
SOCIOECONOMIC FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE RISE OF RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM IN SOUTH-EASTERN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study examined the socioeconomic factors contributing to the rise of religious fundamentalism in South-eastern Nigeria. The research design used was a descriptive survey, and data was collected through questionnaires and interviews with religious and community leaders in Anambra, Enugu, and Imo States. The findings revealed that economic disparities, political factors, technological advancements, and external influences all contribute to the rise of religious fundamentalism in the region. The study recommends the promotion of intercultural understanding, educational programs highlighting religious diversity, and diplomatic efforts to address the root causes of religious fundamentalism. Additionally, it suggests fostering interfaith dialogue initiatives and economic programs that promote intercultural understanding. Further research is recommended to explore the impact of scepticism on religious tolerance and the effectiveness of intercultural activities in promoting religious integration.

Keywords: socioeconomic factors, religious fundamentalism, Christianity, Islam, South-eastern Nigeria

Introduction

Africa, with its rich history and diverse cultures, has witnessed the expansion of various religious traditions because the continent has a vibrant trade networks and cultural exchanges. Thus, as goods, ideas, and people traversed across the continent, religious beliefs and traditions were also shared and adopted (Masfa, 2022). Trade routes facilitated the spread of religious ideas, with merchants and travellers introducing new faiths and practices to different regions (Becker et al, 2021). The movement of people across Africa played a significant role in the expansion of religions and traditions. As different ethnic groups migrated and settled in new areas, they brought along their religious beliefs and cultural practices, influencing the local populations. Over time, these traditions became interwoven with the fabric of the communities, leading to their expansion and adaptation (Garbin, 2019). The expansion of religions in Africa was often influenced by political and imperial

powers. Colonialism and the arrival of European powers in Africa during the 19th and 20th centuries brought with them Christianity (Meier zu Selhausen, 2019). These external forces played a key role in spreading Christianity across the continent. Similarly, the spread of Islam was also facilitated by political and military conquests, such as the Arab-Muslim expansion across North Africa (Bayly, 2011).

In any society, fundamentalism often arises as a response to perceived threats or challenges to the core beliefs and values of a particular ideology or religion. It emphasizes the importance of maintaining traditional practices, scriptures, and moral codes as a means of preserving the integrity and authenticity of the belief system (Mahdy, 2019). Fundamentalists may view any deviation from these core principles as a compromise or dilution of their faith or ideology. This rigid adherence to fundamental principles can lead to a rejection of pluralism, tolerance, and compromise, as fundamentalists tend to view their beliefs as absolute and non-negotiable. It is important to note that fundamentalism can manifest in various religious, political, or ideological contexts and does not necessarily imply extremism or violence (Czerny, 2021). While some fundamentalist movements may engage in radical actions to defend or promote their beliefs, others may focus on internal community practices and the preservation of their traditions without resorting to violence. Socio-economic factors play a significant role in the rise of religious fundamentalism. South-eastern Nigeria has faced numerous socio-economic challenges, including poverty, unemployment, and economic disparities. These conditions create fertile ground for the spread of fundamentalist ideologies, as individuals seek stability, purpose, and a sense of belonging. In times of economic hardship, religious institutions often provide social support networks, economic opportunities, and a sense of community (Bello, 2022).

Statement of Problem

The consequence of fundamentalist dynamism has created scepticism and insecurity among Nigerians, which does not only occur at the intra-group, but also at the inter-group level in the country. The increasing tide of religious fundamentalism present Nigeria as a country in dilemma of normlessness or in a state of anomie informed by the dominance of foreign cultures and civilizations, such as the Arab/Islamic and Western/Christian norms and traditions. The rise of religious fundamentalism from intercultural perspectives in South-eastern Nigeria presents a significant problem in the region. This phenomenon is characterized by the growing influence and prevalence of rigid religious beliefs and practices, often accompanied by intolerance and exclusionary attitudes towards other faiths and cultural traditions. The emergence of fundamentalism poses numerous



challenges to social cohesion, religious harmony, and intercultural understanding. By examining these factors, we can gain a comprehensive understanding of the underlying causes of religious fundamentalism in South-eastern Nigeria.

Theoretical Review

Structural Functionalism Theory

Structural functionalism, a sociological theory developed by Emile Durkheim and later refined by Talcott Parsons, posits that society is a complex system of interconnected parts, each serving a specific function to maintain social order and stability. It views society as analogous to a biological organism, where institutions such as family, education, and government play vital roles in maintaining equilibrium (Loiello, 1980). Social structures are seen as interdependent, contributing to the overall functioning of the system. For example, education ensures the transmission of cultural values, while the economy provides necessary resources. Some scholars noted that structural functionalism is an approach in Sociology which was developed at the wake of 19 century's industrial revolution. The theory was developed as an adequate tool for dealing with the interrelatedness of various traits, institutions, groups, and so forth, within the social system (Webster, 1963).

