

PROSPECTS OF ISLAMOPHOBIA IN NIGERIA AND ITS DANGERS

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Abstract

Irrational fear for and prejudice against Islam and its adherents, which is known as Islamophobia has been ravaging many western countries and there appear to be sinister pointers to same in Nigeria. The possibility and risks of a full-blown Islamophobia in Nigeria remains of concern. The origin of Islamophobia in some western countries is linked to violence and terrorism carried out by people who are professedly Muslims. When such incidents are juxtaposed with the state of affairs in Nigeria and counter-violence on Muslims in some quarters, it becomes glaring that Islamophobia is a time bomb waiting to explode in Nigeria. It is however established that those that execute these violence actually do grave harm to the reputation of the Islamic religion which is an essentially religion of peace and are in fact defamers of Islam. The consequences of Islamophobia in Nigeria as elsewhere are grossly undesirable and despicable. But this requires an urgent call to action to avert this impending psychological complex. To live beyond this fear, therefore is the need to intensify vocal denouncement of terrorism by non-Islamic and Islamic leaders, a guarantee of good governance, proper and modest hermeneutics of the Islamic scripture, intra and inter-religious dialogue and collaboration in fighting terrorism and religious violence as panaceas to this imminent plague called Islamophobia.

Introduction

Religious conflicts and its devastating corollary have continued to bedevil Nigeria yet being religious presupposes peace. Religious conflicts, in this regard, have not been the exclusive preserve of any particular religion as the three dominant religions practiced in Nigeria have at one time or the other, been involved in clashes and skirmishes either as an aggressor or in defense. However, of particular interest here is the seeming aggressive nature of Islam, which has given rise to the global psychological complex of Islamophobia. The apprehension that such psychological complex in no distant time may become yet another source of conflict in Nigeria appears rife. There is the need, therefore, to discuss and evaluate contexts that breed it and how it can be avoided in Nigeria. Consequently, this paper will locate in context as well as interrogate the nitty-gritty of Islamophobia, including related global situations with regard to Islamophobia with a view to proposing ways to forestall its occurrence in Nigeria. The deductive approach arising from inquiries into available evidence and contexts that frame the likelihood or prospects of Islamophobia in Nigeria and its dangers constitute the core of this paper. My presupposition is that Islamophobia is a consequence of Islamic fundamentalism and there are social mechanisms to check and control its blossoming in Nigeria. Aligned to the above is the fundamental tenet that undergirds the embrace and practice of religion, which is the quest for peace.

In a nutshell, this paper is investigative in its approach, as it draws from extant publications, interviews and observations, to investigate the likelihood of Islamophobia in Nigeria, x-ray its dangers and attempt to proffer a preemptive measure to this looming danger. Nigeria has already gone through and is currently going through a lot in terms of crises and is obviously not prepared for the kind of havoc that Islamophobia may wreck. The associated societal strife that Islamophobia breeds justifies the need to deconstruct the social contexts.

Conceptualizing Islamophobia

The coinage Islamophobia became popular following the September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Center (WTC), United States of America (USA) which was carried out by a terrorist group – Al Qaeda, who refer to themselves as an Islamic group. Perhaps the trepidation this attack evoked and its aftermath helped to make this vocabulary popular. Center for Race and Gender (CRG) in 2014, citing 1991 Runnymede Trust Report defines Islamophobia as “unfounded hostility towards Muslims, and therefore fear or dislike of all or most Muslims” (p. 1). The CRG avers that the formulation of Islamophobia was based on the framework of the term ‘xenophobia’ which means an intense dislike for foreign people, foreign customs and culture or foreign things generally.

In a nutshell, Islamophobia denotes the irrational fear, prejudice and discrimination against Muslims that is usually directed at a real or imagined Muslim threat. This subjects Muslim adherents to all manner of discrimination and/or even violence. Sometimes, people who are actually not Muslims but dress like or bear Muslim names also suffer from this intense dislike and stigmatization. They fall victims because of their appearance and appellations. Hill (2013) asserts that after the September 11, 2001 attack on the United States, Muslims generally “were often profiled as Arab terrorists. ... Arab men (and sometimes women) were shown being tortured in prison, or on trial or blowing themselves up as suicide bombers” (p. 332).

