

Religious Extremism in Africa

Comprehensive Interview

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1. In your opinion, what is the cause of religious extremism in Africa today?

Let me begin by attempting a working definition of ‘religious extremism’. I define it as the expression of **extreme and unjust positions or actions** taken by some adherents of a religion based on their understanding of a religious teaching or scripture, but **which the majority of adherents regard as fanatical**, unacceptable and unrepresentative of their faith. The adjective “extreme” here is negative and relative to the “moderate” or “centrist” position of the majority or mainstream. I will also assume that in this discussion, ‘religious extremism’ refers to the kind which is expressed through violence.

It is difficult to discuss the causes of religious extremism in broad terms and many generalizations are not very useful because each incidence has its own peculiar combination of concurring factors. Discussing the causes of what appears to be religious extremism in a particular context allows for more thorough diagnosis of that particular expression of “religious extremism” because it enables us know whether it is actually about religion or not; and if it is about religion, how much of it is really “religious”. Or whether describing it as “religious” (or based on religious teachings) is due to prejudice against a particular religion (or religion as a whole), or whether it is just the extremists’ way of mimicking mainstream religion and trying to gain or borrow credibility from it.

As in all forms of deep conflict, religious extremism tends to arise not as the result of a single factor but a concurrence of many factors. To quote **Tolstoy** in the first chapter of *War and Peace*, I ask, “When an apple has ripened and falls, why does it fall? Because of its attraction to the earth, because its stalk withers, because it is dried by the sun, because it grows heavier, because the wind shakes it, or because the boy standing below wants to eat it? **No one thing is the cause.** All this is only the coincidence of conditions in which all vital organic and elemental events occur. And the botanist who finds that the apple falls because the cellular tissue decays and so forth is equally right with the child who stands under the tree and says the apple fell because he wanted to eat it and prayed for it...”

One of these concurring factors which creates the condition for religious extremism to flourish is what I would describe as the **Multiple-Identity fault lines**.

As a continent, Africa is a very **religiously and ethnically diverse settlement, with multiple and often conflicting identities and loyalties**. Nearly everyone identifies formally with an ethnic (or sub-ethnic) group, and with a particular community and region. In addition to this, most Africans have a distinct religious identity. People are usually either Muslim, Christian or profess religious beliefs under the umbrella of varied religions often collectively referred to as “Traditional African Religion”. Thus most Africans have multiple identities. It is quite common to find regions where people of a

particular ethnic group, region or community are also predominantly adherents of a particular faith. If another group in the same area have a different religious identity as well as a different ethnic one, the fault lines increase. Add to the mix one group being 'indigenous' and, as is often the case, the majority, and the other group being 'settlers' or 'immigrants' and the minority; the sense of difference felt by both groups is heightened and those fault lines just get deeper.

The existence of multiple identity fault lines as I have just described does not, in isolation, lead to extremism, religious or otherwise. Where there exists multiple identity fault lines as well as perceived grievances that one group (often the majority) has against the other, conflict is very likely to occur and could easily become violent. The main grievance is often with economics - an imbalance in wealth distribution, living standards, resource allocation, management or control of especially the business community and market. This violent expression of dissatisfaction and anger could take on a markedly ethnic tone, or a religious one. As a result we will hear of an 'ethnic cleansing' or 'religious extremism'. Yet again, multiple identities coinciding with grievances do not often culminate in extreme actions if there is a trusted accessible system for addressing grievances. When the justice system breaks down, trust quickly leaks away and open hands turn to clenched fists.

Therefore another critical factor in the occurrence or non-existence of religious extremism lies in **the respect given to the rule of law by a strong state**, and how well basic rights and the rights of minorities are upheld. It is what distinguishes communities which manage their multiple identity factors well and those which appear unable to do so.

This is what appears to have happened in distant and more recent history in the case of Jews in Germany, Chinese in Indonesia, Tamils in Sri Lanka, Tutsis in Rwanda, Whites in Zimbabwe, Kikuyus in the Rift Valley, Nigerians in South Africa, Hausas in Plateau, Igbos in Kano, etc. Wherever the leadership lacks the political will to respect and enforce the rule of law, the abuse of the minority becomes more likely. So in essence, we see another distinct factor – majority versus minority.

