

## **"Conflict and Christianity" Lecture Series: Nigeria-Challenges to Contemporary Society**

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### **Brief Survey of Modern Nigeria**

Nigeria is currently populated by about 120 million people with 300 tribes and 200 languages. As a result of different historical backgrounds, the divide and rule policy of the British colonialists and the implementation of different forms of government in different parts of the country, Nigeria is today divided sharply into six geo-political zones, namely: North West, North Central, North East, South West, South East and South-South. This divide is actually deeper than it is described here. The multiplicity of ethnic groups and the apparent competition between the two main religions (Christianity and Islam) have further heightened this division. This division has largely dictated the political and economic evolution of Nigeria. The North dominates the political landscape; the South West dominates the economy while the South East dominates the commercial enterprise. The immediate consequence is that the South is pro-West and pro-globalization while the North is anti-West, anti-globalization and pro Muslim world. The ultimate consequence is that the common struggle for Independence in the 1950s has been forgotten and replaced with regional and tribal quest for hegemony (M. Hiskett: 1987).

### **Historical Roots of Muslim-Christian Tensions**

#### **Islam:**

Before the sixteenth century, Islam was principally a religion centred in urban areas of West Africa. But by the beginning of the last century, the religion had rapidly spread by the Kuma Arabs and the Fulanis, who were nomads. The Fulanis are known to have originated from the Futa Toro in Senegal. After the fall of the Ghana Empire, they moved rapidly towards the East and eventually reached the northern parts of Nigeria. They settled in the kingdom of Gobir, one of the Hausa states in the eighteenth century. Gradually, they conquered the seven Hausa states and defeated the kingdom of Bornu in 1808 but could not occupy it for some reasons. The leader of this group was Uthman Dan Fodio who was a Muslim cleric. He was filled with disgust at the way clerics compromised with pagan practices, the way Fulfulde clerics like himself were treated by the pagan rulers and was also filled with the zeal to expand the realm of the divine law, the Shar'iah; his aim was the purification and spread of the practice of Islam. This is the source and the beginning of what came to be known later in history as the "Jihad movement" of the nineteenth century (J.B Webster and A. A. Boahen, 1980).

Islam gave Northern Nigeria useful connection with the Islamic World with which they exchanged articles of trade and knowledge and political relationship. Originally, each people gave its obedience and loyalty to only its king whose area of control had territorial limits; but with Islam, faith has no territorial limit to expansion. Thus many

small kingdoms came together under Islam and were able to form a united force. R. A. Adeleye wrote "The Sokoto caliphate owes its successful establishment far more to the common bond provided by Islam than to any military superiority of the Mujahiddun over their adversaries" (R. A. Adeleye 1967 p. 3). Islam also acted as a unifying cultural force and administrative system of government.

As a result of the above efforts, Islamic brotherhood was directly opposed to ethnic feeling and with the introduction of politics to Northern Nigeria and with the coming into being of the McPherson constitution, (1950), its leaders sought to continue the tradition of ignoring ethnic peculiarities by creating a multi-ethnic political party. This subsequently led to the creation of Jami'yyar Mutanen Arewa the congress of people from the North. This later metamorphosed into two parties namely, Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU) and Northern Peoples Congress (NPC). This Islamic hegemony continued at Independence because, the British Colonialists handed over government at the federal level to the Muslim North, since they won at the federal level as a result of their large population. The hegemony continued during the military era with much emphasis on the religion of Islam.

Anti-western, anti-secular and anti-Christian feelings resurfaced in the second Republic in the 1980s. In fact, it is very clear from the programmes and outlook of the three major political parties in the 80s namely. National Party of Nigeria (NPN), Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), and Nigerian Peoples Party (NPP) that they were based on regional and religious leanings. This had a significant impact on the government in power at this period and its programmes. This will be further developed later.

