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Updates**A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM IN AFRICA AS A  
MANIFESTATION OF FRANCIS BACON'S IDOLS OF THE MIND****Dr. Ratzinger E. E. Nwobodo (Ph.D)**

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**ABSTRACT**

From time immemorial, human beings have exhibited an inherent drive to believe in something greater than themselves. This fundamental yearning for attachment has given rise to religion. While religious beliefs can have a profoundly transformative effect, the issue with religion, especially in Africa, does not stem from the diversity of beliefs, but from the conviction that one belief system is superior to another. The radical insistence on the supremacy of one's religion over others leads to religious extremism, where a particular group seeks to assert the dominance of its beliefs, often through violent means. Although religion is fundamentally rooted in belief, which should allow for tolerance of differing perspectives, it has, unfortunately, become a vehicle for exclusionary practices. This is particularly evident in regions such as Africa and Nigeria, where the major religions—Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion—are often expressed in a dogmatic and jingoistic manner. These expressions, fueled by indoctrination and exaggerated piety, frequently defy basic logical principles, resulting in significant loss of life and the erosion of cultural practices. This paper explores the link between religious extremism in Africa, particularly in Nigeria, and Francis Bacon's concept of the "Idols of the Mind." Bacon's idols represent cognitive biases that distort the human mind and hinder the pursuit of true knowledge. In this context, the paper raises several critical questions: What constitutes religious extremism? What are Francis Bacon's "Idols of Learning"? How does religious extremism in Africa reflect Bacon's Idols of the Mind? Through a method of descriptive and critical analysis, this paper examines relevant literature, including books, Journals, online articles, internet and archival materials, to investigate these issues. The analysis reveals that, at the core of every religious extremist movement, there is a reflection of Bacon's idols of the mind, distorting perceptions and preventing genuine understanding.

**Keywords:** Religion, Religion Extremism, Idols of Learning, Africa, Nigeria.

**Introduction**

Religion is deeply interwoven into nearly every aspect of African life, and this pervasiveness supports the widespread perception that Africans are profoundly religious. Africa is home to a diverse range of religious traditions, with African Traditional Religion, Christianity, and Islam being the most prominent.

While religion has undeniably played a transformative role in African societies—fostering moral conduct, promoting social cohesion, and contributing to development, particularly through educational initiatives spearheaded by Christian institutions—it has also become a source of violence and division. Across the three major religions in Africa, divisions frequently arise due to disagreements in doctrinal beliefs. These divisions are not confined to inter-religious conflicts but also manifest within individual religious traditions. For example, within Christianity, doctrinal differences have led to the proliferation of denominations. In Nigeria, tensions within the Christian community are exacerbated by the spiritual arrogance and fanaticism exhibited by members of various denominations and factions of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN). Similar internal conflicts are also present within Islamic communities, though to a lesser extent within practitioners of African Traditional Religion (Haaga & Ngbea, 2023).

The religious landscape in Africa is marked by a jingoistic approach, where each faith tradition vies for the supremacy of its beliefs. Adherents of each major religion often claim exclusive possession of the "true" revelation, viewing their own faith as the sole path to salvation. This conviction goes beyond mere bias and drives many believers to assert the superiority of their religion, sometimes through violent means. This drive to impose one's beliefs on others, even to the point of inflicting harm or taking lives, is what constitutes religious extremism or fanaticism. In this regard, Awoniyi (2013) notes that religion encompasses a wide range of conflicting truth claims, which contribute to its complex and often divisive nature. Religious extremism, in particular, is a feature that permeates nearly every belief system, characterized by the belief that one's religion is uniquely special, the best, and the only path to salvation. The scriptures of the major "received" religions frequently emphasize this exclusivity. For instance, Jesus' response to Nicodemus in the Gospel of John underscores this exclusivist view: "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God rests upon him" (John 3:36, in Awoniyi, 2013).

I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing. If a man abides not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned (John 15:5, in Awoniyi 2013, p.127).

Such exclusive statements, like Jesus' proclamation in the Bible or Quranic verses such as, "Surely the true religion with God is Islam" (Quran 3:19) and "O my sons, God has chosen the religion for you; so die not unless you are Muslims" (Quran 2:132), are mentally disconcerting for non-believers when viewed in the context of religious coexistence, mutual respect, and cooperation. These authoritative declarations naturally give rise to a "holier-than-thou" attitude, fostering an environment ripe for the emergence of extremists and fanatics (Awoniyi, 2013). Religious extremism, with its ideological foundations embedded in most major religions, is frequently linked to acts of violence that are religiously motivated (Hassan, 2022).

A religious fanatic is characterized by their unwavering and extreme commitment to their beliefs, refusing to entertain any opposing perspectives regarding their faith. The only "room" they offer is for proselytization—inviting others to convert. Fanaticism, therefore, isolates the fanatic, closing them off to counterarguments or alternative interpretations. At this extreme, a fanatic is willing to go to any length, including violence, to maintain their belief or to force others into adherence. Africa, particularly Nigeria, has borne the brunt of religious fanaticism, which has significantly hindered economic and social

development. The violence and conflict spurred by religious extremism have claimed numerous lives and continue to perpetuate division. At the core of religious fanaticism lies indoctrination and the over-exaggeration of religious beliefs. These processes create false impressions that shape closed mindsets, impervious to alternative viewpoints.

