Finding Religious Tolerance on Twitter

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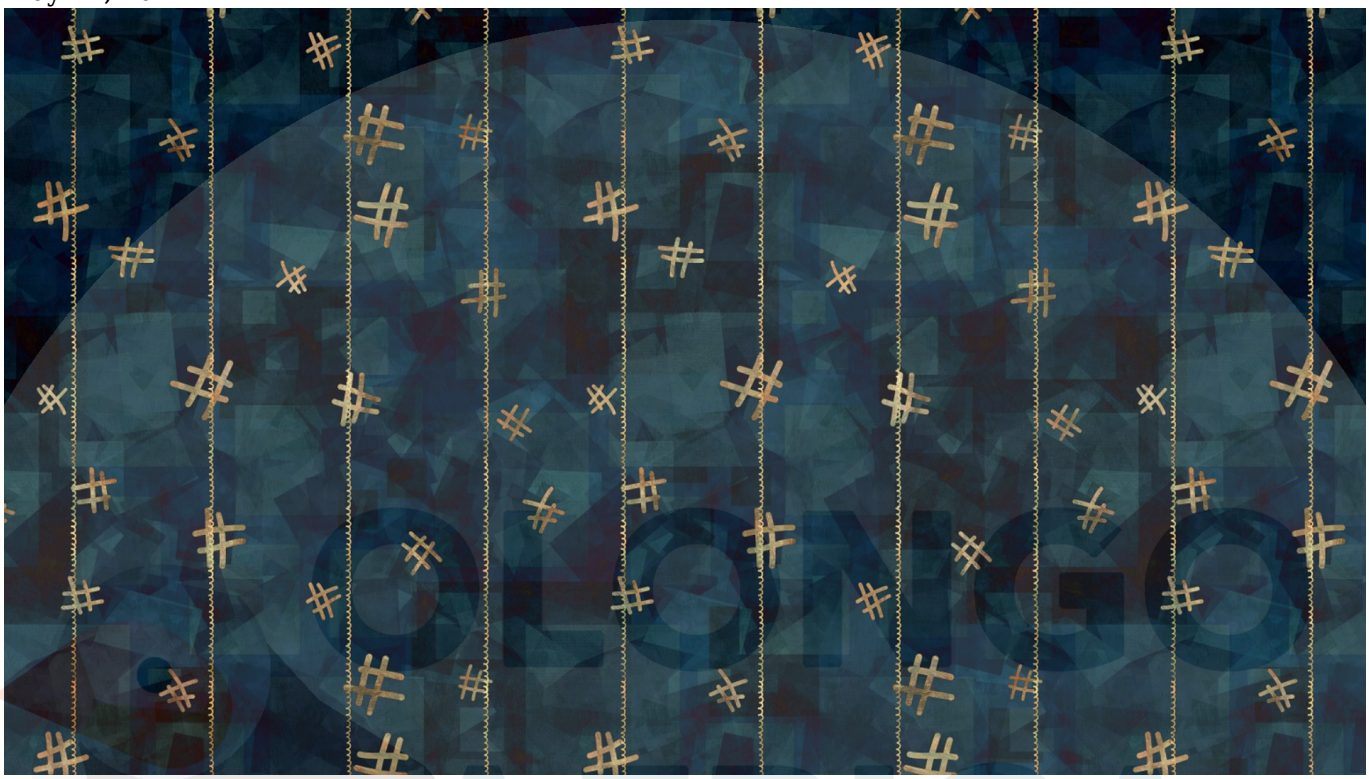

On this Wednesday, we reached a partnership with our Brick House colleagues at Preachy for our first co-written piece.

It is difficult to come across atheists in Nigeria. In a country where hope seems perpetually lost in the fog of corruption and chaos; where you'd often hear tales of humans flying at night or morphing into animals and yams, it makes sense that the average Nigerian hangs onto the comfort of believing that there's a supreme being watching over us. I am one of such people, and for most of my life, I never grasped why anyone would not believe in the supernatural. Amid the raging pangs of poverty and irresponsibility of elected government officials, hope is the only thing the people hold on to. And religion provides hope in torrents.

I first encountered atheists on Twitter. Before then, they were almost elusive to me. I'd heard about them in church, read about them in the bible, been warned against atheism and *the danger of losing God* by my mother. But to go through the Twitter timelines of people that didn't believe in God was…new.

