

Nigerian Muslims and the Miss World Pageant¹

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Theologians do not often have a reason to write about a Miss World contest. The two concerns seem worlds apart. But the 2002 pageant in Nigeria took centre stage in the international media, surely a first in the long history of this annual event. Never have riots in Nigeria received so much prolonged international attention.² Never before was the annual ritual transferred midway to another country for reasons of blood and religion. Since religion played such a prominent part in this episode, this theologian seized the opportunity!

The aim of this article is to explain some of the reasons for the riots that occurred in November, 2002, in connection with the Miss World contest in Nigeria. How could an innocuous tradition provoke so much hostility and bloodshed? My concern is to convince people involved in events and relationships that include Islam and Muslims that any cooperation with them requires a good understanding of them and their sensitivities. This principle is so commonplace that it should not need expressing, but, for some mysterious reason, in matters Islam it is routinely ignored at the expense of peace. Recent revelations that the US government was totally ignorant of Iraqi Muslim sensitivities is only the most recent and most devastating.

Background History

Two hundred years ago, a Muslim revival took place under their beloved reformer Uthman Danfodio in part of what today comprises northern Nigeria. He established what Nigerian Muslims look upon as an ideal Muslim state, culture and religion, shorn of all

¹ This article is also published as follows: (1) "The Anatomy of Miss World." *Christian Courier*, 3 Mar/2003, pp. 12-13. (2) "Nigerian Muslims and the Miss World Pageant." *TCNN Research Bulletin* (research bulletin of the Theological College of Northern Nigeria), Mar/2003, pp. 36-43. That version can also be accessed from the TCNN website www.tenn.org. (3) "Nigerian Muslims and the Miss World Pageant." *Woord & Daad* (magazine of The Reformational Movement of Southern Africa), fall, 2003.

² I refer you to my website www.SocialTheology.com for information regarding a whole tradition of religious riots in Nigeria.

the heretical accretions that had accumulated. That ideal included slavery. From their capital Sokoto, where the Sultan resides even today, and other centres they would descend upon the Traditionalist peoples in the Middle Belt to the south for slave raiding purposes. They created absolute havoc and chaos. Around 1900, Sokoto was reputedly the largest slaving empire in the world. Nigerian Muslims hold up that empire as the ideal for which they are striving.

Enter the secular British with their colonial scheme. Though they promised to leave Islam intact, they undermined it by means of a slow process in various ways, especially by a system of secular education and by incorporating the traditional emirs and chiefs. This combination set in motion a process of secularization that served as a drug: it made the Muslim community drowsy so as to let down their guard.

While this was going on, it looked on the surface as if the British were supporting Islam. Many Traditionalist ethnic groups were incorporated into the Muslim emirates or simply had Muslim emirs imposed on them. Politically, Muslims gained much from the regime, but spiritually it drugged them with the pill of secularism.

Then Ayatollah Khomeini strode onto the world scene with his revolution. He shook Nigerian Muslims awake and rekindled in them the spirit of Danfodio. Fundamentalism thus made its debut in Nigeria.

Christian missions also entered into the mix. It was slow going, but since the 1960s a great people movement took place among the Traditionalists towards Christ. The former Traditionalists became increasingly aggressive Christians over a period of a few decades. The race between the Christianity and Islam reached a high pitch, with both of them gunning for hegemony. Muslims are in a semi-admitted *jihad* in their bid for power and revival. They want to undo the shackles with which secularism has bound them. Christians, on the other hand, are using the banner of secularism against the onslaughts of Islam that they regard as imposing a Muslim style government on the country. The demand for secular structures is becoming more adamant as Christians catch up with Muslims.

So, there you have the inferno. On the one hand, Muslims angry at having been drugged by a secularism they consider the ultimate weapon of satan and Muslims nervous as they observe their numerical advantage eroding steadily. On the other hand, Christians

angry at having been subjected to Muslim rule and seeking to stem the perpetual Muslim *jihad* for power with the tool of secularism. "Secularism" has become the flashpoint for both, one opposing it, the other promoting it.

