

## Usage of Effective Communication in Curbing Religious Fanaticism: The Nigerian Experience

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### Abstract

Religious Fanaticism have been the bane of our society since most religions claim to be the best way or right path for the Devotee to attain Nirvana (Kingdom of God). Thus this paper examines the extent that religious leaders in Christianity and Islam in Nigeria have influenced religious fanaticism through their teachings via communication to their Devotees and general believers. It is a known fact that in Nigeria, victims of religious arrogance and beliefs have suffered a lot of violence from numerous religious fanatical groups under the guise of religion. The thematic framework for this paper is the Two –Step Flow theory which stipulates that influence from communication on an individual is more on a personal level than through the mass media which is impersonal. This means that communication is mostly believed when it is from the set of people we love and respect on a face- to- face basis. The researcher recommends that the religious leaders of both religions in Nigeria should use effective communication in curbing religious fanaticism which will eventually enhance peaceful coexistence within the country.

*'There is only one religion, though there are a hundred versions of it'*  
-GEORGE BERNARD SHAW (1989)

**Keywords**-Religious Fanaticism, Devotee, Religious tolerance, Effective communication, Religious Syncretism.

### Introduction

Communication is a process by which people use signs, symbols, icons, behaviours etc to exchange information and create meaning, but it goes beyond just communicating because any message sent improperly will not be effective and not produce good results. According to Okhakhu (2010), in all there is in life, communication is central and that it is only effective communication that achieves good results and this could be achieved through several ways such as speaking, writing and listening. Without effective communication, several dimensions of our lives will be affected; in fact, it is a very little aspect of our lives that does not get actively involved in communication. (Bittner, 1989:3)

According to the Encyclopaedia of Mass Media and communication (21<sup>st</sup> century), communication is, 'the way we interact for the purpose of sending and receiving messages through a medium/channel from a sender to a receiver and vice versa'. Communication can also be said to be on a face- to – face level without the influence or use of the mass media and this can be said to be on personal / group level, which happens on a daily basis in our lives. This type of communication that is done on a face to face basis could be referred to as the interpersonal and group communication (Vivian, 2009:12) as is practiced by these two religions in Nigeria.

There have been lots of controversies between Christianity and Islam in the past and recent times in Nigeria with each religion claiming to be the best for a convert/ faithful to make heaven, attain nirvana and have profound peace. The various religious claims have one time or the other lead to major crises in the country almost disintegrating it, for example, Jos religious crises of 2001(Ogbonna;2012:163). Even recently, there have been claims by the rebellious group popularly known as Boko Haram to Islamise Nigeria thereby making use of arms and other forms of ammunitions just to pass their message across forcefully to non- converts.

Religious Fanaticism from both religions (not the only religions in Nigeria) have been on the increase and this is been compounded with the religious leaders who interprets diversely, all aiming discretely for one thing or the other to be achieved. These religious leaders' who include but not limited to – Archbishops, Bishops, Reverends, Sheikhs, Imams, Pastors, Shepherds, prophets and prophetesses, are humans and not as Godly as they claim most of the time going by what has been happening in the country especially with the harsher economic climate, as most persons (dubious ones) want to make "it" at any cost (www.guardiannews.com 2015)

According to Karl Marx, because '*religion is the opium of the people*', followers (devotee) who are so

devoted in every sense of the word, gets so involved and committed to most interpretations delivered to them via these religious heads unquestioned, which can have either a negative or positive aspect (Marcionis,2005:486). For instance in some denominations today, sayings like; ‘the God of Bishop David Oyedepo is my God’ or ‘‘the God of chosen is my God’’, is no longer alien, as devotees are willing to go to any extent for the denomination they belong. These statements can go a long way to judge the convert’s loyalty to the said church, mosque or the religion in question. When such statements are made, one can easily tell the extent the individual is willing to go for the church, Bishop or Pastor.

Same goes with the followers of Islam. For instance, a misled Muslim can kill anybody who is a non-Muslim because his sheikh/Imam interpreted the holy Quran to him the way the Imam chose to or even when a non-Muslim is seen with the Quran and the worse been that such cannot quote certain important verses from it correctly, it becomes an act of blasphemy (these are extremist behaviours). Because of the reverence the devotee has for his/her religion and their religious heads, questions are not asked as to why such beliefs/ actions should be in that religion, like instances of killings. Unknowing to the Muslim, such action from the sheikh/Imam could be for selfish reasons, inferiority complex and racism or even ignorance to the proper tenets of the Holy Quran (David:1984). I totally agree with what this author said, judging from how our Christian brethren and Muslim faithful treat anyone that is not from the same race/ region as they are.

