

# FAMILY AND GENDER ISSUES

*It is an established fact that women in position of trust have always demonstrated a greater capacity of trust, a greater capacity to deliver service and a greater capacity for honesty, nationalism and patriotism.*

**President (Elect) Umar Yar'Adua<sup>1</sup>**

*In the Islamic commandment, the emphasis is on modesty, not on erasing a woman as a human being or erasing her beauty.*

**Ausma Khan<sup>2</sup>**

*It was important... to emphasize that gender equality must be regarded as an absolute human ideal, that Muslims need to acknowledge... as a natural progression of their faith in the twenty-first century.... Gender equality must be acknowledged as the ultimate goal of any civil society. There is a trend among conservative Muslims to justify continuing inequities based on a rationale that can only be relevant to the mores of seventh-century Arabia. Conservative Islam still operates*

*within the cultural framework of long ago. It is therefore imperative to recognize that the conditions justifying disparity in gender rights no longer exist and must be revisited as religious precepts.*

**Farzana Hassan<sup>3</sup>**

### ▲ GENERAL STATUS AND ROLE OF WOMEN ———

For an “early” statement on the status of Muslim women I refer you first to the British Muslim Institute’s *The Muslim Manifesto*. It contains two carefully crafted pages on women that must be read in the context of the entire document. I draw your attention to a few statements. It was approvingly observed that British Muslim women are “rapidly” increasing in both higher education and professions. The emphasis is on the women themselves: they themselves must develop an Islamic lifestyle. They need to “develop their talents and achieve their ambitions to the full, always guided by Islam.” Among other things, they must “play a major part in the public life of the Muslim community.” These things will only happen if they have their own platform. Hence, the authors recommended establishing a Council of Muslim Women.

Every chapter of this document ends with a maxim, this one typically Muslim: “Muslim women have a higher and nobler place in society than the so-called ‘emancipated’ women have in the West.”<sup>4</sup> I have good reason to suspect that this “higher and nobler place” is raising children in the home and thus influencing the future of the society and nation. After all is said and done and all these prestigious ambitions achieved, the most noble is still that most ancient occupation of all, the nurture of children. Muslims are not impressed with families where the mother, the one considered hardwired to care for child and home, works outside the home at the expense of her personal presence among her

children. You will have learned that from earlier volumes in the series.<sup>5</sup>

Turning now to the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC), its Dakar Communique of March, 2008, called for drafting a “Covenant on Women’s Rights in Islam” [par. 105]. Various OIC bodies held conferences on women’s issues through the years. A perusal will quickly show a strong awareness among the leaders that all has not been well with women and a strong determination to elevate their status and their rights. In November, 2008, it was decided to begin a programme “for *re*-activating the role of women in the development of their Islamic societies.”<sup>6</sup> I urge you to read this document to get a full appreciation of the emphasis placed on women and their rights.

In his lecture at Columbia University, Ihsanoglu stated, “The Charter does not neglect the pressing social issues prevalent in the member states, and gives due consideration to the efforts related to the promotion of the role of the family. It uplifts the role of women to ensure their full participation in all spheres of life. It also emphasizes the importance of the sound upbringing of youth and children. In short, the new OIC Charter has sought to write the blueprint for an enlightened future to the Muslim world.” “A great deal of the efforts of the OIC is now directed toward human development in the socio-economic spheres..., providing health services to newborns and mothers all around the Muslim World...and elevating the status of women.”<sup>7</sup> I could quote OIC document upon document, all of them exhibiting this elevating spirit, but these representative samples must suffice.<sup>8</sup> The devil is in the details—and, unfortunately, they are not there in these documents. So we are left with a vague impression of an elevating spirit without details. That may be good propaganda, which is all OIC is about, according to Mohamad Rachid, but it leaves us in the dark as to just where things are going.

Rachid emphasizes that Islam focuses on harmony and peace

between the genders, not on differences. Instead of adversarial relationships, it turns men and women into equal partners, though with different functions that go along with their physical differences. There is an equality of honour, in religion and before the law. Women are free to manage their own finances and to own businesses and properties. They can go into politics and everywhere else. But all of this is voluntary. Women are not *forced* to go out and work, since the man is responsible for the family finances. To prove his point, Rachid reminds us of Asian Muslim countries having had female heads of state, while the largest Islamic society in North America has a woman as president.<sup>9</sup> Several Muslim countries have had female prime ministers or presidents: Pakistan, Turkey, Senegal, Indonesia. Bangladesh just elected their second female Prime Minister, with the first having been elected twice, while the current one, Sheikh Hasina, was enthroned only recently. What does that say for the Muslim world in contrast to the world's champion of democracy?