Currently, Muslims are concentrating on restoring their legal system, the *sharia*, as their solution to secularism. They want to shrug off the yoke of an imposed, foreign secular legal system. They envision that sharia will help the country revive its economy and overcome the corruption that is dragging the country into an ever deepening hole. Though they keep promising that sharia holds only for Muslims, that does not seem to be a serious promise, for sharia states honour this promise only by breaking it time and again.

Christians have noticed this fact and thus strongly resist the push for sharia. Because Muslims are clearly not serious about restricting sharia to Muslims, Christians are not prepared to listen to any arguments for sharia, not even legitimate ones. In fact, both camps are deaf to each other.

The easy resort by Christians to secular thought is due to the influence of Western missions that have brought the gospel wrapped in the cloth of the traditional Western worldview. That worldview, it has been widely recognized by scholars of every stripe and colour, includes a dualism that separates religion and spirituality from so-called "mundane" or "secular" affairs. Though Evangelical mission bodies are beginning to reject this dualism, the damage has been done: It forms an unfortunate part of the heritage of Nigerian Christians with which they counter the Muslim challenge.

This is a confusing heritage that has prevented Christians from developing a theologically responsible and consistent stance. While Muslims are inconsistent in their application of sharia, Christians are inconsistent in their application of secularism. While they demand separation of church and state, they are also clamouring for government funds to keep their health and educational institutions going. While they declare that the church should not be involved in politics, their main mouthpiece, Christian Association of Nigeria, is highly politicized.

As a result, neither party believes or trusts the other. Neither party lives up to their declared intentions. The battle has brought the country to a state of perpetual tension that is constantly searching the horizon for a spark to make it ignite. It is only the

nature of the spark that cannot be predicted. The Miss World pageant of 2002 contained a few such sparks.

Muslim Problems with the Pageant

Muslims were hesitant about holding the pageant in Nigeria from the beginning. They associate the event with bikinis and other forms of blatant sex, something that deeply offends them. Thus, early rumblings started about the event being an offence to Muslim morals. That should have put the organizers and the government on its guard for possible violence.

There were several complications that increased Muslim apprehension. While they are trying to portray Nigeria as a Muslim country, the expected open sexuality of the event was scheduled to be flaunted through the media before the entire world. In the end it was in fact televised in 142 countries. This was like flaunting Muslim defeat. The implication was a world-wide announcement that they had lost control in Nigeria.

In addition, it was scheduled to be held during the Muslim fast, a period that calls for sobriety and reflection. With this event to be shown on TV also throughout Nigeria, the attention of many Muslims, it was argued, would be diverted from the spiritual exercise of fasting. It was, to them, clearly part of the ongoing alleged Christian campaign to undermine and destroy Islam.

Then there was the promise that the event would not touch Muslim communities, but it was scheduled for Abuja, the capital. Clearly, the organizers were siding with Christians by implying that Abuja is not a Muslim city. It is a new capital and Muslims have been accused by Christians of imposing a Muslim face on the place. It was another declaration of the fall of an important Muslim symbol.

There was also the international boycott advocated by some human rights bodies. Prompted by sharia, Muslim law, a Muslim single mother for adultery had been sentenced to death by stoning. Other similar cases were waiting in the wings. Though its execution was being delayed, the situation raised the ire of these human rights bodies. At least five of the queens were going to honour the boycott. To make it worse, in reaction to the threat of boycott, the President assured the queens and the rest of the world, that Nigeria would not allow the execution to take place. The constitution, the world was

assured, has precedence over sharia. This amounted to an international presidential declaration of war on the pro-sharia movement. These developments clearly placed the pageant on the anti-sharia side, even though the organizers had nothing to do with the boycott.

To top it all off, the queens were invited to Aso Rock, where they had tea with the President while the Chaplain conducted a prayer meeting. While all of this might have seemed innocuous to innocent bystanders, everything about the Miss World contest smelled of anti-sharia sentiments to suspicious Muslims.