For the fact that this is a research topic that brings out real scenario in the religious patterns practised in the country today, instances will go on and on. Talking about racism for instance, if a member of Christ embassy who happens to be a Yoruba is in the same church unit/ department like the ushering unit with a Fulani man, do not be shock to find out that, the two Christians will hardly be good friends instead they will decide to follow members of their tribe/ race. Appalling as it seem, these extremist tendencies are exhibited in most churches.

One major way of making heaven and not losing one’s soul to eternal torment according to the Holy Books- (Bible, the Quran, Bhagavad Gita, Unto thee I Grant, Talmud, and Mantras) are through enhancing ones devotion through proper embrace of high spiritual tendencies and less of materialism. One important aspect of identity for many people in this country is their spirituality which they do not play with and for the fact that, a religious leader in a church, mosque or an ashram knows this common fact, most of the time such weakness on the part of man to comprehend and practice what is in these aforementioned Holy books by themselves through the wise counsel of these God’s representatives on earth are capitalised on to the disadvantage of the devoted member of that religion. According to (Floyd, 2011:5), ‘Spirituality involves ones beliefs and principles in religious practises like; I value equal treatment for all people, I cannot take life, it is bad to lie, I believe I will reap what I sow in life and so on’. These religious principles are at best more preached than practiced by most religious leaders who use religion as an undercover for their heinous crimes (Soyinka, 2016).

Even though, that is a commonplace fact, how many converts and devotees are willing to study what was written by these great prophets and Holy masters of the past, meditate on their wise counsels and put such advice to good use, without the need of a middleman who calls himself a ‘‘*God/ Allah sent*’’? Instead, the order of the day is to run to one religious head or the other for the interpretation of the particular Holy Book or prayers, giving these heads a very high and mighty position in the scheme of things in the lives of their converts. Generally speaking, religious fanaticism results from communication imbalance between the sender and the receiver which results from the misinterpretation of the tenets of the said religion from the religious leaders to the receiver of the message, be it in a church /mosque. Misinterpretation of these Holy books can sometimes come from these set of believers who have high extremists tendencies of these Holy books but this is done on a minimal level. (Floyd, 2011:5).

It is pertinent to note at this juncture that, religious fanatics are not streamlined to only the illiterates or the poor as some easily say( a hungry man is an angry man or that anybody who is poor can easily be cajoled with good food and other things of life in other to met out excessive violence and even kill), rather, it cuts across board as it is carried out by the old, young, rich, poor, literates (both in the country and those in Diaspora), male and female gender in both religions in the country and outside, as was reported on CNN news live on march 7, 2015 of how the rich and literate UK University students are lured in to joining Islamic State of Iraq and Levant(ISIL).

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper is based on the Two-Step theory. This theory was propounded by Elizabeth Noella-Newmann and Paul Lazarsfeld in 1948 when these theorists having conducted a research on 600 people, discovered that, their campaign opinions were formed majorly by people they know like friends and acquaintances, and not the media. According to these theorists cited in Vivian (2009;403), the Two-Step theory is of the opinion that, ‘‘personal contact is more important than media contact, in that, people are less motivated and influenced by the mass media ( impersonal in nature) than by the people they know personally and respect’’. The key players in the two-step model are people called the opinion leaders which includes clergy, teachers, neighbourhood merchants, union leaders, people of reputable characters, influential friends, acquaintances and loved ones(McQuail;2005)

Additionally it was discovered that whoever had got the information firsthand will not simply be passing on the information but also help to shape and interpret it (Folarin 1999: 60). In this case, the clergy and other high ranking men of God/ messengers and whatever name the denomination call their most revered officials, claim they receive these messages from God directly and as a result, give out what their claims are to the believers who believe as they are indeed opinion leaders. Blake (1979) see opinion leaders in the two- step flow theory as the core of communication and influence on the message receivers.

In relation to this study, it is important to note that our clergymen and religious heads/leaders have influential role on their followers. This is mostly possible because, the followers of the particular religion look on to them as '*saviours*' even though in human flesh, and as such, treat them with unquestionable respect. There have been numerous incidences to show the state of religious extremism as demonstrated by people in this country on the news, documentaries, talk shows and books or posts on social media daily which range from assault and dehumanisation of the human body to ritualist tendencies, as the case may be.

