

WHAT IS FANATICISM?

The exercise of faith in the Lord's service calls for zeal but when zeal is excessive or goes beyond the bounds of reason contrary to the Scriptures, it loses spiritual value. A Christian is required to show that he has the Spirit of God by his utterances and deeds which should reflect Christ-like qualities.

Fanaticism is defined as violent, unreasoning or excessive enthusiasm especially in religious matters. And a person who is filled with such enthusiasm is a fanatic.

According to the Encyclopedia of Religion and Religions by E. Royston Pike, a fanatic was originally a person who was occupied in the service of a temple to the exclusion of all other interest. "In course of time the word assumed an opprobrious meaning, being applied to persons whose zeal in religious matters is apt to outrun not only their discretion but the bounds of human feeling – all with the idea of acting so as to be particularly pleasing to God." As it is in religion, so it is in politics and there are political fanatics all over the world today.

There is nothing wrong in seeking to please God. Such an attitude is most commendable. But in our effort to please Him care must be taken that His commandments are not overstepped. Many people had wrongly been called fanatics when, in fact, they had taken the right course of faith in God. Even today acts of firmness or constancy in the Christian faith are sometimes regarded by non-Christians and nominal Christians alike as having sprung from fanaticism.

For instance, in this country some Christians so-called subscribe to contributions of their villages or tribal unions that are meant for idolatrous purposes or for things unchristian. They may intend to erect a

shrine, or build a house for the revival of an ancient god of agriculture or of thunder or of war, or clean the town preparatory to a juju festival, or want to consult oracles in respect of an epidemic or a land case, and so forth.

But a true Christian, who definitely refuses to contribute in any way to such things because they are contrary to his faith, may be branded a fanatic or as unpatriotic. This, obviously, is an error of judgment. A Christian who abides by the tenets of his faith as is consistent with the Scriptures is not a fanatic. He deserves to be commended for his integrity and steadfastness.

Experience of Mordecai

There are such instances in the Holy Bible. The experience of Mordecai in the kingdom of Medo-Persia is a case in point. He was a Jewish exile who was employed in the palace of Ahasuerus the King. When Haman, one of the officers of the king, was promoted an order was issued to the effect that the servants of the king should bow down and do obeisance to him (Haman). While all the other servants did bow, Mordecai, being a Jew who worshipped the Almighty God, bluntly refused to do so.

His attitude was not borne out of pride but was due to his awareness of the law of God and his determination to obey Him rather than men. His fellow servants did not appreciate why he should flout his majesty's command. In spite of their daily challenges Mordecai remained firm, and so they reported the matter to Haman. When he saw that Mordecai was not bowing to him, he felt that his pride had been wounded and was filled with anger. Having learnt that Mordecai was a Jew he scorned to deal with him alone, and sought to destroy all the Jews throughout the whole kingdom. – Read Esther 3:1-6

In carrying out his plot he made a false and malicious misrepresentation of

the Jews to the king. He painted them as a people who were disaffected to the government. He said: "There is a certain people, dispersed among the many peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom, who keep themselves apart. Their laws are different from those of every other people; they do not keep your majesty's laws. It does not befit your majesty to tolerate them. If it pleases your majesty, let an order be made in writing for their destruction; and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver to your majesty's officials, to be deposited in the royal treasury." – Esther 3:8, 9, New English Bible

It is a matter of great lesson that it was not long before the day of retribution dawned upon Haman. The plot and mischief which he contrived for the annihilation of the people of God returned upon his own head. Thus he was hanged on the very gallows he had prepared for Mordecai!

And consequently, Mordecai having, proved to be a man of integrity and merit, became the favourite of the king. He was then elevated and he succeeded Haman in office, being made next in rank to the king.

