

UNRAVELLING SOME OF THE CONFUSION

By now you may well be confused. If there is to be such a close relationship between confessing Christ in both politics and government, then what is this hoopla about secularity and separatism all about? There are several forces at work here that tend to becloud the issues.

▲ FEAR OF ISLAMIZATION

Underlying the entire Christian struggle is their conviction and fear of Islamization of the country.¹ Since this is the subject of Monograph 3, I can dispense with it quickly here. *Muslims have a huge task ahead of them to prove this conviction false.* Christians expect that secularity will prevent Muslims from realizing their goals by keeping governments from aiding and abetting Islam at the expense of Christianity. The issue is not really separation but partisanship and favouritism versus neutrality and evenhandedness on the part of governments. In fact, as we have seen, Christians practice little separation. They readily accept government support for Christian projects.

Christians seek an ally in secularity, even though they know that the very word is to Muslims as a red flag is to a bull. One senior Christian statesman² in a letter to me wrote that he recognises the secular approach may not be the ideal, but what alternative is there? Secularity is supposed to safeguard the country against Muslim oppression. It is the Christian hope and guarantee for religious and all other freedoms, from oppression at the hands of both government and the Muslim community. When the government is truly neutral with respect to all religions, when it no longer favours one above the other, then all the religious problems of Nigeria will be solved and the country can return to peace. That is the hope and point of all these calls for secularity.

Negatively put, the call for secularity is *not* meant to separate genuine religion from politics. Christians call upon themselves to bring the best of their spirituality to bear on government to the benefit of all citizens, regardless of religion. It is only when religion takes on the form of power play and the atmosphere of tribe or party that Christians want to eliminate it from the public sector—at least, so they say.

▲ THE TWO FACES OF RELIGION —————

Throughout these discussions, two aspects of religion are constantly confused. When Christians affirm the positive application of religion, they talk of religion as a personal commitment to and faith in God. They want to bring all the spiritual resources of their faith to bear on government and politics in a positive way without discriminating against anyone.

But religion has more than one face. It has a sociological face. It creates a community and a culture. That community can take on the character of party or tribe. It shows up when its adherents no longer act on basis of the spirit, truth or ethics of their religion. They seek to enhance the power, position or wealth of their religion

or groups within that religion. They instill in the hearts of their supporters an attitude of pride in their respective religion. They fight their “religious” wars with bumper slogans such as “I am proud of Christianity/Islam.” They refer to others as “*arna*” or “*kafirai*,” Hausa-language terms meaning “pagans”³ that drip with contempt. They will defend any brother or sister in the faith, whether guilty or innocent. An attack on one is regarded as an attack on all. When a judge or police in a dispute between a Christian and a Muslim declares someone guilty, the judge is automatically the enemy of the guilty party’s co-religionists, even if everyone knows he is guilty. A clear case is that of the purse snatchers in Kano, as told in Monograph 1.⁴ A more recent case was the rejoicing of Muslim communities in Nigeria over the 9/11 debacle. *It is a matter of loving the religion more than the truth the religion propagates.*

A religious community that has adopted tribal characteristics feels free to undermine other religions or to oppress them. They have no qualms about discrimination. Fairness is not in their vocabulary. Such people will, by hook or by crook, attempt to get the government with all of its resources to back them up unilaterally. When such a situation persists over a long period of time with a degree of success, the adherents will begin to feel they even have a *right* to the unfair advantages they derive from the government. They are genuinely surprised when adherents of other religions begin to check them. They suffer from the same blindness that is always associated with tribalism and that, I have insisted repeatedly, also characterizes secularism. This is perhaps the situation that Kantiok had in mind when he wrote, “Loyalty to religious convictions is now taking priority over ‘tribal’ kinship.”⁵ Here religious loyalty has replaced tribal loyalty, but it has similar characteristics. In some cases they coincide in that religious and tribal borders are the same.

