

## Hate Speech, Righteous Hatred and Political Stability: A Religious Perspective

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**Abstract:** Of all the spheres where hate speech thrives, religion and politics seem to be more pronounced. Speeches made to cast aspersions on political affiliations and ideologies as well as on religious faiths, heavily affect the political beliefs, participation and reactions of the people concerned to the happenings within the socio-political arena. Comments made on religion, like those on politics, have a high propensity to either make or mar the entire political well-being or otherwise of the country. How religious groups react deliberately or spontaneously to speeches against their faiths, and how such reactions affect the political stability of a country like Nigeria, is what this paper seeks to explore. In this paper that uses the library research method to make an incursion into the subject of hate speech and political stability, works of other scholars in the area are examined and the researcher's position is situated within the raging discourse on the subject matter. Extant laws governing the exercise of religious and speech freedom are explored. The paper contends that certain communication practices in parts of the world have undermined people's right to religious freedom. It, therefore, recommends respect for religious rights and freedom as a way to avert possible political instability occasioned by intolerable verbal attacks on religious practices.

**Keywords:** Hate speech, Righteous hatred, Political stability, Religious freedom, Religious practices.

### INTRODUCTION

A basic concern of any government worth the name, is the maintenance of peace, law and order in society. Every good government believes, and so it is, that a harmonious, conflict-free way of life in the polity enhances its ability to tackle social problems like hunger, poverty, unemployment, abduction, kidnap, drug addiction, electoral vices, armed robbery and prostitution, and to deal with exigencies like outbreaks of diseases and natural disasters (like epidemics or pandemics and flooding). To be able to achieve these ends, all types of government, especially a democracy, want a stable environment. Thus, political stability is the desire of every country, whether yet industrialized or not.

In this regard, the year 1999 marked a watershed in the history of modern Nigeria for it was that year that ushered in what was expected to be a true, enduring democracy. Before then, the country had oscillated between civil and military rule, with the latter having longer periods. Since 1999, however, Nigeria has been enjoying uninterrupted so-called democratic governance which presupposes political stability, yet the growth of the economy seems illusory [1].

### The Concern of this Paper

Although Nigeria claims to be a democracy, contemporary realities in the country seem not to call for any celebration in the area of political stability. There is this recurrent argument in socio-political commentaries on the democratic complexion of Nigeria that there is the need for Nigerians to be patient with their polity in its stand-still march towards true democracy as it took even the United States of America a very long time to attain its present level of advanced democracy. The implication of this viewpoint is that there was an improvement in the American democratic learning process with each passing day or year. But can Nigerians, in all sincerity, also say that the Nigerian electoral process - which is the pivot on which the machinery of democracy turns - improves with the passage of electoral seasons? The answer can hardly be yes with the increase in violence, greed, electoral indiscipline and untamed killings in the country, exacerbated by a soaring incidence of hate speech in our social life, especially in the political and religious sectors. Herein lays the concern of this paper which seeks to examine the implications of religious hate speech for political stability.

### Political Stability and Its Gains

Nomor and Iorember [1] quote the Encyclopedia Britannica as defining *political stability*

as “the durability and integrity of a current government regime”. According to the authors,

*... A stable society is one that is satisfied with the ruling party and system of operations and is not interested in revolutionary or despotic ideas. A stable political scene is one where the ruling government is favored by the population and does not experience strong indicators of social unrest. While there are problems within any nation, and times of war or hardship are common, a stable political system is one that can withstand these occurrences without major societal upheaval...(p.45).*

Sottiolotta [2] cited in Nomor and Iorember [1], observes that:

*The concept of political stability is a very controversial concept. Sottiolotta argued that; a first broad definition refers to the absence of domestic civil conflict and widespread violence. In this sense, a country can be considered rid of instability when no systematic attacks on persons or property take place within its boundaries. Secondly, classic interpretation equates stability with government longevity. Thirdly, political stability draws on the lack of structural change, that is, the absence of internally or externally induced change in the basic configuration of a polity (pp.45-46).*

