

Religious Intolerance in Igbo Society: A Pluriversalist Panacea

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Abstract

Religious intolerance has emerged as a topic commanding global attention. The economic impacts of violence and extremism traced to religion have also been monumental to the extent that it has gained traction from intellectuals and theorists such John Hick and John Locke. Specifically, religious toleration and pluralism have usually been offered as panacea. Through the method of critical analysis, this research takes the popular theorists of religious toleration and pluralism to task for being inadequate to address religious intolerance in Africa where this study is conducted. This study is hesitant to generalize the inadequacy to other climes. Finding it incompetent, this research therefore offers a pluriversalist approach using the Igbo society as a paradigm since Igbo ritual archives are explored. In other words, the pluriversalist approach to providing a solution to religious intolerance from the Igbo ritual archive will not only overcome the limitations or shortcomings of religious toleration and pluralism but also show that within every Afro-religious indigenous or ritual archives there are plausible solutions to intolerance. This study applies it to the Igbo society as a way of foregrounding the peace

and mutual cohesion which the society needs to flourish in the absence of religious-induced animosity is attained.

Keywords: Igbo, Pluriversalism, Religious toleration and pluralism, Violence and extremism

Introduction

There is need to address the problem of frequent and increasing occurrences of violence emanating from religious intolerance among adherents of the Abrahamic faiths in Igbo society. Although various proposals, which include religious pluralism and toleration have been put forward to tackle intolerance among the practitioners of these Abrahamic faiths, these proposals have however been deemed inadequate. When talking about the Abrahamic faiths, we are referring to the religious cultures that derive from some of the 'promises' accorded to Abraham by God which eventually birthed Judaism, Christianity and Islam. For the sake of peace and mutual cohesion among the practitioners of the Abrahamic faiths, this research on pluriversalism in Igbo indigenous ontology as basis for overcoming religious intolerance among adherents of the Abrahamic faiths aimed at offering another approach to overcoming the challenge of intolerance generated by these religions among Africans, by paying close attention to the Igbo society. It is therefore the task of this research to address this gap in literature in three sections. The first section offers a brief into the reality of religious intolerance and its economic impact which makes mutual cohesion and peace unattainable. The third part addresses the limitations or shortcomings of religious toleration and pluralism and why religious intolerance requires an alternative theoretical platform. The third part of this research considers the notion of pluriversalism and its role in deducing relevant ideal in Igbo ontology for addressing the

challenges of religious intolerance. The fourth section is the conclusion of this inquiry.

The Economic Impact of Intolerance Traced to Faith-based Religions

The issue concerning how faith-motivated violence has become replete in Africa has been a course of concern for scholars. Afolabi, (2016) focuses on the spate of religious violence and its implication on national security in Nigeria between 1999 and 2011. The study recognizes that Nigeria is a multi-ethnic society that emerged as a result of the amalgamation of dissimilar peoples for the administrative convenience of the British (Isichei, 2007). The study shows that, whereas, in the northern part of Nigeria, Islam is more dominant, thereby dictating the parameter of the educated and the learned as the one versed in Arabic, this is not the case in South where Christianity and Western education determines the parameter of who is educated and learned.

Afolabi, (2016) argues that the tendency is rife for Muslims and Christians in Nigeria to engage in one form of conflict or the other that has implications for security. In his words: “Violence based on religious affiliation and religious policies have caused physical and psychological damage to several people thereby legitimizing religious schism among Nigerians who simply have different religious affiliations (Afolabi, 2016). Afolabi (2016) argues further that the move by religious bodies to ferment violence has served as a source of threat to national security. National security may be seen as the overall effort that a country puts in place to see that its sovereignty and legitimacy are preserved. The study of Afolabi (2016) is convinced that the reintroduction of the *Shariah* in the

northern parts of the country whose principles are not in consonance with the 1999 Constitution may have been a reason for this breach in security that accounts for loss of lives and property.

While considering how violence from religious beliefs has negatively impacted Africa. Abbink, (2020), notes that Islamic radicalism and violence is more endemic vis-à-vis Christian radicalism in the insecurity that has become replete in almost all parts of Africa. The study of Abbink, (2020), focuses on Somalia and Ethiopia, with comparison to how same evinces in Nigeria. Abbink (2020), explains that “while religious-inspired radical/violent movements are well-known in Africa – the large majority of Islamist character – care is needed in defining the terms and assessing the wider political and historical context.”

