
**SENSIBILITY AND IMPLICATIONS OF ACADEMIC
FREEDOM AGAINST OFFENSIVE RELIGIOUS
OPPOSITIONS: THE OPINIONS OF ACADEMICS AND
STUDENTS IN SELECTED NORTH-CENTRAL
UNIVERSITIES**

Samuel Agbonna **AYORINDE** & Charles Chibuzor **NNAJIETO**
Department of Educational Foundations and Administration
Alvan-Ikoku Federal University of Education, Owerri

Abstract

The study surveyed opinions of public university staff and students on whether it is sensible and implicative to insist on academic freedom against offensive religious resistance in Nigerian universities. Respondents were drawn across two randomly selected North Central states. Four universities were purposively selected from the two states. Two of which were private, owned by religious bodies (Christian and Islamic bodies). Across the universities, 555 respondents were sampled using purposive sampling technique. This consisted of academics 195 and undergraduates 360 Catholics, Muslims, Jehovah Witnesses and Protestants were represented in the two categories of samples. A researcher-made questionnaire titled Academic Freedom against Religious Beliefs Questionnaire (AFRBQ) was used for data collection. The AFARB was face-validated and tested, using tests-re-test method, to have 0.72 reliability coefficient. Collected data were analyzed using percentages. Findings revealed high percentages of academics (85.5% of Muslim; 71% of

Orthodox and 69.8% of Protestants) and students (76.9% of Muslim; 66.9% of Orthodox and 85.8% of Protestants) who believed that insisting on academic freedom against offensive religious beliefs is senseless. Also, 75.4% of respondents believed such insistence could lead to violence. Another 76.2% believed it could cause job loss among academics and 72.2% of respondents believed it could result in strike. Other consequences identified by respondents included: academic disorientation, 61.2%; disrupted school calendar, 61.6%; and lowered academic dignity, 62.1%. Only 39.2% and 27.7% of respondents believed it could lead to faulty curriculum and adjudication respectively. To manage the crisis between academic freedom and religion resistance in Nigerian universities, 69.9% of respondents suggested the need to establish universities mainly on religion affiliations. Another 57.6% suggested that there should be inter-religious reorientation for staff and students. Based on these findings, it was concluded that academic freedom and offensive academic belief or resistance should be sensibly managed to avert negative implications for Nigerian universities.

Keywords: Academic, Freedom, Religion, Resistance, Implication, Sensibility.

Introduction

Religion is an integral part of human life. Just like culture, religion manifests in human's physical, mental and value orientations, associations, and social responses. Religion is a socio-cultural aspect of society that is potent and capable of triggering human collective response. Most of the time, the responses could be spontaneous and unyielding like a religiously build-up resistance to academic freedom (Sulaimon, 2016; Hamsat & Freeman, 2020). Plato, a philosopher, describes religion as opium that can be very toxic so much as to becloud human reasoning capacity. Mostly in Africa, religion beliefs and practices are not taken for granted (Opoku, 2009; Cavanaugh, 2009). Africans are known to uphold religious doctrines tenaciously.

They tend to reference or idealize their beliefs in symbols, objects, persons and places. Characteristically, African symbols of religions are supernatural beings whose doctrine must be upheld with all temporal and physical might (Jujio, 2020, Opoku, 2009). There are three major religions in Nigeria. These are: Islam, Christianity and tradition (Animism and Atheism). At mosque, church and shrines, believers practice and sectionalize in lines with strict doctrines that are age long and metaphysical. In adherence to their faiths, they map in members and map out (ostracize) non-members. Unfortunately, rivalry and extremism often result from the mapping. The act of extremism can transcend, destructively, to other sectors of society.

