

Intercultural Perspectives and the Rise of Religious Fundamentalism in Southeastern Nigeria

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Abstract

This study focused on the intercultural perspective of the rise of religious fundamentalism in South-eastern Nigeria. The region is known for its religious diversity, with Christianity and Islam being the dominant religions. The study aimed to explore the factors contributing to the rise of religious fundamentalism, considering intercultural dynamics, historical context and political influences. The study follows a descriptive survey research design. Purposive sampling was used to select religious and community leaders from Anambra, Enugu, and Imo states in South-eastern Nigeria. The research instruments used include a questionnaire and interview guides for Christian leaders, Muslim leaders, and community leaders. The reliability of the research instruments was established through a pilot study, and the data was analyzed using descriptive statistics. The findings indicated that the interplay between globalization, local cultures, and the growth of religious fundamentalism in South-eastern Nigeria is significant. The majority of respondents agreed that any infraction of religious instruction will bring about God's severe punishment, and only the fear of God keeps people in the right path. They also believed that Satan is behind any attempt to undermine belief in God, and people stay in the right path because they expect reward in heaven. Additionally, religious fundamentalism was perceived as a global challenge. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that the interplay between globalization and local cultures contributes to the growth of religious fundamentalism in South-eastern Nigeria. The study highlights the need for selective exposure to media and technology, good governance and economic justice, and international diplomacy to address

Keywords: *intercultural perspective, religious fundamentalism, historical context, Christianity, Islam, South-eastern Nigeria*

Introduction

In Nigeria specifically, Christian missions gained momentum during the 19th century (Longman, 2021). British missionaries, in particular, were influential in spreading Christianity across the country. Missionary societies, such as the Church Missionary Society (CMS), the Methodist Church, and the Roman Catholic Church, established missions and schools, focusing on evangelization and education (Schneider & Bjork-James, 2020). Meanwhile, both Christianity and Islam are considered to be the most recognized religion in Nigeria. Islam was introduced to Nigeria through trans-Saharan trade routes and cultural exchanges.

The expansion of Islam into Nigeria was facilitated by Muslim traders and scholars who travelled across the Sahara Desert, establishing connections with local communities. The Kanem-Bornu Empire, located in present-day northeastern Nigeria, played a significant role in the early spread of Islam in the region (Salau, 2020). Muslim merchants and scholars from North Africa and the Middle East travelled to Kanem-Bornu, bringing Islamic teachings and practices with them. The rulers of the empire embraced Islam, which further promoted its spread among the population (Beyers, 2023).

Christianity and Islam have both become integral parts of Nigerian society, reflecting the country's religious diversity. Christianity is predominantly practiced in the southern regions, while Islam has a significant presence in the northern parts of Nigeria. These religions have shaped religious, cultural, and social norms, providing frameworks for belief, moral values, and community engagement (Phillips et al, 2019). While there are occasional interreligious tensions, both Christianity and Islam have played significant roles in fostering unity, promoting education, and contributing to Nigeria's rich cultural tapestry (Nakissa, 2023).

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The coexistence and interactions between these two major religions have influenced the country's history, politics, and social dynamics, reflecting the diverse religious landscape of Nigeria. South-eastern Nigeria generally, and Igboland in particular, have been repeatedly described as a predominantly Christian region. Until 1990, conversions to Islam among the Igbo derived from the interplay of internal and external factors whose lines of demarcation were in some cases blurred (Ives & Kidwell, 2019). These factors include the genuine spiritual quest and conviction that Islam is the appropriate way to God; the recognition of Islam as a universal religion; perceived divine

influence through dreams and revelations; mixed religious marriages; the desire for integration within established Muslim financial and political networks, which was heightened by the political and economic marginalization of the Igbo following the Nigeria–Biafra War (Van Tongeren et al, 2019).

Fundamentalism in this context is a term used to describe a strict and literal adherence to the fundamental principles and doctrines of a religious, political, or ideological belief system. It typically involves a rejection of modern or progressive interpretations and a desire to return to what is perceived as the original or pure form of the belief system. Religious fundamentalism is a complex social phenomenon that has gained significant attention in recent years (Knibbe & Kupari, 2020).