We will always have xenophobes who regard religions, tribes, languages, culture, and so on, other than theirs as "foreign"; there will always be among them those who are ever ready to fan the flames of discrimination and violence. Where there is sufficient respect for the rule of law however, it becomes easy to ensure that bigotry and xenophobia are neutralised as soon as they lift their ugly heads. Where, however, the rule of law can be disregarded with impunity, then any group – and especially representatives of the majority – can incite hatred and commit the sorts of atrocities we see growing and thriving in various places. At the core of our challenges therefore is the leadership's inability to uphold the rule of law, especially in new democracies where the leadership often survives by appeasing an increasingly frustrated majority.

The rule of law and break down of the justice system is common where the government is corrupt. Such a government, in order to gain greater control or as a result of its egocentric focus, will foster, nurture or ignore marginalization of some communities, high illiteracy rates, youth unemployment, political illiteracy, economic exploitation, public frustration, lawlessness, etc. In such an environment nearly all the drivers for extremism are in place. If counter balance forces (of poverty-induced apathy,

risk aversion, economic interdependence, historical cultural alliances, strong traditional leadership, inter-religious and inter-tribal marriages) are absent or neutralized, the rise of any form of extremism is imminent.

At this point, it is necessary to talk about the exploitation of religion. As a Nigerian who has for some time been very interested and concerned about the challenges posed by religious extremism in Africa and beyond, over the years I have become **very wary of cases that are simply identified as “religious extremism”**. If two communities are in conflict, and they each belong to a different religion, then it is often concluded that the problem is a religious one. If they belong to the same religion but different ethnicity, then it is taken to be an ethnic or tribal problem. However, if any side claims that it or the other is “religiously motivated”, then it is believed that it must definitely be “religious”, even if they both belong to the same religion. However, like everywhere else, while some communities in Africa may fight for ethnic or religious reasons, others fight over feudal clan power, xenophobia, chivalry and sometimes over old-fashioned criminal robbery, etc. Whatever the claimed reasons, their contexts often instigate and direct such conflicts in such a way as to give them greater political control over economic resources - access of animals to water, grazing or farm land, oil, diamonds, etc. As religion is a central part of peoples’ identity, it is easily exploited in the service of mobilization against the *Other*. And if religion won’t work, then usually ethnicity will.

Poor and simplistic diagnosis of the causes of religious extremism, and the very common “fundamental error attribution” (whereby many acts of violence and extremism are attributed to a religion or religious community in clear disregard for the contextual factors at play) continues to result in wrong prescriptions with disastrous consequences. In some cases, these misinformed attempts to solve what is seen as a religious problem, only serves to make it more intractable and more widespread.

Another cause is the gap created in religious circles which arises for several reasons. Firstly, the **support of the clergy by corrupt and oppressive governments** who use the authority of religion to further selfish aims. Many of these orthodox scholars get some financial support from these governments, “Big Men” or politicians whose campaigns some of the scholars even support. They are also often quick to find “religious” narratives to pacify the victims of oppressive governments, and to come up with verdicts (*fatwas*) forbidding people from organizing even peaceful protests. This results in loss of integrity and, by extension, authority of the clergy. They are regarded by most extremists as corrupt and hypocritical, having compromised their moral independence, and sold their souls to the “ungodly (*kufr*) system”. Extremists therefore have no problem with destroying mosques (and churches) as they view these as mere centres of religious hypocrisy and instruments of mass manipulation. A second cause of the gap is the **“vacuum of relevance” created by the stagnation of orthodoxy** when social justice issues and the need for moral reform arise. Sometimes orthodox scholars are unwilling or unable to respond to changing contexts in a way which satisfies the faithful. As a result, religious hierarchy in such societies breaks down. The religious extremists try to fill this vacuum; they promise to give more relevance to the religion, and uplift the society through their more “genuine interpretations” of the faith. People seeking desperate reform and change are likely to follow them.

Very often, the membership of religious extremist groups have a combination of diverse motives on their own. To compound the problem, many members of the general populace are so uncertain or ignorant about the basic ethical teachings of their faiths that it seems easy for charismatic religious extremists to recruit some of them as members or sympathizers – even if just a few. According to Malcolm Gladwell, in *The Tipping Point*, the right context and a few critical members – “connectors”, “mavens” (or “information specialists”) and “salesmen”(or “persuaders”) - are often all that’s needed to start a “social epidemic”.

