

THE CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM STANDOFF

IN NIGERIA

THE CHRISTIAN VIEWPOINT

The last few years the media, especially the Christian media, have published story after story about frictions between Christians and Muslims. These are usually reports about Muslim attacks on Christians. Seldom is it the other way around. Christian Courier is not left behind in this trend. It has published many stories especially about Nigeria, Sudan and Indonesia for good reasons. The Sudan is a country of international concern, because it seems to stand out as a Muslim country persecuting its Christian citizens. Indonesia shares the Dutch connection with many readers of Christian Courier. Nigeria is of great interest to Christian Reformed readers because of their church's heavy long-time mission commitment to that country. I myself have served 30 years there as a Christian Reformed missionary.

Though this and later articles will emphasize the Nigerian situation, Nigeria is not an isolated case. It can be thought of as a showcase of Christian-Muslim relations in a context where the two religions have an equal number of adherents. It is the only country where there are two huge blocks of Christians and Muslims almost equal in size, some 50 million each. In many other countries that contain both religions, it is a majority-minority situation. In some both are minority religions. It is my hope that this and occasional succeeding articles will help readers to better understand the volatile relations that exist between Christians and Muslims and to pray more intelligently for adherents of both religions as well as for Christian missionaries.

BACKGROUND

Relations between Muslims and others in Nigeria go back many centuries. Originally, all of what is now Nigeria was inhabited by adherents of African Traditional Religions (ATR). (Though each ethnic group has its own variety of ATR and there exist

wide differences, nevertheless, underneath all ATRs lies a common worldview that easily obscures the significant differences to a casual observer.) Muslim traders and preachers began to penetrate what is now northern Nigeria with the eventual result that Islam became the dominant religious and cultural force in the far north. Three major ethnic groups especially submitted to this religion: Hausa, Fulani and Kanuri to such an extent that Islam is now considered their traditional religion. Islam has become so deeply entrenched among these ethnic groups that Muslims have forgotten that their ancestors at one time were Traditionalists. They cannot imagine why any of their ethnic compatriots would choose to be anything but Muslim.

Further south, there is Nigeria's Middle Belt, the focus of Christian Reformed mission work. It is the traditional home to a large number of ethnic groups, each with their own language, culture and variety of ATR. These people over time became the fodder of slave raiding and trading on the part of their northern Muslim neighbours. Muslim rulers, known as "emirs," would regularly send their troops into those areas and totally devastate them in their quest for "pagan" slaves. In fact, the Sokoto Caliphate in present north-west Nigeria was the largest slave society in the world at the beginning of the 1900s.

The devastation caused by these Muslim raiders was almost total. One eye witness of this Muslim terrorism was Karl Kumm, the founder of the Sudan United Mission, a missionary umbrella organization with which the Christian Reformed mission is closely identified even today. The following is a mixed quotation combining my own comments with those of Kumm that graphically expresses Kumm's nightmare:

He wrote of emirs sending slave raiders into their territories in order to collect the annual tribute due to him and in the process destroying, killing, enslaving, utterly devastating large areas. "I have known close on five thousand square miles of territory absolutely depopulated by the ruling empire." He personally had seen "huge walled towns deserted, thousands of acres of farm land relapsing into jungle and an entire population absorbed. And this sort of thing is not done once or twice in a century, but it is... being done somewhere or other every day. (Boer, 1979, p. 127; 1984, pp. 36-38. For bibliographical information, turn to the Boeriana section on this website)

During the 19th century, Western nations turned their interest towards Africa. Missionaries and traders from various countries entered the area, sometimes cooperating, at other times opposing each other. Eventually, the British gained control over the area and in 1914 created what is now the nation of Nigeria. Though missionaries had already gained access to the south during the 19th century, it was during the colonial period of 1900-1960 that they obtained a strong foothold in the Middle Belt so that by independence in 1960, there was a significant Christian church in that area. The process of Christianization accelerated significantly after independence was gained, a sure proof that Nigerian Christianity can hardly be dismissed as a mere colonial affair.

The British put a stop to raiding and slavery and established a sort of uneasy Pax Britannica. However, throughout their rule they consciously favoured Muslims over against Traditionalists and Christians. They had much respect for Muslim culture. It was literate, well organized politically, sophisticated. They appointed Muslims to civil service positions over ATRs and Christians. They placed Muslim emirs over traditional chiefs and ethnic groups that previously had been small but independent nations. What the Muslims could not achieve in the Middle Belt by means of their own warfare and raids, the British helped them accomplish “peacefully.” By the time the British handed over the reins to Nigerians in 1960, Muslims were in solid control of the major power positions in the country and many non-Muslim people were now firmly under Muslim control. These included both Christians and adherents of ATR. Both never have forgotten how Muslim authorities of other ethnic groups were imposed on them. It is an internal form of colonialism that has been a major cause of unrest, upheavals, violence and bloodshed during the 1980s and 90s.