Abbink, (2020), employs history in his analysis as he commences with the violent and extremist ideological *Jihad* carried out by Uthman dan Fodio in the 16th century in West Africa. Overtime, the fact that Islam has become dominant among these peoples has both made the Arabic culture prominent. This is the formative ideology of *Boko Haram* which sees Western education as a heinous crime and impediment to being a full and real Muslim (see Abbink, 2020). Since 2005, there has been the radical group in Somalia which goes by the name of *Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen* (Movement of Young Jihad Combatants). This group has carried and claimed responsibility for killing Somalis and foreigners based on the failure to subscribe to their brand of Islam (Pew Research Centre 2010). Soon, *Al-Shabaab* entered the picture as it considers the constitution of Somalia as nothing but a godless document since it is a product of human ideas short of the *Shariah* (Abbink 2020). These religious-

motivated extremists have not been able to accommodate Western ways of politics and living because of their conviction that these deface real practices of Islam. More so, the government at the center has either become so weak to entertain these differences or so unconcerned that they soon lose legitimacy with some of their territories.

The foregoing contrasts with the situation in Ethiopia. It generally portrayed itself as a secular state. However, from 1991 onwards, Ethiopia has witnessed a period of insecurity and conflicts along religious lines. One of the insurgent groups which emerged around this period is the *Islamic front for the liberation of Oromiya*, which has a serious and deep influence from Salafism (Abbink, 2020). In 1995, there was also a case or instance of sectarian violence “within the Muslim community including the killing of twelve well-known religious leaders in Ansar Mosque compound in Addis Ababa” (Abbink, 2020). In 2006, Muslims and Christians also clashed in Jimma City as hundreds lost their lives. This is aside the *Al-Ahbash* case which also accounts for various instances or cases of violence and confrontations against the government in Ethiopia.

Having used Nigeria, Somalia and Ethiopia for understanding the place of religious violence in Africa, Abbink, (2020) arrives at the outlook that the instance of these countries illustrates “the risks of ambivalent *political structure* that insufficiently regulate and implement laws regarding religious life and communal politics in a pluralist society...” For the moment, it is worthy to consider another important literature on religious violence in Africa.

The publication of Basedau & Schaefer-Kehnert (2019), tries to

show a connection between the theory of relative deprivation and its impact on discrimination and the risk of violence. The work has shown that over the years there has been a surge in the connection between religion and violence in sub-Saharan Africa especially. First, the study reveals that discrimination on religious grounds has been in operation in sub-Saharan African, albeit at a low level. Second, that when considered from the cross-country level, there is a necessary connection between discrimination on religious grounds on the one hand and armed conflict on the other hand. Third, following from the data obtained from the four sub-Saharan African countries which are central to their argument, Basedau & Schaefer-Kehnert (2019), tender that discrimination along religious line may not necessarily inform religious conflicts. Is it however advisable to use just four sub-Saharan countries to make a deduction that religious discrimination does not fuel religious conflict in Africa? We think not.

This research agrees with Basedau & Schaefer-Kehnert (2019) political discontentment is an important element in armed conflicts and this cannot be linked with religious discrimination. An important point to note is that the study of Basedau & Schaefer-Kehnert (2019) is not shy of the religious-induced conflict that is replete in several parts of Africa. And this is true for Nigeria where there are instances of religious-motivated violence on almost all fronts. For instance, in Maiduguri, there was incident of the Maitatsine riot which claimed lives in October 1982 (see Omotosho, 2003).

Instances of religious-induced violence in Nigeria are so rife that a comprehensive or detailed assessment is beyond the scope of the present inquiry. In February 1984, there was the Maitatsine uprising

in what is now Yobe State. Another occurred in Gombe State in 1982 (Imo, 1995). Violence between Christians and Muslims also escalated in Kafanchan in Kaduna in 1987 (Omotosho 2003).

