious institutions stimulate resistance in the process of negotiating social meaning as a result of which it affords individuals the anchorage for self-reliance (Mol, 1976). To that extent, it provides the individual or group with the needed conditions and atmosphere required for the enhancement of a psychological stability (Orngu, 2014:127). Thus, while religion functions to stabilize the individual and establish group identity in Nigeria, it is feared to have been ingrained with the proclivity for inter-group conflicts. This fear has often expressed itself in the intermittent explosive violent behaviours between the adherents of the orthodox religions in the country as will be shown in the course of this conversation. This is because, as experience has shown, a religious group that faces the reality of social, political and economic conditions is likely to deploy the promotion of group cohesion for mobilization towards improved material conditions and political advantage. This is what has often led to the recourse to religious violence among practitioners of the two dominant religions in Nigeria.

The Nigeria's socio-political milieu has two contending dominant religions – Islam and Christianity – to contend with. Interestingly, the two dominant religions have worldviews that are marked by profound differentials, most specifically in conceptualizing the functionality of government and politics. In modern Nigeria, Islam has been advocating for theocracy based on Sharia law in the mould of a caliphate system while Christianity has continued to insist on secularism. The contending issues embedded in these opposing viewpoints are tied to irreconcilable forces of religion in the country. Incidentally, Nigerian government and politics are trapped in this web of irreconcilable contradictions with serious implications for the country's socio-political trajectory. The manifestation of this reality is demonstrated in the dragging of religion into the country's political space as a basis for leadership recruitment. As an illustration of this new political thinking, religious balancing in the context of Muslim-Christian ticket or Christian-Muslim ticket has become a major political strategy by political parties for winning presidential elections in modern Nigeria. In other words, religious balancing has become a major determinant in the process of leadership recruitment in modern Nigeria, especially at the centre. Religious balancing in the mould of Muslim-Christian or Christian-Muslim ticket for governorship election has become an established political culture in the following states of the Nigerian federation: Adamawa, Gombe, Kogi, Kwara, Lagos, Nasarawa, Ogun, Osun, Oyo, Taraba and, until recently, Kaduna. This is the new philosophy that is currently driving the direction of national discourse in the quest for nation building in the country's pluralistic and supposedly secular polity.

1.5 Trends and Dimensions of Religious Violence in Modern Nigeria

There are countless incidences of religious violence among human societies in world history. The fact that religion has become a dominant cultural marker that distinguishes group identity in Nigeria and other human societies of the world is no longer in doubt. The peculiarities of Nigeria's experience with religious violence have excited analytical attention mainly because of the emotions and passions with which religious issues are handled and perceived by stakeholders in the country over time. This explains, in part, the prevalence of trends and dimensions of religious violence in modern Nigeria. Nigeria's first experience with clearly established religious violence dates back to

the late 1970s. Although, some analysts insist that the Kano riots of 1953 and the Igbo massacre in northern Nigeria in 1966 had religious undertones, the two events lacked the basic elements of religious coloration. It is, therefore, safer to conclude that the late 1970s provided the watershed for the history of religious violence in modern Nigeria.

Nigeria also witnessed an upsurge in violence that arose from clearly established religiously motivated activities. During the period, there was a major Islamic uprising known as Maitatsineriots that was spearheaded by Yan Tatsine and his followers. The uprising, which led to thousands of deaths, was masterminded by the Maitatsine movement (1980-1985). In 1991, Reinhard Bonnke was in Kano to hold a crusade. The resistance to the crusade by Muslim faithful led to a religious violence with over a dozen deaths. In 1999, the restoration of democracy in Nigeria witnessed the introduction of Sharia law with its penal code in the Muslim-dominated northern states of the country. Zamfara State was the first to establish the Sharia law in the year 2000 – a trend that soon permeated the northern Nigeria. This deliberate affront on secularity came with flashes of occurrences of religious conflicts between Muslims and Christians living in many northern states of the country. In 2001, there was a violent conflict in Jos, Plateau between Muslims and Christians. The bone of contention was the appointment of a Muslim politician, Muktar Mohammed, to coordinate the activities of the National Poverty Alleviation Programme in a Christian dominated Jos. Scores of deaths were recorded in the violent confrontations.