Past researchers have identified education as one of the sectors that often bear the brunt of violently held religious beliefs (Yakub & Rothfuss, 2012; Gruber & Shalem, 2014; Conlon & Sgueglia, 2015). Certainly, believers' extreme views of their religions can make policies and practices in education difficult. However, to manage such extremism, societies tend to establish mechanisms that are aimed at achieving religious tolerance. One such mechanism is the establishment of educational institutions. What makes educational institutions a good example here is the fact that schools, irrespective of levels, appoint, employ, admit and train with minimal reference to religion and cultural differences. In modern societies, educational institutions, particularly universities, have dual goals of developing society and people. Around the world, universities are established for the purpose of improving knowledge and skills that can boost civil co-existence among diverse human populations. Irrespective of the category of school, people are specifically expected to enroll and complete structured bodies of knowledge that can make them become useful, tolerant and peaceful in society; so tolerant to be ready to understand, appreciate and relate within socio-cultural differences that are peculiar to their and other societies.

Religion differences easily become obvious through sects; just as offensive resistance occurs in humans' desire to prioritize the doctrine of their own sects above those of others. There are Muslims who are Shias or Shiites and Christians who are Jehovah Witness, Protestants, Catholics or Orthodox. The Muslim Shia may

tenaciously oppose Shiites' doctrine even when they are both Muslims. Similarly, the Jehovah Witness may see Catholics as fallen standard of Christian practices just as the protestant Christians may not agree with the orthodox doctrine. Certainly, the fact that Nigerians only identify with Islam and Christianity does not mean that there are no varieties of faiths and doctrines (Faruq & Hassan, 2022).

Most time, it is the religious peculiarities that are subjects of contention in situations of clash between academic freedom and religious beliefs. Of course, each religion has its own peculiarities that must be respected. For example, Muslims (academics or students) often tenaciously maintain that there are only oral depictions of Prophet Muhammad. Muslims will never allow pictorial depiction of the Prophet; it is a serious religious abomination to do that in Islam. Anywhere in the world, Muslims forbid and fight this (Asani, 1995; Ernst, 2004; Sulaimon, 2014). Muslims are also known to value wearing of 'Hijab' (an Islamic headscarf). Sometimes, wearing it may be legal, even in school. There is a Supreme Court verdict (Judgment 8c.910/2016) delivered on 17th of June 2022 that allowed wearing Hijab in secondary schools, if desired by students (Ayorinde, 2023; Hassan, 2022). Insisting on academic freedom to challenge or truncate this policy has not been easy in Nigerian schools (Dania, 2016; Vanguard Dec 6, 2022).

There are also Catholics that believed abortion is a forbidden sin against God. Roman Catholics see abortion as killing human being (Roland & Pet, 2020). The Church opines that human life starts from conception and is sacred till natural death. Catholic doctrine emphatically states that "Human life is sacred because from its beginning, it involves the creative action of God.... And no one can under any circumstances claim for himself the right directly to destroy an innocent being (Ponmile, 2020). Jehovah Witnesses also assert that blood transfusion, electoral voting, saluting the flag and singing of national anthems are against their doctrines. In fact, Jehovah Witness emphatically believes that "Spiritual education has greater value than secular education". They encourage primary and secondary education but discourage higher education. They believe that the latter is susceptible to knowledge of and engagements in

social life that are in-congruent with Jehovah expectations (Ponmile, 2020). No doubt, an attempt by academics to contest all these using academic freedom may not be crises free in schools.

Religious beliefs could become troubled when university staff lay claims to academic freedom. The laws that established universities actually grant university system and its teachers some levels of rights to teach and research on issues that may oppose some religious beliefs and practices. Some of the rights are coded under what is called academic freedom. Academic freedom is the moral and legal freedoms that grant university lecturers freedom of inquiry and teaching. University believes that maintaining its academic freedom is essential if it must achieve its core academic and human development goals (Abubakar & Junaidu, 2016). Academic freedom allows faculty members to teach or communicate ideas or facts even when such may be repulsive to external religious and political groups. It is believed that universities should be able to do this without fear of repression, job loss or imprisonment or being restricted by law and beliefs.

