

BZ Government, Politics and Economics

Jan H. Boer, 2008

In Nigeria, because of their omni-presence, governments pop up in almost every discussion. Throughout most of this series they are often seen as part of the problem. In this section we will see how they might become part of the solution. They are advised on many different topics. Again, many of the concepts in this section have been aired in scattered fashion throughout these volumes; here they are brought together.

Let's begin with an *ad hoc* kind of problem the government was advised to solve, one that irritated a lot of Muslim travelers. A 1995 editorial in the Muslim magazine *Al-Madinah* called on the then Military Head of State, General Sani Abacha, to put an immediate halt to the common practice of preaching in buses. The writer did not distinguish between publicly and privately owned buses. The writer regarded such preaching as one of the major causes of religious fanaticism. "Religious zealots have virtually taken over buses in several parts of the country. They force fellow Nigerians to listen to their rantings. They use offensive language against other religions, thereby injuring the feelings of people." This often leads to fights in the bus. The editor advised Abacha on the need for "an enforceable decree that will outlaw preaching inside buses. Preaching should be limited to religious centres like mosques, churches and shrines." "Roll out the decree now and let Nigerians remember you long afterwards as the Head of State who was neither timid nor sentimental on the vital issue of religious fanaticism and how to curb it."¹

We have earlier seen that religious and other kinds of leaders have come to recognise the need to control the quality of preaching. Bilikisu Yusuf advised that preachers "should be thoroughly screened" while their "press releases and paid adverts... should be checked." Though she was not specific as to whose task the above should be, she followed it up with the suggestion that "the Ministry of Internal Affairs should be more scrupulous in registering religious groups."² The FG unfortunately did not act on the

¹*Al-Madinah*, 2 Nov/95, p. 7.

²A. Akpaka, 6 Apr/87, p. 23.

suggestion of Balogun that it should work out a “strict and comprehensive re-interpretation of Nigeria’s secular status before the Government hands over power to the civilians in 1992.”³

Amuzie Akpaka and his religiously mixed team of journalists suggested that “to Muslim and Christian leaders alike, the main panacea for the peaceful and harmonious existence of the two religions seems to be hinged on what role the government should play in...religion.” While they recognized that the majority of Christians wanted government to keep out of religion, Muslim leaders seemed to be more divided. Akpaka reported that Ibrahim Coomassie, the Kano Police Commissioner, thought of religion as “a personal thing” and that “government should not be involved in religious affairs.” Omar Bello on the other hand, insisted that Islam is a public matter and must be involved in state affairs. He wanted a return “to the pre-Christian colonial days, where there *were* sharia courts in the...Sokoto and Borno caliphates.” Abdul Hakeem Abayomi wanted the government to make up its mind: either accept “secularism in total or accept the fact that getting fully involved in religious affairs is a prerequisite for avoiding religious violence.” At the end of his article, Akpaka conceded that Nigerians have not experienced control of religion, but felt that it “will be very necessary if religious intolerance and riots are to be stopped.”⁴

Yusufu Magaji observed that, under the influence of secularism, the FG had reduced its concern for “the advancement of religion in public affairs,” with the result of increasing corruption. These issues, he asserted, “can assuredly be resolved in dialogue.” He then proceeded to prescribe a multi-dimensional approach that should bring the two religions closer together. The approach included the establishment of a Joint National Conference for Christian-Muslim Dialogue at all levels of government and in each state and LGA. Every government should have a department responsible for religion. Moral and religious subjects are to be given priority in primary and secondary schools. Inspectorates of Religious Studies should be established to ensure high quality. Governments should “install an effective security surveillance on religious activities,

³K. Balogun, “Religious Fanaticism...,” n.d., p. 188. In 2008 this has not yet not happened

⁴A. Akpaka, 6 Apr/87, p. 23.

with greater emphasis on preventive measures.” Finally, open-air preaching should continue to be restricted and even then only practised by certified preachers.⁵

Magaji’s recommendations are typical of Nigerian Muslim dependence on government and their view of the relationship between state and religion. All the elements are government-related—extreme one-sidedness. Religious organizations and leaders are not even included in the package. Fair enough: they do not own religion or our relationship to God. But all this government stuff! What of citizen responsibility?

Usman Bugaje declared that “the Islamic political system must guard jealously its moral value and defend its moral integrity. The Islamic State “is required to fight evil tooth and nail and to cut off its roots once and for all. It cannot condone the trivialisation of morality. Since society thrives principally on sound moral attitudes, the State cannot afford to treat morality lightly.” “One of its goals is to command good and eliminate evil.” “Whatever brings harmony in society, aids the cause of justice and the proper order of society must be promoted.”⁶

In his ideas about the moral function of government, Balogun followed the same rather traditional path: Government has to help shape character, morality and even spirituality-- and that, of course, includes sharia.

