
Is Religion all about Peace or Sometimes about War? Islamic Fanaticism, 'Blasphemy Killings' and God's Avengers in Northern Nigeria

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Abstract: *Religious extremism is a phenomenon that is rapidly on the rise in Northern Nigeria particularly among the Youth. Religious fanaticism and impunity seem to have become a permanent feature of the socio-political existence of the region while failure, on the part of the community/religious leaders and governments, to rein in bloodthirsty religious fanatics is pushing the country to the brink. Ordinarily, given its secular status, the provision of blasphemy via the penal aspects of Sharia law adopted by 12 northern states in defiance of the 1999 Constitution should be an anomaly. Since religion is interwoven inextricably into the northern political, social and ethnic fabric, violence inevitably unfolds along religious lines, even when the visible trigger is not religious. Thus, the increasing spate of these killings and the ease with which they are perpetrated become alluring for academic interrogation. This study seeks to provide some explanation to these questions: Why are Muslim zealots so quick to label people blasphemers in the region and proceed to go wild without fear of censure? Why should people audaciously disregard the law and the constitution of the country? What are those factors that precipitate and linger these dastardly acts? If Islam teaches peace, what then should always propel people into avoidable maiming and killings of fellow human beings? At every moment of conflagration, does the State response douse or ignite more criminal tendency? Relying extensively on secondary sources with the aid of historical and narrative tools, this study contends that the activities of the Islamic extremists in Northern Nigeria can be located within the purview of religious particularity, ignorance and state-aided impunity. It strongly recommends that government should make application of the rule of law- via sanction- its watchword with a view to bringing to justice those responsible for mob action in the name of God so as to serve as deterrent to other potential criminals. As a corollary, the need to respect and uphold the secular status of Nigerian Constitution and the provision for fundamental human rights and religious freedom is also emphasised.*

Key Words: *Religion, Blasphemy, God Revengers, Peace, Fanaticism, War*

1. Introduction

The creation of the country by Britain in 1914 has led to many decades of conflict and bloodshed. As a matter of fact, ever since independence, Nigeria has been torn apart by wars, violence and ethnic conflicts. The most famous of these disputes is of course the Biafra War which raged for nearly three years in 1967-70 as a result of the attempted secession from Nigeria by three eastern states. As posited by Adibe (2015: 3), the fault lines of ethnicity, region and religion run deep in Nigeria. Virtually every part of the country has memory of injury or feelings of injustice,

which they often feel will be best addressed if one of their own wields power at the centre, preferably as the president. By virtue of its complex web of politically salient identities and history of chronic and seemingly intractable conflicts and instability, Nigeria can be rightly described as one of the most deeply divided states in Africa (Osaghae and Suberu, 2005). Nigeria by its complex web of politically salient identities and history of chronic and seemingly intractable conflict and instability can be described as one of the mostly divided state in Africa (Smyth and Robinson, 2001). Nigeria has been pushed hither and thither by recurrent crises of regional or state illegitimacy, often impairing efforts at economic transformation, democratisation, national cohesion and stability (Osaghae and Suberu 2005:4).

Put differently, nearly every decade of Nigeria's contemporary history is replete with violence and conflicts that have religious undertones (Olojo, 2013:7). Before the emergence of Boko Haram in 2002 and the escalation of inhumane violence in 2009, the northern part of Nigeria had experienced a couple of fundamentalist movements, such as the Maitatsine uprisings (Alasia, 2015). Since the 1920s, Nigeria has experienced quite a number of ethno-religious conflicts in the northern and southern regions such that the roadmap to its independence was characterized by conflicts with the use of dangerous weapons such as guns, arrows, bows and machetes and ultimately resulted in civil war from 1967 to 1970 (Best & Kemedi, 2005). It is estimated that over one hundred thousand Nigerians have lost their lives in ethno-religious crisis that have engulfed the country since the enthronement of democracy in 1979. The number of those injured triples the dead, while those displaced are put at millions (Yusuf, 2009). Indeed, it appears the country operates a system that largely encourages lawlessness, irresponsibility, greed, lack of accountability and transparency among other ills. Generally speaking, apart from corruption, one of the major problems facing Nigeria is Christian-Muslim religious unrest. It is not uncommon to hear about violence involving Christians and Muslims anytime in any part of the country.

Among the numerous internal issues plaguing Nigeria today, coupled with the government's inability to address them, are the main two different religious beliefs that separate the country. With their diverse Muslim and Christian communities and the growth of the radicalization of Islam creating religious strife, the Nigerian government must take extraordinary steps if not to solve, to at least address the problems to build a future for the country (Weatherstone, 2012:1). The current security situation in the country (insurgency, militancy, kidnapping and armed robbery) is seen as the worse since the end of the civil war in 1970. This is not necessarily because Nigeria has never experienced such level of violence, but more because of the tactics deployed, arms being used, targets of attack, and the ideologies of the belligerents (Abdu, 2013). The right to life and security has been described as the most basic of human rights. Unfortunately, the preponderance of weak and ineffective governance occasioned by poor leadership in African states including Nigeria has provided a breeding ground for insecurity due to religious extremism. Often religion is misused by weak leaders and religious demagogues who prey on the fears of the people and foster religious zeal and extremism. Such circumstances are then exploited by politicians and "instant religionists" to the detriment of the African peoples, stalling the advance of democracy and perpetuating the cycle of underdevelopment, poverty, ill-health, and marginalization of African populations.

Nigeria does not have a state religion. The secular nature of the Nigerian state was established at independence in 1960 and has been reaffirmed under successive military and civilian governments. Nigeria has not had official membership in international Islamic organizations in order to avoid giving Islam an official status. Nonetheless, the role and place of religion especially

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of Islam-in domestic and foreign affairs has been contentious in recent Nigerian history. The nature of Nigeria's secularity has been fiercely debated (Bienen, 1986:51). Since its independence in 1960, Nigeria has struggled unsuccessfully to clearly articulate the relationship between religion and the state. Whereas the British colonialists seemingly bequeathed to the new nation-state a secular regime at independence, the internal contradictions, which, paradoxically were propagated by the colonial authority, incubated to pose a challenge to the new state soon thereafter (Sampson, 2014). There are different religions in the country with most Nigerians being Muslims, Christians or adherents of traditional religions (Olupona, 1992:265). Central to the understanding of religion identity formation and its transformation from conflict to violence is the upsurge of religious extremism throughout the country. Extremist groups demonstrate considerable intolerance both towards their co-religionists and other religions. Extremists of all religions react to social, economic and political crises of the Nigerian polity in religious terms (Mohammed, 2005).

Conflict scholars have observed that deeply rooted, social conflicts emerge and are entrenched when people perceive that fulfilment of their basic human needs for identity, for survival and/or for security are threatened by another group. As Rosalind Hackett (Sisk, 2011) observes in tumultuous Nigeria, “decades of mistrust and interreligious tensions, plus the need to promote one’s own religious organization in a highly competitive religious environment undermines the need to work together in the national interest.” Similarly, Olawale (2016), contends that “Nigerians are overwhelmingly obsessed about religious and ethnic identities.... The thick cloud of religious and ethnic sentiments has given birth to violence; this has brought global attention and scrutiny to Nigeria”.

In this type of society therefore, concepts- such as blasphemy- deeply rooted in Muslim doctrine and theology can play a role in getting involved in violent extremism. Religious extremism is a phenomenon that is rapidly on the rise in Northern Nigeria particularly among the Youths. Religious fanaticism and impunity seem to have become a permanent feature of the socio-political existence of the region while failure, on the part of the community/religious leaders and governments, to rein in bloodthirsty religious fanatics is pushing the country to the brink. Curiously, as observed by Sultan (2014), every time incredible violence is perpetrated by people who claim the mantle of Islam, the same question echoes from the halls of academia to the talking heads in the media: Where are the “moderate Muslims” and when will they stand up against all this murder and mayhem committed in the name of their faith? These questions tend to be followed up by a call for a “moderate Islam” to counter religious extremism. Though a pocket of ‘moderate’ voices is seldom raised to condemn such violent acts in the name of religion, it is often necessitated by political exigency on the part of the political class. Thus, the rampaging tide has not been tamed fundamentally.

