INTERFAITH RELATIONS TRAINING: A PANACEA TO RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM IN NIGERIAN

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Abstract
Religious extremism which activates violence has become a common and recurring decimal of religious communities in the Nigeria since the last four decades. It has led to the loss of thousands of lives, property worth billions of Naira and development of tradition of hostility. This study therefore, aimed at achieving religious harmony in the society. The method adopted was descriptive phenomenology. Both primary and secondary sources of data were used. The findings revealed training religious leaders in Nigeria on interfaith relations as a solution to the problem of religious extremism. The study concluded with Suggestions for immediate and long term plans for solution.

Key Words: Religious Extremism, peaceful co-habitation and inter-faith relations.

Introduction
Research has proved religious extremism as a major contributor to religious war, bloodshed and hatred. The Islamic Jihads, the Crusades, the European Religious Wars, conflicts in the Middle East, the slaughter between Iraq and Iran, the Hindu-Sikh clashes in India, and many other bloody crises were outcome of religious extremism.[1] Due to these various unpleasant experiences with regard to the relationship between some of the world religions in different parts of the globe, over the years, it was dawn on both civil and religious leaders respectively the necessity of the religions to learn how to peacefully co-exist.[2] In the same vein the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) stressed the reciprocal interactions and influences between, on the one hand, religions, spiritual and humanistic traditions, and on the other, the need to promote understanding between them in order to challenge ignorance and prejudices and foster mutual respect. Hence, Interfaith relations training is an essential component of UNESCO"s Intercultural Dialogue which aims to promote interfaith relations among different religions, spiritual and humanistic traditions in a world where conflicts are increasingly associated with religious belonging.[3]

Interfaith relations which is also referred to as interreligious dialogue, is about people of different faiths coming to a mutual understanding and respect that allows them to live and cooperate with each other in spite of their differences. The term refers to cooperative and positive interaction between people of different religious traditions at both the individual and institutional level. Each party remains true to their own beliefs while respecting the right of the other to practice their faith freely.[4]

In Africa and Nigeria in particular, religious extremism and its resultant effects is the order of the day. There is unwillingness of both Christians and Muslims to truly admit that God's love and providence extend equally to all human beings, regardless of religious identity.[5] Christians do not accept Islam as an authentic post-Christian religious tradition. Muslims accepted Christianity as a revealed faith but do not accept the Christians and their doctrine of Trinity, the church as a source of guidance and the books of the New Testament as authentic scriptures.[6] Both religions in the same manner do not accept African Traditional Religion or any other as a genuine religion or authentic. They often preach intolerance against each other and aggressively seek to impose their respective views on the other. Sometimes they openly condemn the practices and beliefs of each other and the society around them.[7] Muslims believe that there is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his prophet and that Islam is the only true religion. On the other hand, Christians believe that there is only one God; Jesus is the only way to salvation and Christianity is the true religion, while other religions are false. This extremist stand of the two religions has been so disruptive in all facets of humanity in Nigeria and the results have been negative and counter-productive.

Extremism is a complex phenomenon; it means literally "the quality or state of being extreme" or "advocacy of extreme measures or views"[8]. Nowadays, the term is mostly used in a <u>political</u> or <u>religious</u> sense, for an <u>ideology</u> that is considered to be far outside the (acceptable) <u>mainstream</u> attitudes of society[9]. Most simply, Peter and Andrea defined extremism as "activities (beliefs, attitudes, feelings, actions, strategies) of a character far removed from the ordinary."[10] Religious extremism can therefore, be defined as religious activities (beliefs, attitudes, feelings, actions, expressions, strategies) of a person or group that is far removed from the ordinary. The researcher is not ignorant of the fact that the labeling of activities, people or groups as "extremist" and the defining of what 'ordinary' in a setting is always subjective. This is because according to Peter and Andrea, "extremist act will be viewed by some as just and moral (such as pro-social 'freedom fighting'), and by others as unjust and immoral (antisocial 'terrorism') depending on the observer's religion, values, politics, moral scope, and the nature of their relationship with the actor."[11]

Be that as it may, the concept of religious extremism is such that has symbiotic relationship with fundamentalism, fanaticism and intolerance. It involves a person or group of persons or faith community taking a position that their view is absolute and if others do not follow their views and ways, they will be damned. Religious extremists are often very aggressive, seeking to impose their views on other people.