Consequently, fanaticism fosters an incurable bias, leading to discrimination and, in some cases, the justification of harm against those who hold different beliefs. The fanatic's certainty in their religious claims becomes so exaggerated that it defies common logic, pushing belief to irrational extremes. This paper posits that religious extremism in Africa reflects Francis Bacon's concept of the "Idols of the Mind." These idols represent biases that distort perception, creating false impressions and preventing individuals from acquiring true knowledge. Bacon's idols cloud the mind, making it impossible to approach issues objectively or to accept alternative views, even when presented with substantial evidence. With these cognitive biases, anything that does not fit within the established framework of belief is automatically deemed incorrect. In light of this, the paper raises several critical questions: What is religious extremism? What are Francis Bacon's Idols of the Mind? How does religious extremism in Africa mirror Bacon's Idols of Learning? To answer these questions, this paper employs a method of critical analysis, examining extant literature, including books, journals, online articles, internet and archival materials. The findings reveal that at the core of every religious extremist movement lies a reflection of Bacon's idols of learning, which distort perception and prevent the acquisition of true understanding.

### **Towards an Understanding of Religion**

There is no universal scholarly consensus on the definition of religion (Isomkwo & Njor, 2019). Interpretations of the term vary across disciplines, with anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists, theologians, and Marxists offering divergent perspectives. Each definition reflects the conceptual framework of the scholar's field of study, without any claim to being the final or authoritative interpretation (Akama, 1997). Consequently, straightforwardly defining religion is as challenging as defining philosophy, as consensus is elusive due to the varied orientations and intellectual backgrounds of those involved (Nwobodo, 2024). This is further affirmed by Nigosian (1981), who remarked:

In modern usage, religion covers a wide spectrum of meanings that reflect the enormous variety of ways the term can be interpreted. There are diverse ways religion is understood including emphases on the intellectual function, emotional, worship, individual experience and social functions of religion. Religion could therefore be defined as man's attempt to commune with supernatural force(s) as part of man's search for meaning, understanding and explanation of life. By defining religion as a sacred engagement with what is taken to be a spiritual reality, it is possible to consider the importance of religion in human life without making claims about what it is or ought to be. It is not an object with a single, fixed meaning, or even a zone with clear boundaries. Religion is an aspect of human experience that may intersect, incorporate or transcend other aspects of life and society. It cannot be reduced to any single aspect of human experience. It is a part of individual life but also of group dynamics. Religion includes patterns of behaviour, thought and culture. (p. 2-3).

The term religion is derived from three Latin terms: religare, religio, and religere, each of which conveys the idea of a binding force or constraint from which no individual can easily ignore or escape (Amadi-Nche, 2020). Peter Berger defines religion as "the human attitude towards a sacred order that

encompasses all beings, both human and non-human. In other words, religion is the belief in a cosmos, the meaning of which both transcends and includes humanity" (Akpan, 2010, p. 30). James Martineau further defines religion as "the belief in an ever-living God—that is, in a divine mind and will governing the universe and maintaining moral relations with humankind" (Akpan, 2010, p. 30). Paul Tillich, on the other hand, contends that religion is not a distinct function of human spiritual life but rather the dimension of depth in all its functions. He asserts that religion points to what is ultimate, infinite, and unconditional in a person's spiritual existence. In its broadest sense, religion represents the ultimate concern, as it involves being "ultimately concerned with that which is and should be of ultimate concern" (Akpan, 2010, p. 30).

From anthropological and sociological perspectives, religion can be understood as humanity's response to the challenges of existence, where individuals are driven to seek security, identity, and permanence by aligning themselves with a higher reality that is perceived as more significant and worthy (Amadi-Nche, 2020). Religion holds great value for many individuals, often to the extent that they are willing to make significant sacrifices or offerings. In some cases, these offerings may include their most prized possessions, and tragically, even human lives in extreme instances. For many, religious devotion is valued above their own lives and property, which is why followers of certain faiths are often prepared to defend their beliefs vigorously when challenged (Amadi-Nche, 2020). To outside observers, this dedication may sometimes appear as extreme or fanatical when religious beliefs are perceived as being under threat (Wotogbe-Weneka, 2011).

In summary, the definitions provided suggest that religion is fundamentally rooted in belief and emotion. This emotion, often more influential than knowledge, has shaped and guided human lives throughout history. This perspective is supported by Ediba et al. (2021), who cite Gwamna Dogara (2013), stating that:

Religion has influenced different forms of human civilizations such as in art, architecture, music, poetry, history, philosophy, politics, and other aspects of human engagements. Understanding religion, therefore, requires a multi-dimensional overview of its essence and manifestation. Religion has a forceful factor with the capacity to arouse deep emotions in man and passion towards obedience, commitment and total surrender. Religion creates faith which could be revolutionary, that is, with the capacity to influence change and it could also be transformational in content and goal. However, when religion assumes extreme content in its belief and practice, it leads to fanaticism, extremism, intolerance and unguarded bigotry. (p.17)

Dogara (2013) view on religion strongly aligns with the context this paper intends to explore about religion.

### **Towards an Understanding of Religion Extremism/Fanaticism/Intolerance**

The term "extremism" is more easily described than defined. It originates from the word "extreme," which refers to "either end of anything; to do more than is usually considered right or desirable" (Hornby, 1979, in Ottuh & Onimhawo, 2021, p. 89). Religious extremism is commonly associated with religious bigotry, fanaticism, fundamentalism, exclusivism, and intolerance. Its negative consequences include terrorism, human rights violations, social disunity, underdevelopment, and other societal ills (Ottuh &

Onimhwo, 2021). When religious views become extreme, individuals may adopt a fanatical stance, leading to intolerance towards differing beliefs.