Ordinarily, given its secular status, the provision of blasphemy via the penal aspects of Sharia law adopted by 12 northern states in defiance of the 1999 Constitution should be an anomaly. Since religion is interwoven inextricably into the northern political, social and ethnic fabric, violence inevitably unfolds along religious lines, even when the visible trigger is not religious. Thus, the increasing spate of these killings, and the ease with which they are perpetrated, are terrible signs that something is wrong with the Nigerian society.

This study seeks to provide some explanation to these questions: Why are Muslim zealots so quick to label people blasphemers in the region and proceed to go wild without fear of censure?

Why should people audaciously disregard the law and the constitution of the country? What are those factors that precipitate and linger these dastardly acts? If Islam teaches peace, what then should always propel people into avoidable maiming and killings? At every moment of conflagration, does the State response douse or ignite more criminal tendency? Relying extensively on secondary sources with the aid of descriptive and narrative tools, this study contends that the activities of the Islamic extremists in the Northern Nigeria can be located within the purview of religious particularity, ignorance and state-aided impunity.

2. Religion, Peace and Conflict: The Interplay

Violence in the name of religion, plentiful enough in our time, is an enduring feature of religious life. Rituals of sacrifice and martyrdom and legendary tales of great battles abound within every religious tradition (Berman, 2009). The threat of religious extremism is real and well documented. The connection between religion and conflict is in the process of being thoroughly explored, however, to the extent that hyperbole and exaggeration are commonplace. In the popular mind, to discuss religion in the context of international affairs automatically raises the specter of religious-based conflict. The many other dimensions and impacts of religion tend to be downplayed or even neglected entirely. The contribution that religion can make to peacemaking--as the flip side of religious conflict--is only beginning to be explored and explicated. All three of the Abrahamic faiths contain strong warrants for peacemaking. There are past cases of mediation and peacemaking by religious leaders and institutions. For example, the World Council of Churches and the All Africa Conference of Churches mediated the short-lived 1972 peace agreement in Sudan. In South Africa, various churches were at the vanguard of the struggle against apartheid and the peaceful transition. The most dramatic and most frequently cited case is the successful mediation the Rome-based Community of Sant'Egidio achieved to help end the civil war in Mozambique in 1992 (Smock, 2006).

Religion of all kinds ought always to be part of the solution to the many problems facing humans, but at times can itself become part of the problem. Religions that should preach love, compassion and justice can themselves become breeding grounds for hatred, revenge, and violence (Trigg, 2011). Religions that claim to be true and universal in their nature also claim to have a mandate to spread their religious faiths to every corner of the world, to convert every human being to their religious fold. The religions that have taken these universal claims most seriously are Christianity and Islam (Litonjua, 2009). "Christians and Muslims share a common triumphalism. In contrast to the other religions of humanity, including Judaism, they believe that they alone are the recipients and custodians of God's final message to humanity, which is their duty to bring to the rest of the world" (Lewis 2003:5 cited in Litonjua, 2009). This may be regarded as a variant of religious particularity- a veritable ground for religious extremism in some societies. Religious extremists, according to Brahm (2005), see radical measures as necessary to fulfilling God's wishes. Fundamentalists of any religion tend to take a Manichean view of the world. If the world is a struggle between good and evil, it is hard to justify compromising with the devil. Any sign of moderation can be decried as selling out, more importantly, of abandoning God's will. Some groups, such as America's New Christian Right and Jama'at-i-Islami of Pakistan, have operated largely through constitutional means though still pursue intolerant ends. In circumstances where moderate ways are not perceived to have produced results, whether social, political, or economic, the populace may turn to extreme interpretations for solutions. Without legitimate

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mechanisms for religious groups to express their views, they may be more likely to resort to violence (Brahm, 2005).

The statement of the relation between religion and violence is at times marked by denial on the one side and by prejudice and exaggeration on the other. Apologists for religion often regard religion as the carrier of the message of nonviolence, love and peace, and deny that true religion has anything to do with violence. In support of this view, they array such messengers of peace and nonviolence as Buddha, Mahavira, Jesus, Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., and proffer religious violence as a strictly aberrant behavior. Taking this line, many religious leaders, especially Muslim religious leaders, have argued in the recent past that religious people who use their faith to justify violence are not authentically religious, that Muslims who justify violence are not »real« Muslims (Ingersoll 2001 cited in Perumalil, 2004:102). By contrast, apologists for secularism, intent on indicting religion, hold it responsible for most conflicts and argue that the elimination of religion will assure an era of peace and prosperity (Edelen 1999 cited in Perumalil, 2004:102).

According to a report from an International Inter-Religious Peace Conference in Sweden (2005:15), the experience of conflict between Christians and Muslims in northern Nigeria provides insight into the local and global forces driving seemingly 'religious' conflict. Although the root causes are principally political and economic, they interface with ethnic identity and cultural traditions and are refracted through the lens of religion. Behind the scenes political manipulation – in a contemporary rendition of the divide-and-rule system originating in British colonisation – usually precedes the outbreak of communal violence. Yet most of those involved are fervent believers and feel themselves motivated to defend their religion, amidst an atmosphere in which inter-religious animosity has been reproduced and legitimised by religious leaders. Disentangling religious doctrine from political and socio-economically rooted causes is extremely challenging.

The linkage between religion and violence is one of the great challenges for the twenty-first century. It reveals the difficult aspects of globalization in concentrated form: the erosion of culture, the increase in religious fundamentalism, the increasing domination of politics by economics, and the ubiquity of violence (Huber, 2010). It is affirmed by the Institute for Economics and Peace (2014:17), that countries with greater religious freedoms are generally more peaceful, whereas countries with less religious freedom are generally less peaceful. Religious freedom is defined as the absence of government restrictions towards religious practice and expression, whereas religious hostility is defined as the absence of aggression or violence towards particular religious beliefs and practices in a society. However, assessing whether religion is a vice or virtue for conflict does not allow for a nuanced understanding of its relationship with peace. Instead, a more holistic view of peace is needed. Whilst the relationship between religion and peace has some significance, there are many other factors which have greater explanatory power. Government type appears to have a much more significant connection with peace, and religious freedom, than religious characteristics. That is not to say that religious characteristics, like the absence of a dominant group and religious diversity, do not correspond with higher peace. Rather, there are other features which are more significant that are not related to religion.

Religion, without doubt, can be a contentious issue and is susceptible to being a latent source of conflict that can escalate into open conflict by seemingly insignificant events. For many people worldwide, and for some people more than for others, religion, as with ethnicity and race, serves

as a central part of an individual's identity and as a way to distinguish oneself and one's community from the other (McGarvey, 2011). Since the Nigerian civil war (1967-70), nothing has claimed as many lives in Nigeria as the crisis surrounding the issues of relations between Christians and Muslims. Although in their daily lives, Muslims and Christians in Nigeria live together in peace most of the time, taken together with other forms of inter-communal violence in Nigeria, ethno-religious conflict, which can erupt at any given moment in any given place but most particularly in the Northern part of the country, has cost the country tens of thousands of innocent lives (Falola, 2005). While the majority of the Nigerian population (both Muslim and Christian) are moderate, what catches the attention of the West are the instances of violent extremism. However, according to Paden (Cited in Schwartz, 2010), it is important not to treat these cases as the norm, nor simply as instances of religious extremism, as religious conflict in Nigeria tends to be only one layer in a complex set of contentious issues. Rather, it is useful to analyze the triggers that incite the conflict, the demographics of those who participate in the violence, and the efficacy of government responses, so as to gather lessons that can be used to help prevent such outbreaks in the future.

