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LAJOP is an annual publication of the Department of Philosophy of the Lagos State University. The objective of the journal is to publish original articles and research findings in traditional and emerging fields of philosophy which explore not only the various thematic dimensions and traditions of the discipline, but also themes that painstakingly deal with the practical relevance of philosophy in different aspects of human endeavour.

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 - Indent prose extracts (Ctl+M); add a blank line before and after
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Tolerance among Undergraduate Christian Religious Students: A Case Study of Penultimate-Year Students of Lagos State University, Ojo

Kuponu, Selome

Abstract

The Christian Studies Unit of the Department of Religions and Peace Studies of Lagos State University (LASU) has students with remarkable differences in tribe, age, experience and religious persuasions. Though majority of the students are Christians, yet they exhibit considerable difference in their reactions to issues and worldview. This paper uses quantitative analysis to examine how the penultimate students of the Christian Studies Unit of the Department tolerate one another despite their differences. The study considers Karl Popper's view on tolerance and his argument that one should not tolerate the intolerant. I argue against Popper's presupposition on the basis that the idea of tolerance is limitless and there are no yardsticks to measure individual tolerance.

Keywords: religious persuasion, differences, intolerance

Introduction

Karl Popper's paradox of intolerance implies that a tolerant society should be tolerant by default; with one exception: it should not tolerate intolerance itself (Popper 1945: 83). For a culturally heterogeneous society with plurality of religions, fixing this definition into the cultural matrix and religious exegesis will generate multiples of interpretations. By simply probing this assertion through the binoculars of the laws of Moses, while placing it side by side with the teachings of Jesus Christ in his popular sermon on the mountain (Matt.5-7), may also produce a discordant tune. If the verdict of Moses on divorcing an unloved or unfaithful wife (Deut. 24:1-4) is compared to Jesus' stance on intolerance towards divorce (Matt. 5:31-32) and viewed through a non-Christian mind-set, then it could be concluded that there are contradictions in the bible, on the extent to which a man could endure the misbehaviours of his wife in matrimony. The same goes with the doctrine of an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth (4), which was stepped down for higher principle of turning the right cheek (Matt. 5:38-42 cf Ex. 21:24; Lev. 24:20; Deut. 19:21) by Jesus in his very famous expression, "you have heard it said, but now I say..." (Matt. 5:21-22, 27-28, 31-32, Matt. 5:21-22, 27-28, 31-32, 8-39, 43-

44.). But from a Christian's perspective, the biblical approach to understanding of human relations had always hinged on the eternal laws of unalloyed love for God and sacrificial love for one's neighbour. Jesus however, gave the reason why Moses permitted the people of Israel to limit their tolerance, which hinged on the hardness of their hearts (Matt. 19:7-8). He however stated his purpose for coming to the world was to put the laws of Moses in their right context, giving them their proper meanings, so that they would tally with the original purpose of God (Matt. 5:7). By and large, Jesus asserted that people misinterpreted the laws of God as revealed to them through Moses because they did not understand that God is love (I John 4:16) and his children must have such unending love that made God send his rain on both the good and the wicked (Matt. 5:44-45).

This paper uses the principle of unending and indiscriminating love of God to argue the fact that Christian approach to tolerance transcends the border of "common-sense" or human tolerance level and goes into a depth that philosophy and human psychology could not explain. How can a human philosophy be used to explain the case of a man who was, while being stone to death, kept on praying for his killers? (Acts 7:57-60) Or what could one make of the teaching of turning the other cheek (Matt. 5:38-42), going the extra mile (Matt. 5:41), permanence of marriage, with blatant disregard of abuses and inconveniences? (Matt. 19:1-8). This paper argues further that where human endurance to tolerate, forgive and accommodate human frailties end, the inner strength supplied by the Holy Spirit enables him to carry on with superhuman fortitude.

There are two approaches to this study. One, the study quantitatively analyses how penultimate students of Christian Religious Studies in Lagos State University, LASU, tolerate each other despite notable differences in their ages, denominations and tribe. It attempts to find out the role of religious training and spiritual enablement in helping them develop tough skin for intolerance. Secondly, the study also looks at the key statements that Jesus made in Matthew chapters 5 to 7 with the view to noting how sharply they are against the perception of the society about the limit of tolerance in the Nigerian sociopolitical space.

