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Religious Extremism and Environmental Hazards in Nigeria

Solomon M. Mepaiyeda

Abstract

Religion seems to be the only sphere devoid of regulatory agency in Nigeria. Even though there are religious associations, such as the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN), Islamiyya, Ansar-ur-deen and Nasfat, to mention a few, they tend to be inactive in regulating the practice of religion by the adherents. This freedom has led to the conversion of shops and residential buildings to places of worship, thereby creating inconvenience for people through noisy environment.

Therefore, the main focus of this paper is to advocate, among others, the need for the three tiers of government in Nigeria to come up with legislation to check the excesses of religious organizations, which has become a menace in this contemporary time.

Introduction

In the recent past, the Nigerian landscape has been witnessing religious violence resulting in arson, maiming and unwanton destruction of lives. One major contributory factor is fanaticism, which has been described as “extreme beliefs or behaviour, especially in connection with religion or politics.”¹

¹ Sally Wehmeier & Michael Ashby (eds), *Oxford advanced Learner's Dictionary*, (6th Edition), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, p.421.

The extreme behaviour of some adherents of both Christianity and Islam also emanated from lack of proper understanding of the fundamentals of their religions. It is a combination of both ignorance and hypocrisy, because religious experience, which to Rudolf Otto,² describes as “*numen*”, possesses, among others, the quality of developing in a religious mind, love towards God and mankind; as well as transforming the adherents into new creatures.³ Otto adds that the encounter with the “*mysterium tremendum*”⁴ transcends cosmic realities that propels one to total submission to the majesty of God. Rather than show this, the claim of particularity, doctrinal issues and extremism in expressing religious beliefs have characterized the religious horizon in Nigeria. These have concomitant effects of destroying relationships and undermining the role of each religion, because, once the horizontal affinity with one’s neighbour is unachievable, the vertical relationship with the ultimate reality remains a dream.

While it is appreciated that the Nigerian government has been making frantic efforts to curb excesses of religious fanatics through organized resistance, the other dimension it seems to have neglected is the establishment of a law to combat environmental hazards that have crept in through religious practices.

The Nigerian government, urgently needs to emulate the Lagos State Government, by creating policies to check noisy environment created by vigils and unwarranted hardships the motorists face on Nigerian expressways due to religious activities.

The unpleasant sound of religious centres, particularly those with prayer sessions, occur at any time of the day. For example, the Muslim *adhan* is at 5.00a.m, 2.00p.m, 4.00p.m and 7.00p.m. It is always accompanied with loudspeaker noise, which has effect on the people

² Ojo Ayodele & Jegede G.G, *Religion: An Introduction*, Ado Ekiti: Kaycee Publishers, 2005, p. 13.

³ *Ibid*, p.14

⁴ *Ibid*.

sleeping or observing their siesta in such religious environment. The same goes with Christian prayer activities during morning and night prayer programmes. The constancy of this disturbance echoes in the works of Vijayalakshma (carried out in India)⁵ and Egunjobi (carried out in Nigeria)⁶. Vijayalakshma remarks that, in India, the problem caused by noise pollution is more aggravated in view of the fact that there is hardly any celebration, festival, associated with religious functions, where there is no use of loudspeakers at a very high pitch continuously for a long time. In Nigeria, Egunjobi, citing the situation in Ibadan, notes that, for 36.2% of the people in and around their homes in Ibadan and 16.6% of the people in and around the workplace in the city, noise from culture-related factors (record players, religious worship) represent the most insidious form of noise pollution.

In addition, this paper serves as information to religious extremists to transit from myopic world view to a more civilized way of thinking. This becomes imperative because it is irrational for religion, a vanguard of societal truth and justice to become an instrument of environmental chaos.

Religion and Religious Practice

Today, there is a notable different understanding of the concept which gives birth to absurd approaches and practice of religion. Adelowo⁷ agrees with many writers that it is important to emphasize the distinction between “authentic” intensive inner religious experience and “routine peripheral” religious activity.

⁵ Vijayalakshma, K.S. (2003), “Noise Pollution” in Martin J. Bunch, et al (eds) *Proceedings of the Third International Conference on Environmental and Health*, Chennai India, 15-17 Dec. pp. 597-603.

⁶ Egunjobi, L. (1988), “Urban environment noise pollution” in *Environmental Issues and Management in Nigeria in Development* (eds) Shark, P.O. and Odemorhu, F.O.) Ibadan: Evans Publisher.

⁷ E. Dada Adelowo, *Methods and Theories of Religion*, Ado Ekiti: Olugbenga Press and Publishers, 2001, p. 121.

