

# THE NIGERIAN CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM STANDOFF

## SOME UNDERLYING ISSUES

### PARAMETERS FOR A SOLUTION<sup>1</sup>

*(Ran Wanka Ba A Boye Cibiya)<sup>2</sup>*

Ever since the constitutional fracas over the shari'a in the 1970s, the relationship between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria has been tense at the best of times and bloody at many of the worst of times. The events marking the journey have been too well documented to need repetition in this article. All Nigerians and others involved in this country know the sad record. The aim of this article is to outline the different points of view held by Christians and Muslims and to examine them in order to come to some necessary parameters within which a peaceful solution can hopefully be found ---*and without which there will be no solution.*

## Some Underlying Issues

### The Christian Perspective

The Christian perspective is based on three pillars. The first has its roots in pre-colonial times. Like those of Nigerian Muslims, the ancestors of Nigerian Christians were adherents to African Traditional Religions, long after Islam had already made deep inroads, especially in what is now northern Nigeria. That era was marked by constant and intense slave raiding of the Traditional communities on the part of Muslims. In fact, the Sokoto Caliphate in present north-west Nigeria was the largest slave society in the world at the beginning of the 1900s.

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1 *TCNN Research Bulletin*, March, 2000. See my website ([www.SocialTheology.com](http://www.SocialTheology.com)) for history, career and achievements during my 30 years of service in Nigeria from 1966-1996. My doctorate is based on a dissertation on the interplay between religion and colonial politics and economics in Nigeria. I offer the insights expressed in this paper after having studied the issues in depth over a number of years in preparation for a series of eight volumes on Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria, all of which are now (2015) to be found on this website page. A serious attempt is made at honesty by bringing out issues that are usually swept under the carpet.

2 Popular Hausa proverb--literal translation: "On washday you don't hide your navel," meaning "Do not sweep the dirt under the carpet."

The Christian successors to these Traditionalist victims have not forgotten this history and they see a line of continuation through colonialism into contemporary Nigeria. They have seen how, under the policy of indirect rule during colonialism, Muslims knew how to manipulate the British and largely controlled access to power and wealth. They remember how the Sardauna utilized all the power and wealth of government in his bid to Islamize the north and to dip the Qur'an into the Atlantic Ocean. They continue to experience the oppressive behaviour of Muslim emirs and state governments. On the very day the shari'a development in Zamfara state is defended as applicable only to the Muslim faithful during the closing months of the millennium, I read reports about the Kano State Government's threat to many churches to either relocate or be destroyed and about the Emir of Ilorin's call to move all churches out of his city. Such developments do nothing to instill confidence in this Zamfara promise. Furthermore, published reports of the contrary trend are firmly etched in the Christian mind (Danjuma Byang, *Shari'a in Nigeria: A Christian Perspective*). The confessions of Alhaji Aliyu Ibn Mamman Dan Bauchi are similarly too graphic to be forgotten (CAN: *Leadership in Nigeria*). These and a myriad of similar events over the years make the Zamfara promise sound rather hollow. Already it is reported that non-Muslim women in Zamfara have difficulty accessing public transport. Anti-alcohol legislation can hardly fail to affect non-Muslims.

The second pillar of the Christian perspective is the Muslim doctrine of the place of *dhimmi*. *Dhimmi* are non-Muslims in a Muslim society. This is a matter of established Muslim orthodoxy of public record accessible to all. *Dhimmi*s are at best second-class citizens whose religion is merely tolerated and only then in a truncated form dictated by Islam. While Islam has a better record than do Christians of tolerance for other religions in the past, that record has long been surpassed by much of the contemporary world, especially by world Christianity. What was comparatively broadminded in earlier centuries, is today regarded as unacceptable intolerance. Islam has never withdrawn its position on the status of *dhimmi*. The difficult situation of Christians living among Muslim majorities is well known. All this, too, makes the Zamfara promise sound rather empty. In view of all this history and the classic stand on *dhimmi*, Christians have every reason to fear the present trend.

The third pillar of the Christian perspective is the unity of religion and politics in Islam. The basic tendency in Islam is to identify politics and government as a major arena for the practice of Islam. While Christians – in my opinion, incorrectly – tend to put most of their energies into churches, for Muslims politics and government are among the main foci. Muslims feel comfortable in that sector. They do not hesitate to use whatever government resources available to them for the benefit of Islam. Once again, the Sardauna's mission is the most overt and clear example of this tradition.

This is one of the reasons Christians are clamouring for a secular government and a secular constitution, for the separation of church and mosque from government. They do not want their tax and oil monies spent on mosques all over the place or on Muslim courts or pilgrimages to Mecca. They are of the opinion that Muslims will commandeer the major share of these funds

and that the latter will not equally honour the rights of others to those funds. They have seen too many evidences of Muslim attempts to turn Nigeria into a Muslim country. They regard the Federal Government as having been hijacked by Muslims. As a result, they claim, government favours Muslim causes at the expense of Christians at various fronts. In fact, they have a strong sense of persecution by both Islam and its tool, the Federal Government and some state governments.