It is however necessary to state here that fear is a natural phenomenon that could lead to aggression when there is a legitimate threat. However, the sort of fear that culminates to Islamophobia is usually not rational as it is often too generalized and generally it arises as a result of implied threat from all Muslims. For instance, the current airstrikes by the USA and its allies such as Britain, United Arab Emirate, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) could be said to be a plausible reaction against a legitimate threat and cannot be described as Islamophobia.

The Situation Elsewhere

Like earlier stated, after the September 11, 2001 attack on the WTC and Pentagon in the USA by Al Qaeda, there have been fears in the USA of Muslims, people with Muslim names or even religious groups such as the Sikhs, who in their dressing and physical appearance, look like Muslims. Little (2007) is of the opinion that the September 11, 2001 incidence “stands as evidence for the conviction that religious fervor can lead to violence” (p. 4). Little’s opinion is based on the premise that Al-Qaeda is motivated by Islamic religion.

Several shootings have been reported in Mosques and even Sikh temples in the USA. For instance, in August 2012, there was a shooting in a Sikh temple at Wisconsin which led to the killing of 6 people and left 4 others injured. An inquiry revealed that the perpetrator who was formerly in the United States army thought that these people were Muslims and had a 9/11 tattoo on him. A similar incident is that of 2011 shooting in Oslo Norway by Anders Behring Breivik which killed 77 people and injured over 200 people. The shooter had claimed that he had done it for the fear of Muslims’ aggression and Islamization of Norway.

A current case in point is the fear prompted in Europe and France in particular by ISIS or Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). This fear is as a result of their brutality especially towards non-Muslims. It is alleged that a substantial number of French citizens have traveled to Syria and

Iraq to join this militant group. This constitutes a grave threat and in fact, appears to justify the fear of French citizens. Tunakan (2014) states that “recent incidents show that there is a growing intolerance in France towards the Muslim community ... due to ISIS militants” (p. 1). It should be recalled that a similar terror attack occurred in London in the spring of 2005. Also, in September 2014, David Cameron, the British Prime Minister in a press briefing asserted that terror attack on Britain was very likely. This assertion is not unconnected with the threat of the increasing number of ISIS British recruits and volunteers. Tunakan (2014) maintains that Islamophobia was heightened recently after a British citizen was taken captive by this militant Islamic group. In August 2014, this Islamic militant group decapitated an American journalist James Forley that they had held hostage for about two years. This was followed by the beheading of another American Journalist, Steven Sotloff in September 2014. After these killings, ISIS has threatened Britain over a British hostage David Haine and on September 14, 2014, ISIS released the video of his actual execution, thereby further fueling the embers of Islamophobia and generating belligerence and animosity towards Muslims in Europe, America and even in Africa.

The positions above have precipitated and heightened Islamophobia in the West, especially in USA and Europe. Hill (2013) has a contrary view as regards the connection between Muslims and terrorism. He claims that “there are 1.3 billion Muslims in the world – comparatively speaking, almost none are terrorists” (p. 332). Continuing, Hill (2013) posits that “Muslims have had to suffer serious discrimination” (p. 332). One wonders how Hill’s supposition can be defended considering global experiences from a group such as ISIS – an essentially Islamic group. The fact is obvious. Some fundamentalist Muslims and not all Muslims are actually terrorists and violent but all Muslims seem to suffer the scourge of Islamophobia where it is found. Muslims generally have been disparaged, disdained and ‘demonized’ and sometimes unjustly harmed as a result of Islamophobia. No doubt, this situation has exasperated non-extremist Muslims and exacerbated religiously motivated unrest and rebellion in such places. This state of affairs has actually led to a seemingly unending vicious cycle of violence. The United States of America’s ‘War against Terrorism’ has been heightened as a result. James Cameron the British Prime Minister, on the aftermath of the execution of David Haine by ISIS vows to confront the menace and many other nations have queued up behind America and Britain to get rid of this ‘Islamic’ terror.

One can therefore submit that a good chunk of Muslims are petrified and have formed or joined terrorist groups. Distinction must however be made between these violent-prone Muslims and moderate, peaceful and non violent Muslims. Kukah (2011) insists that these petrified groups do not represent majority of the believers of the Islamic religion. More so, the distasteful actions of terrorist groups that are professedly Islamic call for fear. However, the irrational fear against Muslims in general is objectionable.

