

PRE-EMPTING ‘JIHADIST’ VIOLENT-EXTREMISM IN GHANA: THE ROLE OF INTRA-FAITH AND INTER-RELIGIOUS PEACEBUILDING

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Abstract

Contemporary global peacebuilding efforts, be it scholarly discourse or practical engagement, cannot ignore the Islamic perspective or the Muslim factor. This is because it is virtually impossible to engage in any useful discussion on how to pre-empt, prevent or even resolve global violence today without considering the activities of Islamist militant groups. In effect, it can be stated that the Islamist militant groups have become de facto actors of global violence in our contemporary times. These groups use radicalization as a necessary means to establish extremism in Muslim communities. They use religious images and expressions, sagas, mythology and tales to capture the mind of ignorant Muslims for their violent agenda. Being surrounded by troubled neighbours such as Burkina Faso and Mali who are struggling to fend off Jihadist militants, Ghana cannot take its fragile peace for granted. This paper discusses the need for increase Muslim intra-faith and inter-religious peacebuilding in Ghana in the midst of the ever-increasing global religious radicalization and violent-extremism. The general aim of this paper is to examine the creeping religious tensions in Ghana and how radicalization and violent-extremism which have engulf part of West Africa could escalate to defile the fragile peace being enjoyed by Ghanaians. The paper adopts the theological approach in its analysis. The paper finds among other things that the relationships among Muslim groups in Ghana and between Muslims and Christians are not deep enough to consolidate the religious peace in Ghana. In view of this, the paper recommends among other things that religious groupings in the country should unite in practical terms in order to collectively pre-empt any violence visited on Ghana through religious feuds which could destroy the fragile peace enjoyed in the country.

Keywords: Peacebuilding, Muslim, Violence, Inter-faith, Ghana

Introduction

The world is witnessing an increased perpetration of violence through various forms of conflicts, acts of terrorism and ethno-religious tensions. Inter-

states conflicts, genocide, civil wars, systematic abuses, inter-faith and intra-religious tensions, and sheer act of terrorism have undoubtedly defiled the peace of the world and brought untold suffering and insecurity to almost every community of the globe. Many hold the view that Islamic fundamentalism, radicalization and extremism have contributed to the unprecedented violence and insecurity in the world and still poses a threat to global social and political stability (Daniel 70). This view cannot be ignored especially when some Muslim groups have relied on some verses in the Qur'ān and traditions of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) to encourage the use of violence to settle parochial scores. For instance, in 1998, Osama Ibn Ladin of the Al-Qaeda group in reference to a number of Qur'ānic quotations in a *fatwa* (an Islamic religious ruling) justified the use of violence in Islam (Keay 138). These Islamist militant groups use religious ideologies and themes including the concept of Jihād to justify the use of violence for political control and recognition as portrayed by at least Osama Ibn Ladin (Bassam 11). However, as Shaykh Muhammad Al-Yaqoubi asserts, the irony is that Muslims are the most affected victims to these atrocities even though these groups claim to fight for Islam (23).

In the context of Ghana, recent media reports suggest that Islamic radicalization of young Muslims is gaining grounds as some young Muslim university graduates flee Ghana to join ISIS in Syria and Iraq. For example, in 2015, it was widely reported in both local and international media (e.g. the BBC) that a 25-year old Ghanaian university graduate, Muhammad Nazir Nortei Alema had left Ghana to join ISIS in Syria. Two days after the story broke out in the media, the government's national security coordinator confirmed that two (2) Ghanaians, Nazir and Rafiq, have left the country to join ISIS (Graphic online). Moreover, in 2017, the Ghana News Agency reported that the Libyan government has announced that it has identified at least fifty (50) Ghanaians as frontline fighters of ISIS. Indeed, an earlier study by Kwesi Aning and Mustapha Abdallah asserts that "Islamic radicalization and violence is increasingly becoming a security concern in Ghana" (150). Aning and Abdallah further suggest that Islamic radicalization is making marked impact in the northern region of Ghana which has "implications for intra-faith and inter-religious peaceful coexistence as well as national security" (150). The confirmation by Ghana's National Security, which was reported by the Daily Graphic in September 2015 that two Ghanaian Muslim youth have joined ISIS affirms the

conclusion made by Aning and Abdallah in relation to Islamic radicalization in Ghana.

The paper is anchored on two main objectives. Firstly, it examines the nuances of Jihadist violence that have engulfed the world and its implications on Muslims and their religion. Secondly, the paper seeks to evaluate the creeping religious tensions in Ghana and how radicalization and violent-extremism which have engulf part of West Africa could escalate to defile the fragile peace being enjoyed by Ghanaians. The main subjects of discussion are Islam and the Muslim community in Ghana.