It is clear that this Christian perspective is not one that encourages wholehearted cooperation with Muslims in building up a nation to which the two religions would contribute as equal partners, each from its own standpoint. Christians want a situation of equality, but they see anything but that in the Muslim stance. In fact, they are sure that Muslims intend to turn Nigeria into a Muslim country, including the *dhimmi* provision for non-Muslims. They feel that only a secular government and a secular constitution that eliminates all traces of religion from the sphere of government will make for a viable Nigeria. Anything compromising secularism, they reject – at least, sometimes.

The basic motivation of this Nigerian Christian stance was a combination of fear for Muslims, mistrust, anger and even hatred. I believe that the fear has largely dissipated. Christians have overcome the earlier passivism, inherited from both their forefathers and from pietistic missions, that prevented them from challenging government takeover of schools and hospitals during the 1970s. In the late 1990s it does not take much for Christians to actively challenge any perceived Muslim attempt at hegemony.

The same cannot be said about mistrust, anger and hatred. A grand dose of this combination, based on a reading of history and long-term patterns of Muslim behaviour, still firmly undergirds the Christian perspective; I believe there are solid reasons for this mistrust and I share it. Anger also has its reasons in this context. When one reads Muslim publications like *The Pen* and its Hausa-language counterpart, *Alkalami*, he can only shudder with apprehension. Even though the government-sponsored *Gaskiya Ta Fi Kwabo* superficially seems much more objective when there is no crisis at hand, its true colours shine through clearly during any Christian-Muslim crises.

However, anger and hatred, though humanly understandable, can never serve any constructive Christian purpose. Combined with mistrust, we have here a fatal combination that tends to disable Christian leaders in the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) from serious Christian reflection or careful strategizing. Nothing Muslims do or say is understood in its own terms. And much of what Christians do or say cannot be understood on their own terms either. The situation is much like the former cold war between East and West, when both major parties looked at every issue in terms of their cold war relationships. I have observed some very wise Christian leaders, in succumbing to this anger and hatred, react in stunningly unreasonable fashion to some Muslim initiatives that seemed altogether reasonable and fair. The term “fair” simply has little place in the Christian vocabulary when it comes to Muslim issues.

## The Muslim Perspective

The main Nigerian Muslim perspective similarly rests on a number of pillars. The first is the excessive infatuation of Muslims for their religion. Non-Muslim students of Islam have observed repeatedly how deeply Muslims love their religion and all its trappings. They have the deepest admiration for the Qur'an. They absolutely love the shari'a. They boast repeatedly of its comprehensive way of life. They are deeply thankful for its beautiful simplicity and appreciative of its appeal to reason. Some have called it fanaticism. No other religion, it is claimed by some, has been able to arouse such absolute loyalty and pride, often to the point of apparent fanaticism. They consider themselves the true people of God. I admire them for their devotion and wish the same could be said of most Christians.

It is with the above devotion that Islam has spread both militarily and peacefully, including the use of economic, political and diplomatic pressures. Muslims cannot imagine why in the world anyone would resist becoming a Muslim. Such a beautiful religion! Why resist it? Besides, it is incumbent on everyone to accept Allah, His Prophet and His Qur'an. This is not a matter of free choice. It is a beautiful obligation that anyone in his right mind will naturally and gladly accept. And so Muslims have no compunctions about using almost any method open to them to recruit, cajole, trick, buy, marry or force people into the fold. The use of government power and facilities is perfectly legitimate in this crusade – excuse me: *jihad*.

Muslims appear not to have any sense of fair-mindedness with respect to non-Muslims. The latter are basically despised and referred to with the contemptuous term *khaffir*. It is the same term apartheid and other racists have used to refer to South African Blacks. A derivative of the term, *kaffer*, is used in my own native tongue to refer negatively to stupid or devious people. Muslims may preach their gospel anywhere and even block major city roads regularly for their purposes, but they do not extend the same privilege to others. They may quote from the Bible, publicly say or write extremely derogatory things about Christianity, but woe betide a Christian who publicly quotes from the Qur'an. It has started bloody riots as in Kafanchan. Muslims feel free to dominate government facilities like the press and radio.

And what is behind all of this? Their infatuation with their religion. How could anyone possibly object to the use of any device at all in the propagation of such beautiful and powerful truth? Islam is after all the most democratic and the greatest force for peace and justice in the world. That being the case, what is wrong with using all the resources that Allah has placed in their hands for the pursuit of *da'awa*, Muslim mission? Is that not the reason Allah gave them these resources? To fail to use them would be nothing short of disobedience. After all, Islam is the embodiment of what all reasonable men seek: democracy, justice and liberty. These constitute the great goals of *da'awa*. Of course, that same privilege does not need to be extended to *khaffirs* with their nonsense paganism. To so extend it would be the height of irrationality and absurdity.

