

INTRODUCTION

More than once I have introduced either book or chapter with a statement about the central place that religious controversies occupy in Nigerian national life. That holds especially true for the more specific question of sharia. In 1986, National YouthCAN spoke of “the clamour for the introduction of the sharia nationwide.”¹ Barely into the new sharia era, John Gangwari started his article with the statement, “For some time now, sharia or Islamic law has been the main focus of attention and discussion in Nigeria. Now more than ever before in Nigeria, the sharia issue has assumed an explosive and dangerous dimension. It almost tore the country apart.” No kidding! “A lot of questions were asked. Why this new zeal for sharia? And why now when a Southern Christian is the president? Why was it not necessary when Northern Muslims ruled the country? Or is it a political strategy to frighten the Federal Government (FG) to address the perceived marginalization of the North? Is it really true that the Nigerian Penal Code is inadequate?” “Statesmen, politicians, jurists, religious and opinion leaders, commentators and even ordinary

Nigerians, all aired their views on the sharia,”² many of which you will read about in this book.

Tokumbo Awoshakin, at one time associated with the daily *TD*, asked about “the sudden emergence of sharia,”³ a question similar to that of Gangwari above. Anyone who has kept abreast of sharia developments since the 1977 CA will hardly consider its emergence as “sudden” or its concern as a “new zeal.” The writings, the arguments, the threats and the declarations from that time on made it clear that it was waiting to happen. D. Dodo in his NIREC lecture of 2000 refers to the “forty years, 1960–2000, that Muslims in Nigeria have been struggling to see that the sharia is given what Muslims consider its rightful place in the Constitution.”⁴ The water was about to break. It was merely a matter of either a courageous prophet or a clever politician—or a combination of these—to take the bold step. That figure turned out to be Governor Ahmed Sani of Zamfara State. But “sudden” or “new?” Hardly!

This book is about Christian views of sharia. It treats two subjects: How Christians interpret sharia and how they *experience* sharia. *It will be seen that interpretation here is guided more by Christian experience with Muslims than by Muslim teachings.* As to interpretation, it is always difficult for a non-adherent to fully understand the dynamics of a religion as its own adherents experience them. Thus, you can expect that these Christian descriptions of Islam are going to contain inaccuracies. Christians may study Islam in great depth and have deep understanding of it, but it is only a few exceptional ones who can catch its dynamics and spirit fully.⁵ We have seen this to be true of Muslim views of Christianity in Volume 6, and you will see it again in this Volume. It is almost inevitable. Also, I am afraid, for me.

This is even more likely to happen in an atmosphere charged with anger, suspicion and fear. For then the contending parties are no longer looking for truth so much as scoring points, finding weaknesses and contradictions. Caleb Ahima, the current General

Secretary of TEKAN, wrote, “Deep-seated anger, unforgiveness, fears and suspicion, hatred, distrust and discouragement are some of the prominent wreckage that litter the path of the history of relationships between the Church and the Mosque in Northern Nigeria.”⁶ While these indeed often exist in religions that share the same environment, focusing on them is not going to help you understand the genius of your own or the other religion. Religion often deals with mysteries and realities that do not readily submit to outside human logic, especially when the latter is interfered with by these emotions. The contradictions may be there in logic and on paper, but the adherent has a way of reconciling them in real life. Apparent tensions seen from the outside often dissolve in experience on the inside. Outsiders draw logical conclusions from certain doctrines that, in fact, do not resonate in the experience of the adherents. I remind you of the advice of a Nigerian pastor of limited education but of wide experience with Muslims. To understand a religion, he advised, you need to zero in on the best a religion has to offer, not the worst. In the current Nigerian context, not many follow his advice. They are not ignorant of each other, as Muslims are fond of charging Christians. Christians and Muslims read each other’s explanations of their religion. They know a great deal about each other, but it *is* often a skewed knowledge developed in an environment of fear, hate and hostility. That is seldom productive.

