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White-collar fundamentalism: interrogating youth religiosity on Nigerian university campuses

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ABSTRACT

Home historically to a politically engaged youth sector, Nigeria has, over the past two decades, witnessed a growing incidence of religious extremism involving educated youth, especially within university campuses. For all its important ramifications, and despite the continued infusion of social and political activity in the country by religious impulse, this phenomenon has yet to receive a systematic or coherent treatment in the relevant literature. This paper aims to locate youthful angst displayed by Nigerian university students within the context of postcolonial anomie and the attendant immiseration of civil society. Youth religious extremism on Nigerian campuses reflects both young people's frustration with national processes, and their perceived alienation from modernity's 'cosmopolitan conversation'.

INTRODUCTION

I propose that the most degenerate cults or quasi-cults are the religion inspired ones, gangs that roam the campus in open daylight and assault women either for their dressing or for daring to hold hands with a boy friend, citing as authority the dictates of their religion. (Soyinka 1994)

In December 2002, the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), the umbrella body of Nigerian university academics, did something quite unusual. In apparent exasperation at the perceived sluggishness of the

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Nigerian federal authorities in regard to higher education in the country, the Union declared a week-long period of 'fasting, mourning and prayers'. According to a section of the print media, ASUU had presumably come to the conclusion that 'there is a need for God's intervention to rescue education in Nigeria from total collapse' (*The Guardian* 7.12.2002). Why would ASUU, a union of academics dedicated (at least in theory) to the defence of secularist rationality, adopt religious means in prosecuting an intellectual struggle? I suggest that ASUU's appeal to the religious imagination is best interpreted as a metaphor for the growing influence of religion on Nigerian university campuses, and the articulation and affirmation of personal identities along sectarian trajectories.

This development itself indicates dynamics within the broader Nigerian socio-political culture (Falola 1998; Ibrahim 1998; Ojo 1988), one in which state-society intercourse is famously underpinned by religious calculations, occasionally to the extent of threatening the stability and continued existence of the country. Across Africa in general, similar patterns involving the deepening influence of religion can be observed (Abbink 2005). Deborah Durham (2000: 114) argues that this is due in most part to 'the impact of globalisation and tensions between continuity and change [which] are particularly acute'.

In Nigeria, arguably the most fascinating development in the religious sphere in the last two decades has been what is generally regarded in the literature as the 'Pentecostal revolution' (Gaiya 2002). Notably, this 'revolution', which has succeeded in permanently changing the face of Christianity in Nigeria, had its roots in developments within the university campuses and other institutions of higher learning. Thus, while Ojo (1988) and Marishane (1991) acknowledge the role of American Pentecostalism in sparking the 'charismatic' movement in Nigeria in the 1970s and 1980s, Ruth Marshall (1991: 22) rightly insists that the birth of the movement cannot be fully understood without reference to the 'interdenominational student groups of the newly formed Nigerian universities'. The initial loci of this new movement were the federal universities at Ibadan and Ile-Ife, both in Western Nigeria, from where it spread to other university campuses and the larger Nigerian society. The period thus remains an important watershed in the history of evangelism, even youth participation in social processes in Nigeria.

Beginning from the early 1980s, this collective identity of the students as the most powerful youth group in the political life of Nigeria since juridical independence (Amuwo 1995: 19; Nwokoh 1997) underwent a dramatic change, leading to and reinforcing the impression that the students had ceased to be the social force that they once were. This change has not

taken place in isolation: it both keys into and foregrounds larger upheavals in the entire university system. Elements of this turmoil include the upsurge in cultism and cultist-related violence (Adekeye 2002), incessant strikes by academic and non-academic staff of the universities, and the general collapse of academic infrastructure, to name but a few. This explains the persistent allusions in the mainstream Nigerian media to 'the crisis of higher education in Nigeria', and the portrayal of the universities as 'citadels of violence' (Ogunye *et al.* 1999; Olayemi 2002). This paper is primarily concerned with the increasing crystallisation of the social space within the universities as what might be called an emergent religiosphere.

One obvious indicator of this process of intense religionisation is the increase in both religious intolerance[1] and violence on the campuses. In this respect, a certain pattern has been discernible since the crises at the Usman Dan Fodio University, Sokoto, and the University of Ibadan, both in May 1986 (Okafor 1997; Okon 1998). Such violence must be accepted as a consequence of the ever-increasing role that religion has been playing on Nigerian university campuses. Such is the situation that in the contemporary Nigerian university, the average student is more likely to 'interpret everything about life in purely religious terms' (Albert 1997). Part of the aim here is to unveil the reasons behind this clear upsurge in ecclesial fervour.

In so doing, a host of other important questions are privileged. How do religious dynamics in Nigerian universities embody and feed into the larger contestation for power between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria? Why, generally, has religion become such an important part of the university culture in Nigeria; and specifically, why has religion become such a critical factor in the life of the average Nigerian university student? Why has identity mobilisation along faith trajectories become the order of the day on the campuses? And why has the religious identity become seemingly hegemonic over other identities?

