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Paul Kangkai

## Challenging times in Nigeria

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The wave of violence sweeping through Nigeria is unprecedented, surpassed only by the Biafran civil war (1967-1970). The killings and carnage are of inexplicable proportions when one takes into account the spread and the figures involved. They have not only been consistent and relentless but systematic as well, especially in the Middle-Belt and North-East of Nigeria. While there are other forms of violence caused by crime, our concern is the type of violence that can be described as ethno-religious. Since 1999, northern Nigeria has been ravaged by repeated episodes of religious and ethno-religious violence involving the loss of thousands of lives, the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people and the destruction of vast quantities of property.<sup>1</sup> Whole communities are sacked by vicious militias or terrorists unchallenged. To add insult to injury, their possessions are looted or destroyed and sometimes their land taken away from them. The violence is overwhelmingly between followers of the two important monotheistic religions, Islam and Christianity. We cannot but ask why are the conflicts and violence on the increase rather than abating? What has happened that the two great monotheistic religions that preach peace in their classical books, laws and theology turn on themselves in violence?

These conflicts and violence are now part of our existential reality. They are of interest to us because more often than not our Christian population are on the receiving end. Thousands who have survived the onslaught of terrorists are living as internally displaced citizens, not knowing when to return to the safety of their homes. The carnage grossly affects the life of the Church.

As far as we are concerned, it is persecution based on our Christian convictions. While it has never been publicly acknowledged or declared by government, either at the national or state levels, individuals, groups and sects have taken it upon

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1 Abdoul Raufu Mustapha ed., "Interpreting Islam: Sufis, Salafists, Shi'ites & Islamists in Northern Nigeria" in *Sects & Social Disorder: Muslim Identities & Conflict in Northern Nigeria* (New York: James Currey, 2014), 1

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themselves to embark on such a dehumanizing mission. This is not to say that people of other religions, particularly Muslims, do not sometimes find themselves in the firing line. The point we are making is that there is a sinister agenda to Islamize not only the minority tribes in the north, but also, the entire country.

#### ISLAM AND CHRISTIANITY IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

The Islamic religion came to Nigeria in two well documented phases. The origin of the first goes back to the 8th century. This means that Islam was in northern Nigeria only two hundred years after it was founded by Prophet Mohammed himself. It was well enshrined by the 12th century, when scholars and trade merchants from North Africa made inroads through the trade routes of the Sahara Desert into what later became northern Nigeria. During this phase, Islam was mainly a religion of the elite with the Kanem Bornu Empire, on the northeast of Lake Chad, the first part of latter-day Nigeria to get Islamized.<sup>2</sup> By the sixteenth century, Islam had become the religion of the empire. During this period, elites in other parts of northern Nigeria that had accepted Islam had also begun forging diplomatic alliances and exchanges with Muslims leaders in other parts of the continent. As a result of these exchanges, Arabic literature also began making inroads into the country. For Abiodun Alao, despite the advances of Islam into northern Nigeria, indigenous religion still had considerable number of adherents. It was this remnant that was to wait for the second phase of Islamization of northern Nigeria.<sup>3</sup>

The second and most recent phase of Islamization in Nigeria was the 19th century jihad of Usman Dan Fodio. Best regarded as a social reformer and Islamic scholar, Dan Fodio, in 1804, “led a great jihad which within 50 years, swept all Hausa rulers off their thrones and established Fulani hegemony in most of the present day northern Nigeria.”<sup>4</sup> It did not take a long time before Islam became the dominant religion. Through contacts with other groups, trade and war Islam expanded and penetrated the south-west of Nigeria dominated by the Yoruba ethnic group. It has been pointed out that “the most important consequence of the jihads was the creation of the Sokoto Caliphate, the largest political unit in the nineteenth century West Africa, a confederation of states (emirates) held together by common aims and religious allegiance to the *Amir al-Mumini* [Commander of the Believers] ... Stress was laid upon the uniqueness and exclusiveness of Islam and its opposition to

2 Abiodun Alao, *Islamic Radicalisation and Violence in Nigeria*, Country Report, 6. For more detailed discussion, see, Kenneth W. Morgan, ed., *Islam, the Straight Path: Islam Interpreted by Muslims* (New York: Ronald Press, 1958), 247.