Theoretical frame

The paper utilizes Johan Galtung's peace and violence model as the theoretical framework bracing up the discussion. In his book *'Peace by Peaceful Means'*, Johan Galtung contends that in any peace initiative, peace cannot be achieved by the action taken by the elite only, unless concerted action of all parties is solicited (1). Galtung also posits the idea of 'negative peace and positive peace' which guide peacebuilding practice and initiatives in contemporary times. According to him, negative peace "is the absence of violence, absence of war"; and positive peace "is the integration of human society" (2). For him, the understanding of violence which he defines in relation to peace as being "present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realisations are below their potential realisation" is crucial in any peace initiative (168). Equating peace to health and violence to disease, he states that: "Peace studies are so similar to health studies. The word-pair 'health/disease' from health studies and 'peace/violence' from peace studies can be seen as specifications of these more general labels" (1). Thus, peacebuilding demands the tackling of all root and structural causes of violence and tension in society. In this light, Baljit Singh Grewal sees Galtung's concept of positive peace to be emancipatory in posture and that it devolves peacebuilding from the state to individuals and groups in society (6). Galtung's writing on peace, especially his definition of peace and how it relates to violence is of great relevance to this discussion which explores how to counter violence with peaceful values within religious communities in Ghana.

Indeed, many scholars have extolled the positive peace dividends of intra-faith and inter-religious engagements. Writing on "*Dialogue as a Source of Peaceful Coexistence*", Karina Korostelina argues that tolerance and dialogue play crucial

roles in establishing a peaceful co-existence between Muslims and non-Muslims (103). Korostelina further explains that “dialogue between people of different cultures and faiths could bring mutual understanding, respect, and dedication to justice” (103). Similarly, Fathullah Gulen contends that interfaith engagement promotes peacebuilding and can be effective because all revealed religions are based on peace, security, and harmonious relationship in the world (34). However, Gulen argues that interfaith dialogue is only possible when people leave the past behind, ignore their differences and concentrate on what the religions have in common (34). Writing on Islam’s allowance for pluralism and respect for diversity, Abdulaziz Sachedina asserts that when Muslims are made to understand that religious and cultural diversity as well as peaceful co-existence are entrenched Islamic values, they will not take to violence (23). This assertion made by Sachedina suggests that most Muslims do not know the Islamic imperatives on peacebuilding and the value of peaceful co-existence in Islam. Indeed, one of the popular Qur’ānic verses that inspires Sachedina’s thoughts on Pluralism and diversity in Islam states: “Humankind was one single nation, and Allah sent Messengers with glad tidings and warning; and with them he sent the Book in truth to judge between people in matters wherein they differed... (Qur’an 2: 213). According to Sachedina, the above verse implies three main fundamental realities: that the humankind is one under one God; that there are particularities of religions brought by the prophets; and that revealed messages play a role in handling differences that affect communities of faith (Sachedina 23). Additionally, Abdur-Rahman Abdul- Kareem Al-Sheha argues that a true Islamic peace advocates mutual respect and collaboration among diverse social groupings so as to ensure social stability (12). Al-Sheha further avers that in order to promote peace and harmony in the world, Islam advocates for tolerance, kindness, mercy and benevolence among humanity regardless of religious affiliation (13). The above scholarly works and many others affirm the relevance and primacy of intra-faith and inter-religious engagements in enhancing collective communal peacebuilding. However, most of these works do not directly discuss how good intra-faith and inter-religious relations can be leveraged to prevent religious radicalization and violent-extremism. In the context of Ghana, this paper argues that effective intra-faith and inter-religious peacebuilding engagements will improve trust among the diverse faith-based groupings in the country; and will help in the quest to pre-empt religious radicalization and violent-extremism.

Notions of Violence in Global Islam

Even though the peaceful nature of Islam has always been articulated by Muslims, the interpretations of certain Qur'ānic verses by some Islamic scholars and the actions of militant Muslims portray Islam as a source of violence, tension and belligerence in society. An Islamic scholar, Chaiwat Satha-Anand alludes to this view and asserts that as a result of the interpretations of some Islamic texts by some Islamic scholars and the claim of acts of violence by some Muslim groups, Islam is generally perceived especially by non-Muslims as a religion that radiates and perpetuates violence (1). Consequently, words such as fundamentalism, radicalism, extremism and terrorism have been used to describe Islam and Muslim behaviour in contemporary times. Even though such characterization of Islam has grown with the increase of the use of violence globally in the name of Islam, many scholars including non-Muslims are not comfortable with such representation of Islam. They see this branding of Islam as a defilement of what the Islamic tradition represents. For instance, Islamic scholar and theologian, Yusuf al-Qaradawi alludes to how indelibly the word “extremism” has been attached to Islam in both academic and ordinary conversations relating to violence and suggests that Muslims should confront this (mis)conception with the exhibition of the true Muslim character which he or she considers as being a peace-builder (22). Similarly, Abdul Rashied Omar (158) makes reference to the use of the phrase ‘Islamic fundamentalists’ and argues that its usage permeates the literature and that it is always used to suggest that Islam is a source of “contemporary terrorist violence” of which he rejects. Omar’s comments suggest a disapproval of the use of such phrases to describe that Islam as a religion stands for. Again, Ze’ev Maghen reiterates the deep-seated perception in the world today that Islam has to do with “fury, fierceness, fanaticism and intransigence” (38). For Maghen, these unbending representations of Islam contradict the life of the Prophet of Islam who showed a high degree of compassion and flexibility in his mission (38). Moreover, Khaled Abou El Fadl asserts that in the minds of many people around the globe, Islam has been associated with “intolerance, persecution, oppression, and violence” (4). Indeed, many people in the world including scholars consider these attacks on the United States of America in 2001 as having given birth to almost an indelible notion that Islam is the source of contemporary terrorism and violence, and posing a threat to international security (174). Moreover, Ayşe Kadayici-Orellana alludes that radicalization is the source of extremism among Muslims. Kadayici-Orellana explains that a typical agenda

