

The Muslim Side of Things
Speech Given at First Baptist Church, Vancouver
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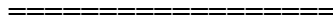
Informal Introduction

Muslims. Last month, Colin spoke about them. Today, again, Muslims, but a very different setting. Last month, in Colin's presentation, they were under *food* pressure; today, they are suffering from *political* pressure.

Thanks for inviting me to share with you some aspects of the Christian-Muslim situation in Nigeria, a situation that Fran and I have lived in for 30 years. And after our return since 1996, I have spent by far most of my time doing research, reflection and writing on the subject. The result you can check out here on this table—8 vols with a total of 2700 pages. And a Companion CD-Rom that contains all the volumes plus thousands of additional articles, mostly on related and supportive materials.

A bit of orientation would be helpful, I believe. Here is the map of the country and its 36 states. About the size of BC with 140+ million population, of which around 65 million are Christian and 65 million, Muslim. Two large equal blocks facing each other.

Show roughly the regions and where the religions are. On December 31, 1899, there was no Nigeria and no Northern Nigeria. All this area was populated by 400 tribes, each with their own language and culture. Some very tiny tribes of a couple of villages; some very large ones as well. Then on January 1 1900, the map changed and the birth of Northern Nigeria (NN) was announced to the world by the British. All of these tribes here put in the box called NN. No one was consulted. It just happened. Ah, the while man and his power at the time!



We all know that if you want to understand people quarreling with each other, you must understand both sides, not just one side. A *judge* must know the entire picture before he can make his judgement. A *pastor* must know both sides in a marriage quarrel to be able to counsel them wisely. Both judge and pastor need to be objective and not take sides prematurely. The same is true for quarrels between religious groups, but for some reason we are all too prone to forget that basic truth and take the side of our own religion without understanding the point of the other side. The result is that the problems keep festering and create more tension than is necessary between religions.

This morning I am going to explain the Muslim side of the Christian-Muslim struggle in Nigeria to help you understand the full picture. This does not mean I favour the Muslim side at the expense of my fellow Christians there. Christians *are* being persecuted and oppressed in certain parts of the country by Muslims. It's an ugly picture there. And deep down, I side with them and pray for them. However, they also contribute to the problem, due to historical reasons, to traditional reasons, to reasons of human nature and to problems created by us missionaries. Someday I would like the opportunity to explain all these reasons to you. But today, it's the Muslim side you will hear.

Islam has been in northern Nigeria ever since the 11th century. It came mostly via traders and their caravans from other West African locations and from across the Sahara Desert, i.e. North Africa. At the beginning of the 19th century, Usman Danfodio took over the Sokoto Emirate and brought about a renewal or cleansing of the Muslim culture and religion by means of military conquest of much of NN. A century later, around 1900, when the British established the Protectorate of NN, there was a well-established and well-developed Muslim civilization. Usman Danfodio, the man of the hour in 1800, is now a major cultural icon, the architect of the culture the British found in place. He was a philosopher, theologian, poet, author, politician and warrior who placed his stamp on the culture. His emphasis was, among other things, on *justice and on sharia (muslim law)*. It was a comprehensive religious legal system that covered all of life and was based on the Qur'an and some other Muslim traditions.

In competition with their European counterparts, the British entered West Africa during the last half of the 19th century for economic purposes. First as traders without much government involvement. Eventually it became clear that they would lose out to the French if the British government did not get involved. And so, January 1, 1900, on behalf of the British government and after some fierce military battles, Lord Lugard announced the establishment of the Protectorate of NN.

