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THE NIGERIAN CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM STANDOFF (II)

The Muslim Viewpoint

Dr. Jan H. Boer

In a recent article I promised several more on the issue of Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria. That initial article dealt with the Christian point of view. This article attempts to present some aspects of the Muslim viewpoint of these relationships. However, I need first to do some spade work to cut out the underbrush before proceeding with the task at hand. To put it in another way, I need to lift up the rug a bit to eliminate the accumulated dirt that has been swept under it.

Calling the Spade

The point of view expressed in this series of occasional articles is not very popular with most Nigerian Christians. They have suffered too much at the hands of Muslims to be very sympathetic to them or to lend them an objective ear. Some of them realize that the secular solution advanced by Christian leaders is not an ideal solution, but it is the best they have to offer at this point.

Similarly, the viewpoint I express below may not be politically correct with some Canadian or other Western readers. My experience is deeply coloured by the Nigerian context in which we are seeing an oppressive Islam becoming increasingly intolerant as it fears losing its powerful grip on the country due to a growing Christian community. In contrast, the experience of most readers of Christian Courier is of a small expatriate Muslim minority that represents a threat to no one at this point and that tugs at the heart of sympathetic Christians to give them a place in the Canadian sun—or ice. Here in Canada the Muslim community seeks protection from the dominant culture and religion, while in Nigeria Christians feel they need protection from Islam.

Religions present different faces in different contexts. The face of today's Western Christianity is that of a seemingly retreating religion that speaks—wrongly, in my opinion—of “post-Christianity.” That is a very different face of the bygone “glory” of “Christendom.” Similarly, the faces of various Christian communities living under Communist regimes or those living with Muslim majorities have a wide range of different wrinkles. Different contexts develop different faces.

The same is true of Islam. In the more distant past, Muslims were tolerant and self-confident enough to appoint Christians to very high positions in their governments—but that was in the past. Even then, as now, where Islam forms the majority, it invariably arrogates to itself the right to define the scope of minority religions. In Muslim countries, Christians have never been free to express themselves or live out their religions fully. They are at best second-class citizens who are merely tolerated. In the previous article I referred to the status of *dhimmi*s in this regard. Sometime in the future I hope to fully describe the classic Muslim stance vis a vis non-Muslims.

On the other hand, when Muslims constitute small minorities as is the case in some African countries and in all Western nations, they will adopt the face of the innocent and helpless victims of discrimination. They will exploit modern concepts of toleration to the hilt to their own advantage. They know how to exploit the bad colonial conscience of the West. As a result, Western people, including many Christians among them, bend over backwards to accommodate the Muslims among them by fighting alongside them in their struggle for recognition and rights. In such environments, including our Canadian and American environments, Muslims claim the very rights and freedoms they consistently deny the minorities living in Muslim countries. In their countries of origin the very people protected by Christians in Canada will withhold the rights of the same person protecting them here. Our bad consciences prevent us from recognizing this incongruity or exposing it. We would invite the horrible charge of being politically incorrect!

It is high time that we recognize that Muslims through the centuries have been as imperialistic, if not worse, than has the West. While they continuously dangle the shame of the Crusades before the Western conscience, they themselves have been

waging a continuous crusade called *jihad* up till today. And while the Christian community has long ago recognized its guilt with respect to the crusades and colonialism, Islam with its anemic view of sin, has yet to apologize to anyone for its treatment of conquered peoples.

It is time Western Christians confront the Muslims amongst them with their own record, for *both* parties to confess their sins and start with a new slate together. The silly whimper of one-sided Christian confession and weak-kneed unilateral Western accommodation helps no one and certainly will not earn us the respect of Muslims. While they solicit our cooperation, they secretly laugh at and have deep contempt for us. “Enlightened,” tolerant Canadians are mere tools in their hands. Western aid to Muslim communities in Nigeria is accepted gladly, but the donours are regarded with contempt as mere rich pagans who are only tolerated because of their wealth. Hard, brutal and unselected facts are among the prerequisites for genuine dialogue and for coming to terms with each other. There is no one more eager for such dialogue and rapprochement than yours truly, but it will not seriously occur unless we are prepared to face the honest, bilateral facts and clean up what has been swept under the rug for too long.

