



Religious intolerance and negative media coverage

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Abstract

The topic, Religious Intolerance and Negative Media Coverage is a product of proliferation of Religious beliefs and the ever-growing population of Religionists in our contemporary society. As the world continues to tame Religious Intolerance and its negative consequences, the social media have been accused of being at the root of it. Using a historical approach, this article will examine the issues of religious intolerance and negative media coverage in order to bring a lasting solution to the unabated problem in the society. The paper recommends that religion and the media can promote religious freedom, peace, harmony and mutual trust instead of driving violence and social disharmony.

Keywords: Religious, intolerance, negative media coverage

Introduction

Globally, the multiplicity of religious beliefs and the ever-growing population of religionists have created a situation of unwanted disaggregation and have led to a high spate of religious intolerance. The pivotal role played by the media in checkmating or increasing religious intolerance must be appreciated, as it lies on them to furnish the masses with either real or adulterated information on the subject matter (religious intolerance). As the world continues to contend with the ills associated with religious violence, negative media coverage remains the evil that fans the embers of religious intolerance and its accompanying violence. In the pursuit of profit, most media channels tend to adopt a negative style of reporting news bothering on religious intolerance especially by emphasizing the dramatic, most violent and conflicting account on the religious intolerance and the fight against terror. This has rather increased radicalization and the inevitable religious extremism that comes with it. Media channel should adopt a more neutral ground while reporting stories on religious extremism and intolerance. No particular religious sects should be "interlinked" with religious intolerance and extremism while writing reports on the subject matter. This chapter seeks to expose the obvious, yet ignored role played by the media in encouraging religious intolerance and spurring religious violence while trying to provide a lasting solution to the problem.

Drivers of Religious Intolerance

Religious intolerance does not occur in isolation, it is driven by many factors such as:

Attitude of Religious Leaders

Onuegbu (2012) ^[13] posit that most religious leaders assume the position of God and will speak on behalf of their co-religionists. The negative attitude of some religious leaders is quite unfortunate as it is only through them that tolerance and peaceful coexistence between religious groups can be performed. They tend to analyse religious issues from a stereotypical perspective capable of multiplying chaos instead of calming the situation.

Role of the Press

This is the most devastating yet un-emphasized driver of religious intolerance. Mischievous and irresponsible reportage and comment from certain sections of the press on religious issues actually heighten or promote religious crisis. When Journalists subterfuge, especially, religious leaders or religious issues out of context, their reports only inflame passions and promote religious ill feeling and intolerance. In truth, drivers of religious intolerance may not actually emanate from the tenets of the religious groups in dispute.

Poverty

As the world continues to contend with poverty and a high level of frustration among the people especially in marginalized areas like Asia and America people tend to find succour in their various religious beliefs not because of faith but because they want to ease off their tension. Hence, the saying that religious is the opium of the masses. Countries in Asia and Africa which rank as the two most marginalized continents in the world suffer higher cases of religious intolerance and violence because poor and frustrated individuals are willing tools for the execution of religious based violence. The case of north eastern Nigeria serves as a clear example of this claim. The UNDP's 2008-2009 report reveals that the high poverty level in the region (northern Nigeria) which is characterized by hunger, minimal security of lives and property, very poor people etc has facilitated the growth of the Boko Haram terrorist group (an Islamic religious sect) in the region because the high incidence of poverty have made the people willing tools of violence.

Key Ideological Differences

It is an established fact that religious intolerance in the world today has its roots in our historical past with regard to racial heterogeneity, and is further compounded by the irresponsible role of certain sections of the press. Most religious sects either dispute or refute the beliefs of others. For instance, Islamists refute the claim by Christians that Jesus Christ was crucified for the atonement of the sins of mankind. The Quran says that Jesus was neither killed nor

crucified (Quran 26:45-48). Such ideological difference as highlighted above is capable of heightening religious intolerance and sparking violence whenever arguments on such an issue erupt.

Masdoosi (1962) ^[8] observes that the attitude of the adherents of different faiths to the opposite faith stem from political, tribal and nationalistic sentimental rather than religious motivation. It behoves us then to look beyond the religious confines whenever there is religious conflict be it inter or intra. Another serious driver of religious intolerance in the world is racial ethnic antipathy. It has been observed that the two major religious group of logger heads (Christianity and Islam) have adherent from two mutually hostile racial continental background; - the west and Middle East respectively. It is generally observed that most attacks on the Christian in the middle - east and vice versa is driven by the ill feeling harboured by the two ends.