An incident at the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, in 2002 illustrates my claim about the apparent ascendancy of the religious identity on the campuses. In that year, Ms Azizat Adetokunbo Amusa, then a 300-level student in the University's Department of Management and Accounting, was involved in a long-drawn-out saga with the university over her decision to wear the Islamic *Niqab*.[2] The university objected to her decision on the grounds that her mode of dressing 'obscures identification' (Owolabi 2002). Significantly, all the Muslim students whom I interviewed at the Obafemi Awolowo University in the course of data collection for this paper backed Ms Azizat's decision, arguing that since she was acting according to the dictates of her religion, she could not

have done anything wrong. When I suggested that she may have acted in contravention of the convocation oath, they insisted that her religious obligations should *always* enjoy primacy.[3] Oyelami Abass,[4] a student of Chemical Engineering and the imam of Fajuyi Hall[5] at the time, justified the decision with the following quotation from the Quran: 'There is no obedience to the creature in disobedience to the Creator.' For its part, the Obafemi Awolowo University chapter of the Muslim Students Society defended Ms Azizat's decision by affirming that 'the use of the veil is a direct injunction of Allah who commanded in chapter 33 (Suratul Ahzab) verse 59 thus: "O prophet! Tell your wives and your daughters and the believing women to draw their veils all over their bodies"' (Owolabi 2002).

This affirmation of a primarily religious identity on Nigerian university campuses resonates with developments in other parts of the world, where a certain religious revivalism has been evident over the past two decades or so (Setran 2007). While an extensive discussion of the factors behind this awakening is beyond the immediate purview here, it is important to note, among other causes, the perceived fear among adherents of a possible failure to reproduce (their) religious culture; the sense of spiritual displacement occasioned by 'modernity'; and, possibly, the articulation of 'fundamentalism' as an ideological critique of either the nation-state or secular nationalism (Beckford 1996; Gellner 1994).

However, the 'fundamentalist' experience in Nigeria appears to buck the global trend in at least one respect. One such departure is the involvement of literate young men and women in incidents of religious violence/intolerance. It is this phenomenon that I capture in this paper as 'white-collar fundamentalism', aware of the tendency in the literature to imagine fundamentalism as the preserve of the unlettered 'underclass'.[6] I am equally mindful of the ambivalent (and often pejorative) understandings that the term 'fundamentalism'[7] has generated, and thus define it simply as combative defence of the literal truth of a (religious) text.[8] I argue that fundamentalism, thus understood, does not necessarily have to involve direct physical violence, and that it may actually be a means of looking backward to find resources for dealing with the troubling changes in the present.

This leads to the final reason why I believe this investigation is essential. Of late, an emergent body of knowledge has focused on the menace of what is loosely articulated as the fundamentalist threat to 'modernity' (Armstrong 2001; Bruce 2000; Gauchet 1997; Kepel 1994; Marty & Appleby 1993). What this vast and often contradictory scholarship underscores is the need for more empirical work to validate or debunk

some of the 'wisdoms' generally taken for granted. This task has become imperative especially in the light of differing explanations in the same literature for the sudden global explosion of religious movements and the mysterious tenacity of what the French intellectual, Bernard-Henri Levy (2003), captures as 'the will to purity'. This paper takes up this challenge by focusing critical attention on the specific processes involved in the increased affirmation of religious identity in Nigerian universities and higher institutions.

Kepel (1994: 11) has suggested, rightly I think, that religious fundamentalism has 'a singular capacity to reveal the ills of society'. By exploring the factors accounting for 'white-collar fundamentalism' on Nigerian campuses, I illuminate the interface of religion and politics in Nigeria, showing how, within the context of the declining power of the state to provide social services and guarantees, religious identity weighs in to provide moral and material refuge.

The paper is divided into five sections. In the next section, I provide evidence of deepening religiosity on the campuses, focusing specifically, though not exclusively, on the two institutions where data collection for the study was undertaken. This is followed by an appraisal of the theoretical literature on youth and fundamentalism in the context of modernity. In this section, I underscore the paradox of how the forces of modernity are accentuating, rather than depleting, religious sensibilities. I also show how fundamentalism is enclosed within the very process of modernity, as opposed to being outside it. The fourth section advances the analysis by locating the patterns observed in Nigeria within a global canvas, making a case for seeing youth religiosity in Nigeria in the context of an emergent and rapidly transforming youth identity. The paper concludes by considering the implications of youth religious extremism, and the assumption of a primarily religious identity, for the constitution of a secular public sphere in Nigeria.

THE EMERGENT RELIGIOSPHERE: ORGANISATION AND PRACTICES

Data collection for this study was carried out between February and May 2003 at the Obafemi Awolowo University (formerly University of Ife), Ile-Ife, and Nigeria's premier university, the University of Ibadan. I have already noted that in the 1970s, both were 'hotbeds of Pentecostalism' (Gaiya 2002: 4) and have continued to feature prominently in the unfolding dynamic of religious revivalism on Nigerian university campuses. This history, coupled with ease of access, determined my choice of research sites.