And then came the real blow--probably one of the most famous gaffes in history of Christian-Muslim relations-- from Isioma Daniel, an innocent young female reporter for *ThisDay*, who had little understanding of Nigerian Muslim dynamics. In a defense of the pageant, she lightheartedly suggested that Prophet Muhammad would not have objected to the event. He probably would have married one of the beauties! That was more than Muslims could take. Now Christians had crossed the line by insulting the holy Prophet. Her last name, "Daniel," was sufficient to establish her Christian identity.

It took little time before the city of Kaduna rocked with a riot that left more than 200 dead, not to speak of the destruction of numerous churches, mosques and hotels. Both Christian and Muslim youths got out of hand and took revenge by destroying mosques and churches. It was a bloody event in true Nigerian style. For Kaduna city this was at least the fourth bloody religious riot.

Reactions of Muslim Leaders

Muslim *leaders* did not take kindly to the gaffe. Dr. Ibrahim Datti, President of the Supreme Council for Sharia in Nigeria, stated that the newspaper *ThisDay* had declared war on Muslims. Muslims should retaliate with their own war. Another leader, Dr. Mohammed Mahdi, declared, "Muslims in the country have been pushed to the wall and it is high time we reacted vehemently and swiftly."

The Council of Imams and Ulama of Kaduna published the following statement:

Ordinarily, the decision to host a beauty contest in an environment with a considerable Muslim population would insult the religion and moral sensibility of a typical Muslim, and, of course, he/she would voice against it. This has been the

case since the stage-managed victory of Nigeria's Agbani Darego.... Muslim opposition should have had an effect on the process of conducting the bestial contest. But with a blasphemous article, the government needs to cancel the contest for the sake of corporate survival. Let it be unequivocally stated here that Prophet Mohammed forms the chunk of passion of a conscious Muslim so that any insult on the Prophet's personality unleashes the rage in Muslims. That is why a portion of the satanic article in *ThisDay* has dared the guts of the Moslems.

The Deputy Governor of Zamfara State pronounced a *fatwa* on Miss Isioma and some members of the paper's management team, the same sentence served on Salman Rushdie some years ago. It means open season. Anyone is allowed to kill her. Soon afterwards, Muslim authorities declared the *fatwa* invalid, since it was pronounced by one without such authority.

However as far as the ruckus was concerned, most Muslim leaders, even those who were upset about the pageant and the gaffe, publicly disapproved of it as not befitting true Muslims. Sheikh Karibullah Nasiur Kabara, Vice President of the Supreme Council for Muslims, though he had harsh words for the paper and demanded that the government should punish the managers if they want to reduce Muslim tension, also urged Muslims to remain calm.

Lateef Adegbite not only wanted that people remain calm, but also urged that they accept the apology. A lawyer, he had threatened legal action if the paper did not apologize for what he dubbed that "dastardly statement...without caring for the effect such tantrum would have on the psyche of Muslims." When that apology came, he pleaded with Muslims that it should be accepted and that the paper should be forgiven.

Explanations for the Ruckus

But was it really a *religious* riot? That's always a question in Nigeria. Or was it politics? Many prefer the political explanation--but always as illegitimate politics conducted in mafia style.

Christian Courier, a Canadian Christian bi-weekly, recently featured an article containing the opinion of Josiah Fearon, the Anglican Archbishop of Kaduna, who explained it basically in political terms without denying the religious aspect. Those

instigating the riots were trying to unseat the state's Muslim Governor, Makarfi. In distinction from other northern state governors who had adopted the sharia in total, Makarfi adopted it only to cover the Muslim majority areas of his state. Had he tried to apply it universally, he would have had a much bigger problem on his hand. The pro-sharia forces would not accept this "real politick" and sought to dethrone him by destabilizing the state by these riots. These forces worked behind the scenes to get the ball rolling and once it did, it took on its own dynamics with hoodlums looting and others just venting their general anger at Christians by killing and burning. Christian youths were not slow to enter the fray.

Fearon's opinion represents that of many people, both Christians and Muslims. The Roman Catholic Archbishop of Lagos, Anthony Okogie, is a well-known Christian activist. Calling up shades of President Bush, Okogie conceded that there are thousands of Moslems that are very good, who practise their religion in the righteous way. But then we have these unwanted fanatics...who don't just care. Their own is to cause chaos, not only chaos, but they want to steal in order to get what they want. They don't just go on rampage, they want to set ablaze; they are not doing it because of religion, they are only using religion as a cover; which is not good. How can a devout Muslim go out rampaging, looting people's property under the camouflage of Ramadan? It is giving a bad name to religion....