There are few basic assumptions that this study will make on who a Christian is and what Christianity is all about in this write up. First of all, the concept of Christianity is devoid of denominational colouration. Secondly, the present practice and the day to day reality of interactions with Christians on the street or in the market place do not necessarily represent the stance of bible on the correct form of Christianity. This implies that Christianity is viewed as the lifestyle of the immediate followers of Christ as noted in their

practices in the acts of apostles. Thirdly, this write up sees Christian experience as a journey of faith which is empowered by the inner fortitude offered by the indwelling Holy Spirit, who energises an ordinary “man of like passion” (James 5:17) to do something beyond human endurance and human perseverance. In sum, the assumption of this study is that whoever is a Christian must have a semblance with the lifestyles of the apostolic lifestyle as noted in the Acts of Apostles. Also, it should be noted that the narratives in the book of Acts never took a full flight until the disciples were empowered by the Pentecostal experience (Acts 2:1-4). All the basis of discuss will base on that conceptual framework and any deviation will be an aberration. The reason for this clarification became necessary because the sceptics may disprove draw examples from common occurrences from the socio-religious space to discredit the whole narrative of Christian endurance, tolerance and longsuffering as an unattainable. So, if Stephen could pray for his enemy while dying, then an average Christian could do it. After all Stephen was just an ordinary “server of the table” (Acts 6). This was not an isolated case, since the precedence was laid by Christ who did the same thing for his enemies on the cross (Luke 23:34). This paper therefore attempts to vehemently argue that what a particular Christian does or fails to do does not represent the general philosophy of Christianity, as the moral failure of a person or group of persons does not necessarily represent the outlook of the institution. The common practice of praying for the death of a perceived enemy, while Christ admonished a Christian to pray for one’s enemy is not the failure of the Christian faith, but that of the practitioners in question. One cannot also rule out the role that culture plays in the perception of people about intolerance. For instance, there is a saying among the Yoruba’s in the Western Nigeria which says, “*Bi ediye ba da mi l’ogun nu, ma fo leyin!*” This is literarily similar to the “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” maxim in Mosaic law which essentially was the essential bedrock of the Jewish culture. But, just as Paul claimed, we did not so learn Christ (Eph.4:20). By implication, there is a new culture, a brand new civilisation that Christ advocated, which was at variance with the existing culture of its time and also many of the cultures that it eventually was exported to. The problem still remains delineating the Christian principles from the cultural practices that had tainted it and gave it another colouration. In order to address this, this paper will also highlight areas like interpersonal relationship, political preferences, and other areas of interactions where conflicts do arise and where Christian principles need could be called to play.

Christian Principles and Open Speech

In his work, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, Popper unequivocally states that he does "... not imply, for instance that we should always suppress the utterance of intolerant philosophies; as long as we can counter them by rational argument and keep them in check by public opinion, suppression would certainly be unwise (Popper, 1945: 87). Putting this side by side the article 10 of the European Convention on Human rights which stipulates that,

Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. The exercise of these freedom... may be subject to such formalities, conditions, restrictions or penalties as prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society... for the protection of the reputation or rights of others (Frameshift Consulting).

And, Nigerian constitution 35(1), which states that "Every person shall be entitled to his personal liberty and no person shall be deprived of such liberty save in the following cases and in according with a procedure permitted by law." The consensus here is that every individual has right to freedom of expression. He has freedom to air his views and advance his convictions. Sometimes, it is not what is said that is harmful, but how it is said. That was why Paul counselled that the speech of a Christian should be seasoned with salt, and should carry a great amount of grace (Eph. 4:29). The implication of this is that Christian principles on interpersonal communication do not support the use of hurtful and vengeful words. As a matter of fact, Christianity is of the view that sin committed against a fellow man, especially through the wrong use of words is punishable by an irrevocable sentence to hell (Matt. 5:22). The Christians are not supposed to be muted; they are not supposed to be cowed into submission because of their faith. They are enjoined to be bold, but also discrete. They must be as wise as serpent, but as humble as lamb (Matt. 10:16).

The main challenge here is how a Christian should react or respond when he is at the receiving end of a dangerous speech or hate speech. The Nigeria Stability and Reconciliation programme, differentiated between the two by stating that, "dangerous speech is a catalyst to violence or the amplification thereof, whereas hate speech is generally offensive communication that does not incite violence" (NSRP, Accessed 6/3/19). The position of the bible on this is similar to what Evelyn Beatrice quoted Voltaire as saying, "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to death your right to say it" (frameshift Consulting).