A rash person who of course is without spiritual understanding would easily have passed sentence on Mordecai as having been guilty of fanaticism for flouting the king's law. Such was the opinion of his fellow servants and Haman who preferred to place God's law in a secondary position as below that of the king. But the truth is that he (Mordecai) was not a fanatic. He was just firm and steadfast in his faith in God to whom even the king was subject – yet without the least intention to be disloyal to the government. And Mordecai was indeed vindicated because his cause was just.

Three Faithful Jews

Another instance that readily comes to mind is that of the three faithful

Jews with the Babylonish names of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who were administrative officers in the kingdom of Babylon.

Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, had set up a golden image of an enormous size to be dedicated. He summoned all his high-ranking officers – civil and military – from all provinces of his extensive dominion to attend the dedication. The royal command was that all peoples and nations of every language were to prostrate themselves and worship the golden image when they heard the sound of musical instruments. And whoever refused compliance with the order was immediately to be thrown into a blazing furnace.

All the peoples with the exception of the three Jews did obey the order. The Jews were mindful of the law of God prohibiting the worship of idols. (Exodus 20:3-5, Isaiah 2:8, 9) The fact that the image was of gold and was set up by a king does not make it different from any other idol. The law of God must take precedence over the laws of men. Under such circumstances, man for carnal considerations are prone to attribute fanaticism to those who on the ground of genuine faith refuse to toe the line of the majority – more so when the order are from the rulers. But the attitude of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego was far from being fanatical. It was but a demonstration of intrepid faith and courage which are attributes of the faithful.

When Nebuchadnezzar was informed that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego disobeyed the order he, as is characteristic of some men in authority, was rashly infuriated without consideration for the faith and conscience of the Jews who had all along proved to be loyal, quiet and helpful subjects. The three of them maintained their courageous refusal and stood firm on the ground of their faith despite the fury and threats of the king. (Read Daniel 3:1-18) As a result of this the three faithful Jews were thrown into the burning fiery furnace. God Almighty, the God of

unequalled wonders, delivered them so miraculously that the king was amazed. They came out of the fire unhurt and without the slightest smell of fire. – Daniel 3:26, 27, Exodus 15:11, Psalm 136:1, 4

Nebuchadnezzar was compelled to swallow his pride and he blessed the Most High for sending His angels to deliver “...His servants that trusted in him, and have changed the king’s word, and yielded their bodies, that they might not serve nor worship any god, except their own God.” He then declared: “Therefore I make a decree, That every people, nation, and language, which speak any thing amiss against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, shall be cut in pieces, and their houses shall be made a dunghill: because there is no other God that can deliver after this sort. Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, in the province of Babylon.” – Daniel 3:29-30

There is much to learn from the whole episode. Majority – in many cases – is not always right. (Exodus 23:2, Matthew 7:12-14) Though Nebuchadnezzar and his host of officers used their positions and power against the very few faithful worshippers of God; they were proved to be wrong.

Even, today, where an emperor, a king, president or government in any part of the world sets up any object for special respect or reverence and a Christian on the ground of his faith refuses to give such reverence to an inanimate object he may be branded a fanatic or as an unpatriotic fellow. And some may go to the extent of persecuting the innocent like as Nebuchadnezzar did.

However, it is a matter of gratitude to God that there are also many rulers in the world in our time who have high regard for religious freedom and toleration. They concede to citizens their right to practise their religions according to the dictate of their conscience with less a hindrance.

These points are made in order to correct the wrong notion whereby some mistake sincere acts of faith and integrity for fanaticism.

Acts of Fanaticism

In ecclesiastical history instances of acts of fanaticism abound. When Saul of Tarsus as a Pharisee practised Judaism, he was a fanatic. Without taking pains to get an insight into the basis of the Christian faith as professed by the apostles and other disciples of Jesus Christ, he subjected them to cruel persecutions. His excessive zeal for the traditions of his fathers always drove him into acts of violence against the Christians.