In 2002, Isioma Daniel wrote an article relating to Prophet Mohammed and Miss World Beauty Pageant in trying to illustrate the irresistible beauty of the contestants. The Mohammed Cartoon that followed the illustration sparked off severe violent reactions from some Muslim faithful in Kaduna with mass destruction of lives and property. Consequently, the Miss World contest of 2002, which was to hold in Abuja, the country's capital territory was moved to London. The killings that were instigated by the Mohammed cartoon led to violent reprisal attacks, particularly, in the Christian-dominated Onitsha town of south eastern Nigeria.

In 2002, the Boko Haram was founded in Maiduguri, Borno State, by Mohammed Yusuf, its leader with the sole aim of opposing western education, western culture and science (Kertyo, 2015:72). The conviction of the Boko Haram is influenced by the Quoranic phrase which goes that “anyone who is not governed by what Allah has revealed is among the transgressors” (Kertyo, 2015:72). The group, therefore, promotes a version of Islam that forbids Muslims from associating with any form of socio-political activity that relates to the western society ([www.unher.org.refworld/docid/...](http://www.unher.org.refworld/docid/)). This includes Christianity, which is associated with western culture. Since 2002, when Boko Haram came into being in Nigeria, it has been causing havoc on lives and property in Nigeria.

In general, the trends of religious violence in modern Nigeria have continued to assume new dimensions with destructions of unimaginable proportions. The causes and sources are steadily becoming more complicated and complex.

1.6 The Lynching of Deborah Yakubu: Religious Violence at Its Peak of Absurdity

Since the establishment of the Sharia law in the Muslim-dominated northern Nigeria in 1999, there has been recorded cases of the killing of persons alleged to have contravened the moral codes of the law in that part of the country. At least, twelve out of the thirty-six federating units of the country

have *Sunni Islam* as their predominant religion and operate the Sharia court system. Offences like adultery, alcoholic consumption and stealing attract different levels of punishment in the Sharia law. Blasphemy against Islam and Prophet Mohammed, according to Sharia law, attracts the most severe punishments, including execution. Therefore, vigilantism and extrajudicial killings have become regular occurrences on the heels of accusations of blasphemy in the Muslim-dominated northern Nigeria. In other words, any action that is interpreted as blasphemous by the adherents of Islam attracts instant death for the offender in the areas that have adopted *Sunni Islam* and the Sharia law. This was the circumstance that led to the lynching of Deborah Yakubu Samuel.

What started like a harmless debate on a pending examination on a WhatsApp platform created for members of Deborah's class was what led to her death. In the course of their interaction on the WhatsApp platform, Deborah had attributed the successes of her academic performances to Jesus Christ. The Muslim members on the platform found this abhorring and requested her to pull down her comment that gave glory to Jesus Christ. Her refusal to comply with the request and her alleged remark against Prophet Mohammed, which they claimed was blasphemous to Islam, became the bone of contention. On May 12, 2022, Deborah Samuel Yakubu, was flogged, killed and her remains burnt by a mob of Muslim students in Sokoto for allegedly sounding blasphemous (Oyero, 2022). She was brutally killed by some of her Muslim classmates without an opportunity to fair hearing as she struggled in agony to utter the following last words: "what do you hope to achieve with this?"

The circumstances surrounding this phenomenon of extrajudicial killing in Nigeria on the allegations of blasphemy have often raised fundamental questions regarding the legality of enforcement of Sharia law in a constitutional democracy. In the case of Deborah, as in many other instances, her accusers were at the same time the prosecutors, the judges and the executors in the case of the alleged blasphemy. This reality clearly runs against the tenets of fairness, natural justice, equity and good conscience, especially in the context of the extant laws of the Nigerian federation. Added to that is the fact that Deborah's accusers/killers brazenly took the laws into their own hands to have meted such punishment on an accused person. Very importantly, the blasphemy for which Deborah was accused is not a crime/offence in the Nigerian constitution. Thus, in the Sharia states where blasphemy has been criminalized, the provisions of the Sharia law are clearly inconsistent and at cross purposes with the provisions of the Nigerian constitution, which guarantee freedom of expression and the right to life as fundamental human rights that cannot be contravened in such a manner as done by the killers of Deborah.