Another factor which causes extremism is the **existence of grievances which extremists claim that they wish to address**. These grievances could all be summarized as simply repeatedly broken promises by the leadership. They however include grievances against corrupt and weak governments, foreign governments (especially Western) that cooperate with and support these governments, security services who defend them all; religious clergy who are aligned with the power structure of the state, and are hardly ever critical of the misdeeds and atrocities of these corrupt governments; the clergy who are not aligned with corrupt governments but constitute a barrier to the extremists winning the hearts of the faithful because they actively denounce the extremists’ views and their claims to religious legitimacy (such vocal Muslim scholars have been targeted by extremist groups); the general populace which fails to give them the desired popular support and even cooperate with security personnel to arrest, torture or kill them. In this context, every security officer, civil servant or tax-paying citizen is seen as supporting the violent and “ungodly (*kufr*) state”.

It is perceived grievances that I believe trigger or activate what Charles Kimball in his excellent book *When Religion Becomes Evil*, calls the “five warning signs of human corruption of religion” – that can be found in all religions, but especially those major religions that more readily engage with political structures and have a strong global missionary impulse. He explains that, “When one finds one or more of these dynamics at work, history suggests that serious trouble lurks ahead. The inclination toward corruption is strong in the major religions. At the same time ...helpful correctives are found within the religious traditions themselves.” In the presence of sufficient grievances, these five otherwise latent “warning signs” mutate and transform an otherwise peaceful (even if “noisy”) fringe group into violent “religious extremists”. These are “Absolute truth claims; blind obedience; establishing the ‘ideal’ time; the end justifies any means; and declaring holy war.”

There is therefore the **need for very careful diagnosis of the narratives each religious extremists group uses**, so that the religious vocabulary that is often used by the various “religious extremist” in different contexts, does not act as a distraction or smoke-screen that prevents an insight into, and appreciation of the real underlying local grievances and their local remedies. As noted in Eliza Griswold’s insightful bestseller, *The Tenth Parallel: Dispatches from the fault line between Christianity and Islam*, “...to insist on viewing the struggles that plague these communities through the lens of a global conflict between “civilizations” or “religions” is to distort their true nature and to ignore the fact that they are nearly always matters of local political history, of sometimes age-old and sometimes recent ethnic rivalries, and of fights for economic survival and prosperity.”

In the struggle against the rise of “religious extremism” and “religious violence” in Africa, failing to study with care, humility, sensitivity and curiosity the numerous, nuanced and complex local causes of “religious extremism” or extremist behaviour in a particular place, has so far had deadly consequences. It also potentially turns each clash in Africa into additional fuel for spreading hate elsewhere, while allowing the real local causes of such extremism to continue to grow unattended to. Our egos, stereotyping, prejudices, confirmation biases and preconceptions very often distract us from the real local issues.

So while we should always try to “think globally and act locally” about every challenge, when it comes to religious extremism anywhere, and definitely in Africa, it is imperative to “think locally!” for solutions often exist within the local context.

2. Religion is often a synonym of violence. Al-Shabaab in East Africa, Boko Haram in Nigeria and LRA in Uganda, for example, justify their brutality with religion. But what is the religious landscape in Africa and what does explain the use of religion in various conflicts?

Difficult to separate religion from public and private life

In most of Africa, **religion permeates every facet of community life** – births, funerals, marriages, business ethics and morals, dressing, grooming, food, ceremonies and celebrations, rites of passage, titles, names of people, days of the week and months, language, national anthems, pledges, and oaths, law and politics, conflict and peace-making – everything! Thus, when conflict arises, it could easily take on a religious tinge. As Karen Armstrong says in her extraordinary *Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence*, “Religion, like the weather, ‘does lots of different things’... Identical religious beliefs and practices have inspired diametrically opposed courses of action.”

Religious branding and exploitation

Religion has had a positive impact on the lives of many adherents in various ways. It is synonymous with hospitals, education, enlightenment, hope, service, sacrifice, charity, compassion, social cohesion, liberation, peace, reconciliation, purpose, meaning, spirituality, salvation and a relationship with their Creator, etc. From it, most of the faithful have derived meaning beyond this earthly existence, and a hope that transcends the rational limits of our existence. It is a source of guidance towards goodness, ethics and the best in humanity.

Religion therefore has brand power and gives credibility to anything it can be successfully tied to, including political and secular causes. It is this positive brand and deep connection with the faithful that is exploited by many – corrupt governments, oppressive institutions and individuals, and religious extremists – to gain traction for unjust and irreligious causes. The extremist simply turns religion into a “liberation theology” that uses religious narratives for violent political purposes.

