An Academic Response to the Elusive Search for Peaceful Coexistence in Nigeria's Ivory Tower of Academia

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The National Policy on Education, implemented at all levels of education across the nation, does not seem to have gained much prospect in achieving the national unity it canvasses. Violence and disaffection among citizens have become rampant at every cranny of the country. The malaise of interreligious distrust and suspicion have infiltrated the tertiary institutions where policies and leadership training are designed. Succinctly, Nigeria's tertiary institutions' social, religious, and even political composition reflects happenings in the larger Nigerian society. Stakeholders in the citadels of knowledge have replicated instances of interreligious conflicts and fracas ensuing from outside the walls of tertiary schools. These instances are evident despite the status of the schools as environments where solutions would ordinarily have been crafted. Efforts at religious correctness at the expense of peaceful coexistence in Nigeria's ivory towers has persisted. The potential implication of such a negative attitude on interreligious relations is dreary and needs to be addressed. This paper is qualitative in design and adopts historical and text analyses of relevant documents to identify the fundamental cause of interreligious conflicts in Nigeria's tertiary schools. The paper attempts to solve the problem of mutual suspicion, violence, and struggle for supremacy by reviewing the historical antecedence that borders on recent sordid experiences. The expose shall compare the ideals of National Policy of Education with extant General Studies curriculum in Nigerian tertiary school to suggest the inclusion of Peace education for the attainment of peaceful coexistence in Nigeria at large.

Introduction

Instances of violent attacks and reprisals between religious adherents in Nigeria have considerably decreased. Nevertheless, the moment of interreligious peace currently enjoyed in the country is comparable to cuddling a ticking explosive. Commonly witnessed outbursts on assumed provocative statements by the religious other in the country indicate harbouring bottled anger, mutual suspicion, deep-rooted distrust, and intolerance. The situation is understandable because many Nigerians have experienced direct consequences of the interreligious fracas and are yet to be held of such memories. Memories of killings, maiming, and destruction of properties instigated by interreligious conflicts have neither been forgotten, healed, nor resolved in most cases. Victims of the unfortunate incidences are found on the nation's streets; they work with other compatriots in offices and classrooms as school staff or students. This paper aims to facilitate an academic orientation towards a peaceable society.

There have been academic efforts to proffer solutions to instances of interreligious conflicts in Nigeria. Works by Ihedinma, 2004; Jackson Robert, 2004; Lemu, 2005; Ushe, 2012a; Wingerden et al., 2012; Onyenali, 2013; Ajibola, 2018; Dada, 2019, are a few of the unique research reports that have correlated curriculum review with the attainment of peaceful coexistence in Nigeria. However, the bedrock of the education enterprise in the country, namely, the National Policy on Education, does not seem to have been adequately engaged. This article does not pretend to sufficiently engage the NPE at attaining peaceful coexistence in the country. Still, it does call attention to the document as a pacesetter to which recourse must be made to achieve peaceful coexistence in the country.

Methodology

The broad aim of identifying the fundamental cause of interreligious conflicts in Nigeria's tertiary schools, and the specific objective of proposing a fundamental solution to the problem from an academic standpoint,

warrant a historical and analytical approach to the research. From acknowledging religious violence in the country, and the indictment of schools in the hatching and execution of some of the altercation experienced across the nation, it is expedient to trace out the underlining cause/s of the sleazy experiences. The historical method would help to assess the point at which the country deviated from the set goals for the unity of its citizens irrespective of religious variations. A content analysis of the NPE concerning Nigerian tertiary schools' General Studies curriculum would also help identify the fittingness or otherwise of the documents for the peaceful coexistence of divided religious adherents in the country.

Violence and the advancement of religious interest in Nigeria Higher Institution

Nigeria has experienced violent protests in various measures, the Boko haram attacks, banditry, other shades of violent experiences arising from kidnapping and offshoots of a high level of insecurity in the country. Suitable source materials on violent interreligious conflicts include the work of Boer (2004) and Van Gorder (2012). Of particular concern are religious conflicts and violence that had their origins in the nation's learning institutions. According to Hackett (1999), "the intensity of religious activity on university and college campuses in Nigeria, with its attendant factionalism and territoriality, has at times generated unrest which radiates beyond the boundaries of the educational institutions themselves."