3 Alao, *Islamic Radicalisation and Violence in Nigeria*, 7.

4 Ibid.

any form of accommodation with African traditional beliefs.”<sup>5</sup> The brand of Islam propagated by the jihadists was reformist and ultraconservative. However, in practice, it proved problematic as many of the participants in the jihad could not sustain the emphasis on religious purity. For many of the followers of the jihadists the overriding interest was political and economic considerations rather than the purification and spread of Islam. Victory in the war campaigns brought them economic and political gains. The expansion of the jihad was brought to an end as a result of the British colonial government.

Christianity is relatively much more recent to Nigeria. It too can be said to have come through two phases. Portuguese missionaries brought the Gospel first at a time when Western Christians were still undivided and all owed allegiance to the See of Rome. Priests accompanied the trade expeditions along the coasts of Africa during the fifteenth century under Prince Henry the Navigator.<sup>6</sup> By 1500, the Gospel had been preached at the courts of the kingdoms of Benin [Nigeria] and Congo, in one case with immediate response from the members of the royal family. But by the end of the eighteenth century, most of these missions had faded away.

The second phase of the missionary movement to Africa began at the end of the eighteenth century spearheaded by Protestant, and, a little later, Catholic missionaries.<sup>7</sup> John Cardinal Onaiyekan has observed that the Christian missions which came to Africa from the 19th century brought a divided Christianity, because missionaries came from many different Christian denominations and groups.<sup>8</sup> Despite the denominational differences, Christianity achieved in less than two hundred years tremendous progress to the extent that it caught up with the Islamic religion. In 2005, northern Nigeria celebrated the centenary of the coming of the Catholic mission pioneered by the SMA. The rapid growth of Christianity all over the country led to a fierce competition that marks the relationship between Nigerian Muslims and Christians. Both Islam and Christianity have more than sixty million adherents each, a rare situation of two religions with equal force.<sup>9</sup> Given this

5 Marinus C. Iwuchukwu, *Muslim-Christian Dialogue in Postcolonial Northern Nigeria: The Challenge of Inclusive Pluralism* (New York: Palgrave Mcmillan, 2013), 9-10. See Lissi Rasmussen, *Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa: The Cases of Northern Nigeria and Tanzania Compared* (London and New York: British Academic Press, 1960), 6.

6 T. A. Beetham, *Christianity and The New Africa* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1967), 7.

7 *Ibid.*, 9.

8 John O. Onaiyekan, *Seeking Common Grounds: Inter-Religious Dialogue in Africa* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2013), 87.

9 *Ibid.* 87. It is almost an impossible task to arrive at any useful figure on the number of adherents within sects of a religion, much less that for the followers of the various religions.

unique position, it is not surprising that many religious related issues emanate from Nigeria. Alao opines that Nigeria has more recorded conflicts over religion than all African countries put together and the number of people that have died as a result of religious violence in the last two decades is higher than those of all African countries combined. It is worth noting that Nigeria was one of the few African countries that had their nationals arrested in Afghanistan for allegedly fighting alongside the Taliban insurgents. The country was one of the two African countries specifically mentioned by Osama Bin Laden in one of his video releases in 2002 as places where Muslims should rise in rebellion. We recall sadly that the publication of the Danish cartoon of the Prophet Mohammed resonated more distinctly in Nigeria than most other countries with many people losing their lives.<sup>10</sup> A Catholic priest, Fr. Michael Kwali of Maiduguri diocese was killed and his body burnt.