However, when there are children, the family becomes crucial. Yes to the above, room for women everywhere, but the *ideal* situation is for the man to work outside to care for the family's economic needs, while the woman stays at home to raise the children. Though this task may be belittled and despised in some societies, in Islam this is a most honourable occupation. "The emotional side of the family is as important as the economic side, if not superior to it."<sup>10</sup>

Nigerian Christians and Muslims hold very similar general views in this respect. Women are free to work in all spheres and at all levels. The St. Piran's Anglican Church of Jos to which I belonged for almost two decades, is filled with married women who have made their mark in the professional, business and political spheres in an impressive way. Hannatu Monday is the perfect BZ representative advocate for the "total woman" who is involved at all societal fronts but also is the soul of the family and home.<sup>11</sup>

Jenny Jacob runs a column in *The Light Bearer* of COCIN under the title “Virtuous Woman.” She features all kinds of women successful in modern Nigeria and beyond and clearly admires them for their achievements. It is important to realize that these articles occur in a publication dominated by men who could easily prevent them from appearing and owned by a denomination dominated by more men who could have done the same. The continued appearance of the column is an indication of how COCIN encourages the advancement of women. At the same time, the paper continues to uphold their domestic importance in ways similar to Islam.<sup>12</sup>

Gender equality does not sit well with all Muslims, of course. At the global level, I point you to a statement by Fazl Hadi Shinwari, at the time a chief justice in Afghanistan’s Supreme Court and an Islamist, “that sharia rejects three crucial freedoms—those of expression, religion and equality of the sexes.” But, then, what else would you expect from an Islamist? Nina Shea summarizes the position of women under a number of Muslim regimes. The honourable position of women demands that they be protected. So this honourable creature ends up with “varying degrees of gender segregation rules”— dress codes, barred from traveling without a male custodian, forbidden to drive. In some of these situations her standing before the court is less than that of a man, and she may be seen as “temperamental and lacking in reason and for this reason may be barred from being a judge and from other areas of employment.”<sup>13</sup> No wonder OIC is worried and is trying to make amends. Such situations do little to enhance the image of Islam, one of its major concerns these days.

Neither does the notion go over well with some *Nigerian* Muslims. When the Kaduna State Governor, a Muslim, appointed a Christian woman chairperson to a commission that included Muslim men, one of them, Yahaya Jinadu, harassed her, stating that they could not submit to a woman leader. The late Abubakar Gumi stated repeatedly that he would not tolerate a woman presi-

dent.<sup>14</sup> Even highly placed judges like Kwara State Grand Khadi Abdulkadir Orire describe the obedient wife in terms acceptable to few outside of that community. He compares the relationship of husband to wife as that of a farmer to the soil in such gross manner that I do not care to repeat it, even though in a major NIREC paper he offers eloquent pronouncements on human rights. While they pay lip service to the freedom of women to participate fully in society, the bottom line always comes down to raising the family. If this sounds demeaning to most Westerners, to the Muslim this is a most honourable and most responsible task upon which the future of the nation depends. Even some Muslim women write in that spirit. The woman, first and foremost a homemaker and nurturer of the next generation. It does not get more honourable than that.

The problem, according to one lady, Rabi Wali, is that even in the above theoretical status of honour, women cannot feel secure. In fact, they seem to do most of the work and form the “backbone of the economy.” Far more is demanded from them than the above would lead one to expect, even contributing to the family’s financial needs, officially the responsibility of the husband. She is basically a mere “commodity” who is discarded once her beauty has faded. She has no right to education. The whole situation is buttressed by “misquoted and misinterpreted verses and *hadiths*.” Well, read the materials in this endnote to refresh your memory.<sup>15</sup> For the most part, it is not a pretty picture. But Muslims, including the victims, tend not to discuss these problems. Throughout this series we have come across Muslim denials about things that should not occur, but do. Muslims are tolerant; *therefore* there is no persecution. Muslims honour women; *therefore* they do not abuse them in any way. When the Dutch Moroccan Saida Elhantale confided to others that she had been sexually abused, they were shocked to hear this admission. She commented, “In our culture, such things should not occur. We don’t even talk about it. Therefore it does not happen.”<sup>16</sup>

