

INTRODUCTION

We are making good headway. In previous monographs I dealt with the Nigerian religious riots from 1980-2002 (Volume 1) and with the Muslim and Christian explanations for these riots (Volumes 2 and 3).¹ Then we moved on to the Nigerian Muslim opinion about secularism (Volume 4). We are now ready to move on to Christian ideas about secularism.

It is well to realize that having left the subject of violence behind us does not mean violence itself has ceased. In fact, the contrary is true. The index of articles about Nigeria during 2003 published on the *Compass Direct* Web site shows the continued frequency of violence. The index features the following relevant titles: "Religious Conflict Invades Education," "Religious Violence Erupts Again," "Schools Remain a Battleground," "Pastor and Six Family Members Burned to Death," "Religious Violence Claims 10 Lives," "Muslim Terrorists Invade Village," "Plots against Christians Uncovered," "Pastor's Children Killed in Ethnic Clash," "Two Catholic Priests Assassinated," "Muslim Militants Attack Christian Villages," "Convert Attacked for Refusing to Renounce

Christianity,” “University Students Clash, Churches Demolished,” “Campus Violence Leaves Three Dead, Scores Injured,” “Muslim Mobs Burn Churches and Homes of Christians.” The last entry is dated December 15, 2003.² I apologize to Muslims for the one-sided list, but I have not been able to locate a more balanced one. Yes, I know: The one-sided media...!

May 2004 was a horrible month in Plateau State. Over 600 Muslims were reportedly killed in Yelwa, after the atmosphere had become increasingly explosive due to alleged Muslim provocation. The violence rocked the entire nation and spilled over to some other states. It is no longer my primary focus, but I am inserting a folder with many reports and articles on these events on the *Companion CD-Rom*. There you will find a more balanced collection of articles, thanks to the Gamji Web site with its many Muslim and Christian writers and to *Daily Trust (DT)*, one of the few Nigerian Muslim newspapers accessible on the Internet—at least, until a few months ago! The point of these two paragraphs is that while we are moving on, so is the violence in grand Nigerian style. Lest we forget...

This discussion on secularism or secularity, depending on your definitions, is taking place at the very time that secularism is coming under heavy attack in other quarters. Muslims are not the only ones to oppose it. Due to the prodding from Kuyperians, evangelicals in North America have begun to wake up from their secular slumber in a process not unlike that of Nigerian Muslims. In addition, postmodernism is attacking it from a philosophical perspective. Sue Careless’ report on a conference on the subject at McGill University makes it clear that religion, long under secular attack, is making a comeback in areas from which secularism has banned it for a century or more. “The world,” she observes, “except for Western Europe, is being *desecularized*.”³

The Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto, a centre of Kuyperian thought, has long been vocal about issues of religion versus secularism. Now that the idol of secularism is tottering and

about to slide off its previously almost impervious pedestal, the Institute community leaves no stone unturned to aid the process of dethronement, without necessarily working for its demise, for that would go against another Kuyperian emphasis, namely, pluralism. Jonathan Chaplin from the Institute, quoting a number of scholars, refers to the traditional belief or creed of secularism that “religion as a significant public influence would necessarily recede as societies underwent ‘modernization,’ even if it survived as a harmless private indulgence.” Another recent statement to the same effect had it that “advances in the rational understanding of the world will inevitably diminish the influence of that last, vexing sphere of irrationality in human culture: religion.” However, scholars are now writing about “the failure of religion to wither away on schedule”! “They are now, instead, reporting the ‘desecularization of the world,’ the title of a recent book edited by Peter Berger.”⁴ Do you recognise the distortion of language? The survival, if not the victory, of religion over secularism is dubbed “its failure”?! *Ach so!* Fantastic! Such marvelous English!

Although Canada, according to Sue Careless, “is an increasingly secular state,”⁵ its secularism is being challenged from various other sides as well. Douglas Todd’s is one of several voices.⁶ Another prominent Canadian voice critical of secularism for its hostility to religion is that of Archbishop Michael Peers, recently retired Primate of the Anglican Church of Canada.⁷ Secularists have tended to berate religion and laugh it out of court as absurd, but, asks Adam Nicolson, “Why does all this strike *us* [Westerners] as...absurd? In the long historical perspective, of course, it is the radically secularized societies of the West that are the anomaly...”⁸ The answer, if you ask me, lies in the provincial tunnel vision of secularism. Similarly, Jonathan Chaplin suggests that

if we take a longer view, we could argue that the last two centuries during which modern secular liberalism rose to

*ascendancy in Western nations, and secular Marxism in Communist nations, were a historical deviation. The 'normal' state of affairs seems to be that religion makes its presence very much felt in public life...Perhaps we are now returning to 'normalcy'...*⁹