Unfortunately, academic freedom has not always passed unchallenged in Nigerian schools and universities. Academics and teachers have not always had free days to teach or act whatever they like, without facing stiff and sometimes violent restrictions from people in and outside school. Neither have schools always enjoyed academic freedom to make policies that religious bodies would not find inconvenient. In September 2018, Mrs J. O. Sadare, the Principal of Isolo Senior a Secondary School, Lagos State was heavily reprimanded for sending Hijab-wearing student home. Her policy and action triggered a series of court cases and protests (Blueprint, September 25, 2018). Also, in February 2021, the Kwara State Government ordered closure of 10 Christians Missionary secondary schools that are controlled by government. This happened over Hijab wearing controversies. Subsequently, more violence erupted, and the schools were attacked. Similarly, in March 2021, Surulere Baptist Secondary School was violently attacked (Sahara Reporters, March 17, 2021) and on 27th February 2022, Oyun Baptist High School was attacked all because schools insisted their students will not wear Hijab.

With cases like these, one begins to ask whether it is sensible for university lecturers to insist on academic freedom in situations of religious threats and offensive oppositions. The question is: can universities enforce academic freedom in religiously volatile areas of Nigeria? Despite records of religion-related violence in schools, there are no known researches that focus on finding out the opinions of stakeholders on whether it is sensible for academics to insist on exercising their academic freedom in the face of deadly religious oppositions in Nigeria. The available body of literature only focuses on the concept of academic freedom (Abubakar & Juinadu, 2016; Theophilus & Anthony, 2020). Some literature also focuses on the challenges or factors that hinder application of academic freedoms (Arikewuyo, 2012). The absence of adequate research on these variables created a research gap that motivated this study.

Objectives of the Study

The study finds out what the opinions of academics and students in universities located in North-Central Nigeria are, on the sensibility and implications of applying the principle of academic freedom in the situation of offensive religious opposition. The specific objectives are to determine:

- i. the opinions of students and academics on the sensibility in insisting on academic freedom when faced with offensive religious resistance;
- ii. the implications of such clash between academic freedom and religious beliefs in Nigerian universities; and
- iii. sensible means of handling clash between academic freedom and religious resistance in Nigerian universities.

Research Questions

The following research questions were raised in the study:

- i. Does it make sense to insist on academic freedom in situation of offensive religious resistance in Nigerian universities?
- ii. What are the implications of clash between academic

- freedom and religious beliefs in Nigerian Universities?
- iii. What are the sensible ways of maintaining balance between academic freedom and religious beliefs in Nigerian Universities?

Methods

The population for the study comprised undergraduate students and academic staff of public and private universities in the geopolitical zone. To sample the respondents, the researchers used random sampling technique to select two states (Kwara and Kogi State) from the six states in the zone. Purposive sampling technique was thereafter used to further select four universities across the two states. This consisted of two public universities and two private universities owned by religious organizations. Across the four universities, a purposive sampling technique was used to sample 195 academic staff and 360 undergraduates. A researcher made-questionnaire titled Academic Freedom and Religious Belief Questionnaire (AFRBQ) was used for data collection. The questionnaire was face validated and was tested to have 0.72 reliability coefficient using test-re-test approach. The Questionnaire has 2 sections. Section A consists of items seeking respondents' biographical data such as religious sect, university ownership and gender. Section B has three parts. The first part has items testing sensibility of insistence on academic freedom. Part II has items testing the implications of such insistence and Part III tested methods of handling clash between academic freedom and religious beliefs. Each item on the questionnaire was structured positively with response options ranging in accordance with the content of the items. Collected data were analyzed using percentages.

Results

Research Question 1: Does it make sense to insist on academic freedom in situation of offensive religious resistance in Nigerian universities?

Table 1: Academic Staff Responses

University	Muslims (n=P53/R43)		Orthodox (n=P26/R20)		Protestant (n=P31/R22)	
	Sensible N	Not Sensible %	Sensible N	Not Sensible %	Sensible N	Not Sensible %
Public Univ.	6	11.3	47	88.6	4	15.3
Religious Univ.	4	7.5	39	90.6	9	45
Total	10	10.4	86	89.5	13	28.2

**Sample size indicated in brackets: “P” is Private Univ and “R” is Religious Univ.

Data on Table 1 show that only 10.4% of Muslim academics, 28.2% of Orthodox Christian academics and 30.1% of Protestant Christian academics across public and religiously owned universities believed it was sensible to insist on academic freedom in situation of religious offensives. On the other hand, 89.5% of Muslim academics, 71% of Orthodox academics and 69.8% of Protestants academics believed insisting on academic freedom in situations of religious offensives in Nigerian universities is senseless.