On entering either the Obafemi Awolowo University or the University of Ibadan, a first-time visitor is invariably struck by *the essentially contested nature of the campuses themselves as religious spaces*. This is evident from the religious bills and posters which adorn strategic locations on both campuses. The messages on the posters give sufficient indication of a three-layered war between the Christians and Muslims (i) for supremacy; (ii) for converts (converts from the other religion being especially prized);[9] and (iii) for the general self-imposed mission to, as one Christian adherent put it, 'depopulate Hell'. Examples of such messages at the University of Ibadan are: 'Accept Islam and be Saved', 'Islam: the Only Way to Paradise', 'I love being a Muslim. There is no other *god* except ALLAH', and 'Only Jesus can Save'. At the Obafemi Awolowo University, adherents of the Islamic faith also warn the 'other' to 'Die not except as a Muslim', while the Christians confidently assert that 'Great Ife [the university] is for Christ'.

The broad polarisation of Nigerian universities into what Ruth Marshall (1991: 22), in a related analysis, calls the 'Communities of the Saved' is one of the major developments in both the spheres of religion and tertiary education over the past two decades, and helps direct the critical gaze to the corridor connecting the two. In at least one significant respect, this represents a form of closure. In the two decades following the role of the campuses in the making of 'the Pentecostal revolution' in Nigeria in the mid-1970s, the universities continued to shape and be shaped by the dynamics of religion in the larger Nigerian polity. Such, for instance, was the ferocity of the crisis which began at the College of Education, Kafanchan, about 300 kilometres from Kaduna, and which later spread to Kaduna, Zaria, Funtua and Kano in March 1986, that the then President Ibrahim Babangida described it as 'the civilian equivalent of an attempted *coup d'etat* against the Federal Military Government and the nation' (Udoidem 1997: 174). Gaiya (2002: 4) has already noted how the same ferment of the 1970s culminated in the formation, to cite one major example, of the Deeper Life Christian Ministry.

The story of the creeping spiritualisation of the public consciousness in Nigeria[10] cannot be deemed complete without a proper analysis of the way in which the world of the campus and the outside world (the town and gown) have interacted in the production of new and often virulent religious forms. The closure that I adumbrated above can be apprehended thus: if the campuses have been implicated in the altogether 'positive' efflorescence of the spirit of piety in the country, they have also been a crucial factor in the ascendance of the 'will to purity'. One would be right to imagine that one is the logical outcome of the other.

Right from the moment the fresh intake steps on the soil of the university, s/he becomes a target of the two competing 'communities of the saved'. S/he is courted at every opportunity and receives invitations to numerous fellowships and other religious functions. What these communities offer is both material and spiritual security, commodities (particularly the former) that the fresher soon requires in abundance. One of the indices of the crisis of higher education in Nigeria has been the decline of physical infrastructure. As indicated earlier, and to choose just one example, this has had repercussions for student accommodation. At the Obafemi Awolowo University, a room designed to accommodate two students in the 1960s is now shared, officially, by eight, a number that does not include the additional average of another six to eight illegal 'squatters'.

One major challenge that a new entrant into the university faces is that of where to lay his/her head. The various religious organisations usually come in at this point, offering accommodation where possible (usually the rare opportunity to squat with a more knowledgeable 'stale' student), or at least some moral sympathy where actual accommodation is not possible. By providing some form of social relief and safety net in a situation which actual institutional (university) alternatives have all but disappeared, religious organisations manage to make themselves relevant to the existential anxieties of the new student. Indeed, in the face of the decline of other forms and avenues of sociability, campus religious fellowships have emerged as crucial spaces for socialising.[11]

This also has to be understood within the larger context of the prevailing economic regime in Nigeria. The 'abject poverty of the majority' that Onyeonoru (2000: 129) refers to is without doubt one of the enduring consequences of recent military rule in Nigeria. The Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) introduced by the Babangida junta in 1986 after a 15-month 'economic emergency' period left a profound imprint on civil society. According to Olukoshi (1993: 66–7):

> In the context of an almost ten-fold decline in real incomes between 1986 and 1990, many Nigerians have found that they simply cannot afford basic consumer goods and even certain categories of food items which were taken for granted by most households.

SAP also had serious consequences for public education in Nigeria, at least in three significant respects. First, through the contraction of public expenditure on social security and services, state funding on education in real terms has shrunk considerably. Second, in conceiving education more as a private good, it constitutes one of the areas where the principle of the market is to be applied through the liberalisation and commercialisation of

the sector. Third, other SAP policy measures, including currency devaluation and interest rates deregulation with their adverse effects on the rate of inflation in the country, have had negative consequences for the welfare of both staff and students in the educational institutions, and also for the provision of infrastructure and learning materials and equipment in schools, which usually have a high import content (Adejumobi 2000: 212).

The foregoing conveys a sense of the socio-economic environment in which 'the changing identities from unionism to cultism' (*ibid.*: 230), and now religiosity, have taken place. The combination of structural distortions in the larger society and the growing pauperisation of the university students meant that the campus community became particularly suggestible to intimations of empyrean rectification. Onyeonoru (2000: 129) notes: 'the almost two decades of economic, political and moral crises witnessed in Nigeria from the 1980s produced a social environment typified by anomie, and this had significant impact on social order and normative behaviour in Nigerian tertiary institutions'.