Prospects of Islamophobia in Nigeria

Truly, religious violence in Nigeria has not been the exclusive preserve of any particular religion. Referring to Christians and Muslims in Nigeria for instance, Windibiziri (2007) notes that “religious leaders of both communities have been known sometimes to instigate or exacerbate violence and confrontation” (p. 158). However, the magnitude and intensity of the violence and terror unleashed by Maitatsine in the 1980s, Talibans and presently, Boko Haram since 2009 all with Muslim foregrounding, for instance is next to none. A seeming dominance in the records of violence is attributable to Muslim fundamentalists who have resorted to an ‘interpretation’ and

most times, ‘misinterpretation’ of the Islamic Quran for a rationale for violence and aggression. The section of the Quran that has been most susceptible is the call to jihad as enshrined in Quran 9:5 and 9:29. An excerpt from 9:5 states “slay the idolaters wherever you find them”, while an excerpt from 9:29 states; “fight those who do not believe in Allah ... nor follow the religion of truth” Little (2007) therefore succinctly states that “religious teachings are being used to legitimize wars and all forms of brutality and violence” (p. 4).

Jihad in Islam has been particularly popular as physical violence against non-Muslims and an opposing Muslim sect. Even though, most Muslim and even non-Muslim scholars have continued to debunk such insinuations about Jihad. Jihad is a command in Islam which basically means struggle. It could be struggle against sin, behaviours and attitudes against the teaching of the Quran or for the propagation of the Islamic religion. Its meaning is however dependent on the interpretation given to it by a particular teacher, speaker, scholar or preacher at a particular point in time. Often times, the interpretation ranges from subtle and moderate to intense and violent connotations. When the interpretation is moderate, it is in fact desirable but when it is intense and violent, especially as regards the propagation of Islam, it actually serves as motivation for violence against non-Muslims as well as an opposite Muslim sect.

However, many rebel and terrorist groups that have caused mayhem in Nigeria and elsewhere confessedly carry out their despicable acts under the auspices of the Islamic religion. They claim to be fighting for the course of Islam. For instance, the known sects (Maitatsine, Talibans, Boko Haram and so on) that have championed religious violence and killings in Northern Nigeria claim to be Muslims fighting the course of Islam. Ukanah (2011) categorically states that “Muslim extremists were the aggressors in many religious riots in Nigeria” (p. 372). He also alleges that many Muslims travel to conservative Islamic countries like Yemen, Somalia, Afghanistan, Iran and Sudan where they are given the fiery brand of Islamic training. They learn the art of arms manufacturing, suicide bombing and so on and then travel back to Nigeria to practice the vile version of Islam that they have learnt.

These terrorists have seriously derided Islam which is basically a religion of peace. They are obviously doing a disservice to the religion they claim to defend as their actions apparently denigrate the religion and for moderate and non violent Muslims, their actions grossly misrepresent Islam. Kukah (2011) argues that bellicose religious groups “do not represent majority of their believers ... more often than not, they do a disservice to the religions they pretend to be champions of” (p. 263). Expressing a similar view, Ukanah (2011) asserts that many Muslims are actually “embarrassed, uncomfortable and flinch at the publication of the death tolls their fundamentalist religious cousins cause in the name of executing jihads” (p. 341).

Ironically, these terror groups advertently or inadvertently ridicule the Islamic religion. Nigerians are known to be truly/pretentiously very religious and are usually very emotive and sensational when religion is at centre stage. This might explain why some non-Muslims generalize and assume that all Muslims are ferocious and hardly value human life. In Nigeria, this attitude of religious stigmatization has generated religious violence in the past and has the potential to be worse. This could lead to Islamophobia in Nigeria, a situation whereby anything ‘Islam’ is suspected, detested and dreaded by non-Muslims, especially Christians.

