

BOOK REVIEW

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Christians and Muslims: Parameters for Living Together (Studies in Christian-Muslim Relations, vol. 8-2) by Jan H. Boer. Belleville, Ontario: Essence, 2009; Bukuru: ACTS, 2009. Pp. 560. Price: N 1500. Reviewed by Timothy Palmer.

Nigeria is in a crisis. The problem is the uneasy relation between its two largest religions. This is evidenced by more than three decades of Muslim-Christian fighting. Is there any solution?

John Boer wrote a series of eight volumes called "Studies in Christian-Muslim Relations." In the first volume, he catalogued the religious riots of the last three decades. Then in six volumes he presented the Christian and the Muslim views of the violence, secularism and Sharia law. Now he offers his solution to this Nigerian problem.

Boer starts with the question of worldview. A worldview for him is a comprehensive religious view of all of life. In Nigeria, we have four main worldviews: Islam, Christianity, ATR and secularism. For Islam, all of life is religious. All of life is under the sovereignty of Allah. But what is the Christian worldview?

Many Christians want secularism. But secularism is a worldview that excludes God from much of life. Boer uses the theology of Abraham Kuyper to suggest a wholistic Christian worldview; all of life is religious and all of life is under the sovereignty of God and Jesus Christ. This is Boer's Kuyperian presupposition.

But now we have a problem. In Nigeria there are two main worldviews that claim that all of life should be determined by their religion. How can these two worldviews co-exist in one state? The answer lies in a pluralistic state.

Boer claims that Nigeria is not and should not be a secular state. We are all religious, so how can we advocate secularism? Instead, Nigeria is a pluralistic state. Nigeria is a state where two or more religious worldviews should be able to co-exist. "Under pluralism, no worldview has a privileged position, whether religious or secular. They all have an equal place at the table" (74). "Pluralism [means] tolerating practices you dislike, and perhaps even defending the right to

practice them” (76). Pluralism means “equality of status, access and rights; critical solidarity” (148).

So what does this mean in Nigeria? “For Muslims, it is about doing away with underlying absolutist attitudes For Christians it is about changing perspectives from secularism to wholism” (123). In other words, Boer argues that the Muslims need to dispense with the idea of a totalitarian Muslim theocracy; but Christians need to give space for distinct Muslim religious practices in our pluralistic country.

So how does this work in practice? Boer suggests that maybe we should have religious political parties. “Religious parties,” he says, “would not be out of place” (189). Religious parties were successful in the Netherlands; why not here?

Pluralism also means that “we cannot continue to treat third generation residents as settlers or foreigners” (207). This applies both to Muslims in Christian states and to Christians in Muslim states. Pluralism also means that “partiality and discrimination have no legitimate place in any healthy nation” (216).

Pluralism also means fully respecting the human rights of every citizen. This includes the rights of Christians to evangelize and to worship in the northern states. Pluralism also recognizes the equal rights of women in our society. But pluralism does not mean favoring immodest dress. Christians and Muslims should work together to promote modesty in our society. Perhaps it was right for the Ahmadu Bello University to develop a dress code.

John Boer also believes that pluralism means that religious banking should be encouraged. If all of life is religious, why should not there be Christian banks and Islamic banks, as long as they operate within the parameters of Nigeria’s pluralistic, democratic society?

For Boer, pluralism also means that there should be room for two legal systems in one country. Boer alleges that Nigerian common law is not neutral but Christian. If Nigerian law is Christian, as Boer claims, then there should be full implementation of Sharia law alongside of common law. John Boer thus supports the full implementation of Sharia law in Nigeria as a parallel religious legal system to common law.

This is John Boer’s bold proposal for Nigeria. We have to recognize that we are not a secular country. Both Islam and Christianity are religious world-and-life worldviews. Both religions lay claim to all of one’s life.

Instead, we are a pluralistic society in which two major religions co-exist. We need to respect the traditions of both religions. We need to respect the human rights of each citizen in our country. I concur with the basic pluralistic premise of John Boer.

But caution is needed. We need to guard against polarization. Perhaps Nigeria has rightly avoided religious political parties out of fear of polarization. Our present democratic system is not perfect. But it is commendable that in most or all of our political parties, Muslims and Christians work together. Perhaps the present political system, imperfect as it is, reflects something of the ideal cooperation that we expect in a pluralistic, democratic society.

On the issue of common law, I believe that John Boer is wrong. John Boer claims that Nigerian common law is Christian since all of life is religious. Boer claims that Nigerian common law is Christian because it has roots in Christian Europe. Yet he also acknowledges possible Muslim influence on English common law (351).

I suggest that Nigerian common law is a neutral instrument of a pluralistic society that accommodates both Christians and Muslims. Nigerian common law is based on principles of justice, equality and fairness that are common to both Christians and Muslims. Nigerian common law has been used reasonably by both Christians and Muslims.

I therefore feel that care should be taken in implementing Sharia as a legal system on an equal status with common law. Nigerian common law is a good system that has served the Nigerian state well in the last 50 years.

John Boer's book is a stimulating one. Boer loves Nigeria and grieves to see it torn apart. This book is important in reminding us of our pluralistic society. One will not agree with everything that John Boer recommends, but he does point us in a good direction. I recommend this book to the reader.