### **Christianity:**

The Portuguese had more or less a monopoly of movement along the West African coast in the 17th and 18th centuries and the spread of Christianity was their chief aim. Along with it nevertheless, they attached importance to commerce because of the support it gave to their missionary work. Portugal had had a long and bitter struggle against the Muslims in North Africa who had for a long time dominated the Iberian Peninsula - where grew up an active resistance to Muslim domination. They carried this war against Islam in Europe to Africa. It was a war against the Moors in North Africa. They later moved to West Africa but they did not succeed for various reasons. The Catholics through the influence of the Portuguese traders were the first missionaries to set foot on Nigerian soil. By the 19th century the first English missionary groups had established their presence very rapidly. By the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Christianity had spread to every part of Nigeria except the north western and north-eastern parts of the country.

The greatest contribution of the missionaries in Nigeria was in the field of education. The first known school in Nigeria was established by Mr. & Mrs. De Graft of the Methodist mission in Badagry and was named "Nursery of the infant Church". But it was the C.M.S. mission that made the most important contribution to education in this early period. The primary objective of the early Christian missionaries was to convert Africans to Christianity through education. Education was Bishop Crowther's chief method of evangelism. Missionaries also hoped to prepare Africans to be administrators in their own areas.

The rapid growth of converts from Islam and traditional religions to Christianity made the Northern Traditional rulers to put pressure on the colonialists to stop the advance of Christianity to the north western and north eastern parts of the country.

The 1970s and 1980s saw an accelerated growth of Christianity because of the impact of the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements and the Independent African Churches. By then, it was said that Nigeria had the largest number of evangelical Christians in universities and colleges worldwide (Patrick Johnston: Operation World, WEC International 2001) There was also the establishment of indigenous missionary groups who focused their attention on reaching the unreached peoples. These, coupled with the fact that more Christians were getting involved in politics led to conflict between the Christians and the Muslims. The first major conflict was centred on the entrenchment of the Federal Sharia Court of Appeal in the Nigerian Constitution. The second was the establishment of an "Islamic Board" at the presidency. The Christians criticized these as a subtle means of Islamizing Nigeria.

### **Political Manipulation of Religious Tensions**

The advent of democracy in the 1980s with the break-up of the regions into states, brought with it the use of religion for political ends. In addition to the conflict generated by the Federal Sharia Court of Appeal and the Islamic Board, there was a sinister move by the federal government to register Nigeria as a full member of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC). These three issues agitated the minds of the Nigerian Christians to the extent that these issues became divisive forces in the political emancipation of the country. In fact, politicians and ordinary Nigerians began to take sides on these issues.

The other major manipulation of religion to serve political ends is the full implementation of the Sharia in some Northern states. As a matter of fact, the civil part of the Shari'ah has always been in the Nigerian constitution right from independence in 1960. But with the advent of the 4th republic in 1999, Muslim politicians in the north sought to introduce the criminal aspects. The major Muslim argument for Shari'ah is that the present Nigerian legal code is English and Christian in origin and content. Therefore, they advocated for a separate law to govern the lives of an average Muslim in Nigeria. However, the Christians saw in between the lines that this was a subtle means to gradually Islamize the country. First, they argued that this part of the Shari'ah was never introduced whenever a Muslim was in power. Why was it introduced now that a Christian is president of the country? Secondly, the Christians believed that from experience, whenever there is a full implementation of the Shari'ah in any country in the world, the Christians have always suffered deprivation, marginalization and discrimination (Pakistan, Somalia, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Iran are good examples). It is therefore their submission that the introduction of the full implementation of the Shari'ah was directed against the Church.

Already twelve states in the North have implemented this with the establishment of a Muslim vigilante group(excluding Kaduna) to enforce this law (These states are Zamfara, Kano, Katsina, Sokoto, Kebbi, Jigawa, Bauchi, Minna, Bornu, Yobe, Gombe, Kaduna). Since then Christians in some of these states have become 2nd class citizens,

as a result of marginalization, discrimination, harassment etc. Even though the governors of these states promised the Christians that their fundamental rights would be guaranteed, churches and schools have been burnt by Muslim youths, many churches have been denied land acquisition, there is a ban on the teaching of Christian religious knowledge in schools, and many Christians have lost their jobs and businesses and relocated.