Of course, some of us know an exception or two to the above attitude. However, these are indeed individual exceptions that do not represent the dominant mood of world Islam. There are many stories in Nigeria of Christians and Muslims living together as friendly neighbours, but as soon as the larger Muslim community puts on the screws, almost without exception these friendly relationships turn into murderous hostility. While we may be grateful for fine personal relationships with some individual Muslims on our block, these must not blind us to the larger picture.

The Dominant Muslim Perspective

In this section I present aspects of the dominant Muslim perspective of Nigerian Christian-Muslim relations as I see them from the outside, as I have experienced and observed them during my 30 years among them and recognize them from their own writings. Much of what follows comes from reading their own writings or from between their own lines.

A. *Infatuation with the Muslim Religion*

A basic element for our discussion is the Muslim infatuation for their religion. Non-Muslim students of Islam have repeatedly observed how deeply Muslims love their religion and all its trappings. They have the deepest admiration for the Qur'an. They absolutely love the shari'a, their law. They boast repeatedly of its comprehensive way of life. They are deeply thankful for its beautiful simplicity and appreciative of its appeal to reason. Some have called it "fanaticism." I once described it as an "excessive infatuation," but am not sure that it is a fair or legitimate description. But infatuation it surely is. No other religion, it is claimed by life-long observers, has been able to arouse such absolute loyalty and pride. They have no doubt that they are the true people of God. I admire them for their devotion and wish the same could be said of more Christians.

It is with the above devotion that Islam has spread both militarily and peacefully, including the use of economic, political and diplomatic pressures. Muslims cannot imagine why in the world anyone would resist becoming a Muslim. Such a beautiful religion! Why resist it? Besides, it is incumbent on everyone to accept Allah, His prophet and His Qur'an. This is not a matter of free choice. It is a beautiful obligation that anyone in his right mind will naturally and gladly accept. What is wrong with forcing people into this fold if it is incumbent on them? And so Muslims have no compunctions about using almost any method open to them to recruit, persuade, cajole, trick, buy, marry or force people into the fold. It is the best thing they can do for them. The use of government power and facilities is perfectly legitimate in this divinely ordered crusade—excuse me: *jihad*.

Because of this divine obligation on all men, Muslims appear not to have any sense of fairness with respect to other people. In the heat of the Nigerian battle, the country's Muslims have almost forgotten the traditional special Muslim regard for Christians as "people of the book." Instead, Christians are basically despised and referred to with the contemptuous term "*khaffir*". It is the same term supporters of Apartheid and other racists have applied to South African Blacks. A derivative of the term, *kaffer*, is used in Dutch to refer to stupid and stubborn people, or, according to

one Dutch-English dictionary, “boor”—no relation to this author! In Nigeria, Muslims may preach their gospel anywhere and even block major city roads regularly for their purposes, but they do not extend the same privilege to others. They may quote from the Bible, publicly say or write extremely derogatory things about Christianity, but woe betide the Christian who publicly quotes from the Qur’an. Such Christian quotations have become the excuse for bloody riots. Muslims feel free to dominate government facilities like press, radio and TV while denying almost any coverage to others.

Behind all of this lies the Muslim infatuation with their religion. How could anyone possibly object to the use of any device at all in the propagation of such beautiful and powerful truth? Islam is the most democratic of all and constitutes the movement for true justice in the world. That being the case, what is wrong with using all the resources that Allah has placed in their hands for the pursuit of *da’wah*, Muslim mission? Is that not the reason Allah gave them these resources? To fail to use them would be nothing short of disobedience. After all, Islam is the embodiment of what all reasonable men seek.

It will no doubt surprise many readers of this article that Muslims claim that their earthly mission is to work towards democracy, justice and liberty. Westerners hardly associate Islam with these noble aspirations. Yet Muslims claim that these constitute the great goals of *da’wah*. What Muslims consider democratic and just is experienced by others as the very opposite. A case of doublespeak? I do not think so. I consider it rather a case of blindness caused by their infatuation with Islam.