It is not the intention of this paper to give any formal definition of religion, since past efforts have proved abortive. Leuba's forty eight definitions as well as Bolaji Idowu's additional two⁸ could not convince scholars. In addition, the focus is not on the theories of religion as propounded by Euhemerus,⁹ Sigmund Freud, George¹⁰ Simmel¹¹ or Emile Durkheim,¹² among others.

However, the elements of religion include the belief of people about God, and his relationship with the world,¹³ and man's relationship with his fellow human beings. The third element just mentioned constitutes a vital essence of religion. Human beings do not live entirely individual live. Because religion is both an individual and social activity,¹⁴ which requires sharing with others or practising within a community, caution must be exercised. This will avert infringement on the rights of citizens. Ilesanmi¹⁵ avers that the conduct of religious beliefs should take cognizance of issues that fall outside the exclusive jurisdiction of a particular religious community but which have a great bearing on the lives and interests of other persons and other religious or non-religious communities. This implies that the practice of religion which causes disturbance or discomfort to others in a given society is an aberration; it runs contrary to the ethics of religion.

⁸ *Ibid* p.12

⁹ Euhemerus was a Greek scholar, a forerunner of the rationalistic school of thought with reference to the origin of religion known as Euhemerism.

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud's psychological theory of the origin of religion states that religion originated with childhood-neurosis or father-complex.

¹¹ Simmel & Durkheim are sociologists who opine that all that is in religion is *vox populi vox dei*; meaning; the voice of the people is the voice of God.

¹² *Ibid*.

¹³ David Brown, *A Guide to Religions*, London: SPCK, 1975, p.8.

¹⁴ *Ibid*.

¹⁵ S.O. Ilesanmi, *Religious Pluralism and the Nigerian State*, Ohio: Centre for International Studies, 1997, p.5.

In Judaism, Christianity and Islam, ethical standards as regards man's relationship with God and fellow man are contained in their scriptures. In Judeo-Christian teachings, various laws on human life and peaceful co-existence are spelt out in Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, and so on. Later, Jesus tried to condense all into two basic forms - love of God and love of fellow human beings. This, I interpret to mean the essence of religion. In addition, apart from the credal statement of Islam – “there is no deity except God; Muhammad, the messenger of God”,¹⁶ which demands the worship of God, the ethics of Islam stipulates good neighbourliness for the purpose of integration, cohesion and wholeness. This implies that, in trying to live out religious experience, one's neighbours must be put into consideration. Religious expression must be devoid of extreme behaviours or unbridled activities that can cause disaffection in the society.

Religious Practice in the Early Church

For almost three centuries of its inception, Christianity remained a religion without the legal backing in the Roman Empire. Hence, it was practised in secret. Initially, it enjoyed the privileges accorded Judaism. But by the time it became known that the two religions were different, which resulted in the persecution of Christians, the practices of the church through prayer, worship and so forth, had to be done quietly for the fear of being arrested. Holy Communion and other services were celebrated with doors closed, while cemeteries, Bishop's house and individual homes became centres for fellowship.¹⁷

Down to many centuries before the development of modern technology, Christians preferred to practise their religion without infringing on the coolness of their environments. We might want to argue that the reason for that posture was lack of modern electronic gadgets at that time, but a closer look at their practices reveals their sense of deeper

¹⁶ E. Dada Adelowo, *op. cit.*, p.7

¹⁷ Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980, p. 216.

understanding of the scripture which suggests that Jesus Christ is in support of practising religion in the closet. Superficial dimension of worship does not, in any way, attract divine attention.

It is true that the early Christians were persecuted, partly due to religious extremism, but it must be pointed out that the reasons for such were different from what obtains today. The early Christians were not known to have infringed on the rights of other citizens by creating noisy environment in the name of practising their religion. All that could be deduced from historical data was that their allegiance to Christ led to their refusal to join the Roman Army or engage in any other activities that could affect their Christian profession or stand.¹⁸ Other reasons for persecution, such as incest, cannibalism and treason, stemmed from gross ignorance or misinterpretation of the Christian faith by the Romans.

Furthermore, by the time Christianity became *religio licita*, evangelistic strategies were devoid of coercion or any disturbance to the society. Most converts were made through personal contacts, visiting, literary evangelism and apologetic writings,¹⁹ rather than through public evangelism that the contemporary church often employs. Even if public evangelism must be adopted today for the purpose of disseminating gospel message in a changing world, such must be done with modesty.

