

SICK RELIGIOSITY, FUNDAMENTALISM AND FANATICISM IN NIGERIA: A PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Sick religiosity is wrecking havoc around the world. In Nigeria, a group of fanatics and fundamentalists (Boko Haram) in Bauchi and Borno states are killing and maiming innocent citizens and the quiet and peaceful Jos and its environs are sitting under the gunpowder cake of sick religiosity. The paper explicates and illustrates the meaning of sick religiosity under the terms religious fundamentalism and fanaticism. It looks for the causes from clinical experiences and literature, and proffers solutions.

Statement of the problem

*Far upon the mountain, I saw a beast
When I came nearer, I saw it was a man
When I came nearer still, I saw it was my brother.*

- Mohammed Akran

*Science without religion is lame;
Religion without science is blind.*

- Albert Einstein

Religion – and its power to help as well as to hurt – is by no means confined to the private world of the individual. It involves families, communities and nations. A day hardly passes without news of tragic consequences from conflict related to religion. The positive contributions of religion, however, are really great.

Religion has individual and social dimensions. The two are intertwined. And, both have healthy and unhealthy aspects. The healthy aspects of religion enable people to be compassionate, truthful, disciplined, understanding, peace-loving, responsible, creative and open-minded. This is ‘healthy spirituality’ and it is best manifested as ‘mature spirituality’. The sick (unhealthy) side of religion makes some religious people hateful, clannish, ethnic, alienated, fearful, arrogant, destructive, irresponsible, rigid and close-minded. This is referred to as sick/unhealthy religiosity. It is this latter part that this paper sets out to explore.

Religious conflicts are the major roots of many, if not most, wars and aggressions going on all over the world. Christians and Moslems fight in Lebanon. Arabs and Israelis have been on each other’s throat for decades running. Moslems and Catholics fight in the Philippines; Catholics and Protestants fight in Northern Ireland, Moslem Shiites and Sunnis fight one another in Iraq; The Coptic Christians fight the Moslems in Egypt.

Furthermore, assassination attempts have been the highlights of the recent past. In 1981, President Anwar Al Sadat of Egypt, a devout Moslem, was assassinated by Islamic fanatics, who hated him for signing peace deals with Israel. In 1982, Pope John Paul II, survived assassination attempt by an Islamic fanatic, Agca. In 1984, Margaret Thatcher, the then Prime Minister of England, narrowly escaped an assassination from the Irish Republican Army (IRA). In the same month, Sikh extremists assassinated Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India.

In Nigeria, ethnic prejudices or ethnic behaviour, which denies equal dignity of all the members of human family and blasphemes the creator, appears to be in ascendancy. Christians living with their

Moslem brothers and sisters in the northern part of the country are hounded to death in the name of religion. Cases of Maitatsne, Boko Haram in Jos, Bauchi and Borno and even that of the young Mutalab with his bombing mission to the United States of America are good examples. Moreover, Nigeria as a nation has been “nichodemously” enlisted as a member of the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC), knowing fully well that Christians make up half of Nigerian population.

Politicians could sometimes be tempted to buy favour from one ethnic group or another, while still others foment ethnic unrest and hatred in order to win votes. Discrimination in housing, lending, employment, job promotion, contracting, retailing, education, health-care and wide variety of human services frequently serve to the disadvantage of the people in the ethnic minority. Such discrimination is sometimes “justified” by individuals who build their case on prejudicial assumptions that cannot be borne out of fact. Some few individuals still believe in the superiority and inferiority of some ethnic groupings and then continue to attempt to prove their ill-founded assumptions.

The aim of this paper is to explicate sick religiosity and find out through literature the causes of sick religiosity, and to proffer some solutions to sick religiosity in Nigeria with focus on fundamentalism and fanaticism.

Definition of terms

Fundamentalism

When pure light of spirituality, emanating from the mystical source passes through the prism of human experience, it transforms into a spectrum of radiant religious colors. Each color has its own beauty, but the more it distances itself from the source of light and tries to be exclusive, the deeper it falls into the darkness of unhealthy religiosity (Xavier, 1987: 197).