Academic and policy-oriented literature on religion and international affairs is rich in publications arguing that religion is a useful – if not necessary – instrument for achieving peace. More specifically, religious beliefs/values, religious leaders and faith-based organisations are thought to have huge potential in promoting peace in any society and/ or in the international arena (The British Academy, 2015:28). Religion in many parts of the world is contributing to violent conflict, although exaggerated in many cases. This is well documented and broadly accepted. Usually disregarded, however, are opportunities to employ the assets of religious leaders and religious institutions to promote peace. Traditional diplomacy has been particularly remiss in its neglect of the religious approach to peacemaking (Smock, 2006). In virtually every heterogeneous society, religious difference serves as a source of potential conflict. Because individuals are often ignorant of other faiths, there is some potential tension but it does not necessarily mean conflict will result. Religion is not necessarily conflictual but, as with ethnicity or race, religion serves, as a way to distinguish one's self and one's group from the other. Often, the group with less power, be it political or economic, is more aware of the tension than the privileged (Brahm, 2005). The next section seeks to deepen the analysis by focusing on socio-political and economic factors that precipitate or engender sectarian violence and religious extremism in the country.

3. Sectarian Violence and Religious Extremism: Unbundling the Economic Texture, Political Utility and Social Content

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, a casual glance at world affairs would suggest that religion is at the core of much of the strife around the globe. Often, religion is a contentious issue. Where eternal salvation is at stake, compromise can be difficult at or even sinful. Religion is also important because, as a central part of many individuals' identity, any threat to one's beliefs is a threat to one's very being. This is a primary motivation for ethno-religious nationalists (Brahm, 2005). Religion has always been important in Nigeria and in Nigerian politics (Enwerem, 1995) and the political elites have always sought to manipulate the multifaceted identities (ethnic, regional, minority-majority, and religious divisions) especially during political competition and this has given rise to conflicts and instability in Nigeria (Nnoli 1978, Dudley 1973).

Extremism is a complex phenomenon as many researchers and analysts have defined it as “views that are inconsistent with existing norms while others have defined it as beliefs, feelings,

actions and strategies that are far away from ordinary” (See Iqbal and Lodhi, 2014:195). However, religious extremism is not a new phenomenon as it has existed in its diversified forms throughout the world history. For Schmid (2014:12), religious extremists differ not only from radicals but, in some ways, also from more secular (e.g. right-wing) extremists. Charles Kimball has identified five warning signs (which do not exclusively apply to individuals only, as they may sometimes be applicable to a whole group or a theocratic regime): 1. Absolute Truth Claims; 2. Blind Obedience; 3. Establishing the “Ideal” Time; 4. The End Justifies Any Means; and 5. Declaring Holy War (Kimball, 2002).

When individuals’ beliefs move from being relatively mainstream to being radical and they want a dire change in society, this is known as radicalization. Extremism is based on the concept of exclusivism which makes extremists think that they are different from others on cultural, linguistic, ethnic or sub-religious grounds and use violence in expressing their identity and pursuing their ideological, social, economic and political objectives. Violent extremists often are driven, in part, by culture-based and culture-specific perceptions of what is fair and unfair, just and unjust; they are moved by implicit understandings of when deprivations constitute an integral part of life and, therefore, merely have to be endured and when, instead, they amount to violations of some basic moral compact between rulers and ruled, and, thus, provide a legitimate ground for violence.

Explanations of why individuals resort to violent extremism or terrorism frequently stress the “root causes,” “structural factors,” or “underlying conditions” that allegedly drive this phenomenon. Among these “underlying conditions,” in turn, social and economic ones (e.g., large-scale poverty and unemployment, inadequate government services, and insufficient economic opportunities) often receive a disproportionate level of attention. Although perhaps to a lesser extent, political factors (such as bad governance, government repression, and/or the existence of ill-governed or poorly governed areas) also frequently loom large in “root causes” explanations (Denoeux and Carter, 2009:8). Historically, religious extremists have tried to legalise violent behaviour and bloodshed in the name of God. This is apparent in the violent terrorist attacks that are justified by people who believe that they are involved in a form of holy warfare. In this context, Juergensmeyer’s concept of “cosmic war” (Juergensmeyer, 2000 cited in Nwankwo, 2015:293) provides a useful theoretical structure for investigating the conflict that religious extremists indulge in today. This framework refers to the encounter between the forces of evil and good that highlights religious humility, yet induces conflict. Killing in the name of God is therefore one of the major motors of religious violence today (Juergensmeyer, 2000 cited in *ibid*).

The structural violence paradigm offers theoretical insight to the ongoing crisis. Its logic, as advocated by its chief proponent Johan Galtung, underscores how socio-cultural systems, political structures and state institutions act as indirect instigators of violence (Galtung 1969 cited in Olojo, 2013b:2). It further explains how poverty, class discrimination and societal injustice prevent citizens from reaching their full potential. Accordingly, the theory suggests how seeds of hostility are sown and ultimately degenerate into large scale uprisings, revolutions and conflicts within societies. In Nigeria, a number of observers and senior administrators have been quick to underscore a nexus between the rising rate of aggression and the governance and development shortcomings of the Nigerian state.

The compulsions fuelling religious conflicts are certainly complex. According to Alasia (2015), to comprehend the most repugnant violence unleashed by a non-state actor in Nigeria's post-independence era, it is pertinent first to understand the motive of this group; second, to scrutinise the layers of the insurgency; and third, to investigate the dynamics that fuel the violence. Violent extremists are a not new threat – they have sought to tear down civilization for as long as others have worked to build it. But in the global age – where peoples connect through travel, trade, and technology like never before – the terror threat has evolved in profound ways (Sewall, 2016). Olojo (2013a:8) contends that religion by itself is not the problem or cause of the crisis in Nigeria; rather, the destructive exploitation of Nigeria's religious temperament by criminal-minded individuals or groups has been contrived into a key driver of public support for violence in the country. Even though Christianity and Islam have contributed positively to the growth of the country; they have also created a history of conflict and or violence (Falola, 1998). This includes a war of words motivated by conflicting beliefs: A good Muslim is one who is able to withstand Christian conversion tactics and campaigns. A good Christian is also one who is able to confront Islam and challenge the Quran's authority (Falola, 2001). These beliefs sanction symbolic violence, and Muslims and Christians use each other's sacred writings to perpetuate stereotypes that “express fear and anxiety about the domination of others... reflect a narrow extremist subculture of either their community or their religious group” (Falola, *ibid*).

Many scholars have attributed the causes of conflicts between and within various religious groups in Nigeria to a number of factors, such as ways of propagating the religions, selfishness, intolerance, mistrust and suspicion between the followers of the various religious groups (Agbaje 1990; Blakely, Walter and Dennis 1994 cited in Omotosho, 2014:137). It is argued that the failure of the Nigerian government to address pervasive poverty, corruption, police abuse, and long standing impunity for a range of crimes has created a conducive environment for the breeding of extremist groups. Indeed, many studies of extremist movements stress the underlying grievances that engender impetus for collective action, including ‘blocked social mobility, a lack of political freedom, economic despair, a sense of cultural vulnerability, humiliation and state repression (Agbiboa, 2015). The perspective which blames social conditions for the violence is anchored on the human needs theory of social conflicts. Its central thesis is that all humans have basic needs, which they seek to fulfill, and failure caused by other individuals or groups to meet these needs could lead to conflict (Maiangwa and Whetho, 2012). Other intellectuals oppose this socio-economic rationale of conflict, raising the notion that poverty, education deficiency and unemployment are nationwide problems. If socio-economic deprivations are responsible for violent extremism, why have terror-minded groups like Boko Haram not emerged in other geopolitical zones in Nigeria (Alozieuwa 2012 and Ogoloma, 2013 cited in Alasia, 2015). While analysts contend that poverty cannot rationally provide theological basis for violent religious beliefs, it, at least, provides a fertile ground for the recruitment of frustrated elements in the society.