When these equal and honourable women in the form of the Association of Divorcees, Widows and Orphans tried to call attention to their plight in Kano by means of a demonstration, they were prevented from holding it by Director General of the sharia police, the *Hisbah*, Saidu Dukawa. In addition to security concerns, he said “the idea of street protests were ‘un-Islamic,’ and ‘morally wrong.’ Never in the history of Islam have women taken to the street to press for their demands.” “They feared the demonstration would ‘ridicule Kano in the eyes of the world.’”<sup>17</sup> This is in sharp contrast to Saida Elhantali, who also organized women. As the Kano ladies were up against the honour of Kano, Elhantali ran into problems created by the honour of the family. Probably because she was infected by the freedom-loving Dutch, she did not give in as did the Kano ladies. She bluntly dismissed the concern: “According to her, this family honour that must be upheld has little to do with religion. In her eyes it is more a matter of the culture of mostly uneducated and illiterate people.”<sup>18</sup> Regarding female oppression by their Muslim husbands, she explained, “When fundamentalists tell me that we women are reprehensible, it is precisely out of Islam that I counter their arguments. Islam teaches that women should stand up for themselves. It is men who oppress us, not the religion.”<sup>19</sup>

Nigeria, too, does not lack strident females who publish statements about the high social status of women in Islam and about their fully equal rights. We have our Fatima Zubair, who insists that women have the “fundamental right to exercise... [their] abilities in all areas of human activities.” As one would expect, she was promptly challenged by threatened men who wanted to place limits on female freedom.<sup>20</sup> The situation again evokes the question whether this is Islam or just Muslims pushing their own traditional tribal thing. For Muslims the answer depends on which side of the fence you find yourself. Rachid would dismiss these restrictive views impatiently as traditional culture, not Islam; in fact, *anti*-Islam.

Enter the Zamfara-style sharia, that great liberator of all mankind and, ostensibly, all womankind. How do women fare under its administration? I ask you to check it out for yourself in earlier volumes, following this extensive endnote.<sup>21</sup> From those readings you know that there is a wide-ranging common mind about both the domestic and societal roles of women among both Christians and Muslims. There is also a large number of women, again from both religions, that regard the new sharia oppressive and restraining.

In May, 2007, during his days as President Elect, Umar Yar'Addua indicated a positive attitude towards the role of women. He met with an unidentified women's delegation led by Inna Ciroma, a member of the outgoing Federal Cabinet. Discussing the issue of women's participation in his upcoming government, he said, "I share the conviction of President Olusegun Obasanjo and that of the PDP, that the space needs to be expanded for women to participate." He added that he has confidence in the ability of the womenfolk to perform any responsibility most creditably, pointing out that "this has been demonstrated by our sisters who have the opportunity to serve in the present government." "It is an established fact that women in position of trust have always demonstrated a greater capacity of trust, a greater capacity to deliver service and a greater capacity for honesty, nationalism and patriotism."<sup>22</sup>

In unity lies our strength. I advise Christian and Muslim women to unite in so far as they agree on the oppressive nature of the literalist version of sharia. Whether you wish to withdraw or reform that sharia, a united front will provide you with the power to effect it. In view of the deep-seated and irrefractable nature of the problem in Nigeria, you need to devise a programme of radical action that touches the *radix* or root of their situation. Perhaps you need to call in the services of our friend Shehu Sani, who could perhaps help you with the production of creative drama that depicts the situation not only, but that also fires up the imagination to



move beyond drama towards creative solutions. This requires out-of-the-box thinking. Women, you can do it. You have the support of your respective dynamic religions. Utilize their dynamic spiritual resources of faith and prayer and remember the words of Elhantali: It is the men who oppress you, not your religion. Even more important: Remember the words of the Old Testament *Attaurat*<sup>23</sup> given to both women and men equally: Subdue and rule the world—through the cradle and beyond.