#### THE NATURE OF THE SOCIETY IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

Historically and demographically, northern Nigeria is a pluralistic society. It is culturally diverse. Muslims form the majority of the population of the 19 northern states along with a significant Christian minority and a generous sprinkling of followers of African Traditional Religions.<sup>11</sup> In most parts of northern Nigeria, Muslims and Christians live together without any discrimination on the basis of religion. As it is in any normal society they work and, sometimes, do their businesses together. Unfortunately, owing to the infiltration of many northern communities by terrorists and militia groups, coupled with incessant unprovoked attacks and reprisals in villages, towns and cities, we are beginning to see a gradual segregation of communities. Many people feel much safer in the part of a town or city populated by members of their religious persuasion. Identifying culprits is quite difficult because attacks are carried out either by a mob or in a clandestine way. It is vitally important to state that disturbances either by a sect or a group of Christians or Muslims do not represent the general attitude of adherents of both religions. In the same way that there are different faces of Christianity, Islam too is not a monolithic religion.<sup>12</sup> It is dynamic in its features which has created deep rooted diversity among Muslims. This accounts for the variation in

10 Alao, *Islamic Radicalisation and Violence in Nigeria*, 5.

11 Abdul Raufu Mustapha & Murhtar U. Bunza, "Contemporary Islamic Sects & Groups in Northern Nigeria" in *Sects & Social Disorder: Muslim Identities & Conflict in Northern Nigeria*, 54.

12 Muhammed Nur Alkali, Abubakar Kawu Monguno, Ballama Shettima Mustafa, "Overview of Islamic Actors in North Eastern Nigeria," in *Nigeria Research Network (NRN)*, University of Oxford, NRN Working Paper No. 2, January 2012, 9.

practice and attitude to non-Muslims. Equally, we must state that the greater majority of Muslims in Nigeria are peaceful. Although there is no comprehensive record of the number of violent clashes between Christians and Muslims, it has been suggested that 104 out of 178 were classified as religious.<sup>13</sup> Two of the most dangerous terrorist or militia groups who claim to be Muslims who have been responsible for the mass murder of thousands of people are *Boko Haram* and *The Fulani Muslim Herdsmen*.

*Boko Haram* is the best known because of their affiliation to ISIS and the kidnapping of over 200 school girls in the sleepy town of Chibok. It has not always been a terrorist organisation. Atta Barkindo has argued that the founder of the group Muhammad Yusuf in his book, *Hadhihi Aqidatuna wa Minhaj Da'awatuna* ("This is our creed and the methodology of propagation"), calls for a return to a pristine age of Islam. The content of the book is quite peaceful.<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, since its transformation into a terrorist organisation, *Boko Haram's* activities have resulted in the deaths of more than 20, 000 people and the displacement of 5.5 million in the Lake Chad basin.<sup>15</sup> Initially, it was a conflict between them and the state but in the end Muslims and Christians were affected. Currently, their activities have been greatly diminished but they are able to come up with periodic attacks. The diocese of Maiduguri which is at the epi centre of this conflict was brought to its knees as about 500 Churches were destroyed with many of the priests coming under attack by the insurgents.

The *Fulani Muslim Herdsmen* are as dangerous as *Boko Haram*. As the name suggests, they are herdsmen, mostly of the Fulani ethnic extraction. Traditionally, the Fulani herd their cattle throughout West and Central Africa. Since open grazing is the norm in most of these countries, they roam across borders freely without any hinderance. They drive their cattle into local communities and generally do not cause harm and when they do they have local mechanisms for resolving incidences amicably. The Fulani herders are frequently the target of cattle rustlers and armed bandits. However, there is a new trend that has been observed in the last few years. They have become more protective of themselves and now carry dangerous weapons. Emboldened with their military hardware they have become more daring and deadly, using their weapons to advance a different agenda other than herding cattle. Under the guise of seeking fertile land for grazing they have unleashed a deadly campaign against predominantly Christian

13 Alkali, *Nigeria Research Network* (NRN), 18.

14 Atta Barkindo, *How Boko Haram Exploits History and Memory* (London: Africa Research Institute, 2016), 1.

15 *Ibid*, 1

minority groups in the Middle-Belt and other parts of Nigeria. The aftermath is that hundreds of selected Christian farming villages and towns have come under vicious and brutal attacks in what can best be described as genocide or ethnic cleansing.