Social isolation and marginality, it is observed, may also trigger a search for identity, meaning and purpose, which can lead to increased religiosity; that quest, in turn, can open the door to joining violent religious extremist organizations. Most importantly perhaps, the primary impact of social marginality on radicalization appears to be through the personal relationships, networks and group dynamics that often develop, or solidify, in response to these phenomena. In some cases, social isolation prompts individuals to drift into pre-existing extremist groups, usually via prior personal relationships with members of such groups. More often, it leads them to seek out like-minded individuals, who share their deep disaffection from, and hostility to, the society around them. In

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the process, cliques are formed which, over time, often become the primary venue through which individuals are radicalized.

It is argued that social and economic conditions alone cannot explain the problems of radicalization and violent extremism. Youth vulnerability to fringe movements both left and right wing terrorism and violent extremism, street gangs and cults are more of a feature of the developed world. In the same token poverty alone cannot fully explain the long process of radicalization and violent extremism. To complete the process other factors and agencies need to be present. Often, the situation could be marked by a poor education system stratified along socio-economic lines and disparate economic opportunities across segments of society. Frustrated expectations and relative deprivation of mainly educated youth represents a danger zone. Moreover, perceptions of social exclusion and marginality in an environment of a youth bulge are a recipe for radicalization. These are warning signals that could increase the likelihood for young members of society being lured towards extremist causes (Denoeux and Carter, 2009:25).

The issue of religion and politics is a very important one and has come to the fore this period for a number of reasons – crimes are being committed daily against humanity in the name of God and religion within and across national frontiers by religious fundamentalists; the globalization of democracy; and developments in communication, science and technology which makes the world a global village, thereby bringing the conditions of life of some other societies to our knowledge. However, the way religious faith glosses over to the political realm in Nigeria makes religion incompatible with politics. The level of religiosity is so high that religion has acquired the capacity to impose and assert its perspectives in the country's political agenda and this makes secularization of the nation imperative (Akwara and Ojomah, 2013:34).

It should be noted that religion has always featured prominently in Nigeria's political life. It has also been recognised as a prominent factor in determining who governs the nation. The excesses of religious bigots have over the years affected tenuously the political stability of the nation. In fact, the several altercations that have dotted our political landscape are often traceable to religion (Kalu, 2016). One of the dominant explanations of the interface of religion and politics in Nigeria is the manipulation thesis. This thesis, as lucidly summarized by Jibrin Ibrahim (cited in Ilesanmi, 1995:317), posits that "political actors often amplify differences and provoke confessional conflicts as part of a wider strategy for the acquisition of political power and/or enhancing the political assets of groups involved in the process of power brokerage."

The contextual background out of which the debate over the manipulation and politicization of religion arose was the metamorphosis of Nigeria's economic base from agriculture to petroleum, a process which led to the centralization of the country's financial resources. The petro-dollar economy exacerbated all forms of struggle for political power and consequently for economic resources. Religion, commonly regarded as an effective weapon for social mobilization, came to play an important role in the distribution of the national pie (Ilesanmi, 1995:318). As rightly observed by Ayantayo (2009:96):

Religious institutions are integral part of the Nigerian public sphere. They have capacity to influence politics and society. At group or sub-group levels, religious practitioners do meet, freely discuss and identify societal problems, and through such discussion influence political action. This is done by interpreting religiously governance in its entirety, especially as it relates essentially to

policy formulation and the execution of public import. In other words, every governmental apparatus, political power, authority and control are coated with religious flavour and they therefore provide a basis for government legitimacy and the need for obedience to constituted authority. The government officials too, do influence the public under religious canopy in marketing and implementing their political policies. This feeling is expressed in the conception of political power and nation, political manifestoes, voting patterns, choice of candidates and party leadership, and swearing of oath of office.

The use of religion as a tool for achieving political ends has contributed immensely to the problem of religious conflict in Nigeria. Some politicians in Nigeria are known to engage in reactionary recourse to religious fervour as a means of either holding on to power, or as an instrument for political ascendancy (Omotoso, 2014:137). In Nigeria, a number of observers and senior administrators have been quick to underscore a nexus between the rising rate of aggression and the governance and development shortcomings of the Nigerian state (Olojo, 2013:3). Contemporary state–religion relations in Nigeria are characterized by ill-defined boundaries. As observed by (Tar and Shettima, 2010:8), “the Nigerian state has always been constructed as secular. This is a colonial legacy that has been carried forward to the current era, albeit only in rhetorical terms. Present claims of secularism are nothing but expressions of the imagination within official circles and undermined by the sectarian agenda of those in power”. Whereas the Nigerian Constitution has declared freedom of religion and apparently seeks to separate state affairs from the doctrinal leanings of religion, the same constitution creates and recognizes executive and judicial institutions with religious biases.

Thus, the existence of multiple judicial systems based on secular, religious, and traditional jurisprudence, as well as multiple educational systems based on secular and religious principles, only serve the purpose of obfuscating the real character of the Nigerian state, whether secular or religious. The security ramifications of this conceptual uncertainty mean that religion is often instrumentalised for political and hubristic ends, thereby creating strong animosity among religious groups (Sampson, 2014). The leadership of this country has revolved between the two dominant religions – Christianity and Islam. The constant unhealthy rivalry between the adherents of the two religions has remained of paramount worry to their leaderships, including the security agencies that are kept on their toes endlessly. The ongoing unrests across the country are deemed to have a semblance of religion, which makes them precariously frightening (Kalu, 2016).

4. Islamic Orientation, Mob Action and Combustible Northern Nigeria: Faith-Inspired or Ignorance-Induced?

Ignorance as a causal factor of fanaticism consists not so much in intellectual incapacity to grasp complex religious issues, as in the lack of the necessary religious knowledge where it ought to exist. It is a case of gross ignorance in religious matters which has more often than not, its source in religious indifferentism. This ignorant religious indifference has left the highly educated men in a state of perpetual catechistic and doctrinal infancy (Saila, 1984). According to Vasudev (2006), more than a few religious adherents know very little of only their scriptural teachings, without caring to have broad based knowledge of other scriptures. This reinforces their fanaticism, which is counterproductive to religious tolerance, sustainable democracy and national development. It is also observed that religious fanatics are often the products of religious organizations and institutions from where they draw their inspirations and encouragements. An

ignorant and unenlightened religious leadership is thus the most prolific facilitator of religious fanaticism and extremism. Such a poor religious leadership is often too conservative and too theologically and socially impotent to be able to reconcile and adapt its creed and practice to the legitimate imperatives and values of modern times (Rodney, 2000).

Islam is regarded as a complete way of life that guarantees happiness and succour both in this physical world and in the Hereafter. It is a religion institutionalized for the advancement of human beings that submit totally to their Creator, Allah (Ismail, 2005:50). To understand Islam, one needs to accept certain facts about this religion. The impact of Islam on the daily life of Muslims is far greater than that found in the Western Culture since the Middle Ages (<http://www.targetofopportunity.com/islam.htm>). For example, in Saudi Arabia, a country ruled by Islamic law, sorcery, witchcraft, and blasphemy are all crimes punishable by death... they behead people convicted of these "crimes" in the public square. This is what Islamic law advocates. Saudi Arabia holds to Shariah Law and has a Religious Police to enforce all the aspects of Shariah Law. Christian Bibles are destroyed by the thousands like book burnings in Nazi Germany. This is not a religion of tolerance as so many Muslims claim.