of radicalization uses religious images and expressions, sagas, mythology and tales which resonate with the religious community in order to link the minds of the population for selfish political objectives (23). Indeed, recent writings of Islamic scholars appear to suggest that the actions and inactions of some individual Muslims and group of Muslims seem to affirm the violence perception about Islam. For example, a Palestinian-American academic, Edward Said writes that:

For the right, Islam represents barbarism; for the left, medieval theocracy; for the center, a kind of distasteful exoticism. In all camps, however, there is agreement that even though little enough is known about the Islamic world there is not much to be approved of there (xv).

Similarly, Rashied Omar (158) argues that the attack on the United States of America on September 11, 2001, the violent activities of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the attack on the Indian parliament in December, 2001, and the violent separatist conflicts in Chechnya among others have reinforced the perception that Islam encourages violence. Additionally, Mohammed Abu-Nimer affirms the endemic existence of negative image of Islam as a violent religion rather than being viewed as a peaceful religion, especially in the eyes of the West. Abu-Nimer reveals that, a search of the Library of Congress subject catalogue on Islam and violence gave a result of thousands of articles, whereas a search for Islam and nonviolence produced fewer results (3).

Inasmuch as Said's assertion appears to be value-judgemental, contemporary global Islamist activism and the violent political affairs in parts of the Muslim world seem to vindicate him. However, the undertone of Said's argument follows a cultural perspective as it seems to dwell on the experiences of Islam by the West. On the other hand, Omar and Abu-Nimer appear to express their opinions from a theological perspective since they seem to compare the actions of some Muslims vis-à-vis their understanding of the non-violent nature of Islam. Abu-Nimer's view about the contemporary representation of Islam, particularly in the West presents three main possible implications. Firstly, it implies that the perception of Islam as a source of violence is a deep-seated phenomenon among people across the globe, particularly among non-Muslims. Secondly, it implies that the use of violence in the name of Islam is so prevalent that it has generated a lot of discourse among scholars and social commentators.

And thirdly, the general thinking around Islam and violence has been overshadowed by the proliferation of Islamist Militant groups and their activities, leaving the vast knowledge on Islam and peace untouched. But in all these arguments, the fundamental submission being put forward by these scholars is that the display of violent behaviours and attitudes by some Muslims create the perception that violence is an endemic feature of Islam; and that these postures are in contradiction with Islamic values and principles. Nonetheless, there are many questions seeking for answers in this regard. Is there basis for some scholars and writers to characterize Islam as a religion of violence? Are the scholars who claim that Islam is a violent religion making this conclusion out of sheer ignorance? Is there evidence of violence being committed in the name of Islam? And if there is, are these acts of violence emanating from the (mis)interpretations of injunctions from the holy Qur'ān and the traditions of the Prophet?

The Polemics of 'Jihād' and Muslim Violence

Another key concept in Islam which is associated with Muslim violence is the concept of 'Jihād'. Indeed, both non-Muslims and some Muslims have deduced violence from the concept of Jihād because the concept has been implicated as the motivating factor in many atrocities committed in the name of Islam. The term *Jihād* in Islam has been a subject of controversy within the purview of Islamic peacebuilding and conflict resolution. *Jihād* has been a problematic concept especially in the eyes of non-Muslims because in many cases Islamist militant groups rely on it as a motivating springboard to engage in acts of terrorism and unprovoked violence. As a result, the popular understanding of Jihād especially to non-Muslims is that it is a weapon of war used by the Muslims to impose Muslim worldview on others (8). The term is therefore equated to aggressive "holy war" and therefore represents Islam as a religion of violence and terrorism (160). The concept is therefore seen at least from the perspective of the West and non-Muslims as being a radiator of violence and a source of insecurity for humanity (21). This conception or perhaps misconception about *Jihād* does not reside with only nominal non-Muslims but also with renowned scholars as well. For instance, Maulana Muhammad Ali (345) quotes Klein who says:

Jihād - The fighting against unbelievers with the winning them over to Islam, or subduing and exterminating them in case they refuse to become Muslims, and the

causing Islam to spread and triumph over all religions is considered a sacred duty of the Muslim nation.