Then the crucial questions are what does it mean to profess faith in a nation of many religions? How can one be fully a Christian or a Muslim in Nigeria and at the same time respect the faith of others?[12]Is violence part of religious beliefs, ethics, teachings and practices**?** How can the adherents of religious communities in Nigeria peacefully co-exist**?** These questions beg for answers and that was what motivated this study. The researcher's objective was to achieve religious harmony in the nation. In order to realize this objective, descriptive phenomenology method of inquiry was adopted. It is the best methodology for this research because it described experience as it is on-going. Both primary and secondary sources of data were used. The study was approached in three sub-headings: firstly, manifestation of religious extremism in Nigeria was discussed. Secondly, attention was given to the necessity fortraining religious leaders on interfaith relations and thirdly, suggestions for immediate and long term plans for solution was made.

Manifestations of Religious Extremism in Nigeria
Prior to the emergence of Islam and Christianity in the region known as Nigeria, Traditional Religion was in vogue and passionately practiced by the ethnic nationalities therein. Islam and Christianity at their arrival in Nigeria respectively, initially co-existed with Traditional Religions adherents peacefully. Later when the two foreign religions have gained grounds in the soil of Nigeria, they started struggling for dominance in every sphere of life including national affairs. Hence, Muslims realized that indigenous traditional religious worshippers who had peacefully co-existed with them over the years were worshipping idols. Consequently, they should be forcefully converted to Islam. In like manner, Christians branded traditional religious practitioners: 'idol worshippers.' This warranted the compulsory conversion of the indigenous people to Christianity. That justified Igwe's claim that "both religions were introduced into Africa mostly as instruments of colonialism, feudal conquest, and the destruction of the local culture and traditions. They sowed strife where peace used to prevail and made killing of the innocent to become part of African cultures…and are silent over the mass annihilation, weapons, genocides and ethnic consciousness they initiated."[13]

The result of this extremist stand of these two religions on traditional worshippers range from physical harm to forced conversion, pulling down of temples, destruction of shrines, psychological pressure, imprisonment to

mention only a few. The 19th century Jihad is a practical example of the above claim. Muslims attacked all Traditional worshippers and their rulers who refused to accept the reformed Islam and forced them to submit to Islam and Allah.[14]. Similarly, during the colonial era, the Christian Missionaries in collaboration with the colonial powers put the Traditional Religions and societies in shambles. In 1892 precisely, the British administrator of Lagos, Governor Carter used force on Ijebus when he got to know that the Ijebus were unwilling to accept Christianity. The Ijebus were defeated in the expedition and Christianity imposed on them. Governor Carter claimed that "the Ijebus were heathens of the most uncompromising description even hostile to the missionaries who "were of their own race"[15]

The same methodology was applied to the eastern part of Nigeria. The Christian Missionaries attacked many Igbo communities who did not welcome Christianity. In some areas, their traditional priests were either killed or imprisoned and their religious objects destroyed. At Nri for example, converts were encouraged to flout the authority of the "Ozo" men, burn their ritual objects, break their taboos and reveal the secrets of the ritual mask. "The encouragement of the destruction of the traditional objects of worship spread out all over Igbo land. They condemned the traditional title system, marriage, rituals, songs, arts and dances and labelled them Satanic."[16] The great values of Nigerian culture were considered devilish and indigenous religion a symbol of poverty, ignorance and superstition. Most authors who wrote on African Traditional Religions labelled the adherents of the religion 'primitive', 'pagans' 'heathens' 'idolaters', polytheists', 'barbarians', 'superstitionists', 'fetishists', to mention only a few.[17]

The post-independent Muslims and Christians inherited this trend (prejudices) from the past colonial theology of having superior monotheism, against primitive animism and polytheism of Nigeria Traditional Religions. Thus, the deliberate pulling down of temples, destruction of shrines and Totems of the Traditional worshippers by Christians. For instance, on May 20, 2007, Christians in Mbaise of Imo State of Nigeria demolished a 300-year-old Shrine. They claimed that the trees (some) were responsible for the retardation and stagnation of progress within the community. This has been the case and attitude towards traditional religion; it is always down-trodden, intimidated and suppressed by the two foreign religions – Islam and Christianity.[18]

Although Traditional religion is always at the receiving end of the product of religious extremism but its adherents often times are guilty of religious extremism. Indigenous worshippers persecute those members of theirs who convert to Christianity or Islam, thereby not allowing them to practice and worship God according to the dictate of their conscience.[19] More often than not,

traditional worshippers impose their religious practices on non-traditional religious practitioners mainly during cultural festivals like new yam festival or the like especially in the southeast Nigeria. Religious ceremonies in some places require that no other public activities will take place save that of the indigenous one. Every member of the community must both make certain contributions for religious rites or rituals and participate in the ceremony irrespective of one's religious creed or culture. The violent clash between Yoruba traditional worshippers and Hausa groups in Sagamu, Ogun State on 11th July, 1999 was a typical example. The crisis originated from the killing of a Hausa woman by the Oro Masqueraders for violating traditional rites. That instigated reprisal attacks in Kano during which lives and property were lost.[20]