In Islamic states, where there is no formally recognized separation between religion and law, mosque and state, Shariah Law is a cornerstone and is often implemented as the final and ultimate formulation of the law of God, not to be revised or reformulated by mere mortal and fallible human beings. The connection between Islam and violence is unsurprisingly complex, and a fuller explanation of the problem needs to reference other things, including individual psychologies, an established subculture of violence within the Muslim world, and the political and socioeconomic realities that some Muslims live within (Rowe, 2015). Given the decline and the constant search for identity, a large section of the Islamic society has found solace in their glorious history. This has led to further radicalization, rigid blasphemy laws and constant attempts to keep the religion afloat. The hatred and Islam phobia justify the necessity for them. The Islamic Revolution created a perfect atmosphere for political opportunism, thus allowing religious tyrants taking charge and creating further mass destruction (See <https://www.quora.com/If-Islam-is-a-religion-of-peace-as-claimed-by-its-followers-why-are-terrorists-and-militants-acting-in-the-name-of-jihad-and-sharia>).

In Nigeria, there is a long-standing recognition of the use of Shari'a law to govern personal status issues. However, in 1999, twelve of Nigeria's 36 states contravened the constitution, effectively creating a state religion by instituting the Shari'a penal code, or 'Full Shari'a', under which both blasphemy (insulting Islam) and apostasy (leaving a religion: in this case, Islam) are punishable potentially by death. The creation of a de facto state religion has had the unfortunate consequence of legitimising often deadly mob action against alleged perpetrators of blasphemy and the collective punishment of religious minorities following false or unproven accusations of blasphemy. But what does the Qur'anic teaching say about blasphemy that could have continually provoked murder via mob action in Northern Nigeria?

The Qur'anic teaching on blasphemy, according to Humayun (2015:1) is in direct conflict with the general Muslims' practice of this doctrine. While the Qur'an condemns blasphemy on moral and ethical grounds, the Muslims' practice of killing the blasphemer – as justifiable punishment – is contrary to Islamic teachings. Similarly, capital punishment for blasphemy, as legislated in several Muslim countries, is contrary to Qur'anic teachings. In other words, Islam strongly

condemns blasphemy on both moral and ethical grounds but it does not prescribe any physical punishment nor authorizes humans to penalize the blasphemer. Humayun contends that all Muslims claim to accept the Prophet as a perfect exemplar; yet those who justify or sympathize with the killing of blasphemers have chosen to place their personal convictions above that of the Prophet's and the scripture.

Perhaps, no prophet of God was more blasphemed, maligned, insulted and abused during his life-time than Prophet Muhammad himself. He and his followers were subjected to verbal invective and physical harassment of the harshest form. The severity of persecution forced him to migrate from Mecca to Medina with all his followers. Ten years later he returned to Mecca as a triumphant leader, with thousands of followers; the city surrendered without a fight and its citizens welcomed him. Much to the amazement of the Meccans, the prophet forgave their atrocities and announced a general pardon. This was the prophet's general attitude towards his enemies and blasphemous opponents throughout his life (Humayun, 2011).

The approved response for Muslims against blasphemy is to temporarily disassociate themselves from the blasphemer(s) by staging a walkout from an assembly where religious values are being mocked and ridiculed. Registering the protest peacefully will send a strong message to the blasphemer that vane speech will not be appreciated and that action could cost them their friendships. Interestingly, this broad directive covers all religions and does not specifically mention Islam. The Qur'an also asserts that the boycott should be temporary and should last only for the duration during which the act of blasphemy is being committed. No mention of any human punishment or authorization to humans to carry out any punishment is made in these verses (Humayun, 2015:4). It could be said therefore, that ignorance of the Islamic faith is one of the major sources of religious extremism and conflict that permeate the northern region. In a study conducted by Onuoha (2014), it is revealed, in all the states surveyed, that:

There is unanimity that initial ignorance of religious teaching is the leading factor influencing the adoption of extreme religious views, especially among youth. The lack of deep knowledge of true religious teaching is partly related to three observable dangerous trends in the recent practice of religion in Nigeria: the proliferation of sects in both Islam and Christianity, the proliferation of independent preachers in both religions, and the increasing reliance on preachers rather than on the holy books themselves. As a result, young people are very vulnerable to recruitment and radicalization by independent and roaming preachers, extremist groups, and religious ideologues, who often distort religious injunctions.

The existence of "street boys" (unemployed youths) and armed gangs like the Almajirai, Yan Tauri, Yan Daba, Yan Banga, and Yan Dauka Amarya in Northern Nigeria has made some parts of the north, like Kano, hot spots. These gangs are mostly the product of a desire to resort to violence as a coping mechanism (Adesoji, 2011: 104). In addition to other factors highlighted in this study, it can be said in the final analysis that ignorance, (rather than adherence to faith) that frequent collaborator with fanaticism, leads the Northern Youth to frequently engage in mob action and perpetrate heinous crimes in the name of defending the Islamic faith.

5. The Many Cases of "Condemned-to-Death-as-Charged": God Avengers as Drivers of Violence

Religious fanaticism and impunity seem to have become a permanent feature of the socio-political existence of the Northern Nigeria while failure, on the part of the community/religious leaders and governments, to rein in bloodthirsty religious fanatics is pushing the country to the brink. Indeed, the activities of the Islamic extremists in the Northern Nigeria can be explained within the purview/prism of religious particularity. Religious particularity, according to religious scholars, is among the key drivers of insecurity in Nigeria. Simply defined, religious particularity is the claim to divine truth or recognition of one's religion as the most superior or authentic over and above other (Dopamu, 1984 cited in Owoyemi, 2014:106). It is the non-recognition of other religious scriptures or prophets apart from those which one professes or recognizes. In an extremist's view, religious particularity is condemnation of other religions besides one's religion and regarding other people as "irreligious or non-believers" who have been condemned to hell fire. This mindset, no doubt, has precipitated many avoidable mob killings and attacks in this part of the country.

Several legal instruments promote the sanctity of human life and right to freedom of religion. Section 33 (1) of the 1999 Constitution, (as amended) stipulates that "every person has a right to life, and no one shall be deprived intentionally of his life, save in the execution of the sentence of a court in respect of a criminal offence of which he has been found guilty in Nigeria. Also section 38 of the constitution stipulates that "every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom (either alone or in community with others, and in public or in private) to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance". Also Article 4 of the African Charter of Human and Peoples Rights promotes the right to life and Article 8 talks about the right to freedom of conscience, and free practice of religion. However, recent events in Nigeria have negated the provisions of these legal instruments which uphold the sanctity of human life. Some cases are cited here for further analysis.

On May 1, 1980, there were disturbances in Zaria during which property belonging to Christians were destroyed. In December 1980, a riot spearheaded by the deadly sect, Maitatsine in Yan- Awaku ward, Kano State claimed 118 lives and property were damaged. The Kala- Kato and Maitatsine clash in Bullumkutu Maiduguri, Borno State in October 1982 claimed scores of lives and wanton destruction of property. During the time under review, Muslim demonstrators allegedly burnt down churches in Kano. At Dobeli ward in Gombe in the first quarter of 1984, a crisis reportedly spearheaded by the Maitatsine sect claimed about 568 lives and wanton destruction of property. In March 1986, Muslims and Christians clashed during an Easter procession by Christians. There were also clashes between Muslims and Christians in March 1987 at College of Education, Kafanchan, Kaduna State. In the same vein, waves of religious riots in different locations in Kaduna in the same March 1987 witnessed loss of lives and destruction of property. Religious riots among students at Kaduna Polytechnic in 1988 resulted to the destruction of the foundation wall of the Christian Chapel (Ukegbu, 2016).