Within this context, part of the vacuum that these religious associations have filled, apart from the all too familiar existential perturbations, is the former network of measures that used to provide a soft landing to the deprived student.[12] Thus, to cite just one example, institutional decay on the campuses translates at a very basic level into the discontinuation of bursary and scholarship schemes from which needy students could and used to benefit. The emergent religious forms have thus built an alternative socio-spiritual community, one that demands complete loyalty, from the debris of a failed institutional arrangement.

That this alternate community recognises and treats its members as being *different* (something akin to a 'subsidiary academic citizenship') is observable in several areas. For instance, Omoluabi (1999: 82) has listed six characteristics according to which various Christian and Muslim denominations on the campuses tend to separate themselves from the 'Other'. These include:

a. strong belief in God through a specific saviour;
b. a specific mode of religious worship;
c. a peculiar mode of dressing;
d. a prudish code of moral ethics;
e. a holier-than-thou attitude towards people of other dominations; and
f. discriminatory interpersonal relationships.

Because of their rigid adherence to these characteristics, it is not difficult to identify students who subscribe to this austere model. The average

'purist' also considers as his/her primary duty the conversion (through aggressive evangelisation) of the non-believer. It is not unusual for lectures to be prefaced by a brief exhortation (Conversion Time) by an adherent so inspired on the perils of sin and the comparative merits of living a holy life. At such moments, listeners are passionately reminded of the temporality of life and the vanity of this world, and the consequent need for fellow students to put their salvation *before* everything else, including their academic studies.[13]

This accent on the primacy of salvation is not an accident, but is actually consistent with their view of *this* world, which is leading towards another in which one's academic qualifications will be of little or no significance. However, this emphasis on the *next* world of the immaterial, it would appear, has not completely blinded the adherents to the realities of the material present. For example, at the Obafemi Awolowo University some religious associations also have business interests. Most favoured are apparently innocuous businesses such as photographic studios, restaurants and outlets that sell literature, tapes and other religious items. Profits from such concerns are usually ploughed back into the work of evangelism, which is the ultimate aim.

This raises the issue of how emergent religious organisations are organised. For one, it seems that the campus associations, on the average, are better organised than their regular counterparts outside. This seems to apply especially to the Christian groups. One of my interviewees, an academic who also pastors a church, expressed amazement that some student groups like the Evangelical Christian Union (ECU) have congregations which are larger than those that churches outside can boast of. Because of the size of these congregations, the appointment of a full-time pastor among the students would seem virtually automatic.

Such pastors[14] are so regarded by the 'laity', and because of the burden of responsibility on them, seem to embody more sharply the contradiction between the *student* and the *faithful* mentioned earlier. Such, in fact, is the usual workload that some are known to totally devote themselves to their 'spiritual calling', to the obvious detriment of their academic work. The pastor is assisted by a team of lieutenants and a string of committees on various life themes. One of my interviewees noted with a heavy tinge of irony that there is even a Committee for Marriage Counselling, peopled not surprisingly by those who may never have tasted the joys (let alone the rigours) of the institution.[15]

Although it was difficult to ascertain, there is a widespread belief that these religious groups have linkages with external organisations, both within and outside the country. This seems to be the case even though

most of those I spoke with denied the existence of any such linkage in the strongest possible terms. However, previous studies (Akinrinade 2000 is a good example) have demonstrated the existence of such links, especially with foreign bodies (Gaiya 2002; van Dijk 2000).[16]

In general, however, the relationship between campus organisations and such external institutions is symbiotic. While the campus organisations rely on them for much needed fiscal and other support, these institutions also use the campuses as recruitment grounds.[17] A source disclosed to me that a substantial number of young people usually seen at (mostly Christian) religious revivals and related functions across the country is made up of student adherents who are usually mobilised from their campuses through relevant local bodies. The scale and efficacy of such networks should not be underestimated. At Ife and Ibadan, for example, every academic department also boasts a corresponding religious (Christian) fellowship. Thus, for instance, the History Christian Students' Association, International Relations Christian Students' Association, a.k.a. Diplomats for Christ, Religious Studies Christian Students' Association, and so on. While their Muslim counterparts may not have similar organisations at this level, they are nevertheless known to be always on the alert to protect the interests of fellow Muslims.

In any case, no self-respecting Christian ministry operates these days without the necessary campus aspect. Examples of such churches with active campus branches are the Deeper Life Bible Church, Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries, the Redeemed Church of God, Rhema Chapel Winners' Chapel and Christ Embassy. Generally, membership of one or another religious denomination entails a fierce (physical and spiritual) territoriality. This, presumably, is one of the reasons behind the increasing incidence of religious violence on the campuses. What is clearly evident is that each of the two dominant religions perceives itself as being involved with the other in a never-ending struggle for physical space and political resources on campus. Each sees the campus itself as a social space to be conquered and brought under its spiritual superintendence. The following excerpt from a report published by *Hotline* magazine in the wake of the June 1988 crisis at the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, provides a cameo of the situation in contemporary Nigerian university campuses. According to the report:

> The entire university community [in this case the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria], not just the students are divided along lines of religion. Religious divisions are now so hardened, as a result of this latest of many religious disturbances, that very few conversations can be held, few academic debates can be conducted, few appointments and promotions can be made without the issue of religion being

brought up or cited as the reason why certain actions are being taken, or certain decisions made. Even in the recent appointments of Deputy Vice Chancellors, it is clear that while both men are imminently (*sic*) qualified, one had to be a Christian and the other had to be a Muslim. (Abubakar 1988: 10)