For Paldam [3], political stability covers four dimensions: stable government, stable political system, internal law and external stability. On its part, the International Consulting Firm Eurasia Group [2] sees political stability as the capacity of a country’s political system to withstand internal or external shocks. In this sense, the Group says, a broad operational definition of political stability should take concepts and indicators into account such as human development (as measured by the UN Human Development Index); inequality (Gini index); political legitimacy (i.e. the more or less widespread support for the government, be it democratic or non-democratic); constraints on regime responsiveness (i.e. the economic constraints that governments encounter in meeting the requests of their citizens as expressed, for instance, by the total stock of a country’s public debt); and regional/international integration (meaning, for instance, membership in international and regional organizations or the ratio of total foreign trade over GDP).

Abeyasinghe [4] writes that political stability, regardless of the extent of democracy, has a significant effect on growth in developing countries. He says political stability ensures improvement in employment; protects the basic rights of citizens; promotes their culture and unity; provides basic infrastructure and services, electricity, water supply, healthcare; and so promotes increase in both local and foreign investments.

### **Threats to Political Stability in Nigeria**

Political stability in Nigeria is threatened by the triplets of greed, corruption and indiscipline as well as hate speech which is becoming very disturbing today in Nigeria. One: corruption. Ene, Arikpo, Jeffery and Albert [5] contend that political stability can be established in Africa through good governance, fairness, honesty, justice, transparency, accountability and a careful nurture of democracy through good education. They, however, observe that corruption has been one of the most internal constraints to development in Nigeria. In their view, corruption has led to political instability in Nigeria and has affected economic growth of most African states. Corruption has resulted in the erosion of cherished cultural values such as dignity of labour, fairness, honesty, faithfulness, integrity, etc; and for them, it has also affected the practice of democracy in Africa and hindered transparency and accountability, leading to bad governance.

Two: greed, violence and indiscipline. Although Nigerians are aware that the much sought-after peace, stability, democratic growth and development and general economic and political prosperity are the rewards of free and fair elections, we have, as a nation, allowed our electoral system and process to be plagued by fraud and violence, with violence rating highest on the scale of the vices. Our politicians engage decadent youths other than their own children in all forms of electoral malpractice and thuggery. For just a shekel of silver! On their part, the youths understand the Aristotle’s proverbial “good life” in terms of fleeting rather than permanent pleasure and immediate rather than mediate gains [6]; and so they sacrifice their great tomorrow on the altar of today’s profane desire to eat, drink and be merry.

Whereas able-bodied youngsters are capable of understanding political issues and taking independent decisions on them, they have deliberately allowed themselves to be misinformed or even kept in the dark on crucial issues which affect their lives and basic rights. A great many, therefore, participate in electoral campaigns not because they choose to do so for any genuine interest but because they are goaded to do so by power-seekers who care less about the sanctity of human life. Many vulnerable youths are drawn by dare-devil politicians into various acrimonious disputes and electoral malpractices in the course of which the youths lose their lives while their sponsors, the politicians, engage with gusto in the flagrant looting of the national treasury.

### **Hate Speech and Righteous Hatred or Indignation**

The American Bar Association cited by Head [7], defines *hate speech* as “speech that offends, threatens, or insults groups, based on race, colour, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, disability, or other traits”(para.1). It is any utterance, typed

document, advertorial, musicals, or any form of literature that is used to attack an individual, a group (religious, social, political, business), gender or race[8].

Fasakin *et al.* [9], citing Adibe [10], says hate speech employs discriminatory epithets to insult and stigmatize others on the basis of their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation or other forms of group membership. It is any speech, gesture, conduct, writing or display which could incite people to violence or prejudicial action. Segun, cited in Fasakin [9], adds that hate speech is often the gateway to discrimination, harassment and violence as well as a precursor to serious harmful criminal acts.