In the West, secularism is at least partially the result of an aggressive and intolerant version of Christianity that needed to be put in its place, that needed chastening. Secularism provided that service and ended up suppressing it till this very day, especially in a country like Canada. In Nigeria, it is again aggressive and intolerant religion that is calling forth secularism, or, at least, some light version of it. But this time, it is the Muslim religion that is evoking it among Christians. So, while in the West the tables are turning so that secularism is now receiving a beating for suppressing the Christian and other world views, Nigerian Christians are reaching for their version of secularism in order to protect their religion and their liberty. Many do not seem to realize they are dealing with a Trojan horse. This series of books is meant as a warning to my fellow Christians that they are playing with a fire that may consume them or with a virus that will slowly wear down their resistance, until they collapse helplessly in the lap of an aggressive Islam.

We are dealing here not with some peripheral issues that are of concern only to a clerical class with vested interests. Ilesanmi, a Nigerian scholar in the U.S.A., justifies his book by declaring these issues “the single most important issue in Nigeria’s post-civil war history.” Here we have “the plumb line for testing the capacity, or lack of it, of Nigeria as a nation-state to flourish or to flounder.”¹⁰

Though students of Christian-Muslim relations mostly turn to Asian countries or North Africa and, of course, to Sudan, Nigeria is the right country to concentrate on for these issues. I have already indicated its importance in Monograph 1, but it may bear repeating. According to Henri Tessier, Archbishop of Algiers, and

John Onaiyekan, Catholic Archbishop of Abuja, “Nigeria is the greatest Islamo-Christian nation in the world,” with some 60 million of each facing each other. There simply is no other country with this kind of configuration.¹¹ In addition, according to a recent BBC poll, Nigeria could well be the most religious country in the world.¹² At the eye of this Nigerian storm is the concept of secularism. Ever since the mid-1970s it “has been the most sustained issue in Muslim-Christian relations.”¹³

Until now, all our discussion about Christians and Muslims has, with a few noted exceptions, been about *Nigerian* Christians and Muslims. In Part 1 of this volume, that tradition will continue. However, in Part 2 I will discuss the views on secularism and related issues as developed by the Kuyperian Reformed tradition I referred to in the introduction to Volume 1. I offer the world view of that tradition as an alternative to the mixed up Nigerian Christian version.

The reason for bringing this tradition into the discussion is to help Nigerian Christians develop an approach that is more Biblical, more theologically and philosophically responsible and more consistent. I adduce it also because this tradition has some unique parallels to Islam that may help the two religions develop greater understanding and appreciation for each other. These latter developments, I hope, will, in turn, lead to co-operation rather than confrontation. I do not imagine for one moment that the basic antithesis will evaporate in the face of those parallels, but I do insist that they present a basis on which Christians and Muslims of goodwill can move into a mode of co-operation in social development. That is, after all, what this entire series is leading up to.

Some may wish to argue that the Kuyper model is foreign to Nigeria and, therefore, irrelevant. But tell me, who is *not* using foreign models? Both Christianity and Islam are imported religions, and their Nigerian adherents are constantly looking for foreign models. The Nigerian government was at one time fashioned after

the British parliamentary system, not as a colonial imposition but as a conscious post-independence choice. The current system is modeled after the American presidential system. The model Nigerian Marxists, both Christian and Muslim, uphold is equally foreign. Catholics, Protestants, Muslims—all resort to foreign models and all borrow from the global pool of ideas. The patriotism of Matthew Hassan Kukah, the well-known firebrand Catholic author-priest, can hardly be doubted, but he feels free to recommend a Catholic solution to Nigeria’s problems that has been developed on basis of a medieval European theologian, Thomas Aquinas.¹⁴ Simeon Ilesanmi’s deep-going analysis of the Nigerian condition, along with his proposed solutions, is based almost exclusively on foreign theories, Christian, Muslim and secular.¹⁵ So, I do not apologize for adding to the hopper of alternatives.

I invite the adherents of both religions to listen carefully and see what the Kuyperian perspective has to offer. Nigerians who have observed me, especially during my more mature years, have noticed that my perspective is markedly different from that of many missionaries. For most Nigerians, the difference was positive, but they have wondered why. Today I am letting the cat out of the bag for the second time. The first time was during a lecture at the Theological College of Northern Nigeria. A student asked me to account for the “success” of my ministry in Nigeria. I believe he was asking about the popularity of my approach. I answered that it was due not to any originality on my part but to the perspective I have inherited from the Kuyperian school of thought. Though I seldom flew its flag, Nigerians detected a wholeness in my approach that they found lacking in their inherited view of Christianity. Without being able to put it into words, they sensed a different world view on my part that attracted them, that made the Gospel so much more relevant to themselves and to the affairs of the nation. In Part 2, I offer that perspective to both Christians and Muslims for their serious consideration.