Two other major issues have resulted in religious tensions between the Christians and Muslims, namely, tensions over demographic statistics and competition among ethnic groups over scarce resources. It has always been argued by the Muslims that they constitute a majority in the North and indeed in the whole of Nigeria. The Christians have denied this claim as spurious. It is true that before now, particularly in the 60s and 70s that Muslims constituted the majority in the extreme parts of Northern Nigeria but with current rapid expansion of the Church in the North especially the Middle Belt, this claim may no longer be true. Unfortunately, since census figures are politically arrived at and therefore unreliable, it is difficult to know which group constitutes the majority in the country.

In recent years, the country has witnessed many communal clashes. Most of these are primarily caused by competition over scarce resources but religion has been used as a cloak to cover up these political rivalries. A major case in point is the conflict between the indigenes of Plateau State and the Hausa settlers. Thousands of lives have been lost as a result of this crisis which is basically ethnic in origin and content but explained away as conflict between the Muslims and the Christians.

There is no doubt that the Christians constitute about 60% of the population of the Middle Belt of Nigeria while the Muslims are about 30%. But as a result of Muslims dominating the government at every level in Northern Nigeria the Christians have suffered political and economic domination. This is another source of major crisis in Nigeria between the Christians and the Muslims.

### **Results of Sharia Implementation and Communal Violence:**

The Northern states have increasingly become a hotbed for religious and ethnic crises as a result of the implementation of the Sharia. Some major results of these crises are the massive dislocation of citizens, loss of life and property and massive refugee problems. Following these is increased segregation of the population along religious and ethnic lines. This has led to a further decrease in Christian representation in the political and economic lives of the North.

### **Variety within Nigerian Islam and Christianity**

Unlike Christians, who consider the Church to be the mystical body of Christ, Islam did not sustain a centralized organization. Instead, Prophet Muhammad's *Khulafah*, Caliphs or successors, provided leadership, but succession disputes frequently arose and divided --and re-divided -- the faithful. Religious

authority became increasingly dispersed among the *ulama*, scholars and clerics in numerous Islamic denominations spread throughout Muslim realms.

The debate over succession began immediately after Prophet Muhammad's death; for he had left no indisputable instructions about the rules of succession or whether spiritual leaders were political leaders as well.

Indeed, the theological and political consequences of these struggles over succession were far-reaching. After Ali's assassination, *Shiat Ali*, the Party of Ali, created its own *Shii* branch of Islam. Initially, the break was over the succession dispute, with the *Shii* favouring a succession based on blood ties to the Prophet. Muslims who favoured an elective system came to be known as *Sunni*, taking their name from *sunna*, which in this context refers to the customs, actions and sayings attributed to the Prophet and the first four Caliphs (otherwise, *sunna* refers only to the Prophet's sayings and deeds). Early divisions in Islam ultimately resulted in scores of Muslim denominations. Virtually all of these different positions are present in Islam as practised in Nigeria with a strong emphasis on radical Islam.

Nigeria is about equally divided between Christians and Muslims, with a small number of animists. If radical Islam is left unchecked, it will continue to provoke widespread inter-religious conflict and that, combined with endemic ethnic strife, may fragment the country. This could make the giant of sub-Saharan Africa - a major oil exporter to the United States and a new, struggling democracy - into a haven for Islamism, linked to foreign collaborators.

As in much of Africa, family law in Nigeria has long drawn on sharia, the body of Islamic law and precedent. But the versions of sharia introduced in the last two years are closer to those imposed by the Taliban in Afghanistan or the Wahhabis in Saudi Arabia. Since 1999, Zamfara state has sexually segregated buses, taxis, and many public places, banned alcohol, enforced a dress code on women, and closed non-Muslim schools. Its *hizbah* (religious enforcers) mete out immediate, harsh punishments for "un-Islamic" activities such as questioning Islamic teaching or women wearing trousers.