This seems to explain the venom that usually surrounds student union elections in university campuses across the country. Because such elections are perceived as undeclared contests for (secular and spiritual) supremacy between the Christian and Muslim groups, mobilisation for them also tends to take place along those lines. As such, over the past two decades, religious considerations have become an integral part, not only of the sociology of university students' elections, but also of student politics in general. During the election campaigns that culminated in the 1988 ABU crisis, for example, the Christians reportedly showed their support for Stephen Awobi, their candidate (his slogan was 'A vote for Steve is a vote for Christ') by mobilising and freely using church drums, trumpets and flutes (*Hotline* 27.6–10.7.1988).

There are numerous other examples of hostilities arising directly from the transmutation of the campuses into a religiosphere, and their bifurcation along Christian/Muslim lines. Such is the seriousness of the situation that the same pattern is now being reproduced in other institutions of higher learning. For example, in October 2002, and despite a prior agreement between the Muslim Students Society and the Christian Students Union on a rotatory principle for the sharing of elective offices, the students' union election at the Federal College of Education, Zaria, boiled over into a conflict which reportedly claimed 25 lives (Abiola 2002; *The Guardian* 1.10.2002). Trouble was reportedly sparked off when Inuwa D. Bawa, the incumbent Muslim president, decided to re-contest, in contravention of a prior gentleman's agreement, a situation which apparently did not go down well with the Christians (*ibid.*). Similar deadly clashes over space and resources have been reported at the Hassan Usman Katsina Unity College, Bauchi (Michael 2003); the Federal Government College, Kano; the Federal Polytechnic, Kaduna (*Daily Times* 14.6.1996; *The Guardian* 19.6.1996); the University of Abuja; the University of Jos; and the Ahmadu Bello University (*The Guardian* 1.10.2002).

As a result, no student union election these days is merely that, and there is every reason to expect that these linkages between campus religious organisations and bodies both within and outside the country will continue to grow. In any case, organisations have a vested interest in developing and servicing such links for a variety of reasons. For groups in the country, such would definitely include calculations that are linked to the larger Muslim/Christian struggle for hegemony in Nigeria. Examples

of such vested interests in the country are politicians, political parties, university alumni organised on the basis of faith,[18] the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), and the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (SCIA), which may have (rightly or wrongly) calculated that the campuses constitute part of the turf to be protected from the incursions of a rival religion, and that developments on the campuses would logically have a spill-over effect on the larger society. Again, the *Hotline* report in respect of the ABU crisis is apposite:

> ABU has long been a testing ground for domestic political issues. In the past, national issues featured strongly in the campaign rhetoric and sloganeering of student union elections. A decisive victory for candidates identified with or representing certain issues would provide a psychological lift or even begin a 'snowballing effect' for similar movements in the larger society. This is why political parties in the last civilian political order invested so much money into ABU student union elections. It was money well spent if their candidates emerged victorious. It seems that in this last exercise of student politics, contending religious interest groups have rushed in to fill the vacuum left by the proscribed political parties. (Abubakar 1988: 9)

These external interests are believed to provide both material and financial support (as noted earlier, although this is hotly denied by the religious groups that I spoke to), and it is hardly surprising that candidates for campus elections these days boast of decent campaign war chests. Okon (1998: 63) has suggested that general unrest in the universities may be crucial to 'understanding the problems associated with governmental politics in Nigeria'. I should like to note the obverse: that an examination of larger processes within the Nigerian social space can greatly illuminate developments on the campuses. Using this dialectical imagination as a framework, one is able to escape a 'monolithic diagnosis' (Onyeonoru 2000: 127) of developments on the campuses, and locate them within broader national and transnational contexts. In the following section, I undertake this appraisal within the frame of the global literature on youth, modernity and religious fundamentalism.

YOUTH, MODERNITY AND FUNDAMENTALISM

> Religion has not faded away with modernity, it has not disappeared with the triumph of science and rationalism. On the contrary, the religious sphere has expanded, fuelled largely by global secular processes such as urbanisation, migration, transnational capital and the mass media. *Religion today is a product of modernity as a well as a response to it.* (Ibrahim 2001: 185–6, emphasis added)

The persistence of what might be called the metaphysical ethic is one of the profoundest ironies of modern times. It seems to challenge Weber, whose 'de-magification' thesis, propounded at the dawn of the twentieth century, had confidently forecast the relegation of religious activity 'into a subsection of society' (Kim 2000). In recent times, Weberian 'de-magification' has been re-echoed by those who, to paraphrase Hadden (1987), hope that in due course, the sacred will disappear altogether except, possibly, in the private realm. These speculations have provided the building blocks for what has been described in the literature as the 'secularisation thesis', one whose basic principle is the diminution of the influence of religion, especially in industrial and industrialising societies.