The Free-dictionary and Google (2009) define fundamentalism as a strict adherence to specific set of theological doctrines typically in reaction against the theology of Modernism. The term “fundamentalism” was originally coined by its supporters to describe a specific package of theological beliefs that developed into a movement within the Protestant community in the United States in the early part of the twentieth century, and that had its roots in the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy of that time. Moreover, groups who manifest rigid beliefs, dogmatism, exclusiveness, orthodoxy and highly conservative social-political stances in different religions are now referred to as fundamentalists.

Fundamentalists believe their cause to have grave and even cosmic importance. They see themselves as protecting not only a distinctive doctrine, but also a vital principle, a way of life and of salvation. The fundamentalist “wall of virtue” which protects their identity is erected against not only other religions, but also against the modernized, nominal version of their own religion. In Christianity, fundamentalists can be known as “born again” and “Bible-believing” Protestants as opposed to “mainline”, “liberal”, “modernist” Protestants. In Islam, there are Jama’at (‘religious’ enclaves with connotations of close fellowship) fundamentalists self-consciously engaged in jihad (struggle) against the Western culture that suppresses authentic Islam (submission) and the God-given (Shari’ah) way of life. In Judaism, fundamentalists are Haredi ‘Torah-true’ Jews. There are fundamentalist equivalents in Hinduism and other world religions.

According to Huff (1986: 240),

...fundamentalists in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam despite their doctrinal and practical differences, are united by a common worldview which anchors all of life in the authority of the sacred and a shared ethos that expresses itself through outrage at the pace and extent of modern secularization.

Dobson, Hindson and Falwell (1986) give the features of extreme fundamentalism (hyper-fundamentalism) as: intolerance, absolutism, militancy, separatism, inflexibility, weak social emphasis, confrontation and proclamation, as against dialogue.

The fundamentalist mood is wider today in the world than cable television. A list of events can be added in fundamentalism as of today: weeping icons in Greek Orthodox churches, statues of the Blessed Virgin Mary weeping in Germany, calls by some lay and clergy to denounce all liturgy beyond the Latin mass; propaganda for South Africa and Israel that they are divinely approved, while their neighbours are cursed; decrees from Iran that novelists (Simon Rushdie?) or women intellectuals are to be executed. Even here in Nigeria a novel (Satanic Verses) is banned for sale by the then government. Faith is now measured by the acceptance of the apparition of the Blessed Virgin Mary at Aokpe, in Trans-Ekulu (Enugu), and at Bishop Shanahan Hospital, Nsukka. The prayer warriors are now on the increase as they rise to destroy cultural artifacts in the name of cleansing.

Religion and faith seem to have gone mad and contrary to expectations of secular intellectuals. This religious attitude is everywhere. O'Meara (1984: 35) observes that:

The issues involved in fundamentalism are without doubt among the most serious pastoral problems today. Very many people are seriously concerned with them...The alienation between people that it brings about is extreme...Within families it is common for young persons ...to become fundamentalists and to end up evaluating their devoted upbringing as little better than paganism. Irreconcilable religious tension between husband and wife sometimes leads to the verge of marital breakdown.

A person who manifests the characteristics mentioned above is regarded a fundamentalist in this presentation and equally belongs to sick religiosity.

The convinced psychologically fixated fundamentalist can ruin a family, wreck a community, and destabilize a university programme. Human beings have always found an array of things ready to be identified with God: sacred pages, translations of religious texts, phrases in foreign languages, gestures, clothes, geographical places and buildings and other innocent creations identified with the demonic - food, drink, dancing, playing cards, plays, machines, buttons, musical instruments, or skin colour. The preaching of Jesus removes any magic from the ordinary things of life, as he offers not divisions to human race, but maturity and community in God's realm.