Under the guise of religion, many religious extremists have frequently plunged into unnecessary wanton destruction of innocent lives and property either in the name of fighting for God, changing socio-political system or showing others the right way to God.[21] A case in point was the beheading of Gideon Akaluka, a Christian by the Muslims extremists in Kano in December, 26, 1994 based on an accusation of desecrating the Qur'an. After they chopped off his head, they paraded his head on a stake round the streets of Kano as a show of their service unto Allah and victory over the infidels.[22] Constant extremist actions and violent crises still persist. Some cities in the Northern Nigeria were turned to be the melting pot of religious bloodshed by the Boko Haram sect. The frequent suicide bombing in many Christian churches and some strategic government institutions including international institutions, media houses and economic institutions in the Northern part of the country and Abuja the Federal Capital Territory were all extremist activities.

John observed that among Christians and Muslims, there are extremists who are tempted to aspire to making their nation such that their religion is not only dominant, but dominating up to the point of having it as a state religion. This crave has no possibility of a peaceful and just realization in Nigeria. Islam is more particularly prone to this temptation, as the call for the Islamic state rings out from many states of the north.[23] For instance, the effort to include Sharia legal system in the National Constitution has been a problem in Nigeria. It first surfaced in 1978-79 constituent assembly without success. In 1986, the Federal Government under the leadership of General Ibrahim Babangida secretly registered Nigeria as a full-fledged {the 46th permanent member}of Organization of Islamic Conference {OIC}.This ensued controversy that nearly rocked the existence of Nigeria.[24] In the 1988 constituent assembly, the Sharia once again came up. It almost disrupted the proceedings of that assembly but for the timely intervention of the Federal Military Government. In 1999 Zamfara State adopted Sharia legal system in full length and other eleven

northern states. The heat of Sharia generated tension all over the nation. Till today, the problem of Sharia has not been resolved.[25]

Egochi discovered that Nigerian political system is seriously overheated with religious extremism and its deadly result of upheaval and conflicts. He argued that Nigeria is threatened with disintegration.[26] Recently, the leader of the proscribed Indigenous People of Biafra {IPOB}Mazi Nnamdi Kalu was agitating for the freedom and sovereignty of Biafra. The reason why there was such agitation was not unconnected to the problem of religious extremism via Islamization agenda and its concomitant effects on the nation which include social injustice, poverty, discrimination, and disrespect for human dignity among others. There are other similar cases in some ethnic groups in Nigeria agitating for freedom for instance Niger Delta Avengers among others.

Pam's research revealed that the end result of religious extremism is always adverse to the society because it generates bloody religious crisis, pollution of environment, social disintegration, suspicions, enmity, hatred, and revenge, killing without remorse, anger and deprivation. Many children, women and men become orphans, widows and widowers.[27] No economic development could take place in an environment of fear, chaos and anxiety. Losing of means of livelihood, unemployment, poverty and starvation are some of the economic repercussions of religious crisis triggered by extremism in Nigeria. Many people lose their means of livelihood as a result of destruction of their property, shops, offices and economic institutions.

The Necessity for Training Religious Leaders on Interfaith Relations
Training religious leaders on how to peacefully co-exist in a religiously and culturally pluralistic society is very essential. One of the fundamental challenges that rocked all the inter-faith initiatives by Federal Government was lack of adequate inter-faith relations training for the members.[28] Training of this type enables the trainee to acquire knowledge on what, why and how to cooperate and collaborate with the faithful of other religious bodies.[29] This focuses more on joint planning and action, to better the lots of the society without necessarily forcing or suggesting to anyone to change his or her religion or deny it for any reason.[30]

Edmund has revealed that through the teachings and seminars organized by Interfaith Mediation Centre Kaduna on interfaith relations, the Muslim and Christian youths jointly rebuilt destroyed mosques and churches in the State[31] They also assisted the State Government in the formation of the Kaduna Peace Committee in 2002, founded a Muslim Christian Dialogue Forum and Interfaith Monitoring Centre in Kaduna.[32] Peter discovered that Religion was used to secure freedom and independence of Poland from Prussians and Russians in

