

INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM:
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CASE STUDIES ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM: PANEL DISCUSSION

Contribution on the Nigerian Case

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- 1.** **Nigeria in the News:** Nigeria has been very much in the international news media in the last year, and this unfortunately for reasons that are far from being positive. The news has been centered around the violent activities of an Islamic terrorist group popularly called the *Boko Haram*, (*BH*) a nick name which loosely translates as “Western education is an abomination.” I say “nick name” because the group has a different name for themselves, in Arabic, namely: *Jama’atu Ahlis Sunnah lil Dawah’ati wal Jihad*. This long name loosely translates as “The Association of Suni Muslims for the Propagation of the faith (da’awah) and for the Struggle for Islam, (Jihad). Whatever their name, what has hit the headlines is their series of violent activities, mainly in the Northern parts of Nigeria.

We live in a violent world, and our country Nigeria has had more than her fair share of such violence. For quite sometime, we have had the challenge of rampant armed robbery and kidnappings, ethnic clashes, socio-political militancy in the Niger Delta and other forms of social unrest. But the BH has brought something new and sinister into our experience of violence at least in two ways:

- a) it is unusually virulent in its attacks, including the use of **suicide** terrorist tactics, and
- b) it makes claims of acting in the name of God, deliberately targeting Christians and their institutions presumably for the promotion of Islam.

Although the members are few and constitute a small minority within the Nigerian Muslim community, they are a real danger to the entire Nigerian community because they are fanatics, with warped logic and twisted minds. They have almost succeeded in polarizing our nation along religious lines, hitting at our fragile harmony built over many years of patient efforts and trying to make us enemies of one another. They have definitely succeeded in giving us the bad name of a nation that is unstable and unsafe, where Christians are being persecuted and indiscriminately killed with impunity by freely rampaging Muslim terrorists. This is probably why I have been invited to this program on “International Religious Freedom” along with other speakers from Cuba and Iraq, countries well known to be oppressing Christians.

2. Religious Freedom in Nigeria: Despite all we have said above, especially about the activities of BH, it has always been, and still is, my conviction that there is a basic atmosphere of religious freedom in Nigeria. The very constitution of Nigeria makes two important points. The first is that religion is recognised as an important element in our nation, as it states that we are committed to build a united and prosperous nation “under God”. The other point is that neither the Federal government nor the government of any state shall adopt any religion as state religion. Furthermore, the general principles of fundamental freedoms clearly spell out the freedom of every Nigerian, according to the provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations to freedom of belief and thought. Our constitution provides for not only the freedom to adhere to any religion of ones choice, but to also change ones faith if one so desires.

This prohibition of state religion has been interpreted in some quarters to mean that Nigeria is a “secular state”, a terminology that has generated a lot of controversy in terms of what exactly it means. From the debate at the constituent assembly, that expression was dropped from the draft in difference to those who rejected it on the ground that it could be construed to mean that Nigeria is a

“godless” nation. That Nigeria is NOT a “godless nation” is a point on which Christians and Muslims would generally agree. The clause on prohibition of state religion came as a compromise formulation to satisfy both sides.

However, disagreements, sometimes serious, have arisen as regards what constitutes making a religion a “state religion”. How far can the government go in sponsoring the religious concerns and agenda of any particular religion? An important case in point is the place of the Islamic Shari’ah in our legal system. This has generated a lot of debate that is still to be resolved to the satisfaction of all concerned. The call of the BH for an Islamic State, with full blown Shari’ah, has been roundly rejected not only by Christians, but by the main stream of Islam in Nigeria. In fact, the recognised leaders of Islam in Nigeria, under the Sultan of Sokoto, Sa’ad Abubakar, has consistently denounced the BH sect as not according to the correct tenets of the Islamic faith. It would seem that even those Muslims who may secretly nurse the desire for such a situation, are realistic enough to see that such a desire is futile in the face of the realities on the ground.