During the initial post-colonial period, Muslim rulers felt free, as Muslims generally do, to utilize all the government machinery, power and finance in their Muslim mission. The most powerful of them, the Sultan or Sardauna of Sokoto, Sir Ahmadu Bello, is famous for pulling out all the government stops in his bid to “dip the Qur’an into the Atlantic”—a pithy statement expressing the alleged Muslim goal of Islamizing all of Nigeria, from the northern desert to the Atlantic coast. By means of giving government largesse, he bought over chiefs and entire ethnic groups, politicians and businessmen. It was a veritable crusade or, as Muslims call it, *jihad*. The crusade led to the conversion to

Islam of many thousands of adherents of ATR and even of many Christians. It became a major contributing factor to Christian resentment and mistrust of the Muslim community.

1966 was the year of the first two of many coups in Nigeria. Ahmadu Bello, the nation's leading Muslim, was killed. General Yakubu Gowon, a Christian, became head of the military government. At first glance, it looked like Christians had beaten Islam and were now in power. However, after the civil war against Biafra, the Christian Gowon presided over the confiscation of Christian hospitals and schools. The Christian reaction, in keeping with their traditional stance in the country till now, was one of quiet resignation and much grumbling. The question arose in the Christian mind as to who really ruled. Was Gowon merely a Christian pawn in Muslim hands? The event snapped something in the Christian psyche that would never be reversed. Next time they were faced with a Muslim challenge, they would not take it lying down again.

That next challenge was the Muslim demand to have the shari'a, the Muslim law, enshrined in the national constitution. During the 1970s a constitutional assembly was held that was to produce a new constitution for the country. The pivotal issue turned out to be whether or not the shari'a could have a place in it. The antithesis between the two religions as it has developed in Nigeria became starkly obvious to all and brought the country close to another civil war. (I intend in a future article to give some flesh to the dangerous political brinkmanship the controversy produced, but in the meantime any interested reader may consult my 1979 and 1984 publications for details) The Christian response to this demand was an absolute negative with no compromise ever offered. While the Christian community earlier in the same decade had grumblingly and passively accepted the confiscation of its institutions, this time around its response was aggressive. By now they were convinced that Muslims did indeed plan to turn Nigeria into a Muslim country and they were determined not to let it happen, come what may. The battle line was drawn. It has remained so ever since, even into the new century.

The Christian Perspective

The Christian perspective is based on three pillars. The first is their memory that has its roots in pre-colonial times. Like those of Nigerian Muslims, the ancestors of Nigerian Christians were adherents to African Traditional Religions, long after Islam had

already made deep inroads, especially in what is now northern Nigeria. The Christian successors to these Traditionalist victims have not forgotten this history and they see a line of continuation through colonialism into contemporary Nigeria. They have seen how during colonialism, Muslims knew how to manipulate the British and largely controlled access to power and wealth. They remember how the Sardauna utilized all the power and wealth of government in his bid to islamize the Middle Belt. They have had to strongly battle against enshrining the shari'a in the constitution into the new century. They continue to experience what they see as oppressive behaviour of Muslim emirs and state governments. In fact, they are convinced that the entire government machinery in Nigeria at all levels is skewed against Christians and controlled by Muslims.

On the very day towards the end of 1999 that the imposition of the shari'a in Zamfara state was defended as applicable only to the Muslim faithful, I read reports about the Kano State Government's threat to many churches to either relocate or be destroyed. On that same day, I read about the Emir of Ilorin's call to move all churches out of his city. Such developments do nothing to instill confidence in this Zamfara promise. Furthermore, published reports of the contrary trend are firmly etched in the Christian memory. The astounding confessions of one Alhaji Aliyu Ibn. Mamman Dan-Bauchi, a strong *jihad* warrior prior to his conversion to Christ, are too graphic to be forgotten. These and a myriad of similar events over the years make the Zamfara promise sound rather hollow. Already it is reported that non-Muslim women in Zamfara have difficulty accessing public transport. Anti-alcohol legislation can hardly fail to affect non-Muslims.

The second pillar of the Christian perspective is the Muslim doctrine of the place of *dhimmi*. *Dhimmi* are non-Muslims in a Muslim society. This is a matter of established Muslim orthodoxy of public record accessible to all. *Dhimmi*s are at best second-class citizens whose religion is merely tolerated and only in a truncated form dictated by Islam. While Islam has a better record of tolerance for other religions in the past than do Christians, that record has long been surpassed by much of the contemporary world, especially by world Christianity. What was comparatively broadminded in earlier centuries, is today regarded as unacceptable intolerance. Islam has never withdrawn its position on the status of *dhimmi*. The difficult situation of Christians living among

Muslim majorities is well known. All this, too, makes the Zamfara promise sound rather empty. In view of all this history and the classic stand on *dhimmi*, Nigerian Christians have every reason to fear the present trend and to oppose it.