After his conversion to Christianity he regretted his pharisaical fanaticism and confessed his ignorance which made him obtain the mercy of God. He wrote: “You have heard what my manner of life was when I was still a practising Jew; how savagely I persecuted the church of God, and tried to destroy it, and how in the practice of our national religion I was outstripping many of my Jewish contemporaries in my boundless devotion to traditions for my ancestors...” – Galatians 1:13-16, New English Bible

And in his first epistle to Timothy, his beloved spiritual son in the gospel, he stated of himself as one “Who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious:” He then added: “but I obtained mercy, because I did *it* ignorantly in unbelief.” – 1 Timothy 1:13

During the religious upheavals of the 16th century termed “The Reformation” fanaticism was deeply rooted in the actions of many who purported to be the advocates of Christianity. There can be no justification on the basis of the Scriptures for such actions which led to the destruction of lives and property, setting ablaze of copies of the Holy Bible and condemning of souls to the flames. Nowhere in the sacred Scriptures – since the advent of Jesus Christ, the Reformer – is it stated that God mandated human beings to take vengeance or take away the life of a

person because of differences in doctrines or beliefs.

It is most unfortunate that up till today, incidents fraught with fanaticism are often in the news, both from among Christians so-called and those of other faiths. That people who profess Christianity should resort to the use of carnal weapons and indulge in brutal violence and bloodshed is very unfortunate indeed. This is Fanaticism at its worst. Whether the basis of the controversy is religious or political it stands condemned at the bar of reason, and above all from a scriptural standpoint.

In the days of old before the advent of Jesus Christ, physical or carnal weapons were employed by the people of God against their enemies. This is disallowed in the Christian Era. The word of God described as the sword of the Spirit (Ephesians 6:17) is the weapon Christians are urged to employ in the battle against falsehood and all unrighteousness. And St. Paul stated: "For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh: (For the weapons of our warfare *are* not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds;) Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ." – 2 Corinthians 10:3-5

A Nigeria national magazine, SPEAR(August 1972) carried a comprehensive feature story on Northern Ireland described as "The Land of Terror and Murder" by Stephanie Richards. The war is between the Protestants and the Catholics. Concerning the situation there the writer put it thus:

"In the emotionally-charged atmosphere in Ulster, Logic and peace are as alien as goodwill and fair settlement... With this fierce hatred between the two religious groups it seems the country will never know peace for any length of time."

Stephanie Richards concluded:

“It would take a miracle indeed – either a Catholic or Protestant induced one – to penetrate the cancerous growth of bitterness – so that the past may be forgotten and these ardent representatives of Christianity could start practising what their respective doctrines teach.”

Is this not a reproach on Christianity especially the denominations concerned? Until they remove this stigma from their faces and put their houses in order their priests anywhere are not competent to pose as ambassadors of Christ to teach men the love and fear of God. St. Paul Asked: “Thou therefore which teachest another, teachest thou not thyself? ...Thou that makest thy boast of the law, through breaking the law dishonourest thou God? For the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles through you...” – Romans 2:21-24

The other day, sometime in 1969, there were reports of the burning of the Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. This was widely condemned by the GKS and other Christian groups as an ungodly act. And when feelings among Moslems were rising high in this country, the Daily Times reported Alhaji Dauda Adegbenro as warning “Moslems in Nigeria against making any policy statements on the burning of the Al Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem UNTIL ALL THE FACTS WERE KNOWN”. He was reported to have added: “We in Nigeria are too far away from the spot to know all the delicate issues involved.” – Daily Times, September 9, 1969. (*Caps ours*) It was a timely and judicious advice acclaimed as having helped to check action that would have outrun reason.

This country loves peace and unity and so should not subscribe to any act that will promote religious or political rancour or conflict. Rather, we should be tolerant and should always pursue what will make for quietness and good neighbourliness. But fanatics who resort to physical violence and destructive acts should be punished according to the law.