A fundamental contention of this study, following the consideration of how religious-induced terror operates in African concerns with the relationships that we perceived, and are convinced, to exist between a peaceful religion and the resort to terrorism. This problem is what this study focuses on with a view to explicate the perceived relationships among these stated notions and to argue that they need a political core for them to be able to achieve their presumed ideals (Kaunda et al 2018). Various ways of assessing the violent and terrorist activities related to religious fundamentalism has reduced the trust on these religions because the humanism with the love and peace that they are supposed to address have been compromised. This is why Mala & Oseni, (1984) say that we must not deceive ourselves; we cannot find this 'something' (they mean peace) in Christianity and Islam. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that the negative impact insecurity mediated by religious-induced violence or extremism on the economy cannot be wished away.

There is a deep connection between insecurity and the investment that are within the environment that is insecure. Various scholars have been able to talk about the various ways through which these connections or inter-relations ensue.

Another study which has also given attention to the relationship between investment and insecurity is the publication of Ejimekeuwa et al (2015). The study posits that where there is noticeable surge in crimes there is a decrease in foreign direct investment and vice-

versa. The study of Ejimekeuwa et al (2015) has been able to consider the relationship between crime and foreign direct investment in about 41 African countries. Their conclusion is that in places where there are conflicts, reports of have been negative concerning foreign direct investment (Ejimekeuwa et al 2015).

Demirbas et al, (2022) has succeeded in adding another dimension to the discourse by pointing out that in societies where crimes have evolved into insecurity, capital flight from the country to other country is noticeable. In other instances, some important companies may even shut down operations in an insecure country and relocate to another country which is deemed more secure and conducive for the smooth operations of the firm's economic activities. This has been affirmed in the study of Efobi and Asongu, (2016) that conflicts in a country reduce investment in the environment where it is occurring leading to the rise and insurance premiums as well as dangers exposed to or even visited upon assets.

The foregoing studies based on the relationship between insecurity and investment clearly applies to the situation of Nigeria. With the presence of vices such as political conflicts, kidnapping for ransom, corruption and embezzlement of public funds, low and almost no regard for law and order in Nigeria, the country has been regarded as a breeding ground for insecurity and reduction in foreign direct investment with capital flight too (Koko et al, 2017). It is based on this realization that Demirbas, et al. (2022) concludes that “terrorism-led insurgency destroyed the investment climate in Nigeria.” This is in line with what the previous studies on the connection between insecurity and investment have alluded to.

With the problem of religious-induced violence with the economic

impact clearly outlined, the next task is to turn to some suggestions that have been used to offer ways through which a plummet of violence may be addressed. This is the task of the next section.

The Limitations of Religious Toleration and Pluralism: The Need for an Alternative

Perhaps the most prominent scholar on religious toleration and pluralism in the last century is John Hick (2010; 1989; 1985; 1980). His contributions to the field are so worthy and deep that a fair attention to his ideas is crucial for the realization of the objectives of this research. For one to understand the position of Hick, it is important to first articulate some of the ideas that are deeply embroiled within the Abrahamic faiths by other scholars such as Jaffee (2001) and Erlewine (2010). Before going too far, it is helpful to consider the meaning of religious toleration and pluralism.

For Rousseau, his reflection on religious tolerance is documented specifically that in his *On the Social Contract*. In this work, Rousseau (1997) provides deep insights into the subject of toleration as it pertains to religion. Rousseau discovers the difficulty in comprehending the reality of God on the one hand vis-à-vis the belief concerning the treatment of those who do not share a belief in that God. In the end, he concludes that the state overrides religion and whoever thinks otherwise should be kicked out of the state (see Rousseau 1997).

Locke (1983) is popular for his famed essay entitled: “A Letter Concerning Toleration”. In the case of Rousseau where theological beliefs were made secondary to politics, Locke takes a more cautious approach. Locke talks about a distinction between civil life and

religious life which also considers dichotomy between the individual and the collective. Through this distinction, Locke continues to make reference to the existence of a state religion which should not interfere with the political sphere.