Commitment to fundamentalism springs not so much from much prayer or Bible or Koran study as from psychological needs. Condemnation and exclusivism mark the fear-filled prison of a fundamentalist stance. Barr (1984) maintains that people do not become fundamentalists if they are already well informed about scripture and theology.

Marsden (1982) claims that fundamentalists are angry evangelicals and have most of the elements of fanaticism but may or may not show the militancy, active hatefulness and distinctiveness associated with fanaticism. In his own view, Xavier (1987: 42) adduces that "fundamentalism contains the smoldering fire which bursts into the ravaging flames of fanaticism under the influence of certain winds in its environment". For example, the winds are usually those of change that give fundamentalists more power and prestige or cause them increased insecurity or hurt-pride. The Islamic fundamentalism in Iran turned into fanaticism once the mullahs got political power.

Fanaticism

In law what plea to tainted and corrupt but, being seasoned with a gracious voice obscures the show of evil? In religion, what damned error but some sober brow will bless it and approve it with a text hiding the grossness with fair ornament? There is no

vice so simple but assumes some mark of virtue on his outward parts.

- Shakespeare (*The Merchant of Venice*).

The word fanaticism comes from the Latin word ‘fanaticus’, which means inspired by a deity. It is also marked by excessive enthusiasm, and an uncritical devotion. Enthusiasm and devotion can be healthy; the problem in fanaticism is the excess of enthusiasm and the irrationality of the devotion. American Heritage Dictionary (1986) defines a fanatic as one who engages in the pursuit of a given interest to lengths that are considered inordinate and even irrational and often to the exclusion of virtually all other interests, or one who advocates the advancement of a cause of action to limits far beyond those considered wise or proper by the majority usually by means that are equally excessive. Xavier (1987) claims that the word fanaticism came from the Arabic word ‘hashishiyin’, which means hashish smoking. The hashishiyin was a fanatic sect of Moslems in the Middle ages (11th – 13th Centuries). They had a stronghold in Iran, whence their activities spread to the neighboring countries also. Those extreme Shiites believed it is their religious duty to kill others whom they considered to be the enemies of the true Islam, like the Boko Haram of North eastern Nigeria (2010). They usually infiltrate many communities, charming women with presents of dress and attracting children by offering them toys. They treacherously murdered the men whom they wanted to get rid of.

Santayana (1905: 13) defines fanaticism as “redoubling your effort when you have forgotten your aim”. Churchill (1948) commenting on fanaticism claims that a fanatic is one who can’t change his mind and won’t change the subject. By either description, the fanatic displays very strict standards and little tolerance for contrary ideas or opinions. James (1958: 265) maintains that “spiritual excitement takes pathological forms whenever other interests are too few and the intellect too narrow”. Furthermore, James (1958)

emphasized that excess leads to corruption; excess involves one-sidedness or lack of balance.

Fanaticism, of course, is not confined to religion alone. One can be fanatical about anything in life. According to Xavier (1987: 39-41)

Fanatic beliefs and behaviors are pursued with rigidity, lack of openness to other possibilities, a sense of exclusiveness and absolutism, personal pride and antagonism or hostility towards alternate views or ways. While all fanaticisms cause rigidity and limitations, religious fanaticism does much more to trends to destroy the very heart of religion.

Fromm (1966) coined the term “burning ice” to stand for the fanatic, as he houses the inner coldness and deadness and the outer excitement. Fromm (1966), moreover, maintains that fanatics choose an idol, be it God, State, Mosque, or Church and submit to the idol to compensate for the inner deadness and depression.

Popular examples of religious fanaticism, according to Ellen (2005), include Christianity under Constantine’s empire. It proceeded almost to viciously repress all policy and practice. Another prominent form of fanaticism came a few centuries later with the Spanish Inquisition. Selengut (2008: 70) said “The inquisitions were attempts at self-protection and targeted primarily ‘internal enemies of the church’”.

Furthermore, Edwards (1391: 352) says that:

Ferdinand and Isabella’s Inquisition...repressed...the natural yearnings of...Jews who had converted to Christianity...after the attacks mounted against numerous Jewish communities in the early summer of 1391.