The second issue is about Christian experience of Islam. People living close to each other get to know each other through the experience. In fact, adherents of different religions living in one society learn things about the other religion that its adherents may not realize about themselves. Muslims in Nigeria always express great surprise when Christians accuse them of intolerance and oppression. Why, Islam is the religion of peace! Intolerance and oppression have no place in Islam. Ergo: they do not practice them. Amongst themselves, Muslims freely write about their own serious

attitudes of intolerance and incidents of oppression, and they often do so as if they do not realize Christians read these internal wranglings or do not experience them. This series contains a lot of writings in which Muslims critique themselves. But over against Christians, Muslims mostly close rank and assume the stance of surprise. Why, Islam by definition does not do these things! Suddenly a disconnect appears between teachings and practice that leads to denial and a kind of hypocrisy. As Musa Gaiya put it, “A gap still exists between the ideal and reality.”⁷ This tendency among Muslims, also found among Christians, is parallel to the attitude of tribalism I have described elsewhere.⁸

Whatever Muslims say their religion cannot do, Christians simply go by their experience of intolerance and oppression, the very things Muslims deny about themselves. My family sees things in me to which I may be blind and even deny, but they are there. They experience them daily. From that perspective they know me better than I do. Psalm 19:12 asks rhetorically, “Who can discern his errors?” And then pleads, “Forgive my hidden faults.” In this book you will see some faults and problems in Muslims that may be hidden to them but not to Christians who experience them daily. It is the side Christians know better, apparently, than Muslims do themselves. Of course, in other volumes I have shown that Christians have their hidden faults as well—hidden only to themselves. Not all Muslim critique of Christians is off the mark any more than is all Christian critique of Muslims and Islam.

The plan for this book does not include defining and describing the sharia or its history. That has been covered in the first chapters of Volume 6, where these materials are presented from a Muslim point of view. I do not intend to rehash all of that from a Christian point of view. After all, it is Muslim property. This is not to say that Christians are not familiar with that material. Some of the Christian source books for this volume actually cover it. Examples are the publications of Danjuma Byang (1988), Justin

La-Nibetle (2000) and of Bee Debki (2000). Let it suffice to say that at least some Christians are not as ignorant of the history of sharia and its sources as Muslims sometimes make them out to be.

Neither is the plan for this book to cover all the literature. That is hardly possible and certainly not necessary for a book that does not pretend to be an academic treatise. I *do* try to cover all the main issues. Few of the sources I use are of academic nature. I use mostly popular discussions that are closer to the people.

Few Christian writers take the trouble to explain the motives that Muslims claim undergird their push for sharia as Muslims themselves do. Most Christians are too upset to bother with reasons they do not accept. Musa Gaiya is one who indicates that he has listened to them. He summarizes the Muslim unhappiness with sharia developments under colonialism.⁹ He reminds his readers that the sharia declaration of Zamfara in 1999 was really an attempt to fulfill Muslim aspirations that had been denied them during the CAs of 1978, 1988 and 1995. Muslims believe “they had made a lot of concessions to make for peaceful coexistence, but Christians never reciprocated.” While Christians opposed membership in the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC),¹⁰ Muslims all along tolerated various Christian institutions and traditions such as diplomatic relations with the Vatican, the use of the Gregorian calendar, the adoption of Saturday and Sunday as work-free days, and more.¹¹ “Thus sharia was an attempt to create a Muslim counterbalance which would provide for Muslim identity, which over the years had eroded.” Another Muslim aim was for sharia “to check the moral deterioration in Nigeria.” Grassroot Muslims place strong hopes on sharia as the solution to the country’s vices. Muslim women hoped that the new sharia would restore their freedom, as promised in Muslim literature. Finally, of course, Gaiya recognized that the Nigerian sharia movement is “part and parcel of the worldwide Islamic resurgence.” In other words, the new sharia movement is a “localization of a global phenomenon.”