The observation of Hackett above indicates the existence of radical religious ideologies or warped religious sentiments that provoke an equal reaction from opposite religious followers. To be a student in a tertiary institution presupposes exposure to some reasonable level of academic and formal education. It would ordinarily be expected that a person at that level of education should be civil and operate on a 'reasonable' principle. Thus, outside instances of an impulsive burst of religious conflicts, it will not be wrong to infer that some of the violent religious conflicts on academic campuses across the country result from planned and articulated religious ideologies. Few of such cases arising from organized religious interest include those reviewed below.

If the religious connotation of the horrific civil war between 1967 and 1970 is correct (Philips, 2000), it would be the first significant landmark in the struggle for dominance between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria. The sharia debate in the constituent assembly between 1977 and 1978 would be next. The latter marked the first considerable conflict that polarized Nigeria along religious lines (Adesoji, 2011:100). Although the incident was debated without resort to arms and violence, shortly after that, in 1980, Nigeria witnessed the Maitatsine uprisings of about the same violent intensity as the Boko Haram insurgence. In 1987, a College of Education in Northwest Nigeria had an interreligious upheaval with a spill over at a University in Zaria. Shortly before the incident, the University of Ibadan in the South-West experienced a massive religious crisis arising from what Hackett (1999:555) tagged as "Crisis over the Cross." Even Secondary Schools have had their share of interreligious problems with human and material losses. In Kaduna State alone, such crises include, among others, those of Queen Amina College, Kaduna, 2002; Kufena College, Wusasa, Zaria, 2005; and Technical School, Malali, Kaduna, 2006. Crises arising from the school often end up engulfing the entire host communities and beyond. According to Usman (2013:41), such incidents leave lasting effects of lingering animosity between adherents of Islam and Christianity.

Infiltration catalysts of religious intolerance in Nigeria tertiary schools

The observation of Hackett (1999:558) that the Nigerian education sector is "a microcosm of wider religion-state relations" is quite apt in assessing the inter-religious relation of citizens from the nation's educational institutions. The religious and often political discord between the Christians and the Muslims across the country has dramatically infiltrated the classrooms in tertiary institutions. Students' activism and official schools' policies are reckoned as possible infiltration catalysts of religious intolerance. As recent as 2017, a government-owned tertiary institution in

Katsina State, Umaru Yar'Ádua University, published a religiously exclusive memo on "Registration of Students Clubs/Association." The document reiterates the 'Management's resolution at its 59th meeting held on 10th January 2017' that "Muslim Students Society of Nigeria (MSSN) is the only religious association allowed to operate in the University" (Chika, 2017). The resolution was made despite the presence of indigenous Christians on campus and around the city. Of course, other Nigerian Christians and non-Muslims from different parts of the country worked and studied in the institution when the resolution was passed. However, the situation could not have been otherwise as the control of schools' curricula for religious purposes has been one of the significant areas of interest for both Christian and Muslims in the country.

The control of the religious studies curriculum in Nigerian schools has been an area of conflicting interest since independence (Falola, 1998:171). Christian agencies in the country have owned and operated schools since the advent of Christian missionaries in the 19th century. Hence, the overbearing presence of Christian schools and their administration in the 1970s was understandably considered by the Muslims as a ploy to advance the spread of Christianity in the country. Falola further recalled a notable Islamic scholar had expressed concern over the Christian owned and controlled schools in the country, seeing such schools "as breeding grounds for Christians, and enemies of Islam" (171).

Labelling Christian-owned schools as breeding grounds for "enemies of Islam" automatically sets schools owned by religious bodies as daises for religious bouts and contests for religious subjugation and conquest. Therefore, it was not a surprise when the Muslims argued against the continued ownership and control of schools by Christians and urged the federal government to take over the schools. Subsequently, schools funded and maintained by Christian missionaries and other Christian agents were eventually taken over by the government. Later, many schools and colleges that Christians originally owned, especially in the country's Northern parts, were renamed after Islamic figures and entities. For example, Queen of Apostle College in Kaduna was renamed, Queen Amina College,

Taking over the Christian mission schools and renaming them after Islamic figures despite their Christian origin and background was not a palatable experience for the Christians. They live with the memory of seeing their originally owned schools renamed after Muslims. In some instances, the schools are no longer accessible to their children because of the exclusively Islamic population of the pupils. Obviously, and expectedly, the Christians couldn't have been happy with the development.