I end this section with the pronouncements on women by the AFREG in its Action Plan. The bottom line is expressed in the top line of the section “Gender and Development:” “Provide equal opportunities for male and female to contribute to governance and development.”<sup>24</sup> The actions to be taken towards that end are the following:

1. Recognize and support women as community leaders and as development agents.
2. Build a clear vision for gender and development that is rooted in Africa, not just mirroring what is happening elsewhere in the world.
3. Churches should create policies which ensure active participation of women in development activities and decision making.
4. In view of gender being critical to good governance and development, *a paradigm shift is needed*, where both male and female have equal opportunities at every level (home, school, church, marketplace, etc.).
5. The church and communities should affirm women and acknowledge their role in development projects.
6. The church and communities should create opportunities to mentor young people towards their gender sensitive personal development.
7. Create conducive working environments, which would enable women to empower themselves in their contexts.

In these points there is no reference to the domestic role of women. This does not necessarily mean a downgrading of that role. This is a political document dealing with an area of culture where women are scarce. So steps need to be taken to change that situation. Though the recommended steps are fair enough and I support them, I do wonder whether something more radical needs to be said. The insistence on an African model is right on. I suspect that is directed towards the secular human rights and women's liberation models that parade themselves as modern, universal and global. There is the expressed need for a paradigm shift. That, of course, is what I am pleading for in all these chapters, but if not in a secular direction, then which way? Such a shift holds the potential for more drastic measures than this mild document is proposing. A little more detail would have been helpful to compare them with mine.

*I would like to hear an evaluation and critique of these seven steps by a group of young educated women.*

### ▲ ABDUCTIONS AND FORCED MARRIAGES —————

I now turn to a long-standing controversy between Christians and Muslims about forcing mixed marriage on Christian girls. Christians do not favour mixed marriage with Muslims, but they are offended by the fact that Muslims allow their men to marry Christian women, but not vice versa. Christians regard this as part of the all-embracing *jihad* and are offended by the practice.<sup>25</sup> The stories are many and varied. There is the story of Elizabeth Nmadu, a 20-year old Christian girl whose Muslim father tried to force her to marry a Muslim.<sup>26</sup> Her story is told in Appendix 97. Sometimes these stories are intertwined with riots as in the case of Catherine Abban and the Potiskum riot of 1994.<sup>27</sup> See Appendix

98. Another Christian woman Sa'adatu was married by choice to Simon Adamu, also a Christian. A drama ensued when her Muslim father wanted to force a Muslim husband on her. For the details of the story follow this endnote.<sup>28</sup> These incidents have not stopped with the new sharia. There are the almost unbelievable AZ stories of abductions or kidnapping of girls or even women for similar purpose!<sup>29</sup> Neither are they confined to Nigeria.<sup>30</sup> These stories are not the result of evil rumour mongering; they are for real, they happen!

We can continue to ask whether this is Islam or erring Muslims, but the issue is becoming old and tiring. These horrors are perpetrated by Muslims in the name of Islam and moderate Muslims are not stopping them or publicly condemning them. One is forced to ask where this ethereal Islam is that cannot be blamed for anything. Does it exist at all, anywhere, in any shape or form? Wherever it is, the flesh-and-blood moderate Muslim community cannot reject responsibility as long as it does not resist such atrocities and put a stop to them. Or are even these so-called "moderates" as ethereal as Islam itself? Muslims, things just don't add up!

### **▲ MORAL ISSUES AND THE QUESTION OF (DE-)REGULATION**

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From the global perspective, the infamous Nigerian adultery cases generated by the new sharia regime at its inception represented the more spectacular aspect of the initiative.<sup>31</sup> After all, sexual relations are the most intimate of all gender relations. The human rights movement, represented mostly by Nigerian lawyers, immediately jumped into the fray, mostly on basis of secular individualistic rights perspectives. Trained as secular lawyers, they had little sympathy for or even understanding of a basic motivation of the people towards sharia, namely to revive the economy and to halt moral deterioration at every front.<sup>32</sup> Sharia is to squash any virus that threatens the

harmony of the community before it infects all. It aims to protect the family as the “most important social institution responsible for the upbringing of the next generation.... The sharia is therefore very strict with regard to the protection of the family. There is severe punishment for adultery....” Its measures are as much designed for prevention or deterrence as punitive, a perspective that also pervades the Old Testament.<sup>33</sup> *It is a perspective that takes sexual behaviour out of the private into the sphere of public concern and responsibility, since it has such a potentially destructive impact on society.* As Ibrahim Sulaiman put it, “The State must give full recognition to the Islamic value system. All things Islam declares to be morally good, such as worship in its widest sense, public decency and others, must be regarded as such by the state.”<sup>34</sup>

The infamous cases grew into terrible legal muddles. Western trained Common Law lawyers challenging poorly trained local sharia judges under the blinding lights of TV cameras ensured chaos. Both systems were at their worst. Individualist human rights were pitted against a communalist or collectivist worldview, while the haughty secular West was there in full force, looking for every chance to pounce upon and humiliate Islam and its sharia. The world was given a ringside seat to what became a full-fledged circus. It was an impossible situation that could not but end with the acquittal of the accused. Most of us are happy with the acquittals, I should think. Given the Nigerian situation, the verdict was to be expected, just as President Obasanjo predicted.<sup>35</sup>

But all that outside interference was no way to jumpstart the new sharia.