The reality is that the about 170 million inhabitants of Nigeria are fairly equally divided into Muslims and Christians. This has made our nation the “greatest Islamo-Christian nation in the world”. By this, I mean that there is no other nation with so many Christians living with so many Muslims in the same nation, in mutual equality and respect. One or the other of the two religions may be dominant in some places, but both are present everywhere, to some extent. To continue to speak of “the Muslim North and the Christian South” is grossly misleading to the point of inaccuracy, convenient though it may be for the journalist. If the far North and the South East are respectively predominantly Muslim and Christian, the Middle Belt and the South West are quite mixed. That is why any talk of dividing Nigeria into a Muslim North and a Christian South not only makes little or no sense, but is also a veritable recipe for chaos..

Because of our occasional and sporadic outburst of ethno-religious violent clashes, there is the unfortunate tendency to overlook the very important

fact that in the normal lives of our people, there is a commendable measure of peaceful and harmonious living together across religious lines. Apart from Fridays and Sundays, when we go our different ways for weekly worship, we live most of our lives as citizens of the same nation, living and struggling to live under the same socio-economic conditions and sometimes members of the same family. One only needs to visit any government office, market or business premises to appreciate this fact.

3. Addressing the Anomaly: In the light of the above, the phenomenon of the BH and similar religious fanaticism are quite an unfortunate anomaly which I believe can and will be contained in the not too distant future. Already, we are seeing evidence of a gradual return to normalcy in the areas most affected. We are aware that the terrorists are still on the prowl, hitting soft targets in many places in the far North. Just last week, we are still hearing of attacks against schools, markets, security outposts and, more of a novelty, communications installations in some remote locations. But on the whole the general atmosphere of panic and fear in which we lived earlier in the year has considerably gone down. Even the many alarmist cell-phone messages spreading rumours of impending bomb attacks are being replaced by jokes with typical Nigerian sense of humour. As an example, here is one I received last week.

“A bomb just exploded in Kano again. This time in a cemetery. All the dead bodies ran out of their graves, but no casualty. The Commissioner of Police has asked them to return to their normal spiritual duties, without fear”.

The message ends with: “Hope I got you smiling!” If we can now begin to smile, it is because some tangible progress has been made to respond to the challenge.

Here are some of the responses:

- **Security Response:** The BH terrorism took Nigerians by surprise. Our security agencies had never had to deal with such form of violence. The anti-terrorism strategies of government were for a long time quite ineffective, as the terrorists seemed to be able to hit at will everywhere. The massive use of fire

arms by soldiers and policemen at times created more terror than the activities of the BH. Suspects were at times summarily executed under panic, exposing our government to accusations of human rights violation. But as time passed, the methods have improved and we are beginning to see evidence of effective containment of the menace.

On the part of the society at large, everyone has learnt to be security conscious. In particular, Churches and other targets of the BH have worked out effective ways of safeguarding their premises, often at great inconvenience to public. For example in most churches in Abuja, the entry of cars into the Church premises is very strictly restricted. Worshippers are subjected to strict body checks with metal detectors. There is massive deployment of heavily armed security agents at major church events. The same measures, and often even more stringent, are also imposed on people at other public occasions where crowds gather in large numbers. There are also long queues at the many security check points on the highways and at the entry to major cities. Most people accept these inconveniences as a price to pay for our security.

- **Political Discourse:** It was clear very early enough that the menace of BH could not be effectively addressed only by armed and security response. There was need to open the room for discussion. It was an open secret that some of those who lost out in the last elections were still licking their wounds. If they were not facilitating the activities of the BH, neither were they ready to lift a finger to assist government in dealing with the terrorists. On its part, government was pointing accusing fingers at the opposition parties. It would seem that better reason is now prevailing. All the political forces have now realised that we are facing a common menace and all need to join hands to deal with it. We are hearing of “dialogue”, if not directly with the BH, at least with those who can reach out to them. We are still to hear about the details and the results of any such contacts. In any case, it is agreed that talking is better than fighting, and even fighting would at last eventually and inevitably be ended by talking.

- **Interfaith Contacts:** Because the BH has a clearly religious dimension, it was expected that the religious leaders would play a key role in bringing about peace and reconciliation. Unfortunately, this did not happen. The apex Christian/Muslim contact group, the Nigerian Interreligious Council, (NIREC) was gravely handicapped, perhaps mainly because of the charged atmosphere of religious tension. Until now it has not been able to convene, let alone issue any common statement or carry out any joint action for peace.