Moreover, the missionary strategies of Apostle Paul are very clear and lacked and infringement on the peace of the neighbourhood. He employed modest in his dealings with the pagans of Lystra²⁰ and the philosophers of Athens²¹, believing that the best mechanism of evangelism is a life of impact, meaning that the gospel is better lived out rather than preached. By this means, the gospel can be related sensitively to reach person and situation. Even gifted evangelists of many nationalities, including John Wesley and George Whitefield in the eighteen-century Britain and America, respectively transmitted the message of the gospel effectively without disturbing their communities²²

¹⁸ *Ibid* p. 217

¹⁹ *Ibid* p. 223ff

²⁰ Acts 14: 14-18

²¹ Acts 17:220-23

²² John Stott, *The Contemporary Christian*, Leicester: Inter-varsity press, 1992, p 240.

Environmental Hazards

The term “environment”²⁷ refers to the complete surroundings of an individual either distant or close; anything that comes into contact with a person’s physical, mental and social well-being.²³ Environmental hazards therefore connote those factors that expose the environment to risk or danger. By extension, it means any action or event caused either by man or nature that has the likelihood of exercising danger on man’s physical, mental and social well-being. Although we have biological, chemical, mechanical, social or psychosocial environmental hazards, an aspect of the physical dimension shall be emphasized in this study. The works of experts in Biblical studies on environmental issues show the concern for abating environmental crisis (Abogunrin),²⁴ biblical basis for such concern (Abe)²⁵ and making a historical and exegetical analysis (Manus).²⁶ However, the scope of this article is to see how religious practices constitute environmental hazards through the means discussed below.

a. Noise Pollution

Noise, an unwanted sound, is increasingly creating a hazard in our environment. It is true that the 20th century has been described as the “century of noise”²⁷ due to industrial revolution and other technological equipments. However, it is absurd that religious organizations should generate noise through loudspeakers tuned in full volume, particularly at night. At the fall of the night, Nigerians wish one another “happy or pleasant night rest” after the stress of the day. But the truth is that such rest has been eluding most Nigerians due to noise produced, most especially, by churches observing vigils. Some extreme Christians, through electronic gadgets, disturb the neighbourhood at night without considering the effect of such disturbance on others. Corroborated this view, Soni Ehi asserts that:

²³ Makinde S, Lecture notes on Introduction to Environmental Health, School of Hygiene, Eleyele, Ibadan, 2005, p2.

²⁴ S.O. Abogunrin, “Biblical Study and the Environment”, *Nabis West Biblical Studies I*, Ibadan: Alofe Publishers, 2009, p 1.

²⁵ G.O. Abe, “Biblical Basis for environmental Concerns”, *Nabis West Biblical Studies I*, Ibadan: Alofe Publishers, 2009, p 29.

²⁶ C.U. Manus, “Toward Biblical Theology of the Environment: A Re-reading of Gen. 1:27-28”, *Nabis West Biblical Studies I*, Ibadan: Alofe Publishers, 2009, p 13.

²⁷ Makinde O.S. Op. cit. p. 16.

Residents of our big cities are increasingly going through the gradual process of partial deafness. Their sensitive eardrums are daily being bombarded by a continuous barrage of environmental noise overflowing from ear shattering, drum –size speakers of mosques and churches.²⁸

Reports have shown that many Nigerians have relocated even from their personal buildings with all its comforts to accommodations of lesser comfort due to this disturbance. Lamenting her ordeal, Dr. Dorcas Akintunde said the noisy environment in their neighbourhood forced her to relocate with her husband from their personal house to the campus.²⁹ In a similar vein, Ven B.O Akosile described it as an unfortunate development, that religious is use religion as an instrument for societal disturbance.³⁰ One wonders if vigils are meant for church members or public participation. It is tantamount to madness for any church leader to think that he is exercising his/her spiritual right or he is doing the society any good by creating unwanted sound because those who benefit from their night programmes are members of the church.

b. Establishment of Camp Grounds

Christianity and Islam in contemporary Nigeria are witnessing a drastic change within their circles. What is in vogue now is the acquisition of land in choice areas, especially Nigeria's expressways, for campgrounds. The purpose this venture serves include, availability of environment conducive for spiritual development, uninterrupted fellowship among brethren of the same faith-based organization or people from different denominations as well as deforestation of that particular area.

²⁸ Soni-Ehi, a. "The Challenge of Noise to Public Health" *The Guardian*, 5, Dec. 1984.

²⁹ Interview with Dr. Dorcas Akintunde, A lecturer, Aged 49, Department of Religious Studies, University of Ibadan, January 3, 2009.

³⁰ Interview with Ven. B.O. Akosile, Rtd. Anglican Clergy, Aged 72, Ado Ekiti, October 17, 2008.

Nevertheless, one cannot gainsay the negative effects that campgrounds have on other Nigerians. It is a well-known fact that, during the annual convention or mid-year programmes holding at such camps, people are subjected to untold hardships. The journey which should have taken less than two hours between Ibadan and Lagos, for instance, takes more than four hours due to heavy traffic. Even some people end up spending the whole night in their cars whenever complete traffic jam occurs. One of such victims was James Okungade who was held up throughout the night between Mowe and Sagamu in Lagos-Ibadan expressway in December, 2007³¹. This means that, through religious practice, environmental hazard is being created. Even though the Nigerian constitution entrenches freedom of worship, it does not guarantee infringement on the rights of other Nigerians.