There was also a news item (Daily Times, August 17, 1972) that a Moslem leader and teacher was alleged to have led some of his followers to damage the doors and windows of a building belonging to an Ogboni cult. If this was true then their action of physical violence was fanaticism. But there would have been nothing wrong if the Moslem preacher had employed the authority of the Koran as it is, like the Holy Bible, against secret societies in criticizing and denouncing Ogbonism as a warning to the public, particularly the Moslems.

In February this year 40 pupils as reported by the Daily Times (Feb. 12, 1973) were injured when a group of religious adherents entered into Saint Joseph Catholic School, Kaduna, to seek retaliation. Doors and windows of the school were alleged to have been shattered, and a car belonging to a priest destroyed. The children of the Catholic faith were reported to have disturbed the devotion of the other group by pouring sand on worshippers and deliberately making horrible noise to distract their attention.

Such fanaticism as was manifested in the act of the Catholic children was unchristian and therefore devilish and must be strongly discouraged. Similarly, the Moslem youths whose "2 p.m. Jumat prayers" were disturbed, and whose anger was justified, were wrong for acting ungodly in damaging "doors and windows of the school" of their offenders and in destroying "a car belonging to a Reverend Father who is in charge of the school". It is universally known that two wrongs do not make a right.

With regard to the incident the President of God's Kingdom Society, Brother E. T. Otomewo, sent a telegram dated February 14, 1973, to the Catholic Bishop in Kaduna as follows:

"HIS LORDSHIP THE ROMAN CATHOLIC BISHOP KADUNA X I
REFER TO NEWS ITEM DAILY TIMES TWELFTH INSTANT PAGE
THREE REPORTING VENGEANCE TAKEN ON YOUR SAINT JOSEPH

SCHOOL CHILDREN KADUNA BY CHILDREN OF ANOTHER RELIGIOUS GROUP FOR DESTURBING THEIR DEVOTION X IF PUBLICATION IS TRUE LET US PRAY GOD ALMIGHTY NOT ALLOW BIGUTS TURN NIGERIA INTO WHAT WE READ ABOUT NORTHERN IRELAND TODAY X IT IS VERY UNCHRISTIAN FOR YOUR SCHOOL CHILDREN TO ACT IN THE UNRULY WAY REPORTED X CHRISTIANITY AS YOU KNOW IS OPPOSED TO FANATICISM AND VIOLENCE BUT ADVOCATES TOLERANCE GOOD NEIGHBOURLINESS AND PEACEFUL CO-EXISTENCE AT THIS STAGE I REMIND YOUR LORDSHIP OF ROMANS CHAPTER TWELVE VERSES SEVENTEEN TO NINETEEN AND VERSE TWENTYONE X I HOPE YOUR LORDSHIP WILL THEREFORE TAKE IMMEDIATE ACTION TO RECTIFY THE SITUATION AND PROMOTE GOOD NEIGHBOURLINESS — OTOMEWO PRESIDENT GKS.”

Wheat and Tares

An understanding of the parable of Jesus Christ concerning the good seed and the tares is enough to inspire religious toleration and co-existence of all religious groups – good or bad, true or false.

The tares were planted among the wheat by an enemy. And when the servants of the master attempted to remove the tares, he objected saying, “...Nay; lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up also the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn.” – Read Matthew 13:24-30

In interpreting the parable Christ said that the good seeds were the children of God’s Kingdom; the tares were the children of Satan; the harvest was the end of the world; and the reapers were the angels. He added: “As therefore the tares are gathered and burned in the fire; so shall

it be in the end of this world. The Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity; And shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Who hath ears to hear, let him hear.”

Read Matthew 13:37-43

In the light of the foregoing passage anyone who expresses his religious belief unreasonably by resorting to violence against others is guilty of fanaticism. God through His angels will take steps soon in this our age to deal with false religionists. It will be wrong there fore for any person to go before God. No human is mandated by God to take vengeance on people.

What is more, St. Paul admonished “Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but *rather* give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.” – Romans 12:19, Read also Proverbs 24:29.