1.7 Matters Arising from the Lynching of Deborah Samuel Yakubu

The brutal killing of Deborah Samuel Yakubu was followed by spontaneity of reactions from different angles of the global community. On the home front, President Muhammadu Buhari ordered a probe into the incident. Some Christian and Muslim clerics were vocal in their condemnation of the killing. The order of the President was the normal official response from Nigerian government anytime there was a serious breach of peace and security challenges involving lives of citizens in the country. To further buttress this notion, soon after the suspects of the heinous crime were arrested by the Nigerian Police Force, there was an open protest by some Muslim youths from some parts of northern Nigeria that demanded the immediate release of the culprits. Interestingly, the protestors were not arrested for their impunity and callous guts in challenging the security agency in the discharge of their constitutional duties in the face of the breach of peace and order. The position of

justice on the matter has remained unknown up to this moment.

Christian clerics like, Bishop Matthew Hassan Kukah, Rev. Fr. Polycarp Lubo, Rev. Akpen Leva, Rev. Fr. Moses Lorapuu, and various state chairmen of the Catholic Association of Nigeria, all condemned the killing of Deborah in strong terms and called on the relevant security agencies in the country to take the necessary steps to ensuring that justice was served (*The Sun*, May 14, 2022). The Sultan of Sokoto, who first publicly condemned the killing of Deborah, came under heavy criticisms and threats from some rabid for condemning the killers (*The Vanguard*, May 14, 2022). Similarly, Muslim clerics like Sheikh Muhammad Nuru Khalid, Imam Umar Shuaibu, Ibrahim Momo Danladi and many more condemned the brutal killing of Deborah and called on the relevant security agencies to clamp down on the perpetrators of the heinous crime to get justice for the deceased (www.synnewsonline.com). At the international level, the British government, through its High Commissioner in Nigeria, Catriona Laing, condemned Deborah's killing, described the murder as horrific and called for justice (tribuneonline.com>killing-of-deborah; *The Tribune*, May 14, 2022; www.channelstv.com). This demonstrates the fact that Deborah's killing attracted reactions beyond the shores of Nigeria.

Deriving from the scores of reactions from different quarters, it became obvious that the extra-judicial killing of Deborah on the allegation of blasphemy was roundly condemned. Of course, the fallout of the incident also showed the extent to which sensitive issues are held up in political indecisiveness as some key political actors in the country maintained a somewhat indifferent position to protect their chances of political advantage. Thus, there was a conspiracy of silence on the part of some Nigerian key political actors in the infamous episode.

1.8 Conclusion and Options for Peace Building

This conversation has established that religious violence is an important part of Nigeria's social and political history in colonial and post-colonial eras. From a rigorous interrogation, it is clear that religion serves as a cultural marker or group identity. The emotions and passions with which religious concerns and interests are pursued in Nigeria between and among the adherents of the two orthodox religions in the country provide the basis for aggressive contestations over values. This is the reality that has instigated many occurrences of religious violence in Nigeria; and this has severe consequences for national integration and peaceful co-existence in the country. There is, therefore, the need to create an atmosphere of peace for national solidarity to thrive for national development.

Given the above reality, the following options for peace building are imperative: First, there is the need to include ethics and religious values into the component of General Studies in Nigerian university system to acquaint undergraduate students with the common values inherent in the orientations of existing religions in the country. This will diminish the negative pathological fixations that adherents of one religion harbour against the adherents of other religions in the country.

Second, there is the need for intermittent inter-religious dialogue among adherents of different religions to generate interactions for common goods of humanity and peaceful co-existence among Nigerians.

Third, there is the need to de-emphasize the place of religion in the political process of the country. The recent political creation of religious balancing in leadership recruitment in the country is already beginning to generate tensions on the grounds of real or perceived exclusion in governance.

Fourth, the supremacy of the Nigerian constitution should be upheld as sacrosanct by adherents of all religions in the country. No religious code should be given preference in terms of application and interpretation over and above the extant laws of the Nigerian federation.

Fifth, Nigeria should convoke a constitutional conference with credible conferees under a genuine representative arrangement to articulate a new constitution for the country. The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended) has a faulty foundation with gaps and ambiguities that are seemingly irredeemable under the country's present circumstances.

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