In communities where religious identity has more credibility and mobilization potential than other identities such as ethnicity, nationalism, or “king and country”, it becomes a more important unifying, mobilizing and branding tool for supporting any cause, be it personal, tribal, political, economic or a combination of these. Just as religion and its vocabulary and symbols are often employed to give credibility, to unjust cultural practices and the patriarchal status quo, it is also used to give credibility to new ideas, counter-culture, social reform, political movements (through various “liberation theologies”). “Like the weather, religion does many things!” and who controls the religious narrative is critical to which way the wind blows and how successful a “social epidemic” becomes.

While many religious groups have, from time to time, fallen far short of the ideals of their religions, these still remains the ideals of most mainstream teachings of religious instruction, and the measure by which piety and faith are judged by most.

Perspective

A particular religion may be a synonym for violence and oppression in a specific context, but this is often only in the eyes of those who do not belong to or believe in it, or those who have been victims of crimes committed by its adherents. For the believer, their religion is a source of pride, hope, peace and salvation for all. It is often the other’s religion that’s the problem, not our own. It is the other’s ethnicity, race and nationality that’s the problem, not ours!

In a society where religion informs nearly everything, it is easy to link religion with either good or bad. It’s the ideal scapegoat, excuse and cover-up for many things we would like to blame on others. Usually, for Christians in Africa, the problem is often Islam. For Muslims, it’s usually Christianity. Everyone prefers to blame that thing about the other that is markedly different. If it’s not religion, then it’s ethnicity, or race, or nationality, etc.

But as noted by Griswold in her book, *The Tenth Parallel: Dispatches from the fault line between Christianity and Islam*, even when the problem was described as religion, “Christianity” or “Islam” (for example) were “simply loaded catchall terms for the misdeeds of the people, government and policies” of the south (usually Christian) and north (usually Muslim) respectively.

A convenient justification

In toxic situational contexts, humans have been known to become “Werewolves”, and do the most unimaginable things to one another. In *The Lucifer Effect: How Good People Turn Evil*, Social Psychologist and Stanford Professor Emeritus, Philip Zimbardo explains the need to not just keep an eye on the evil “Person”, but also on the “Situation, and System”, and understand how “‘Bad systems’ create ‘bad situations’ create ‘bad apples’ create ‘bad behaviors,’ even in good people” (sic). This broader focus (he repeatedly says) is not meant to in any way excuse evil or irresponsible behavior, but to understand better the contributions of otherwise “innocent” situational and systemic influences, and how to more effectively prevent such wrong doing.

One of the dominant conclusions from Zimbardo’s famous Stanford Prison Experiment was “that the pervasive yet subtle power of a host of situational variables can dominate an individual’s will to resist... Dehumanization is like a cortical cataract that clouds one’s thinking and fosters the perception that other

people are less than human. It makes some people come to see those others as enemies deserving of torment, torture, and annihilation.”

I do believe that the arrogance of some people and especially religious extremists who regard themselves as pious messiahs and good saviors of others can very easily make them overestimate their personal invulnerability to evil, and underestimate the power and influence of negative situational forces (or “temptations”) that surround them. They are therefore often least on their guard and more vulnerable to slipping into inhumanity and incarnating into an evil even greater than what they claimed to be fighting against in the first place. While religious extremists cite religion as the justification for their brutality, it often has little to do with religious teachings, and more to do with human nature and social psychology. To escape the guilt of their atrocities, extremists try to infuse meaning into their madness by seeking creative ways to justify their actions and if possible, even put a halo on it. For such people, quoting religious texts and authorities becomes a convenient instrument for justification and an anesthesia to their evil.

3. Could you give an example of one specific project you implemented in your respective countries opposing religious extremism and radicalization?

The pathways and drivers to “religious extremism” are numerous and varied, so there is need for holistic and concerted efforts of many stakeholders both in the formal and informal sector.

There are unfortunately no “silver bullet” approaches to all forms of religious extremism. There are however certain general threads and concepts that most religious extremists groups have in common, such as specific gaps in Islamic scholarship - especially its legal theory and the traditional sciences of interpreting religious texts. Most of these have been identified and discussed by more respected contemporary Muslims scholars such as Sheikh Abdullah bin Bayyah, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Muhammad al-Ghazali, Tariq Ramadan, Khaled Abou El-Fadl, Jasser Auda, Hamza Yusuf, and numerous others. Of course, if a religious fanatic wants to do something, then counter arguments are unlikely to dissuade them and security services may have to come in for safety reasons. The target audience of most of our counter narratives is the “recruitment field” comprising mostly youth who might be lured into the extremist insulated group dynamic by religious arguments. Through the use of these counter narratives, we aim is to “inoculate” or “intellectually vaccinate” the youth, and to build resilience against extremism by building the capacity of grassroots youth, activists and religious leaders to present counter narratives and offer alternative ways to effect social change and deal with perceived grievances.