It will be recalled that a quarrel between a Fulani man and meat seller in Tafewa Balewa, Bauchi State in 1991 later assumed a religious colouration, resulting in wanton destruction of property and loss of lives. A peaceful protest by the Izala sect in 1991 to halt Rev. Reinhard

Bonnke's crusade in Kano snowballed into a full-blown riot resulting to wanton destruction of property and lives. In May 1992, in Zangon-Kataf, Kaduna State, a feud between the Kataf and Hausas later assumed Muslim-Christian riot in other major cities of the state which resulted in destruction of lives and property (Ukegbu, 2016). One cannot but recall the murder of Gideon Akaluka, who was savagely beheaded by a mob and had his head stuck on a spike and paraded around the city of Kano in a most barbaric manner. According to reports (See Pointblank News, 2014), Akaluka, a young Igbo trader, allegedly desecrated the Koran. He was arrested after his wife allegedly used pages of the Koran as toilet paper for her baby. After the police locked him up, a group of Muslim fundamentalists broke into the police station cells, beheaded Akaluka, and paraded his bodiless head around the streets of Kano.

Another outstanding protest that broke out sometime in 2002 was in connection with the Miss World contest in Kaduna and Abuja. Violence surged when a columnist wrote that the Holy Prophet Mohammed would likely support the pageant, an event some Muslims felt was indecent. The 'blasphemous' article suggested that the Prophet Mohammed would have liked to marry a Miss World beauty queen (The Straits Times 2002). Some Islamic fundamentalists perceived this as an insult to Islam and it eventually led to further riots in which many people lost their lives. More than 2,000 people died in the rioting that followed in Kaduna and Abuja. In 2006, riots over Danish cartoons depicting Prophet Mohammed led to the deaths of nearly 200 people in several Nigerian Northern cities, more than in any other country that experienced violence in the global backlash against the cartoons (Hill and Asthana 2006).

Similarly, Christianah Oluwasesin was lynched by secondary school students in Gombe in 2007 who accused her of desecrating the Qur'an (Adesanmi, 2016). The deceased was reportedly assigned to invigilate the SS1 students who were writing their Islamic Religious Knowledge paper when she observed that one of the students was attempting to smuggle some books into the examination hall. Sensing that a foul play was about to take place, she allegedly collected the books and threw them outside. Unknown to her, a copy of the Holy Qur'an was among the books she allegedly collected from the aberrant student and threw outside. Newspaper reports claimed that she was attacked outside the school premises after the examination and beaten to death by the students for allegedly desecrating the holy book (Nigerian Tribune, 2007). Also, Grace Ushang was raped and murdered in 2009 in Maiduguri for wearing trousers - Khaki trousers that was issued to her by the Nigerian state for NYSC (Adesanmi, 2016).

In June 2016, some irate, homicidal Muslims youths beheaded a female trader over allegations that she blasphemed Prophet Mohammed. The tragedy happened in the Wambai area of Kano State (Yahaya, 2016). The slain woman, Mrs Bridget Patience Agbahime, aged 74 years, a trader at the Kofar Wambai Market in Kano, was tending to her shop when a Muslim man reportedly entered the space and attempted to carry out his evening prayers. She objected and began arguing with him, which prompted the man to make blasphemy accusations against her (Silva, 2016). The Public Relations Officer, PRO, of the Kano Police Command, DSP Musa Magaji, who confirmed the incident reportedly said the victim, who was said to be of Igbo extraction, was accused of blasphemy during a religious argument at Wambai market. The woman was in the company of her husband when she was murdered; but for the timely intervention of the police, he too would have been lynched. One also recalls an incident in the same Kano in 2015 where a blood-thirsty mob nearly ran down a court and police station with the intention to seize and lynch a man accused of blasphemy.

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Two days earlier, another trader identified as Methodus Chimaije Emmanuel, 24, was reportedly attacked and murdered by another mob in Pandogari, in Rafi Local Government Area of Niger State. The killers had alleged that he posted a blasphemous statement in the social media. Although the military quickly restored order, the mob resumed hostilities the next day and killed three more persons, including a member of the Nigerian Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC). The killers also burnt a church, a house and at least 25 shops as they blocked the Lagos—Kaduna Expressway linking the Northern and Southern parts of Nigeria (The Sun, August 31, 2016).

A 42-year-old mother of seven, Mrs. Eunice Elisha, was on July 9, 2016 murdered by unknown assailants while evangelizing around Gbazango-West area of Kubwa, a satellite town in the Federal Capital Territory. Eunice, who was a Deaconess at the Divine Touch Parish of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Old NEPA Road, Phase 4, Kubwa, was said to have been cut in the neck and also stabbed in the stomach. It was learnt that her killers left her in the pool of her blood with her Bible, megaphone, and cell phone (Sahara Reporters, 2016). The victim, according to Olatunji (2016), was killed by Muslim fundamentalists who were displeased with her evangelism work in the community. Her murderers left her in the pool of her blood with her bible, megaphone and cell phone.

Religious bigotry and mindless violence were, once again, on display in Zamfara State on August 22, as an angry mob lynched a polytechnic student over an allegation of blasphemy by a Muslim fellow student. (The Sun, August 31, 2016). The student was alleged to have made a blasphemous statement against Islam and Prophet Muhammad and was consequently attacked by a mob. According to reports, an argument among some students of the Abdu Gusau Polytechnic veered into the religious realm and soon, as is so common in that environment of intolerance, a spurious allegation of blasphemy was made against a young man. This, again as usual, prompted a mob action (The Punch, 2016). The News Agency of Nigeria (2016) reported that the boy was said to have been beaten to a pulp by the mob, and the man, whose name was simply given as Tajudeen, took him in his car and drove him to a hospital. Enraged by the act of the man who rescued the student, the mob moved to his (Tajudeen's) house, set it on fire and killed eight persons.

There was confusion in some parts of Kakuri, in Kaduna South Local Government Area, when a 41-year-old carpenter, Mr. Francis Emmanuel Francis, almost lost his right eye following an attack on him by Muslim youths for not observing the Ramadan fast. The carpenter courted trouble for himself when he was spotted by some Muslim boys in the Sokoto Road area of Kakuri, at about 2.30pm, eating when others were supposed to be observing the fast. This drew the ire of the youth who started beating him. He was inflicted with deep machete cuts on his head and other parts of his body during the incident. Narrating his ordeal to journalists from his hospital bed, Emmanuel said he was taking his lunch when the boys, numbering about six, descended on him on the grounds that he was not fasting (Isenyo, 2016). His words:

I went to buy wood to do some work, when I came back, I bought food to eat. As I was eating, about six Hausa boys came and asked me whether I was a Muslim or a Christian. I did not answer them. They asked me why was I not fasting with them? I told them that I am not a Muslim. Before I knew it, one of them slapped me. As I stood up, the rest came and surrounded me and started attacking me with knives. I don't know them. Nobody could come to my aid

because of the type of dangerous knives they were carrying. They used cutlasses, scissors and knives on me until I became unconscious, I don't even know who brought me to the hospital (Odunsi, 2016).