The word *jihād* is etymologically linked to the words ‘*mujahadah*’ which means struggle or contention, and ‘*ijtihad*’ which is the efforts exerted by Islamic Jurists to arrive at correct ruling in Islamic law (1). However, linguistically, the word ‘*jihād*’ is derived from the Arabic origin ‘*jahd*’ or ‘*juhd*’ meaning ability, exertion, effort or power; and it is normally used in Arabic verbal form ‘*jaahada*’ (‘*yujaahidu*’) (7). The Holy Qur’ān most often uses the verbal forms of the word *Jihād*, as for example: “*And whoever strives hard (jaahada), he strives (yujaahidu) only for his own self (that is for his own benefits)*” (6). It must be underscored that *Jihād* is a multi-layered term and comprehensive. It denotes many concepts including the pursuit of commendable goal, peaceful persuasion, passive resistance, and armed struggle against oppression and injustice (160). However, in all its usage, the phrase ‘*holy war*’ which translates in Arabic as ‘*al-harb al-muqaddasah*’ as it has been extensively used generally to refer to is never used in the Qur’an. Muslim scholars have disapproved this equation. For instance, Khaled Abou-el-Fadl (160) has objected to equating *Jihād* to ‘*holy war*’ and states:

The Islamic concept of Jihād should not be confused with the medieval concept of holy war since the actual word al-harb al-muqaddasah is never used by the Qur’ānic text or Muslim theologians. In Islamic theology, war is never holy; either it is justified or not.

It is against this background that Satha-Anand argues that “*Jihād* categorically places the notion of war and violence in the moral realm” (10). In view of this, the Qur’ānic verses that relate to the concept of *Jihād* need to be catalogued. According to Ibn Kathir, the following sets of verses are generally agreed upon by early Muslim scholars such as Ibn Abbas, Mujahid, Muqatil Ibn Hayyan, and Qataadah among others (103):

Truly God defends those who believe. Truly God loves not every disbelieving traitor. Permission is given to those who fought because they have been wronged. Surely, God is able to give them victory- those who have been expelled from their homes unjustly only because they said: “Our Lord is God.” And if it were not that God repel led some people by means of others, then monasteries, churches, synagogues,

and mosques, wherein the Name of God is mentioned much would surely have been pulled down. Verily, God will help those who help Him. Truly, God is powerful and mighty— those who, if We give them power in the land, establish worship and pay the poor-due and enjoin kindness and forbid iniquity. And to God belongs the outcome of [all] affairs (Qur'an: 22: 38-41).

A cursory look at Islamic scholars' position on *Jihād* reveals three camps. The first camp of Muslim scholars hold the position that Islam must be the governing religion on earth and that Islam must expand its influence through various means including offensive Islamic approaches (41). Proponents of this view rely on Islamic sources that encourage the use of force without due recourse to the context. The ideology behind Islamic militancy is obviously rooted in this understanding of *Jihād*. However, this 'offensive' position is always met with the key question of non-compulsion of religion as espoused by Islam. The Qur'an categorically states: "There is no compulsion in religion. Verily, the Right Path has become distinct from the wrong path" (Qur'an: 2: 56). One of the contemporary scholars who reject offensive *Jihād* as a principle in Islam is Seyyed Hossein Nasr (263) who argues that: "Those who carry out terrorism in the West or elsewhere in the name of *Jihād* are vilifying an originally sacred term, and their efforts have not been accepted by established and mainstream religious authorities as *Jihād*". Nasr's view resonates with many other scholars who argue that the concept of *Jihād* has nothing to do with aggression. For instance, Tariq Ramadan (159) asserts that "*Jihād* is a commitment to peace and a war cry". However, the above notion suggests at least that there are Muslims including scholars who see *Jihād* as an Islamic avenue for wanton aggression against non-Muslims.

The second group of Islamic scholars see *Jihād* as a defensive mechanism and argue that, Islam permits the use of violence under certain conditions such as self-defence (Moulavi 79-82). The proponents of this view contend that under oppression and persecution, Islam permits Muslims to defend themselves as exemplified in wars fought by the Prophet and his companions in Madina. However, in such situations, the scholars hold the view that the combatants and non-combatants must be distinguished in times of war (Kadayifci 41). The position of self-defence is a natural phenomenon for all; and from the Islamic understanding, everybody has a right to self-defence, Muslim or non-Muslim alike.