Religious fanaticism represents an irrational attitude toward religion, compelling adherents to practice their faith beyond the bounds of reason and moderation. It manifests as violent and unreasoning enthusiasm, characterized by an inability to reconcile theoretical beliefs with the practical aspects of faith (Iwe, 2000; Balogun, 1988; Haaga & Ngbea, 2023). According to Danfulani, as cited in Ushe (2012), religious fanaticism embodies a negative and destructive attitude towards religion, marked by exaggeration, immoderation, manipulation, exploitation, excesses, and violence. Ede (2020) further defines it as the exploitation of religious beliefs by adherents to serve selfish interests, often involving violence. This phenomenon reflects a binding belief that a particular idea or doctrine is true, legitimizing the notion that it is acceptable, even righteous, to compel others to accept that belief (Gwamna, 2014; Olawale, 2020).

Religious fanaticism signifies an unguided enthusiasm within one's religious practice, alongside an attempt to elevate one's traditions, doctrines, and beliefs to a level that leads to prejudice against and derision of practitioners from opposing faiths. Furthermore, it involves a compulsion to impose one's beliefs on others who are perceived as ignorant (Haaga & Ngbea, 2023). A religious fanatic exhibits unwavering commitment to their convictions, firmly believing in their righteousness and rejecting alternative perspectives, even if those alternatives are superior. This mindset is also characterized by efforts to impose their beliefs on others whom they view as lacking understanding. Ultimately, religious fanatics may be willing to sacrifice their lives and the lives of others to force compliance with their beliefs (Haaga & Ngbea, 2023).

### **The Genesis of Religious Extremism in Nigeria**

Religious intolerance in Nigeria can be traced back to the legacy of foreign missionaries (Nelson & Babale, 2022). The introduction of Islam and Christianity significantly altered the socio-religious landscape of Nigerian communities, fostering an environment of intolerance and antagonism (Atoi, 2016; Atoi, 2019). Uzoma (2004) asserts that the arrival of these two missionary religions instigated religious antagonism and social upheaval across Nigeria. This troubling development began when foreign missionaries employed derogatory terms such as "primitive," "savage," "paganism," "heathenism," "idolatry," and "fetishism" to characterize the religious thought forms of the African people.

As a result, adherents of Christianity and Islam condemned African religious beliefs, leading to the destruction of sacred vessels, vestments, altars, and shrines associated with Indigenous practices (Atoi, 2019; Atoi et al., 2019). In response to this negative religious trend, Idowu (1973) argues that it is inappropriate to refer to the religion of any living people using such derogatory language. He emphasizes that it is not only unsuitable but also offensive to describe the African religious belief system in this manner. Similarly, Ubrurhe (2000) notes that Christians and Muslims often exhibit contempt towards African traditional religious beliefs and practices, as evidenced by their tendency to destroy the symbols and images associated with Indigenous religions.

It is crucial to recognize that religious intolerance in Nigeria manifests at both interfaith and intrafaith levels—between different religious traditions and among sects or denominations within the same religion (Nelson & Babale, 2022). According to Ubrurhe (2000), various Christian denominations and sects have

frequently ridiculed each other through songs, indoctrination of their members, and a focus on their respective weaknesses. The history of Christianity in Urohoboland illustrates this point, as the later arrival of Catholicism led to the condemnation of Anglican doctrines. Furthermore, the rivalry between Catholic and Protestant missionaries among the Igbo from 1857 to 1914 contributed to a culture of religious intolerance. The emergence of neo-Pentecostalism introduced a new dimension to religious intolerance within Nigerian Christian churches (Nelson & Babale, 2022). These neo-Pentecostal churches are characterized by their radical interpretations of Christian doctrine and a militant approach to evangelism, often adopting an aggressive style of witnessing and demonstrating intolerance toward those they classify as "unbelievers."

Similarly, intolerance is prevalent within Islam in Nigeria (Nelson & Babale, 2022). Numerous fundamentalist sects have emerged among Muslims, often displaying hostility toward other Islamic groups. For instance, the relationship between Islamic fundamentalists and orthodox Muslims has been strained. In the 1980s, the Maitatsine sect waged war against fellow Muslims whom they deemed as unbelievers (Ubrurhe, 2000). The Maitatsine, an Islamic fundamentalist group, was particularly intolerant of other religious factions within the country, especially in the ancient city of Kano. Led by Muhammadu Marwa, a radical Qur'anic teacher and preacher, the sect adopted a forceful, charismatic, and radical stance on Islamic doctrine. Marwa rejected many prevailing views within Kano's Islamic circles, denouncing certain interpretations of the Holy Qur'an and criticizing Prophet Muhammad. He opposed most aspects of modernization and all Western influences, condemning common technological items such as radios, wristwatches, automobiles, motorcycles, and even bicycles. Those who used these items or engaged with literature outside the Holy Qur'an were labeled as hell-bound pagans (Falola, 1998).

Moreover, numerous cases of religious intolerance have been reported in Nigeria's tertiary institutions since the 1980s (Nelson & Babale, 2022). A notable incident occurred in Kafanchan, where violent clashes erupted between Christian and Muslim students at the College of Education on March 6, 1987. According to Kukah (1993), what began as a minor misunderstanding escalated into widespread destruction of lives and property, extending beyond the institution to various parts of the country. This conflict was reportedly triggered by a Christian preacher who allegedly used verses from the Qur'an to undermine Islam while asserting the exclusivity of salvation within Christianity (Gofwen, 2004). The sharia conundrum is another significant issue that has fueled religious intolerance in Nigeria since its introduction in the Constituent Assembly (C.A.) of 1978 (Nelson & Babale, 2022). The re-introduction of sharia law into the socio-political landscape by certain northern state governors, beginning with Zamfara State in 1999, has intensified intolerance across the nation. Gellar (2007) notes that in predominantly Muslim states in Northern Nigeria, which also contain Christians and adherents of African traditional religions, the push for an extreme majority model imposing sharia law on all citizens has been a major source of escalating inter-religious conflicts.