The Media's Role in Promoting Religious Intolerance

As most religious sects or groups continue to seek expansion by way of clamouring for more followership, they tend to proliferate the media in order to gain wider audience and imprint their ideals on the masses. This proliferation has both negative and positive impact on religious interaction and public peace. There is every tendency that when a disagreement erupts between two or more religious sects, the groups involved tend to use every available media platform to furnish the masses with information that will favour their cases and aggravate the situation.

Another major failing of the media is the unfair treatment of Muslims by certain journalists who tend to paint stories about "extremist" Muslims while ignoring the high levels of Christian extremism that could also be described as such. Abby (2013) ^[1] points out that the story of good Christian/bad Muslim is told both by expression and omission, by naming or not naming, the religious or ethnicity of terrorist. He further buttressed this claim by citing the case of Breivik Anders, a Norwegian mass murderer who self -identified himself as a Christian and would be protector of European Christian and media tactically avoided describing him as a Christian, he was denounced and his actions were described as political and not religious, a generosity not extended to Muslims who murder for political/religious reasons.

Abby (2013) ^[1] further posits that despite the fact that most media misrepresentations concern Muslim, the most vocal complainers are Christians. He claims that Christians who are generally treated favourably by the media are so quick and professionally slick in defending themselves, arguing that they are a badly neglected and misunderstood section of society. Gibbs (2011) ^[5] provides a clear scenario where a church in Florida announced that it was planning an "international burn a Quran Day" to commemorate the September 11th, 2001 terrorist attacks on New York City. The news spread rapidly on the internet and was picked up by dozens of mainstream media outlets worldwide. This created public outcry and caused spontaneous violent reactions by Muslims on Christians in the middle east and Africa — Zohra (2010) ^[16] provides another scenario where in September 2008, an on Air Personality (OAP) Amir Liaquat in his talk show on Pakistan national TV "Aalim online" appeared to endorse the killing of some Ahmadis (member of another religious sect). Three days later, three

members of Liaquat's religious group were killed in different parts of Sindh, Pakistan. Liaquat showed no remorse and his popularity rating remained high and the channel continued to promote his show through large billboards.

Since the beginning of the new millennium, media coverage of Islam- related issues has changed dramatically and was heightened by the events of September 11, 2001 which saw to the bombing of the World Trade Center (WTC) in New York by an Islamist sect (Al Qaeda). The bloody event of September 11, 2001 which is now known as the 9/11 incidence or the black Thursday has led to Islamophobia which is further heightened by the American led war on terrorism. Journalists, in their bid to get big new stories have ended up in forming harmful Islamist stereotypes. The bulk of the world's perceptions of the relationship between and terrorism are driven by the media. The Kenyan media council provides that the media sometimes sensationalizes, stereotypes and distant issues of Islam and terrorism consequently, the over simplification of issues around Muslims, extremists and terrorism and the prosperity of mainstream media to marginalize, dismiss or ignore diverse or ignore diverse and or moderate views across Muslim communities are sometimes considered culpable of the link between Islam and terrorism.

Religious Intolerance and Poor Representation by the Media in the Middle East

In the Middle East, exists yet another dangerous form of negative media coverage and misrepresentation of religious intolerance. Pakistan, a Muslim majority state in the Middle East can tell the story of poor coverage and religious bias. Zohra (2010) ^[16] notes that Pakistan's electronic media has gradually been proliferated by Muslim programmes she notes that one of the earliest programmes that promoted the most conservative's interpretation of Islam and Sharia was the series of lectures given Dr Israr Ahmed. His programme "Al Huda" was concerned with what "true" Islam was all about. The general trend in Pakistan and indeed most states in the Middle East is that the media is wholly dominated by Muslim programmes, other religious groups are either regulated strongly or not given an opportunity at all.

Abdallah (2006) provides an example where Pope Benedict XVI spoke on September 12, 2006 at Regensburg on Faith, Reason and the University. The Arab media seized a particular paragraph as the breaking story, without regard to how it fit into what the Pope saw as the profound coexistence between faith and reason in Christianity which he did not see in Islam. The quote was taken at of context and was constructed as some sort of papal insult to Islam. The Arab press was reluctant to gather fact and this led to violent sparks of rage from Muslims in the Middle East against the relatively scanty population of Christians there.

Abdullah (2006) further notes that the Arab press becomes furious over the slightest discrimination that befalls Muslims in Europe and America. He further points at that the media in the Middle East is more interested in capturing stories of Muslim persecution by the west so as to spur spontaneous reactions against Christians against Muslim in the Middle East observes thus. Not long after the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center, the Egyptian managing editor of the Student Newspaper flew to New York. The young lady wore a large scarf over her head. The 9/11 attack in the World Trade Center the Egyptian managing editor of the

student newspaper flew to the New York. The young lady wore a large scarf over her head Egyptian Muslim women or “Muhagaba. “She breezed through customs and security at JFK Airport. Outside the gates, she was greeted by a reporter and photographer representing one of the two main Egyptian Newspapers. She was asked if she had been hassled in any way or inconvenienced by the homeland security personnel at passport control or at customs, she said no, not at all. The news team went off in search of another would be victim.