But this does not mean that religious leaders and groups have been doing nothing. At different levels and in various parts of the country a spate of interfaith actions and initiatives has been sprouting up. Individual religious leaders, women, and youth groups have been reaching out to one another to say “no” to religious polarization. For example, with a group of Muslim and Christian leaders in Abuja, we have set up an “Abuja Interfaith Peacebuilding Forum”. Women, under the leadership of a Catholic nun, Rev. Sr. Agatha Chikelue, DMMM, and a Muslim woman leader, Hajia Myriam Dada Ibrahim, have organised themselves into the “Abuja Women of Faith Network”, affiliated with an international women group of the same name under the auspices of the New York based *Religions for Peace International*. The youth too have done something similar. Through such new structures, we have been carrying out symbolic gestures to project the message of peace and cooperation across religious lines. Examples of such gestures include “Peace Tree” planting by the youth, mobilising women at the grass roots level to spread peaceful attitudes, Radio and Television programmes and Christians attending Ramadam “breakfast” events in the mosque. Nigerians believe a lot in prayers, and lots of prayers have been rising to Heaven in churches and mosques, as well as from individual groups. We are moving in the right direction. A Muslim friend, the Executive Secretary of the Abuja National Mosque, Alh. Ibrahim Jega, told me recently that our present crisis will be used by God to bring about a better Nigeria where religion will be able to play its proper positive role in our national life. I

believe that this will happen, if we follow up on some positive developments that are now starting.

4. The BH, a National Concern:

I believe that in this kind of audience it is important to point out that the activities of the BH have affected not only Christians but the entire Nigerian nation. The fact that they have targeted Christians on worship in their churches has attracted very necessary attention of the world media. To kill innocent people is a grave crime. To kill people in worship is a heinous diabolic crime – especially when perpetrated in the name of a religion that proclaims peace.

Perhaps because of this, the world media has tended to ignore the fact that the BH has also targeted other institutions and people. The August 2011 bomb blast against the UN Building in Abuja, for example, killed and maimed people indiscriminately. Similarly, the attacks against government institutions, security outfits, public places and even markets have killed Muslims and Christians alike. In the now well known bomb blast against St Theresa’s Catholic Church, Madalla last Christmas morning, the target was the Christians at worship. But the blast killed many passing by or in vehicles on the road. Very pathetic is the case of the Muslim Nigerian Policeman posted on security duty to our Church that day, blown to pieces by a “Muslim” bomb. We have often heard it said in Muslim circles that BH has killed more Muslims than Christians on their nefarious operations. This is likely to be true since their indiscriminate violence is mainly in Muslim dominated areas of Nigeria. Their activities have inflicted heavy damage on the socio-economic life of most of the Northern states, to warrant a desperate cry of alarm by some of their governors.

Thus, every Nigerian feels threatened. We have a shared concern which should make us intensify our common efforts to address the national danger.

4. More Rivers to Cross: Our present crisis has exposed a few issues that we need to pursue in more positive directions if we are to consolidate the

foundation of our nation as a multi-religious, peaceful and stable country. Here are some of them:

- Dialogue:** The tentative proposals by government for dialogue with BH have to be pursued with more vigour and transparency. Those whom government has always described as “faceless people” need to be unmasked. If this dialogue is on behalf of all of us, we need to be adequately informed at some point – and the point has come. In the same vein, government needs to bring other stakeholders into the discussion, especially the religious, political, economic and socio-ethnic forces. Such a forum would facilitate a more comprehensive approach to finding a lasting solution.
- **Constitutional Clarity:** I have already spoken above about some *lacunae* and inconsistencies in our present constitution. There is much talk in Nigeria these days about the need to review, amend or even totally re-write our constitution. Whatever we decide to do, we shall need to clarify better the role of religion in our national life. On the one hand, the constitution prohibits any state religion. On the other hand, in the light of our past experience, it does not seem to have adequately sealed the government from dabbling into many religious issues and agenda. The most clamorous case is the Sharia, which is explicitly mentioned in the constitution. This is the time to tidy up the document and purge it of its many inconsistencies and thus ensure freedom of religion for all, autonomy of religion within the law, and even handedness in the treatment of all faiths, especially between Christians and Muslims.
- **Restraining the Mad Dogs:** As we talk about the BH, we should know that they are not the first group of Muslim fanatics that has perturbed the religious peace of our land. There have been many such cases in the past. We recall here the Maitatsine gang which terrorized much of the North in the 1970s. This may not be unconnected with the legacy of the violence that has historically been associated with the spread and establishment of Islam in much of the North. It has been suggested that this is the reason for the difference between Islam in the

North and in the rest of the country, e.g. in Yoruba land. We know that the reigning Sultan of Sokoto, and other Muslim rulers of the North have long given up the idea of spreading and maintaining Islam by conquest and force of arms. But some belligerent attitudes continue to linger on in some circles, and these need to be put under effective control.