The knowledge of the fact that the perpetrators of wickedness in the name of Islam are criminals that disparage Islamic religion and do not represent Islam in its entirety is not handy to so many non-Muslim Nigerians. Also, non-Muslims seem not to differentiate between Muslim fundamentalists that have become terrorists and decent and peace-loving Muslims. Hence, there is this negative stereotype of all Muslims as terrorists. They drew their conclusion from the obnoxious activities of Muslim insurgents and radical apologetics of Islamic religion in Nigeria and elsewhere. Sampson (2012) pointedly states that just like Muslims, especially those from the Northern part of Nigeria, are in the habit of referring to all non-Muslims as *Arna* or *Kafir*; Arabic words for ‘heathen’ or unbelievers; it is common for Christians to refer to all Muslims as terrorists and people prone to violence. This situation in contrast to Islamophobia has been described with the coinage ‘infidelophobia’, which means, irrational fear and untold hatred for ‘infidels’ (non-Muslims) by Muslims.

Presently in Nigeria, a lot of non-Muslims in their naivety about the fact that there are, relatively speaking, two broad strands of Muslims, refer to all Muslims as ‘Boko Haram’. Kukah (2011) posits that if he had not witnessed how some staunch Muslim friends of his led peaceful lives and carried out their own jihad with their pen in lieu of the sword, he would have been made to believe that jihad is all about physical violence because of the repugnant activities of some Muslims in the name of living the Islamic faith.

Whenever jihad is mentioned, most non-Muslims and Christians particularly assume it is synonymous with violence against non-Muslims. In the words of Hill (2013), to non-Muslims, jihad “denotes danger, violence, suicide bombers and fear” (p. 334). In essence, according to Arinze (2002), experts say that jihad in the original Islamic sense means endeavour, striving or struggle. Hill (2013) opines that it could be struggle against greed, violence and hatred. Arinze (2002) also avers that it could be struggle toward the propagation of Islam. The latter could either be by the tongue or pen (peaceful) or by the use of force as mentioned in Quran 9:5, 29. These verses command Muslims to fight and kill ‘infidels’ that refuse to convert to Islam. Nzomiwu (1989) and Hill (2013) agree with Arinze (2002) that there are explicit commands in the Quran to fight so as to win unbelievers. They are also of the opinion that everything about jihad boils down to interpretation which could be benign or malignant. However, while admitting that there is actually warlike jihad in the Quran, Hill (2013) insists that it is not for aggression but defence. For him, “it is similar to the “just war theory” proposed by the Christian theologian Augustine of Hippo (345-430)” (p. 335). Jihad must be waged for a just cause, in defense, as a last resort and non-combatants must be protected. Islamic jihad therefore does not explicitly connote aggression which involves loss of lives like it has been erroneously held by many non-Muslims in Nigeria. This wrong notion has heightened the prospects of full-blown Islamophobia especially among non Muslims in the country.

It then would not be out of place to surmise that the reaction to sections of the Quran that stipulate violence, appeal to Muslim adherents differently. By this supposition fundamentalists appear to appropriate the above contexts of the Quran denotatively, while moderate Muslims approach the sections connotatively. The above presuppositions are explicit in the positions advanced by Christian theologians. Accordingly, the rationalizations which they provide is a moderate hermeneutical approach and position that has the capability to assuage tensions that lead to Islamophobia.

From antecedents that have been obtained elsewhere around the world where Islamophobia set in as a result of violence by Muslims, one could say that Islamophobia in Nigeria is imminent. For instance, the past five years, Boko Haram has unleashed so much terror in Northern Nigeria, the north-east particularly, mimicking ISIS in Iraq and Syria. ISIS conquered and annexed some parts of Iraq and Syria and declared an Islamic State. In the same vein, Boko Haram also declared an Islamic Caliphate in Bama local government area of Borno State. More so, in core south-eastern cities like Onitsha and Aba, Muslims live in constant fear because of the perceived animosity from non-Muslims in such cities which most times wait uneasily for the slightest trigger to launch an attack on the Muslim community in the cities.

Be that as it may, Islamophobia is a syndrome that has come to be popular in Western Countries. Their reasons are not far-fetched - unscrupulous Islamic pedagogues, reprobate demagogues and Islamic fundamentalists have wrongly portrayed Islam as a dreadful religion and Muslims as perpetual belligerents through their manipulation of the religion. This wrong perception has therefore led to a vendetta between Muslims and non-Muslims, especially Christians in Nigeria and elsewhere. In the United States for instance, the fear of/suspicion for/prejudice against Islam or any of its resemblance has led to undue aggression against Muslims and even non-Muslims that have Muslim semblance in any ramification.

