

## From Hate Speech to Non-Violence: An Approach towards a Peaceful Coexistence from Sociology of Religion Perspective

OLANIRAN O.E. BALOGUN

Tai Solarin University of Education, Ijagun, Nigeria

**Abstract.** Our great nation, Nigeria, is going through turbulent and trying times. There are a series of protests, strikes, secession-seeking groups and anger-filled movements seeking public expression almost daily. Part of the reason may very well be the present challenging times as a result of the economic hardship caused by decades of maladministration. This bad governance which has been caused by politicians and military men least prepared morally, psychologically and educationally to lead the great assemblage of the nature our country is made of. So, suddenly we have been plunged into an era of delusion in which foul language and hate speech have become common currency, making the majority of Nigerians uncomfortable. At a moment like this, many wish they belonged to a nation a little more civilized or would rather not belong to the sort of mess they find around them. Some are beating the drums of war, others would want to take a more conciliatory direction. Stemming hate or hate speeches and seeking a nonviolent option is the only way forward. In this short reflection, using the Catholic Social Teaching methodology, the See, Judge, and Act, we shall see why the non-violent option is the best for the future of Nigeria and indeed for countries facing internal strife and conflicts in the African continent today.

### 1. Introduction

There is no universal legal definition of hate speech. In general, it is considered to be communication used to intentionally harm any identifiable group including those categorized by

ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or religion. Hate speech, is therefore, communication designed to incite hate, cause violence, and/ or prejudicial action.

Due to incessant verbal attacks against various groups, the Nigerian government has chosen to declare a war on hate speech. Addressing the National Economic Council in Abuja on August 17 2017, Vice-President Yemi Osinbajo announced that the government had "drawn a line against hate speech; it will not be tolerated; it will be taken as an act of terrorism and all of the consequences will follow it". He explained that hate speech is a sort of terrorism. Terrorism is defined popularly as "the unlawful use of violence or intimidation against individuals or groups especially for political ends." Barely, five days earlier, on August 11, Interior Minister, Abdulrahman Dambazau, a retired General, had informed the media at the end of a meeting of the leadership of the ruling All Progressives Congress, that "a draft executive bill to the Ministry of Justice on hate speech was almost ready. The bill would be sent to the National Assembly for necessary debate and approval. Right on cue. Senate President Bukola Saraki announced on August 15 that the National Assembly would consider such a bill as a fast-track.

The proposal of such a new law only underscores the government's desire to stem hate speech decisively otherwise there are ample laws already available to handle such crimes. Nigeria's Terrorism (Prevention) Act of 201 1, amended in 201 3, prohibits among many things,

acts that "seriously intimidate a population". These include acts that "incite, promise or induce any other person by any means whatsoever to commit any act of terrorism. "The Electoral Act prohibits 'abusive language directly or indirectly likely to injure religious, ethnic, tribal or sectional feelings" as well as the use of "abusive, intemperate or slanderous or base language or insinuations or innuendoes designed or likely to provoke violent reaction or emotions." Incitement to hate is a crime under both the Criminal and Penal Codes. The rationale for this in law is obvious: hate speech not protected speech.

## 2. What is Hate Speech?

To understand the issue at hand, we must ask again, what is hate speech? The answer to this is not easy. In September 2013, the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination issued General Comment No. 35 on "Racist Hate Speech" in which it clarified that "hate speech can take many forms and is not confined to explicitly racial remarks." The UN Committee pointed out that "speech attacking particular racial or ethnic groups may employ indirect language in order to disguise its targets and objectives."

Digital expression has enhanced both the immediacy of hate speech and the capacity to monitor it. The Centre for Information Technology and Development (CITAD) in Kano, which tracks hate speech in Nigeria, has recently published an analysis of its monitoring undertaken over six months covering June-December 2016. Over this period, it recorded 6,258 incidents, a monthly average of 1,043 incidents. Hate speech directed at religion accounted for 2,603 or 41.59 per cent while those directed against ethnicity or tribe accounted for another 39.13 per cent. In other words, between them, religion and ethnicity were the focus of 80.72 per cent of the incidents of recorded hate speech. With considerable understatement, CITAD concludes that "this means that Nigerians are becoming (more) ethnically and religiously insensitive, even intolerant,"

Hate speech in Nigeria is not new but it seems to have gotten worse with increasing political competition. In 2011, following the post-election violence in parts of northern Nigeria, President Goodluck Jonathan constituted an investigative panel headed by Sheikh Ahmed Lemu, a former Grand Khadi of Niger State to find ways of stemming divisions in the country. In its report, the panel found a pattern of "threats, verbal intimidation, hate speech, disinformation" and concluded that a major cause of violence was "inflammatory campaign utterances of politicians, reinforced by the preaching of divisive sermons of hate and hostility in mosques and churches across the country." In its advisory on election violence in February 2015, the National Human Rights Commission complained of an election "characterised by bellicose rhetoric" and "a rise in hate speech". Government has been somehow unwilling to act firmly with the instrumentality of the law but it's never too late to do what is right. In his Reflections on the Nigerian Civil War: Facing the Future, published in 1969, Ralph Uwechue laments that "the principal cause of our current tragedy is bitterness born of misunderstanding." in October 1972, then Head of State, General Yakubu Gowon, condemned political activities "which tend to cause sectional hatred". Far from progress, the country has retrogressed deeply in the intervening 45 years. The pathology of hate in Nigeria has deep roots and considerable resilience. We don't have enough bullets to shoot it into extinction. The POP governments of recent years made a mess. President Buhari promised to change it but has deepened the mess. Segun Adeniyi wrote recently that "the post-election utterances of President Muhammadu Buhari energised certain subliminal impulses in our society." Partisanship on hate speech will guarantee that we'll never be able to get those impulses under control.