It is not only Islam which has to deal with its mad dogs. There are fanatics also within the Christian fold, whose utterances and attitudes are far from peaceful. The Yoruba translate religious fanatics as “*Agbaweremesin*”, which literally means “those who have adopted madness with their faith.” Religious bodies have the duty to purge any madness from their followers, through a system of auto-regulation of their preachers. But since many of such “mad” preachers are often not under anyone’s control, it will fall to the state to monitor the use of freedom of speech and insist that public utterances must be within reasonable limits of civility, under the sanctions of the law. This is an area where interfaith structures and action can be most effective, in collaboration with the state.

- **Good governance:** Our BH experience has shown the importance of a good government when it comes to dealing with the type of crisis we have had. Politics is not only for capturing power to be used in the interest of the rulers. It is above all a mechanism for installing a just society that ensures the common good of citizens in freedom and solidarity. Government should therefore wage unrelenting war against poverty, sickness and corruption at all levels. It has been said in some quarters that the young men carrying bombs to blow themselves up have been pushed to desperation by poverty and hopelessness. This is obviously no justification whatsoever for massacring innocent men, women and children. But an atmosphere of poor government, debilitated by corruption and lack of concern for the common good, is a fertile ground for all kinds of lawlessness. An army of unemployed and unemployable youths is a time bomb only waiting to explode in more sense than figurative. In this regard, the Nigerian nation has a great challenge before it.

5. International Dimension: We have heard suggestions that the BH has strong links with international Muslim terrorist networks. We do not have hard facts, but it seems that they are at least influenced by the record, exploits and reputation of those groups. It is rumoured that some of the leaders and operatives have had combat experience in the ranks of groups like the *Al Qa'eda*, *Al Shabaab*, and the *Talibans* in the places where those groups have been operating. If even only a part of all this is true, then we are seeing here one negative aspect of the phenomenon of globalization.

But the impression we get in Nigeria is that the terrorists rely largely on their own ingenuity, producing Improvised Explosive Devices, (IEDs) from locally available materials. They supplement these with whatever guns and ammunition they capture from our security forces in their attacks on military check points and remote police stations. Furthermore, our porous Northern borders with Niger and Chad also opens us to inflow of illegal arms from the nearby theatres of war in Ghadafi's Libya and the Dafour region of the Sudan. All this only goes to confirm that in our modern world, no nation is an island. Globalization has come to stay, for good or for evil in our world.

In recent times, there has been much expression of concern for and solidarity with us in our predicament. On the official government level, many diplomatic missions have come to our country to find out how best to help us. The concrete results of such visits and the content of their discussion with our government are often shown only in short news announcements in the public media, with no details of what is said, offered or received.

In moments of crisis, friendly nations do consult and help one another on mutually agreed basis, with full respect for the sovereignty of the nation in crisis. I am sure our nation would welcome any such offer from any helpful quarters. The news was widely circulated recently that the United States government had designated three leaders of the BH as terrorists. But most people in Nigeria did not know what this meant in concrete fact. There are suggestions and even

appeals in some circles that the BH itself should be designated a “terrorist organization”. Again, most Nigerians would want to know what would be the practical implications, if any, of such a declaration. If it would mean giving the US, or any foreign nation for that matter, any form of license to intervene directly in the internal security of our nation, most Nigerians would certainly oppose it. Our government is weak and often overwhelmed. But Nigeria is still functioning, and not a failed state. What we need from the international community is a sincere spirit of collaboration and cooperation for world peace and harmony, based on an ever increasing international justice and solidarity.