## **History of Violence**

A closer examination of all major religions in the world will indicate that the primary aim of the people in adhering to religious doctrines and worship is to attain spiritual salvation i.e. to be in good communion with God and subsequently to enter "the kingdom of God" But it has been discovered that the people's adherence to religious doctrines and worship has underlying consequences for the society at large apart from the attainment of spiritual salvation. "These consequences are what sociologists term the latent function of religion in the society" (Elizabeth K. Nottingham, 1967 pp. 15-20). These functions may have positive or negative consequences for the society. For Nigeria, Christianity and Islam, even though have contributed positively to the growth of the country; have also created a history of violence. (Falola gives a well-documented history of violence in Nigeria).

They have indeed created disintegrative forces within the society. These forces are dictating to a large extent which political party an individual associates with. When it comes to voting at elections, religion dictates to a large extent which candidate or political party an individual votes for. Apart from this, there is the problem of religious fanaticism among the various sects within the same religion. A case in point is the Maitasine riots in Kano, Yola and Maiduguri where about 5,000 people were killed (Christian Association of Nigeria C.A.N. statement read at a press conference held at the Catholic Secretariat, force road, on Monday 14th November, 1983 - p.3). This riot led to an extensive destruction of houses, shops and other property and the destruction of normal life in the country.

There was also the Bulunkutu uprising in Maiduguri in October, 1982. Within the same month, there was the violent demonstration in Sabon Gari, Kano by the Muslim Students Society. These riots led to the loss of many lives and destruction of property.

By 1987, these violent religious riots had taken a bigger dimension by the extent of its scope and destruction. The 6th March, 1987 will forever be remembered by the Christian population in Zaria, Kaduna and other major cities in the area. For the next seven days churches and mosques, hotels and cinemas, business and vehicles, private homes and persons were attacked violently.

All economic, educational and other activities came to a halt. Police and security forces were completely absent from the scenes of these attacks because these attacks were believed to have had political and religious backing. These events were not the brain work of hooligans but well orchestrated and planned and manipulated by ... politicians and activists (Bala Usman, 1977 - 1987).

Several powerful media organs particularly the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria, Kaduna were used by politicians to further aggravate the situation. These crises affected the unity of the country because majority of these affected were Christians from the Southern parts of the country. Some openly canvassed for the breaking up of the country. Indeed, it is believed in many quarters that the Orkar's coup of 1990 was a reaction to this crisis. (Coup staged against Babangida's government).

The current democratic dispensation which began in 1999 has seen several violent riots in some parts of the Northern States particularly Bauchi, Kaduna, Kano, Minna and Jos cities. The scope of human and material losses is unimaginable. These riots were often the handiwork of politicians and religious leaders who were dissatisfied with the government in power or wanted a change from democratic to military governance by force.

### **Attempts and initiatives at Dialogue, Cooperation and Reconciliation**

As a result of the disintegrative forces created by the violence described above, some state governments, individuals and groups have made some attempts at fostering peace at the grassroots and local levels. For instance, every local government in Kaduna State has been mandated by the State governor to create a dialogue forum between various religious leaders and traditional rulers within their domain. This

decision was taken in 2002. At the state level a Committee on Religious Harmony is in place. On its part, the diocese of Kaduna has created a "Centre for the study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations" whose aim is to teach the religion of Islam for the sake of knowledge, peaceful co-existence between the adherents of the two religions and assist the Muslim to discover the missing Christ in the Qur'an. Some other state governments in the Northern parts of the country have created similar Reconciliation committees.

At the national or Federal level, the following bodies have been set up for the purpose of cooperation and reconciliation namely, "Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution" in the Presidency; "Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NTREC)" "Institute for Development, Justice and Peace". The Anglican Church also have a well-staffed department dealing with Inter-faith and Ecumenical matters.