They knew they would not be able to control or govern the country by themselves but would need the support of local rulers. So they established a system known as *indirect rule*, whereby they ruled via or through the existing system of emirs and chiefs. They did not establish a completely new way of governing the people, but used existing channels and structures. In order to gain their support, the British appointed the emirs and chiefs and ensured payment of their salaries. They now became kind of civil servants beholden to the colonial government, no longer to the people. It was a bargain. For being appointed and for having their salaries and other amenities guaranteed, these emirs over time lost their connection with their subjects and were no longer responsible to the indigenous structures but to the British. They now had vested interest in the colonial regime and made its continuation possible. They would constantly lecture their subjects to be peaceful and obey authorities and thus often sided with the occupiers. In due time, during the 1950s when it became necessary to prepare for independence once again, these emirs were involved in the negotiations and worked hard at retaining their privileged status in the national constitution. Emirs traditionally were the protectors of the people and of Islam, including sharia, but now they became oppressive and separated from their own people. Thus, indirect rule was one of the safety measures the British installed to create political and economic stability. Eventually, the people developed disrespect and hatred for those who

originally were meant to champion their interests. But it served British purposes. This bifurcation between elite and commoners made it a weak society. Indirect rule achieved its purposes.

A second measure was a promise known as *lugard's promise*. The British knew that the Muslims were suspicious of these secular white rulers and that they had contempt for them because of their non-Muslim status. They feared that the British would interfere in their religion. To overcome this fear, Lugard made his famous promise in the presence of a large crowd. We, he promised, *will not interfere with your religion*. It is reported that the crowd uttered a tremendous sigh of relief at hearing this promise.

But there was a *problem of interpretation*. This was a promise about religion to a Muslim people. When they heard the word “religion” come from Lugard’s mouth, the audience heard something different from what Lugard meant. To them, the promise meant that the British would not interfere in their entire Muslim culture, including sharia law. But Lugard was a Western secular man with a narrow definition of religion. To him religion is what you do in church or mosque, at home and in your private life. It was that narrow slice of life, that part that plays no role in the marketplace or in politics, that he promised would not be affected. No one caught on to that very important difference.

A third measure the British took was to impose Muslim emirs on the people to the south, living in Nigeria’s Middle Belt. They were living in tribal groupings and practiced animistic culture and religion called ATR. These people were non-literate and spoke a myriad of languages. They had little or no skills at public administration beyond their own individual tribe. The British were more comfortable with the Muslim literate culture. So, they grouped these tribes into various new political entities known as emirates or sultanates or, sometimes, simply into local government areas and appointed Muslim emirs over them.

Now you must realize that, though this is all NN, the NN arrangement was brand new and imposed on them without their having any input. These Muslim emirs imposed on these smaller tribes were regarded as foreigners with a very different culture and who did not have the welfare of these tribes at heart. During the 19th century, before the British came, these Muslims had tried to subdue these tribes but had little success. Now they were given to them on a platter by the British. These non-native rulers did all they could to Islamize their subjects and favoured their Muslim subjects in appointments and licenses. They were oppressive and despised their non-Muslim subjects. While these Traditionalist still adhered to their ancient religions, this arrangement worked for some decades. But once their subjects became Christians and then pursued education, things changed. They no longer accepted this arrangement and eventually, during the post-colonial period, this led to violent riots and a lot of bloodshed that Nigeria is known for today.

in spite of the promise, The British *did* interfere in the culture—in education they started a secular system, the very thing Muslims abhorred and feared. They also introduced a controlled version of Western secular capitalist economics. But the worst was their *legal interference*. In law, they came with their own British notions and even introduced a notion they officially called “*repugnancy*.” Any Muslim law they did not like was declared repugnant and then voided to be replaced by a so-called more civilized British law. Legal

education was totally westernized and Nigerian lawyers were trained to dress, to think and to practice like Western lawyers. Legal education completely ignored the sharia as if it were worthless and did not exist. Among the educated Muslims, secularism set in as it has done among Christians in Canada and other Western nations. Though they remained Muslims and practiced the five Muslim pillars, in their social, political, economic and legal thinking they were completely secularized by stealth, step by step, unnoticed for a long time—much like us Western Christians.

At first, Muslims did not realize what was happening. However, after independence, when they had to operate their British-inspired system by themselves, cracks began to appear. Christians with graduate degrees now were beginning to challenge Muslim hegemony. A whole series of Constituent Assemblies was conducted to make the Constitution and legal system more amenable to Nigerian culture. Abroad, Khomeini woke up the Muslim world in general as to the secular virus or poison pill that Muslims all over the world had swallowed.