One characteristic of tribalism is blindness to your tribe’s fault and its contributions to problems and, thus, lack of self-critique; it is always the other tribe/religion that is at fault. *It seems both reli-*

gions have succumbed to this state. When Christians talk of separating religion from politics, this is the kind of religion they mean to exclude: a religious group that has become tribalistic and acts accordingly. Or it has taken on the character of a secular political party. But, true to character, according to Christians, it is the Muslim community that is always at fault, never the Christian. It is the Muslims who oppress, and the government supports them unilaterally. And for Muslims it is, of course, the reverse.

Sanusi Lamido Sanusi, a prolific Muslim writer whom we first met in Monograph 4, affirms that this process of tribalisation has indeed taken place among the northern Muslim *ummah*. He writes, “The call for a return to sharia and to Islamic authenticity both complements and reinforces the tribal social life of the north.” “Tribalism,” as used by Popper, one of Sanusi’s favourite philosophers, is “the emphasis on the supreme importance of the tribe without which the individual is nothing. The ‘tribe’ may be an ethnic group, a class or some other collective as, in our case, the northern Muslim people.”⁶ While Christians recognise these symptoms in Muslims and oppose them, they are largely blind to their own similar affliction. But that is to be expected, since that blindness is inherent in the affliction.

Failure to take this distinction between the internal and external dimensions of religion into consideration causes a lot of confusion and even havoc. The way in which Christians in their writings and discussions constantly move back and forth between these two meanings, without indicating that they have shifted, sometimes renders their utterances totally confusing. Not infrequently they appear to be saying “Yes” and “No” in the same breath. One cannot blame Muslims for sometimes shaking their heads at the confusion. The Christian position seems to them like a bundle of impossible contradictions. Of course, Muslims make the same mistake and create similar confusion.

Failure to be aware of this distinction prevents some very good things from happening. One such good thing that was squashed

because of the failure to distinguish between the two faces of religion was the attempted prayer movement among Plateau State civil servants in Jos. It was misunderstood or, perhaps, consciously misinterpreted by the authorities. They identified it as an expression of the second form of religion, as an attempt on the part of Christians to impose themselves on others. In short, they regarded it as a power plot.

Samuel Aruwan refers to the same distinction between the internal and external dimensions of religion in his own words. "True religion is not all about being too attached with religion, but strictly adhering to the laid down rules and regulations governing different religions, which is basically being kind, compassionate, showing love and kindness, giving to the needy, doing justice to all, sincerity and honesty."⁷ I would use different terminology, but his sentiment multiplied a 120 million times would do wonders for Nigeria.

▲ ADHERENTS AND INSTITUTIONS

Another important distinction is that between the adherents and institutions of a religion. When Christians want to keep religion out of politics and government, it is the institutions of all religions they want to isolate. They do not want JNI or CAN or any of the denominations to have power in government. No Anglican or Baptist established church with special advantages. No such Muslim establishment either. They do not want a state religion that gives unilateral favourable treatment to any such institution. All religions are to receive equal treatment and enjoy equal standing. *That* is their main concern. Everything else is secondary.

Unfortunately, there is a lot of inconsistency here, and Muslims have recognised it. Christians, like Muslims, eagerly avail themselves of unilateral government favours to them or their institutions when within reach. In earlier volumes we have read of Muslim educational struggles in some Western states.

However, Christians *do* want the influence of Christians in politics and government, both as individuals and as a group. It is not a matter of separation of religion and state so much as that of church or mosque from the state, especially when a religion turns tribalistic. Again, there is lack of clarity here in the way Christians express themselves.