Islam has overcome many forms of opposition throughout the world, but many of its major challenges have come from the West. There were the Crusades, an early Christian variety of *jihad*. These continue to play an important function in the Muslim attitude towards the West and its traditional religion, Christianity. They refuse to acknowledge the many sounds of contrition from the Western church about these Crusades. Forgiving and forgetting does not seem highly developed in Islam and thus the Crusades are brought up at every possible occasion. The fact that they themselves have been waging an unending crusade or *jihad* does not extend that right to others. It was also because of the West that their expansionist drive could not take them permanently beyond the Balkan region.

And then came colonialism that subjected much of the House of Islam to the pride and sense of superiority of Western *khaffirs*. The people of God, almost the entire House of Islam, were subjected to outsiders and taken advantage of during a moment of disarray and weakness. This situation was theologically impossible and totally unacceptable. Even though Nigerian Muslim political leaders made the best of their assigned role within the British scheme of indirect rule, deep down the arrangement was considered a profound insult.

Despite the insult inherent in the situation, Nigerian Muslim rulers took advantage of it. The British removed many barriers to the further spread of Islam. They subjected many Traditional ethnic groups to the power of Muslim emirs, a factor that, decades later, has caused bloody riots in Kaduna and Bauchi states. The northern Muslim establishment even delayed independence because they preferred the foreign invader to their southern compatriots. But deep down this colonial arrangement was the ultimate insult no Muslim people should ever have to bear. That other ethnic groups were subjected to internal Muslim colonialism had nothing to do with it. It was the best thing that could happen to them and was doing them a favour. But for Muslims to be subjected to others, no, that could not be tolerated. Muslim colonialism and other forms of forceful expansion are perfectly acceptable; the opposite, under no circumstances. Crusade? No! *Jihad*? Of course! It is ordained by Allah.

In spite of the opportunity for Islam to spread under colonialism in places where it previously was not welcome, Muslims in Nigeria consider colonialism as a serious attempt at undermining Islam. Yes, Islam spread. However, simultaneously a poisonous virus was let loose among the people, the virus of Western secularism. Secularism is regarded as a deep attack on the very foundations of Islam in that it would restrict the scope of religion to a narrow religious slice of life. Islam was reduced to a mere religion, to a religious sector of life with no influence in the larger culture. Until this day, the imposition of secularism is regarded by Muslims as a concerted attempt to destroy their religion. This was so damaging to Islam that it by far offset the favourable climate for expansion created by colonialism as well. It is felt that secularism totally disoriented the Muslim community, a situation they are still struggling to overcome. Again, the fact that Islam forces exactly the same reduction on the *dhimmi* amongst them is irrelevant.

The imposition of secularism is made worse by the fact that Muslims have long asserted that private and public morals in the secularized West are far below Muslim standards. They have contempt for Western moral standards and see corruption and degradation in every area of life. What business does a *khaffir* nation have to impose such degradation on the people of God? What possible benefit can be derived from such a corrupted people? And then to think these people come with a superiority complex! This is both unbelievable and unacceptable, totally. In technology they may have something to contribute, but spiritually and morally they are bankrupt. Their own rather recent history of slavery is conveniently forgotten. Muslim slavery is alright. It's only its Western version that is remembered and condemned.

The spread of Christianity by Western missionaries is regarded as part of the colonial scheme to undermine Islam. Although the fact that colonialism seriously hampered the spread of Christianity in Nigeria is well documented, Muslims refuse to acknowledge it. To them colonialism and Christian missions worked hand in glove to subdue Islam. They were full partners and Muslims will not tolerate any documented research to create a more nuanced picture in their minds.

The Muslim equation of Christianity with colonialism and secularism gains strong support from the current Nigerian Christian call for a secular approach to government and politics. Does that not prove their point? And so Christianity is hated along with the other members of this unholy triad as part and parcel of the Western attempt to destroy Islam, pure and simple. That is the purpose and goal of Christianity in Nigeria. Thus, Christianity must be resolutely resisted along with colonialism and its successors, neo-colonialism and, now, the free market. All of them must be destroyed. There is no choice. It is either they or Islam. Co-existence is no real option, except as a temporary strategy forced on them by the situation or in terms of the classic *dhimmi* scheme.

The Christian church has made great inroads into northern Nigeria among former adherents of African Traditional Religion(s). Prior to colonialism, these were the fodder of Muslim slave raiding. During colonialism, these were the people increasingly subjected to Muslim authorities and they often took it passively. However, over the past two decades, Christians among them have not only grown in number but also in courage and resistance. Whereas during the early 1970s they passively, though grudgingly, accepted the Gowon government takeover of their institutions, today they are aggressive in protecting their rights and their turf as they see it. The Nigerian Muslim community in the north has become nervous about this development. They are not used to such challenges. They do not know how to respond appropriately. And they certainly do not listen carefully to Christian complaints anymore than do Christians to Muslim accusations. They always respond very clumsily with an offended and almost "holy" surprise. How can you Christians say such things about us, the people of God? We who are so righteous and just, so blessed, so religious, so wise, so understanding, so tolerant and democratic?