During the 19th century, most Christian nations have adopted the principle of separation between church and state. In most recent times,

Pope John Paul II apologized on behalf of the Church against those ancient atrocities.

Moreover, Islam has become the most publicized religion with members who display fanatic tendencies. Ever since Osama bin Laden's fatwa in 1998, the world had known about radical jihad. Fanatic jihadists' beliefs, as Ellens (2004: 43) says, stem from a feeling of inferiority to Western civilization. He says:

Because of its sense of inferiority in power and its sense of arrogant superiority in spiritual and religious quality, this militant form of Islam feels thoroughly justified in resorting to the most vicious forms of violent assault on its identified enemy. America is the perceived source and center of its problems.

Although fanatic jihadists have committed many terroristic acts throughout the world, perhaps the best known is the September 11, 2001 attacks. According to Ellens (2004: 35), the al-Qaeda members who took part in the terrorist attacks did so out of their belief that by doing it, they would "enact a devastating blow against the evil of secularized and non-Muslim America. They were cleansing this world, God's temple". The Boko Haram members of the north eastern Nigeria fanatically believe they were cleansing those with Western education.

Finally, Oates (1987) noted several features of unhealthy religiosity (fanaticism). These include: a lack of self-criticism, absence of genuine humility, presence of magical thinking and self centeredness, legalistic morality, inability to deal with ambiguities and unpredictability, and a tendency to throw too much responsibility on God.

Causes of sick religiosity

From literature and clinical experiences, some possible causes of sick religiosity emerge. According to Xavier (1987: 196),

We are caught between the dusk of a passing age and the dawn of a hopefully better era. The cross-currents of vast change are causing insecurity, confusion in belief and sense of belonging, and hurt pride in many individuals and groups. Many others are suffering from the consequences of excessive power and glory. These negative effects are causing defensive and offensive reactions of fundamentalistic rigidities and fanatic destructiveness.

La Verdier (1983) observes that fundamentalism flourishes among those who amid a constantly changing society can find no stable position in society, or who in depressed economic conditions are without prospects for the future. It should not surprise us to find fundamentalist in poor populations nor should it amaze us to find it among those who find themselves erode daily. We should also expect to find it among students who struggle with their studies and who know that even if they succeed they may not find a place for themselves in the world of work. Should we wonder that such people see the world around them as coming to an end? Even among the wealthy and middle class, fundamentalism can provide a buttress against changes which threaten their way of life, privilege, and status.

A considerable body of literature in mental health field abound. Levine (1981) made several points based on considerable research literature review and clinical work. Levine (1984) argues that identity problems give rise to one joining sick religiosity. Furthermore, he argues persuasively that the radical departure joining the group is a detour in the process of growing up. The detour is a result of the blockage of normal paths of growing up – a blockage caused by society's failure to meet youths need for believing and belonging. This detour is psychopathological.

Dysfunctional family system

Moreover, it has been noted that those who join sick religiosity are mainly from dysfunctional families. Such families are characterized by:

- a. authority figures who are alternately stern and loving parents;
- b. hateful sibling rivalry;
- c. unpredictability;
- d. rule of shame;
- e. certain feelings are declared taboo;
- f. forbidden to discuss conflicts and openly work toward resolution;
- g. closed system with little opportunity to confirm reality and no checks and balances;
- h. enmeshed family boundaries where childhood wounds are reopened and deepened.

Flip-floppers

Some children from dysfunctional families, where parents preached fanatic religion and practiced hypocrisy, find themselves in the sick religiosity. In some cases the parents or one of the parents had insisted on the child being strict adherent to a particular denomination. As the children grow up they find it intellectually dishonest and spiritually wrong to follow the example of the parents. So they would move to antireligious or a-religious stance and pursue that for a while. The dissatisfactions of spiritual needs and the fears instilled during childhood would slowly catch up with them (Xavier, 1987).