There were subtle posts; the type of stuff I expected: the *god is not real*, the dismissal of the power of prayer, the disbelief in miracles. Then there were the tweets that were not so subtle. The almost-essays, and the near-dissertations that did everything from attack the men of the bible to criticise God. I was mortified.

Whenever I found myself face-to-face with views that contradicted mine, the sensation that followed was what I imagined my head would feel like if a can of spiders were poured inside my cranium. I would even take a deep breath to brace myself for the annoyance, anger, even, that would surely follow. Eventually, I learned to filter out certain words from my timeline. Words like "sky daddy" and "atheist". Anything, really, that I felt would invite uncomfortable opinions to my feed. Did it work?

Almost.

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The topic is, “Inter-religious marriages”. It is not as exciting as the previous one, “Blowjobs and other forms of oral sex”, so the group-chat is slow to respond today.

“I don’t think it matters,” I text. “As long as both families are alright with it, there’s nothing there.”

Because to me, the *ban* on inter-religious relationships is unbiblical. It is nothing but a reflection of human intolerance. And so, the folks that do not have a problem with contrasting doctrines should not have to suffer for it. At least, that is how I think it should be: one size doesn’t fit all, in this situation.

However, as other people arrive at our digital conference of random subjects, I learn that there *is* something there. Conversations begin to broaden: on one side are the Christians who believe that the children of God should have nothing to do with sinners or unbelievers. On the other hand are the Christians indifferent to the conversation of marriage. As you might expect, the former are a vocal bunch.The bible verse that I’m reminded of is 2 Corinthians 6:14, “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? “

To be “yoked together” with unbelievers is to get too close, too familiar. It is to put yourself at risk of getting “tainted” by opinions and ideas that are not inline with The Word. To be yoked together with unbelievers is to soil your white (purity) with mud. It is to dim your light. To many Christians, especially in Nigeria, any other form of faith (that isn’t Christianity) is a call to the darkness. Basically, unbelievers—non-Christians—have not seen the light yet, and still live in the dark (sin).

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The older I’ve grown, and the more experience I’ve earned, , I’ve become much more critical of everything in the world. Why aren’t girls encouraged to play sports the way that boys are? Why are piercings and tattoos “unprofessional”? Who decided that sunglasses were cool? How are we certain that the bible wasn’t tampered with? Questions like the first three were easy. They did not shake my belief system. They did not give me sleepless nights, worrying that my thoughts were blasphemous. They did not make my friends and family question my loyalty to God.

Having doubts about religion is almost like having a mental health crisis. There is the part of me that is apprehensive about every little thing: the validity of miracles, the truth in scripture, ridiculously affluent pastors, and it is in constant conflict with the part that prays every day; the part that finds comfort in the existence of a supreme being. Being a product of a religious home, a bunch of the teachings and religious lessons that I grew up with sometimes clash with my personal understanding of life. Even though, at the time, I didn’t have the right words to describe some of the things I felt about religion and the practice of it in this part of the word, I was sure that some sort of contradiction existed.

That’s when I stumbled on the cognitive melting pot that is twitter. And I discovered that for every idea or opinion that I couldn’t fully explain, even to myself, there were tweets and whole threads by complete strangers with just the right words to convey my deepest thoughts. For me, Twitter became more than a shopping mall of ideas: it furnished me with a school where various ideas co-existed side by side, something rich, expansive, much more than I had ever been in contact with. I found that, even among people like me that believed strongly in God; that pray and fast, that read their bibles; that go to church, there were people that asked the same questions that I did. I also

discovered the people that asked these questions to the point that they saw no reason to believe.

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I am still new to Twitter. But in a short time, I have learned that there are *cliques* in this space, and that they are created based on agreement on opinions: there are always opinions floating around; opinions about gender, about political leaders, about tribe; any topic, really, that can cause division.

Because of the people I follow, my introduction to "Religious Twitter" is in the form of tweets that show reverence to God. There is the usual, "My God can never flop," based on a popular skit, and the much longer tweets, reserved, seemingly, for bible studies and prayers and manifestations.

And then, during one of my late night scrolls, I see it.

"god does not exist."