This subject has recently become a significant topic of public discussion among Canadian Christians. The heading of an article by Sue Careless in the Canadian context says it well: “Separation of Church and State Doesn’t Mean Excluding the Spiritual.” Careless quotes Preston Manning, a respected senior Canadian politician: “Keeping the institutions of the state separate from the institutions of faith communities surely cannot mean excluding spiritual considerations...from the public square.”⁸ Bruce Clemenger, President of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, recently wrote,

We are told that religion is a private matter and that in Canada, Church and state must be kept separate. But this accusation confuses religious institutions with the faith, or religion, that animates the institutions. It reveals widespread failure...to distinguish between Church and state, faith and politics. Evangelicals do not confuse Church and state. We understand each to be entities with different calling and purpose. Neither do we believe faith can be compartmentalized. It extends to and influences all areas of life, including the political. Church and state can be separated. Faith and politics cannot. Something—faith, religion, world view or ideology—will guide one’s politics. The political is not neutral territory.⁹

Both Nigerian Christians and Muslims have in common with Western secularists that they tend to be unaware of this significant distinction. It is taken very seriously in the Kuyperian tradition, although it does not accept the institution versus individual scheme—but that is a story for Part 2.

▲ WORLD VIEW ISSUES

A discussion of world view issues requires first of all a definition of the term. Albert Wolters presents us with a brief one: “the comprehensive framework of one’s basic beliefs about things.”¹⁰ This definition is sufficient for our immediate purpose. In Part 2, I will dwell more on definitions.

The confusion I have described so far in this chapter is deep down the result of the clash produced by the commingling of three world views in the hearts of Nigerian Christians. These are the world views of ATR, secularism and Christianity.

1. AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

ATR is noted for its wholistic world view of integration of religion and society. There are few separate religious institutions, though there are shrines and other sacred places as well as religious functionaries. Religion is so interwoven into the fabric of society that the term “religion,” if understood in the dominant Western sense, hardly applies. This situation has prompted some scholars to deny that ATR is even a religion, a view that defines religion as inextricably bound up with separate religious institutions.

Aspects of ATR are still very much operative. It resides deep down in the hearts of many Nigerian Christians—and, I should add, of many Nigerian Muslims as well—as I have explained elsewhere.¹¹ This continuing influence cuts several ways, some positive, some negative. Positively speaking, there is a whole tradition of scholarship that claims a strong sense of tolerance on the part of ATR that has made it possible for different religions to coexist in Africa. Lissi Rasmussen points to U. D. Anyanwu of Abia State University and to Ali Mazrui as representatives of this view. Her opening sentence sounds like a voice from a world very different from what I am describing in this series: “Muslim-Christian relations in Africa have been more harmonious than elsewhere. They

have been able to live side by side in tolerance and patience.”¹² This tolerance, it is often assumed, is due to the dominant influence of ATR, even if only present in residual form.

Though this traditional ATR form of integration is not identical with that found in the Bible, it finds far greater support there than do the individualism and separations inherent in the secularism taken over from Western Christianity. When I once led a group of Nigerians in a study of Moses of the Old Testament, they kept responding with surprise, “But you’re describing our traditions!” That traditional integrated world view is one side of the clash. This is the world view that supports Nigerian Christians when they affirm the need to bring their religion to bear on politics and government. It receives further strong support, of course, from the Bible that espouses a thorough integration of religion and life. However, that integration is discouraged by the aspects of secularism Nigerian Christians have absorbed. These are only a couple of the positive contributions of ATR.

But there are the negative aspects as well. When ATR, in either its official or residual form, faces challenges or chaotic conditions as in Nigeria, it can show a different face altogether. I have experienced that other face as well. Under such conditions, as in Islam, other aspects of ATR kick in and influence developments in other directions. These are the aspects of ATR that contribute to the chaotic situations this series deals with.

2. ETHNOCENTRISM

A major component of the traditional African world view is ethnocentrism or, as the retired South African philosopher Bennie van der Walt calls it, “communalism.”¹³ In more traditional terminology it is called “tribalism.” It could be regarded as the sociological dimension of ATR. It is a perspective that, like pagan Greek philosophy in the Western Church, has penetrated the African Church and continues to play its havoc there, as described in

Appendix 7.¹⁴ Nigerian Christians, along with the country as a whole, including the various levels of government, are acutely aware of the destructive reality of ethnocentrism.