Contrary to this one-track dynamic, however, we observe a global pattern in which the process of spiritualisation is folded into the secularisation dynamic, being simultaneously advanced and pushed back by it. As a result, while 'the religious sphere has expanded, fuelled largely by global secular processes' (Ibrahim 2001: 186), at the same time, 'the forces of modernity – migration and urbanisation, the development of the print and electronic media, higher literacy and educational standards – have lead (*sic*) to the rapid development of religious movements rather than their decline' (*ibid.*: 187).

What explains this paradox? For many scholars, the mass embrace of religion represents a last ditch response to the existential angst and social disarticulation that have become axiomatic of societies in the 'developing' world, of which the Nigerian formation is a good example. The materiality of what Deborah Durham (2000: 114) refers to as 'disenchanted states' and 'decayed institutions' in Africa can hardly be denied, and Ibrahim (2001: 186–7, emphasis added) has cast a useful light on the situation thus:

> The conditions created by urbanisation and social transformation have created ideal conditions for the proliferation of informal as well as formal religious activities and actors … *Religious actors are social agents that provide meaning for the new and difficult conditions in the squatter towns, new forms of bonding and differentiation have to be created, new social networks to provide comfort and emergency relief to those in distress are needed, new lucrative spheres for accumulation* … Over and above all these profane needs, religion also provides salvation for the soul, by many considered the most vital of needs in the post-modern age.

There is no gainsaying that young people in the developing world not only constitute a majority of the victims of these dynamics, but are also to be found at the hub of the modes of existence (active and reactive) generated by them. This paper suggests that the recourse to religion *and* religious fundamentalism is ultimately an example of part of this process of

reaction, and understanding the meaning of modernity (late or early) should help clarify what exactly fundamentalism is a *reaction* to.

Although 'modernity' has failed to lend itself to a monolithic understanding, two broad understandings are possible – modernity as the confounding *psychosocial* experience of humanity; and as the culmination of a *historical* process that dates back to the dawn of the Enlightenment and the successful assertion of the claims of rationality over blind faith.[19] Here, my understanding is closest to Giddens' (1991: 14) model of modernity as 'a post-traditional order, in which the question, "How shall I live?" has to be answered in day-to-day decisions about how to behave, what to wear and what to eat – and many other things – as well as interpreted within the temporal unfolding of self-identity'. It is within this understanding, I argue, that a sense of the recourse to religious extremism can be made. I am also convinced that this understanding of modernity helps us to see religious fundamentalism (as exemplified in the Nigerian situation), as a *part of* the modern order itself.

Yet, to argue that fundamentalism is enclosed in the very process of modernity is not to suggest that it espouses the same moral or political projects, and it may be necessary here to quickly note some important tensions. For example, while 'modernity requires an abandonment of metaphysics' (Amin 1989: 133), 'fundamentalism feeds on the (medieval) metaphysical vision' (*ibid.*: 131). Again, while fundamentalism seems to valorise the past and received wisdom (the backward-looking myth of a golden age, preceding what is described as the 'great deviation'), the basic principle of modernity is anchored in the unrelenting interrogation of the past and present, with the only thing that is sacralised being the very procedure of interrogation itself. As Giddens (1991: 21) notes:

> the reflexivity of modernity actually undermines the certainty of knowledge, even in the core domains of natural science. Science depends, not on the inductive accumulation of proofs, but on the methodological principle of doubt. No matter how cherished, and apparently well established, a given scientific tenet might be, it is open to revision – or might have to be discarded altogether – in the light of new ideas or findings.

Fundamentalist thinking, on the contrary, 'is marked by a profound sense of crisis. The cause of the crisis is society's desertion of eternally valid, divinely revealed, and textually literal received principles of order, which had once been realised in an ideal community – the "Golden Age" of original Christian, Islamic, or other communities.' Thus, 'overcoming the crisis is possible only by a return to these divine statutory prescriptions' (Riesebrodt 1993: 16).

Religious fundamentalism thus imbricates in modernity in several fascinating ways. While on the one hand it emerges as a critique, even rejection, of modernity's perceived a-moralities, extremism is at the same time inextricably bound up with the process that it so fervently denounces. What I articulate as white-collar fundamentalism on Nigerian university campuses encapsulates this paradox.

WHITE-COLLAR FUNDAMENTALISM IN NIGERIA: TOWARDS A SOCIOLOGY OF YOUTH IDENTITY

A major problem in the scholastic discourse of fundamentalism is the relative poverty of what might be called a comparative sociology of the subject. Part of the reason for this situation, I argue, is the mistaken attribution of fundamentalist psychology to 'other' cultures. Over the past two or three decades, developments in different parts of the globe have made a rethink imperative. Studying and 'observing fundamentalisms' (Marty & Appleby 1993), as the first instalment in the Chicago fundamentalisms project instructively conveys, thus became necessary, the project itself being undertaken, according to Heim (2002: 1), 'to redress past scholarly indifference and/or flippancy'.

Recent global developments appear to have validated the need for greater scholarly inquiry. For example, following the attack on America on 11 September 2001 (an event which seems to illustrate perfectly the mutual co-existence of secular nationalism and religious fundamentalism), greater attention is being paid to the involvement of well-educated, urban-based youth in the fundamentalist movement.[20]

In a sense, then, this paper may be seen as an illustration of this growing interest, although my primary concern is to dock the ship of global theory in a concrete empirical harbour, in this case Nigerian university campuses. Studying what I call 'white-collar fundamentalism' in Nigeria also seems a useful way to analyse contemporary Nigerian universities on the one hand, and the larger socio-political habitat into which they are embedded, on the other.