I have been very fortunate to work with the Islamic Education Trust (IET) as Director for Research and Training of our Da’wah Institute of Nigeria (DIN), and tremendously blessed with a wonderful team of colleagues and volunteers with whom I continue to learn a lot about religious extremism. The institute’s main objective in this area is the capacity-building of Islamic organisations, religious leaders and activists with better concepts and approaches to responding to religious extremism, building community resilience to it, and training others in more effective peace-building. Over the last decade or more we have directed a fair amount of time and resources into understanding various expressions of religious extremism (especially among Muslims) and finding ways of countering these.

In line with this, we have done the following:

- We have identified and responded to 200 plus specific arguments or narratives used by recruiters for violent extremism as well as a host of other faith-based opinions and “supporting arguments” used by various shades of non-violent extremists to undermine interfaith and intra-faith relations (“bridge-burning” ideas) and greater gender equity, etc. Working in collaboration with a network of activists, former extremists, scholars and religious leaders, we have responded to all of these arguments, and have included most of them in our training resources and literature for distribution and online access.
- We have developed training programmes for Imams, religious and youth leaders (including women) that is aimed at empowering them with a unique set of concepts and skills to think more critically and systematically about extremism and (mis)interpretations of religious texts, respond to and deconstruct extremist narratives, build their personal development and community leadership capabilities, improve their skills in managing human resources and conflict, encourage them to be more proactively in building interfaith networks for better peace and community development, develop through community participation, more effective and structured strategies for non-violent social reform, be actively supportive of greater gender equity and in representing a more ethical and value-oriented paradigm of Islam.

One of the most important parts of our training programme is the “Shari’ah Intelligence” Course. Consisting of critical thinking tools, analytical methods and concepts derived from the credible and classical works of Islamic legal philosophy and jurisprudence, the “Shari’ah Intelligence” course is a carefully developed and purpose-driven introduction to the principles of Islamic jurisprudence (*Usul al-Fiqh*), legal philosophy, and the higher intents and purposes of Islam (*Maqasid al-Shari’ah*). These “thinking tools” and concepts have helped scholars respond to social realities and the various arguments and methods used by religious extremists throughout Islamic history. Scholars have also used them to ensure that orthodox methods of interpretation of texts and contexts have limited the extent to which the mainstream schools of jurisprudence can run wild or go rogue on its own values.

These equip participants with better conceptual tools obtained from within the Islamic tradition that allow them to more easily identify and systematically critique extremist, unjust, irrational and harmful opinions (*fatwas*) associated to interfaith relations with non-Muslims, women’s rights, contemporary application of Islamic law, minority rights and a host of other issues.

The course equips participants with an “operating system” that allows them to develop the capacity for “compatibility” with sound, rational and consistent interpretive methodologies used by the classical and contemporary jurists in reaching more appropriate verdicts (*fatwas*) for their modern contexts. “Downloading” even the limited (weekend) version of “Shari’ah Intelligence” has been a liberating experience for many of our participants. We’re really grateful to God and those who’ve help us develop this course. Fortunately, these conceptual methodologies also have the endorsement of the earliest and most respected medieval classical scholars and schools of Islamic jurisprudence.

And without sounding too presumptions, the “Shari’ah Intelligence” course and its related modules are in our humble estimation one of the most powerful antidotes and cures for numerous forms of religious extremism that we have come across so far, and we’re very excited with the results in especially in Nigeria, but also the feedback from Malaysia, Australia, Sudan, Kenya, Tanzania, Bahrain, and a couple of other places where we’ve conducted our courses.

Through a series of train-the-trainers courses we are able to build better community resilience and effectively counter the narratives or recruiting arguments of various religious extremists. This reduces the intellectual recruitment capacity of extremists, leaving them with fewer faith-based arguments strong enough to counter the faith-based arguments for non-violent ways of reform and dealing with perceived grievances. Our efforts are targeted at undermining the religious credibility of the arguments developed and used by extremist recruiters in their literature, recorded and interpersonal debates and online materials.