The most recent form of religious intolerance in Nigeria is exemplified by the activities of the Boko Haram Islamic fundamentalist sect, which poses a significant threat to the country's coexistence. This group has exhibited extreme intolerance by perpetrating violence against both Muslims and non-Muslims. According to Onuoha (2010), Boko Haram seeks political and religious reform within Nigeria, specifically advocating for the implementation of sharia law based on the principles of Orthodox Islam. The sect vehemently opposes the secular nature of Nigerian society, advocating for full sharia

implementation and expressing strong hostility towards secular education and government institutions (Alkali et al., 2012).

### **Exploring Religious Extremism/Fanaticism in Nigeria**

Religious fanaticism is not solely a Nigerian issue; it manifests globally, as evidenced in various nations where attempts to curb its spread continue (Haaga & Ngbea, 2023). From Pakistan to India to Afghanistan and beyond, individuals who see themselves as custodians of their respective religions often argue for the superiority of their faith while disparaging others (Salaam, 2012, in Haaga & Ngbea, 2023). This perspective is echoed by Hassouna (2018), who posits that “our world is suffering from religious fanaticism that is widely spread in many regions, countries, and places. We have many religious fanatic groups everywhere in the Middle East, Africa, Asia, America, and Europe” (p. 260). Similarly, Kunhiyop (2008) aligns with Hassouna's viewpoint, noting the persistent conflicts in the Middle East, including the struggles between Israelis and Palestinians, as well as sectarian violence in Iraq. He also highlights tensions between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland and between Hindus and Muslims in India.

In Nigeria, the situation mirrors these global patterns. Traces of religious extremism and fundamentalism can be found across Christianity, Islam, and, to a significant extent, African traditional religions, all of which contribute to the prevailing intolerance in the country. Analyzing Nigeria's religious climate reveals that diverse religious groups often seek to assert their supremacy by undermining the claims of rival faiths. This mindset frequently permeates familial structures, as parents indoctrinate their children with these beliefs (Haaga & Ngbea, 2023). Consequently, these children grow up harboring fanatical attitudes and hostility towards other religions. Supporting this notion, Church-Hill (2020, in Haaga & Ngbea, 2023) highlights the detrimental impact of inadequately qualified individuals who are responsible for transmitting religious traditions to the younger generation. He argues that when those tasked with interpreting scriptures for their followers lack comprehensive knowledge, the result is a generation of “religious idiots.” Furthermore, in quoting Iwe (2000), Church-Hill (2020) asserts that this educational deficiency perpetuates a cycle of intolerance and fanaticism.

Misinterpretation of the scripture is common among the religions of the book, such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. In Islam, fanatics and fundamentalists misinterpreted Jihad to stand for physical combat against non-Muslims instead of a spiritual attack against evil and demons. Religious fanatics or fundamentalist adopt purely literal as opposed to metaphorical or mythical interpretations of their holy scripture deny the validity of interpretations of other religious traditions and assume that religious truth resides with their perspective, thus, creating a lopsided message to their adherents and the society. The literal interpretation of the scriptures could lead to false doctrine, and false doctrine could lead members to puff up with the sense of superiority in revelation, making the one in error unteachable and placing emphasis upon fleshly activities as a gateway to the spiritual, as in asceticism and vegetarianism (p. 167).

Ede (2020) aligns with this perspective, arguing that a significant danger among religious adherents in Nigeria is the pervasive belief in the supremacy of their religions over others. Many practitioners, particularly Christians and Muslims, regard their faith as the sole authentic religion. This mindset drives them to employ various means to convert others to their beliefs. In Nigeria, fanaticism is especially pronounced within Islam and Christianity. Within the Islamic context, the primary objective of Islamic

fanaticism is to reform and revive the Muslim community through education and force, advocating for a "true Islam" free from any innovations in its doctrines (Haaga & Ngbea, 2023). For these fanatics, the reformation of all Muslims to adhere strictly to Islamic laws is paramount, and they call for the establishment and maintenance of Islamic governance (Nabiebu & Otu, 2019). Ushe (2012), as cited in Haaga & Ngbea (2023), highlights the Maitatsine and Boko Haram as the most notorious Islamic fanatics today, underscoring the violent and extreme measures they employ in pursuit of their objectives. In his words:

Maitatsine seems to have condemned Islam's main principles as laid down in the Holy Quran and the Sunnah. They also condemned the Holy Qur'an and denounced the prophet Mohammed...Boko Haram, on the other hand, has exhibited characteristic features of fundamentalism and fanaticism or extremism. They are anti-western education, destructive and intolerant, even to their parents, friends and the government. They also condemn, sometimes in an undisguised language and as strongly as they can, all those who have accepted Western civilisation and do not share their religious view... they demonstrate a holier-than-thou attitude in all places and at all occasions (p.167)

The impact of fanatical Islamic groups in Nigeria is significant, leading to substantial loss of life, widespread property destruction, and the displacement of countless individuals from their homes. The activities of the Boko Haram sect have particularly heated the religious landscape of the country. Moreover, extremist interpretations of Jihad have distorted the original meaning of the term, promoting the notion of holy war to propagate Islam through violence and forced conversions. Historical instances of such fanaticism include the forced conversion to Islam in ancient Hausa states by Shehu Usman Dan Fodio in the 19th century, which resulted in significant loss of life, and property, and violations of people's rights based on their religious affiliations (Ushe, 2012, in Haaga & Ngbea, 2023). A notable example of this fanaticism occurred in July 2016, when a Nigerian Islamic cleric allegedly incited his followers to kill a Christian woman for her early morning preaching in her neighbourhood (Enweonwu et al., 2021). This incident exemplifies the fanatical attitude that dismisses the beliefs of others, reflecting an intolerant and violent response to differing expressions of faith. If the cleric and his followers had recognized their understanding of God as superior and pure, they might have approached the woman's preaching with tolerance rather than aggression.