As Orlu-Orlu [11] writes,

*What is central to the definitions or explanations above is the fact that hate speech is not a mere defamatory statement or insult against an individual or group but that the ill statement or abuse is made against the individual or group, not ordinarily, but on account of its attributes like religion, race, colour, political affiliation, kingship, disability, gender, business or profession or any other personal or group trait. This is the context within which hate speech is situated in our discourse here, otherwise any vilification of or quarrel with anybody would pass for hate speech.*

This explains why Gelber and McNamara [12] observe that whereas hate speech is widely used, it lacks a single meaning. They, therefore, endorse the three defining characteristics of hate speech which are postulated by Parekh [13] as follows: (1) Hate speech is directed against a specified or easily identifiable individual or a group of individuals based on "an arbitrary and normatively irrelevant feature." (2) Hate speech stigmatizes the target group by implicitly or explicitly ascribing to it qualities widely regarded as highly undesirable. (3) The target group is viewed as an undesirable presence and a legitimate object of hostility.

In the light of the foregoing distinction of hate speech from an ordinary unpleasant statement occasioned by some misconduct, it is ridiculous to mix up hate speech with righteous hatred which is expressed in the exercise of one's religious faith. "In Europe people are starting to be jailed for saying what they think." These words, according to Albert Mohler, President of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, were spoken by Vladimir Palko, a Slovak Interior Minister, in a strongly worded protest to the Swedish ambassador to Slovakia. The minister's comments represented outrage over the jailing of a Swedish pastor for preaching against homosexuality.

As Mohler [14] narrates, Ake Green, pastor of a Pentecostal congregation in Kalmar, Sweden, was

sentenced to one month imprisonment on a charge of inciting hatred against homosexuals. Pastor Green was prosecuted and found guilty of "hate speech against homosexuals" for a sermon he preached in 2003.

Fortunately, Sweden's Supreme Court in 2005 overturned the judgement and acquitted Pastor Green of the charge on the ground that his sermon was protected by freedom of speech and religion [20]. The report of Vanderheyden has it that Green had been convicted and sentenced by a lower court in 2004 for his so-called hate speech. While the media had falsely claimed that Green referred to homosexuals as a "cancerous tumour" on society, Green told the courts that he was referring to homosexual acts, not persons. A relevant part of his 2003 sermon on the issue read: "Sexual abnormalities are a deep cancerous tumour in the entire society."

The recent expansion of hate crime laws in Canada, intended to outlaw all criticisms of homosexuality, is convincing proof that this trend is not limited to Europe. The logic of restrictions on free speech is clear. Where homosexual behaviour was once characterized as sodomy and thus criminalized, some now openly call for the criminalizing of all "hate speech" addressed to homosexuals. Disturbed by the trend, Mohler [14] laments that:

*...in the name of sensitivity, tolerance, and political correctness, such offensive speech must be eliminated, the pulpit must be silenced, and faithful pastors are now fair targets for condemnation and, eventually, for criminal prosecution. Pastors in Sweden are now on notice--if you preach what the Bible teaches about homosexuality, you will go to jail. The watching world and the praying church must bear witness to this violation of conscience. We are now witnesses to the criminalizing of Christianity (para. 16).*

A similar case in Sweden was that of a 71-year-old man who was prosecuted for "hate speech" for criticizing the Islamic ideology [16]. Like Pastor Green, the old man, Denny Abrahamson, had said he did not cast aspersion on Muslims; he had read the Qu'ran and was only sharing his own opinion on the Islamic ideology which he said was totalitarian.

There is a difference between hate speech and righteous hatred or indignation which can occasion a rebuke or critical comments against anti-social or unnatural practices like homosexuality, rape, nudity, pornography and prostitution all of which debase society.

What is righteous hatred or indignation? Hatred means an extremely strong feeling of dislike or intense dislike. Its synonyms include hate, loathing, abhorrence, detestation and resentment. Whereas hatred or hate is generally an ill feeling, indignation means anger at what is regarded as unworthy or wrongful;

wrath excited by a sense of wrong, or by meanness, injustice, wickedness, or misconduct. Indignation, therefore, means righteous hatred. Some people call it righteous or dignified anger. Thus, righteous indignation is typically a reactive emotion of anger over perceived mistreatment or malice. *The Roycroft Dictionary* defines righteous indignation as hate that scorches like hell, but which the possessor thinks proves he or she is right.

In Christian teachings, righteous indignation is considered the only form of anger which is not sinful such as when Jesus drove the money lenders out of the temple for making his Father's house a place of merchandise (John 2:13-17).