Unfortunately, this awareness is not sufficient to undermine its power and damaging role. People are forever accusing each other of tribalism, but rarely recognise it in themselves or their own tribe. The havoc it has caused is almost indescribable, for, in addition to the intra-Christian wars it has caused in both Nigeria as well as other African countries, it penetrates deep into the very fibre of religious denominations as well as at the local church level, where it poisons relationships. Like racism, it is constantly used as a convenient tool to shirk responsibility by allocating blame to the other tribe.

As I explain in Appendix 7, tribalism absolutizes the demands of the tribe above those of God. The function of the spiritual powers is to support the welfare and ambitions of the tribe and its members, not, as in Christianity, vice versa. The purpose of religious rites is to manipulate those powers in order to have them do the tribe's bidding or that of its members. If that should go contrary to the interests of another tribe, so be it. Along with corruption and religious animosities, Nigerians themselves identify tribalism as a huge obstacle to development in general. They realize tribalism often overrules the tenets of either Christianity or Islam in the hearts of their adherents, but it is always that other party or religion that practices it, never I or my tribe or my religion. The two sometimes almost fuse. Over against another religion and/or tribe, the identity and interests sometimes simply commingle so that it becomes difficult for researchers to determine the main forces at work: religionism?¹⁵ tribalism? Usually it is a case of commingling and fusion. Few people recognise and oppose the power of tribalism as did Tanko Yusuf.¹⁶

Peter Tanko, a Catholic priest, expressed it well in an article that constitutes Appendix 19. He wrote, "Ethnocentrism is not always physically violent, but it is always unjust" in that it leads to

discrimination on basis of tribe. It “permeates the whole of African social and economic life.” The Church in Africa is shot through with it. It is the major explanation for the Rwandan debacle where Christians warred against Christians. Tanko gives a number of examples of the role tribalism plays in the Church and concludes along with Archbishop Obiefuna of Onitsha, Nigeria, that “the blood of tribe is thicker than the water of baptism.” If we “set the houses of neighbours on fire and kill each other, it is because this message has not been firmly rooted or understood” by Christians.¹⁷

3. SECULARISM

Further serious complications have been created by the dominant Western version of Christianity that has commingled with aspects of secularism and with strands of Pagan Greek philosophy. This is the Western version missionaries introduced into Nigeria. Nigerians inherited a seriously weakened, truncated and distorted form of Christianity that continues to be plagued by contradictions. Many have noted contradictions in Christian missionaries, but few are aware of their source. Nationalists and their press as far back as the early twentieth century, however, were acutely aware of the contradiction inherent in the close relationship between missions and colonial exploitation. Some hit the nail on the head by accurately identifying the problem. Ako Adjei, a nationalist during the closing decades of colonialism, wrote that the churches suffered from “an irreconcilable dichotomy of secular and sacred spheres” and hence were largely indifferent to “the stark realities of life.” The Ghanaian Armattoe wrote of the “inherent inconsistency” that was not always apparent to the missionaries.¹⁸

So, then, there is this Western secularism. This is a dualistic world view that I have already described in other publications.¹⁹ Major features of this world view are a dualistic separation of religion and society, privatization of religion and a strong dose of individualism. Related components are faith in the objectivity

and neutrality of both reason and secularity. This world view has entered the Nigerian Christian community through the avenues of colonialism, missions and education. It continues to receive constant and strong reaffirmation in Nigeria's universities. As in the case of most missionaries, most Nigerian Christians have imbibed aspects of this world view unconsciously and uncritically. This is the world view that many Christians operate with when they counter Islam and its demands. Muslims have noticed this tragic commingling and have described its development.²⁰ It will be further explained in Part 2 of this monograph.

4. UNEASY SYNTHESIS

These two world views, ATR and secularism, clash with each other and with Christianity, the third world view, even as they commingle. People somehow manage to commingle them. Depending on the situation, they will skip around between these world views, usually without noticing the inherent contradictions between them. The synthesis is an uneasy one and has led to a unique Black African syncretism. Muslims, as we have seen in Monograph 4, see the resulting contradictions clearly.