*There is need for the development of a more appropriate perspective that includes both preventive and punitive aspects of justice, a rights perspective that includes responsibilities and communal as well as individual rights. All of that should be subjected to a more histor-*

*ical, contextual and less literalist reading of the orthodox sharia sources that takes into consideration all the elements of an offense. These are all issues I have discussed previously. And since Islam by nature welcomes new scientific developments, DNA evidence should from here on be routinely included. I know that some of these issues are already being worked on by the appropriate sharia state authorities.*

Difficult as they may be, the above are simply unavoidable issues. An important one relates to a popular Hausa proverb, “*Rigakafi ya fi magani*” [Prevention is better than cure]. Should we adopt prevention as a major legal principle? The sharia includes it, but Christians should also decide on the issue. There is need to come to an agreement here, for it could lead to laws more intrusive than are currently on the Nigerian books. For example, if alcohol often leads to dangerous behaviour, should drinking it be prohibited? If indiscriminate sex leads to social chaos, should it be prohibited or, at least, somehow discouraged? In the words of former Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, does the government have any business in the nation’s bedrooms? Islam says “yes” to all three questions. If not, on what basis? Do privacy concerns trump public chaos? Does the personal and individual trump the communal?

It is the old question of regulation versus deregulation. Preventive regulation is common in the economic sector. In fact, during the current global economic meltdown of 2008, Alan Greenspan, the former chief of the US Federal Reserve, publicly confessed he had been wrong in opposing increased regulation of the US economy, a policy that might have prevented global chaos. Governments across the globe are battling illegal drugs. Lateef Adegbite asked, “If government considers it necessary to establish para-military agencies to check trafficking in drugs or corruption

in financial and economic matters, crimes that, in comparison with religious misuse, are less incendiary, there is no justification for not setting up religious police. It is an enforcement agency long overdue.”<sup>36</sup> Nigerian Christians would challenge such a provision, but on what logical basis? In Canada, deregulation of sex in the name of privacy is one of the factors that is leading to sexual, family, social and cultural chaos.

*But it must be realized that regulation can also cause chaos.* The war against drugs has not reduced drug traffic but definitely has increased drug-related chaos. Prohibition outlawed alcohol in the US, but it created another chaotic illegal world and had to be abandoned. Nigeria is not the West and has to devise its own answers, but it *is* part of the human race whose global experience it cannot ignore. Its approach has to be hammered out on the two anvils of Christian-Muslim dialogue and of human experience. Both religions take experience seriously.<sup>37</sup> Social policy must be based on the reality of a human nature that always finds ways to resist, abuse or circumvent the positive intent of public policy, whether regulation or deregulation. You often have to be satisfied with compromise or half-solution.

We should not forget Zakzaki’s school of thought that rejects the Zamfara sharia because the timing was wrong. It should come *after* all the utopia-like social conditions have been put in place. According to this opinion, sharia regulation at this time of social demoralization will only lead to a cruel judiciary that ignores harsh circumstances that may have led to crime. Kabiru Saleh of Kaduna also expected utopian conditions to be in place *before* sharia can ever work!<sup>38</sup> All I can say to that is, “Dream on, brother!” How does he c.s. expect society to reach the required level? *This opinion amounts to an admission that sharia cannot do it.* So, there are many reasons to be careful about issues of (de)regulation and not to jump to conclusions too hastily or determine public policy prematurely.