Through our work in this field of capacity-building for the purpose of understanding and responding to religious extremism, we have appreciated more, the importance of ensuring that there are many decentralized and alternative voices and faces associated with messaging and countering extremism, and the need to preserve the independence of imams and scholars. The more independent of government and “Big Men” a scholar is believed to be, the more credible he (or she) is likely to be in the eyes of many marginalized youth.

4. What further steps should be done for religion to promote social inclusion, economic growth, women’s rights, health care and education?

Ownership of the reform and implementation process by the faithful. This is where steps taken to promote economic growth, women’s rights and so on are initiated, supported and/or driven by religious authorities. This “in-house”, “home-grown” and intra-faith strategy is also a template that ensures that any major opposition to proposals put forward by the religious institutions would have to also challenge the credibility of the religious authorities and their institutions, instead of directing the challenge to the less trusted politicians or “the West”.xxx

For instance, the current Emir of Kano, in Northern Nigeria, HRH Muhammadu Sanusi II, set up a multi-disciplinary team of well-respected traditional and contemporary local religious scholars and experts of various other fields to put together a proposal that has been submitted to a council of Islamic scholars for "validation" which will then be presented to the Kano State legislature to be passed into law for the Shari’ah (Islamic) courts. This proposed bill is for a number of reforms to family law and the rights of women including some important legal restrictions on polygamy, improved marriage rights, right to education, fair application of inheritance laws, a ban on forced marriages and on domestic violence, giving women the option to seek compensation for any bodily harm and the complete right to divorce in cases of domestic abuse. This is very important as the overwhelming majority of Muslims in Kano and elsewhere, would rather go to the Islamic courts with their complaints whenever these are available.

This approach by the Emir ensures that the most respected scholars of the orthodoxy are sufficiently informed by experts about the challenges faced by women in a culturally patriarchal society. It also exposes some of them to the juristic interpretive tools and methodologies of Islamic legal theorists which other scholars amongst them possess. In the long run, this would give Kano a synergistic team of scholars and experts that allow the religious authorities to own and support legal and cultural reforms that would otherwise be impossible for the secular state authorities to enforce on their own.

It also forces those who would like to critique how these new laws were arrived at and how they have gotten the endorsement of the religious authorities, to also get exposed to the “shari’ah intelligence” and the rational workings of Islamic jurisprudence and law as it tries to achieve the common good and its higher intent. This is useful in enabling other reforms in laws, religious orientation and culture. If this proposed Bill and its on-the-ground implementation succeeds, it has the potential for a domino effect on the other states and nations in the region at least.

While there is still a lot to be done in terms of social integration and religious reform, I think the most critical challenge is this one of strategy, cultural sensitivity and ownership of the reform and implementation process. “Nothing about us without us!” seems to be a maxim of increasing importance in all sectors of societal reform.

The main obstacles to development have also been the disregard for the role of the religious leadership and institutions. As has been shown in the efforts by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Carter Centre, etc., the resounding successes in rolling back and controlling some key health problems such as polio, malaria, guinea worm, etc. was only realized when credible FBOs (Faith-Based Organisations) got involved with the support of traditional religious leaders. In many parts of Africa, because of greater authority of religious leadership over cultural traditional leadership, some of the most successful ways of eradicating or reducing harmful cultural practices has been through religious reforms, particularly when the cultural practice has absolutely no support from the religious tradition.

In some of the more conservative religious communities, better religious education and exposure of the religious leadership to alternative religious perspectives by more respected religious scholars and jurists and Shari’ah (Islamic) court judges from within and outside the country have been critical in bringing positive reform. This has been the case with the movement for better Girl-Child Education and the efforts against Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). As Charles Kimball mentioned in his book *When Religion Becomes Evil: Five Warning Signs*,

“It is all too easy to lose sight of the most basic teachings in one’s religion, particularly when oppressive social, political, or economic conditions figure prominently into the arguments advanced and sacred texts are quoted by authoritative leaders. Fear, insecurity, and a desire to protect the status quo can foster a tribalism in which otherwise sincere people engage in dehumanizing patterns of behavior, even war. Nevertheless, in my view, broad-minded people of faith offer the best hope both for correcting the corruptions leading to violence and for leading the way into a more promising future.”