The violence is not one sided. Christians groups and tribes also carry out acts of violence against Muslims. Beyond self-defence, some Christian youths have engaged in premeditated acts of violence and militancy against Hausa-Fulani Muslims and their properties.<sup>16</sup> Violent conflicts in the northern cities of Jos and Kaduna demonstrate how some youths in the name of Christianity promoted organized aggression against Muslims. The bottom line is that such militancy has contributed to the bloody orgy of violence between Christian and Muslims in norther Nigeria.<sup>17</sup>

#### LOOKING INTO THE FUTURE

Religious violence and religiously motivated conflicts have been taken to such sad levels that, if unchecked, can escalate beyond the traditional borders of northern Nigeria to engulf the rest of the country. With a population of over 180 million people, one can hardly imagine what the repercussion will be not only for the country but for her neighbours. Therefore, it calls for concerted efforts at rebuilding trust and mending relationships that have been torn apart. The process is already ongoing judging by the number of publications on inter-religious dialogue and engagements by individuals and organizations working collaboratively towards a more harmonious relationship. For us as Christians, there is the unavoidable consciousness that Christianity exists in a world of religious plurality.<sup>18</sup> Karl Rahner asserts that pluralism is a fact which should be incorporated into “the totality and unity of the Christian understanding of human existence.”<sup>19</sup> After all, holding Jesus Christ as normative for the Christian conception of reality does not inhibit dialogue.<sup>20</sup> It is for this reason that we are always seeking out collaborators that will work towards conciliatory relations. We are aware that religions make claims on society which can come into conflict with each other. Our responsibility is to be able to learn from the painful experiences of other cultures and come to the quick realization that in the long run society gains more from freedom of religion. In addition, it is the basis of a free constitutional and legal system as well as the foundation of a social

16 Iwuchukwu, *Muslim-Christian Dialogue in Postcolonial Northern Nigeria*, 79.

17 *Ibid.*, 79.

18 Gavin D’Costa, *Theology of Religious Pluralism* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 3.

19 Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 5, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966), 115.

20 Roger Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God* (New York: Orbis Books, 2002), 417.

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order and peace.<sup>21</sup> Walter Kasper has observed that “the basis for freedom of religion is not indifference towards other religions, but respect for other religions and attempting to live peacefully together.”<sup>22</sup> For him, this positive freedom of religion is the basic prerequisite for interreligious dialogue. It contains not only the right to personal religious conviction (freedom of conscience), which include the right to change religions, but also the freedom to publicly exercise the religion, obviously in a way that the public peace (and so the freedom of others) is not endangered.<sup>23</sup>

An important challenge facing Nigeria, specifically northern Nigeria, is the challenge of building a plural and inclusive society. It must come to terms with the reality of creating a society that is at home with diversity and guarantees justice and equal opportunity to all. The attempt to create an unequal society through the promotion of the Hausa-Fulani ethnic groups, who are predominantly Muslims, over others has ended in violence. In the same way that violence has been allowed to grow out of proportion, it can equally be controlled or avoided altogether. Culturally, northern Nigerians have a feudalistic mindset. Traditional institutions are respected and revered. Traditional chiefs, religious leaders and elders command a lot of respect and determine to a great extent how society behaves. In the past, these traditional institutions have been deployed for the resolution of conflicts.

In the same vein, it must address the economic and social inequality in her midst. Leaders in the north of Nigeria have to take urgent action on the over 15 million children who are out of school. The region is the poorest in the economic index of the country. It goes without saying that the highest proportion of the northern poor are Muslims. Authorities in northern Nigeria have to take concrete action to halt the trend that almost all the religious violence, fanaticism and extremism is found in their midst. This task is not insurmountable. All they have to do is to look at their southern neighbours who have invested so much on education and are reaping the harvest of harmonious relations and economic progress.