Righteous indignation is anger and hatred against evil that pleases God (Exodus 32:19; Psalms 45:7; 97:10; 101:3; 119:128,163; 139:19-22; Proverbs 8:13; Amos 5:15; Mark 3:5; Rom 12:9; Ephesians 4:26; Heb 1:9).

God has righteous indignation – holy anger and fury at sinners (Psalms 69:24; 78:49; Isaiah 30:27,30; 34:2; Jeremiah 10:10; Ezekiel 21:31; 22:31; Nahum 1:6; Malachi 1:4; Micah 7:9; Habakkuk 3:12; Zephaniah 3:8; Zechariah 1:12; Romans 2:8; Heb 10:27; Rev 14:10).

Men may have righteous indignation against their own sins (II Cor 7:11; Je 31:19; Ezekiel 20:43).

#### **Examples of Bible Characters that displayed Righteous Indignation**

1. Moses had righteous indignation against Israel for worshipping the golden calf (Exodus 32:19-29).
2. The Levites had righteous indignation against their closest relatives for the calf (Ex 32:25-29).
3. Phinehas had righteous indignation against an Israelite and his pagan paramour (Numbers 25:1-15).
4. Jael, as a great housewife, had righteous indignation against Sisera (Judges 4:12-17-21; 5:24-31).
5. Jehu had righteous indignation against Ahab, Jezebel, and Baal worshippers (II Kings 9-10).
6. Paul had righteous indignation against the fornicator and church at Corinth (I Corinthians 5:1-6).

#### **The Legality of Hate Speech and Legality of Religious Profession**

The issue of hate speech has received significant attention from legal scholars and philosophers alike. But according to Brown [8], the bulk of this attention “has been focused on presenting and critically evaluating arguments for and against hate speech bans as opposed to the prior task of conceptually analyzing the term ‘hate speech’ itself”(p.1).

Orlu-Orlu [11], writing on the legality of hate speech, cites a number of foreign and local cases which serve our purpose in this paper. Head 92018), cited by

Orlu-Orlu [11], reports that in 1949 in the case, Arthur Terminiello v. Chicago, the anti-Semitic views of a defrocked Catholic priest which he expressed regularly in newspapers and on the radio, had given him a small but vocal following in the 1930s and '40s. In February 1946, he spoke to a Catholic organization in Chicago. In his remarks, he repeatedly attacked Jews, Communists and liberals, inciting the crowd. A number of scuffles broke out between audience members and protesters outside, and Terminiello was arrested under a law banning riotous speech, but the Supreme Court overturned his conviction. Justifying the apex court's action, the lead judge, Justice William O. Douglas, as Head [14] recalls, argued that freedom of speech was protected against censorship or punishment.

Head [14] notes that much as the American Supreme Court justices have acknowledged the offensive nature of hate speech, in recent cases, they have been reluctant to impose broad restrictions on it. Instead, the Supreme Court has chosen to impose narrowly tailored limits on speech that is regarded as hateful. In *Beauharnais v. Illinois* [4], Justice Frank Murphy outlined instances where speech might be curtailed. These include speeches that are lewd and obscene, profane, libelous, insulting or 'fighting' words, the mere utterances of which could inflict injury or tend to incite an immediate breach of the peace.

On August 19, 2017, the *Sahara Reporters* conveyed the viewpoint of a Nigerian legal practitioner, Ebun-olu Adegboruwa, on hate speech with the headline, “Nothing like Hate Speech under Nigerian Law.” In his article, Adegboruwa argues thus:

*First, I do not agree on the concept of hate speeches. The Constitution in section 39 has granted an unqualified freedom of expression to every citizen. If any speech made has violated anybody's legal rights at all, there is the extant common law remedy of libel actions for damages in civil cases and criminal libel in criminal cases.*

*Recently, it has become common place for government and government officials to seek to gag the people by seeking all manner of restraint on the freedom of speech...*