B. *Islam vs the West*

1. Crusade and Jihad

Islam has overcome many forms of opposition throughout its history, but many of its major challenges have come from the West. There were the Crusades, an early Christian variety of *jihad*. These continue to play an important function in the Muslim attitude towards the West and its traditional religion, Christianity. They refuse to acknowledge the many sounds of contrition from the West about these Crusades. Forgiving and forgetting is not a highly developed skill in Islam. The Crusades

continue to raise their hackles. The fact that they themselves have been waging an unending crusade or *jihad* does not give others the same right. There is no similar contrition on their part or any apology ever uttered to anyone.

2. Colonialism

And then came colonialism that subjected the entire House of Islam to the pride and sense of superiority of Western *khaffirs*. The people of God subjected to ignorant outsiders. Taken advantage of during a moment of disarray and weakness. This situation was theologically impossible and totally unacceptable. Even though Nigerian Muslim political leaders made the best of their assigned role within the British scheme of indirect rule, deep down the arrangement was considered a profound insult.

Nigerian Muslims nevertheless took advantage of the colonial setup. The British broke down many barriers to the further spread of Islam. The end of slave raiding slowly made the Muslim trader more welcome into traditionally hostile communities. He would settle in the community, offer a wider range of goods than previously available and thus become associated with progress and convenience. The British would appoint Muslims to responsible civil service positions because they were literate and seemed so much more civilized to them. The British also appointed many Muslim chiefs and emirs to rule over non-Muslim communities, a situation that current is being challenged and rejected increasingly by affected ethnic groups. The Muslim establishment of the North even delayed independence from the British because they preferred to share power with the foreign invader rather than with southern Nigerians.

In spite of the advantageous position gained by Muslims during colonialism, they hated the regime and experienced it as the ultimate insult to be ruled by foreign *khaffirs*. It was an insult no Muslims should ever have to suffer. Never mind that Muslim powers were imposed on non-Muslim Nigerians. That was another subject altogether that had no connection with their own plight. Having Muslim authority imposed on others was doing them the greatest favour. But for Muslims to be subjected to others could not be tolerated. Muslim colonialism and other forms of forceful expansion are perfectly acceptable; the opposite, under no circumstances.

Crusade? No! *Jihad*? Of course. It is ordained by Allah himself. How can you object to that?

3. Secularism

In spite of the advantages Islam gained under colonialism in countries like Nigeria and others, the entire world Muslim community, including Nigerians, consider colonialism a serious attempt to undermine Islam. Indeed, colonialism helped Islam spread in previously hostile places. However, simultaneously a poisonous virus was let loose among the people, the virus of Western secularism. Secularism is regarded as a deep attack on the very foundations of Islam in that it would restrict the scope of their religion to a narrow slice of life as it has done in the West. Secularism seeks to reduce religion, including Islam, to a religious sector of life and to religious institutions that have little or no influence in the larger culture. Till today, Nigerian Muslims regard Western secularism as a deliberate, calculated and concerted attempt to destroy their religion. This aspect of colonialism was experienced as so damaging to Islam that it by far offset the favourable climate it created for Muslim *da'wah*. Secularism is experienced by Nigerian Muslims as having totally disoriented the thinking of their people, a situation they are struggling very hard to overcome. This is the struggle that lies at the bottom of current hostilities with Christians. It is the struggle of comprehensive religion versus secularism.

The fact that Islam traditionally imposes similar religious reductions on minority religions seems to be irrelevant to Muslims; they see no connection or inconsistency. These are not parallel situations as far as they are concerned. Restricting other religions is a divine duty; restricting Islam is satanic and undermines it. They merely shrug off the accidental parallel as irrelevant.

4. Western Moral Bankruptcy

The colonial secular setup is made worse by the fact that Muslims consider Western private and public morality to be far below Muslim standards. They have contempt for Western moral standards. They see corruption and degradation in every area of Western culture. What business does a *khaffir* nation have to impose such low

standards on the people of God? What possible benefit can be derived from such a corrupted people? And then to think that these people come with such a strong superiority complex! Unbelievable and unacceptable, totally. Technically they may have some contributions to make, but spiritually and morally they are bankrupt. The picture of slavery as depicted in the previous article in this series is conveniently forgotten Muslim slavery of non-Muslims is alright. It is only its Western version that is remembered and condemned. Again, that one-sided picture. It appears everywhere. That Nigeria with its 50 million Muslims—as well as 50 million plus Christians-- is by its own confession the most corrupt nation in the world is, once again, irrelevant.