Within Christianity, fanaticism manifests, though perhaps not to the same extent as in some Islamic contexts, particularly regarding the destruction of lives and property. A notable area of contention is the sustained hostility between Catholic and Pentecostal Christianity in Nigeria (Haaga & Ngbea, 2023). This conflict has intensified as certain Christian sects label themselves as "living" or "holy churches," implying that other denominations are "dead" or "unholy," fostering a culture of derision toward those outside their faith community. While overt acts of violence against mosques are less common among fanatical Christian groups, they do engage in destructive behaviors against African traditional religious practices. Instances include attacks on shrines, the destruction of sacred trees, and even the killing of priests from African religions, all in the name of spiritual cleansing. This violence is often justified through biblical interpretations, such as the injunction to "not suffer a witch to live" (Haaga & Ngbea, 2023).

The atmosphere of fanaticism among the three major religions in Nigeria poses a significant threat to freedom of thought, conscience, and religious expression (Udofia & Uduigwomen, 2022). Historical examples, such as the violent actions of the Maitatsine sect in the 1980s, highlight how religious

intolerance can erupt into chaos. In predominantly Islamic regions, Christians often face hostility when attempting to evangelize, with efforts to spread their faith leading to riots and fatalities. The right to freedom of religion, a fundamental human right, is jeopardized when religious adherents engage in conflicts driven by their beliefs, interpretations of scriptures, or competition for influence and power. Factors such as territorial control, demographic recruitment, and political authority exacerbate these tensions, revealing a complex interplay between religious fanaticism and societal stability (Dzurgba, 2010).

In summary, Ogbonnaya and Ugoha (2015) encapsulate the essence of religious fanaticism in Nigeria by asserting that Christians perceive both Muslims and practitioners of African Traditional Religion as condemned to eternal damnation, necessitating their conversion to Christianity for salvation. Similarly, in Northern Nigeria, Islamic adherents often view non-Muslims as infidels who must be coerced—through violence or otherwise—into embracing Islam or face extermination. This mindset underpins the actions of extremist groups like Boko Haram, which advocates for the imposition of its interpretation of Islam and Sharia law on all Nigerians.

While it is evident that fanaticism primarily manifests within Christianity and Islam—two religions contributing significantly to the conflicts and crises stemming from religious intolerance—one must also recognize that the tolerance historically exhibited by traditional religion practitioners facilitated the spread of both Islam and Christianity in Nigeria (Kukah, 1993). Therefore, it is expected that these religions should refrain from spiritual arrogance, high-handedness, and intolerance in their practices and evangelism.

The discourse on religious fanaticism in Nigeria is extensive and rich, with ample historical evidence and contemporary examples to sustain it (Haaga & Ngbea, 2023). However, the primary aim of this paper is to critically analyze religious extremism through the lens of Francis Bacon's theory of knowledge, particularly his concept of the idols of knowledge. The study posits that religious extremism and fanaticism stem from these idols—biases and misconceptions that inhibit the acceptance of alternative perspectives. This discussion leads us to the next section, which will delve into Francis Bacon's Idols of Knowledge.

### **Francis Bacon's Idol of Knowledge**

Francis Bacon, born in 1561 as the son of the Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal, was initially trained for a career in law and served as a member of Parliament. However, he soon became disenchanted with the notion of pursuing a solely active public life (Stumpf, 1971). Widely regarded as the Father of Modern Philosophy in England, Bacon (1561–1626) argued that knowledge is power—how humanity can conquer and control nature (Copleston, 1953). He contended that knowledge must be rooted in the study of nature itself to facilitate understanding and mastery; otherwise, it remains ineffective (Olatunji, 1998).

Bacon emphasized that the pursuit of knowledge should aim to enhance humanity's control over the natural world (Kenny, 2006). However, attaining certain knowledge of nature is complex and challenging due to the human mind's susceptibility to preconceptions and biases, which can distort our interpretations of experiences and affect our judgments. Therefore, he stressed the importance of recognizing "the idols and false notions" that influence the human mind and hinder the attainment of genuine scientific

knowledge. Bacon argued that awareness of these biases is crucial; one must be vigilant against them to achieve true understanding and insight (Coppleston, 1953).

In the context of religious extremism and fanaticism, Bacon's concept of the idols of knowledge is particularly relevant. These idols can manifest as biases and misconceptions that foster an inflexible mindset, leading individuals to reject alternative perspectives. This rigidity ultimately contributes to religious intolerance, as adherents become entrenched in their beliefs and dismissive of differing viewpoints.

### **What is an idol**

From the perspective of fallacy studies, Bacon's doctrine of the "idols" is a significant contribution to understanding human cognition and its limitations (Walton, 1999). In his work: *Novum Organum*, Bacon asserts that knowledge derives from objects in nature, yet we invariably impose our human constructions upon these objects. He argues that in our quest to understand knowledge, we project our frameworks and "creations of the mind and hand" onto it (Bacon, 1620, p. 12). Even scientific theories, according to Bacon, are constructions shaped by our subjective interpretations of reality (Walton, 1999). As a result, they are imbued with inherent human biases.