The mixed-up and contradictory world-view-in-the-making discussed in this chapter is used by Christians as their major weapon against Muslim domination. *Though this world view is contradictory, that is no reason to berate Africans for it. All the world is undergoing profound parameter shifts, not only Africa. During the process one can, indeed must expect contradictions. These contradictions need time to work themselves out.* These studies are a contribution towards that process. The problem is that the Christian-Muslim struggle is taking place in the midst of this process of parameter changes with its inherent contradictions. The timing is bad. *While pointing out these contradictions is not a matter of fault-finding, they do create problems of weaknesses in the struggle described in this series and put Christians at a disadvantage.*

In Part 2 of this book I offer aspects of an alternative Christian world view known as Kuyperian or Neo-Calvinist, one that is also constantly struggling to free itself from its Western Greek inheritance and its secular environment, a tall order that never seems to end. I offer this alternative in the belief that it will help Christians develop better tools for the crafting of a more constructive and consistent world view. I also do so in the hope that my Muslim neighbours will be interested enough in the surprising parallels that will emerge to pursue them further in order to correct their view of Christianity.

Perhaps we can work together after all.

▲ NOTES

¹ This conviction and fear is not restricted to Nigerian Christians. It is found in many countries. The prayer for today, 27 November 2004, in the bulletin of an organization I will not name, is about Uganda, where, it is reported that a former official of the Muslim Student Association, who was converted to Christ, “revealed the Islamic agenda for Uganda, which is apparently in the form of a fifty-year plan.”

² I do not identify this well-known figure, for I do not have his permission to share private correspondence.

³ The term is reminiscent of apartheid terminology—no accidental coincidence.

⁴ J. Boer, 2003, pp. 47-48.

⁵ J. Kantiok, p. 411.

⁶ S. Sanusi, 1 Oct/2002, p. 1.

⁷ S. Aruwan, “21st November, 2002.”

⁸ S. Careless, 18 Nov/2002.

⁹ B. Clemenger, May-June/2004, p. 38. See also Clemenger, 1999, p. 7.

¹⁰ A. Wolters, p. 2.

¹¹ J. Boer, “Old Wine...”; Monograph 3, pp. 66-68. See also E. Lamle, pp. 112, 117, 129-130, 133, who treats this phenomenon among his own people, the Tarok, people at the centre of the May, 2004 violence in Plateau State.

¹² L. Rasmussen, p. 1.

¹³ B. van der Walt, 1994, p. 209.

¹⁴ J. Boer, 5 June/98, pp. 10-11.

¹⁵ “Religionism” is my own coinage. It is a takeoff from “religionist,” which means “religious zealot,” according to Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary (10th edition). My democratically home-made definition of “religionism” is “the pursuit of vested interests on the part of a religious group by the use of methods and for purposes that contradict the basic tenets or spirit of the very religion the group seeks to promote.” A typical example would be bishops routinely oppressing entire populations for purposes of naked power and wealth through the use of their ecclesi-

astical powers, as was not uncommon during the Middle Ages in Europe. “Religionism” is religion gone awry, derailed, distorted and far removed from its deepest genius. Where it exists, marginalized adherents often begin to call for the end to this or all religion. Nigerian Christianity and Islam have long been developing in this direction.

¹⁶ L. Grissen, pp. 43, 52-53, 98, 113, 114.

¹⁷ P. Tanko, 26 Jan/2000. Appendix 19.

¹⁸ J. Boer, 1979, pp. 107, 236-237, 340-343.

¹⁹ J. Boer, 1979, pp. 240-243, 249, 362, 365, 446-460, 480-482, 484-487; 1984, pp. 116, 120, 132-137, 156, 159-160; 1989, pp. 11-13; “Foundations...,” 1991.

²⁰ J. Boer, Monograph 4, Chapter 2.

▲ PART TWO

THE CHRISTIAN NO