5. Mission and Church

The spread of Christianity by Western missionaries is regarded by Muslims as part of the colonial scheme to undermine them. The fact that colonialism seriously hampered the development of Christianity, though well documented, is not taken seriously by Muslims. As far as they are concerned, colonialism and missions worked hand in glove to subdue Islam. They were partners and no documented research is allowed to lead them to a more nuanced view of that relationship. They refuse to hear it. It does not fit their interpretation.

The Muslim equation of Christianity with colonialism and, therefore with secularism, gains support from the current Nigerian Christian call for a secular approach to government and politics. Does this Christian call not prove the point? Christianity is seen as a member of an unholy triad along with colonialism and secularism. It is part and parcel of the international campaign to destroy Islam. Pure and simple. That is the purpose and goal of Christianity throughout the world, including Nigeria. Hence, Christianity must be resolutely resisted along with colonialism and its successors, neo-colonialism and, now, the free market scheme. All of them must be destroyed. There is no choice. It is either they or Islam. Co-existence is no real ultimate option, though it may be acceptable as a temporary strategy forced on Islam by the situation.

The Christian church has made remarkable inroads into northern Nigeria among former Traditionalists and not inconsiderable inroads among Muslims. Prior to colonialism, these were the people subjected to Muslim powers and slave raids and they often took it passively. However, over the past two decades Christians have not only increased in number but also in courage and resistance. They have moved from a passive mode into a much more activist one. During the 70s, you may remember from the previous article, they passively, though grudgingly, accepted the government take over of their institutions, but today they aggressively protect their rights and turf.

The Nigerian Muslim community, especially in the north, has become nervous about this development. They are not used to such challenges. They do not know how to respond appropriately. They tend to respond very clumsily with an offended and almost “holy” surprise. How can you Christians say such unkind things about us, the people of God? We, who are so righteous and just, so blessed, so religious and wise, so understanding, so tolerant and democratic.

The paragraph above is not meant to be sarcastic. It represents the actual spirit in which Islam in Nigeria is responding to the current Christian challenge. Neither is the paragraph an accusation of Muslim hypocrisy. It is not hypocrisy; it is blindness caused by infatuation with Islam. This infatuation has closed their ears, their minds and their hearts. This infatuation, combined with an inadequate anemic sense of sin as I argue elsewhere, makes it next to impossible for the Muslim community to listen to others. They are almost constitutionally incapable of listening empathetically to critique and complaints from others.

6. Mainstream and Fundamentalism

Some may argue that the Muslim stance as described above does not represent mainline Islam. And indeed, in Nigeria some who consider themselves more mainstream have sought to disassociate themselves and Islam as a whole from so-called Fundamentalism, but such attempts are hardly persuasive. If there were a more mainstream Islam in Nigeria with greater understanding of others, with a greater sense of fairness, the popular government-owned Hausa-language newspaper, *Gaskiya Ta Fi Kwabo*, would be more open to Christian writers. The airwaves of Kaduna Radio

would be more accessible to Christian speakers. “Mainstream” Islam just does not scream as much as does Fundamentalism, but it is basically in agreement with the latter. It sometimes feels embarrassed at the occasional crudeness of Fundamentalists. We do not hear of mainstream Muslim opposition to present attempts to unseat Christianity in Kano, Illorin or Zamfara. Mainstream Islam may be more polished and diplomatic. It *sounds* more fair, balanced and rational. However, deep down I am convinced that it appreciates the rough and radical expressions of Fundamentalism not only, but also that it uses the latter as its running dogs. Fundamentalism is doing the dirty work for “more respectable” mainstream Islam in Nigeria.

Closing

So, here then we have the basic building blocks of the Nigerian Muslim attitude towards Christians. Infatuation with their Muslim religion; religious pride; lacking any sense of fairness; intolerance; contempt for others; experiencing a deep sense of being insulted; holding an anemic view of sin and evil; feeling deep frustration, anger and nervousness. Unless that baggage can be significantly reduced, I see no way for Muslims and Christians to come to some sort of peaceful solution to their decades-long standoff.

But Christians also need to make significant accommodations, especially in their attitude towards secularism. More about that some other time.