The point being made above is that the media in the Middle East or (Arab media) adopt anti-western styles of reporting stories. They move towards proving that Islam is highly discriminated against by the west. It has been observed that the media in the Middle East (Egypt, Iran, Somalia, Pakistan etc) adopt a very dangerous style of reporting news on Christian- Muslim relations. The Arab Press shows little interest in gathering more facts in a story than one paragraph taken out context. The Pope’s speech earlier mentioned led to a strain in Catholic —Muslim relations over the past few decades following the reports provided by the press, it led to the murder of non-Catholic and the torching of catholic churches occurred in two of the three most lawless parts of the Muslim world.(Somalia and Iraq) (Abdallah, 2006). This chapter does not serve to criticize the Arab press or compare it with the mainstream American media, but it must be stated as a matter of fact that the American media is more decent in reporting stories on Muslim- Christian relations, they tend to exercise moderation in reporting injustices and also carry positive stories about Islam. Mohammed (2007) provides that the high disregard for facts generates chaos and religious intolerance is profoundly un-Islamic in theory. The media should strive towards objectivity and accuracy. Abdallah (2006) backs this claim by does not promote chaos and does not totally abolish other religious beliefs (Christianity in focus). The establishment of Al Jazeera, a professional Arab journalist to practice free Journalism and open debate has over time shifted from this course and now espouses Arab nationalism and Islamism. Islamist militant combatant killed in fight were described as “martyrs” by the title capable of stirring up emotions and causing more frenzy. The fact being emphasized here is that the media in the intolerance. Pakistan, a Muslim majority state in the Middle East can tell the story of poor coverage and religious bias. Zohra (2010) ^[16] notes that Pakistan’s electronic media has gradually been proliferated by Muslim programmes she notes that one of the earliest programmes that promoted the most conservative’s interpretation of Islam and Sharia was the series of lectures given Dr Israr Ahmed. His programme “Al Huda” was concerned with what “true” Islam was all about. The general trend in Pakistan and indeed most states in the Middle East is that the media is wholly dominated by Muslim programmes, other religious groups are either regulated strongly or not given an opportunity at all. Abdallah (2006) provides an example where Pope Benedict XVI spoke on September 12, 2006 at Regensburg on Faith, Reason and the University. The Arab media seized a particular paragraph as the breaking story, without regard to how it fit into what the Pope saw as the profound coexistence between faith and reason in Christianity which he did not see in Islam. The quote was taken at of context and was constructed as some sort of papal insult to Islam. The Arab press was reluctant to gather fact and this led to

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The Media’s Role in Curbing Religious Intolerance and Promoting Peace between Religious Groups

We should not underestimate the role played by the media

in diminishing religious tension and bridging the world's religious division. To state that media organizations have the power to divide or unite societies is not unfounded. Endy Bayuni of the Jakarta post rightly submits that good journalism in the name of public service can help promote peaceful coexistence and greater tolerance between religious communities. The media should understand that as a matter of fact, people get more information on religious events through media reports. Gibbs (2011) ^[5] posit that the media together with the general society should find a way to put the good news ahead of the bad, to give stories of hope and courage and to avoid giving frenzied attention to stories of anger and despair on issues relating to religion. He is of the view that with the concerted efforts of reasonable journalists and well-meaning members of the society, the "mega phone" will be taken away from those who would sow seeds of religious intolerance and allow the quieter chorus of peace and fairness to prevail.

The "kompas" example

One of Indonesia's largest national daily newspaper "Kompas", owned by a Catholic foundation has received credence for maintaining a neutral stand in reporting news on religious issues. Endy Bayuni of the Jakarta post notes thus; - Nothing in the Paper's appearance suggest that it caters to a specific religious community. Kompas serves as an example to the media because it does not cater for only the media needs of the tiny Roman Catholic community in Indonesia, it spreads news that reaches out to wider public. What Kompas has achieved is a rare feat in the media world, an outlet owned by a somewhat marginalized religious group in a country like Indonesia which boasts of the world's largest media population. Nothing stops Kompas from painting a picture of religious intimidation and marginalization in a bid to capture public attention, its founders were mindful that how issues that concern religion is reported would affect public opinion and could inflame tensions. The media should therefore learn to take a neutral stand while reporting issues bothering on religion because any one-sided report on religious tensions is capable of inflaming the whole situation and multiplying chaos.