Muslims “are filled with nostalgia” for the “glorious period of Islamic revivalism and dynamism of the pre-colonial time during and after Usman Danfodio in the early nineteenth century.”¹²

At this point I want to give an impression of the amazing sharia atmosphere in the North during the mid-1980s as recorded by Matthew Kukah. Kukah tells the story of a 1985 visit to the Institute of Legal Studies in Zaria by Professor S. Richardson some years after his involvement in Nigeria’s sharia developments. The professor wrote of the shock he received during a lecture he gave at the institute. “I expected about 100 law students for the talk, but instead, thousands of people from the bush, thousands of students from all faculties of the University, priests, imams, press men, loud-speakers all over the place.... They said that the Penal Code had been a colonial imposition which had got rid of Muslim law.”¹³

This story reminds me of the 2004 sharia conference at Unijos, where over 900 people signed the attendance register to participate in what often was a hot debate. Like that of Richardson, this event also included people from street and village. Attendance exceeded the “wildest expectations” of the organizers.¹⁴ No one can legitimately doubt the depth of feeling for sharia on the part of Nigeria’s Muslims.

In addition to these stories about the sharia atmosphere, I offer a few pages to give you a taste of the *Christian* stance towards sharia around the first CA in 1977–1978. The pages you are about to read from my doctoral dissertation were written during the sharia heat of those days. I reproduced the Muslim side of that beginning history in Volume 6. Here is the Christian half.¹⁵

A number of Christian objections to the sharia have been raised, but most of them are based on a narrow view of religion we associate with dualism.¹⁶ Sharia will retard efforts to unify the nation—and God knows how great that need is! “A dual legal system will tend to bring disunity in the country,”

affirms Abari.¹⁷ A related argument is that religion and, therefore, sharia, should be kept out of the constitution because religion is in itself divisive. It is one of the factors that has contributed to disunity in Nigeria, charges Amalaha.¹⁸ It "is capable of ruining our unity," Opugo asserts.¹⁹ The definition of religion as essentially a private affair is another argument. Babatope, by his own confession opposed to religion in general, views religion, when brought into public affairs, as divisive and suggests that "at best religion should be considered a private affair."²⁰ Opugo insists on a sharp demarcation between religion and politics. The former concerns man's relationship to God and has to do with his conscience. It is personal, whereas politics is a public concern.²¹ Non-Muslims are fearful of including the sharia, because they have experienced oppression at Muslim hands where the latter are in the majority. Bitrus Duniya relates rejection of the sharia directly to past and present Muslim oppressive measures.²² The articles by Mustapha Muhammed and Bappa Mahmoud, both Muslims, whether so intended or not, are in effect confessions that human rights have not flourished at Muslim hands.²³ In fact, the attempt to include the sharia is interpreted by many Christian leaders as a thinly-disguised form of jihad, a Muslim crusade to achieve hegemony in Nigeria. Wilson Sabiya has been a particularly strident advocate of this view and he has rallied much support for it.

One can hardly have anything but strong sympathy for those who oppose including the sharia. The need for greater unity in Nigeria is overwhelming indeed. Muslim intolerance of other religions is best illustrated by the position of Christian minority groups in Muslim countries. Nigerians have every reason to be on their guard against such developments. However, the question is: What alternative do Christians offer? It is here that the Christian shoe begins to pinch.

*The overwhelming demand is for a secular constitution that eliminates all religious influences. Osita Okeke feels that Nigeria must be seen “as a secular state and therefore any laws based on religion should have no place at the center.”*²⁴ George Hoomkwap similarly opts for a secular state which he defines as “one in which no single religion receives official patronage or recognition to the exclusion of or in preference to others.”²⁵ Abari objects to the sharia precisely because it “is not a secular law but a religious law.”²⁶ Patrick Okpabi states that the “Common Law ... is neither a Christian nor Moslem system of law. It is a law for everyone.”²⁷ An unnamed author advocates “the common law which is secular and not the Sharia which has religious undertone. In order not to make either Muslims or Christians feel that one group has an edge over the other, common law should be adopted—which is secular and neutral from the canon and the sharia laws.”²⁸

In the secular solution noted above it is not difficult to recognize a direct relationship with the dualistic view of religion we have earlier pointed out. As over against the Muslim view of religion as a total way of life, these objectors to the sharia generally seek a solution to their very genuine fears in a reduced version of both Christianity and Islam. Religion is private, personal. Religion tends to divide. Hence we must go beyond religion to what men have in common, to a neutral zone where one can be objective and work together. Here we have a clear indication of modern Humanism at work, a philosophy that will only tolerate a religion that limits itself to a spiritual realm and that lays no obligation on the public domain. Not the law of God, but the laws that man concocts for himself are to apply in politics. The revelation of God is restricted to church and personal life; common reason guides public affairs.