All these developments created a stirring in the hearts and minds of the Nigerian Muslim community. They heard all about it and woke up from their secular slumber. Their scholars began to write and to expose the secular lies with which the British had led them along and they became angry at the deceit. The increasing challenge from the emerging Christian community further contributed to their anger and frustration, especially when Christians under British appointed emirs began to revolt and demanded their removal. It is deeply ingrained in the Muslim soul that once you have control over an area or a people, you never release them. To be told they were oppressive and must go simply astounded them. Did they not bring them the blessings of Islam?

The Muslims concluded that they had been had and they were not humoured. *they began to demand a return to the more original pre-colonial sharia regime.* They argued that a legal system must be based on the culture it seeks to regulate. A foreign legal system cannot work anywhere. They are supported in this argument by some of the highest legal scholars in the West. a legal system must be based on the local culture. All scholars, whether Christian, Muslim or secular, support this thesis without exception that I know of. So, *muslims have a real point in demanding a return to the old sharia regime and to do away with the foreign colonial legal system.*

Nigerian *Christians* agree with this principle as well. They agree that the legal system has to evolve out of the local culture it seeks to regulate. However, they seek to apply it in a very strange and distorted way that I don't have time for today.

Around the turn of the millennium, the governor of Zamfara State in Nigeria declared the sharia as the basis of their legal system. Within a good year, 11 other northern Muslim states followed suit.

Christians were up in arms. How can sharia be imposed on Christians? How can religious law be imposed on people not adhering to the religion? They demanded that Christians in the affected states not be subject to sharia but continue with their secular British system. That, after all, is a neutral, objective, rational system that is fair to all. Furthermore, they

suspected that this sharia move was really a huge step in the Islamization of all of Nigeria. So, they opposed the sharia move strongly. Many conferences were held by both sides, some with both Christians and Muslims meeting and discussing together. Communiques were published by both sides. Newspapers and magazines were full of article on the subject. Many books were written. It became a crisis that threatened the very unity of the country. The emotions of hatred, fear and suspicion underlay it all.

Muslims were surprised at the Christian reaction. Is British law not secular? How then can Christians support secular law? Muslims read the Bible and know that the Bible does not support the kind of secularism Nigerian Christians are demanding. Christianity, Muslims argued, is more like Islam than secularism. They shook their heads at these wayward Christians and often berated them as untrue to their own religion.

Besides, Muslims argued further, *western law is not as secular as nigerian christians claimed*. Again legal scholars have shown that Western law is based on or inspired by Christianity, more so than on secularism, though the last few decades secularism is becoming more prominent. Some of the best Western legal scholars agree on this one as well. So, that would make Western law religious law, just like sharia is religious law. Why do Christians want to impose Christian law on Muslims?

So we have here a situation where *both religions are seeking to impose a foreign religious law on the other*. Muslims, the sharia on Christians; Christians, Christo-secular law on Muslims. Both are doing the same thing—imposing one religion and one legal system on another. But neither side will admit they are imposing on each other.

The basic issue is one of *definition of religion*. Islam is wholistic and wants religion applied all across culture. Christianity, from my perspective at least, wants the same and is equally wholistic. However, Nigerian Christians have inherited a version of Christianity from missionaries, from my colleagues, that is semi secular, not wholistic. It is a handicap that they have begun to recognize and are struggling to outgrow. However, habits of thought are hard to overcome and take time. In the meantime, the struggle goes on.

I know, I sound pro-Muslim in this speech and perhaps anti-Christian. That is not my purpose, but given the short time I have, there is no time for a more balanced approach that presents both sides. I am prepared to present the Christian side at another breakfast.

My final word is a plea for prayer for Nigeria as a whole, for its 65 million Muslims; for its 65 million Christians, for its 3 million or so Baptists. Yes, 3 million, many times more than we have here in Canada. Southern Baptists, mostly. My guess is more Baptists than any country in the world, except the US. Brothers and sisters, PRAY that it not become a Muslim country. This can only be avoided if Christians not repay violence with more violence or fight with carnal weapons of hatred and anger. Instead, pray that they put on the full armour of the Spirit.