George Ehusani, another influential Roman Catholic, wrote in stronger words:

Where one part of the country can decide to enforce criminal elements of the Islamic legal code that are clearly at variance with the nation's constitution, cutting off the limbs of petty offenders, condemning poor adulterers to death by stoning, and harassing those who do not share their faith every so often, the impression created is that no one is in charge of our affairs, and there is no law and order in place.

In addition to Muslims, Ehusani holds the Federal Government responsible for this and all the suffering Nigerians have endured over the past decades:

I hold the current leadership of the Nigerian State responsible for the massive destruction of lives and property in Kaduna, Jos, Kano, Zaria, Bauchi and elsewhere, over the Sharia controversy, and at the hands of Islamic

fundamentalists, because the president and his team have remained indolent and insensitive in the face of a very explosive situation. I hold President Obasanjo and his team accountable for the blood and tears in Kaduna and other parts of the North, where non-Muslims have lost their right to live in peace, for it is the primary duty of government to protect innocent and law abiding citizens from the nefarious activities of hooligans, bandits and fanatics. I hold those in power responsible for the pain and anguish that is the lot of the innocent citizens of Northern Nigeria who for the umpteenth time have been rendered refugees in their own country, because I expect them to own up to their ineptitude and resign from their high office, if their being in office makes no difference for the internal security of the nation.

Even some Muslims were of similar minds. Sheikh Kabara called those behind the gaffe "pen terrorists" out to create tension and riots. The article "emanated from mercenaries hired to destabilize Nigeria...for the benefit of...people who have failed...to achieve their political goals." Many were of the opinion that someone was behind this so-called innocent gaffe and it is necessary to uncover their identity. It is possible that someone in the *ThisDay* organization was bought over to create this havoc. This may seem farfetched only to those not familiar with Nigeria. The rest of us know that the "art" of scheming and intrigue is one of the more highly developed "art forms" in Nigeria and can go to any length if the stakes are high enough.

The State Government initially thought that the gaffe was the major cause of the ruckus. However, as they began to interrogate the more than a thousand people they had rounded up, they also became convinced of behind-the-scenes political machinations on the part of political hopefuls that aimed to defeat the Governor.

Others expand the explanation to include wider circles of intrigue and manipulation even up to international level. The ruckus and all the opposition to the pageant were somehow influenced by a group of international schemers who want to demonstrate that Africans are incapable of hosting such events. They will go to any lengths to prevent it in order to dent the reputation of Africa. The names of prominent media feature in these arguments: Voice of America, BBC and some British newspapers. All of them allegedly wish Africa only evil. Prof. Jerry Gana, Federal Minister of

Information, is the highest government official to blame the mayhem on those sinister agents, but he is by no means the only one.

My own opinion is that the explosive situation started to build up because of the pageant itself and its association with anti-sharia politics. The gaffe was the spark that brought it to a point where the behind-the-scenes manipulators encouraged groups of young people and hoodlums to start rioting. From there on the usual dynamics of Nigerian riots kicked in and we had a full-scale riot on our hands.

It was a combination of religion and politics. Religion in Nigeria is a sensitive issue. Both Christians and Muslims are nervously watching each other and expecting the worst from each other. As soon as the religious issue reached its flash point, the political manipulators ensured that the spark would ignite and then started their machinations.

Nigerian Muslims have managed to put the Miss World competition on one of the world's front burners. It is likely to return there towards the end of 2003, since the new queen is Miss Turkey. Will Turkey host the next competition? It is officially a secular country, but the Muslim ethos there reigns supreme. The issue could develop into a clash between traditional Muslims and those wanting to join the European Union (EU). The latter need to prove that Turkey is a modern European nation with an ethos that will comfortably fit in the EU. Organizers of the Miss World pageant, welcome to one of the world's hot seats. Enjoy the spotlight--and the heat!

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