The third categories of scholars see *jihād* as a non-violence enterprise and argue that Muslims can fight injustice and resolve conflicts through non-violent resistance (Kadayifci 41). According to Kadayifci-Orellana (42) such approach of non-violent *jihād* is the preferred method of resolving conflicts from the Islamic perspective. These scholars opine that the promotion of non-violence as an approach for peacebuilding is a duty on every Muslim (Mazzahim 14). And this is where Islamic peacebuilding becomes very necessary. Looking at the three categories of scholarly appreciation of the word *jihād*, it can be said that the term is not meant for unleashing wanton violence on innocent non-combatant people. It is clear that the term has been hijacked by belligerent for their own parochial interest.

Traces of Muslim Violence in Ghana

Religion plays a very significant role in the lives of most Ghanaians, and as Wiafe Eric Oduro (1) puts it: “We should know that Ghana is a religious country as almost all the people belong to one religion or the other”. Consequently, the major religions in Ghana, including Christianity, Islam and the African Indigenous Religion impact greatly on the people especially on their social and religious lives (Nathan 58-61). Perhaps, the most important contribution from religion towards national development is the religious tolerance and peaceful co-existence that exist between various religious groups in Ghana especially between the three major religions, Islam Christianity and African Indigenous Religion. Undoubtedly, the relatively peaceful co-existence that exists among various religious bodies in the country plays a significant role in ensuring peace in Ghana. However, the peace being enjoyed in Ghana has not precluded occasional tensions, conflicts and violence that erupt from intra-religious conflicts, inter-religious misunderstandings, intra and inter-political clashes, and ethnic tensions among others. This makes the peace fragile and calls for continuous efforts to sustain the peace.

In his State of the Nation Address (SONA) in February, 2015, the President of Ghana, Mr. John Dramani Mahama traces the long history of religious tolerance in the country and states that: “From the period of the Trans-Saharan trade, the two major world religions and our African traditional religion have coexisted peacefully in this land [Ghana]” (63). Indeed, it is significant to indicate that the religious pluralism in Ghana emanates from the 1992 Constitution of Ghana which guarantees freedom of religion and beliefs. For

instance, Article 21, Clause 1 of the 1992 Constitution of Ghana specifically mentions freedom of religion, worship and beliefs. As a result; there has been an influx of other religious groups in Ghana. Beside the three major religions of Islam, Christianity and the African Traditional Religion, other religions such as Buddhism, Baha'ism, and Judaism have entered into the Ghanaian religious space (Wiafe 1). There is also a proliferation of religious denominations and groups in the country, particularly within Christianity and Islam (Nathan 65).

Muslims in Ghana have experienced violent intra and inter-religious conflicts which resulted in the loss of life and property; and affected social relationships (Hussein 98). The intra-religious conflicts were mainly as a result of doctrinal fanaticism and provocative preaching among the two main Muslim groups in Ghana: the Salafi Ahlus Sunnah Wal-jama'a group and the Sufi Tijjaniyyah Brotherhood (Hussein 101). Even though there had been pockets of intra-Muslim tensions all over the country, there were those that degenerated into full-blown wanton violence which resulted in the loss of life and property and became national security issues. For instance, in 1995 and 1998, series of fatal clashes occurred between followers of the *ahlussunnah* group and that of the Tijjaniyyah group at Wenchi, a town in the Brong Ahafo region of Ghana. The Ghanaian Times reported the clashes of 20th January, 7th February, 14th June, and 3rd August, 1995 and 16th January, 1998 between the two Muslim groups claimed lives and several properties were destroyed. While the People's Daily Graphic also reports the preceding of the Wenchi clashes where the Muslim experience intra group conflicts in Kumasi (the second largest city of Ghana and the capital of the Ashanti Kingdom) between two same groups in December, 1986 and July, 1987 in which lives were lost and properties destroyed. Similarly, a Muslim intra-religious conflict in Wa, one of the populous Muslim towns in the Upper West region of Ghana, left dozens of people injured and several properties destroyed in 1997. Again, the Daily Graphics reported in 1997 how violence ensued between the Tijjaniyyah and *ahlussunnah* groups in Tamale in the Northern Ghana (arguably the most populous Muslim city in Ghana) which resulted in the loss of life of one person and the destruction of several properties. Indeed, because these Muslim conflicts were deadly and bordered on national security, it always captured the front pages of Ghana's foremost national newspapers: the 'Daily Graphic' and the 'Ghanaian Times'. It is interesting to note that the immediate cause for most of these intra-Muslim conflicts is insulting utterances at public preaching from scholars of both the Tijjaniyyah and Ahlussunnah groups (Hussein

115). Moreover, it appears that these preaching episodes which triggered damaging clashes among these two Muslim groups in Ghana in both Wenchi and Kumasi were deliberately targeted at intra-faith opponents with the objectives of condemning certain religious practices of one another in order to show sectarian supremacy (Hussein 120). By and large, both immediate and remote causes are ascribed to the intra-Muslim conflicts which occurred in the 1980s and the 1990s. The main causes of the clashes were basically doctrinal disagreements on certain Islamic concepts such as divination in Islam; Qur'ānic erasure (writing and drinking of verses of the Qur'ān for spiritual benefits); the celebration of birthday of the Prophet Muhammad; insulting preaching (wrong preaching methodology); and general religious intolerance among the two groups (Hussein 126). Whereas the Tijaniyyah group in Ghana believes and indulges in such religious practices, the Ahlussunnah group rejects these practices and sees them as *'bid'ah* (innovation in Islam) (Hussein 128).