*Efforts should be made by the government and the religious bodies of this country to emphasise the deep spiritual and moral values in the various religious faiths. There is no doubt that there exists in the main religions strong ethical norms which the people are yet to understand. What then was needed was a cleansing of minds and hearts. Such emphasis which is required from the government and the people of this country should be given prominence in the various religious studies curricula at all levels of education.*⁷

Muhib Opeloye was interested in harmony and thought secondary schools could help create that by teaching both religions to all students. But he recognized that few people go through secondary school and wanted the government to take responsibility for those who do not. He wanted the FG’s Advisory Council for Religious Affairs, a BZ progenitor to NIREC, to “vigorously pursue a policy” that would help the “masses” to understand the “area of similarities in the two religions.” This could be done with the

⁵Y. Magaji, *First International Conference*, 1993, pp. 86-87.

⁶U. Bugaje, “Politics...,” 1988, p. 29.

⁷K. Balogun, Dec/86, p. 66.

help of the mass media, but this must be a cleansed media as has already been suggested earlier in this chapter. “The media should treat religious issues with caution and less sensation. They should strive to maintain objectivity.”⁸

Opeloye had more roles in mind for the FG. It “has a vital role to play in promoting cooperation and peaceful existence.” It must be recognized that many religious problems have become political problems while many political problems have been given a religious interpretation. He then listed a number of religio-political problems that the FG was struggling with and warned that “government should strive to maintain the principles of fairness, justice and liberality in dealing with religious interests. No religion should be placed above the other or be given preferential treatment.” Then he urged the FG to “realise that Islam is already put at a disadvantaged position by virtue of certain religio-political problems emanating from the colonial experience.⁹ There is therefore the need for a spirit of give and take.” Opeloye was optimistic. He had no doubt that if all his suggestions that are scattered through this chapter “are pursued with all sincerity of purpose, Muslims and Christians would be *able* to accommodate one another on the basis of the spirit of tolerance entrenched in their scriptures. A more harmonious relationship would develop and they would be able to live together as partners in progress.”¹⁰

Like so many others as already shown throughout Volume 6, many Muslims were of the opinion that poverty and illiteracy contributed to the high level of sharia violence. Peace will not return to the land unless these factors are dealt with. Ambassador Kazaure expressed it as follows: “Given the widely accepted belief that poverty breeds social unrest, including religious disturbances, efforts aimed at achieving quick economic recovery and self-sustained growth as well as narrowing the gap between the rich and the poor and between the developed and less developed areas of the country should be intensified.”¹¹ At a 1986 National Seminar at ABU, Usman Bugaje prescribed four “irreducible requirements” of a Muslim state: “food, shelter, family life and transportation.” A state that fails here, has failed. To achieve this, there must be

⁸M. Opeloye, 1992, p. 90.

⁹These disadvantages have been fully discussed in J. Boer, vols. 2, 4, 6.

¹⁰M. Opeloye, 1992, pp. 90-91.

¹¹Z. Kazaure, 1987, p. 17.

“equitable distribution of resources, free access to land by all people and fair taxation.”¹² Such economic improvements, as you may remember from Volume 6, were major considerations in the sharia debate. They do not need to be repeated any further here.

Politics and government are both to be part of the revival, for Islam is often said to be almost identical to politics. We have explored this already, of course, in Volumes 4 and 6 and thus do not need to go into details here. But if Islam is to revive, it must revive politics along with it, according to Aminuddeen Abubakar. He rejected the dualistic approach of some who claimed, “*Babu ruwan Musulunci da siyasa. To, addinin Musulunci kuwa, kashi tara bisa goma duk siyasa ce. Manzon Allah yana cewa ‘Addini shi ne Mu’amalla.’ To, mu’amalla kuwa ita ce siy’asa.*”¹³

¹²U. Bugaje, “Politics...,” 1988, p. 28.

¹³A. Abubakar, 31 March/89, pp. 11. English translation: “Some deny any connection between Islam and politics. Actually, politics constitutes nine-tenths of Islam. The Prophet said, ‘Religion means being in transactions with others.’ Well, that is exactly what politics is all about.” For a more precise Muslim meaning of “*siyasa*” [politics] see J. Boer, vol. 4, 2005, p. 34.