I ask my Muslim readers once again for a special favour. I want you to make a special effort to understand the Christian point of view sympathetically. Put aside your hostility and suspicions for a brief moment while you read these chapters. Listen carefully to what they say, but not in order to find loopholes in their arguments. Figure out their heartfelt cries, even if they may not always have their facts or theology straight. Feel along with Christians and try to understand their problems. Ask yourself how *you* would react if you were in their shoes and were struggling with the same problems. I have asked the same of Christians in the previous volume, where I treat your perspective on secularism, and will ask them again in the next volume when I explain your views on sharia. As Habila Istifanus, at the time Director of the Institute of Church and Society (ICS), Jos, Nigeria, put it gently, "I suppose we can start by encouraging Christians to try and see at least a little bit from the Muslims' perspective: why the Muslims are against secularism of the state. At the same time, we should encourage the Muslims to try and see from our perspective why we are advocating for a secular state." Elsewhere in the same paper, Istifanus suggests, "For us Christians to come to agreement with Muslims on the issue of secularism, we must first listen and study very carefully what Muslims are saying about the issue."¹⁶ Hear! Hear!

But I want both Christians and Muslims to pay very special attention to Part 2, where I give a scanty introduction to a more wholistic version of Christianity. It may be difficult reading the first time, but read it over several times and the concepts will slowly sink in. Adherents of both religions will likely be surprised at an expression of orthodox Christianity of which they have heard, read or seen little. For some of its implications, I invite you all to locate and read my books where some of the concepts are applied to the Nigerian situation.

All the things I have written in the introductions to previous monographs about style, endnotes, quotations, and other household

issues apply here as well, especially those in the introduction to Volume 4. A major change is that *all of the appendices for this volume are on the Companion CD; none are found within these covers*. The reason is space. There are so many appendices, several of considerable length, that I judged it better to place them all on that CD. Sorry for the inconvenience. Check with me via my e-mail address about the availability of the CD.

I remind you that on the *Companion CD-Rom* you get the final *prepublication versions* of the volumes already published, including those currently at the publisher or still in my own hands. In other words, here you get a full preview of some volumes in preparation. Eventually, the prepublication versions will be replaced by the final published editions. In addition, the CD features a few other articles of mine on subjects touched on in this book and a host of articles from other, mostly Nigerian, writers. The topics include other Muslim issues, as well as articles of national Nigerian interest like corruption, external debt and the Miss World debacle. There is also extensive coverage of the 2004 crisis in Plateau State and its fallout. This CD is constantly expanding, almost daily.

And, of course, keep checking my Web site for the unfolding developments of this project on www.SocialTheology.com.

Once again, welcome to our journey.

▲ NOTES

¹ The materials in these first three monographs are effectively confirmed in S. Ilesanmi, pp. 115-145.

² *Compass Direct*, www.compassdirect.org/content/index.

³ S. Careless, 4 Nov/2002. She could have mentioned Canada along with Europe.

⁴ J. Chaplin, 2002.

⁵ S. Careless, 4 Nov/2002.

⁶ D. Todd, 7 Feb/2003, 2 Aug/2003, 9 Aug/2003.

⁷ M. Peers, "Time to Acknowledge the Participation of Canada's Living Faith Traditions," *Anglican Journal*, Feb/1999. See *Companion CD*, "Secularism in Canada—Primate," http://generalsynod.anglican.ca/stories/news.php?newsItem=2002-03-19_a.ann. "Truth Suppressed Always Takes Its Revenge," sermon delivered on 1 Jan/2002. http://generalsynod.anglican.ca/stories/news.php?newsItem=2002-01-10_b.ann. "Faith Should Not Be Ignored," *Anglican Journal*, Feb/2002. <http://www.anglicanjournal.com/128/02/canada04.html>. "Religious Freedom vs Freedom from Religion," *Anglican Journal*, March/2002. <http://www.anglicanjournal.com/128/03/oped01.html>. "Primate Laments Diehard Secularism," *Anglican Journal*, Feb/2004. http://www.anglicanjournal.com/extra/news.php?newsItem=2004-01-26_ms.news.

⁸ A. Nicolson, 13 Dec/2003. Italics mine.

⁹ J. Chaplin, 2004.

¹⁰ S. Ilesanmi, p. xxvii.

¹¹ J. Onaiyekan, 21 June/2000, p. 2.

¹² BBC, "Nigeria Leads."

¹³ T. Falola, p. 75.

¹⁴ M. Kukah, 1999, pp. 216, 235.

¹⁵ S. Ilesanmi, *Religious Pluralism and the Nigerian State*.

¹⁶ H. Istifanus, 1995, pp. 52-53.

▲ PART ONE

A CHRISTIAN AMBIVALENT YES!