To many non-Muslims, this attitude is surprising. They hardly think of Islam as tolerant and democratic. They are more likely to consider such an attitude as nothing but hypocrisy. It is not, I

believe. It is the result of Muslims' extreme infatuation with their religion. That infatuation has closed their ears, their minds and their hearts. Such infatuation combined with an inadequate sense of sin, I am arguing elsewhere, makes it next to impossible for the Muslim community to listen to others. They almost seem constitutionally incapable of empathy.

Though some mainstream Muslims have sought to disassociate from so-called Fundamentalism, such attempts are hardly persuasive. If mainstream Islam understood fairness, *Gaskiya Ta Fi Kwabo* would be more open to Christian writers and the airwaves of Kaduna Radio would be more accessible to Christians. Mainstream Nigerian Islam just does not scream as much as do Fundamentalists, but it is basically in agreement with the latter. And do we hear of mainstream Muslim opposition to present developments in Kano and Ilorin? In Turkey, one reads of national Muslim newspapers who object to recent police persecution of Christians (REC, 10/99), but that does not happen in Nigeria. Mainstream Islam may *seem* more polished and diplomatic. It *sounds* more fair, balanced and rational. However, I argue elsewhere that deep down it appreciates the rough and radical approach of Fundamentalists not only, but that it uses the latter as its running dogs. The Fundamentalists are doing the dirty work for more respectable mainstream Islam.

So, here then we have the basics of the Muslim attitude towards Christians. Infatuation with their religion, religious pride, lacking a sense of fairness, contempt for others, sense of being insulted, total rejection of secularism, superficial sense of sin and evil, frustration, anger and nervousness. Unless that baggage can be significantly reduced, I see no way for Muslims and Christians to come to some sort of peaceful solution to their decades-long standoff.

## **Necessary Parameters for Cooperation**

### **Parameters for Both Parties**

One of the most important actions on the part of both parties is to search their hearts *whether they really want Nigeria to work*, whether they really want to make a go at it together. Or are both aiming at simply conquering or swallowing up the other? At the moment the latter appears to be the case. If that really is the case, we should be honest and do one of two things. Either decide that we will be at perpetual war and in unending chaos or we will seek the dissolution of Nigeria into two or more countries in such a way that both can live at peace. And while we are at it, we may as well throw ethnic issues and goals into the mix as well. Why, we could be blessed with 400 or more countries with each ethnic group on its own. Those divided among religious lines would be allowed the luxury of dividing as well. What a blessing religion and ethnicity are about to become to Nigeria and to the world!

The above scenario is, of course, both impossible and undesirable. It really is nonsense – but nonsensical as it is, it seems to me the only long-term solution and the only logical direction if

the present state of affairs is not definitely and consciously rejected. The unending multiplication of states and local governments units clearly shows the logic of current attitudes. Not only would such a political situation be undesirable and make these mini-states totally vulnerable to all manner of oppression and manipulation by other countries, but such a development would also call into serious question the value of religion. One of the reasons for the decline of Christianity in the West is the bloodshed it caused in the past and the intolerance it practiced. Already Nigerian voices questioning the benefit of religions are heard. Do Christians and Muslims really want to so discredit their respective religions or religion in general? Do we want that to be the final result of our competitive missionary efforts? A mere rhetorical question. What a colossal waste that would be after so much effort. But the mood will definitely move in that direction if Christians and Muslims do not learn to live and work together in building up the nation. People will grow indifferent and call for a plague on both houses.

This then means that adherents of both religions *must* learn to live and work together under an arrangement that is more than a forced peace. We *must* devise a way of living together – in peace, not in strife; with cooperation, not deadly competition; for mutual upbuilding, not pulling down. We must all decide that we are going to make it together, come what may and cost what it may, with both our country and our religions intact, not under force, but with eager desire that it be so. Presently, we are a nation under siege, occupied by our own army. This cannot go on forever. How many times have we not come to the brink of dissolution? How deeply troubled is our economy in the midst of untold natural wealth? Will we, Christians and Muslims together, turn all the blessings of tribe, of energy and creativity, of culture, music and dance, of endless natural resources and of viable religions that God has given us into one grand curse? To ask it is to answer it. A negative here would spell the end of Nigeria not only, but of all Africa and, possibly, of the reputation of the entire Black race. The answer to our original question *must* be a determined positive. And that holds for both our houses. At this point Nigeria is a mere deck of cards waiting to collapse.