There is therefore the possibility that with time, if religious uprisings and repugnant religious machinations by unscrupulous groups that claim to be championing the course of Islam in Nigeria are not curbed, there will most probably be actual and clear manifestations of Islamophobia. This could then lead to a cycle of fierce confrontations, ridiculous polemics (this is already apparent from arguments in the social media), attacks and reprisal attacks that would result in the desecration of sacred human lives and destruction of properties.

Dangers of Islamophobia in Nigeria

Having looked at the possibility of Islamophobia in Nigeria, it is expedient to also x-ray its hazards. A cursory look at the existing state of affairs in terms of inter-religious relationships in Nigeria will reveal the fact that there are a lot of discrepancies. Thanks to inter-religious dialogue that has actually minimized misconceptions and negative stereotypes about others' religions but even the champions of inter-religious dialogue in Nigeria admit that the effects of dialogue is very slow and much is left to be desired in terms of inter-religious appreciation and acceptance. There still exists between different religions what could be described as walls instead of bridges and bigotry has not been totally eradicated among adherents of different religions.

Therefore, if Islamophobia finds a foothold in Nigeria, it could lead to scores of attacks on Muslims as is the case in the United States for instance, and of course, reprisal attacks from Muslims which will throw the country into cycles of attacks and reprisals that would be extremely devastating. Sufficient unto the day, the Bible says in Matthew 6:34, is the evil thereof. In essence, the country already has so many problems to handle at the moment that there is no space to accommodate more. Islamophobia will further foster disunity in the country as Nigerians are basically divided along ethnic and religious lines. More so, it will greatly threaten the sanctity of human life, human dignity and other fundamental rights and freedoms enshrined in the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, African Union Charter and the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The already very fragile Nigerian State will be thrown into a state of utter chaos and barbarism. In the words of Center for Race and Gender (2014),

“Islamophobia reintroduces and reaffirms a global racial structure through which resources distribution disparities are maintained and extended” (p. 1). Here, Center for Race and Gender decries the situation where Islamophobia leads to unfairness in the distribution of resources.

If and when Islamophobia and perhaps Infidelophobia become apparent in Nigeria, the ultimate potential will be cataclysmic. Religion and religious sentiment are very delicate and sensitive issues that when not meticulously and properly handled, could lead to a religious/civil war or expedite a break up of already brittle Nigeria. Ukanah (2012) puts it thus; “except serious and urgent actions are taken on all fronts many things point to an impending break-up of the country” (p. 380). It is a known fact that Muslims preponderate in some northern parts of Nigeria while Christians are more in the south, especially the south east and south south. Hence, the common categorization - the Muslim north and the Christian south. It therefore means that any prejudice against Islam will adversely affect some northern parts of Nigeria and this could lead to a major rift in the country. The needful therefore has to be done to thwart the reality of Islamophobia in Nigeria, uphold the sanctity of human life and trumpet the values of harmonious existence.

Already, in social internet networks like twitter and facebook, religiously aggrieved Nigerians have started to voice their grievances against violence associated with Islam especially in the north eastern part of Nigeria. If Islamophobia is given a free rein in Nigeria, it could ultimately lead to a religious war. Ukanah (2012) is of the opinion that, “reports of seizures and interceptions of arms and ammunition are simply indicative of how far Nigerians are arming themselves for [a] ... show-down” (p. 379). Therefore, if Islamophobia permeates the Nigerian State, then the future of the country will become very bleak as its impact will go beyond religious sphere to political, economic, social and ethnic spheres. In other words, its impact will cut across all sectors in the country with dreadful consequences. Hence, the need for preemptive measures to nip this emerging peril in the bud cannot be overemphasized.

Overcoming Islamophobia and the Prospects of Taming Religious Insurgencies

Everywhere Islamophobia has been seen, it has been associated with tales of woes that instigate fear. There is therefore the need to preempt such fears in Nigeria so as to avert the consequences that come with it. Engaging some positive actions will hopefully, tame the prospects of Islamophobia and subsequent dangers in Nigeria.