A number of International Organizations are also involved in the process of reconciliation, particularly the International Centre for Reconciliation at Coventry Cathedral. In 2001, a peace pact was signed by the leadership of the Christian and Muslim Communities in Kaduna city as facilitated by Coventry Cathedral in the United Kingdom.

It is worth noting that the Christian and the Muslim communities themselves have been involved in this peace process particularly the Christian Association of Nigeria, the Ja'matu Nasril Islam and the Ansarudeen Society of Nigeria.

### **Conclusion, Prognosis, Suggestions for the Future**

The thesis of this essay is that religion constitutes a major and indispensable link between the government and the peoples of Nigeria. The essay seeks to indicate the influence that religion exerts on the political process in Nigeria. Politicians apparently have always manipulated the values of religious symbols and gods of their people to serve the ends of the state and their own personal ambitions. Also, organized religions, in this case Islam and Christianity, have used their authority to exert pressure on the state. These two forces have led to a series of violence or riots in the country.

There is no doubt that religion plays a vital role in the political development of a country. The conflicts described above have created mistrust, sectional interest, non-cooperative attitude and religious intolerance. It is therefore my considered opinion that political leaders should note that they are politically responsible to everyone within their constituencies. Political leaders in Nigeria in particular should note that this is a pluralistic society and hence they should not involve the government in any issues that are likely to generate religious controversy. This does not mean that government and religious groups should not interact at all. Both have the responsibility to maintain harmony in the society. The government is to look after the welfare of the people; to cater for the economic and social needs of the people. In the process of doing this, it should cooperate and work in harmony with religious bodies. Religious bodies, on the other hand, may also come to the aid of the state in educational, health or other social matters. Religious groups and government should be neither rivals nor enemies but rather to work together harmoniously for the

progress, peace and unity of the country. Hence government and religion are not to be regarded as mutually exclusive in their different functions. African political leaders have realised that religion and politics are intimately connected. They affect each other, draw on each other's insights, and make an identical appeal to trust and loyalty (L. Sanneh 1996 p. 96). As Peter Merckyl put it: "Virulent nationalism and religious myths have been major political factors in modern history" (Merckyl and Smart, 1985, p. 1).

The conflicts described above have created mistrust, sectional interest, deep hatred, non-cooperative attitude and religious intolerance. In spite of the efforts by government at the Federal, State and Local levels, the country of Nigeria seems to be sitting on an active volcano ready to erupt at any time.

Nigeria is not a pariah state; she is an active member of the commonwealth and the 5th largest oil-producing nation in the world. The Muslims in that country believe they have a god-given mandate to preserve Islam as it was given to Muhammad, the prophet of Islam. This is the reason for wanting to control the government of the country.

Islam's association with terrorism presents an enormous challenge for all seeking a peaceful, prosperous world. In 1993 Samuel Huntington published an essay entitled "the Clash of Civilisations". The thrust of his essay was that the collapse of communism signalled the end of ideological battles of the political kind. Western Capitalism was now dominant. The next battle, according to Huntington will be the clash of cultures with Islamic and Christian civilisations separating the world. For so many reasons, western scholars, politicians, religious thinkers concluded that his thesis was flawed. In 1997 he published a book of the same name, modified the thesis but retained the underlying argument that a clash between Christian and Islamic cultures was only a matter of time. He said:

"Islam's borders are bloody and so are its innards. The fundamental problem for the west is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam, a different civilisation whose people are convinced of the *superiority of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power*'

May I without any hesitations affirm to this audience that Nigerians and Africans have always known this and said it in many ways but the West would neither listen nor believe us. Unfortunately September the 11th has confirmed to the West that we are witnessing a clash of cultures and dealing with two different world views. Africans and Nigerians in particular have known this since 1960 when the country became independent from the British Colonial government. What therefore do I bring for your considerations as Muslims and Christians in the Western world?