*I propose that more consideration be given to the potential role of the religious aspect of the problems of religious, moral and other forms of chaos and lean less on the legal. Adherents of the two religions should consider ways in which both can provide spiritual motivation from the heart rather than from external laws. They should also explore how governments can encourage and support churches in this task.*

I have just stumbled onto the subject of revival, one that both Christians and Muslims are pushing for.<sup>39</sup>

### ▲ GENDER SEPARATION

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Earlier volumes in this series are replete with gender issues. Please turn to their indices to remind you of the details. The revived sharia invigorated gender distinctions and separations with a vengeance hardly ever encountered before. Major issues were separate public transportation, separate education, female uniforms and dress code in general. Christians as well as many Muslims strongly objected to these measures.

As in other gender issues, here, too, the motivation is to eradicate immorality from society. This is to be achieved by “protecting” the high honour of women. “God has told us that they are really precious and should be given utmost care.” Proper public transport will help protect their honour.<sup>40</sup> Christians do not experience these as honour provisions. To them transport separation spells inconvenience, oppression and humiliation. Christian women are even prevented from traveling with their husbands!<sup>41</sup> They object to these provisions and, with the cooperation of CAN, even have provided their own alternative Christian drivers. As far as Christians as well as many educated Muslim women are concerned, the only appropriate action here is simply to withdraw these provisions.

The provision for separate transportation might not have become the problem it did if the transportation sector had been fully developed and adequate transport available for all. Even in buses plying the streets of my Canadian city, it is obvious that most men and women prefer not to sit next to random members of the opposite sex; they generally sit next to gender mates or, often, will remain standing. In both Egypt and Japan some trains dedicate wagons to females to avoid harassment. No one complains about such separation. Indiscriminate public mixing of genders seems to meet with natural resistance in widely different cultures, even in the sexually wide-open West.

Even Lateef Adegbite, that icon of Yoruba Muslim wisdom, expressed skepticism for economic reasons about gender separation in the transport sector. His advice was to assign separate sections within the same facilities.<sup>42</sup> Two additional reasons helped turn it into a controversial issue, namely, the Islamizing aspect of it along with the brutality of the *'yan agaji* in implementing it.<sup>43</sup> On the motorcycle-taxis women passengers cling to unknown male drivers, a basic taboo. In addition, the prevailing female fashions rendered motorcycle travel offensive in the sharia atmosphere. Here is one sharia provision that should indeed have been kept in abeyance till there were adequate transport facilities, but it was one way for the government to demonstrate it meant business with sharia.

*Given the prevailing cultural and religious ethos of the region, and assuming all other conditions for it having been met, there is no good reason that in some distant future these provisions could not be considered acceptable. If women passengers would, for example, wear slacks, so much more appropriate for riding motorcycle, the current offences of immodesty would partially be overcome. Remember, the major community has the right to having its sensi-*



*tivities honoured. In the meantime, sharia states should relax these provisions until they have provided adequate alternatives. The time is not yet.*

### ▲ DRESS CODES, FASHIONS AND MODESTY —————

In Nigeria female fashions have over the last few decades exploded as a religious and cultural flash point. Major points of controversy include uniforms for schools, nurses, NYSC, sports and civil service dress. You have only to check out entries like “dress code” and “fashion” in the indices of previous volumes to become aware of the issues and their intensity. Generally it has been a matter of Muslim revulsion to Western type uniform designs that are seen as undignified, disrespectful, unbecoming, degrading, vulgar and upsetting to the male psyche. When Muslims either demand or impose replacement of these uniforms, Christians get up in arms and accuse Muslims of imposing Islam on them. Such steps are seen not in terms of their intrinsic worth but in terms of the Christian-Muslim struggle. Muslims regard those uniforms as the colonial imposition of crude and sex-arousing secular standards that need to be replaced by more modest designs.<sup>44</sup> Hence the moves in some sharia states to impose more modest Muslim-friendly uniforms on all students, whether Christian or Muslim.

I can fully sympathize with the Muslim rejection of the crude, ill-fitting Western female uniforms in Nigeria that often push the limits of modesty, if not decency, and that generally rob women of any dignity. If one follows both the advance of secularism in the West and the changes in female fashion, there is good reason for seeing a definite link. Secularism increases; modesty decreases. Secularism causes a breakdown of standards of modesty and decency. Living as I do in Vancouver, one of the citadels of secularism, I see it around me every day. And then people are surprised

at the increase of sexual predators, pornography and other sexual crudities. They seem blind to connections that seem so obvious to Muslims—and to me. Why, indeed, should Muslims tolerate the imposition of such crude standards?<sup>45</sup>

At the same time, Christians have good reason to suspect that this Muslim demand for more modest fashion is not merely driven by modesty but also by the Muslim plan to Islamize the country.<sup>46</sup> For this reason, Christians tend to ignore the modesty issue and turn the controversy into a sharia issue. It is seen as an attempt to impose sharia on Christians, as just one more way to further the plan. And so Christians defend crude secular standards even when they fly flat in the face of Biblical teaching of modesty.