The purpose of this paper is to drive home the point, that communication when used and applied properly, can be used to reduce the spate of religious fanaticism in the country.

### **Religion and Religious Fanaticism**

Throughout human history, human beings living in small societies attributed birth, death and even whatever happened to the operation of supernatural forces, African countries for example (Ugboajah,1977). Religion has eaten deep into the core values of Nigeria, to the extent that the making and enactment of laws e.g. the sharia Law beliefs and that of the Holy Bible are partly enshrined into the country's constitution. According to Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, fanaticism is, 'the practice of extreme political or religious beliefs and ideas that is often dangerous'. This religious fanatical tendencies are often demonstrated by Nigerian religious heads and converts for we all are very religious as demonstrated in our everyday lives.

Religious fanaticism is a very radical and dangerous affair especially in a country such as ours; where the two major religions (Christianity and Islam) are always claiming superiority over the other. Some religions like Islam have this serious quest for absolute truth at whatever cost on the faithful. Remember the instance of how sharia law was used in Zamfara State (Nigeria)?, that was extremely fanatical in nature. There has been lots of maiming, destruction of properties worth millions, and killings even from remote times till now as a result of clashes between these two religions (Ogbonna,2012). Due to these absolutist religious tendencies demonstrated by converts in these two religions in Nigeria, we have groups like Boko Haram, members/ recruits of Al- Qaeda, one Christian denomination/group claiming superiority over the other and Al- Shabab causing violence, maiming, killing and rendering people homeless.

It is pertinent to note that, Nigeria is in Africa and most African cultures are based on the peoples' culture and belief systems which sometimes includes the people's superstitions. As a result, it is a herculean task for one to impose these foreign religions and expect the people to embrace peace especially when most tenets of Christendom and Islam are interpreted by the very few who are spiritually '*super*' in their various religious denominations (Soyinka, 2016). Such interpreters that interpret such religious dogmas within a belief system that can lead believers to become fanatics he called; blasphemers and infidels. There have been attacks and counter-attacks from both religions to the extent that, some devotees now prefer to be non-affiliate to any but to worship God the way they choose, in order to avoid been victimised by the so-called servants of God/Allah.( The Guardian newspaper of 14<sup>th</sup> march,2014)

Religion which majority of the people especially the impoverished ones see as a hope for having a better world, is maximised as a medium by some cruel opportunists religious leaders who use it as a channel to gain their wicked plans(Marcionis, 2005: 487). For example, Islamic extremists like the suicide bombers in the Muslim brotherhood who spread terrorism the world over, were more or less '*preached*' to and brainwashed by their '*masters*' (not all of them) who interpreted the Quran the way they choose to, so as to suit the wicked aims for their '*Bosses*' - ranging from politicians, oil Moguls and other big shots in the society – who make gain from such actions of the ignorant devotee who is promised heaven when he/she risks his/her for the sake of making supreme that particular religion against other religions, e.g. the Boko Haram sect (Nigerian Tribune 25<sup>th</sup> july,2014)

Most African countries particularly Nigeria, are very religious but not reasonably in practical terms as we still base our lives on superstitious beliefs despite our religious affiliations (Ugboajah,1977). A typical Nigerian attribute virtually all that happens (whether good or bad) in their lives to one belief system or another, no matter the social, academic or material status of such an individual.

Religion according to Lester (1995) is , 'A social institution involving beliefs and practices based upon a conception of the sacred'. Micropeadia Britannica defines religion as the, 'Essence and science of the mind which is a sure way for man to understand the universe and his God'. Religion, was also defined by Marcionis(2005;488) as,'the belief (faith) anchored in conviction rather than scientific evidence; for instance, the new testament of the Holy Bible defines faith as the assurance of this hoped for, the conviction of things not

seen(Hebrews 11:1)'

Sociologists, media experts, philosophers and religious psychologists, recognise that, religion appears central to virtually every culture on earth and as such, its value in the society among the scheme of things should not be underestimated, hence the essence of this write-up. All religions have models of life by which people can organise their activities (Peter, 1999) like; living the ethical life, knowing the difference between what is sacred and profane. For example, to make clear the boundary between the sacred and the profane, Muslims remove their shoes before entering a mosque to avoid defiling a sacred place of worship with the soles of their feet that have touched the profane ground outside, this belief also goes to the devotees of the church known as the celestial church of Christ.