Effects of Environmental Hazards

The consequences of noisy environment as well as traffic stress cannot be over emphasized. It can lead to the following:

One, **deafness**. Scientists argue that exposure to noise above 160dB will definitely rupture lymphatic membrane.³² This implies that people living in a noisy environment stand the risk of temporary or even permanent deafness.

Two, **low level of efficiency**. Anyone who does not have enough rest in the night due to noise interference will not be efficient enough at work because of the fatigue he/she will experience in all parts of the body.

Three, **physiological and physical changes**. Rise in blood pressure, increase in heartbeat rate and breathing, sweating and annoyance are all the results of noisy environment.

Four, **environmental security**. In a noisy environment, produced by religious activities, it becomes difficult for other neighbours to notice quickly alarms raised by victims of robbery attacks at night. The noise from the generator, microphones and loud speakers would have overshadowed the alarm.

³¹ Interview with James Okungade, A Scientist, Aged 30, Lagos, Feb. 10, 2008.

³² *Ibid* p. 17.

Five, **deterioration in health status**. Many people who are placed on drugs but denied of rest due to noise will definitely have their health deteriorated. In addition, people who engage in using drugs such as sedatives in order to sleep are equally liable to health hazards, if not immediately, but in future.

Six, **Untimely death**. The traffic stress daily experienced by Nigerians through civil or religious means, is a contributory factor that creates untimely death.

Ayantayo asserts that a noisy environment also has sociological implication well manifested in the enmity between religious centres and their immediate environment.³³ The annoyance and loss of sleep that goes with it, has led to conflict of interest between religious leaders. Sometimes, it leads to physical combat, vandalization of religious centres and inter-religious conflicts. He cites a conflict in Ajibode, which took a dangerous dimension. The Torn Veil Christian Ministry was accused to directing its loudspeakers to the nearby mosque. In reaction to this, the mosque too bought a giant size speaker and directed it towards the church. The two centres generate noise almost at the same time to the discomfort of people living in the town.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Having discussed so far the consequences of environmental hazards produced by religious activities, the paper now suggests way of curbing such hazards.

There is the need for careful planning of Nigerian cities. The ministry in charge of urban and regional planning should so design our cities to indicate residential areas from area designated for religious organizations. The practice of converting residential buildings to churches or mosques should stop. Approval should only be given to those who comply with the layout principles of the ministry before any structure is erected.

³³ Ayantayo, J.K. "Religious Communication in Nigeria and the Challenges to Environmental Management", *Journal of Environment and Culture*, 2006. Vol. 3, No. 1. p 79.

It is high time that Nigerian government came up with legislation to be enforced by environmental agencies. The bold step taken by the Lagos State government in 2009 which, among others, banned the use of external loudspeakers at night by religious organizations can be popularized by other tiers of government. This will reduce environmental hazards and promote peaceful co-existence in the society.

Furthermore, religious organisations with campgrounds should come up with strategies to alleviate the hardship of motorists during their weekly or annual conventions. Such strategies like creation of many feeder roads within their camps and collaboration with traffic agencies in their states have the capability of achieving societal peace and reducing tensions.

In addition, any disturbance associated with religious practices is an uncivilized behaviour. It is ironic that people, who are affected by the noise, do not complain. They suffer in silence; they complain to themselves and others but are not ready to act to effect a change. Quite often, this is because they have mystified or deified the religious leaders who produce the noise pollution. The leaders are considered as super beings, who should not be questioned. In this wise, the victims are unable to claim their rights. The situation could, perhaps, be put under check by government agencies, like FEPA – Federal Environmental Protection Agency. But these agencies have not been performing their official responsibilities. Moreover, the town planning agency has failed to enforce rules governing residential areas; hence, a few people could turn the areas into religious centres.

The World Council of Churches clearly states that:

All elements of the God's earth are his creation. All of God's creation has value and is to be treated with relevance for the sake of its maker who accounted it good. We are commanded to be good steward of God's world. We are held responsible for it. It is not ours to do with things we please; rather we are to do what pleases the Lord.³⁴

³⁴ WCC, Conference on Faith, Science, and the Future (ed.) Paul Albrecht, Cambridge, 1979. p.68.

To achieve the above, there is need to give room for fairness and justice in the use of the environment. If the environment is God's property, religious people should not impair it in the course of pursuing their desires. Any action contrary to the above is tantamount to an offence against the owner.

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