Bacon describes these biases as "idols" or "idle dogmas" (p. 16), which are invented images that serve as our representations of the true essence of natural objects. These idols, he posits, are anticipations that generate a sense of unanimity due to their familiarity and immediate appeal to our understanding, thereby satisfying our imagination (p. 17). However, because these idols are shaped by our perspectives, they introduce distortions akin to "false mirrors" (Hamblin, 1970, p. 45). Hamblin notes that the term "idol" (eidolon) literally means "false appearance" (p. 144) and, in the seventeenth century, also carried connotations of "idolatry," referring to the worship of false gods. In *\*Novum Organum\**, Bacon explicitly characterizes human understanding as a "false mirror" that "distorts and discolours the nature of things" (Hamblin, 1970, p. 45). Thus, the concept of idols carries inherently negative implications for Bacon (Walton, 1999).

Since these idols do not accurately reflect the nature of reality, they can lead to misconceptions, errors, or even logical deceptions. While it may be overly simplistic to categorize idols as fallacies in the traditional sense recognized in the history of logic, they do represent types of human bias that critical thinkers must be vigilant about to avoid being misled by errors or fallacies (Walton, 1999). In summary, Bacon's exploration of the idols of knowledge emphasizes the need for awareness of our cognitive biases in the pursuit of understanding, particularly in the context of scientific inquiry and critical thinking.

According to Walton (1999), Bacon contends that human thought is invariably influenced by preconceived notions shaped by "a tincture of the will and passions" (*\*Novum Organum\**, p. 26). Consequently, it would be misleading to classify the idols as mere fallacies. Instead, Bacon's doctrine suggests that idols embody biases or distortions in human reasoning, which can skew judgment and lead to erroneous conclusions (Walton, 1999). Hamblin (1970, p. 146) asserts that Bacon's ideas revolutionized the field of logic by integrating a psychological dimension into the understanding of fallacies. This shift significantly contributed to the inclusion of bias as a critical concern within the logic curriculum. Bacon's exploration of idols also advanced the theory of cognitive prejudices articulated by thinkers such as Arnauld and Watts, fostering a modern focus on bias in reasoning.

In summary, idols can be understood as cognitive distortions, akin to the way light may be warped when reflected through an uneven mirror (Stumpf, 1971). They are likened to “cobwebs of learning, admirable for the fineness of thread and work, but of no substance or profit” (p. 221). Bacon articulates this notion in: *Novum Organum*, as follows:

The doctrine of the idols stands to the interpretation of nature as the doctrine of sophistical arguments stands to common logic (p.40)

Copleston (1953) tries to explain the idols further;

Just as it is useful for the syllogistic dialectician to be aware of the nature of sophistical arguments, so it is useful for the scientist or natural philosopher to be aware of the nature of the idols of the human mind, so that he may be on his guard against their influence (p.302)

An idol, in this context, refers to a mental image that is revered yet lacks inherent substance. These idols serve as influences that can distort our interpretations and perceptions. They encompass the prejudices and preconceptions that colour our understanding and shape our experiences (Omeregbe, 2011). Accordingly, as Kenny (2006) asserts, “to introduce discipline into the art of scientific generalization, we must first make ourselves aware of the factors that can introduce bias into our observations” (p. 204). Bacon categorized these idols into four distinct types: the Idols of the Tribe, Idols of the Cave, Idols of the Marketplace, and Idols of the Theatre. We will examine each of these categories in detail below.

## **IDOLS OF THE TRIBE**

The Idols of the Tribe, or *Idola tribus*, reflect the inherent tendencies of human nature that shape our perception of the world. Bacon (1902) posits that these idols lead us to perceive nature as more regular and orderly than it truly is. This fallacy includes the inclination to over-generalize from a limited number of instances while neglecting counterexamples (Walton, 1999). Rooted in the collective experiences of humanity, the Idols of the Tribe assert that the senses of humans are often mistaken as the ultimate measure of all things. In reality, perceptions and understandings are subjective, varying according to individual experiences rather than conforming to universal truths. Bacon (1863) illustrates this point by comparing human understanding to a false mirror that distorts and discolours the essence of reality by blending its nature with that of the observed world.

The Idols of the Tribe encompass several cognitive biases, such as the tendency to accept superficial appearances without thorough investigation, cling to outdated beliefs, view things as fixed rather than fluid, and see the world through a lens of personal desire (Omeregbe, 2011). Additionally, these idols reveal the inherent errors in human nature that obstruct objective judgment, including the anthropomorphic interpretations we often impose on natural phenomena. People have a tendency to attribute human-like final causes to nature, deriving explanations based on their own experiences rather than the intrinsic properties of the universe (Omeregbe, 2011). Furthermore, the human mind is prone to engage in abstractions, often mistakenly perceiving changeable phenomena as constant. Bacon cautions against the dangers of relying on mere appearances and uncritical sensory data, as well as the pitfalls of wishful thinking and the misidentification of abstractions as tangible realities (Nnadi, n.d).

### **Idols of the cave or den**

The idols of the cave (den), or *idola specus*, signify the individual ways in which people interpret nature based on their unique dispositions. These interpretations are influenced by personal preferences, such as a fondness for specific colours or subjects (Walton, 1999). As Copleston (1953) further elaborates, these idols encompass the subjective inclinations and biases that shape one's understanding of the world, leading to variations in perception that are often deeply rooted in personal experience.