1. Non-Muslims should never seek to demonise Muslims or ridicule their faith. Christians and Muslims have records of living together in harmony as neighbours; both also have records of bloody and bitter conflicts in the past. Neither faith can take the high moral ground and accuse the other of using weapons of destruction.

However, the 1967 attack against Israel by a coalition of Arab nations - Syria, Egypt and Jordan that led to the loss of Sinai, Gaza and the Golan Heights in particular became a turning point for Islam and Muslims. Many Muslims saw that humiliating defeat as a need to return to Islam with a whole hearted adherence to the Quran. It was felt that following the West and emulating its ways would lead to moral decline. This gave birth to re-Islamising Muslim societies by fighting encroaching materialism and secularism. Today, we have "radical activists" those who encourage a "fight against infidels", and their creed calls them to bring about revolution through violence.

As a man of faith, it is my opinion that Muslims who want a peaceful world should resist strongly the taking over of Islam by radical activists. As Lord Carey said in his recent lecture in Rome, they should "express strongly, on behalf of the many millions of their co-religionists, their abhorrence of violence done in the name of Allah. We look to them to condemn suicide bombers and terrorists who use Islam as a weapon to destabilise and destroy innocent lives"

2. Both faiths have values; Muslims take their religious values seriously. Western values, gladly mostly derived from the Christian faith. Islam and Muslims challenge the relativism of the West. Christians in the West need to go back to taking the Christian faith seriously. The idea of equating Western values with Christianity needs to be re-examined in the light of African and Asian experiences. (Lamin Sanneh, 2004). Muslims need to take seriously the whole question of integration. The idea of wanting to impose Arab-Islamic cultures on those amongst whom Muslims live has always created problems.

The question Muslims need to ask themselves today is; "what is Islam and what is Arab Culture"

3. In the whole area of human rights may I call on Muslims who believe in the equality of all: (*an nas siyasiyattun ka asnan al-misht*) to reconcile the following statements in Islam with democracy:  
"Islam rules, Islam is never ruled"

The Madinan position taken by Muhammad: *ummatun Wahidatun* (one community) whereby all the religious communities have a covenant of equal treatment as against "*Ummatun Mmuminun*" whereby Muslims see -themselves as "one community over and against the – *ahal al-kitab*" and "*kafirun* "

Finally Muslims need to re-interpret the limited freedom Muslims have:

Anyone is free to embrace Islam but no Muslim is free to leave Islam for Christ or any other religion. The punishment for apostasy according to Islamic law is severe. In the conservative Muslim parts of the world capita! punishment is still often implemented both by official and radical activists. Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, states "everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief..." You will find no analogous guarantee of freedom on either of the Islamic declarations: indeed, Islamic law mandates the death penalty for those who leave Islam.

"The blood of a Muslim who confesses that none has the right to be worshipped but Allah and that I am his apostle, cannot be shed except in three cases: In Qisas (retaliation) for murder, a married person who commits illegal sexual intercourse and the one who reverts from Islam (apostate) and leave the Muslims" (Bukhari 9/83 no. 17)

The Cairo declaration states: "Everyone shall have the right to advocate what is right and propagate what is good and warn against what is wrong and evil according to the norms of Islamic Shariah" If Shariah is the norm, women's rights as well as those of non-Muslims will be severely restricted as we experience in Nigeria- North. This leads to the difficult subject of Islamophobia defined in the free encyclopedia as: "the fear and or hatred of Islam, Muslims or Islamic culture."

My challenge to the Muslims who love peace and love to see this one world a better place for all is that they need to work harder at giving a human face to their religion. Christian scholars speak out and critique their faith when used as a reason for violence, our Muslim neighbours need to accept this challenge and do the same. Those living in the West and enjoying the freedom to be who they are should speak to their fellow Muslims in the Muslim world to allow the same liberty to non-Muslims in their midst.

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