Structural functionalism is as old as the history of sociology. This is evident in the works of the founding fathers of the discipline who attempts a definition of structural functionalism. He saw structure as referring to a set of relatively stable and patterned relationships of social units, while he perceived as referring function to the consequences of social activities, which makes for adaptation or adjustment of a given structure or its component parts (Nwokolo & Counted, 2024). While influential in understanding social cohesion, critics argue that structural functionalism oversimplifies social change and neglects power dynamics and conflicts within society. Despite its limitations, the theory has contributed significantly to sociological thought and remains a foundational perspective in understanding the structural dynamics of societies.

Applying the theory of structural functionalism to the study of the rise of religious fundamentalism from intercultural perspectives in Southeastern Nigeria involves examining how various social institutions contribute to the emergence and perpetuation of this phenomenon, with a focus on their functional roles within the broader societal framework. In applying this assumption to understand the intricacies of religious fundamentalism, religion is committed to the promotion of the human good so as to provide basic human needs and promote sustainable development (Johnson, 2017). This implies that religious fundamentalism inculcates spirit of hard work and industrialization,

which is the foundation that brings about sustainable development. Proper adherence to religious values and principles will immensely lead to tolerant, trust, hard work, honesty, hope, courage, peace and love which bring about development. In addition, strict adherence to religious values and principles provides the unifying foundation that brings peace, socio-economic, political, education and technological development (Kansese, 2021).

In South-eastern Nigeria, the coexistence of diverse ethnic and religious groups forms a complex social structure. Structural functionalism suggests that religious fundamentalism may arise as a response to perceived threats to social stability. Institutions like family, education, and religious organizations play pivotal roles in shaping cultural norms and values (Kanu, 2019). The breakdown or perceived erosion of traditional values within these institutions may create a sense of social strain, prompting individuals to turn to fundamentalist ideologies as a means of restoring perceived order. Religious institutions, serving as integrative mechanisms, might offer a sense of belonging and purpose, especially in the face of cultural diversity. As South-eastern Nigeria undergoes social, economic, and political changes, religious fundamentalism may emerge as a reaction to these disruptions, aiming to restore a perceived moral order (Kolapo, 2018). The theory also prompts investigation into how political and economic structures in the region influence the rise of fundamentalism. Economic disparities and political instability can create conditions conducive to the appeal of fundamentalist ideologies, offering a sense of certainty and structure in times of social flux (Kwashi, 2013).

Review of Related Studies

Likewise, fourth, the belief in obedience to a disciplinarian God and the necessity of surrendering unconditionally to Him may also be stronger among fatalistic individuals, who consider their fate as firmly established and that there is little one can do to change it (Igboin & Adedibu, 2019). Individuals who rely more on family and friends as a source of information concerning religion are less likely to avail themselves of other and more diverse sources, and more likely to espouse stronger fundamentalism. On the other hand, those who rely on diverse sources of information are more likely to be exposed to a variety of perspectives on religion. As a result, they tend to develop a general awareness of the existence of a plurality of belief systems and alternative venues for spiritual satisfaction, and consequently, are less likely to espouse religious fundamentalism (Uroko et al 2023). Finally, among demographics, social class, ethnic and religious identity, and urban-rural residence

may all be linked to fundamentalism. They study argued that higher education and income are likely to weaken fundamentalism; education is said to lower cognitive barriers to enlightenment.

The educated are more skilled in analyzing issues, assessing alternative perspectives, and making sense of the world autonomously than those less educated. They are thus less likely to espouse a literalist, exclusivist, and intolerant view of religion, compared to those with lower levels of education. Also, individuals with higher incomes are less likely to harbor fundamentalist beliefs given their greater access to more diverse cultural perspectives and networks. Lower-income individuals, on the other hand, are more likely to support fundamentalism (Efuntade & Swart, 2022).

Experiencing a higher level of status insecurity, they are more likely to support the communitarianism of religious fundamentalism. Inequality in terms of ethnicity and religion or religious sect may also have ramifications for fundamentalism. Parallel to the view that relates prejudice by the members of the dominant ethnic group to their perception of threat from other groups we assess whether members of the dominant ethnic group are also more strongly fundamentalist than are ethnic minorities.