Obviously, the first point in this regard is the way in which religious fundamentalism on Nigerian campuses illuminates larger social, economic and political processes in the country, thus confirming Kepel's (1994: 11) observation that 'religious fundamentalism has a singular capacity to reveal the ills of society'. According to him, fundamentalists are 'true children of our time: unwanted children, perhaps, bastards of computerization and unemployment or of the population explosion and increasing literacy…' (*ibid.*).

Therefore, what they 'say and do is meaningful, and does not spring from a dethronement of reason or from manipulation by hidden forces; rather it is the undeniable evidence of a deep malaise in society that can no longer be interpreted in terms of our traditional categories of thought' (*ibid.*: 11). My analysis of the phenomenon of white-collar fundamentalism on Nigerian campuses appears to validate this statement. The limited data on religiosity on Nigerian university campuses helps to draw a tentative sociological portrait of the Nigerian university undergraduate. In this context, religion and its literalist defence by an increasing number of students emerges in sharp relief amid the evident civic denudation and dearth of social trajectories of personal fulfilment. Life *outside* the university (and more important life *after* it) is thus a critical factor in understanding the depth and extent of the religious mentality on the campuses.

Giddens has advanced the view that fundamentalism might have resulted from a deliberate opting out (by fundamentalists) of Richard Rorty's 'cosmopolitan conversation of mankind'. My study qualifies this wisdom by positing, drawing on data from the Nigerian context, that student fundamentalism actually constitutes a protest at a more primal, structural *alienation* from the same conversation, rather than a refusal to *engage* in one. In contemporary Nigeria, social policy has been generally youth-blind, and the (university) student specifically is merely an 'unruly subject' (Boren 2001), held at arm's length by officialdom. There are too many examples of this situation to warrant any amplification here.

Part of the evidence for this alienation can be seen in the ambivalent attitude towards the label 'fundamentalist' itself. At the outset of this research, I was under the impression that, following in the tradition of similar signifiers usually deployed to 'denigrate' the 'other', the word 'fundamentalist' was likely to be rejected by whatever groups it might be used to describe. I was partly encouraged in this conviction by my knowledge of the historical trajectory of the concept, from the favoured nomenclature that early twentieth-century American Christians used to *set apart* themselves, to the modern incarnation with which many in the West have sought to *particularise* adherents of other (non-Christian) religions, especially the Islamic faith.

It was therefore something of a shock to discover that religious fundamentalism is actually regarded in most circles (both Christian and Muslim) as something 'positive', a disposition that recalls the manner in which the first American fundamentalists wore the badge with evident pride. For the self-confessed fundamentalist, to be thus called is proudly taken as a recognition that someone has stuck rigidly to the fundamental tenets of their faith. Conversely, it is taken as an indication of a flexible and

compromised (if not diluted) practice of the faith when an adherent is thought not to be a 'fundamentalist'. Within this equation, what every 'serious' adherent actually works towards (and hopes for) is to be regarded as being fundamentalist. This is a useful framework for explaining incidents such as the *Niqab* controversy referred to earlier.

Much as it plugs into larger social processes in other parts of the world, the increased assertion of religious identity on the campuses also provides a vista for understanding the major transitions in the undergraduate lifeworld across time. Thus, deepening religiosity itself becomes a phase in the social life of the student, one with which s/he seeks personal security in the interfaces of individual uncertainty and social anomie. Thus, while fundamentalism may be, as Albert (1997) argues, a platform for venting anger against social and political injustices, it is also a means of negotiating individual safe havens amid the galloping amoral inflation of the times. That being the case, white-collar fundamentalism in Nigeria is, primarily, an *effect*, rather than a *cause*.

Among other things, the foregoing also reveals the complex attitude of Nigerian youth extremists towards what is defined as 'the modern'. While, on the one hand, they may see the modern world of sin (whether the country or the whole world, as the case may be) as fit only for abolition, they nevertheless seek to transform it in line with (admittedly) narrowly conceived 'traditional' precepts.

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Its contested meanings notwithstanding, modernity is generally agreed to have resulted broadly in the 'demise of old certainties' and the 'contingency of meaning'. In Africa, the global consequences of modernity have been sharpened by what Haynes (1994: 16) describes as 'the decreasing capacity of the state to satisfy even minimally the political and economic aspirations of its constituent publics'. Youth and (especially) students form a major part of this unattended public.

Implicated in the historical struggle to liberalise the public space in Nigeria through focused activism, university students in Nigeria have, especially since the turn of the 1980s, become enmeshed in the steady institutional decline of which Nigerian universities are only a part. Several studies have identified and analysed the most critical of these problems, ranging from staff demoralisation, to persistent strikes, infrastructural collapse, students' unrest and cultism (Amuwo 1999; Obadare 1997). These problems are interwoven and in many cases mirror the ills of the Nigerian socio-political environment. Indeed, the menace

of cultism which has plagued the universities from the mid-1980s has been blamed, in part, on the militarisation of the Nigerian public sphere.

