Ending Religious Extremism in Northern Nigeria: A Study of Elnathan John’s Born on a Tuesday

Susan Dauda
Nile University of Nigeria

Fundamentalism has been defined as an unwavering faith to a religious system. Although it could be applied to adherents of any religion, today it is mostly associated with Islam. Islam is said to have arrived Nigeria in the 11th century through the activities of mostly traders but it eventually took root and spread through the Fulani jihad of Usman Dan Fodio and the establishment of the Sokoto caliphate. From the late 1970s several reform movements have taken place but the most violent have been that of Maitatsine and currently the Boko Haram insurgency. Born on a Tuesday is a story about religious fundamentalism told by Dantala an almajiri. In telling the story we see the various issues that create an atmosphere in which fundamentalism thrives. Gladly in stating the issues we also note the solutions. This paper therefore discusses the problem of fundamentalism and highlights the solutions as evident in the book.

Keywords: Fundamentalism, Islam, Jihad, Usman Dan Fodio, Sokoto Caliphate

INTRODUCTION

Islam arrived in northern Nigeria in the eleventh century and first appeared in the Kanem Borno Empire northeast of the country. It was spread mostly through the activities of traders and led to the development of literacy in Arabic. Later Islam emerged in Hausa land in the northwest and also spread through the activities of Muslim clerics, traders and the Trans Saharan trade. In the second half of the eighteenth century the Fulani jihad of Usman Dan Fodio took place primarily in Hausa land. The jihad which lasted for six years aimed at reviving and purifying Islam. It sought to eliminate syncretism and a return to pure orthodox Islam. However, this religious revolution also had a political element concerning state formation and state conflict. It united the Hausa states under sharia law. In 1812 the Hausa dynasties became part of the Islamic State or Caliphate of Sokoto. The Sokoto Caliphate ended with partition in 1903 when the British incorporated it into the colony of Nigeria and the Sultan's power was transferred to the High Commissioner. Muslims in Northern Nigeria are predominantly Sunni and Shia with the Shia’s being the minority. Several Islamic reform movements have taken place in Nigeria since the late 1970s, including the Izala movement and Maitatsine. Whereas Izalas were interested in denominational issues such as guiding the Muslim community and “correcting” its faith Maitatsine was militant. It was led by Muhammad Marwa an Islamic scholar who migrated from the town of Marwa in Northern Cameroun to the city of Kano in
1945. While in Kano he started preaching against modernization or westernization and was particularly abusive and provocative especially against the emirate and political class thus the name Maitatsine (one who curses). He was able to attract large followers particularly among the commoners. Their activities became a threat and after they overwhelmed police units sent to contain them the military was called in. They were able to dislodge them and the leader was killed.

This did not spell the end of extremist Islamic movements as the more dangerous Boko Haram (Western education is forbidden) emerged in Maiduguri in 2002. It was founded by Mohammed Yusuf with the ambition of turning Nigeria into a truly Islamic state by imposing sharia law. They first clashed with police when they disobeyed a law that required motorcyclists to wear a helmet. Yusuf was arrested and executed without a trail. Under their new leader Abubakar Shekau the group became extremely violent and introduced terrorist activities hitherto unknown in Nigeria and indeed West Africa.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Fundamentalism has been defined as “an unwavering faith to a religious system” (Rausch). Although it could be applied to adherents of any religion today it is most associated with Islam. In Nigeria Islamic fundamentalism has resulted in acts of terrorism hitherto unknown and has taken even Muslims by surprise. In the past Nigerians thought it was impossible for anyone to engage in suicide bombing because we love life too much. Boko Haram has disproved that. Now people wonder what cause would make people including children strap an explosive device to their body knowing they would die and not care. Ford asserts that the group has been a growing force in Nigeria for years and has deep roots in the country’s social development. He states that “Its rise is not an accident and signals the emergence of a dangerous, militant religious movement that threatens Nigeria’s survival as a nation-state.” Since its uprising however it is clear that the Nigerian government has not been able to contain the group. It started with outright force but this rather emboldened the group and made its successes a potent recruitment tool. The carrot and stick method was also tried but it has largely failed. Although the government of President Muhammad Buhari rose to power with the promise of wiping the insurgency it has only been able to scatter it and the group still remains deadly as recent media reports show. This paper will look at how the problem of fundamentalism can be solved as depicted in Born on a Tuesday by El Nathan John.

SUBJECT MATTER

Born on a Tuesday is a story about religious fundamentalism. It is told by Dantala or Ahmad the main character. The title of the book is actually an English translation of his name. It opens with Dantala and his under the Kuka tree friends in Bayan Layi. They are apparently a bunch of miscreants who are mostly used by politicians for their dirty work. They are hired by politicians of the small party to burn up the big party’s headquarters in after they lose elections. Police are called in and Dantala must flee to save his life. He ends up in Sokoto and is taken in by Sheikh Jamal who becomes his mentor. Life begins to look up for him and he is able to travel to visit his mother after many years during which he learns of the tragedies that befell her. Abdul-Nur who is Sheikh Jamal’s assistant brings his nephew Jibril to Sokoto and they become firm friends with Dantala. He teaches him English and Dantala uses the words he learns to explain things happening around him. His mother dies and he travels to Dogon Icce where he meets his brothers
who are Shiites and who have become strangers to him. While there he learns that Sheikh Jamal has been shot. Blaming the Shiites Abdul-Nur mobilizes their followers who burn down Shiite mosques. Crisis breaks out but Sheikh Jamal is able to broker peace with the Shiite leader. Meanwhile Dantala becomes Sheikh Jamal’s trusted aide. Things get bad when Abdul-Nur returns from Saudi Arabia to start a new movement that culminates in the killing of Sheikh Jamal and the resultant riots. Dantala is detained for nine months but he survives and is released. He receives a message from Jibril that gives him hope for the future. It is in view of this that the questions arise: What can be done to end the problem of fundamentalism in Nigeria? Can we find solutions to the problem of fundamentalism in Born on a Tuesday? What solutions to fundamentalism does Born on a Tuesday offer?