Both Christians and Muslims must quit their whining about being persecuted by the Federal Government. Both must shed their persecution complex. Both must cease the silly game of producing one-sided statistics that supposedly prove their one-sided points. Though Muslims have a huge paranoia complex on an international scale, Christians in Nigeria are not free from it either. Neither case is convincing as long as one-sided arguments continue to be advanced that ignore the points raised by the other.

### **Parameters for Christians**

While the last section emphasizes parameters that both sides need to work on, this section suggests some issues Christians must work on to improve the climate. The first is undoubtedly the need for clarity and consistency on the secularism issue. First of all, they should become

more sensitive to Muslim thinking on this subject as I have summarized earlier. You do not make peace with a bull by waving a red flag in front of him. You certainly cannot expect cooperation from Muslims by continually harping on secularism.

Not only do Muslims strongly oppose secularism in principle, since it would violate the comprehensive nature of religion as they see it, but Christians are also inconsistent in both its interpretation and application. One cannot make out whether Christians mean the separation of *church* and state or *religion* and state or both. The first means to prevent any specific religious body from being the established religion in the country. In some countries, the Roman Catholic Church is the official state church. In Britain, it is the Anglican Church; in Scotland, the Presbyterian; in some East European nations it is the Orthodox. The separation of church and state would make such an alliance impossible. Even Christians who reject secularism will usually support this kind of separation, for such alliances make for oppression and favouritism. It puts the non-established religious organizations at a serious disadvantage.

But the separation of religion and state is another matter. Here we approach the very essence of religion and its public role, an issue we can only lightly touch upon in this article. I subscribe to the dictum that all of life is religion, much like Islam does. In this I am not alone as a Christian. I stand in the Kuyperian Reformed tradition from which people like Charles Colson derive much of their inspiration. (See my website: [www.SocialTheology.com](http://www.SocialTheology.com)) In some ways parallel to Islam, this tradition insists that all of life is religious and that one cannot separate his basic religious viewpoint from his politics. A person's politics is expressive of his basic beliefs or worldview.

Sometimes Nigerian Christians sound as if they want all government functionaries to ignore their religious convictions in the course of their duties. We are told we need to resort to a neutral, non-religious platform, where we all can meet on the common ground of reason, whatever our religion. Our religion is strictly a spiritual, private and personal matter that has no business intruding into the worldly public sphere of politics and government (Boer 1979, 479-481; 1984, 143-144). This common Nigerian Christian view is the sad heritage of dualistic missions that separate the spiritual from the affairs of the world and have thus laid the groundwork for the Christian call for this separation.

At other times, Christians speak enthusiastically about the duty of a Christian in government. They expect that a Christian will adhere to Biblical principles in the pursuit of his official duties. All of a sudden the separation of religion and government has evaporated.

On the one hand, Christians denounce government involvement in Muslim affairs such as the annual pilgrimage, in Muslim universities or university departments thinly disguised as centres for Arabic studies, in the building of mosques and in unilateral support for Muslim radio programming. These are private and spiritual matters in which the government has no business, Christians argue. But then they turn around and demand government support for their schools and hospitals. They praise state governors and other highly placed Christian officials for their

generous contributions for new church buildings, usually without asking from whence this largesse. The only disagreement Christians had with respect to government grants for the national ecumenical centre is that it was not enough. They have even forced the hand of government to support Christian pilgrimages to Rome and Jerusalem so that many states have two pilgrim boards, one for Christians, the other for Muslims. Christians hover haltingly between a secular approach and pluralism or multi-religion.

Is it any wonder that Muslims are confused about the Christian call for secularism? To Islam, secularism represents a reprehensible reduction of religion. It takes religion out of the public square and turns it into a powerless diversion from the serious matter of nation building. While Islam is paraded as a total way of life and the Muslim community publishes an endless array of articles and books on Muslim economics, politics, business, government, *etc.*, Muslims see in Christianity little more than a weak, spiritual and confused churchianity that is a mere puppet in the hands of the enemies of Islam. It should not come as a surprise that these confusing and mixed Christian signals about secularism have only served to increase Muslim contempt for Christianity. Islam finds it hard to take such a reduced religion seriously either as an equal religion or as a national partner. So much of it seems trivial and mixed up.

This is not the place to discuss the origins of this inconsistent and confused Christian response (Boer 1979, 446-456, 132-133). It cannot be denied that the immediate roots for this weak response lie in colonialism with its emphasis on secularism and in the tragically truncated, trivialized, westernized and secularizing gospel inherited from Western missions as summarized in the charge of CAN (*Leadership in Nigeria*, viii). This heritage has led to serious Christian self-marginalization. This is not simply an expression of a favourite Nigerian Christian pastime of using missionaries as scapegoats for their problems. There is substance to it. I remember a very prominent missionary lamenting, "If only Nigerian Christians would leave religion out of politics." However, the time that Nigerian Christians can settle for blaming Westerners for their shortcomings and woes is past. It is time to move on to more solid and better things.