Physical and moral hypochondria

Some parents are negative in their thinking. For example: their approach to life is one of excessive guilt over past mistakes and high levels of anxiety regarding mistakes they may make in the future. Xavier (1987) claims that a child from such a home will pick up a highly critical (judgmental) attitude from the parents and apply it to

himself and others. This attitude will inevitably lead to hypochondriacal tendencies when confronted with different religious beliefs especially those which talks about ‘hell-fire’ and the avenging God. This begets excessive fears about God, damnation, intellectual doubts, search for truth, and love of people of other faiths.

Age of anxiety and identity crisis

Much of human conflict and consequent suffering – much of the inhumanity of human beings to one another – has been due to identity conflicts. More than any other time in history, we have the opportunity to understand and correct it. The big question is whether we will do that or whether we will continue in our old ways. Religion can sprinkle holy water on destructive tendencies in identity or it can lead us onto the constructive path of holistic identity. Ultimately, the healthy identity involves the harmonious union of uniqueness and unity. Healthy spirituality fosters the process; unhealthy religiosity hinders it (Xavier, 1987: 140).

Chinese ideogram for crisis indicates problems as well as opportunities. As people face immense problems, they also have the benefit of the accumulated wisdom of science and religion. The wisdom can help actualize the individual and collective potential for growth and prevent the propensity for destruction. The challenge has never been greater nor the opportunity more profound.

Auden (1948: 63) wrote a poem depicting our times as an “age of anxiety”

*...this stupid world where gadgets are gods, and we go on
talking, many about much, but remain alone, active but
alone. Alive but alone, belonging – where? –
unattached as tumbleweed.*

Ofordile

Sick religiosity in Nigeria

The role of therapists and the sales of valium and other tranquilizers today indicate that we still live in that age. Negative identity is one of the problems that results when the process of identity goes wrong. It refers to the sense of having bad or unworthy characteristics. This eventually leads to prejudice, pseudo-speciation (tendency to behave as different species) and 'totality'. Many young people struggling with identity conflicts are prime candidates to join unhealthy religious groups.

Prejudice

James (1958) observed that piety can be a mask covering up the tribal instinct of rejecting outsiders. Prejudice is marked by avoidance of the disliked group, discrimination and leads to physical attack and ultimately to extermination. Allport (1958: 415) says "the chief reason why religion becomes the focus of prejudice is that it usually stands for more than faith – it is the pivot of the cultural tradition of the people". Fanatics are full of prejudice.

Ignorance

Man is the weakest reed in creation but a thinking reed.

– Blaise Paschal

Xavier (1987) and Porterfield (1993) claim the ignorance is usually understood as lack of information and another type of ignorance is ignoring the information already present. Moreover, there is a type of ignorance which may arise because of fear of new ideas or because of prideful attachment to previous ideas. Fanatics favor ignorance apart from specific information that is approved by the group's authority figure.

Closed-mind

Rokeach (1960) pointed out that the close-mind shows compartmentalization and inconsistency of sub-systems or belief/disbelief systems unlike the open-minded person. The close-

minded individuals depend on authority to made decisions for them. The fanatics are not far from close-minded individuals who by extension tend to swallow whatever the accepted authority says even if it is contradictory to the other belief systems they hold.

Narcissism

Narcissism involves an exaggerated sense of self-importance and a need for confirmation of that image. In the myth of Narcissus, he fell in love with his image. The image is very important to the narcissist even as he disregards his true self. Narcissists have an air of success and confidence. They can change their style like some animals change colour to suit the environment.

Panacea and therapy for sick religiosity

Education

Unhealthy religiosity must be fought with education for the best inoculant against any form of ignorance is education. Unhealthy religiosity is a form of spectacular ignorance: ignorance of the basic principles of true religion. It is no coincidence that fundamentalism and fanaticism have arisen in Nigeria at the same time that the public education system has collapsed.