The third pillar of the Christian perspective is the dualism they have inherited from missionaries versus the unity of religion and politics in Islam. The basic tendency in Islam is to identify politics and government as a major arena for the practice of Islam. While Christians -- in my opinion, incorrectly-- tend to pour most of their energies into churches, for Muslims politics and government are among the main foci. Muslims feel comfortable in that sector. They do not hesitate to use whatever government resources available to them for the benefit of Islam. Once again, the Sardauna's mission is the most overt and clear example of this tradition.

This Muslim unity of religion and politics is one of the main reasons Christians are clamouring for a secular government and a secular constitution, for the separation of church and mosque from government. They do not want their tax and oil monies spent on mosques all over the place or on Muslim courts or pilgrimages to Mecca. They are of the opinion that Muslims will commandeer the major share of these funds and that the latter will not equally honour the rights of others to those funds. They have seen too much evidence of the Muslim intention to turn Nigeria into a Muslim country. They regard the Federal Government as having been hijacked by Muslims. They claim government favours Muslim causes at the expense of Christians at various fronts. In fact, they have a strong sense of persecution by both Islam and its tool, the Federal Government as well as many state governments.

It is clear that this Christian perspective is not one that encourages wholehearted co-operation with Muslims in building up a nation to which the two religions would contribute as equal partners, each from its own standpoint. Christians want a situation of equality, but they see anything but that in the Muslim stance. In fact, they are sure that Muslims intend to turn Nigeria into a Muslim country, including the *dhimmi* provision for non-Muslims. They feel that only a secular government and a secular constitution that eliminates all traces of religion from the sphere of government will make for a viable Nigeria. Anything compromising secularism they reject—at least, sometimes.

The basic motivation of this Nigerian Christian stance was a combination of fear for Muslims, mistrust, anger and even hatred. I believe that the fear has largely dissipated. Christians have overcome the earlier passivism, inherited from both their forefathers and from pietistic missions, that prevented them from challenging government takeover of schools and hospitals during the 70s. From the late 70s on, it has not taken much for Christians to actively challenge any perceived Muslim attempt at hegemony.

The same cannot be said about mistrust, anger and hatred. A grand dose of this combination, based on a reading of history and long-term patterns of Muslim behaviour, still firmly undergirds the Christian perspective. I believe there are solid reasons for this mistrust and I share it. Anger also has its reasons in this context. When one reads Muslim publications like *The Pen*, a weekly, and its Hausa-language counterpart, *Alkalami*, he can only shudder with apprehension. Even though the government-sponsored newspaper *Gaskiya Ta Fi Kwabo* superficially seems much more objective when there is no crisis at hand, its true colours shine through clearly during any Christian-Muslim crises.

However, anger and hatred, though humanly understandable, can never serve any constructive Christian purpose. Combined with mistrust, we have here a fatal combination that tends to disable Christian leaders in the Christian Association of Nigeria from serious Christian reflection or careful strategizing. Nothing Muslims do or say is understood in its own terms. And much of what Christians do or say cannot be understood on its own terms either. The situation is much like the former cold war between East and West, when both major parties looked at every issue in terms of their cold war relationships. I have observed some very wise Christian leaders, in succumbing to this anger and hatred, react in stunningly unreasonable fashion to some Muslim initiatives that seemed altogether reasonable and fair. The term “fair” simply has little place in the Christian vocabulary when it comes to Muslim issues.

Another component of the Christian attitude is the dualistic worldview they have inherited from western missionaries, including Reformed missionaries. This dualistic version of the Gospel, which I hope to further delineate in a later article, separates the spiritual from the material, religion from life and has led to a worldview that accepts a secular perspective on life.

Readers of my books may be dismayed that here comes this Boer with his complaint of dualism once again. I will have you know that the curse of this dualism is recognized increasingly by leading English-speaking Evangelicals who have become aware of it not only, but who have also begun to reject it as a serious shortcoming in the missionary message. I intend to deal with that also in some future article.

It is as un-African as it is un-Biblical, but it is the only one the Nigerian church has inherited. Nigerian Christians latched on to this dualistic approach not as a conscious strategy so much as an instinctive decision based on their missionary heritage. It constitutes the basic foundation of the perspective they offer the nation—and is in direct conflict with a central aspect of the Muslim worldview, namely a wholistic view of religion that leaves no room for secularism. Both parties have drawn the line of battle at this front with Christians offering a secular approach that is countered by the Muslim insistence on a wholistic solution to the problem of the relationship of religion and government.

In a following article I plan to present the Muslim perspective with the full expectation that Reformed readers will find it intriguing because of its parallel with Reformed thinking. I thus leave you with the debt of several promises to be fulfilled.