It is high time for Nigerian Christians to throw off the chains of this reduced secularizing and trivializing "gospel" and to replace it with the dynamics of the Biblical Gospel that is as comprehensive as Islam. Developing such a comprehensive Gospel is not simply copying the "enemy." It will amount to a revival of Biblical Christianity as it was meant to be, a Gospel that has concrete perspectives to offer for politics, government, business, education and so on. It will give Christians a task far more constructive than simply opposing Islam. And it will help them meet Islam as an equal partner with its own Christian perspectives on the country's challenges. Such a programme will turn Christianity into a much more potent force in the country than it is in its present reactionary and trivialized forms. As it is, Christian politics in Nigeria is not much more than reacting to and undermining Muslim politics. Its only goal seems to be negative, for they have not inherited any positive impulse. This new programme would once and for all end the Nigerian Christian flirtation with secularism and move the goalposts of the current struggle away from its present dead end.

Please understand me well. I am not proposing mere cosmetic changes or simply a better strategy to counter the Muslim advance. I am talking about a deep renewal of our understanding of the Gospel and of our Christian style, a renewal of ourselves before we can expect a change in Muslim behaviour. I am talking about the colossal beam in the Christian eye. In the meantime, I propose that the Western missions that have been operative in Nigeria render a joint public apology to the entire nation for having led it astray with their reduced trivialized gospel.

Another important point calling for change is the hierarchical spirit of the Christian church in Nigeria. Some Christian traditions, such as the Roman Catholic, Anglican and Methodists, are consciously hierarchical. Others, such as the Baptists and most members of TEKAN, the Fellowship of the Churches of Christ in Nigeria, have non-hierarchical traditions. They tend to be more democratic. Authority is more dispersed.

However, due to the influence of African tradition, many of them are increasingly tempted to construct their own hierarchies. They use all kinds of excuses for this. It is more in keeping with African culture. Their leadership will demand more respect from the government. However, the issue is not first of all culture or respect from the world.

The primary issue is faithfulness to the Bible in this respect. Where does the spirit of the Bible lead with its emphasis on servant leadership? It often seems far removed from the pomp and circumstance church hierarchies create around themselves. Instead of servant leadership we have mystification through special robes and protocol for purposes of power and privilege that cannot stand the light of Scripture but that go counter to the style of our Lord Himself. I know. I was once part of the scene. I experienced it. I participated in it. I know the mystification that goes along with it and its effect on the church.

Apart from its distance from the Bible, in the context of this paper such hierarchy creates problems at two fronts. Muslims recognize the mystification Christian clergy enact and they scorn the church for it. They proudly point to their own egalitarian system where one can hardly point to a specific concrete organization with a hierarchy of leadership. To them, this is utter nonsense. Muslims consider such religion as little more than child's play and it turns them off. It confronts them with a trivialized gospel versus their own comprehensive system. It constitutes a false barrier, since the Bible points in the opposite direction. If Christians expect greater respect from Muslims, they will have to come to terms with this glaring inconsistency.

Not only does this situation constitute a false barrier to the Gospel, but it also is grossly inconsistent with a major message the church has presented to the nation in 1987 through the TEKAN submission to the Federal Government under the title *Towards the Right Path*. A major emphasis in this memo is on the need for democracy. Without democracy, the memo insists, development will be difficult. An honest comparison of this memo with current church hierarchical practice immediately reveals a glaring contradiction between what the church does within itself and it demands from the government. Hierarchy and democracy do not make easy

bed partners. It appears church leaders refuse to recognize the gap between the church's words and actions. The church has not responded to my challenge on this score. But whether they admit the gap or not, they should not think that it goes unnoticed in government and Muslim circles. The memo is a good piece of work and it was even published. However, it failed to make the waves it deserved. The main reason for this failure is likely that gap. Actions speak louder than words. The church only exposed the splinter in the government's eye. It thought it could hide its own beam. Unfortunately, you cannot easily fool an entire nation for long nor an overly critical Muslim community of nearly 50 million.

There are more changes that need to be made. However, the above proposals for renewal are enough to chew on. Once that programme has been put into motion, all the other problems will take on a different colouration that cannot be accurately predicted at this time. So, I am content to work on this major renewal for now without asking for any additional changes.

### **Parameters for Muslims**

A major change Muslims must make is an attitudinal one. They suffer from a multi-faceted malady of self-righteousness. They would do well to remember the old adage that pride comes before the fall. It is one thing to be grateful for one's religion, but another to be proud. Pride and religion do not mix well. Pride distorts religion into something ugly and intimidating. The popular bumper sticker "I am proud to be a Muslim" is more a hostile challenge than an invitation for others to join. Muslims ought to realize how their pride obscures the gratitude that is of the essence of Islam and that is expressed a myriad times daily in the routine greeting response in Hausa, "*Da godiya,*" (I thank God). Their blind pride and fierce loyalty to Islam as a religion is often a party slogan rather than an expression of genuine spiritual devotion.