It is by no means only theologically illiterate politicians who advocate such dualistic solutions to this intricate problem. Let us listen to voices emerging from the churches themselves. In addition to pointing out various problems that will arise from the inclusion of sharia, an NKST statement suggests that it is precisely the religious foundation of the sharia that makes it objectionable: "We are aware of the highly codified nature of the sharia law, but we still contend that this . . . does not make it non-religious, because these laws are still injunctions from the Koran and Islamic theology." The ingrained nature of this dualistic vision is further demonstrated by a declaration from a conference called by the ICS in Ibadan. It also posits the possibility of religious neutrality of a constitution that should uphold only "the ordinary law of the land administered by the ordinary law courts."²⁹ This law is to be neither Christian nor Muslim, but to be based on "ordinary" notions, terminology one cannot help but identify with the modern Humanistic idea of a general, neutral and objective common sense shared by all men, based on sound reason quite apart from their basic religious commitments. Muslims, not having experienced Western autonomous rationalism, have quickly pinpointed the problem, but Christians who are heirs to the tradition of dualism are found advocating a court system that must be divorced in principle from their highest source of authority, the Bible itself. Without belittling the tremendous urgency of the problem, we contend that the solution for Christians must be sought in a different direction, namely within the framework of Biblical thought.

Though we reject in principle a dualistic approach, we are not suggesting that a more Biblical solution is within easy reach. The specific solution offered by Ibrahim Usman, a member of the CA, may not be possible, for he appears to advocate a rather legalistic adoption of Mosaic laws.³⁰ However, his

attempt to find a non-dualistic solution and his fearlessness in presenting it in spite of opposition of the Christian community in general is nothing short of admirable. And one would hardly expect one individual to solve the complicated problem in a fully satisfactory way. Adegbola is one of the few other voices calling for a similar direction, but he advises the Christian community as a whole to seek a solution.³¹

Not only have fellow Christians rejected Usman's approach, but they have indicated no appreciation for his basic concern, namely to seek a Biblically legitimate solution. Even less have they presented a responsible Biblical alternative or given a responsible Biblical reason for the rejection of Usman's attempt. We locate the reason for this reaction in the dualism inherited from the missions. This inheritance has led to a limited religion that has little or no constructive role in public affairs. In the public arena it is replaced with humanistic concepts. Here humanistic values and beliefs reign. However, it is not a matter of subjective religion versus an objective and neutral approach; it is a matter of one religion—Christianity—versus another set of religious values and beliefs that emphasize faith in the ability of autonomous man to find his own solutions, but that will have little truck with Biblical notions of a reason severely impaired by sin. Secularism is not non-religion; it is another religion that, because of its subtlety, is a far greater threat to the Christian community than is Islam. We thus find Christians resorting to the beliefs and practices of one rival religion in order to undercut the threat posed by another. In spite of all the forces surrounding the church that encourage her to adopt a more wholistic approach—Traditional African Religion, Islam and the Bible itself—it was the same dualism that caused missions to go astray in their support of capitalism and colonialism, that tragically triumphed.³²

You have just been introduced to the climate at the beginning of our period. Since then, much has changed. The number of Christians has dramatically increased. Christians have become more mature and sure of themselves. More aggressive, even. They have established quite a number of leadership training institutions, some even awarding advanced degrees. Some years ago, The Church of Christ Among the Tiv (NKST) established a university with the explicit aim of overcoming the dualism that has plagued Nigeria's Christians. During the early part of the new century, COCIN decided to establish the Karl Kumm University, named after the German Karl Kumm, founder of the Sudan United Mission (SUM).³³

Certain other things did not change. The first is that, throughout, Muslims continued to insist relentlessly on sharia while they failed to muster any sympathy for even the most rational Christian arguments to the contrary. The second is that, throughout, Christians continued to relentlessly resist all attempts to have the sharia imposed on them and equally failed to muster any sympathy for some very solid arguments on the part of Muslims. For Christians, the issue stranded on bitter experience, not theory, doctrine or even truth. Muslims rejected the secular underpinnings of the Christian attitude; Christians, the alleged Muslim plan to take over the country.