Likewise, we expect fundamentalism to be higher among members of the dominant religion or religious sect because of their claimed ownership of religion and the perception that religious minorities have deviated from the true path and therefore pose a threat to their religion (Agbarakwe, 2020). People living in rural areas, with limited access to a more diversified religious environment, may display stronger fundamentalism than those in urban areas. Finally, to rule out the possibility of spurious functions of employment, age, gender, and marital status, we statistically control for these variables (Folami, 2022).

Research Design

This research adopted the descriptive survey research design. This design affords the researcher the opportunity to gather data from a large sample within the study area through the church leaders, Muslim leader and community leaders located within the study area. The population for the study includes Clerics and Community leaders who are Christians and Moslems from the selected three states in Southeast Geo-Political Zone of the country. The states are Anambara, Enugu and Imo States.

Sample and Sampling techniques

The study adopted purposive sampling technique to select the respondents from Anambara, Enugu, and Imo States who are religious and community leaders that are familiar with the rise of religious

fundamentalism from intercultural perspective within the south-eastern Nigeria. From each of these states 40 were selected. And this gave us 120 respondents were selected from the population of study.

Description of the Research Instruments

The instrument used for this study are questionnaire and interview guide. These were developed by the researcher and used to gather data for the study. The questionnaire was divided into two parts. The first part was used to gather information on the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents while the second section was used to elicit responses from the research questions. In addition to the above, the questionnaire was structured and designed on a five-point Likert scale to elicit responses from the respondents. The Likert scale in this study was structured as follows:

SA = Strongly Agree (4 points) A = Agree (3 points) D = Disagree (2 points)

SD = Strongly Disagree (1 point).

The instruments are:

- a. Intercultural Perspective Strategic Adoption Questionnaire (InPSAQ)
- b. Interview Guide for Christian Leaders (InGuCL)
- c. Interview Guide for Moslem Leaders (InGuML)
- d. Interview Guide for Community Leaders (InGuCL)

Each of the instruments meant for completion by the respondent are written in English language.

Validity and Reliability of Research Instruments

Copies of the questionnaire and inventory scale were given to experts in evaluation and core research area of validation. The suggestions and observations were collated and effected to produce final draft of the questionnaire and the inventory scale before their administration at the research sites.

Pilot study was conducted using 15 natives from Afo-Ogbe community in Mbaise Local Government Area of Imo State. Outcome of the analysis from the administered questionnaire was used to determine the reliability of the research instrument.

Table 1: Reliability Values of the Research Instruments

S/N	Instrument Construct	Crombach Alpha
1.	Intercultural Perspective Strategic Adoption Questionnaire (InPSAQ)	0.76
2.	Interview Guide for Christian Leaders (InGuChL)	0.76
3.	Interview Guide for Moslem Leaders (InGuML)	0.76
4.	Interview Guide for Community Leaders (InGuCL)	0.77

Source: Researcher's Fieldwork 2023

Table 1 indicate that the results of the Crombach Alpha test of 0.77 and 0.76 were above 0.70 as the benchmark, criterion. Therefore, the researcher accepted the research instrument as reliable for data collection for the study.

Results and Discussion of Findings

This chapter presents results and discussions of findings according to the research questions raised in the study. The study was carried out to evaluate the rise of religious fundamentalism from religious perspectives in southeastern Nigeria. The data were presented in tables. Simple percentage was used to analyse the personal data of the correspondents. Weighted mean (score) was used to analyse the study objectives.

Analysis of Research Question

To what extent do you believe economic disparities contribute to the rise of religious fundamentalism in Southern Nigeria?

Table 2: Causes of economic disparities and how they contribute to religious fundamentalism in Southern Nigeria (N=120)

S/N	Statement	SA	A	D	SD	Mean ()	Std. Dev.	Remarks
1.	Our children should not be allowed to learn other religions	24 (20.0%)	16 (13.3%)	29 (24.2%)	51 (42.5%)	2.1	0.646	Rejected
2.	The followers of other religious should not have the same right as mine	21 (17.5%)	18 (15.0%)	40 (33.3%)	41 (34.2%)	2.1	0.644	Rejected
3.	Criticism of Islam/Christianity should not be tolerated	53 (44.2%)	42 (35%)	17 (14.2%)	8 (6.7%)	3.2	0.703	Accepted
4.	Criticism of Muslim/Christian religious leaders should not be tolerated	46 (38.3%)	39 (32.5%)	12 (10.0%)	23 (19.2%)	2.9	0.696	Accepted
5.	Ethnicity funds religious fundamentalism	34 (28.3%)	51 (42.5%)	28 (23.3%)	7 (5.8%)	2.9	0.777	Accepted
6.	Technological advancements and media are influencing the spread and acceptance of religious fundamentalism ideologies in Southern Nigeria	44 (36.7%)	36 (30.0%)	23 (19.2%)	17 (14.2%)	2.9	0.780	Accepted
7.	Interfaith dialogue initiatives are	33	37	29 (24.2%)	21	2.7	0.713	Accepted