The intercultural dynamics of South-eastern Nigeria contribute to the rise of religious fundamentalism. The region's diverse cultural and religious landscape creates opportunities for both interfaith dialogue and inter-religious tensions. While interfaith initiatives promote peaceful coexistence, clashes between different religious groups often result from the clash of cultural values and beliefs. In an attempt to protect their cultural and religious heritage, some individuals turn to religious fundamentalism as a means of asserting their identity (Ezeugonna et al, 2022).

Statement of Problem

This study aims to provide an intercultural perspective on the rise of religious fundamentalism in South-eastern Nigeria. South-eastern Nigeria is a region known for its cultural diversity, with various ethnic groups and religious affiliations coexisting. However, the region has witnessed a growing trend of religious fundamentalism, particularly within Christianity and Islam. This study seeks to explore the background factors contributing to this rise, considering intercultural dynamics, historical context, socio-economic factors, and political influences. One major consequence is the erosion of the region's long-standing cultural diversity and pluralism, as fundamentalist ideologies tend to reject or marginalize alternative beliefs and practices. This threatens the intercultural fabric of South-eastern Nigeria and undermines the region's rich heritage of coexistence and mutual respect. Moreover, religious fundamentalism can contribute to social tension, conflict, and even violence, as extremist elements seek to impose their views on others or engage in acts of religious intolerance. Addressing the rise of religious fundamentalism in South-eastern Nigeria requires a comprehensive approach that promotes intercultural dialogue, education, and respect for diversity. This is the gap the research intends to fill.

Theoretical Review

Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory was developed by social psychologists Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s. Their work initially focused on minimal group paradigms, where individuals were categorized into arbitrary groups, leading to in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination. One of the proponents expanded on these ideas, emphasizing that individuals categorize themselves and others based on social attributes, forming a social identity that influences behaviour and perception.

In the context of the rise of religious fundamentalism from intercultural perspectives in South-eastern Nigeria, Social Identity Theory becomes a valuable lens through which to examine the dynamics of group identity. Nigeria, with its diverse ethnic and religious composition, offers a complex social landscape. The theory is relevant to the study as it explores how individuals, facing cultural diversity and potential intergroup tensions, may seek a strong social identity through religious affiliations, contributing to the rise of religious fundamentalism (Mepaiyeda & Popoola, 2019).

South-eastern Nigeria, characterized by a mosaic of ethnicities and religions, provides fertile ground for the application of Social Identity Theory. In this region, individuals may align themselves with religious groups as a means of forging a clear and distinct social identity in the face of cultural diversity. The theory helps illuminate how religious affiliations become a source of pride and self-esteem, especially when faced with historical tensions and contemporary challenges (Mgbemena & Dike, 2019).

Social identity theory allows researchers to explore how individuals categorize themselves and others based on religious affiliations, leading to in-group favouritism. The desire for a cohesive social identity within a religious community may drive individuals to adopt more rigid and fundamentalist interpretations of their faith. Additionally, the theory helps in understanding how intergroup dynamics, influenced by social identity, contribute to the formation of religious communities that may resist or feel threatened by cultural diversity²²³.

Empirical Review

Given the above, it may not be an over statement to forecast that, the three dominant religions in Nigeria will outlive the 21st Century. The future of ATR, Islam and Christianity appears to be very bright in Nigeria. The Pentecostal churches are really proliferating in Nigeria. For instance, the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) has vouchsafed to plant churches within five minutes walking distance in every city and town of developing countries, and within five minutes driving distance in every city and town of developed countries. The Roman Catholic Church and the Baptist Church are experiencing exponential growth in Northern Nigerian which has not been the case in the 1960s (Omavuebe, 2021). There is the likelihood too that Islam will blossom in Nigeria. The greatest concentration of Muslims is in the Northern States, forming about three fourths of the entire northern population, but today Islam is the dominant faith in a few of the Southern States, which equally is gradually penetrating the eastern States. The reason for this spread of Islam may not be far- fetched (Omavuebe, 2021). Islam adopts a very simple way of life and most of its propagators are traders who usually spread their tentacles everywhere. Again, Islam has successfully mixed substantial portion of its belief with indigenous beliefs especially belief in magic and medicine for protection which seems appealing to most people in this crisis prone Nigeria. The question of whether ATR will survive in Nigeria or not is in the affirmative (Dyikuk, 2019).