Christians are enjoined never to trample on the rights of any individual. Encroaching into a private space is not supported by the bible. Even God

in the Garden of Eden gave man the right to make his choices (Gen. 3:2-3). But how can a Christian cope with a dangerous speech, a communication that could threaten his life, the life of a loved one or the community at large? The bible should defend itself at this point? It would be difficult to draw conclusions from the utterances of religious leaders of several denominations, who have divergent opinions about this. A visit to different churches will leave one confused about a Christian approach to hate or dangerous speech. But, the bible has examples of God's directives in such situation. The first instruction is not to pay evil for evil. The second instruction is to pray for the wrong doer (Matt.5:43-48). Is it possible to do it? Yes. Is it easy to do it? No. Then what provisions did the bible make to enhance the capacity of a person to achieve this? The grace of God, the example of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. What makes a dying man pray for his enemy is far beyond the capacity of the dying man! Being dead to flesh (Rom. 6:13) implies being dead to all the desires of the flesh and all the common human weaknesses. A Christian is a living corpse. He is dead to sin, to the flesh, to human opinions, to public views - but he is alive to God. He is no more working according to the principles of this present world (Rom. 12:1-2). Until a person is able to return blessing for curses; love for hate and joy for sorrow; he had not started the Christian journey. A Christian is a filth of the world, a person before whom this world is of no value (Heb. 11:38). This is the standard and the norm, but practice and experience may be different. It will be a fallacy, therefore, to judge a faith by the practice of a few. The stand of the Christian faith is to tolerate hate or dangerous speech, even till the point of death. However, the bible cautions that a Christian must be wise (Matt. 10:16).

Paul encouraged Christians to speak the truth in love (Col. 4:6). The principle of unending love, which made Jesus to lay his life down for human beings, is the guiding principle of the Christian faith. I Corinthians 13 tells us that love bears all things and endures all things. It further states that love keeps no record of evil, love is kind, etc. God is love (I John 4:8). It was love that made God to offer his only begotten son to die for the sin of the world (I John 3:16). The bible stated the condition under which this ultimate sacrifice happened: while we were yet sinners! (Rom. 5:8). It was not a return of favour for a qualified world; it was an unmerited favour to a world too broke to pay anything in return! As an anonymous song writer puts it: "... I owed a debt I couldn't pay; he paid a debt he didn't owe..." This is the paradox of unending love that is a shoulder higher than the paradox of intolerance.

Going Beyond Human Endurance

One of the best sermons of Jesus was recorded in Matthew chapters 5 to 7. Specifically, Jesus challenged the traditions, beliefs and practices of the Jews. They had formed a tradition through the laws of Moses and the teachings of the prophets. Though Moses gave the Ten Commandments, the Pharisees and the scribes gave several interpretations to those laws and multiplied them to the extent that they became a burden for the people to bear (Matt. 23:1-4).

Though Jesus claimed that he did not come to destroy the law, but to fulfil it (Matt. 5:20), in a way he set a lot of the laws aside based on their inconsistencies with the nature of God. When asked why he did that? He said some of those laws were not originally from God (Matt. 19:4). He further stated that some of the laws were given by Moses due to the hardness of the heart of the people (Matt. 19:8).

The new laws that Jesus gave were based on the very nature of God. He said that God made rain to fall on both the good and the bad (Matt. 5:45). That testified to his “beyond” human nature. That is the nature that Jesus said Christians should have: “be as perfect as your father in heaven” (Matt. 5:45). The beyond human nature advocated are highlighted below.

The first aspect was the list of the beatitudes. Jesus said that the humble in spirit will inherit the kingdom of God. The meek will inherit the earth. The merciful will obtain mercy. The pure in heart will see God. The peace makers will be called the sons of God. Those who are persecuted on the account of being righteous will inherit the kingdom of God (Matt. 5:10).

The second aspects of these beyond human laws are the laws on relationship, marriage and human interactions. Jesus redefined many of the common sins and problems in human relationships. He introduced a new dimension to the concepts of murder, adultery, and so on. He said by simply getting angry with someone without a cause is punishable by God. He rated cursing others as a serious offence. In order to drive home his point he counselled the people who wanted to give gifts at the temple to God should first of all reconcile with someone who had issues with him, thereby, he rated good human relationship above mere religion. He also advocated out of the court settlement, turning the other cheek, instead of trying to get even (Matt. 5:23-26), and sometimes accept to be the fall guy.