Shaping Perception

Be it as it may, information on a particular subject matter serves as a veritable instrument of shaping the perception of on that particular issues. The media is solely concerned with providing information on issues concerning religious intolerance. People actually react to issues based on information they receive. The media should therefore strive towards shaping the perception of people towards positively, the media should avoid stereotyping has against the other and give more space to the voices of moderation that speaks of peace and less to the fear-mongering radical and extremist groups.

Controlling Government Policies to Ensure Religious Freedom

As the fourth pillar of democracy, the media especially in pluralistic societies should strive towards controlling government policies to ensure religious freedom. As a matter of fact, countries like Nigeria (in Africa) which possess an almost equal population of Christian and Muslim with latter having more prospect for capturing political power and taking the leadership of the country, it lies on the

press to preach against religious dominance (objectively). The press must ensure that the government of the day does not do anything that could mean that a particular religious group is being promoted while another is relegated. The media should hold the government accountable for ensuring religious freedom and for protecting the right of religious communities including their right to build places of worship and to practice their faith.

Ghassan (2011) ^[6] while stressing the need for the media to help in the fight against intolerance, submits that if religious bias in the media cannot be stopped, it can be tempered with positive stories that demonstrate inter-religious understanding. Tolerance and diversity based religious education can generate compelling stories. He further argues that there is need to challenge media standards and advocate for socially responsible journalism both within the main networks end in online forums to allow for greater balance in reporting. He submits further that the creation of effective institutions for maintaining the media would create greater pressure on editors, producers and reporters to disseminate content that gives hope.

Recommendations and Conclusion

The fight against religious intolerance cannot be won until the media stops exaggerating negative news and engaging in subterfuge. It is therefore in recognition of the fact that whether or not the world really is getting worse, the nature of news will make us think that it is. The following recommendations are therefore made to relevant stakeholders with a view to expunging religious intolerance and negative media coverage.

To the International community

The international community is trying their best in the fight against religious intolerance but efforts should be intensified toward the fight against negatives media coverage of religious issues. The United Nations alongside her component unit should become more serious in the crusade against negative media coverage of religious based violence intolerance.

To Religious Leaders

When religious leaders begin to understand that the most of their word is law before their co-religionists and the fact that they reserve the power to either inflame or deplete religious intolerance, then a good part of the fight against religious intolerance has been won. Religious leaders should as a matter of fact exercise extreme care while commenting on issues pertaining to religious relations before the media. Wisdom should be applied by religious leaders while attending press conferences and commenting on an issues that involves other religious groups.

To Individual Adherents of Different Faiths / Religious Beliefs

Religious intolerance is not something that sparks off in isolation. The individual adherent of the different religious group in fact, have a big role to play. Shulman (2016) ^[15] advocate for religious tolerance among the individual adherents of different faiths by providing the following point.

- Individual adherents of different faiths can model more tolerant attitudes through their own actions and words they speak.

- Individual adherents can also share with others, what they know of their religions that they may not be aware of. A little education can go a long way to make sure someone think twice about their assumptions. It falls on us as adherents of different faiths to teach others, to help change their negative assumptions\ perceptions of a particular religion. It is also very important to listen to the perspective of other on religious issues, while trying to understand why they feel and think the way they do. Shulman (2016) ^[15] suggests that by listening to members of other religious groups, we make them more open to listening to our own alternative perspective. In this way, dialogue can be started and in time, religious intolerance will rub off and a better climate of peace and tolerance will thrive.

To the General Press

The fight against religious intolerance can only be won, if Journalists become active participants in this fight. In as much as the UDHR sues for freedom of the press, the general press should exercise discretion in reporting issues concerning religious intolerance. The Kenyan Media Council is of the view that the media should generally avoid giving space or airtime to people with extremist views, with regard to terrorism and jihadism. Such radicalized statements made during the interview and documentaries with the news sources should be discouraged and edited.

The media shouldn't be painting only negative pictures of Islam, they should not appear to be in favour of Christianity or any other religious group. The war on terror and religious intolerance should be investigated professionally by unbiased journalists, and reports of such investigations should represent both sides. The media should work with facts and not assumptions.

Social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Twitter, etc) should be monitored thoroughly to ensure that religionists don't use such platforms to promote religious intolerance through negative and comments. Administrators of these social media platforms should put measures in place to ensure that any post capable of promoting religious intolerance is either censored or deleted.

Considering the enormous role played by the media in the encouragement of the religious intolerance through negative coverage of religious extremism, we may be forced to conclude that if journalists continue to engage in bias and subterfuge, religious intolerance will only grow and cause more damage than it has already done. We therefore reiterate that if the long-desired world peace and religious balance must become a reality, the media must take a neutral stand on religious issues and only report news with the intent to pacify all the contending parties.

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