The 'idols of the den' are the errors peculiar to each individual, arising from his temperament, education, reading and the special influences, which have weighed on him as an individual (p. 303)

These influences compel individuals to perceive phenomena through the lens of their personal "caves." As Copleston notes, each person possesses a unique cave that alters and distorts the natural light of understanding. The Idols of the Cave represent the individual biases of each person. Beyond the universal fallacies inherent in human nature, everyone has a personal den that refracts and colours their perception of reality. This distortion may arise from one's unique traits, educational background, interactions with others, the literature they read, and the opinions of those they respect and admire. Variations in mental states, whether from predispositions or indifference, further contribute to this refracted understanding. Consequently, the human spirit, influenced by these factors, becomes a variable entity, often swayed by chance. As Heraclitus aptly noted, people tend to seek knowledge within their limited spheres rather than engaging with the broader, shared reality (Bacon, 1863).

### **Idols of the marketplace**

According to Bacon (1902), the idols of the marketplace, or *\*idola fori\**, stem from the "poor and inappropriate formation of words" (p. 21). For instance, certain terms refer to entities that do not exist, yet we often assume their existence simply because they are named (Walton, 1999). This phenomenon reflects errors influenced by language, which shapes our understanding based on common perceptions. The words we use, as representations of human thought, can mislead and obscure the very ideas they aim to convey. The challenge of acquiring knowledge is further complicated by the fact that even philosophers can fall prey to these idols, often coining terms for concepts that exist solely in their imagination. Additionally, they may create names for qualities such as "heavy," "rare," or "dense," without grounding them in concrete reality (Stumpf, 1971).

Copleston (1953) expands on this idea, noting that the idols of the marketplace are errors arising from linguistic influences. The terms employed in everyday language reflect commonly accepted notions; however, when a discerning mind recognizes that conventional analyses fall short, language can hinder the expression of more nuanced understandings. This presents a significant obstacle on the path to knowledge. Often, words are used without a clear idea of what they signify or lack a universally accepted meaning, further complicating communication and comprehension (Copleston, 1953).

### **Idols of the theatre**

The idols of the theatre, or *Idola theatri*, encompass the entrenched dogmas of philosophy and science (Bacon, 1902). These represent flawed modes of thinking that arise from established philosophical and scientific systems. The "idols of the theatre" symbolize the historical philosophical frameworks that serve as mere theatrical performances, depicting fictitious realities crafted by human imagination. They consist of the established and competing philosophical and theological doctrines that have been transmitted to us

since ancient times (Bacon, 1869). Bacon (1869) observes that without a more discerning approach to inquiry, a persistent under-determination of theories by empirical data remains. He argues that "[f]or as many imaginary theories of the heavens can be deduced from the phenomena of the sky, so it is even easier to found many dogmas upon the phenomena of philosophy." He likens the resulting incommensurable systems to the unique worlds presented in theatrical productions, suggesting that these staged realities are often more coherent, refined, and enjoyable than those drawn from actual history (p. 162).

Broadly speaking, Bacon identifies three categories of false philosophy. The first is 'sophistical' philosophy, with Aristotle as its primary representative, who compromised natural philosophy through his reliance on dialectical reasoning. The second is 'empirical' philosophy, which is based on limited and obscure observations; chemists are particularly culpable in this regard, with Bacon citing William Gilbert, author of 'De Magnete' (1600), as an example. Lastly, there is 'superstitious' philosophy, which introduces theological considerations into philosophical discourse. The Pythagoreans engaged in such practices, as did the more insidious and perilous Plato and the Platonists (Nnadi, n.d). In light of these idols of the mind, it becomes essential to analyze how religious extremism mirrors these distortions.

### **A Critical Examination of Religious Extremism in Africa as a Manifestation of Francis Bacon's Idols of Knowledge**

Despite the doctrinal differences and beliefs among Christianity, Islam, and African traditional religions, a closer examination reveals a significant commonality: none of these faiths advocates for violence. Each religion aims to transform individuals toward living virtuous lives and fostering a society conducive to coexistence. This holds even in Nigeria, where the major religions promote essential social values such as respect for elders, honesty, contentment, and kindness. Thus, despite their doctrinal disparities, these religions share a common objective of nurturing a healthy society. This suggests that if adherents of these faiths concentrated on their shared values rather than their differences, extreme interpretations of beliefs might diminish. The core aim—to guide individuals toward moral living—is already being fulfilled.

However, challenges arise when the focus shifts to doctrinal differences, giving rise to religious extremists and fanatics who exhibit intolerance toward others' beliefs. Consequently, the primary issue lies not within the core tenets of various religions but rather in the interpretations that elevate one set of beliefs above others, leading to the expectation that all must conform to it. Churchill (2020), referencing Iwe (2000) in Haaga & Ngbea (2023), underscores this point.

Misinterpretation of the scripture is common among the religions of the book, such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. In Islam, fanatics and fundamentalists misinterpreted Jihad to stand for physical combat against non-Muslims instead of a spiritual attack against evil and demons. Religious fanatics or fundamentalist adopt purely literal as opposed to metaphorical or mythical interpretations of their holy scripture deny the validity of interpretations of other religious traditions and assume that religious truth resides with their perspective, thus, creating a lopsided message to their adherents and the society. The literal interpretation of the scriptures could lead to false doctrine, and false doctrine could lead members to puff up with the sense of superiority in revelation, making the one in error unteachable and placing emphasis upon fleshly activities as a gateway to the spiritual, as in asceticism and vegetarianism (p. 167).

Ede (2020) supports the notion that a significant danger among adherents of various religions in Nigeria is the belief in the supremacy of their faith over others. Many religious practitioners, particularly Christians and Muslims, view their religion as the sole authentic path. This mindset leads them to employ various means to convert others to their beliefs. When a specific group perceives itself as the only true religion and begins to adopt extreme views, conflicts arise as they insist that everyone must conform to their beliefs. Those holding these extreme views often indoctrinate others, magnifying their beliefs and personal inclinations to an unwavering certainty. Such a mindset clouds judgment and closes off rational discourse.