As a result of the proactive measures put in place by the government and national security as well as the co-operation by national Muslim leadership, the frequent clashes among Muslim groups and groups abated, leading to a relative harmony among Muslim groups in Ghana today. However, the very causes of the fatal clashes which erupted over a decade ago are still there. Scholars from the Tijjaniyyah, *ahlussunnah* and Shi'a communities are still doing the provocative preaching along sectarian theological lines. Hence, there is no such a guarantee that those ugly conflicts may not erupt again. Therefore, there is the need for continuous exploration of peacebuilding initiatives in communities such as the ones cited above in order to sustain the peace among Muslims in particular and Ghana as a whole. Any such initiative in such conflict-prone communities should explore common grounds on which all Muslims, irrespective of their different sectarian orientations, will appreciate their commonalities which can be used to foster tolerance and peaceful co-existence.

Aspects of Inter-religious Intolerance in Ghana

Muslim-Christian relations in Ghana have been cordial but not without sporadic clashes and tensions among the adherents of the two religions. The relation between the two religions in the past especially before the 1990s was generally characterized by tolerance, mutual respect and co-operation (Elorm 40). However, the early 1990s witnessed a strained Muslim-Christian relation characterized by suspicion, conversion tactics, and provocative preaching against

one another which sometimes resulted into physical violence (Nathan 203). Between 1995 and 1997, the Christian Council of Ghana recorded about thirty-two press reported religious conflicts cases, and most were clashes between Muslim-Muslim, Muslim-Christian, Christian-African Traditional Religion and Christian-Christian among others. Nathan Samwini describes this high incidence of religious conflicts in Ghana at the time as “an unprecedented state of religious disturbances in Ghana” (Nathan 205). Samwini’s description of the situation is understandable because Ghana had been peaceful since the early 1980s despite the existence of religious pluralism. Indeed, Elorm Dovlo had described Ghana in the period preceding the religious conflicts of the mid-1990s as being blessed with inter-faith harmony in the wake of the religious conflicts in other West African countries such as Nigeria (Dovlo 40). It must be stated however that, anytime that tension built up between religious groups in the country, level-headed national religious leaders in Ghana quickly rallied around in unity against violence to prevent a potential widespread religious conflict before it degenerated into an irreparable disaster (Nathan 207).

The history of sporadic inter-religious conflicts in Ghana must be a reminder for continuous peacebuilding efforts with the view to consolidate the relative peace that exist in Ghana’s religious space. It cannot be over-emphasized that there is a relative religious tolerance and peaceful co-existence in Ghana. The situation is aptly recognized in the 2015 State of the Nation Address of the then President, Mr. John Dramani Mahama when he stated: “Ghana has enjoyed a long history of religious tolerance. From the period of Trans-Saharan trade, the 2 major world religions and our African religion have co-existed peacefully in this land” (John 63). The President’s view reflects the views of many scholars of religion in Ghana (Dovlo 40; Nathan 208). However, this recognition of religious tolerance in the country does not suggest that Ghana has not had its share of religious intolerance and conflicts in the past. Better still, this acknowledgement of peaceful co-existence of religions in Ghana does not immune the country from future religious disturbances of the peace. Indeed, there have been turbulent times of religious disturbances in Ghana especially in 1980s and the early 1990s which claimed life and property; and took a concerted effort from the Government, religious leaders and civil society groups in conflict resolution to stem the waves of religious intolerance in the country. Since then, Ghana has enjoyed relatively peaceful co-existence among various religious groups.

However, in the last decade, certain postures and pronouncements by some religious leaders among Muslims and Christians appear to be building tensions among the two major religious groups in Ghana which if it is not worked on, could jeopardise the current peace being experienced in the country. In his 2015 State of the Nation Address, the then President of Ghana, John Dramani Mahama again expressed his worry in the recent nuances of religious intolerance in the country especially with regards to religious discrimination in schools when he stated:

“Our constitution in Article 21, Clause 1 guarantees the freedom to express one’s religious beliefs. That is why recent complaints about religious discrimination coming from Muslim Groups in the Western Region and the Christian Council of Ghana are worrying. It is wrong under our constitution for Muslim students to be compelled to attend church services or for Christian students to be compelled to attend Muslim congregational prayers. It is also wrong to prevent Muslim women from wearing their hijab or Nuns from wearing their habits to work or to school. Heads of institution must note this for strict compliance. Appropriate sanctions would be taken against any head of institution who act contrary to the constitutional provisions” (Mahama 63).