First of all, non-extremist Islamic clerics and leaders should be more vocal in denouncing terrorist groups that claim to be fighting to expand the frontiers of the Islamic religion. They should be called what they are – terrorists and misguided Muslims who are defamers of the Islamic religion. A lot of prominent Islamic leaders and clerics in Nigeria have actually publicly denounced Boko Haram and other terrorist groups but more is still left to be desired. The Muslim communities in Nigeria also have a role to play by, for instance, borrowing a leaf from the #notinmyname# campaign that is being spearheaded by a group of young Muslims in Britain. They have taken to the social media to denounce the activities of terrorist groups such as ISIS who kill innocent people as un-Islamic and unjust. Hill (2013) however laments that “vehement protests that such violence (perpetrated by terrorists) is incompatible with Muslim teaching have often gone unnoticed” (p. 332). More vigor and ardour should therefore be put in by Muslims in emphasizing that Islam is a religion of peace that upholds love for neighbor, peaceful coexistence and the sanctity of human life. In situations of apprehension that Islamophobia can bring about, it is advisable to curtail or avoid inciting and unguarded statements that sow seeds

of radicalism and hatred for non-Muslims, but trumpet the pacifistic elements across religious divides. For example, Islamic clerics should keep sermons within the realms of balance and decency so as not to inadvertently incite bellicosity.

More so, a clear distinction should be made between Muslims and terrorists who perpetrate violence in the name of religion. The general public should desist from qualifying terrorists as Islamic. On the aftermath of the execution of the British hostage David Haine by ISIS, David Cameron the British Prime Minister stated unequivocally that ISIS is not a Muslim body but 'monsters'. Even though these terrorists claim to be Islamists, they are in actual sense, perverts of the Islamic religion. Islamic leaders and clerics who have openly decried the activities of these terrorists and categorically stated that these mischief makers do not and cannot represent the Islamic religion should be taken very seriously. Boko Haram for instance has more political undertone than a religious one. Actually, these terrorists may have been trained by people that claim to be Muslims. Perhaps they draw their ferocious and destructive strength from their use/misuse of the Quran. They interpret/misinterpret the Quran to justify their actions which they often times, hinge on the delusion that the violence they perpetrate is at Allah's behest and that they would be rewarded for it. However, non-Muslims and especially Christians must understand that just as some groups or sects that claim to be Christians are apparently misguided and cannot be reckoned as representative of Christianity, terrorists should not be reckoned as Islamists and therefore, using the adjective – Islamic to qualify terrorists should be discouraged even though that is what they claim. This is even more so when the Islamic community and authorities have dissociated themselves from the activities of such groups in a particular society.

The government also has a part to play. Terrorism is sometimes, an ugly way of expressing dissatisfaction by aggrieved members of a particular society. Most times, this dissatisfaction is towards the government of the day and Nigeria is not an exception. Maitatsine uprisings in the 1980s and Boko Haram insurgency that has heightened since 2009 allegedly have very serious political undertones. It should be recalled that the activities of Boko Haram heightened after Dr Goodluck Jonathan was announced the winner of the presidential election in 2011. It could be that they are reacting to a perceived political injustice. Whether they hide under the guise of religion or anything else, their recalcitrant attitude could be traced to bad governance. Adebayo (2010), Halliru (2012) and even Kukah (2011) all agree that poverty and unemployment which are to a great extent, governance factors are underlying causes of religious conflicts and violence in Nigeria. Fotion, Kashnikov and Lekea (2007) therefore suggest that to slow down terrorist movement, "the political card is to democratize ... create a cluster of just societies. ... Give people a better government and improve their lives, the argument runs, and terrorism would dry up" (p. 118).

Terrorism in Nigeria whether religious, political or otherwise could be tackled by dismantling the remote socio-political factors that trigger or fuel aggression. Government has a role to play in addressing issues such as poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, marginalization, exploitation and so on. If decent jobs were handy for some of the disgruntled citizens that end up as terrorists, perhaps they would have had a rethink. Adenrele (2012), as cited in Unumen (2014) rightly points out that "notwithstanding that the emergence and activities of Boko Haram sect in Nigeria is often couched in Islamic ideology and intent; the emergence and activities of the group have deep-seated economic, social and political roots" (p. 236).