The words sit in the middle of a long thread, but I am hardly bothered by the contents of the tweet. It is not the jarring finality of the sentence, or the thunderous echo it created in the back of my mind that made me stay still on that page, staring at the words, pondering on the audacity of such confession. What sticks out to me is the first letter of the sentence. The small "g" that disobeys the grammar rule of starting a sentence with a capital letter. The small "g" that, in all its frailness, I consider too small to carry the weight of an Almighty being. All my religious sensibilities are offended by the ridiculous proclamation of God's inexistence.

Reading the sentence feels like a sin on its own.

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Everybody's lived experience is unique. It is based on everything from how they look to their perspective of life, while also contributing to said perspective, and the opinions that they hold. I like to see twitter as the, "Big Book of Lived Experiences", because it has introduced me to the views and ideas of people I'd usually never encounter in real life.

Every now and then, an image jumps into my head. It is a Juju priest strutting the aisle of a bus, dressed in a red wrapper, decorated with cowries and feathers and other odd things, and chanting incantations, much to the dismay(and fear) of the passengers, who are an almost accurate representation of Nigeria's religious population: half Christian, and half Muslim. People like the Juju priest make up a meagre zero-point-something percent.

It was a post on bus preachers that left this image in my head. In most Nigerian states, before an interstate trip, it is normal for a pastor, armed with a bible, to pray for the safety of the trip and preach to the passengers.

"But how'd you feel if a *babalawo* entered the bus and started chanting?" the tweet asked.

Mortified. I would be mortified.

I had never perceived public preaching as anything out of the ordinary. When churches blasted their sermons too loud from their speakers, or street preachers shouted scriptures from megaphones as early as six in the morning, I considered these actions completely normal. Never in my life had I ever considered that they were a disturbance to people who were uninterested in the Word. And I was very sure I would detest it if someone started yelling, "There is no God!" at six in the morning (frankly, even Christian street preachers get on my nerves).

From that moment, there was a shift in my brain, and my mind opened to the many ways that Christians, especially, aren't as respectful with their beliefs and practices as we think. I noticed how odd it was for evangelists to continue preaching to people even when they've already announced that they're not Christian. I noticed that, as "tolerant" as we called ourselves, some people still got disowned by their parents (even their entire family) when they confessed that they didn't believe in God or wanted to practice a different religion. I realised how wild it was for Christians on twitter to try to convince an atheist woman that she was "doing the wrong thing" by raising her children as atheists like her and she should, "take the children to church, at least" (can you even begin to imagine the uproar that'd follow if an atheist told a Christian to, "stop taking the children to church, at least"?)

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I don't quite know why, or how to explain it, but my general annoyance at non-religious folks had come to an end. Maybe it was empathy, suddenly seeing things from their point of view, but, in a weird way, I no longer perceived atheism as "ridiculous" or outrightly disrespectful. To an extent, I realised that being religious makes it harder for us to understand other people's perspectives about issues. There seems to be a close-mindedness that comes with being religious which, as practised in Nigeria, requires being parochial and slightly intolerant of any other view of life. But, for me, Twitter, even with some of its problematic opinions and perspectives, opened me up to the possibilities of cross-learning. I became interested in understanding the intricacies of atheism and what would have prompted anyone to believe in the exact opposite of what the two popular faiths in Nigeria hold sacrosanct.

This is not to say, though, that non-religious people can't be disrespectful towards believers. It is one thing to have an opinion, but it is an entirely different thing to mock people that do not share those opinions, by shaming them for believing in the power of miracles, for example. I also think it's the height of disrespect to make scripturally ignorant statements about a religion, which are based on said scripture. It will never not strike me as an effort to be intentionally obtuse. I remember reading a tweet claiming that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was raped by the Holy Spirit. If the person had *actually* taken time out to read the scripture objectively, maybe they would not have come to such a ridiculous conclusion.

Obviously, from a religious perspective, to denounce the existence of God is blasphemy, which *is* registered as a sin in the bible. However, from the perspective of a regular human being who recognises that everybody has the right to say what they believe and what they do not, (as long as it is not harmful or encouraging harm), I am unbothered.

Like every other platform of human convergence, Twitter has its share of people who, rather than have civil conversations, are mostly interested in starting troubles; with their offensive and insensitive takes. I have learnt to deal with these excesses and to take only the ideas that appeal to my worldview while studying and learning about the different opinions: to change a thing, you must first understand it.

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