First of all the protagonist Dantala is an almajiri. His father had sent him off to Quranic training at a tender age. He had earlier sent off his other children Maccido, Hassan and Hussein to be almajirai at Tashar Kanuri (John 43). The almajiri system is said to have existed in Nigeria since the 11th century. However AbdulQadir has asserted that the almajiri system of education as practiced today in Northern Nigeria is a completely bastardized system. He asserted that in its original form it did not involve begging as the pupils lived with their parents while they attended schools usually located within their environment. Today the almajiri has become a serious social problem in Northern Nigeria. Since the activities of their teachers are not regulated the children are exposed to all sorts of extremist views that births the problems of fundamentalism. It is important to note that Mohammed Yusuf and Abubakar Shekau were all almajiris. Thus the system has to be abolished or restructured to provide western education alongside the Quranic.

In addition, the activities of their teachers need to be regulated by the religious leadership in the North.

Related to this is that free, compulsory education should be enforced in Northern Nigeria. We see Dantala’s excitement and joy when he begins to learn English. It opens up a new world to him “I love learning new words. I love reading the definitions and examples in Sheikh’s dictionary, then finding those words in books or magazines and using the words (87). Quranic education alone keeps a person limited but as we see from the book learning a universal language like English opens up new vistas. Who knows how many Dantala’s would have been doctors, scientists, inventors or teachers today.

The need for regulation of preaching by religious authorities in collaboration with government is also important as we can deduce from the book. Malam Abdul-Nur spread his extremist views in the mosque quite freely. Writing in his new found English language Dantala expresses concerns about Abdul-Nur’s ideas which continue even after Sheikh Jamal cautions him (98). Dantala also writes about things that terrify him like “how easy it is for Malam Abdul-Nur to say the word kill especially when he is talking about the Shia people” (118). Because there is no system in place to check such teachings Abdul-Nur is able to recruit a lot of gullible people into his movement. This inability to regulate preaching is also evident in the rise of the Maitatsine movement where for years Mohammed Marwa continued to make abusive sermons without any one challenging or stopping him.

Provision of economic opportunities in Northern Nigeria is another way through which fundamentalism can be curtailed. Abdul-Nur returns from Saudi Arabia with a turban and a new movement. He provides loans to people to set up or increase their
businesses. Dantala wonders “not sure if it is the hope of money that lures them or the fact that the Mujahideen movement is something new” (187). Where government provides infrastructure that promotes economic activity people are less likely to join extremist groups for economic reasons. Boko Haram is known to have provided financial incentives including paying their members to kill Nigerian government officials (Zenn).

In addition, the training of security forces on how to manage insurgency is very vital. When Dantala tries to escape from Sokoto following the killing of Sheikh Jamal his bus is stopped by the military and two men who had tried to escape are shot and killed (222). The soldiers don’t know who they are and they were never given a chance to defend themselves. A report by Amnesty International showed that the military engaged in human rights abuses as a result many innocent people were extra judicially killed. Note that it was after the extra judicial killing of Yusuf Mohammed that Boko Haram turned deadly. Ability to manage and nip in the bud any possible trace of fundamentalism using the legitimate judicial process would go a long way to prevent its ugly manifestation.

Finally encouraging moderate Muslim voices to counter extremist ones is another way to tackle the problem of fundamentalism. In the Middle East and the West Muslims have tried to reclaim their religion by speaking out against the atrocities of Al Qaeda, ISIS and others. For example a group of Muslims in Morocco posted an online video titled “Not in my name” in which they declared that these terrorists’ organizations don’t represent them (Avraham). The British group of Muslims that visited Sheikh Jamal could be described as moderate voices. They declare that Islam is peace in a bid to promote the positive sides of the religion (84). In Nigeria the voices of these moderates is hardly heard, maybe out of fear but the Muslims in the Middle East have as much to fear but they speak out anyway.

CONCLUSION

Born on a Tuesday not only states and describes the problem of fundamentalism in Nigeria but in doing so reveals the solutions. Fundamentalism however has to do with ideology and faith so it’s not an easy thing to fight. But like all challenges facing nations today a strong will and commitment to fight it will bring victory. This is clearly seen in the United States fight against Al Qaeda, a highly sophisticated terrorist group. With resilience, patience and commitment the U.S. almost singlehandedly downgraded the capabilities of Al Qaeda and capped it up by killing Osama Bin Laden. Nigeria will do well to learn from this instead of hurriedly declaring that Boko Haram has been defeated.

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