Table 1.1: Undergraduates responses

University	Muslims (n=P72/R58)		Orthodox (n=P61/R42)		Protestant (n=P67/60)	
	Sensible N	Not Sensible %	Sensible N	Not Sensible %	Sensible N	Not Sensible %
Public Univ.	16	22.2	56	77.7	23	37.7
Religious Univ.	14	24.1	44	75.8	11	26.1
Total	30	23.1	100	76.9	34	33.1

**Sample size indicated in brackets: “P” is Private Univ and “R” is Religious Univ.

Data on Table 1.1 indicate that only 23.1% of Muslim undergraduates, 33.1% of Orthodox undergraduates and 14.1% of Protestants undergraduates believed insistence on academic freedom in situation of religious resistance is sensible. However, 76.9% of Muslim undergraduates, 66.9% of Orthodox undergraduates and 85.8% of Protestant undergraduates believed such insistence is senseless.

Research Question 2: What are the implications of clash between academic freedom and religious beliefs in Nigerian universities?

Table 2: Respondents 'opinions on the implications of clash between academic freedom and religious resistance

Implications	Muslim (n226)		Orthodox (n149)		Protestants (n180)		Total (n555)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1. Violence	206	91.1	111	74.4	102	56.6	419	75.4
2. Faulty curriculum	104	46.1	51	34.2	63	35	218	39.2
3. Loss of job	198	87.6	100	67.1	125	69.4	423	76.2
4. Assassination	174	76.9	67	44.9	89	49.4	330	59.4
5. Strike	185	81.8	111	74.4	106	58.8	402	72.2
6. Adjudication	28	12.3	47	31.5	79	43.8	154	27.7
7. Religious disorientation	49	21.6	51	34.2	93	51.6	193	34.7
8. Academic disorientation	185	81.8	96	64.4	59	32.7	340	61.2
9. Disrupted school calendar	167	73.8	81	54.3	94	52.2	342	61.6
10. Low academic dignity	146	64.6	89	59.7	110	61.1	345	62.1

As shown on Table 2, 76.2% of the respondents across religious categories believed clash between academic freedom and religious beliefs in universities could result in job loss for academics. Also, 75.4% of the respondents believed the clash could result in violence while, 72.2% of the respondents believed it could lead to strikes in the universities. On the other hand, 62.1% believed the clash could lower academic dignity and 61.2% believed it could result in academic disorientation. However, only 27.7% of the respondents believed a clash between academic freedom and religious beliefs would result in adjudication. In fact, only 39.2% of the respondents believed it could bring about faulty university curriculum. Though, 59.4% of respondents agreed the clash could result in assassination of academics.

Research Question 3: What are the sensible ways of maintaining balance between academic freedom and religious beliefs in Nigerian Universities?

Table 3: Respondents opinions on solutions to clash between academic freedom and religious beliefs

Implications	Muslim (n226)		Orthodox (n149)		Protestants (n180)		Total (n555)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1. Enact policies to negate Academic freedom	98	43.3	37	24.8	41	22.7	176	31.7
2. Enact policies to negate Religious beliefs	18	7.9	14	9.3	6	3.3	38	6.8
3. Establish and operate Universities solely on faith	189	83.3	89	59.7	110	61.1	388	69.9
4. Appoint academics Base on faith	156	69.1	57	38.2	73	40.5	286	51.5
5. Admit students base on faith	142	62.8	84	56.3	49	27.2	275	49.5
6. Popularize inter-religious	97	42.9	114	76.5	109	60.5	320	57.6

Orientation and Appreciation

Data on Table 3 show respondents' opinions on the best ways to manage occurrence of friction between academic freedom and religious beliefs in Nigerian universities. As shown on the table, 83.3% of Muslim respondents believed the best way to manage the clash is to establish faith-based universities. 59.7% of Orthodox respondents and 61.1% of Pentecostal respondents agreed to this, too. Also, 76.5% of Orthodox respondents believed popularizing inter-religious orientation and appreciation would be the best strategy. However, only 42.9% of Muslims and 60.5% of Pentecostals agreed with this. The idea of enacting policies that will negate religious beliefs on campuses to prevent its clash with academic freedom was not rejected by the three categories of faiths. For example, 7.9% of Muslims, 9.3% of Orthodox Christians and 3.3% of Pentecostal Christians agreed that such method will be effective. Similarly, only 31.7% of the respondents believed enacting policies that will negate academic freedom would be the best option. The only strategy that seems popular with Muslims, Orthodox, and Pentecostal respondents is the method of establishing and operating universities solely on faith.