He advocated against adultery. But beyond physical contact, Jesus said eye contact carried equal punishment, if it was done with a negative intent (Matt. 5:27-30). As regards divorce, Jesus limited it to only matrimonial unfaithfulness (Matt. 5:31-32). He advised people never to take oaths under

whatever pretence, rather to be truthful to their words (Matt. 5:33-37). He further advocated for trying all within their power to get along with their antagonists and to return good for evil. The summary of such beyond human laws was the higher level of perfection. That is to be as perfect as God is. It will only take God to take a human to such a higher level of beyond human nature.

John G. Paton (1898), a pioneer missionary in the Hebrides gave a touching account of how he saved the lives of those who had earlier wanted to kill him. According to the account, having escaped an assassination attempt by the whisks, his assailants were accosted in a reprisal attack by his powerful allies in the community. While the people on his side of the battle wanted to deliver a jungle justice, he held the leader of the team and begged him to spare the assailants and never to pay evil for evil. This is correct interpretation of the love for the enemy advocated in the epistle of Paul to the people of Rome (Rom. 11:17-21). As earlier stated, the modern practice and lives of public figures, who are at the forefront of the Christian faith, may be contrary. Andrew Murray, was quoted as saying, "Neither faith nor work will profit if we have not love. It is love that unites with God; it is love that proves the reality of faith. This love is of special consequence when we labour for such (fellow men around us) and pray for them. We sometimes give ourselves to work for Christ from zeal for his cause, as we call it, or for our own spiritual health, without giving ourselves in personal self-sacrificing love for those whose souls we seek (Herald, Sept. 2017, p.5).

This love advocated by Murray is a love that is beyond the human definition of love. It is what is described as agape love, the kind of the love that God possesses.

There are pertinent questions that need a lot of clarifications. Screening these questions through the eyes of the abovementioned will boil to the same point: the love of God enables a man to endure beyond the human breaking point. For instance: what should a Christian do to a repentant Boko Haram member who confessed that he was responsible for the death of his only child? What should a Christian say to someone who curses his parents? How should a Christian lady respond to someone who tries to sexually assault him? Should a Christian forward message that maligns a political figure whose public and private life he disagrees with? What should a Christian do when he is cheated on by a spouse he is faithful to? How should an educated wife respond to a verbally abusive husband? The question could go on and on. But the answer to them all had been given earlier: screen every response, either action or words through the sieve of unending love of God.

Dichotomy between Principles and Practice

According to the statistics made available on unifiedlawyer.com, the country with the highest divorce rate is Luxemburg (87%), followed by Spain (65%), France (55%), Russia (51%), United States (46%), Germany (44%), United Kingdom (42%), New Zealand (42%), Australia (38%) and Canada (38%), making the first ten countries with the highest divorce rate in the world. The list is dominated by countries with the highest number of people that profess the Christian faith. By contrast India has 1% divorce rate. From the same source, the divorce rate is classified by major religion: Protestant Christianity tops with 37%, followed by Catholic (36%), Buddhism (30%), Judaism (28%), Islam (20%) and Hinduism (1%). From the statistics above, it is clear that there is a wide gap and a big dichotomy between what Jesus taught about marriage and divorce and what the practitioners of Christian religion practise. Most people will judge a faith based on the practice of the practitioners rather than the principles of the scripture adopted by that faith. For instance, Islam means peace; but many people may disagree with that based on what the Islamist terrorists are doing around the world. The same applies to Christianity and other major religions.

A close look at the prayers offered in a few “prayer-houses” and “prayer mountains,” which are sometimes referred to as “dangerous prayer,” targeted at the perceived enemies are quite different from the approaches of Jesus on the Cross and Stephen, when stoned to death. Putting these prayers: “Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing” and “God, do not lay this charge against them,” from Jesus and Stephen respectively side by side prayers like, “All those that oppose my promotions should die by fire!” “All those that oppose me, fall down and die!” The rationale and the principles behind the two set of prayers are different. The first set sought for the salvation of the enemy, while the other sought for the destruction of the enemy.

The penultimate level of Christian Religious Studies (CRS) has 11 students. One of them is a Muslim. The rest attend Evangelical and Pentecostal churches, while one attends a Catholic church. The age distribution of students is between 19 and 43 years. Each one of them had different experiences that had sharpened their perception about relationship and interaction.