Religion as practiced in this underdeveloped country of ours is still very extremist in nature as it has been brought to the notice of all that even our religious heads, despite the good examples shown by great religious avatars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century like Mother Theresa (who in 2016 was declared a saint), Mahatma Gandhi, who suffered the flesh and relinquished their richly status and background for the service of God, do not live like these above names due to greed and any other reasons which are most times personal to the detriment of their converts.

These characteristics of the likes of some of our religious heads have done more harm than good in the country today. This quality of amassing wealth through concocting the dictates of what is in the Holy works of God and preaching to their converts to be die-hards no matter the cost, you will agree with these researchers, has led to more extremist behaviours and proliferation of religious bodies all over, each fighting for recognition of the highest level, not minding their improper way of worship- leading to fanatical tendencies.

Some loyal followers of Christendom have practiced religious fanaticism through the use of their mouth to backbite, judge and cause strife and disharmony in the home. (for example, it was reported in a national daily newspaper that, one of the new generation Pentecostal churches, a prophet prophesied to a young man that his father, is a wizard and his life has not been progressing because of his father's evil spell on him. The prophet went ahead to instruct the young man to murder his father so as to be free; this young devotee did by beheading his father in his sleep. The question now is: is this message of committing murder part of the deliverance that the young man needed and besides, have the church been granted the mantle or license to kill?) and towards other religious denominations.

Soyinka (2016) and Peter (1999) contends that despite the hues and cries of developed nations like China on secularization, they do not relegate their culture to the background due to religious influences and allow these foreign religions dictate the state of affairs for them. Nigeria, like most third world nations, is an exception, to the idea of secularization yet *'love your neighbour as yourself'* is very far from reality, as we kill and maim each other through any means possible to make better our religion over the expense of the other person's religion, in this case, making religion run the scheme of things for us.

### **Structure of some Religious bodies in Nigeria**

The structure of Christian churches and that of the Muslims - the mosque, has often created enormous wealth and high status for its religious leaders. For example, the unorthodox Catholic (apart from the pope who is the catholic pontiff which is at the Vatican; its heads include the college of the consistory of cardinals, Apostolic nuncio, Archbishops, bishops and the priest) and Anglican churches (whose church headship titles are closely related to Catholic except for the fact that, a bishop or the like can get married unlike what pertains in Roman Catholic churches where such is highly prohibited), generate huge sums of money and as a result become very affluent and famous from their church affiliation, to the detriment of its followers who are kept in the dark as whatever pronouncement they make from the pulpit is highly respected and unquestioned.

There have been countless films, documentaries, write-ups, and talk shows both on the radio, social media and Television on this issue, as it is believed that, some persons having gone through a lot of hardship in life and due to the economic downturn, turn to starting a church of theirs to meet up with the needs of life. This to these researchers is the height of laziness which leads to the fulfilment of the saying that the *'idle mind is the devil's workshop'*

Taking a look at the cadre of titles that exists in those of the Pentecostals churches (orthodox), you will find virtually the same culture as we have the Archbishop down to the deacons and deaconesses who leave so little to be desired from an observer/ onlooker in terms of character and good qualities as regards their offices. As for Islam worship, we have this order of ranking which includes: the Sultan, Sheik/ Iman, Chief Alfas and Alfas, who are there to give directives to their faithful and these faithful ones in both religions knows no other language than *'obedience'*.

Source: Church Pensions Board, 2016

### **Steps to Achieving a Better Religious Practice in Nigeria**

Some of the steps involve the following: preaching unity in places of worship through effective communication, religious tolerance, religious syncretism and practicing the tenets as stipulated by the Holy



books.

**1. Preaching unity in religious places through the use of effective communication-**

Effective communication according to Vivian (2009), is that 'type of communication that is most effective in delivering a message from the source of the message to the receiver(s), with each party understanding the message sent or received'. In that regard therefore, communication that is most subtle and not violence- intended should be used to preach the tenets of the said religion by the various religious heads, with the main intention of unifying a country with diverse religions as ours.

**2. Religious tolerance-** The avoidance of religious conflicts and wars are inevitable even in a country like ours that is very religious. In fact, according to recent statistics on world religion, Nigeria is the most religious country in the continent of Africa (Press TV on Religion-Africa in view, 2008)

David (1984) defines religious tolerance as, 'the ability to accept or allow other people on what they worship and believe in'. According to statistics from Atlas of world religions by Ninian (1999), 'Christianity and Islam are one of the world's high ranking worships with Christianity having 2 billion world followers and Islam with a total of 1.1 billion (19% of humanity) but this does not make them the surest ways of getting profound peace nor being very 'holy' and making heaven'

Tolerance is an ideal virtue of living that ought to be encouraged in the daily affairs of any living being on earth.