One of the major texts where one finds another discourse on tolerance is Mill's *On Liberty*. In this work, Mill sets out his political theory of liberalism and discusses how tolerance can be attained in a political context. Mill places high price over religious freedom. Mill, (1978 [1859]), maintains that "one very simple principle" that "the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number is self-protection." Although he adds that by itself, this principle cannot bring about religious toleration because there need to be ways to understand that those in government are not the same as those who control religion. While reacting to the religious connections of Mill's discourse on toleration, Langerack, (2010) relays that for Mill, religious toleration is a product of individualism where everyone respects the rights of fellow citizens in ways that these rights do not constitute a nuisance to others.

In addressing this challenge, Rousseau, (1997) considers the connection between politics and theology. Rousseau takes to the position that whatever is against the social unity of humanity ought to be eliminated. Rousseau, bases on this analysis, to arrive at the conviction that since theology constitutes an impediment to social cohesion, then it is better to do away with it (see Erlewine, 2010).

Aside the foregoing, there are other proposals pertaining to religious pluralism as a solution to religious intolerance and violence. The

starting point is to understand the four basic semblances among the Abrahamic faiths: Revelation, Election, Historical Mission and Eschatology [(Jaffee, 2001); (Erlewine, 2010)]. Although there are some other common denominators among them, for its purpose, this research adopts these four in order to see how the efforts in religious pluralism/toleration have been limited. While reacting to the diversity and multiplicities of religions and the belief tied to each of them, Hick perceives these differences as slight matters that have been unduly emphasized. Hick implores that we consider deeply, the places or aspects where we have differences among these religions to be nothing but reasons to consider deeply, our shared humanity. In his most recent intellectual effort, Hick, (2010) continues to champion his outlook that all religions are equal and any effort to rank one as necessarily superior or higher than others will breed violence.

It is questionable how Hick, (2010) arrived at the notion that "...the truth-claims of the different religions are *all* false. Is he making this assertion from the perspective of religious cultures in the oriental and occidental traditions? Does his generalization stem or derive from a study of all religious beliefs on the planet? What is his understanding of truth as used within this context? Whereas these questions may be given satisfactory answers by Hick on a purely theoretical level, it does not speak concretely and pragmatically to the reality of problems and issues faced by people as a result of the antagonism and intolerance of their religious faiths. The implication of Hick's recommendation is further compounded by the understanding that the four common denominators among the Abrahamic faiths which Jaffee (2001) highlights, much as they are crucial in the belief systems of each of these monotheisms, are

usually downplayed or rendered nearly irrelevant by Hick.

In other words, what has made Hick to attract serious critical backlash is connected to the way that he addresses the four features of the Abrahamic monotheisms. He has been accused of reducing or downplaying these elements for the sake of pluralism (see Erlewine 2010). The suspicion of this research is evocative in the reflections of Erlewine, (2010) too who had initiated that:

It is imperative to notice that while ostensibly operating out of an explicitly Christian, and therefore monotheistic framework, Hick has undermined or transfigured every moment constitutive of the basic structure shared by the Abrahamic faiths. Hick is able to reconcile Christianity with pluralism only by entirely shedding the discursive structure of the elective monotheisms, a move which he clearly does not view as problematic”.

Following what has been explored thus far, it is clear that these experts on religious pluralism and religious toleration are still ambivalent and yet to offer a rewarding and plausible proposal even it is to come from the domain of religion. Hence, the next chapter offers a proposal that overcomes the short falls of religious toleration and pluralism for quelling religious-induced violence in Africa

Pluriversalism and Igbo Ontology as a Panacea for Religious-induced Violence in Africa

In the present section, the goal is to offer alternative grounds in order to be able to provide a deep and critical basis to expunge religious intolerance from Africa by using the *Igbo* society through *Igbo*

indigenous knowledge system. We take this perspective since we are aware that Africa is not a homogenous place where what is true in the North is the case in the West. This study therefore limits its critical analysis and application of pluriversalism and the emphasis on African ritual archives, or what can be called indigenous knowledge systems of the Igbo. This can serve as the proper basis for the viability and relevance of African ritual archive for development in contemporary Africa. I must however indicate that we are not the first to offer a pluriversalist account for overcoming differences and extremist tendencies. Kaunda et al (2018) has applied it to the intolerance and conflicts in Pyem of Jos as it is reflected in the notion of *Ngwakindasaidaal* just as Ofuasia (2020) has applied it to the Yoruba society. The task of the present research is to then take the discourse further by seeing how it can assist within the context of Igbo society. The first question to ponder at this juncture is: what is pluriversalism?