When these narrow beliefs are transmitted to the next generation, a breeding ground for religious extremism is created. Individuals raised in this environment develop a worldview that lacks empathy for differing beliefs, often resorting to coercion or even violence against those who oppose their faith, all while mistakenly believing they are serving a higher purpose. This fanaticism elevates belief claims to an absurd level of certainty that disregards logical reasoning.

In this context, the study posits that religious extremism in Africa mirrors Francis Bacon's concept of the idols of the mind, which obstructs genuine understanding. According to Bacon in *Novum Organum*, knowledge is derived from objects in nature, yet we invariably impose our interpretations upon these objects. The same applies to the interpretation of religious texts; with a preconceived mindset, we overlay our biases instead of approaching the text with openness. To grasp knowledge, we inevitably impose our frameworks—our "creations of the mind and hand" (p. 12)—which leads to distorted perceptions and hinders true understanding. The idols of the mind alter our perceptions, preventing us from viewing matters objectively or accepting alternative perspectives, even when reason is abundantly available. Consequently, anything that does not fit within an individual's established framework is deemed incorrect. This jingoistic approach to beliefs obstructs our ability to interpret other religions through a lens of understanding. If these alternate beliefs fall short of our criteria, they are dismissed outright.

When we interpret religious texts with a closed mind resistant to new insights, we inevitably see only what we wish to see, rather than what truly is. Extreme religious views predispose the mind to perceive things in a particular manner. The human understanding becomes akin to a false mirror, which, by receiving light irregularly, distorts and misrepresents the nature of reality by intermingling its own biases (Bacon, 1863). This distortion is exemplified by extremist groups like Boko Haram, who espouse the absurd belief that Western education is evil, even as they utilize tools and weaponry derived from that very education. Religious extremism distorts the mind, colouring perceptions and configuring everything to align with its hue.

Religious extremism, when examined through the lens of Bacon's Idols of the Mind, can be observed in the various types of these idols. The idol of the tribe signifies a tendency to accept appearances at face value without thorough investigation. This includes a propensity to cling to outdated beliefs, perceive things as fixed, read finality into nature, and see things only as one desires them to be (Omeregbe, 2011). Such tendencies provide insight into religious extremism, which often involves a superficial interpretation of texts and discourages questioning. This mindset inhibits the evolution of faith, even in the face of changing times, as it remains fixated on antiquated models that contradict reason. Consequently, individuals are prone to perceiving reality not as it is, but as they wish it to be.

The idols of the cave represent the unique ways in which individuals interpret nature, shaped by their “peculiar and singular disposition” (Bacon, 1902, p. 21). Copleston (1953) elaborates, stating that the “idols of the den” encompass errors specific to each individual, influenced by temperament, education, and personal experiences (p. 303). For example, a child raised with the belief that all Catholics are idolaters or that all Christians are infidels finds it challenging to adopt a different perspective. Such a person views the world through this distorted lens, potentially leading to irrational actions, including violence against others in the name of God, often without hesitation.

The idols of the marketplace reflect errors stemming from the influence of language. Commonly used words often represent things as they are generally understood; however, when insightful minds perceive the inadequacy of this conventional analysis, language can obstruct the expression of more nuanced insights (Copleston, 1953). The translation of holy texts in Christianity and Islam from their original languages into English or other major Nigerian languages can result in the loss of meanings. This frequently leads to literal interpretations and misinterpretations of texts, which have been fundamental in the propagation of extremist religious views in Nigeria.

The idols of the theatre represent philosophical systems of the past, akin to stage plays that depict unreal worlds created by humanity. These established philosophical and theological systems, handed down through generations, contribute significantly to the perpetuation of religious extremism (Bacon, 1869). A closer examination reveals that this phenomenon reflects one of the primary causes of such extremism. Given that humans are inherently imperfect beings, the truth revealed through religion is inevitably coloured by human flaws. Consequently, interpretations may either distort what was originally conveyed, reflect personal understandings, or exaggerate meanings.

For instance, many Christians interpret the biblical story of Eden as a literal account rather than recognizing its primary purpose: to illustrate the origin of all things as divine. Similarly, some Muslims believe in a paradise where martyrs are rewarded with seven virgins, viewing such beliefs as justifiable grounds for extreme actions in the name of Allah. Meanwhile, traditionalists hold a view of the afterlife where individuals who lead good lives join the ranks of their ancestors in a world resembling the present. Each of these religious groups adheres firmly to their beliefs, remaining resistant to alternative perspectives. This rigidity forms the foundation of religious extremism.

## Conclusion

Through an in-depth exploration of religion, religious extremism, its manifestations in Nigeria, and Francis Bacon’s *Idols of the Mind*, our discourse has effectively addressed the inquiry: *A Critical Examination of Religious Fanaticism in Nigeria as a Reflection of Francis Bacon’s Idols of the Mind*. We have illustrated how religious extremism, akin to Bacon’s idols, distorts perception, causing everything within its realm to adopt its particular hue, thereby obstructing the pursuit of true knowledge. We have emphasized that religious indoctrination and a jingoistic approach to faith render the mind resistant to alternative perspectives, maintaining a fixation on outdated models even in the presence of compelling reasoning. Consequently, just as Bacon’s idols of the mind distort understanding by shaping nature to fit individual predispositions, religious extremism stubbornly configures reality to align with its pre-established categorical frameworks. Thus, similar to Bacon’s false mirrors that misrepresent nature, religious extremism serves as a deceptive lens, obscuring the true purpose of religion, which should fundamentally be a transformative instrument for individuals and society alike.

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