Research Design

This study followed the design of descriptive survey research. Through the church leaders, Muslim leader, and community leaders spread around the study area, this strategy gives the researcher

access to compile data from a sizable sample. The study covers Clerics and Community leaders from the three states in Southeast Geo-Political Zone of the nation who are Christians and Moslems. States are Anambara, Enugu, and Imo.

Sample and Sampling techniques

Purposive sampling was used in order to choose the respondents from Anambara, Enugu, and Imo States who are religious and community leaders knowledgeable with the emergence of religious fundamentalism from an intercultural perspective within southern Nigeria. From every one of these states forty were chosen. And this resulted in 120 responders chosen from the study population.

Description of the Research Instruments

The study employs an interview guide and a questionnaire as its tools. Developed by the researcher, these served to compile study data. Two sections comprised the questionnaire. The second half was used to get answers from the study questions; the first part was utilized to compile data on the socio-demographic traits of the respondents. Apart from the aforementioned, the questionnaire was constructed and intended on a five-point Likert scale to get replies from the participants. This research set the Likert scale as follows:

SA = Strongly Agree (4 points) A = Agree (3 points) D = Disagree (2 points)

SD = Strongly Disagree (1 point).

The instruments are:

- a. Intercultural Perspective Strategic Adoption Questionnaire (InPSAQ)
- b. Interview Guide for Christian Leaders (InGuCL)
- c. Interview Guide for Moslem Leaders (InGuML)
- d. Interview Guide for Community Leaders (InGuCL)

Each of the instruments meant for completion by the respondent are written in English language.

Validity and Reliability of Research Instruments

Fifteen residents from the Mbaise Local Government Area of Imo State were part of a pilot study. The reliability of the research tool was established using the results of the examination of the given questionnaire.

Table 1: Reliability Values of the Research Instruments

S/N	Instrument Construct	Crombach Alpha
1.	Intercultural Perspective Strategic Adoption Questionnaire (InPSAQ)	0.76
2.	Interview Guide for Christian Leaders (InGuChL)	0.76
3.	Interview Guide for Moslem Leaders (InGuML)	0.76
4.	Interview Guide for Community Leaders (InGuCL)	0.77

Source: Researchers' Fieldwork 2023

Table 1 shows that the Cronbach Alpha test of 0.77 and 0.76 produced scores above 0.70 as the benchmark, criteria. Thus, the researcher approved of the research tool as dependable for gathering data for the project.

Results and Discussion of Findings

This section presents results and discussions of findings according to the research questions raised in the study.

Does the interplay between globalization and how local cultures contribute to the growth of religious fundamentalism in southern Nigeria?

Table 4.2b: The interplay between globalization, local cultures and growth of religious fundamentalism in southern Nigeria

S/No.	Statement	SA	A	D	SD	Mean (X)	Std. Dev.	Remark
1.	Any infraction of religious instruction will bring about God's severe punishment	39 (32.5%)	34 (28.3%)	29 (24.2%)	18 (15.0%)	2.8	0.701	Accepted
2.	Only fear of God keeps people in the right path	64 (53.3%)	34 (28.3%)	15 (12.5%)	7 (5.8%)	3.0	0.816	Accepted
3.	Satan is behind any attempt to undermine belief in God	73 (60.8%)	27 (22.5%)	10 (8.3%)	10 (8.3%)	3.5	0.951	Accepted
4.	People stay in the right path only because they expect reward in heaven	103 (85.8%)	7 (5.8%)	5 (4.2%)	5 (4.2%)	3.7	0.992	Accepted
5.	Religious fundamentalisms is a global challenge	65 (54.2%)	31 (25.8%)	10 (8.3%)	14 (11.7%)	3.1	0.984	Accepted

Source: Fieldwork, 2023

Table 4.4 b shows the interplay between globalization and how local cultures contribute to the growth of religious fundamentalisms in southeastern Nigeria. The table reveals that 39 (32.5) strongly agreed that any infraction of religious instruction will bring about God's severe punishment, 34 (28.3%) agreed, 29 (24.2%) disagreed, while 18 (15.0%) strongly disagreed. the result of calculated mean was 2.8, which was greater than 2.5 (\bar{X}). The table reveals that any infraction of religious instruction will bring God's severe punishment.