The class is relatively small compared to other classes in the university of the same level, but their worldviews are quite different. It should be noted that less than 40% of the class actually wanted CRS as their first course of study. The rest only settled for it as a final resort. From the analysis of the class based on the effect of studying CRS on their interaction with people of

other faith, it is less than 10%. Majority only felt that studying CRS is just like studying any other course, how they behave basically has to do with their personal upbringing and their personal relationship with God. The relationship among them is cordial and had little to do with denominational differences. Though only two of the students considered themselves as best friends. On the issue of how they view each other in terms of others in terms of character, one of the respondents viewed some of the ladies as not too decent in sexual matters; one of the respondents saw some of the class mates as secretive and selfish. Each one seems to have something not too decent to say about each other or some of the lecturers taking some of their courses. In their three years of staying together there had been major arguments and crisis as a result of hoarding of lecture materials and information about areas of concentration given by lecturers for their examination; misunderstanding during conversations, disagreement over contributions to purchase instructional materials for the class use, unhealthy gossips, undue closeness of certain members of the class to some lecturers, among other issues. They do not all agree on the issue of Christian dressing, attitude to the enemies, prayers or curses for the enemies. Their perception about who the enemy/ies is/are is different. Their belief is along the denominational and cultural lines. Generally, less than half of the class believe that praying for the enemies is the right thing to do.

Though the observations from the class may not generally represent the views of all the CRS students in Lagos State University, but it is in a way representational. Since each of the major denominations (Redeemed Christian Church of God, Deeper life Bible Church, Catholic, etc.) are represented, their views about life and relationship seem to toe the denominational line and personal conviction. Despite church training and religious instructions in CRS classes, the students still feel that they are free to live their lives in their own terms.

The implication of this is very simple: Christianity has high principles which could only be lived based on the extra-terrestrial enablement which mere studying religion or attending religious services could not completely address. The Christian faith is a personal faith and could only be enhanced by the help of the Holy Spirit. Though, many of the practitioners and scholars had misrepresented Christianity based on how to live or how to interpret the teachings of Christ and the writings of his disciples, yet, the "foundation of the Lord stands sure and has this seal, that the Lord knows those that are his, and anyone that names the name of the Lord should depart from iniquity" (II Tim. 2:19). The bible also recognises that "there are many vessels in a great house, some are unto honour, while some are unto dishonour." (II Tim. 2:20).

Paul also referred some people “whose god is their stomach (Rom. 16:18.” The bible does not need a secret or mystical knowledge to interpret it; the instructions are simple to comprehend. The instruction that a person should not use his tongue to curse an enemy (James 3:9-10), is simple and plane. Anyone who says otherwise is an Antichrist.

Difficulties Encountered in Applying the Principle of Infinite Love

Recently, some Catholic priests were convicted of having sexually abused some people when they were children (Google.com/recent high profile scandals). A famous R & B star, R. Kelly was also detained for a day over the case of sexual exploitation of minors (Google.com/Recent high profile scandals). Cristiano Ronaldo, a famous football star, has also been accused and still undergoing trials for rape that he was alleged to have committed several years back (Google.com/Recent high-profile scandals). The question is: how can the principle of infinite love be applied in such cases, especially, if the victim wants to follow the example of Christ in a society that seeks to ensure fairness, equity and justice? Is being silent or letting go not enhancing the continuity of evil in the society? If a Christian reports the offender and the offender is punished by law, is he doing the right thing from the perspective of infinite love? Is being silent not a criminal offence?

Sometimes, it is extremely difficult to give a straight jacketed answer to knotty issues of life. That is why the Christian life can only be lived with total dependence on the Holy Spirit (Rom.8:5-14). The divine direction for one individual may be different for that of the other person. While the Holy Spirit will guide a person to move to the left, he would guide another to move to the right. Since the Holy Spirit is the one that understands the mind of God, he will guide a person along the path of godliness and in line with the principle of infinite love.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Every society has its own tolerance level beyond which it may not be able to go deeper. Allowing hate and dangerous speech and fake news may endanger the peaceful coexistence of a pluralistic society like Nigeria. But beyond the society, religious beliefs, culture and family background has a major role to play in the way people relate to the issue of tolerance. Though all these play a major role in the perception of the people, yet Christian challenges people to embrace a higher lifestyle. The call to love an enemy, never to speak evil of no one, to season one’s speech with salt, to endure abuse in whatever shade or form, or in whatever circumstances is a higher one. The found-