Discussions

Findings in this study revealed that very small percentages of respondents believed such insistence is sensible. In fact, only 10.4% of sampled Muslims students, 28.2% of Orthodox students and 30.1% of Protestant students believe it is sensible to insist on academic freedom when one is religiously threatened. This opinion is similar to that of academics. From the study, 76.9% of Muslim lecturers, 66.9% of Orthodox lecturers and 85.8% of Protestant lecturers agreed with the fact that insisting on academic freedom is senseless. The fact that the academics and students that had this opinion cut across private and public universities mean that the opinion is irrespective of ownership of universities. No doubt, in the aspect of choice of curriculum and teaching methodology, university academics would have upper hands, above students and parents and they may want to exercise this with little or no regard to students' or staff's and parents religious interests.

One of the major implications of insisting on academic freedom in universities located in North Central Nigeria is loss of job. A high percentage, 76.2%, of respondents (academics and students) agreed that academics could lose their jobs if they insist on maintaining academic freedom when they are challenged by offensive religious oppositions. For example, as a result of clash between academic freedom and religion, in December 2022, Lopez Prater, an adjunct lecturer at Hamline University, Minnesota, was sacked for showing her class a medieval Persian painting of Prophet Muhammed while teaching (Silk, 2023). Similarly, 75.4%, of the respondents believed such could even lead to violence which could obstruct academic calendar (61.6%); low academic integrity (62.1%) and cause academic disorientation (61.2%) among members of universities. This finding is related to the opinions expressed by Mustapha (2004) and Theophilus & Anthony (2020). They were of the opinions that unguided application of academic freedom can destabilize peace and academic processes in Nigerian universities. As revealed in this study, it is a popular opinion in literature (Adewale, 2011; Eniola, 2010) that many of the disturbances in Nigerian tertiary institutions may have emanated from negative interference which includes

unfriendly religious practices, from hosting communities. This study further emphasized the fact that clash between academic freedom and religion on campuses can result to strike and even death of some academic personnel. Such occurred on 16 October 2020, when Samuel Paty, a teacher in France was killed and beheaded for showing an offensive picture depicting Prophet Muhammad in a classroom.

If the situation is this dangerous, then what can be done to manage the clashes? A high percentage of respondents, 69.9% advised that creating or establishing and operating universities on the bases of religion could be of help. What this suggests is that religious bodies should establish their universities and operate them only in line with their individual doctrines. This is further supported by 51.5% respondents who believed academics should be appointed solely on the bases of their faith. As crude as this opinions may be, the findings revealed that some respondents believed such classes between academic freedom and religious resistance would reduce only when religious bodies establish and appoint only people of their faith, specifically. Though, another 57.6% of respondents had a different opinion. They were of the opinion that inter-religious orientation and appreciation among staff and students could be the best way of managing the clash.

Conclusion

Universities and their Managements have a lot to do to prevent offensive classes between academic freedoms and religious beliefs. The two seem so complex that it would require personal conviction of academics to be able to prevent problems. Their sensibility could prevent them from being victims of offensive religious oppositions to their efforts to exercise academic freedom, particularly in the universities located in North Central Nigeria.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that university academics should be sensible when applying their academic freedom in the process of teaching and learning, in their universities. Members

of universities (staff and students) should note that classes between academic freedom and religious beliefs can be very destructive to life, calendar and curriculum of university education, irrespective of being private and public. Further researches should be carried out in other geopolitical zones of Nigeria to find out more about issues of academic freedom and religious beliefs in Nigeria.

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