## 3. What does the Bible teach about Hate speech?

The Bible says that Christians are called to peace (Matthew 5:9; 1Corinthians 7:15). We absolutely should not try to rile up hate or violence against a people or group. If the choice is between absolute liberty and God's standards,

we should follow God's standards. It is wrong *to use* words to incite others to hate Muslims, but it is also wrong to allow Muslims the freedom of religion in matters that contradict human rights such as honor killings and child brides.

Romans 12:18 says, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all." While we should not seek to be offensive, our priority is to the truth. Living our faith should be done sensitively without compromising fact or biblical truth.

When visiting Thailand, it is inappropriate to insult or disrespect the king, even though as believers, we recognize that our true King is Jesus. Expressions that are degrading to a group of people are offensive. All people are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). Jesus specifically said we are not to call another a degrading name (Matthew 5:22).

It is appropriate to say that a group and its members hold unbiblical or incorrect beliefs, but it is not appropriate to call them stupid. It is just foolish to rate the pain of a group when we do not have firsthand knowledge of what they have gone through. And insisting the harm did not take place ranges from intentional ignorance to outright lying.

The Bible is clear that Christians should love their neighbors (Matthew 22:37-40), not speak about or to them hatefully. We are to be respectful, forgiving, and peaceable, but we are also to speak the truth. The most hateful speech a Christian can indulge in, is speech that pushes another farther from God's truth and love.

This leads us to the other side of the coin. It is inevitable in this fallen world that those who hold another faith will communicate their opposition in ways that disparage Christians. Jesus told us to expect persecution (2 Timothy 3:12), that it is a sign that we are His followers (John 15:18-19). But He also gave us an example as to how we should respond: "When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly" (1 Peter 2:23). Likewise, Jesus told us that if

someone insults us, we should respond mildly and without offense (Matthew 5:38-39).

And the Bible tells us why: "And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness, God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will" (2 Timothy 2:24-26). Every word we speak and every reaction we give to the words spoken to us should be measured against this goal: to lead others to the knowledge of the truth,

#### **4. What should be the Practical Christian Response to Hate Speech?**

Nigerians in general, but Nigerian Christians in particular, are worried about the constant attacks of Muslims on Christians. The rhetoric, followed by the burning of churches, followed by the killing of Christians, first in the north and now in the Middle Belt through the Fulani herdsmen, referred to by some as mercenaries and what a credible practical response should be. Many now see the need for an armed response, others look elsewhere for a solution. The question is what is the ideal Christian response to hate or to hate speech?

As hard as this may sound in the present circumstances, the practical Christian response must be a non-violent reaction. We must turn hate to love. That was the response of Christ and no response is more powerful than that. Christ did not respond to insults by insulting back. His death which looked like his defeat was actually the power that gave vigor and strength to Christianity. His death and those of the early apostles were the seeds of Christian faith as was often said in the early church, "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of Christianity."

One recent and great Christian example of an alternative and peaceful reaction to hate and hate speech and to violence is that of Martin Luther King Jr. He drew upon his early grounding in family and church to forge a praxis of egalitarian justice in the rigidly segregated American South

of his youth. At that time racial segregation aimed at black Americans was high and perhaps worse than the experiences of apartheid South Africa. King's ethical outlook was eclectic reflecting the figures of his time like Mahatma Gandhi, Howard Thurman and others alongside such ideas as personalism, liberalism, nationalism and realism. King's subsequent studies enhanced rather than diminish or restructure his early formative exposure to the black church and community. King became committed to nonviolence, as a passive resistance, but as an active, aggressive, individual and self-improving solution to problems of gross injustice in society. Nonviolence for King was not an end, but a means, to the achievement of what he called the "beloved community." King was largely influenced by Howard Thurman. It was Thurman who began the nonviolence and Civil Rights Movement in the United States. After Thurman's pilgrimage of friendship with Mahatma Gandhi in India, this most influential African American religious thinker of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century reshaped completely his thoughts and the course of the Civil Rights Movement. Gandhi had told Thurman that "nonviolence was by itself a force and the only form of action leading to a peaceful resolution of problems, because at the centre of nonviolence is a force which is self-acting." Both Gandhi and Thurman were strongly attached to the St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians, in which the apostle said, "Faith, hope and love abides, these three, but the greatest is love"; love is a superior force to all the forces of brutality.

This reflection makes sense if we look at our present circumstances. In our country today, there are all sorts of groupings working towards achieving their goals by way of violence, but what we truly need is peace, without which we can make no progress as a people and as a nation. The entire black race is looking up to Nigeria for a direction in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and whatever choice we make will accompany not only our journey but that of the entire black race. May we choose a nonviolent response as we move to the future, so that our nation may inspire hope for other African nations, but

especially be seen to be seeking the path of peace and harmony in the sight of God.

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