The list of religious conflicts which have claimed wanton property and lives in the Nigerian history is inexhaustible. Very often, Nigerians are treated to gory sights of murder with religious undertones. The increasing spate of these killings, and the ease with which they are perpetrated, are terrible signs that something is wrong with the Nigerian society. Kano State, it seems, set the tone for this type of barbarism- blasphemy murder- and the impunity has ever continued. However, a comparative analysis of religion and conflict across different states in the country will readily indict some overzealous religious irredentists in Northern Nigeria. As rightly observed by Egbujo (2016), a society on whose grounds such mobs can sprout must accept total responsibility. The Kano society set the wolves on the sheep. The Yoruba of south-west Nigeria are divided roughly equally between followers of Islam and adherents of various denominations, including Roman Catholicism and evangelical Protestantism (Haynes, 1995:18); Christians and Muslims who have lived together for the most part peacefully. Some believe it is more peaceful because it is the most developed economically. Others note that faith and practices of both Christians and Muslims in the southwest retain aspects of their traditional religion (Reese, 2015). Lagos, for instance, has millions of Muslims and Christians but not one of such incidents. This doesn't relieve the perpetrators of criminal responsibility. It only implicates a grave vicarious communal liability. Egbujo further contends that "freedom and peace in a plural secular society cannot rest on the willingness of a group to tone down their gospel. The fundamental question resides in the acceptance of the supremacy or otherwise of the constitution". Is the constitution accepted as superior to all interpretations of religious texts? Are there persons or group of persons for whom the supremacy of the constitution is unacceptable? These questions would be better dissected/understood within the context of the state response to the lingering impunity.

6. State Faltering Response to the Festering Religious Criminality/Culture of Impunity

As earlier pointed out, major religions of the world preach and profess peace, love and tolerance. And indeed, the imperatives of the modern world that more or less compel interdependence of peoples, nations etc, of diverse cultures, religions and values clearly point to tolerance as a minimum irreducible virtue for harmonious relationships. Yet, most tribal and political differences often find practical expressions in violent religious crises. Charlatans and patently unreligious persons hide under religion to wreak havoc, advance and/or protect their selfish and personal interests (Nigerian tribune, 2007). The government of Nigeria continues to tolerate systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom that lead to particularly severe violations affecting all Nigerians, both Christian and Muslim. For many years, the government has failed to bring those responsible for sectarian violence to justice, prevent and contain acts of such violence, or prevent reprisal attacks. As a result since 1999, more than 14,000 Nigerians have been killed in sectarian violence between Muslims and Christians. Boko Haram, a militant group that espouses an extreme and violent interpretation of Islam, benefits from this culture of impunity and lawlessness as it exploits Muslim-Christian tensions to destabilize Nigeria (USCIRF Annual Report, 2013:2).

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The Nigerian government, at the state and federal levels, has proven unable or unwilling to address the violence and its underlying causes. The State Department's most recent international religious freedom report found that the government "did not act swiftly or effectively" to stop communal violence or to bring to justice individuals who perpetrated violence. It went on to note that, "Federal, state, and local authorities have not effectively addressed underlying political, ethnic, and religious grievances leading to violence" (USCIRF Annual Report, 2013:3). In other words, the core Nigerian government policies and practices have been reactive rather than proactive in addressing vulnerability and violence. Weakness in the criminal justice system, poorly funded local government structures, corruption, and detached federal policies have eroded trust between communities and government, further diminishing the ability of government to mitigate tensions within and between communities (Ademola-Adelehin and Smith, 2017).

The police and other security agencies are often blamed for not nipping fundamentalist activities in the bud or for being responsible for their escalations, but what is not often stressed is the state's failure to arm them adequately and motivate them for better performance. The intelligence organization as presently constituted has been described as normal security intelligence used for personal protection of government officials and highly placed people. This is in addition to the problem of nepotism in the structure of the security organizations, failure of political officeholders to fund intelligence gathering and administration, and absence of proper coordination among different security organizations in the exchange and processing of intelligence information (Soyinka 2008, cited in Adesoji, 2011:114). Related is the inability of state governors as the chief security officers of their states to control the security forces, which are under the control of the federal government (Adesoji, 2011:114).

In the past decade, the government has deployed Joint Task Forces (JTFs), special combined military and police units, to respond to specific conflicts that the government classifies as national emergencies (Blanchard and Husted, 2016:16). The Buhari administration has come under criticisms for its approach towards agitations and unrests in some parts of the country (Mordi, 2016). In a nation swarming with all manner of militant and religious groups, it might be headed for that day when some crackbrained fundamentalist could just round up people of a different faith and routinely execute them in utter defiance of the state which has repeatedly proved ineffectual in protecting lives and basic freedoms. It is all the more disturbing that the government of the day has remained helpless in the face of a clear erosion of its sovereign legitimacy with anarchy now a clear and present danger (ThisDay, 2016). It is shocking that these incidents could happen in 2016 Nigeria. It also begs the question how equipped and prepared the security agencies are, especially the police, to respond to spontaneous incidents such as mob action. Again, the issue of the police-citizens ratio comes to the fore (Yahaya, 2016). In its editorial, The Sun (August 31, 2016) expresses worry over the seemingly inactive responses from government circle and prominent individuals in the country:

After each horrific incident, the government, states and federal, exhibit political correctness by saying the right things. But, their unwillingness to take the decisive measures required to end these killings makes their statements ring hollow, if not hypocritical. President Muhammadu Buhari has condemned the Zamfara incident, calling it barbaric. The Zamfara State governor has been labouring to reassure Nigerians that this is no Muslim-Christian conflict, pointing out the killing of seven Muslims by the fanatics. The Kano incident had also elicited a statement from President Muhammadu Buhari, who condemned the murder and

urged the prosecution of the perpetrators. The Sultan of Sokoto, Alhaji Sa'ad Abubakar II, also condemned the Kano incident. But, the optimism on the arraignment of five suspects for the murder of Mrs. Agbahime has since evaporated. Nothing more has been heard of the case, just as nothing has been heard of the cases in Niger and Kaduna States

Religious murderers and arsonists have for so long enjoyed unmitigated impunity in the country. The failure to bring perpetrators of crimes of this nature to book is responsible for the unending killings of innocent persons over blasphemy allegations. There is hardly any record of a single diligent prosecution of perpetrators of such murders, to say nothing of a conviction. The perpetrators of these crimes have a sense of protection, that they would never be held to account for these crimes and that is why on the slightest pretext, they accuse their neighbours of blasphemy and get a mob to kill them with impunity. Thus, as long as swift arrest, prosecution and conviction of the culprits fail to follow criminality, the familiar homilies of traditional rulers and governors after every fresh outrage will continue to ring hollow and hypocritical. In its editorial, *The Punch* (2016) expresses worry over this trend:

While the penalty for murder is death, we have not seen scrupulous prosecution of the fanatics that slaughtered over 300 persons in Kafanchan, Zaria and other parts of Kaduna State in 1987; mum is the word on those who killed over 200 persons in 2002 when fanatics declared the proposed Miss World Beauty Pageant in Kaduna blasphemous, or about those who in 2006, killed over 50 persons in Borno State, destroyed over 30 churches and 100 vehicles over allegedly blasphemous cartoons published in a Danish newspaper.

All Nigerians are supposed to be protected by the law, and the law enforcement agencies are expected to sniff out brewing inter-ethnic and inter-religious issues before they blow up into big problems resulting in the loss of lives and property. Justice Oputa (cited in Ezedike, 2011:449) in his work, *Crime and the Nigerian Society*, defines crime control as all efforts and activities designed to hold the volume of crime in effective check, to keep it from spreading, to restrict and prevent crime infection and contamination and to protect the society against the activities of violent criminals. In order to achieve this lofty objective, responsible government controls crime by means of proactive laws, effective policing (which involves prompt detection, apprehension and prosecution of suspected criminals), impartial judiciary (the court system) and correctional agencies (the prisons), which could deal promptly and decisively with all criminal activities in order to produce repressive or deterrent effects on habitual or potential criminals (Membere, 1982).