The struggle over the control of religious studies affairs in Nigeria by the Christians and the Muslim stakeholders took another dimension in 1976. The focus was no longer on who controls the schools but contests over the contents of school curricula. For the Muslims, "western education that did not teach Arabic and Islamic religious knowledge" ought to be rejected (Falola, 1998:172). According to Hackett (1999:541), the displeasure of the Muslim over any model of education devoid of Arabic and Islamic religious knowledge did not begin in 1976. As far back as the 1880s, Muslims have made similar demands, and the British officers sought to accommodate the requests by separating English Language from the traditional Christian schools' curriculum. Nevertheless, despite the accommodation and provision of Muslim Government Schools and facilitating adaptable model of western education with Islam, the Muslim communities still challenged the government over its Christian bias (p.541).

According to studies independently conducted by Falola (1998) and Hackett (1999), the Christians did not infer the same conclusion between Christian religious knowledge and western education. Nevertheless, the Muslims rejected Western education because such a curriculum neither teaches Islamic Religious Knowledge nor is compliant with Arabic lexis. It was further argued that the Hausa language be the medium of instruction in schools. Ultimately the Muslims' plan for education in the country eventually succeeded in minimizing the teaching of Christian religious knowledge in

northern schools and accounts for the removal of African traditional religions from many schools' curricula, or at best, "as an appendage to Christian or Islamic religious studies" (Hackett, 1998:541).

Hitherto, the mêlée for the soul of Nigeria's education sector remains crucial to both Christians and Muslim stakeholders, from school proprietors, government agencies to administrators and students. On the one side are the Christians, the precursor of western education in the country, who prefer to see their schools and the system thrive and continue to serve their evangelization interests. On the other side are the Muslims who needed to catch up with the Christians in the western education sector. The latter has continued to classify Christian schools as platforms for "taking the youths away from Islam" (Falola, 1998). The Muslim's stance "sought to put an end completely to Christian domination of the educational system" (Falola, 1998)., The perspective would continue to attract resistance from the former. Nevertheless, the National Council of Muslim Youth Organization of Nigeria (NACOMYO) has also insisted on "the teaching of Islam in all schools, more funding for Islamic schools, and better representation of Muslims in the management of schools" (Falola,1998).

Students' religious activism and the elusive search for peaceful coexistence

As early as 1923, according to Hackett, Muslim communities began requesting the kind of schools that would meet their standard. They challenged the government over what they considered "its Christian bias" and subsequently formed groups to advance their interests (p.542). For example, the Young Ansar-Ud-Din was formed in 1923 for this purpose. Other groups include the Society for Promoting Muslim Knowledge (SPMK), formed in 1947, and the Muslim Congress of Nigeria (MCN), started in 1948. However, according to Hackett, the pressure became more pronounced in the 1950s "when the promises of the Western Region government to accommodate the educational needs of the Muslim constituency failed to materialize." According to Danmole (1990:338-342), groups like the United Muslim Party

(UMP) emerged and demanded equal educational footing with the Christians. The demand was one of the very early introductions of religious politics into Nigeria's ivory towers. The group did press for better academic training in Islamic law and requested a Chair of Islamic Studies to be created in the University College, Ibadan (which was then a branch of the University of London).

With time, instances of non-religious altercation continue to dot campus politics and have gradually led to major religious crises in schools. Minor issues ranging from whether Christian girls should wear uniforms associated with Muslim girls or whether a Christian student prefect may impose disciplinary actions on a Muslim student or not became possible reasons for religious riots. Gradually, pressure groups were formed with religious intent in tertiary schools. Many of such groups became tools in the hands of political figures and religious leaders for various purposes.

The most prominent religious groups that emerged in the tertiary schools were the Muslim Students' Society (MSS) and the Fellowship of Christian Students (FCS) in 1954 and 1957. According to Hackett (1999:552), the former group is a radical, inter-denominational Christian movement aimed at defending the religious rights of Christian students in a Muslim environment. The group finds sympathy and support from some Christian teaching staff of the Universities and has become the vanguard of political nationalism in the middle belt region of Nigeria. They utilize print media as a form of self-expression and proselytization. Its counterpart, the Muslim Students' Society, was formed to counter the perceived indoctrination of Muslim children in Christian dominated schools. Its target was to promote and strengthen Islam among students. It avails itself of conferences, religious instructions, literary media and gets funding from other parts of the Muslim world for its programs.