1989.[33] Christians and Muslims played dominant role in the freedom of South Africa from apartheid and Dutch domination.[34] Algerians independence on July 3, 1960 was anchored on religion. "Religion was used to mobilize Algerians against the perceived injustice of the French.[35] In the Faisalabad of Pakistan, Christians and Muslims are jointly operating a leprosy centre.[36]Informed religious leaders and adherents on interfaith relations can be agents of advocacy, funding, innovation, empowerment, social movements, and service delivery.[37]

In Nigeria it appears unrealistic to blend the positive aspects of Christianity and Islam for social transformation. Therefore, religious leaders and possibly traditional rulers, town union presidents and youth leaders in Nigeria should pass through inter-faith relations training so as to imbibe the culture of peaceful cohabitation and collaboration without asking anyone to change one's religion. Any religious leader irrespective of his educational status and leadership training he has acquired without exposure to inter-faith relations will always find it difficult to abide by the principles of unity in diversity.[38] He could at best tolerate other religions to an extent. Similarly, any inter-religious body formed by either religious communities or government at any level without inter-faith relations training will likely end up not achieving her goal as in the case of the Federal Government's initiatives of interfaith dialogue. The training should be residential and lasts for at least between two and three weeks. The trained religious leaders should embark on grass root education of interfaith relations in their respective faith communities. Government should be directly involved in this matter as part of her obligation in administering religious freedom.

Suggestions for Immediate and Long Term Plan for Solution
*Establishing interfaith relations training agency:*Owing to the religious leaders training on interfaith relations, the need arises for establishing a training agency in Nigeria immediately. The agency's work would be to train religious leaders for inter-faith relations. The Federal Government in conjunction with the Nigerian Interreligious Council {NIREC} should establish one. In that circumstance their role should focus on research and planning on how to achieve religious peace in Nigeria. Meanwhile the body or team should be thoroughly trained in all aspects of inter-faith relations possibly by the Cambridge Inter-faith Team, London or any other recognized interfaith relations organization.

*Establishing National Institute for Interfaith Relations:*The Federal Government in collaboration with NIREC should plan to establish National Institute for Interfaith Relations Training in the 36 State of the federation and Abuja. The interfaith agency will be saddled with the responsibility of managing the institute.

Among other elements the curriculum of the programme should feature: Scriptural Reasoning (SR) in small groups with experienced facilitators. The scriptural reasoning workshops will showcase SR in a range of contexts and applications. There should also be workshops on leadership, conflict transformation, peace-building and mediation. Buddy groups would be organized giving time for small group discussions. There should also be organized and compulsory visits to mosques and churches, trips to places of religious importance to both Christians and Muslims.[39] Training in this institute should be for at least one month.

Benefits of Scriptural Reasoning include, as participants meet regularly to read their scriptures together, they relate to one another in a less superficial way than some other forms of interfaith dialogue. They speak from the heart as a Christian or Muslim. They would not shy away from sharing truthfully, and are able to ask deeper questions of one another.[40] They would learn and discover something of other traditions through the eyes of believers, rather than through text book and internet descriptions. A surprising excitement about one's own Scripture often emerges as a result of sharing it with people for whom it is unfamiliar. Their fresh eyes do help to see things one might have missed before! The reading of Scripture is invariably enriched by introducing it to newcomers! After scriptural reasoning friendships are built across traditional faith divides, there are hopes and desires for faith communities, and they share ways in which they might act together to resolve hurts and misunderstandings that ensue. [41]

Anybody who will ascend as religious leader including leading a congregation must pass through the institute. Any denomination of both Christianity and Islam that did not comply with this training of religious leaders on interfaith relations should have her Corporate Affairs Certificate (CAC) withdrawn by the Federal Government. Every graduate of Nigeria tertiary institution as part of their one year service should pass through the institute. Government in conjunction with NIREC should ensure that religious leaders or preachers who do not have interfaith certificate would neither lead nor preach publically in Nigeria. The Ministry of Education should incorporate interfaith relations in the school curriculum at all levels. The above suggestions may go a long way to curb religious extremism in Nigeria.

Conclusion
Following the submissions of this research, it could be said without fear of contradiction that religious extremism is one of the problems that challenge the development and unity of Nigeria. If this trend is not checked, it may lead to disintegration. Therefore, mutual recognition and respect for each religious community is pivotal in achieving peaceful co-existence. Cooperation and collaboration of the religious bodies are more aptly required for joint planning

and action to better the lots of the society without necessarily forcing or suggesting to anyone to change his or her religion or deny it for any reason. This can be achieved through training of religious leaders on the rudiments of peaceful co-habitation who will in turn train their members.

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