	addressing the root causes of religious fundamentalism in southern Nigeria	(27.51%)	(30.8%)		(17.5%)			
8.	Educational programs that highlight religious diversity can contribute to mitigating the appeal of religious fundamentalism in Southern Nigeria	48 (40.0%)	32 (26.7%)	30 (25.0%)	10 (8.3%)	3.0	0.910	Accepted
9.	Political factors contribute to the rise of religious fundamentalism in southern Nigeria	49 (40.8%)	32 (26.6%)	21 (17.5%)	18 (15.0%)	2.9	0.714	Accepted
10.	Economic programmes that promote inter-cultural understanding can be used in addressing the root causes of religious fundamentalism in Southern Nigeria	54 (45.0%)	54 (45.0%)	22 (18.4%)	20 (16.6%)	3.7	0.666	Accepted
11.	The influence of external forces such as international forces or global ideologies affect the dynamisms of religious fundamentalism in Southern Nigeria	37 (30.82%)	38 (31.7%)	26 (21.62%)	19 (15.9%)	2.8	0.581	Accepted
12.	Political instability in southern Nigeria intersect with intercultural dynamics to shape the landscape of religious fundamentalism	32 (26.6%)	52 (43.3%)	23 (19.2%)	13 (10.8%)	2.9	0.611	Accepted
13.	Diplomatic efforts and international collaborations can address the impact of political and external influence on the religious fundamentalism in Southern Nigeria	60 (50.0%)	21 (17.5%)	24 (20.0%)	15 (12.5%)	3.1	0.899	Accepted

Source: (Fieldwork, 2023)

Note: A mean score of 2.5 was used for decision criterion. Any calculated mean that is less than 2.5 was rejected, while 2.5 or above calculated mean was accepted.

Table 4.2 shows the causes of economic disparities and how they contribute to religious fundamentalisms in Southern, Nigeria. The table shows that 24 (20.0%) strongly agreed that our children should not be allowed to learn other religion, while 16 (13.3%) agreed. Also, 29 (24.2%) disagreed, while 51 (42.5%) strongly disagreed.

Further analysis reveals that calculated mean result was 2.1, which is less than 2.5 (). This show that the opinion that our children should not be allowed to study other religions was rejected. The table also shows that 21 (17.5%) strongly agreed that the followers of other religions should not have the same right as mine, while 18 (15.0%) agreed.

However, 40 (33.3%) disagreed, while 41 (34.2%) disagreed. The result of the calculated mean was 2.1, which was less than 2.5 (). The result of the finding rejects the opinion that the followers of other religion should not have the same right as mine. The table shows that 53 (44.2%) strongly agreed that criticism of Islam/Christianity should not be tolerated; 42 (35.0%) agreed, 17 (4.2%) disagreed and 8 (6.7%) disagreed. The result of calculated mean was 3.2, which was greater than 2.5 (). Therefore, the result of the finding accepts that the criticism of Islam/Christianity should not be tolerated.

The table also shows that 46 (38.3%) strongly agreed that criticisms of Muslim/Christian religious leaders should not be tolerated, 39 (32.5%) agreed, 12 (10.0%) disagreed and 23 (19.2%) strongly disagreed. The result of calculated mean was 2.9, which was greater than the mean score of 2.5 (). The finding accepted the opinion that criticisms of Muslim/Christian religious leaders should not be tolerated. In the table also, 34 (28.3%) strongly agreed that ethnicity funds religious fundamentalisms, 51 (42.5%) agreed, 28(23.3%) disagreed and 7 (5.8%) strongly disagreed. Calculated mean score of 2.9 which was greater than the mean score of 2.5 was accepted. Showing that ethnicity funds religious fundamentalisms. The table also shows that 44 (36.7%) strongly agreed that technological advancements and media are influencing the spread and acceptance of religious fundamentalisms in Southern Nigeria, 36 (30%) agreed, 23 (19.2%) disagreed and 17 (14.2%) strongly disagreed. For the fact that calculated mean result of 2.9 was greater than the mean score of 2.5, the finding accepted the opinion that technological advancements and media ate influencing the spread and acceptance of religious fundamentalisms in southern Nigeria.