While religious activities in tertiary schools have continued to influence government policies, they have also become malleable tools for political manipulation by disgruntled political figures within and outside the country (Hackett, 1999:552). Such manipulation and

confessional interest have affected the integration of the country. In the words of Hackett, "the formation and growth of students' association in Nigerian schools and universities have contributed to the Muslim-Christian tension and the problems associated with integrating religion and education" (p.554). Unfortunately, the university lecturers seem not to be helping much in promoting interreligious relations. There were many instances where religious studies lecturers used the classrooms as sites for proselytizing, with an underlying argument that "if we do not capture these young minds, the opposition will" (p.554).

The drift in Nigeria's unity based on religious differences has infiltrated the critical sectors of the nation's life. The education sector, which otherwise could have been the best platform to redress the problem, is, unfortunately, also infected. Nevertheless, the federal government has not rested on its oars to restore and sustain peaceful coexistence among citizens. The government has availed itself of various means to facilitate peace in the country; among its efforts is the use of the National Education Policy for national unity.

The National Policy on Education and the Search for Peaceful Coexistence

The need for unity of all citizens irrespective of religious affiliation and an eye on the acceptance of people despite their religious beliefs are matters of concern to the government and well-meaning Nigerians. The need is essential to everyone, but it has continued to elude the citizenry. One of the radical ways the government sets out to address the problem is through formal education. The National Policy on Education (NPE) provides a detailed roadmap on achieving the objective.

As "a statement of intentions, expectations, goals, prescriptions, standards, and requirements for quality education delivery in Nigeria (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013: ii), the National Policy on Education thus remains "the national guideline for the effective administration, management and implementation of education at all tiers of government" (p.ii). The document is expected to "help the nation align its education system with her current developmental goals and that of the emergent global village" (p.ii). Generally, the NPE provides guidelines to correlate the nation's educational goals to the contents and relevance of the various levels of education in the country. The policy allows accredited universities and specialized colleges to provide training for would-be teachers before or during their educational services.

The NPE provides terms of reference for the pivotal role of quality teachers in the service of education at all levels in the country. It emphasizes the importance of making teachers relevant and committed to the goals of the nation. Categorically, the policy states among its goals, "teacher education shall be to help teachers fit into the social life of the community and the society at large and enhance their commitment to national goals" (NPE,2013:28). One of such goals for which tertiary education is instituted in Nigeria, among which are the COEs, is to "forge and cement national unity; and promote national and international understanding and interaction" (NPE, 2013:26). The goal is further reiterated in the philosophy of Nigeria's education which envision citizen "living in unity and harmony as one indivisible, indissoluble, democratic, and sovereign nation founded on the principles of freedom, equality, and justice; and promote inter-African solidarity and world peace through understanding" (NPE, 2013:1).

As cited in the preceding paragraphs, Nigeria's educational goals and objectives culminates in her philosophy of the national policy founded on education for national development and social change. The NPE (2013) reiterates that education is for "the promotion of a progressive and united Nigeria." As such, the various levels of the nation's education system are purposely designed to promote and facilitate the national goals, which are focused on democracy, equality of all citizens, and harmonious living. Substantially, the country's rating as developed or otherwise, as with any other nation, will depend on attaining these goals. According to Nwana (1998:15), "a developed country can be said to be one, which, having clearly articulated its national objectives, has achieved, all or most of them within a reasonable time frame." In the

case of Nigeria, there is no doubt that it has identified and set out its goals in clear terms and continues to strive towards achieving them. Thus, according to the NPE (2013:1-2), the nation's educational objectives are for,

a. development of the individual into a morally sound and effective citizen.
b. total integration of the individual into the immediate community, the Nigerian society, and the world.
c. provision of equal access to quality teachers and educational opportunities for all citizens at all levels of education, within and outside the formal school system.
d. inculcation of national consciousness, values, and national unity; and
e. development of appropriate skill, mental, physical, and social abilities, and competencies to empower the individual to live in and contribute positively to the society.