Here is the first step Muslims must take if they wish to make Nigeria work. That is, if they are prepared to cooperate with Christians. Thankfulness and humility must replace pride. The armour of pride pushes others away and intimidates them; thankfulness and humility will make Islam attractive to others and will instill a different attitude towards others.

An attitude of thankfulness and humility will also aid Muslims in the development of listening skills and self-examination. As it is, they seem deaf to the critiques of Christians or seem not to understand them. Pride of a beautiful religion tends to close their ears, their minds and their hearts. It disables them from the practice of empathy. Coupled with an underdeveloped sense of sin, this multi-faceted attitude of self-righteousness makes self-examination difficult for them.

Another facet of this attitudinal package is contempt for others. Contempt, of course, only complicates the situation as described above. It freezes any sense of obligation to take the other seriously and to make room for him. It squashes any feeling of fairness and justice for others. It explains why Muslims may publicly quote from the Bible but not Christians from the Qur'an. It

explains why Muslims insist on maintaining their domination of the butcher trade, including publicly-funded abattoirs, and thus preventing others from trading in the meat of their choice. It explains why Muslims are so ready to utilize public funds to further their own religion and its institutions without equally insisting on the same right for Christians. It explains why Muslims are still not ready to end their internal colonialism by returning power to Traditional/Christian ethnic groups placed under Muslim emirs by the colonial government. It explains why Muslims reject the notion that what is good for the goose is equally good for the gander – not if the gander is a non-Muslim! It explains why Muslims are baffled by charges of intolerance and oppression.

Then there is this gigantic case of Muslim global paranoia, this international conspiracy theory, that, again, blinds them to the facts. They see the entire non-Muslim world, and especially the West, united in one grand conspiracy to destroy Islam. Colonialism was not about economics; it was an effort to destroy Islam. Christian missions are not about the Christian religion; they are a mere tool in the hands of anti-Muslim forces. The Nigerian federal and state governments along with the Nigerian church are pawns in the hands of the enemies of Islam. They refuse to listen to the hand wringing of large sections of the West for their colonial past. They are stubbornly deaf to the repeated cries of agony on the part of the Western church for her participation in the colonial enterprise. They refuse to acknowledge the many disagreements between Western governments and churches about issues of global justice and poverty. They insist that it is all one grand conspiracy against Islam and no facts can move them from the rock of this conviction. Indeed, there is no better word than “paranoia” to describe this Muslim attitude. Frankly, this attitude makes them look ridiculous and irrational, since it denies too many indicators to the contrary. Muslims proudly insist that their religion is rational. Let them shine the light of their rationality on this severe paranoia and diffuse it by acknowledging the facts rationally rather than hiding them under a bushel of nationalism, emotionalism and “religionism.”

A major point of this article is to show Muslims in no uncertain terms that if they want to make Nigeria work, they must do some serious work on this attitude problem. Without a change at this front, Nigeria does not stand a chance. We may as well forget her. She will soon be crumpled up in the *kwandon mantuwa*<sup>3</sup> of history.

Muslims need to revise their stand on the political role of others. They need to move away from the only model they seem to recognize, namely that of a Muslim majority with a non-Muslim minority. That simply is not the situation in Nigeria. I refuse to enter the murky waters of religious statistics in Nigeria,<sup>4</sup> but that both Christians and Muslims represent large and nearly equal majorities cannot be denied. The traditional role Muslims ascribe to *dhimmis* is nonsense in this situation. If Muslims are surprised that their traditional “toleration” is neither recognized

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3 A Hausa expression literally meaning “basket of forgetfulness.”

4 However, I did enter those “murky waters” in an article on this same website page, [“Religious Statistics in Nigeria.”](#) May, 1998.

nor appreciated by others, they should realize that the world has moved on from mere toleration to a firm demand for equal rights.

While Christians must relinquish their demand for a secular approach – and I have indicated my strong disagreement with their stance – Muslims must move towards a genuine form of pluralism or multi-religion. Their traditional form of pluralism will no longer suffice. Admittedly, it was an advance over the intolerance of Christians through the ages, but that has now been overtaken. Nigerian Christians have woken up. And let it be understood that this is no call for the relativistic type of pluralism as advanced by postmodernism. The call today is for genuine equality and respect. While Christians must allow Muslims to be Muslims according to their own definition, so Muslims must allow Christians to be Christians according to *their* own definition.

The above maxim has its limitation only where their mutual claims infringe on one another. And *that* is where both need to be ready to compromise in an attitude of give and take. Here they both need to be ready to break new paths, not simply follow East or West. In both East and West, the respective dominant forces of Islam and secularism have tolerated Christianity only according to reductionist definitions concocted by the dominant majorities.

