

Christian-Muslim Relations in Nigeria

Dr. Jan H. Boer

Two major problems of Nigeria are corruption and Christian-Muslim relations. If corruption has demonized the country, these relations have bedeviled it. Both have caused untold deaths and suffering. Nigeria is the shining example of the World Council of Churches' finding that bad politics--in the case of Nigeria, corruption-- is the greatest cause of disease. In addition, due to bad inter-religious relations, over the last two decades many thousands of people, both Christian and Muslim, have lost their lives as well as properties, churches and mosques to religious riots.

Some years ago I experienced pressure to contribute to the solution of this second problem on basis of both my 30 years experience in the country and my academic background. Since then, I have embarked on writing a series of monographs entitled *Studies in Christian-Muslim Relations*, Volume One of which is due to appear in June. See my website for details.

I am intensely concerned that the adherents of both these religions not cooperate in their mutual demise in favor of a mass return to a sanitized version of African Traditional Religion (ATR) by some and an embrace of an Africanized form of secularism by others. Both religions need to make certain commitments towards each other if Nigeria is not to fall apart or both religions fall into disrepute. **The essence of my message to Christians is “wholism,” while for Muslims it is “pluralism.”**

In the case of Christians, they have inherited a dualistic secular approach from missionaries that is not only despised and hated by Muslims, but that also goes against the deepest intent of the Bible. I want Muslims to listen as I engage Christians in an expose of their stand on secularism. I want Muslims to understand that they have been misled into identifying Christianity with secularism. Christians need to repent of their flirtation with the language and concepts of secularism in an environment shared with Muslims. They need to move away from it by developing a more comprehensive Biblical worldview that would provide them with the common platform of a wholistic view of religion from which to reach out to Muslims.

Christians also need to develop appreciation for the Muslim perspective that considers secularism as an unwanted colonial imposition on them that has squelched their spirit and their liberty. They need to realize that Muslim hostility towards them is at least partially due to Christian flirtation with and even embrace of a Nigerian form of secularism. That which Christians embrace as a solution to the religious problem is to Muslims the source of the problem.

The problem Muslims have with secularism is that it wants to replace social structures infused with the Muslim spirit with those more amenable to its own norms. As in Canada, so in Nigeria secularism would replace religious norms with those concocted by an autonomous human spirit that knows of no divine revelation or injunctions. It is not simply a matter of religion vs religion or doctrine vs doctrine. It is a battle for the soul of both individuals and society. Canadian Christians have belatedly come to recognize that secular threat. Nigerian Christians are so busy opposing the Muslim threat that they are largely blind to that of secularism and look towards it for a solution.

At the same time, Muslims need to update their sense of political pluralism. It is true that in the past they have been more tolerant of other religions than have Christians. However, that was only tolerance for a people who agreed to the second-class status to which Islam assigned them. Christians as a whole have since moved on to a higher degree of tolerance. Unfortunately, because of the current atmosphere of acute anger on the part of both religions in Nigeria, Nigerian Christians are not the most shining example of this new level of tolerance. Muslims have not noticed. They see, instead, a strong insistence on this hated secularism.

Nigerian Muslims have not kept up with contemporary trends to increasing tolerance. They have locked themselves into a position that once represented the most liberal alternative but that has long been overtaken. They must come to accept, like it or not, that a situation that developed a class of secondary citizens is no longer considered tolerant but oppressive. Nigeria is now marked by a pluralistic situation that no longer tolerates the domination of one religion over all. Conversions to Christianity have produced a Christian community that is at least numerically equal to that of Islam and may well have surpassed it. Such a situation calls for new inter-religious relationships;

the old ideas simply do not cut it anymore. Muslim have no choice but to accept this new situation.

The imperative within both Christianity and Islam is to test the spirit of the day rather than embrace the current spirit simply because it is there. Neither can afford to ignore major sociological and religious population shifts as if they have not happened. While Nigerian Christians are toying with secular ideas without responsible analysis, Islam in Nigeria is in danger of ignoring significant religious shifts among the people.

Both religions need to put to rest the spurious census issue. They insist on majority privileges and powers simply because of a vaunted but unsubstantiated majority. Instead of claiming such spurious majority status and rights, both need to develop an attitude of mutual respect and generosity. Never mind who is in the majority. Agree to equal and mutual rights for each other. Take the threat, the hostility and the "grab-what-you-can" attitude out of the situation and do as you want the other to do to you--a profound wisdom common to both religions.

Both religions have to change their attitudes towards each other. They need to move from hostility to willingness to listen to each other and to practice empathy. A sense of fairness and equality is badly needed. Both need to commit themselves unequivocally to the indivisibility of Nigeria and to the cooperation needed to make it a viable country again. They need to cooperate on basis of the justice to which both aspire in order to cleanse the country of almost total corruption. At the moment there is a great risk that Nigerians will grow tired of all this religious ruckus and turn to the alternatives I mentioned earlier, ATR or full-fledged secularism.

I submit that in the long run Christians and Muslims are both potentially better off with each other than with secularism. Secularism tends to suck the lifeblood out of spirituality and imposes too many restrictive blindfolds to be viable over the long haul. Muslims have come to recognize the destructive role secularism has played. "9/11" was at least partially an explosive "No!" to secularism. Nigerian Christians have yet to discover it. They could borrow a leaf or two from the Anglican Archbishop of Canada who has recently publicly identified it as a force hostile to Christianity. Reformed Christians in Canada have been doing so for decades through their structures.