Please recall from Volume 7 the episode of Christian nurses in Bauchi sacked about their uniforms. In their defence, the Fellowship of Christian Nurses (FCN) wrote: “To forcefully implement the [Muslim] trousers uniform on all female nurses, regardless of their faith, appears to be a deliberate attempt to infringe on their fundamental human rights and religious freedom. The action of the Medical Centre is also an attempt to force the female Christian nurses to act contrary to the teaching of the Holy Bible as contained in Deuteronomy 22:5.”<sup>47</sup> The FCN here engages in a static reading of the Bible that ignores cultural issues and that is a fundamentalist Christian parallel to the static reading of sharia. As long as both sides persist in such reading of their texts, a compromise will be hard to come by. And as long as either or both sides continue to read all issues *only* through the lens of angry struggle instead of considering issues on their own merit, in this case modesty, dignity and respect, no progress will be made. It is complicated: It *could* be part of the Muslim push; it *is* at the same time a genuine issue of dignity and respect.

If Christians do not want Muslim dress imposed on them, why should Muslims continue to accept the long-standing colonial imposition of Western secular fashions that do not even meet Biblical standards? Why do the Christian nurses not recognize that their style has long been imposed on Muslims and that it robs women of their dignity? Of course, replacing one imposition with another does not help any. I do not know whether the FCN first made alternative proposals that would meet the criteria of dignity and respect for both religions. That, at any rate, should have been the first step and might have avoided the conflict and the Christian response would have been constructive.

The solution once again lies in both sides shedding their anger, intentionally build relationships of trust and come to an agreement on uniforms—and fashion in general— that meet both Christian and Muslim standards of decency and modesty. Both should look at the issue itself and take it out of the context of imposition and struggle. Both are guilty of imposition. Both sides should reject the extremes they have developed from *burqah* to miniskirt. If some Muslim women wish to wear the *burqah*, they should have that freedom, but it should not be mandatory on anyone. On the other hand, the Christian church *should* ban all forms of immodesty found in its midst. They have some work to do, in Nigeria as well as the West.

Currently traditional members of the Northern community tend to object to women wearing slacks or trousers. They should realize that Muslim women in some Asian cultures do wear trousers, though they are clearly different from those worn by men. Even in the Bauchi conflict, the Muslim hospital administrator prescribed a Muslim uniform including trousers. Traditionalists cannot have everything their way. These *are* changing times that call for some compromise and new decisions. Even *their* fashion

probably started in the midst of controversy and scandal but was eventually domesticated and sanctified by religion.

But the problem is by no means restricted to female *dress*. The literature on the repression of sex and of gender relations among various Muslim cultures is full of allegations –and evidence?— that the strict gender separation causes unhealthy psychological sexual complexes, desires and dreams among both genders, not the least among men. Some Muslim men cope with this by totally imprisoning their women in their dress [*burqah*] and homes [*purdah*].<sup>48</sup>

Do men never dress provocatively? Why are they not instructed in modesty? Why do I write exclusively about female dress code?<sup>49</sup> Possibly because I am a man and am not sufficiently aware of the sexual impact of men's fashions. Especially in the Nigerian context, I am not aware of provocative male dress at the same level as that of women. I believe that the problem with Muslim men is not *only* female dress but also male psychological fragility. And, of course, most of the writing is done by men! When Nigerian women do write, they do not usually, if ever, complain about male fashion as provocative. Is that a reflection of fewer problems there or are Nigerian women simply less psychologically fragile than their men?