A necessary measure at averting violence in the future is an urgent need for a national reorientation to replace a sectarian culture that debases human life. The sacredness and the sanctity of life is second to none and should be the primary concern for all. This is because we are all created in the “image and likeness of God.” Henri de Lubac reminds us that “humanity is made up of persons who

21 Walter Kasper, *The Catholic Church: Nature, Reality and Mission* (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clarks, 2015), 315.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.



have all the same one eternal destiny.”<sup>24</sup> He contends that “in spite of great differences of understanding and of function, all members of the human race enjoy the same essential equality before God.”<sup>25</sup> Every human being has a right to life. This gives dignity to the human person, and thus, must be respected as a fundamental right which should not be taken away recklessly by religious fanatics and extremists like *Boko Haram* and *Fulani Muslim Herdsmen*. A situation where a sect, because of its own religious convictions, goes on a killing spree is totally unacceptable. Even more appalling is for the same society and its authorities to accept it as normal. There are millions of people in northern Nigeria with the mindset of *Boko Haram* and *Fulani Muslim Herdsmen*. This outlook to life is not restricted to the poor and the uneducated. They are found in every sphere of society including the civil service, academia, military, professionals, religious and traditional rulers. How they will be deradicalized remains to be seen. Key to any change of attitude is paying attention to the local preachers and instructors in Churches and Mosques who transmit such dangerous and divisive sentiments to their followers.

#### CONCLUSION

What we are describing as religious violence is in the real sense of the word the persecution of Christians. Islamic terrorists in our context do not commit acts of violence deliberately against their fellow Muslims. Christians are the main target while others might be caught up in the process. There is no record anywhere of organized Christian terrorist groups going around bombing, raping women and attempting to carve out an independent state. To my knowledge, Nigerian Christians are not at war with anybody and there is data that points to Christians forcefully converting others from Islam to Christianity unlike what obtains in some Islamic communities in the north of the country.

A lot of the violence can be avoided if there is good leadership and governance. Many of the conflicts that escalate into outright violence is as a result of the failure of pro-active enforcement of law and order on the part of government. The violence is the end result of decades or centuries of an exclusive interpretation of religion that is no longer relevant in the world of today. It is incredible the degree of “Christophobia” and “Islamophobia” that one finds in northern Nigeria. The way forward is to intensify building the culture and theology of tolerance by both religions. It can begin with respect for the religion and culture of others and the

24 Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 232.

25 *Ibid.*, 233.

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freedom of others to live and exercise their religion. Peace can only come about when religion is separated from violence. Dialogue initiatives by different groups and individuals is commendable. What they need is the solidarity of the global community. It is a human tragedy in the twenty first century. Crimes against humanity are being carried out against thousands of poor innocent people who can neither defend themselves nor make their plight known to the world. Unfortunately, the terrorists are well armed and richly financed. They get all the media attention while the victims are languishing in refugee camps. Christians in this part of the world need to be supported in order for them to rebuild schools, clinics and places of worship that are witnesses to the faith. It will require people of goodwill and the creative collaboration by all to bring about a peaceful and non-violent society.

**Catholic Schools.** The Catholic school ought therefore to be a community inspired by Gospel values and transmitting Gospel values, including: the sacredness of human life; the dignity of the person; integrity; peace; tolerance; justice; honesty and truth; holiness; gentleness and compassion; mercy and forgiveness; purity; respect. Just as the family home introduces children to the process of socialisation and awareness of others and the needs of the world; the school builds upon this, ensuring that young people learn to relate to, and understand the needs of others, helping them realise that when you take account of others, sometimes you have to postpone, or wait for your own needs or desires. *Amoris Laetitia* puts it well: “The task of education is to make us sense that the world and society are also our home; it trains us how to live together in this greater home. In the family we learn closeness, Care and respect for others. We break out of our fatal self-absorption and come to realise that we are living with and alongside others who are worthy of our concern, our kindness and our affection (*AL* 276)”

– ARCHBISHOP EAMON MARTIN, Address to Catholic Schools Conference, Galway.