*Secondly, I believe that the National Assembly lacks the legal competence in law to pass into law any bill seeking to gag citizens. Such a law, if ever passed, will run counter to section 1 of the 1999 Constitution which has declared the Constitution to be the supreme law. Any law capable of hindering the freedom of expression granted under section 39 of the 1999 Constitution and the African Charter will be illegal and unconstitutional. To that extent, the National Assembly has no power to make any law that will violate the Constitution. It is ultra vires.*

*It is in the light of the above that I find it difficult to agree with the current government declaration that there is a need for a new law to regulate what people term as hate speeches. This is just an attempt by the ruling APC government to gag citizens and if such law is ever passed, we shall challenge it in court.*

Adegboruwa's position was a reaction to the new bill by the Nigerian Senate which has proposed that any person found guilty of any form of hate speech that results in the death of another person shall die by hanging upon conviction [16]. The bill also seeks the establishment of an "Independent National Commission for Hate Speeches", which shall enforce hate speech laws across the country, ensure the elimination of the menace and advise the Federal Government. For offences such as harassment on the grounds of ethnicity or racial contempt, a culprit shall be sentenced to "not less than a five-year jail term or a fine of not less than N10 million or both" ([17]. The bill, which reflects the growing concern over the spate of violence in the nation, was sponsored by the spokesman of the upper chamber of the National Assembly, Senator Aliyu Sabi Abdullahi (APC, Niger State) [17].

On religion, the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, provides in Section 38, subsections (1) and (2) that:

(1) Every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom (either alone or in community with others, and in public or in private) to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance.

(2) No person attending any place of education shall be required to receive religious instruction or to take part in or attend any religious ceremony or observance if such instruction ceremony or observance relates to a religion other than his own, or religion not approved by his parent or guardian.

These constitutional provisions forbid any forceful conversion of people from one religious faith to another as sometimes practiced in parts of Nigeria, particularly by Muslims, by means of violence. The provisions do not forbid the religious practice of evangelism or teaching so long as it is done within the confines of the law.

Whereas to order that Christians or Muslims should be killed or attacked on the basis of their faith is hate speech, to teach the doctrines of the Bible or of the Qur'an either publicly or in private even if the teachings counter the beliefs or do not please those of other faiths, is not hate speech.

### **Implications of Religious Hate Speech for Nigeria's Political Stability**

It is widely believed that Nigeria consists of a minimum of 250 ethnic groups with Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo as the three dominant ones. Each group has its own language and custom and accepts one or more of the main religions of Christianity, Islam and African traditional religion.

According to a 2001 report from The World Factbook by CIA, about 50% of Nigeria's population is Muslim, 40% are Christians and 10% adhere to local religions. A December 18, 2012 report on religion and public life by the Pew Research Centre stated that in 2010, 48.3% of Nigeria's population was Christian, 48.9% was Muslim, and 2.8 percent were followers of indigenous and other religions, or unaffiliated.

The current Nigeria's population of about 197 million is nearly equally divided between Christianity and Islam, though the exact ratio is uncertain [18]. There is also a growing population of non-religious Nigerians who account for the remaining 5 percent. The majority of Nigerian Muslims is Sunni and is concentrated in the northern region of the country, while Christians dominate in the south. Most of Nigeria's Christians are Protestant (i.e. orthodox, evangelical and Pentecostal) although about a quarter are Catholic [19].

This multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-lingual and multi-religious nature of the country makes the pursuit of national unity, unity in diversity, a difficult task and accounts for the disruption and violence that have caused much of the displacement and internal migration in the country today, giving rise to anger and a high incidence of hate speech and fake news that we witness today, especially in the politico-religious sectors.

Comments made on religion, like those on politics, are capable of either making or marring the entire political well-being of the country. When religious groups react deliberately or spontaneously to any hate speech against their faiths, the result is often more hate speech and threats to public peace and social order. In the circumstance, political stability is illusive.

### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

Given all that has been said and the necessity for a peaceful polity, this paper concludes that certain communication practices in parts of the world have undermined people's right to religious freedom and free speech, thereby threatening public peace and political stability. It is, therefore, recommended that there should be respect for religious rights and freedom, to avert possible political instability occasioned by intolerable verbal attacks on religious practices.

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