However, putting all that aside, we do well to take to heart the reminders two ECWA clergymen, G. Okezie and Charles Dah, delivered to different mixed audiences of Christians and Muslims under the umbrella of Inter-Gender. Jesus warned his followers, "All men will hate you because of me" (Mark 13:13; Luke 21:17). Jesus also said, "All this I have told you so that you will not go astray. They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God. They will do such things because they have not known the Father or me" (John 16:1-3).

In addition to Jesus' forecasts, Dah reminds us of the human condition after the fall into sin. "Crises are universal phenomena that are inevitable. They come basically due to our fallen nature." These crises can often be legitimately explained in terms of their natural causes, but behind these natural causes you will find sin and Satan, the two major factors "behind every sort of crisis." As to our reactions to crises, we have a choice of perspectives that guide us, the mix of which constitutes the material for this book, *but it is a choice we freely make, that no one forces upon us*³⁴—unless it arises from the religion or worldview we espouse and which predisposes us. That worldview or religion determines and restricts the parameters within which we make our choices.

The gospel *is* offensive and evokes strong negative reactions such as hatred and killing on the part of unbelievers when they feel threatened by it. In the more rationalistic environment of secularism, it will be dismissed and despised as ignorance, superstition that will disappear in time. The message of sin and redemption through the blood of self-sacrifice by the Son of God is simply too humiliating for a proud human race—and surely both Muslims and secularists are that! And if you have been steeled against it since childhood by the religion or worldview of your community—and that surely is also the case for both Muslims and most secularists—it is too foreign, not to say exotic, an approach to life to even be considered a rational and viable alternative.

Before closing this chapter, I introduce you to a report on the sharia issue by the Human Rights Watch. It is a worthwhile companion to Volumes 6 and 7 of this series. Having both Christians and Muslims on staff, Human Rights Watch parades itself as being neutral, but does not always achieve it. When you tell sharia advocates to do away with capital punishment and amputation and to decriminalize adultery, you are hardly neutral, except perhaps according to secular definitions. The report does not feature much

in these pages simply because, as neither overtly Christian nor Muslim, it does not fit my scheme. But I do refer to it occasionally to whet your appetite. Best of all is that it is available free from the Internet. Check it out in the bibliography.

The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) has occasionally had to defend itself against criticism. The above report, with its mild suggestion that Christians occasionally exaggerate the hardships sharia imposes on them, may well have influenced the FG. CAN of Zamfara State wrote, “We have discovered that some people in government are against us, because in their opinion CAN is over-blowing issues or that what we publish from Zamfara is not the true position of things.” CAN rejected this charge. “Nothing could be farther from the truth. We only report what is actually happening. And before reporting anything, we investigate the veracity of the facts.” At another time, Governor Sani said that he had taken Zamfara State CAN into confidence and explained the reasons for sharia to them. They had approved his plans, only later to turn against him. CAN declared, “Zamfara State Government misinformed the general public about the position of CAN concerning the Government’s decision to introduce sharia. Contrary to the statement of the Government, CAN never at any time expressed approval of the Government’s decision with respect to sharia.” CAN has decided to “keep Nigerians aware of our plight, lest they be deceived by the popular theory that sharia will not touch Christians.”³⁵ Well, I promise you will get an earful!

I have already welcomed you back to sharia country—back, because it is possible you have read Volume 6. I assure you this visit will be different from the previous one; definitely not just a repeat. You spent that visit in Muslim land; now you’re about to enter the Christian sector. Taste, think, explore, weigh. I am afraid I cannot offer you a joyride, though hopefully an instructive one.