**3. Religious syncretism-** According to Micropeadia Britannica, Religious syncretism is, 'the fusion of diverse religious beliefs and practices'. Instances are: Gnosticism (a religious dualistic system that incorporated elements from the Oriental mystery religions), Manichaeism (a dualistic religion founded by the Iranian prophet Mani, that combines elements of Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Buddhism).

Religious syncretism is to further buttress the point that, religion should not be a source of dispute but a source of cohesion and unity no matter the race or region of the individual, for we are one before God.

**4. Practising the tenets of the Holy Books of the Prophets-** the religious heads of diverse religions in Nigeria, should endeavour to practice what is written in the Holy works like the (Quran, Bible, Unto Thee I Grant, Bhagavad Gita, Mantras, Talmud) no matter what it might cost them as they are simply messengers and servants representing God/ Allah on earth, who are looked unto by their devoted members as exemplary figures.

### Functions of a Proper Religion

It is very important to state here that, no matter the denomination of any proper religion, it performs the following roles in the society. They include;

- 1. Social Cohesion-** Religion unites people through shared symbols, values and norms. Religion speaks of the vital human attribute of love. Religion has a way of making people accept each other and learn to tolerate, no matter the skin colour, race or status
- 2. Social Control-** Religion has a way of regulating the behaviours of the people especially in the areas of marriage, reproduction and general moral and ethical life. Some religious bodies for example, Christianity, frown at the use of contraceptives and the idea of a man marrying more than one wife
- 3. Provides Purpose and Succour-** Religious bodies and belief systems offer solace, comfort and purpose for living for mankind. It gives human beings, a comforting sense that the vulnerable human condition serves a greater spiritual purpose (David; 1984). As a result, people are likely to have less sadness, fear and despair over calamities that confront them in their lives, because of their faith that, although the earth is real, there is a spiritual safe haven for rest beyond this earthly realm or plane of consciousness (Ninian; 1999)

### Conclusion

So far, this paper has used this medium to expatiate the great level of negative influence that the wrong kind of communication can get to through a religious leader to his convert based on the two- step flow theory. An average Nigerian whether educated or not, even till date, believes strongly on his belief system been better than that of others except a few. This is made worse with the incessant 'brainwashing' of some religious heads through the power of communication (face- to face basis majorly except occasionally with the use of satellite transmissions) which is presented in the 'wrong language' to their devotees, who overtime find his or herself loyal till the end to that particular religion except he/she realises the fate that has befallen his life and decides to have a change.

In Nigeria, religion is more of a culture-based ideology no doubt. Most people in the Northern part of the country practice Islam, whose belief lies on the sayings of the Messenger of Allah-Muhammad while down south, most southerners believe in Jesus Christ as their saviour (Nigeria compendium 2010 pp:20-21), but we can live

peacefully without having crises as a result of our religious differences when we practice the culture of communicating effectively.

This study has shown that, we can curb issues like ; ritual killings, extremism, conflicts of interests, racism, and terrorism, when our religious leaders communicate the right set of ideals to the people generally, no matter the religion of the individual in question so that, religious fanaticism will belong to the world of the utopian.

### Recommendations

Communication can bring about conflict when wrongly used and at the same time nurture peaceful coexistence if well applied. Just as the saying goes *'the power to make or mar, is in the tongue'* . As a result, effective communication should be encouraged by our religious leaders while teaching from these Holy books to their converts and non- converts in order to curb the spate of religious fanaticism in Nigeria. Future research works should be made in this area of research, so as improve people's awareness about how to see religion in general. Religious leaders should know that their major call to duty is to preach and act Godly in all they do and not to use religion as a disguise to serve some of the greedy ruling elites or their wicked wishes. This paper hopes to also use this medium to inform the devotee of any of the aforementioned religions to be critically minded all the time and particularly to any information handed down from any suspicious religious leader. Religious tolerance should be encouraged among the followers of any religious gathering based on teachings on topics like; discrimination, tithing, alms and offerings, begging and above all love for one another. With the spirit of tolerance in the minds of the populace, the nation is bound to be peaceful and devotees (and potential ones) will accept other religions that they do not belong to and affiliate with them.

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