Africa has already broken some new paths in allowing various legal systems to co-exist. In some Nigerian states there are three different court systems: the Traditional, the Muslim and the Western secular, often the one chosen by Christians. To be sure, not all these courts cover the entire legal front. Especially the Traditional and Muslim courts have limited scope. In some places it works; in many others it does not. And it definitely has not worked where the shari'a is imposed on Christians. Similarly, Muslims often feel deprived of their Muslim rights when the secular system is applied to them.

Muslims have a point: Why should they submit to an alien legal system that denies their own. I am distressed at how little Christians are prepared or even capable of listening sympathetically to the Muslim argument here. What of the Christian claim to democracy? I am grateful that Anthony Enahoro, an elderly Christian Nigerian statesman, dared to raise his lone Christian voice in support of the shari'a recently. He is quoted as saying that

The fundamental question in the Sharia debate boils down to this: If a substantial part of the country wishes to direct its life, organize its local autonomy and order its domestic affairs with a faith, principles and laws which they share with a substantial part of the humanity and immediate neighbours, can you expect for long to deprive them of the right to do so? (Reported by Nubi Achebo in *Naijanews* of Nov. 15/1999.

But Christians also have a point. They are rightly challenging Muslims to convince them that Muslims will really restrict the operation of *shari'a* to Muslims only. So far, Christians have every good reason to doubt the Muslim pledge not to apply their law to non-Muslims. And that is precisely the major reason Christians reject it. It is the trust factor. The Christian secular argument could probably be overcome if the trust were there.

So, Muslims, convince us that you are serious. You are called upon to give Christians a reason to trust you. Restore our confidence in you. Give us some signs that you are listening sympathetically, that you recognize some of your own shortcomings and intolerance. This is not a request for you to unwillingly give in to pressures you can no longer withstand. I am not asking you to capitulate under the force of numbers. I am advising you to voluntarily take the initiative of insisting on equality and on the rights of all regardless of religion. Take a cue from your co-religionists in Turkey. Be prepared to give up the positions of power and attendant privileges you have accrued prior to Christian awakening. Make us believe that you really do want a new beginning. Such a move will not only make Nigeria viable, but it will also enhance your national and even world reputation.

And if you want a missionary rationale for these demands, realize that in most cases Nigerian Christian converts to Islam are largely motivated not by faith but by lust for wealth and power. Such people may increase your numbers, but they do little to enhance your faith community. You know them for what they are. Often you do not even trust them. You are absorbing many weeds in the garden of Islam. However, if people join you because they associate you with justice and equality, then you get genuine growth and genuine converts.

### **The Concluding Challenge**

In conclusion, my action summary to my fellow Christians is this. Give more careful thought to secularism. Be consistent. Don't have your own pilgrim board or accept funds from any government or governor while you are demanding a secular system. That simply makes no sense. It is bound to confuse anyone who pays attention. Shift your basic thinking away from anti-Muslim to pro-Nigeria. Do not be inspired mainly by an anti-Muslim spirit. Do not allow yourself merely to react against what Muslims do. A Muslim call for the institutionalization of shari'a should not result in a Christian call for a Christian state as it appears River State Government is threatening to do (N. Achebo, *Naijanews*, Dec 15/1999). That call is not inspired by the Gospel so much as it is a reaction to Islam.

Better still: Get rid of your secularism. It reduces the scope of the Gospel and the Christian religion. It trivializes Christianity. If Christians do not see that, Muslims see it clearly. Instead, develop a wholistic Christian worldview that can stand the light of Scripture and that covers all of life. Apologize for the crusades on behalf of world Christianity and suggest a trade-off with Muslims for them also to abandon their *jihad*. Definitely do not ever again accept inequality or second-class citizenship. Demand your rights and your respect – and then return the favour. Insist also that Muslims have their rights.

Muslims, remember that not every Muslim situation is the same. Apparently different forms are possible within which Muslims can feel comfortable. The Muslim world has created a considerable variety of political and religious setups. Get rid of your dogmatism that leaves no

room for alternatives. Replace your pride with gratitude and humility. Grant others what you demand for yourself. If you reject crusades, do not insist on your own *jihad*.

I call upon both to admit past mistakes. Then proceed to forgive each other and forget the past. If the call for forgiveness seems utopian to the secular mind, for the Christian – and, I would hope, for the Muslim as well – it is our very breath and native air. Look towards the future. Listen to each other. Practice empathy. Make a commitment to each other that Nigeria is going to be viable. Consult each other and avoid confrontations and crises. Control your extremists. Protect the respect for your religion. Develop a sense of fairness. Know that others are also proud of their religion. Fear, anger, mistrust, hatred – all of these must go. Repent, both of you. Let succeeding generations not wish us a plague on both our houses. Let history not lay the blame for a collapsed Nigeria at the feet of the two most widespread world religions. That would be a defeat of both Nigeria and religion. We want neither. It is up to us to devise a way out of the trap into which satan has lured us.

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