The Ghanaweb News reported the President’s statement came in the wake of a regional demonstration at Sekondi/Takoradi, the capital of the Western Region of Ghana, by Muslim leaders and their followers after Friday prayers on the 20th February 2015. The complaint presented by the Muslims through a petition to government was that Muslim students and women in Ghana were not allowed to use their veils in public schools originally established by Christian Mission and public workplaces; and that this was against the 1992 Constitution of Ghana. In response to the Muslim petition and the subsequent statement made by the President, which was reported by the Myjoyonline news, the Conference of Catholic Bishops of Ghana and The Christian Council of Ghana issued separate statements insisting that their schools will not allow the wearing of veils by Muslim students. Again, in response to the President’s directives, the General Secretary of the Christian Council of Ghana, Reverend Kwabena Opuni-Frimpong saw the directives from government as threats of sanctions and argued that the alleged religious discrimination are human right issues which can best be resolved by the courts and not through threats of sanctions. The Myjoyonline also

reported the statement of the General Secretary: “Now there are directives from government and the directives are coming with sanctions but we are dealing with human rights issues. If somebody complains about his human rights issues, normally one goes to court.”

Moreover, a video which circulated in the social media regarding some pronouncements made by Archbishop Duncan Williams of the Action Chapel International has raised religious tensions and mistrust between Muslims and Christians in Ghana. An online newspaper the Modernghana also reported the archbishop to have said in a sermon to his congregation that: “The Muslims are not just praying; they are dealing with all types of entities and forces. They call on powers of the underworld and the water kingdom. They deal with different levels and dimensions of witchcraft.”

In a Modernghana online news accessed on 5th January 2016, the Coalition of Muslim Organizations, Ghana (COMOG) was reported to have issued a swift response contained in a press statement signed by its General Secretary, Hajj Abdel Manan Abdel Rahman. The group stated among other things that:

Nothing could be further from the truth that these unmeasured and unguided effusions which come as a surprise from the learned archbishop and well-informed leader of an identifiable congregation ... We urge Archbishop Duncan Williams to be mindful about subjects he hardly understands.

Furthermore, a decision by the government of Ghana in 2016 to accept two former Guantanamo detainees in Ghana for two years also raised tensions between Muslims and Christians. The myjoyonline reported different reactions. Whiles the Christian Council of Ghana and the Catholic Church condemned that of America, the Office of the National Chief Imam welcomed the decision and the detainees, and accused the Christian leadership in Ghana for taken such a stand because the persons in question were Muslims. In addition, on the 17th February, 2016, the Daily Graphic reported fatal clashes occurred between Muslims and non-Muslim youth in Kumasi-Tafo, a suburb of Kumasi, the second largest city of Ghana which left two persons dead and a mosque and churches vandalised. According to the report, the clashes occurred as a result of a misunderstanding regarding walling of a local cemetery. Again in April 2021, a denial of a Muslim student to fast in the month of Ramadan at the Wesley Girls High School in Cape Coast shook the foundation peace of the country to an unimaginable height. The

school which was established by the Methodist Church of Ghana and now owned by government rejected a plea by a student to fast. In a statement issued by the Methodist Church of Ghana, the Church even rejected the directive of the Ghana Education Service to allow the student to fast. As a follow up to the statement issued by the Methodist Church, the Christian Council of Ghana (CCG) and the Catholic Bishops Conference of Ghana (CBCG), the foremost Christian umbrella groupings in Ghana issued joint-statement upholding the position of the Methodist Church on the matter. In response, the Office of the National Chief Imam and Muslim Caucus in Parliament acting on all Muslim groups in Ghana issued separate statements disapproving the decision by the Church and calling on the National Peace Council to intervene to ensure that religious freedom is upheld in this matter. These postures taken by the Christian and Muslim groups brought untold tension between Muslims and Christians as well as the country as a whole during the period.

All these reports mentioned-above illustrate that the peaceful relations between Muslims and non-Muslims in Ghana are not as deep as it appears to many Ghanaians. There are still deep-seated suspicions which need to be worked on in order to consolidate the fragile peace that exists among religious bodies in particular and Ghana as a whole. The incidences of conflicts in the last 3 decades also suggest that the nature of the peace in the country is a negative one as it fits into Galtung's description of negative peace (2). And this needs to be worked on as a matter of urgency. This is because it seems there is a gradual relapse of the mutual respect and cooperation that existed between Muslims and non-Muslims in the country, and this need to be checked in order to pre-empt any destructive ramifications as a result.

Beyond Lip-service Intra-faith and Inter-religious Engagements

Planting of conscious peacebuilding initiatives among and between religious groupings in Ghana is critical for maintenance of peace in the country. This kind of religious peacebuilding has the potential to "legitimize violence-preventing behaviour and delegitimize violence promoting behaviour" (David 58). In this regard, constructive and productive engagements are needed at both intra-faith and inter-religious relation levels.