According to Falola, (2018), pluriversalism is an avenue to “create the intellectual dominance over our own thought processes; that we command the protocols of knowledge; that we refine and evaluate protocols; we create a community of scholars that regulate its research and research outcome; and that we put on authentic stamp on what we do.” Pluriversalism does not mean that we should cast away the ideas of the Global North and all the positive aspects that the tradition has bequeathed to us. The point being emphasized is that it is important to give our indigenous ideas a fair presentation and use while being suspicious of theories being handed down to us from other climes. Falola, (2018) shares this position too when he emphasizes: “Sure, we should be able to relate to all theories and paradigms from other places, but to repeat, be vigilant enough to

understand the hidden assumptions and methodological dissonance in them, while being certain that they fit our need.”

This pluriverse dimension suggests the urgency in shifts in explanatory model away from the familiar Western modes of explaining the essence of reality. It does it by emphasizing how the need to turn to African indigenous ideas becomes paramount. It is an outlook that bridges the gap between understanding and interpreting from arrays of perspectives and not just a single perspective which is usually Western (see Escobar, 2010). It is from this orientation that the present research infers its justification to examine Igbo ontology as a platform for mediating peace and harmony among those who profess Islam, Christianity in Igbo society.

With the meaning and object of pluriversalism already addressed, we shall now apply the method of analysis to disclosing what we mean by ritual archives or African indigenous knowledge systems. This study also relies on the views of scholars who are apologist to the revival and the connection between African ritual archives and the new voice of pluriversalism.

Whilst discussing what he means by “African ritual archives” Falola, (2018) points out that “the assemblage of words, texts, symbols, shrines, images, performances and experiences that can assist in the comprehension of the African world-view as philosophy, literature, history and much more.” The call for the return to African ritual archives emerges amidst the subtle connection between knowledge and power. On this note, Falola, (2018) This is true if we call as Falola, (2018) explains that there is a connection between power and knowledge where the former shapes

the latter. Falola, (2018) goes on to state that in the knowledge system of the West, the African university are not relevant. They can only be relevant when they are perceived thus by the Western institutions and their scholars. Although this does not make the system to be totally useless, Falola, (2018) claims that what African universities are, in the present, setting are nothing but gatherers of data and used as footnotes for Western researchers and their institutions.

The need or urgency to delink knowledge from the power that is mediated by the Global North is one of the thrusts of pluriversalism. It is in a related development that Bonaventura de Sousa coins the term 'epistemicide.' Santos (2016) considers 'epistemicide' as the killing of knowledge and ideologies. It is the stripping of any form of confidence tied to a knowledge base or system. Epistemicide for Santos (2016), depicts how the knowledge system of the Global North operates in its Eurocentric and absolute erection of its theories and the repression of knowledge from other places aside the Global North. It is on a related note that Puebla (2013) adds that the approach which is familiar with the Global North has been to nullify the Other – the one who is not from the Global North. They are called primitives and they are in need of colonization and civilization for them to graduate as humans. There is no doubt in the fact that this is the fate of Africa when it encountered the Global North.

What is to be deduced therefore is that it is up to Africa and the Global South to return to their indigenous epistemologies and extract relevant ideals that have the capacity to impact positively the values that will make their lives much better. In doing this, they must also be prepared to eradicate aspects that are not useful in

contemporary times. Since pluriversalism necessarily implies the use of ritual archives, we shall now take a look at how the worship of divinities in traditional *Igbo* society may contribute toward the mitigation of the instances and consequences of religious intolerance and violent extremism which the Western-girded religious toleration and pluralism has failed to tend to in a decisive manner.

To appreciate the depths of our proposal, we concern first with the traditional *Igbo* worship and adoration of the divinities who are perceived as the means to the Great Spirit, the Ultimate Being in *Igbo* ontology – *Chukwu*, which occupies the highest hierarchy on the *Muoladder*.