Muslim jurists and schools of law all formally recognize the role of “juristic reasoning” (*ijtihad*) and the need for “re-form” of certain religious positions (*tajdid*) so as to come up with new and more relevant and ethical religious rulings or verdicts (*fatwas*) on contemporary issues as society’s culture and context change with time. This need for *ijtihad* and contemporary *fatwas* on various issues both old and new, is to ensure that the position of orthodoxy on anything is never out of sync with or neglectful of the values, purposes and higher intents (*maqasid*) of Islam’s ethical way of life (called the *Shari’ah*).

Greater interfaith work is another vital step in leading reforms. They play a transformative role in the way their follower and institutions view and accept religious and other forms of diversity, leading to more collaborative ways to counter various forms of ethnic or even religiously inspired prejudice, discriminations and social marginalization. Interfaith engagement is playing an increasingly critical role in a number of peace and bridge-building efforts that help counter religious extremism, but more importantly help re-direct criticism from religion to the real perpetrators of violence and causes of grievance. This is helping religious organisations move away from the polemics of blaming each other for the woes of society, and making the state and its politicians more accountable for their lapses, corruption, instrumentalization of religion. There has definitely been a rise in the role of interfaith organisations in peace and reconciliation, and rehabilitation efforts after conflict.

The other benefit of interfaith work is that it has allowed new skills and trainings available to one religious community to be shared with others. In Nigeria and elsewhere, a number of international and local interfaith organisations have help in building the competencies of many Muslim and Christian social workers with skills and other opportunities that they otherwise would not have access to.

Their work together has also exposed each other to their respective intra-faith strategies for dealing with their own religious violent extremists. This has given greater assurance to each community that the ‘other’ is not comprised of homogenous by-standers that are insensitive to the atrocities of extremists from within their own fold.

As we move towards an Africa that is getting hotter and more crowded, improving the quantity and quality of such influencers and community resource persons will be critical to Africa’s prosperity and future.

5. What is your hope for Africa’s future?

The reasons for the pessimism of Alain de Botton and Malcolm Gladwell in *Do Mankind’s Best Days Lie Ahead?* are important and very sobering for any social worker anywhere. The outlook however of the concluding chapter alone of Martin Meredith’s *The State of Africa* is dire enough to turn the most ecstatic optimist into a glum self-pitying prophet of doom and despair. The various statistics and

average trajectory of nearly every desirable aspect of life in Africa seems to be moving in the wrong direction, and seems to have no intention of changing course soon.

Fortunately however, and with some encouragement from Joel Best's *Damned Lies and Statistics: Untangling Numbers from the Media, Politicians, and Activists*, my hope is strengthened as I try to be more "critical" (hopefully not cynical, naïve or awestricken) of figures that represent the average of anything in Africa. While average figures that show things are getting worse often mean that definitely things are getting worse somewhere, they do not mean that things are getting worse everywhere and not getting better anywhere! But as these figures are not meant to be acted upon since any action and policy would require and depend on local priorities, statistics and trends, which could be markedly different from the "average" of the whole 54 countries that make up Africa.

- Regarding my hope for Africa. Few countries have suffered more starvation, civil strife and cross-border wars than Ethiopia, or more tragic a genocide than Rwanda. My hope is that others will be able to learn from and be inspired by these countries and peoples, and even try to catch up with these countries in their resolve on peace-building and strategies for building their economies. They remind me of a verse in the Qur'an that says, *"God will not change the condition of a people, until they are ready to change what is within themselves"*.
- These countries I believe prove to the rest of Africa and beyond, that no situation is beyond repair; that there will always be good and caring people within the international community and in Africa willing assist through their governments and NGOs; and that there is always hope if a people and its leadership are determined to care for each other. Dare I also add that they also show that a better future in Africa (as I think of Botswana too, but also South Korea, Singapore and Malaysia) is not necessarily undermined by dictatorships, especially and if very lucky to have a benevolent dictator!

As a Muslim and as a matter of faith however, I have a responsibility to remain hopeful and to try and give others hope too, irrespective of how pessimistic things may appear. Mine is not to change the world or Africa or Nigeria for the better. This is Plant Earth not a perfect Heaven! The world will always have unfinished work for us all. Mine is simply to do the best I can. That's all! Mine is to look for the guidance and energy to keep trying to change myself for the better, and if possible my family, and if possible, my neighbourhood, and my community and whatever else can gradually fall into my sphere of influence, as I grow with the support of others; and if that includes Nigeria, Africa and the world, then so be it! We'll aim high!

Thank you.