On the Muslim front, the discussion so far has revealed that there is the need for more positive interactions and collaborations among various Muslim groups in the country since this will deepen trust and increase peaceful co-

existence among themselves. It is refreshing though to note that the Wesley Girls challenge was a blessing in disguise to the Muslim community in Ghana. It brought all Muslim major groupings together and this resulted in the formation of the fast-flourishing National Muslim Conference of Ghana. This conference headed by the National Chief Imam comprises of all Major Muslim groupings in the country including the Tijjaniyyah Movement of Ghana, *Ahlus-Sunnah Wal Jama'ah*, the Ahmadiyyah Muslim Mission, the Ghana Muslim Mission, Federation of Muslim Women Association of Ghana FOMWAG), and Coalition of Muslim Organizations, Ghana (COMOG) among others. The National Muslim Conference Deed for example, signed an understanding at the end of the 2021 conference on 1st August, 2021 that clearly spelt out the desire of Muslim leadership in Ghana to explore all avenues to mobilize and provide sustainable funding for the developmental objectives of Muslims relating to education, health and finance. This is part of the efforts aimed at engendering positive interaction among various Muslim groups in Ghana in order to strengthen intra-faith peaceful co-existence for development. These intra-faith harmonious engagements will reduce mistrust, and suspicion that normally fuel tensions and clashes among them. The groups working together for the common good should not allow doctrinal differences to stall the positive engagement they have started as it has been in the past. In this regard, Taha Jabir al-Alwani opines that, differences in opinion among Muslims should not result in clashes and escalating tension since it creates the awareness of the various possible aspects and interpretations of Muslim acts and practices (215).

With regards to inter-religious relations in Ghana, it can be said that the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims in Ghana is not deep enough. And as can be seen from the discussion so far, there have been intermittent religious turbulence that the country has been experiencing. There is therefore the need to deepen the peaceful co-existence that exist among the diverse religious groupings in the country. Relationships that engender peace should be grown from strength to strength; for any lapse in such relationships can be leveraged upon by belligerent individuals and groups to destroy the hard-won cordial relationships established through decades of efforts towards peaceful co-existence of various religions in the country. Indeed, faith-based organisations and communities across the world have been engaging in religious peacebuilding over the years. In view of this, Susan Hayward asserts that: “many religious communities have long been engaged in building peace, justice and development

themselves, and the emergence of the secular peacemaking field has led religious communities to systematize and institutionalize their own peacebuilding and interfaith work” (Susan 4). Hayward’s assertion resonates well with the situation in Ghana. The various religious communities in Ghana including Christians, Muslims and practitioners of the African Traditional Religion (ATR) have been working together over decades in ensuring peace in the country Mustapha 21-24). Indeed, the efforts of these religious bodies in peacebuilding were a catalyst for the formation of the National Peace Council which is mainly composed of the representatives of religious groups and traditional leaders in Ghana. In this vein, David Steele avers that the constant interaction between various religious adherents especially at the local level will “cultivate a healthy sense of belonging” as well as encouraging the knowledge of one another which can “dispel distortion and enemy imaging” (Steel 58). Also, this kind of pragmatic relationship between religions can pre-empt radicalization and the use of religious entities to cause violent-extremism against one another.

Conclusion

This paper sought to examine the shades of radicalization and violent-extremism in the name of Islam that have engulfed the world and its implications on intra-faith and inter-religious relations vis a vis the fragile peace being enjoyed in Ghana. Clearly, it can be seen from the discussion that Muslims in Ghana have in the past experienced violent intra-faith conflicts which resulted in the loss of life and property; and affected social relationships. Similarly, the early 1990s witnessed a strained Muslim-Christian relation characterized by suspicion, conversion tactics, and provocative preaching against one another which sometimes resulted into physical violence. All these affected the peace in Ghana and rendered it very fragile. With the high speed of insurgency being witnessed in West Africa, any religious or doctrinal misunderstanding or lack of collaboration among religious groups in Ghana could pave way for violence kingpins to extend their nefarious activities into the country and this will disturb the fragile peace it is enjoying. In this regard, it is anticipated that religious bodies in Ghana will be encouraged by the dividends of their efforts towards peace over the years to engage more in interfaith collaborative programmes and projects that could pre-empt the eruption of violence among followers of these religious groups. Such practical collaborations should be initiated at the grassroots communities where meaningful day-to-day interactions take place among the people. In this regard,

inter-religious collaborations could be focused in the area of education, health and other mutually beneficial social development initiatives. It is hoped that this kind of interaction will engender belonging and build trust among the adherents of various religions in the country. And this will in turn water down suspicion, mistrust and hearsay which accounts for most tensions and clashes among religious groups.

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