It is pathetic that some of the aforementioned issues of governance gave rise to terrorism which has been associated with Islam and have thus led to Islamophobia. The onus is therefore on the government to strive to right its wrongs so as to dismantle structures that encourage insurgency and terrorism in Nigeria and come up with a working strategy for possible disarmament, deradicalization and reintegration of terrorists and militants. Importantly, it behooves on the government to develop the political will to make intelligent efforts to fish out the masterminds, sponsors and accomplices of religious violence in Nigeria and ensure that they face the full weight of the law. That will go a long way to deter terrorism in the name of religion.

Finally, Islamic religious clerics should not get weary in tactfully trumpeting splendid Islamic values such as love, justice, forgiveness, peace, pacifism and the sanctity of human life with compelling hermeneutics. Perhaps that, with the back-up weight of the religion that these terrorists claim to profess, would appeal to their consciences (if they have one anyway). Little (2007) puts it thus; “proper religion exhibits a preference for pursuing peace by peaceful means and for combining the promotion of peace with the promotion of justice” (p. 437).

More so, effective intra and inter-religious dialogue in Nigeria is indispensable in dismantling negative stereotypes like Islamophobia. Dialogue could help to jettison adverse rhetoric and polemics among different religious groups. Effectual intra and inter-religious dialogue will no doubt foster better understanding and solidarity between/among religious groups which could lead to sheathing the sword (physical, verbal and psychological/emotional sword). It would rather motivate these religions to collaborate and topple their common enemy – the terrorists and other perpetrators of violence in the name of religion. The latter sort of dialogue is what Rasmussen (2007) describes as ‘from discursive to cooperative dialogue’.

Conclusion

Islamophobia is apparently a disaster waiting to happen in Nigeria. As a matter of fact, all the antecedents of Islamophobia in the USA and Europe are being witnessed in Nigeria. A careful observation actually reveals that Islamophobia is already manifesting subtly in particularly the southern part of the country. The question that is worth worrying about is; can Nigeria contain such looming menace? The onus therefore lies on religious leaders to properly guide their faithful. Political leaders who have displayed incompetence in managing Nigeria’s religious diversity have to work out modalities to curb religious violence and prejudice. They should strive to build bridges among different religions in Nigeria and not fences and suspicion. It is however disheartening that some of the political leaders that are looked upon for solution to this problem of prejudice and stigmatization among religious groups in Nigeria are complicit in orchestrating these violence and consequently Islamophobia. Furthermore, proper sensitization about one another’s religious doctrines and practices as the inter-religious dialogue group has been doing could also go a long way to curb negative stereotypes and minimize skeptical disposition towards one another’s religion.

It must be reiterated that terrorism is not justified by Islam or any other religion. This position is explicit in the interpretations some Christians, non Christians and moderate Muslims have invested on sections of the Quran that appear explicit in the advocacy of violence. Muslims generally are not ‘people of the sword’ (as they have been wrongly tagged) that are to be avoided and feared. Dr Lateef Adegbite, the Secretary General of the Nigeria Supreme Council for

Islamic Affairs (NSCIA), as cited in Ukanah (2011) debunks any nexus between the Islamic religious doctrine/practice and terrorism. Dr Adegbite made this submission when he spoke at the annual Symposium of Muslim Media Practitioners (MMPN). Terrorism therefore cannot be said to be coterminous with Islam or Islamic jihad. These terrorists that claim to be Muslims have not in any way spared their Muslim ‘brothers’ in their attacks as often noticed also. They as well as non-Muslims have been victims of violence and terrorism.

There is no gainsaying that religious conflicts have plagued Nigeria more than any other kind of conflict in its history as a nation. Therefore, if there must be relative peace in the country, then religion must play an indispensable role for such peace to be attained. The fundamental tenet the religious person should be seen to bring to the fore is peace. This more so is as Nigeria is basically divided along deep religious lines and inclinations. Kukah (2011) concurs with this point. He observes that at a point in Nigeria’s history, “identities began to be narrowed and religion became the basis of identity”. The need to forestall Islamophobia in Nigeria cannot therefore be overemphasized. It is now more expedient than ever for adherents of different religions to learn to live in peace and mutual respect in Nigeria. The ‘Us’ versus ‘them’ mentality should be erased for a mutual coexistence among the diverse religious adherents in Nigeria. This perspective is one among others suggested in this paper in efforts to douse the prospects of Islamophobia in Nigeria and keep its prospects at bay.

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