The best form of education is the teaching of critical thinking skills. It is the most important skill any educator can teach. With it, the fundamentalism's and fanatici's deceiving tricks are quickly exposed and are seen for what they are. Students need to be taught the importance of gathering the evidence and then proceeding to the conclusion, not the other way round. The best way of teaching logic, reason and critical thinking skills is with the "Socratic method" of guided discussion. This should be done beginning in the earliest grade and by the fourth year the formal elements of logic and reason can be introduced, so that students have a guide in recognizing and rejecting fallacious thinking.

It would be helpful too, to teach what true religion really is. Once the student is aware of the nature of true religion, unhealthy religiosity does not stand a chance. Another effective way to fight fundamentalism is to teach humility. Spiritual progress is impossible without it. Scientific progress is impossible without it. (This does not imply that students should be humiliated – for it would amount to child abuse). But the value of humility should be taught so that students understand that they cannot maintain an open mind in the absence of humility.

Ecumenism

Ecumenism is a movement seeking to achieve world-wide unity among religions through greater cooperation and improved understanding. It is an opposite of sick religiosity. While sick religiosity is the sickness of the mind, a lack or absence of wholeness. Ecumenism is wholeness, trying to see God as God (Infinite) and trying to see humans as humans (finite) and realization of our finitude. Furthermore, ecumenism is a mutual learning based upon knowledge and love (O'Meara, 1988). It is a means of teaching from one religious tradition to other traditions not as they appear in hasty images or tattered prejudices but as that tradition has existed in its history, is now, and would like to be. Each tradition must love the other. Love here means permitting something to be what it is and delighting in discovering that essence and learning from it. We must let be, not in the sense of having no commitment but letting God and ourselves be what each is destined to be. To let God be God is to give God the permission to love even those who do not know Him; to let God be God is not to imprison this deity in something or place or person.

Moreover, we can reach out to one another by dialogue which is ecumenism in action. Dialogue is respecting and listening to one another. God spearheaded dialogue with humanity and as God's creatures there is the need for us to learn from our Master a way of reconciliation and peace. Dialogue, however, is not without its difficulties. It is not easy to listen to others with respect, charity and

patience without running the risk of extenuating one's own faith. It is difficult to continue to stretch out a hand of dialogue to people who offer no reciprocal gesture of response. The risk inherent in dialogue must be accepted even and especially where dialogue is difficult. Dialogue takes different forms, for example, the witness of mere presence, doctrinal discussions, spiritual sharing, and active collaboration in life situation. It is also the sharing of life's experiences.

Conclusively, the Son of God came not to condemn the injured and the ignorant but to show God's true self, mercy and love. If Jesus is our advocate, our savior, and our deacon, then human beings should be slow to assume more drastic roles of judge and magician for:

*This is why scripture was written,
Why the world was created,
Why angels and people exist,
That God might be born in us,
And that we might be born in God.
- Meister Eckhart.*

Deprogramming

Deprogramming does work for some time, but not in many cases. Some members of sick religiosity do become hostile towards their former members and continue to manifest fanatical tendencies. Alternative to this could be youth specific programmes, for example, age grade programmes.

Fundamentalists Anonymous (F.A.)

This is a programme for the fundamentalists and fanatics who are seeking some help are given counselling, like the Alcoholic Anonymous (AA) group.

Medication and Psychotherapy

Medications for depression and anxiety are administered and regular psychotherapy and group therapy are followed up. Psychotherapist works on their fears, narrow outlook, pride, self-hate and guilt based on mistaken religious ideas. The follow-up should be to join group studies, attend spiritual workshops and further readings. Execution of the fundamentalists and fanatics is not the cure.

Finally, Bowemian method of counseling could be applied to fundamentalists but not to the fanatics because most fanatics do not even listen to common reasoning.

Job creation by the government

Nigerian government should make it a point of duty to create job opportunities to the teeming youths in the country today for “an idle mind is a devil’s workshop”. If there is no work for the youth toiling all his years trying to get education to get good job, then what does a healthy mind suggest the youth should do?

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