What is to be discerned is that for each of these major divinities that are being worshipped in traditional *Igbo* society, there is the understanding among the peoples that they serve as a means to *Chukwu*, the Ultimate Being. This understanding is synonymous with the emphasis by Christianity and Islam that Jesus Christ and Prophet Muhammad (SAW) respectively are the messengers and means to God in each of these faiths. Rather than having just one personality or deity as the mediator or link to the Ultimate Being, the traditional *Igbo* employ the service of arrays of divinities (Onwuejeogwu 1997). More so, each of these divinities have their mores, taboos and rules attached to them such that the transgression of the one can lead to disequilibrium of the social and spiritual character of the entire society (Ofuasia 2020).

For instance, the worshipper of *Ala* or *Ani* does not perceive the one who adores *Amadioha* as an inferior worshipper. S/he does not

perceive the other as a lesser worshipper of the Ultimate Being via *Amadioha*. There is no competition among the worshippers of these divinities. There is the understanding that the failure to properly understand the other is an ultimate failure to understand oneself.

The mood and the worship of these divinities serve to show that there is no competition among adherents who offer supplications to *Chukwu* through any desired divinity. This in the end fosters the spirit of cooperation and the will to be one another's keeper in matters of morality and spirituality. Perhaps this must have been what Mbiti, (1969) has in mind when he asserts that "I am, because we are." It is nearly impossible to conceive the individual outside the whole. We can see the spirit of *Ubuntu* in this spiritual cooperation among the traditional *Igbo*. Assuming this were the case, of what use or relevance, one may ask, is this, to the surge of violence and extremism that may be traced to the advent of the Abrahamic faiths in Africa? Our aim is to argue that a proper understanding or basis of the spiritual mentality of traditional *Igbo* society can assist us to appreciate the fact that the violence and extremism in this society may be diminished.

In contemporary *Igbo* society, an *Igbo* Muslim is a rare thing or in most cases seen as incompatible with the belief of the person's progenitors. What this means, in other words, is that they are usually stigmatized and discriminated against for converting. Most *Igbo*, out of interpersonal interactions with them maintain that it is not possible to be *Igbo* and to be a Muslim simultaneously. It is my research aim to foreground a plausible research framework, one that is original and fitting. For this, this study explores *Igbo* ontology and spirituality to cater for the ways the *Igbo* progenitors lived

harmoniously even when they worshipped divinities that seem diametrically opposed to one another. They saw the divinities as a means to an end – the Ultimate Being, *Chukwu*.

The essence of the pluriverse perspective which informs this research to propose a solution from an African indigenous knowledge system since the discourses on religious toleration and pluralism in the mainstream and dominant Western philosophy of religion tradition has not foregrounded both a plausible and relevant succor for Africa. This is further compounded by the fact that the religions in question have one source – Abraham, hence Abrahamic faiths. The tussles and battles for superiority, supremacy and recognition among them, which ought not to be, have been exported into the African space, thereby causing so much disharmony and social imbalance.

By relying on *Igbo* ontology, we therefore show how to eradicate this imported tussle among the Abrahamic faiths into *Igbo* society by arguing that it is possible to revive the spirit of community worship and adoration of *Chukwu* via arrays of divinities. The contemporary *Igbo* Jew, Christian or Muslim, is therefore challenge to rethink and employ this tolerance 'technique' of their progenitors and disassociate from the needless tussle and strife that seems to be original, one arising from the common denominators of the Abrahamic faiths. This is possible if we understand that the respective foreign faiths that they wield, all point to one Ultimate Being – God. The matter is less problematic, and animosity can be eradicated almost effortlessly.

Conclusion

In this paper, attention has been given to the limitations of religious toleration and pluralism concerning the topic of religious intolerance in places like Africa. Following the emergence of studies in pluriversalism and the application of its central thesis to overcoming tensions and violence, this study has keyed into its current following the works Ofuasia (2020) and Kaunda et al. (2018) among the *Yoruba* and *Pyem* of Nigeria respectively. Whereas the conclusion of this paper is not final for all other indigenous cultures in Africa and beyond facing religious intolerance, it is the recommendation of this research that these other indigenous cultures tap into the pluriversalist current in order to offer indigenous frameworks to oust intolerance and violent extremism.

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