The national education objectives summarily aim to inculcate national consciousness and unity alongside the inculcation of the right types of values and attitudes for the survival of the individual and the Nigerian society. Therefore, the training of the mind in the understanding of the world around and the acquisition of appropriate skills, abilities, and competencies, both mentally and physically, as tools for the individual to live in and contribute to the development of the society are paramount. These human and social ideals are essential to the teaching profession. Hence the government's investment in teacher education for interreligious peacebuilding and national integration.

Peaceful coexistence and the imperative of Peace education

The NPE roadmap for peace culture in Nigeria tertiary schools is elastic to accommodate the values of nonviolence and tolerance in the practice of private religious beliefs. Individuals, privately and collectively, can aim at peaceful coexistence through deliberate efforts to achieve peace. A planned Peace education curriculum would also facilitate the attainment of the same goals.

Peace education is a concept apt to solve the elusive search for peace in Nigeria. The form

of education entails activities that "promote the knowledge, skills and attitudes that will help people either to prevent the occurrence of conflict, resolve conflicts peacefully, or create social conditions conducive to peace" (Peace Insight, 2021). Like any other foundational knowledge that the government of Nigeria has planned for students in the tertiary institution through the General Studies curriculum, Peace education ought to have a place in such a program.

There is a need to address and reverse the narrative of hurt and unwholesome profiling of others as an outcast by one religious' adherent against the other. A change of orientation that would be far-reaching and lasting in individual psych would have to come through a planned curriculum. For those in the mainstream of formal education, a deliberate step to reverse the narrative of contest that has bred suspicion, distrust, and slander must be made (Ajibola, 2018). Similarly, the General Studies curriculum in Colleges and Universities would need to be structured to focus on social justice, respect for human rights, freedom of religious practice, and solidarity. According to a study on Peace Education (Peace Insight, 2021), the curriculum should reflect "nonviolence, conflict resolution techniques, democracy, disarmament, gender equality, human rights, environmental responsibility, history, communication skills, coexistence, and international understanding and tolerance of diversity."

The initiative of the Federal Government of Nigeria to deploy the education sector in the service of peacebuilding is commendable. Still, the policy must be translated into a workable objective for a far-reaching behavioural change.

Conclusion

Nigeria's public and private tertiary schools have continued to reflect the tense religious climate in the country. Sadly, rather than being academic think-tanks where conflict management strategies may be developed and demonstrated, most institutions have remained breeding grounds for religious intolerance in the country. Unfortunately, the schools are now locations that provide concrete study situations for "ways in which educational institutions - whether primary, secondary, or tertiary - have

been connected on the growth of religious conflict in Nigeria" (Hackett, 1999:537). Nigeria educational institutions are double-edged sites that could provide opportunities for generating or countering religious intolerance. Nevertheless, the prevailing history of mutual religious suspicion between Christians and Muslims and the struggle to control the nation's education sector has lent more weight to bigotry and religious narrow-mindedness.

The need for reorientation for peaceful coexistence requires a reset to default NPE goals for national unity. Conscientious efforts must be made by all stakeholders to overcome mutual suspicion whereby the Muslims see the Christian schools as what Hackett (1999) described as "potential centres of political unrest" (p.546). The Muslim's impression that the Christians' schools are "centres of political unrest" where clandestine political activities were hatched, and by the same token that Muslims schools are hindrances to evangelism, 'part of the overall Fulani policy of suppressing the Christians and favouring the expansion of Islam'" (Hacket:546), must stop.

Deliberate move towards the healing of unpleasant historical memories, and efforts at planned curriculum to dissipate or diffuse mutual distrust and suspicion of the religious adherents living in the same communities as patriots must be made by introducing a Peace education curriculum.

Recommendations

Given the findings made during this study, the following recommendations are proposed for a reorientation in tertiary schools towards a culture of peaceful coexistence in the country at large:

1. Admission and appointment processes for Colleges, Polyethnic and Universities in the country should no longer feature Religion as a requirement for documentation.
2. The General Studies Curriculum across the various levels of education at the tertiary stage should include Peace education, emphasising nonviolence, conflict resolution techniques, history and impact of interreligious violence, communication skills, and coexistence.
3. Relevant education bodies/agents should organize workshops, training, and retraining programs for teachers at all levels of tertiary education. Such training should focus on reorientation for peaceful coexistence.
4. Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council should research the possibility of thematic integration of Peace education into other course contents.

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