Studies in Christian-Muslim Relations

2003-2009

by Jan H. Boer

Reviewed by Bert den Boggende[1]

Between 1966 and 1996, Jan H. Boer, who obtained his PhD in missiology at Amsterdam's Free University and now lives in Vancouver, was a missionary-theologian in Nigeria where he experienced violence between Muslims and Christians. This series on Christian-Muslim relations is a contribution to a better understanding between the two clashing religions. While Boer makes it clear that the series is meant in the first place for Nigerians and not written as historical studies, the books contain an abundance of history. Volume 1, *Nigeria's Decades of Blood 1980-2002* (2003), details the gruesome and senseless violence in eight northern states. Boer provides a brief and useful eight-point perspective rooted in the thinking of the Dutch theologian-politician Abraham Kuyper, with which he critiques both Christians and Muslims in the later volumes. Although he notes in volumes 2, *Muslims: Why the Violence?* (2004) and 3, *Christians: Why the Violence?* (2004), that the two groups interpret the facts differently, he argues that Muslims initiated the violence and that Christians later retaliated. While some Christians express self-critique and put the blame squarely on Christians, he argues, Muslims generally regard themselves innocent and always as victims, refuse to accept responsibility and blame, and tend to exonerate Islam from the onus of violence.

Boer attempts to do justice to both sides by letting them speak for themselves in volumes 2-7. While this approach involves a certain amount of overlap, he presents much information that otherwise is not readily available to general readers. What is important to keep in mind is that within both groups there are significant diverging opinions. Muslims argue in general that during the colonial rule the British undermined their communities and institutions; broke down their morality, social order, economy, justice and health care; distorted governments; and introduced degrading fashions. "From the Muslim perspective, the major context of the riots is the colonial imposition of a Christian-secular establishment that has deranged Nigerian Muslim spirituality and institutions" (2:77).

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[1] Reviewed in *Fides et Historia,* Winter/Spring, 2009, pp. 90-92.

While on the surface there are numerous causes for the violence as described in volumes 2 and 3, Boer has looked below the surface and found two major issues that he argues are at the heart of the violence: secularism and *sharia.* The titles of the volumes 4 and 5, *Muslims: Why We Reject Secularism* (2005) and *Christians: Secularism – Yes and No* (2006), are indicative of the different perspectives. Many Christians are ambiguous about secularism. They see it as a way to survive against Muslim intentions to make Nigeria a Muslim state in which they fear becoming *dhimmis*, second class citizens without political rights and whose religion often is threatened. Muslims complain that the colonial system introduced the "demonic virus of secularism," which they regard as an antithesis to Islam. They reject a common Christian distinction between secularism and secularity, regarding both as undermining their wholistic perspective of the human being and as trivializing religion by making it a private matter. The human being, they argue, is first and foremost a religious being. Secular dualism undermines Islam and makes reason supreme to divine revelation, thus subordinating religion. Boer agrees with their perspective. "I submit that Christians and Muslims are both potentially better off with each other than with secularism," he states (1:16). Without providing evidence, he also suggests that Nigerians, fed up with the violence, may return to a sanitized form of traditional religion or to an African version of secularism.

Secularism, about which Boer gives a short historical overview in volume 4, has pervaded much of Nigerian life. For instance, in politics it introduced neutrality, whereas Muslims hold that "the art of governance ought to take second place to religion" (2:133). They would agree with Boer that "neutral objectivity is a secular myth" and that "secularism becomes the religion of a secular state" (4:21, 53). They complain that in education it excludes morals, resulting, they argue, in mental slavery to Western European-American capitalist imperialism or Eastern European-Asian Marxist socialism. Although for Boer secularism and Christianity are antonyms, for Muslims and many Christians they are synonyms. With such different understandings, it is not a surprise that there is confusion and misunderstanding, giving credence to Boer's observation that the parties are no longer listening to each other. It may be noted that the Hausa have no term for secularism, a good indication of the foreignness of the concept.

Issues related to secularism could be regarded as a subset of those raised by sharia, a topic described in volumes 6, *Muslims: Why Muslim Sharia Law* (2007), and 7, *Christians: Why We Reject Muslim Law* (2008). While Boer makes it very clear that sharia is a way of life, he still concentrates on the legal aspects, even though this constitutes only 10 percent of what sharia means. The reason may be that in 1999, Zamfara State introduced sharia, followed shortly thereafter by eleven other states. Not all of the states introduced sharia in the same way, and Boer surveys some of them. The (re)introduction of sharia could be regarded as a "case of a colonized people trying to reclaim their values in the post-colonial period" (6:119). While one can sympathize with Muslims who want to live according to sharia – a system of rules and

regulations covering life from cradle to grave and without which one cannot be a good Muslim – the legalization threatens the daily life of Christians. Boer gives abundant evidence that the fears of Christians are not groundless. In an Islamic state Christians cannot be full citizens. Disputes over sharia and secularization are the keys, according to Boer, to understanding the violence in Nigeria.

For Boer, volume 8, *Christians and Muslims: Paradigm for Living Together* (2009), is unquestionably the culmination of the series. It is his attempt to get people to listen to each other and learn to live together peaceably. For those interested in Nigerian history, all of the volumes are a must read; for historians of African history volumes 1-7 are most worthwhile; for those interested in Muslim ideas volumes 4 and 6 are enlightening. They may not have been written as historical studies, but they contain insightful historical information and a wealth of notes, appendices, bibliographies and good indexes. Readers who order the books directly from Boer (boerjf@hotmail.com) can obtain a CD-ROM that has all of the volumes as well as more than a thousand related articles that do not appear in the books.