The relationship between Muslims and their non-Muslim counterparts in Northern Nigeria has become that of fear, suspicion and mistrust. There are no indications that the country has actually seen the last of these instances of religious bloodletting and carnage. This is because the so-called peaceful majority seems to be helpless or has been subdued by fanatics (Igwe, 2016). As observed by Maitama Sule, (cited in Maier, 1995), "we may end up with a revolution which is just not religious, but may be political, social and economic. Symptoms of revolt loom large on the horizon today. It is a group of disgruntled elements who are out to vent their anger who are joined by some irresponsible, undesirable waste products of humanity." If, as argued by Nasir (2011:323), Islamic faith and traditions are rich with values and practices that encourage tolerance and peacemaking dialogue, it is therefore, paradoxical that the same faith has always been an alibi for Muslim Youths to engage in criminality such as murder and wanton destruction of property in Northern Nigeria.

7. Concluding Remarks

Many contemporary armed conflicts have religious ingredients. This implies that religious bodies are challenged to guide their members, as well as the public, into an understanding of what religions can do to obtain and guard peace. The challenge goes even further and calls upon religious bodies to meet across traditional religious, social and cultural borders. In such encounters religious communities can find ways both to prevent conflicts and to minimise violence when conflicts appear (Molin et al 2004:2). Also, to have sustainable peace in Nigeria, parents, guardians and teachers need to understand the relevance of respect for life, the need to jettison violence and the obligation to promote a lifestyle of peace and non-violence through education, dialogue and cooperation. Furthermore, there is a need to review the curriculum and content in both the formal and informal educational systems in northern Nigeria, because the channels through which learning takes place are very important in building cultures of peace and non-violence. This means that peace should be seen as more than the end of armed conflict – peace should be understood as a way of life (UNESCO, 1989, cited in Alasia, 2015).

The extant laws of the land, whether implicitly or explicitly, do not permit anyone or group to deliberately terminate the life of another person. So whatever laws the bloodthirsty religious fanatics apply in carrying out their barbaric act are non-existent in our statute books (Nigerian Tribune, 2007). Thus, blasphemy should not be a crime under Nigerian law. Its provision via the penal aspects of Sharia law adopted by 12 northern states in defiance of the 1999 Constitution is an anomaly. Nigeria is a secular state whose basic law forbids the adoption of any state religion. Put differently, the constitution is the highest statute in the country and should be accorded the reverence it deserves. A situation where some people audaciously disregard the law and the constitution is an open invitation to anarchy. With so much tension and disaffection in many parts of the country, the outcome of a spark and conflagration is hard to predict. Already, Human Rights Watch (cited in *The Punch*, 2016), has estimated that over 10,000 persons have died in sectarian violence in the North since 1999. Extrajudicial killing or treatment otherwise known as 'Jungle justice' requires only a severe and drastic approach by the appropriate authorities toward its eradication. Extrajudicial treatment remains barbaric and illegal; hence, totally unacceptable. Its continued occurrence is an assault to the country's criminal laws that are reckoned to be mightier than any person or group irrespective of the circumstance (Nwaozor, 2016).

While poverty is not a standalone instigator of violent extremism in Nigeria as clearly pointed out in this study, the government should endeavour to undercut the ability of extremists who exploit the economically vulnerable in society. Developmental reforms need to be geared towards improving infrastructure, stimulating human enterprise and ensuring that political institutions are corruption free. Particular focus should be targeted at educational needs, and in implementing this, all excluded groups including women must be fully incorporated into a broad strategy of empowerment. There is also need for deeper understanding of radicalisation issues based on expert studies, joint research and knowledge production which aim to explore causes, dynamics and actors (Olojo, 2013:3).

Similarly, religious leaders have a special role to play in both perpetrating and preventing violent conflict. This is because the religious beliefs, values, and practices held by the mainstream in a society are an expression of their basic worldview, a manifestation of assumptions about what exists outside the narrow confines of everyday experience. In most societies, religious leaders

provide guidance on interpreting these beliefs and traditions and articulate the appropriate values and correct moral behaviour for living in alignment with these beliefs. If religious leaders legitimate policies that lead to mass violence or the dehumanizing ideology that justifies it, they directly contribute to creating an environment in which the faithful accept mass murder and may even justify it with a sense of self-sacrificing duty to a higher cause (Report from an International Inter-Religious Peace Conference, Sweden 2005:7). While it is not acceptable to reduce any religious orientation via any form of defamatory actions, it is indeed barbaric to engage in jungle justice. Perhaps, that is why, as noted by Sultan (2014), the idea of a moderate Islam certainly sounds appealing. There is plenty in the Islamic sources and tradition that promotes the virtue of moderation and in praise of the middle way. The Qur'an describes the ideal Muslim community as one that pursues the "middle way" (2:143) and continuously insists on moderation in all spheres of life (7:31 and 25:67, for example).

It is established in this article that the Nigerian government's tolerance of criminal acts has created a permissive environment for continued sectarian violence, leading to a culture of impunity. Thus, the Nigerian government should be seen to be vigorously investigating, prosecuting, and bringing to justice perpetrators of all past and future incidents of sectarian violence. Also, it should develop effective conflict-prevention and early-warning mechanisms at the local, state, and federal levels using practical and implementable criteria while taking steps to professionalize its police and military forces in its investigative, community policing, crowd control, and conflict prevention capacities by conducting specialized training for its military and security forces on human rights standards, as well as non-lethal responses to crowd control and quelling mob or communal violence.

As a matter of obligation, the government should ensure that all laws, including all Shari'ah codes, uphold the principle of equality under the law between men and women and between Muslims and non-Muslims, and do not permit violations of international human rights standards with regard to freedom of religion or belief, due process of law, equal treatment before the law, freedom of expression and humane treatment and punishment (USCIRF Annual Report, 2013:10). On the part of the Secular Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Faith-based Organizations (FBOs), they should redouble their efforts as facilitators of dialogues and mediators of conflicts between conflicting parties. In addition, they should step up their advocacy by sensitizing and conscientising the people about their rights and the rights of others especially on peaceful co-existence, civic and religious rights among others (E nukora, 2005).

In the final analysis, Nigeria needs a new ethos and a new political culture. To satisfy these needs and to break the mould, new leaders with fiery intellect, deep intuitive grasp of the complex issues shaping the 21st century, and instinctive feel of the yearnings and aspirations of the people whose disparate needs are sometimes too abstract and formless to put in words, must emerge (Akinlotan, 2016:64). The government cannot contain religious extremism and violence by simply issuing executive orders. It requires a comprehensive approach that entails monitoring supporters of the militant groups in the civil and military administration, curtailing societal sources of support, and strict action against the hard-core militant elements that use violence (Hasan Askari Rizvi).

Religious fundamentalism, whether arising from Christianity, Islam or African traditional religions, is an abuse of religion and therefore is abhorrent. Genuine religious spirituality respects human dignity under God; advocates for peace and tolerance; justice and fairness; progress and

development; protection of lives and property; promotion of the common good and creation of conditions conducive to human freedom, civil and religious (Ogbonnaya, 2012:15). No country that allows religious extremism to flourish has avoided bloodletting and socio-political disruptions. The government and religious leaders must not allow the few extremists to tip the country towards failure since it would rather be more productive to deter its manifestations through legislation and effective enforcement of law. Nigeria needs to move beyond religious balancing in its state-society relations and address more effectively the underlying causes of media insensitivities, marginalization, and managing disputes over resources and development. The future stability of Nigeria, according to Paden (2015:3), may well lie in the hands of those at the top levels of the party system who must be thoughtful and skilled in managing the realities of religious identity politics. Even more important, given the winner-take-all nature of presidential politics, is the capacity of national leaders to manage ethno-religious symbols in a way that promotes unity rather than disunity.

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