The table also reveals that 64 (53.3%) strongly agreed that only fear of God keeps people in the right path, 34 (28.3%) agreed, 15 (12.5%) disagreed, while 7 (5.8%) strongly disagreed. The result of calculated mean was 3.0, which was greater than 2.5 (\bar{X}). The table shows that only the fear of God can keep people in the right path.

From the table also, 73 (60.8%) strongly agreed that Satan is behind any attempt to undermine belief in God, 27 (22.5%) agreed, 10 (8.3%) disagreed and another 10 (8.3%) strongly disagreed.

the result of calculated mean was 3.5 which was greater than 2.5 (\bar{X}). The table revealed that Satan is behind any attempt to undermine belief in God.

The table also reveals that 103 (85.8%) strongly agreed that people stay in the right path only because they expect reward in heaven, 7 (5.8%) agreed, 5(4.2%) disagreed while another 5 (4.2%) strongly disagreed. The result of the calculated mean was 3.7, which was greater than 2.5 (\bar{X}). The table shows that people stay in the right path because they expect reward.

Lastly, the table also reveals that 65 (54.2%) strongly agreed that religious fundamentalism is a global challenge, 31 (25.8%) agreed, 10 (8.3%) disagreed, while 14 (11.7%) strongly disagreed. The result of the calculated mean score is 3.1, which was greater than 2.5. To this the table reveals that religious fundamentalisms is a global challenge.

The study also revealed that any infraction of religions instruction will bring about God's severe punishment. That is why people believe that only the fear of God keeps them in the right path, as they expect their reward from heaven. This fear of God, according to the study is undermined by Satan through his temptation against people's belief in God.

Lastly, the study further revealed that religious fundamentalism is a global challenge. The reason is because of the influence of external forces such as international forces or global ideologies which affect the dynamics of religious fundamentalism, not only in southern Nigeria, but across the globe.

Conclusion

The aim of this study is to assess southern Nigerian religious fundamentalism factors. Based on the results, the following conclusions were deducing: It was decided that the rise and acceptance of religious fundamentalism in southern Nigeria is being influenced by media exposure and technology developments. Financing religious fundamentalism in the research area is ethnicity.

Recommendations

1. There is the need for selective exposure of the social media and technology advancements. This will curb the infiltration antagonistic mindset that might instigate religious fundamentalism.
2. Politicians and public office holders in southern Nigeria should ensure good governance and economic justice. Such will ensure political stability which will intersect with intercultural dynamics which shapes the landscape of religious tolerance in the study area.
3. International politics and diplomacy should be encouraged among the people in southern Nigeria. This will bring the wave of pro-religious tolerance ideologies that will promote peaceful co-existence like in other parts of the world.

Suggestions for Further Studies

1. As Southeastern Nigeria grapples with the challenges posed by religious fundamentalism, the findings of this study contribute to a deeper understanding of the underlying factors. The intercultural lens applied in the research emphasizes the need for nuanced and context-specific approaches to address religious tensions, fostering interfaith understanding and social cohesion within the region. Future research endeavours should continue to explore the evolving

dynamics of religious beliefs in Southeastern Nigeria, considering the diverse perspectives of age, education, and marital status to inform targeted interventions that promote tolerance and inclusivity.

2. Establish a framework for continuous research and monitoring of intercultural dynamics and religious sentiments in Southeastern Nigeria. Regular studies can provide updated insights into evolving perspectives, allowing for timely interventions and adjustments in strategies.

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