Christians and human rights advocates in general object to turning fashion into a legal matter. That is what was happening in a number of sharia states.<sup>50</sup> An argument arose between Kano State Government and CAN about the former's alleged decision to impose Muslim dress on all students in all schools in the state, government and private both.<sup>51</sup> The Government argued:

*Education is all about discipline and morality, and the purpose of sending our children and wards to schools will surely be defeated if we cannot instill into their young minds the discipline of decent dressing and general good conduct.*

*The Kano State Government is committed to instilling a morally right dress code among its students and therefore expects Northern CAN and indeed all well-meaning organizations to join hands to stamp out immorality and indiscipline in our schools and society. Acting on rumour and cheap religious sentiments will not help us in our struggle for a united Nigeria.*

There were moves towards more regulated dress everywhere. The governing body of BUK published a dress code incumbent on all students, one that called for decent, smart and respectable fashion. The code was said to be “initiated to imbibe sound moral values in the students.”<sup>52</sup> It was also a big issue at ABU. Sule Machika wrote a powerful paper at ABU that covered all the issues—pardon the pun!—and is a *must* read. In fact, I encourage you to delve deeply into the entire resource-rich *Companion CD* folder on the subject. It was absolutely necessary, according to Machika, for ABU to develop a dress code.<sup>53</sup>

*And why not, if it is found that blatant sexual fashion in Nigeria leads to a general lowering of modesty standards and encourages risky sexual behaviour? If the government ends up picking up the broken pieces of sick bodies, then it also has the right to insist on preventive intervention.<sup>54</sup> Then governments and other public institutions, especially religious ones, may need to impose some positive standards. Nigeria should not adopt the Western pretence that men and women **can freely intermingle, dressed provocatively**, without problematic sexual and other relational consequences.<sup>55</sup> So, human rights, yes, but only in tandem with its correlative of human responsibility for each other. We have the God-given right to dress creatively, to express ourselves, yes, but you also have the duty to do so within the bounds of modesty and responsibility to our*

*neighbours, to build them up, not pull them down—even less, to seduce them. This is the classic stance and continuing norm of both Christianity and Islam. We need to work together at this front and push back the borders of a brutalizing and degrading secularism.*

Of course, the issue of Muslim female garb has been internationalized and become the focus of much controversy even in the West. It has become a highly emotional and even political symbol in some countries. When Turkey decided to go secular earlier in the 20th century, it prohibited the *hijab*. Some Muslim women in the West have used the *hijab* or even the *burqah* as a fulcrum for advancing Muslim rights, attempts that have sometimes backfired on them. You will find no general global Muslim consensus on the subject. Rachid emphasizes the Muslim insistence on modesty and piety, but how women choose to abide by these criteria is up to them. The majority do not wear the veil, while the *burqah* is not even mentioned in the Qur'an. When I observe Muslim women in Vancouver who come from many different cultures, I see a general attitude of modesty, but beyond that there is a wide range of female dress, including slacks.

I make the above point to emphasize to Nigerian Muslims and Christians that Muslim female dress is not uniformly regimented around the globe; it varies a great deal. It is interesting and telling that many liberated, educated Muslim women, including Western converts, write of the sense of liberation they experience when wearing the *hijab*, for they now feel protected from the foraging gaze of sex-crazed men.<sup>56</sup> *This global picture means that local Muslims have neither religious right nor religious reason to impose their own narrow definition of proper female dress even on Muslim women, since there is obviously wide leeway, let alone force it on Christian females. That awareness should help Christians oppose such impositions—while simultaneously recognizing that they also*

practice imposition by forcing Western style uniforms on Muslims. By now the terminology is getting stale, but again it is a matter of goose and gander.

In this section, I have looked extensively at an area of confrontation between the two religions. I have raised some questions and made some general proposals. There is a wide range of confluence between the religions in sexual and gender issues as well as related ones like family, abortion and birth control. In Appendix 6 and 35 I have pointed out various joint programmes they already are operating and would only encourage both sides to expand their cooperation on gender issues.<sup>57</sup>

With so many points of disagreement between them and so much suspicion and anger, Christians and Muslims should go out of their way to intentionally capitalize on the points of confluence and work together. Hopefully, this will lead to building relationships of trust that can then spill over into wider areas of national and religious concern. This would also include learning how to cooperate with one another on points of agreement in spite of disagreements elsewhere, to tolerate the core antithetical issues between them and still cooperate where there is overlap. For many leaders as well as persons sitting in the pew or kneeling on the mat this would be a new and challenging experience but one which they really do need to go through, if we are ever to get anywhere. I especially challenge women to move in this direction.

Finally, I draw your attention to Appendix 103, which contains a series of Biblical meditations on women. You will find some challenging and uplifting thoughts there that may help you as you try to work on the new parameters that I am recommending in this book and chapter to you, our mothers. Be the women President Umar Yar'Addua said you are!<sup>58</sup>