On the religious side, we have been receiving many visitors from religious organizations abroad, showing solidarity with us and offering assistance, for which we are most grateful. Often, the Christian groups come with the news that Christians in Nigeria are under Muslim oppression, and in need of rescue. Their visit opens them to the reality on the ground that there is no generalized oppression of Christians in Nigeria, and that whatever “oppression” exists is quite localized and restricted to certain places. Of course, even the “localized” instances can never be tolerated, and have to be vigorously addressed. But I believe this is well within our control as a nation.

Two of such visits deserve special mention here. The first is the visit of the President of the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, His Eminence Jean Louis Cardinal Tauran. He met Christians and Muslims, visited the Sultan of Sokoto in his palace, and was received in audience at the State House, Abuja, by the Vice-President, in the absence from town of Mr. President. At the end, he declared that what he saw in Nigeria was a “pleasant surprise” and that he was returning to the Vatican with an impression different from what he brought with him.

The second is special in that it was an interfaith solidarity visit, jointly organised by the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought of the Kingdom of Jordan, Amman, and the World Council of Churches in Geneva, with an

international delegation made up of Muslims and Christians. The delegation was led by no less personalities than HRH Dr. Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad of Jordan and Rev. Dr. Olav Fykse Tveit, Secretary General of the World Council of Churches. Prince Ghazi is the Chief Advisor to HM King Abdullah II bin Al-Husein for Religious and Cultural Affairs. Some of us local religious leaders joined them in their various encounters which was very rich in experiences, with a firm commitment to a follow-up. This delegation demonstrated the special power of interfaith action in situations of religious crisis.

We spoke above of ‘localized instances’ of oppression of Christians in Nigeria. I wish to highlight this fact, so as not to leave the wrong impression that all is well with Christians everywhere in Nigeria. There are places where the Christian faith is still under great pressure and where Christians suffer a lot of discrimination for many reasons which often include their religion. We must insist that such instances are crying for urgent attention. In many parts of the North where Muslims predominate, there is still some of the pre-colonial feeling that one is in an Islamic community where Christians are at best tolerated aliens. This feeling is out-dated for two reasons. First, the Nigerian constitution forbids State religion in the entire nation and any part thereof. Thus, even if a State is 98% Muslim, that State cannot operate as a Muslim State enclave within Nigeria. Secondly, not only are there many Christians in the areas dominated by Muslims. There are also significant indigenous Christian communities in these States, who are often ignored, marginalized and treated as second class citizens of their own States. Official State and Local Government policies and actions often discriminate against Christians, to the extent of real persecution and denial of genuine religious freedom. Examples are in areas like the availability of land for churches, access to the public media, provision for Christian Religious Knowledge in public schools; equal opportunity for employment and promotions in public institutions, to mention only a few. The climax of all this is the recent declaration of Sharia Legislation as law of some States in the North. Even

though such laws were passed by an overwhelming majority of the Muslim dominated State Legislatures, the move is still against the spirit and letter of our constitution. We shall need to admit that such attitudes and actions create an environment of Islamic “intransigence” - which encourages and facilitates the wild agenda of fanatics. I am not aware of anything similar in the Christian dominated States of the South. We cannot continue to delay or abbreviate full equality and freedom of religion in our land.

Conclusion. I see my presence at this symposium in the light of the Christian solidarity which we have been enjoying in these past year or more. I thank all the organizers for giving me the opportunity to give testimony to what the Lord is doing in our midst. For me, perhaps the most painful experience has been the inability of Christians in Nigeria to adopt a common Christian response to the BH. It has therefore been difficult to act together as Christians. This has also greatly hampered efforts to work with Muslims on the basis of common grounds and shared values for peace and reconciliation. The consolation, however, is that there is a firm common mind and action on the part of the Catholic Church, represented by the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Nigeria, (CBCN). This has been made possible by the fact that we all have the same point of reference in the official documents of the universal Church, especially the documents of Vatican II like *Lumen Gentium* and *Nostra Aetate*, and the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortations of the First and Second African Synods, *Ecclesia in Africa* and *Africae Munus*. I am most comfortable to discuss my country in this audience, knowing that we have a common patrimony of values and guidance. My wish, request and prayer is that the USCCB and the Christ’s faithful of the United States of America will continue to journey with us as we work with all our fellow Nigerians in building a great nation “under God”, where justice, peace and solidarity reigns.