The table also shows that 33 (27.5%) strongly agreed that interfaith dialogue initiatives are addressing the root causes of religious fundamentalism in Southwestern Nigeria, 37 (30.8%) agreed, 29 (24.2%) disagreed while 21 (17.5%) strongly disagreed. Calculated mean score result of 2.7 was accepted

because it was greater than 2.5 (). The table shows that interfaith dialogue initiatives are addressing the root causes of religious fundamentalism in southern Nigeria.

The table also shows that 48 (40.0%) strongly agreed that educational program that highlight religious diversity can contribute to mitigating the appeal of religious fundamentalisms in southern Nigeria, 32 (26.7%) agreed, 30 (25.0%) disagreed and 10 (8.3%) strongly disagreed. The result of calculated mean score of 3.0 was greater than 2.5 (). Therefore, we accepted that educational programmes that highlight religious diversity can contribute to mitigating the appeal of religious fundamentalism in southern Nigeria.

The table also indicates that 49 (40.8%) strongly agreed that political factors contribute to the rise of religious fundamentalism in southern Nigeria, 32 (26.6%) agreed, 21 (17.5%) disagreed and 18 (15.0%) strongly disagreed. The result of the calculated mean score was 2.9 and greater than the 2.5 (). The table revealed that political factors contribute to the rise of religious fundamentalisms in southeastern Nigeria. From the table, 54 (45.0%) strongly agreed that economic programs that promote inter-cultural understanding can be used to addressing the root causes of religious fundamentalisms in southeastern Nigeria, another 54(45.0%) agreed, 22 (18.4%) disagreed, while 20 (16.6%) strongly disagreed. Calculated mean score was 3.7, which was greater than 2.5 (). The table proves that economic programs that promote intercultural understanding can be used to address the root causes of religious fundamentalisms in southeastern Nigeria.

The table also reveals that 37 (30.8%) strongly agreed that the influence of external forces such as international forces or global ideologies affect the dynamics of religious fundamentalisms in southeastern Nigeria, 38 (31.7%) agreed, 26 (21.6%) disagreed, while 19 (15.9%) strongly disagreed. The result of calculated mean was 2.8, which was greater than 2.5 (). The table shows that the influence of international forces or global ideologies affect the dynamics of religious fundamentalism in Southeastern Nigeria.

The table also indicated that 32 (26.6%) strongly agreed that political instability in southeastern Nigeria intersect with intercultural dynamics to shape the landscape of religious fundamentalism, 52 (43.3%) agreed, 23 (19.3%) disagreed, while 13 (10.8%) strongly disagreed, while 13(10.8%) strongly disagreed. Calculated mean score of 2.9 was recorded, which was greater than 2.5 (). This reveals that political instability in southeastern Nigeria intersect with intercultural dynamics to shape the landscape of religious fundamentalism. Lastly, the table reveals that 60 (50.0%) strongly agreed that diplomatic efforts and international collaborations can address the impact of political and external

influence of religious fundamentalism in southeastern Nigeria, 21 (17.5%) agreed, 24 (20.0%) disagreed while 15 (12.5%) strongly disagreed. The result of the calculated mean was 3.1, which was greater than 2.5 (). The table affirms that diplomatic efforts and international collaborations can address the impact of political and external influences on the rise of religious fundamentalism in southeastern Nigeria.

This study has attempted to evaluate the causes of religious fundamentalisms in southern Nigeria. The following conclusions were drawn based on the findings: it was concluded that technological advancements and media exposure are influencing the spread and acceptance of religious fundamentalism in southern Nigeria. Ethnicity also contributes in funding religious fundamentalism in the study area. It was also discovered that the influence of external forces such as global ideologies affect the dynamics of religious fundamentalism in southern Nigeria. Lastly, political factors such as political instability in southern Nigeria intersect with intercultural dynamics to shape the landscape of religious fundamentalism.

Recommendations

Some recommendations were made based on the research findings and conclusion.

1. Christians and Islams (Muslims) in southern Nigeria should avoid criticizing one another. This will promote tolerance, adaptability, peace and harmony among the leaders and their followers.
2. Social, political, economic and religious programs that promote intercultural understanding should be adopted in addressing these root causes of religious fundamentalism. Festivals, cultural dance, football matches and schooling together should be encouraged among Christians and Muslims. This will create room for love and mutual understanding in the study area.
3. The people of southern Nigeria should allow their children to study other religions. Such will help to have a broad understanding of the philosophy of religion and then embrace the universality of God and brotherhood men.

Suggestions for Further Studies

The following suggestions are made for further studies:

1. Further studies can be carried out in the area of how-to scepticism can hinder religious tolerance.
2. The impact of intercultural activities festivals, football matches etc can help for religious integration in the southern Nigeria.

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