The line of enquiry pursued here is therefore an aspect of a multifaceted reality. While religion has always been an important factor in the social life of Nigerian university campuses, white-collar fundamentalism signals the emergence of a trend with potentially serious consequences for both academic culture and Nigerian society.

Yet, as I have argued, it is more usefully seen as an effect rather than a cause. As an emergent phenomenon, its roots are to be found in the conjuncture of global and local circumstances whose futures are difficult to map. The least that can be said at this point is that fundamentalism and the transmutation of the campus space into a religious sphere are processes that cannot be understood using the specific lenses of religion alone. As trends in other parts of the world have shown, they are merely part of the attempt on the part of young people to 'reassert control over life … in direct response to uncontrollable processes of globalisation that are increasingly sensed in the economy and the media' (Castells 1996: 25). Religion is therefore one means, among several, by which students and young people in general are trying to come to terms with these modern uncontrollable processes (*ibid.*).

Yet the relationship between young people and the perceived forces of modernity is profoundly dialectical. The 'threat' and the 'response' have become entwined, and Parekh (1994: 117) rightly observes that 'fundamentalism is suffused with the spirit of modernity … It accepts the modern state and the ideology of nationalism. It accepts and exploits to the full the scientific, technological, organizational and moral resources of the modern age.'

Of course this is not without its own dangers. In the first instance, fundamentalism obstructs the forging of, and endangers, a truly independent public sphere of critical deliberation constituted by equal citizens (Goldfarb 1998). Second, fundamentalist groups attempt to contract the very space that civil society is, at least in principle, dedicated to opening up, thus creating social tension and undermining the secularist foundation on which an enduring democracy can be anchored.

A third danger is the implication for citizenship and nation building. As Tibi (1998) has noted, the Habermasian principle of subjectivity is anathema to fundamentalists, who privilege the identity apparently conferred by the *Umma* over that conferred by the nation-state. The emerging pattern from Nigerian university campuses seems to confirm the reality of this danger.

NOTES

1. My understanding of intolerance here takes after Ilesanmi (1997), who distinguished between 'vertical intolerance' (rifts among sects of the same faith) and 'horizontal intolerance' (conflict between faiths).

2. This is the face veil covering the lower part of the face (up to the eyes).

3. Some did add however that while her decision was correct, it was by no means compulsory.

4. Personal interview, May 2003.

5. A male undergraduate hostel at the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife.

6. The characterisation of fundamentalism as what Riesebrodt describes as 'an antimodernist movement of uneducated yokels' is one important moment in the evolution of fundamentalist thought. For more on this see Riesebrodt 1993, and also Jansen 1997, Laqueur 2002.

7. One danger arising from the contemporary dominant and frenzied use of fundamentalism as a terminology of Othering is the tendency to overlook the fact that in the beginning the word did not have its present pejorative connotation. Fundamentalism was coined in 1920 by Curtis Lee Laws, the editor of a Baptist periodical called the *Watchman-Examiner* (see Riesebrodt 1993: 10).

8. Giddens (1998: 130) says it is 'the use of ritual truth to deny dialogue actively and therefore isn't limited to the area of religion'.

9. The crisis at the College of Education, Kafanchan, in March 1987 was partly provoked by the 'testimony' of Bello Abubakar, a convert from Islam to Christianity. See Udoidem 1997: 174.

10. Akin Adesokan's (2003) wry remark that 'today, most Nigerians live inside a church or in a spiritualist's home' may be a deliberate exaggeration, but calls attention to the seriousness of the situation.

11. Crucially, both universities (at Ile-Ife and Ibadan) are located in 'cities' with very few avenues for relaxation, meaning that for each of them, the campus is the soul of the city. I wish to thank the journal's anonymous reviewer for this important reminder.

12. Religious associations are not alone in this. Studies of cultism and cult-related organisations on the campuses have arrived at the same conclusion. See, for example, Ogunbameru 1998 and Omoluabi 1999. The latter (p. 79) has argued that the same factors such as inadequate physical facilities and the concentration of a large population of people in one location orientate actors independently towards religious fanaticism or cultism.

13. Those who may be afraid of failing their examinations are regularly stabilised with testimonies of those who have prayed and passed with minimum endeavour. In any case, it is usually added, there is no assurance of success in an examination without the all-important otherworldly backing.

14. The Muslim equivalent is the imam who similarly bears a heavy responsibility towards the faithful.

15. Personal interview May 2003.

16. According to Akinrinade (2000: 64), Mallam Ibrahim Yahaya El-Zakyzaky, formerly a student at the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, once received revolutionary training in Iran.

17. Gaiya (2002: 4) has also shown how the revivalist ferment on the campuses in the 1970s was aided by the students' acquaintance with 'charismatic literature from Europe and America as (*sic*) the works of Kenneth Hagin, Oral Roberts, Robert Tilton, Kenneth Copeland' and others.

18. For example, the Muslim Graduates Association.

19. For a further critique of this understanding see Habermas 1983.

20. Most of the youth who flew the deadly sorties that brought down the Twin Towers were educated in American tertiary institutions.

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