

CHRISTIAN–MOSLEM RELATIONS IN THE ARAB AND MIDDLE–EASTERN COUNTRIES: A LESSON FOR NIGERIAN CHRISTIANS ON MEANINGFUL INTERFAITH RELATIONS

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Abstract

This paper examines in graphic historical survey how Christians have fared in the Middle East and in some Muslim/Arab countries. The study is to determine why some Christian groups in these areas have ceased to exist while others have, within living memory and in contemporary times ceased to be a living force in the countries where they were once a dominant force to be reckoned with, at least from the 4th century when the Christian Roman Empire was the dominant power in the region under Emperor Constantine. The survey shows that Christians are persecuted and are now in the minority. The paper argues that the way to restore peaceful co-existence among the religions in any multi-religious state is to guarantee every religious group equality before the law of the land not through interreligious dialogue, but through the constitutional provision of a secular state. This fact is extremely important for Christians in Nigeria where Moslems through the instrumentality of a fundamentalist Islamic extremist group called Boko Haram has vowed openly, without any equivocation that her mission is to Islamize Nigeria. Christians in Nigeria must not be deceived into thinking that their threat is an empty joke – It is not! Their goal is to ensure that the listing of Nigeria in the world map as an Islamic Country (through her membership in Organization of Islamic Conference and the D8 countries – i.e an Organization of Islamic countries made up of (Egypt, Malaysia, Indonesia, Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, Bangladesh and now Nigeria) are not only on paper but in practice, not membership in word but in deed. It is also instructive to note, that the only

way Islam could be checked/controlled in Russia, was through the Constitutional provision that guarantees freedom of conscience, that is, the right to profess or not to profess any religion and the prohibition of incitement of hostility or hatred on religious grounds.

INTRODUCTION

Today, much more than ever before, Nigeria is undergoing a severe test of determining whether it is a Secular State where people enjoy freedom of worship or an Islamic State where people are compelled to become Moslems or be killed in cold blood. In this paper we shall examine how Christians are surviving in the Middle East and in Moslem/Arab countries as a persecuted religious group.

During Muhammad's lifetime, all of the Middle East was part of the Eastern Roman Empire, which was called the Byzantine Empire. Also the lands in North Africa bordering the Mediterranean Sea beginning with Egypt and extending through Libya, Tunisia, and Algeria to Morocco were all Christian. These included the original bishoprics of St. Augustine and St. Cyprian and other famous church leaders. Lands under the control of the Western Roman Empire from Spain through Italy to the Byzantine Empire in Greece and what is now Turkey were also all largely Christian. In other words, Islam was born in an area dominated and ruled by Christians.

THE ISLAMIC CONQUESTS

Within the ten years of the death of Prophet Mohammad in 632 AD, aggressive Islamic armies conquered most of the Middle Eastern nations

for economic gains and forced conversions in the name of Holy Jihad. The earliest major city captured was Damascus in 635. Then Iraq fell in 636, Jerusalem in 638, Caesarea in 614 and Armenia in 643. By 709, Muslim armies had conquered all of Christian North Africa as far as Modern Morocco. In Egypt over four million Coptic Christians were slaughtered. By 711 Muslim armies had overrun Spain and crossed the Pyrenees Mountains into what is now Southern France. It was Charles Martel (Charles the Hammer) the grandfather of Charlemagne that defeated them in the battle of Tours in 732 AD.

In lands that Islam conquered, Christians and Jews were treated as second-class citizens and were subjected not only to pay taxes but they also suffered much humiliation and restriction. They were told that they can only be fully integrated and exempted from paying taxes only when they are converted to Islam. Those who remained Christians or Jews were allowed to pay an annual tribute, which became a very important source of support for the Muslim political administrations. In fact, cooperating Christians were often compelled to help administer the lands taken over by the Muslim armies, who spoke only Arabic.

Eventually the Arabic language of the conqueror became the language of all of these lands just as English became a major language in Nigeria, India, Egypt and other British colonies, and the French language is used in many African nations like Algeria, Mali, Syria and in spheres of French influence.

Christians who resisted Islam were slaughtered just like pagans. Literally hundreds of thousand lost their lives, and their wealth was confiscated. Allah in the Qur'an had promised his followers booty as a temporal reward.

Trying to convert Muslims is against the law in most Islamic nations and may be punished by imprisonment or death. We have already seen that converts from Islam to Christianity or any other religion are always in danger of being killed by their families, friends, or countrymen. This fear of reprisal has kept the Muslims populace in line, and assured that Islam retains an overwhelming majority in most countries where they are in power.

It should be noted that one of the principal reasons for the success of the Muslims fighters is that Muslims believed that, if they died fighting for Allah, they would go immediately to Paradise where they would enjoy endless, sensual delights. They were therefore willing and even eager to fight to death, since they have the support of the Koran which states inter alia:

1. "Punish the unbelievers with garments of fire, hooked iron, rods, boiling water; melt their skin and bellies." Koran 22:19
2. "Kill the unbelievers wherever you find them" Koran 2:192
3. "When opportunity arises, kill the infidels wherever you catch them" Koran 9:5
4. "Any Religion other than Islam is not acceptable." Koran 3:85
5. "The Jews and the Christians are perverts; fight them." Koran 9:30
6. "Maim and crucify the infidels if they criticize Islam" Koran 5:33

7. "The unbelievers are stupid; urge the Muslims to fight them." Koran 8:65
8. "Muslims must not take the infidels as friends." Koran 3:28
9. "Terrorize and behead those who believe in scriptures other than Qur'an." Koran 8:12
10. "Muslims must muster all weapons to terrorize the infidels." Koran 8:60

Other armies were not so dedicated and they succumbed to the Muslims' fearless ferocity. Even today Osamabin-Laden in his life time said ...**"We will win because we want to die, and you want to live."**

SURVIVAL OF CHRISTIANS IN MIDDLE EAST

MIDDLE EASTERN CHRISTIAN RESPONSES TO ISLAM

George Sabra a Lebanese Protestant scholar who has been teaching systematic theology at the Near East School of Theology for over twenty years said in an article published in 2006, that two fundamentally different responses have been evident among Middle Eastern Christians from the beginning of Islam to the present day. He examines the lot of Palestinian and Arab Christians as follows:

1. **Conservatism:** Christians of this kind today, feel positively inclined towards Islam, and their basic instinct is 'Don't antagonise Muslims!' They emphasise their Arab identity and history and feel themselves to be part of Islamic civilization. They have always been strong supporters of Arab nationalism, and have often been anti-western (both anti-European and anti-

American). They are strongly anti-Zionist, and sometimes hate Israel more than they hate Islam.

2. **Survivalism:** Their approach can be summed up in the words ‘*Save Middle Eastern Christianity at all costs!*’ This was the response of the Byzantine Church which felt threatened by Islam over a period of many centuries. For this kind of Christians the only way to maintain their identity as Middle Eastern Christians has been to be connected to a longer form of Christianity – as represented, for example, by Byzantium, the Crusaders, Roman Catholicism and the Protestant Churches. Eastern Christians want to distance themselves from everything Islamic, and their central concern is the freedom and integrity of Christian existence in the Middle East. Their primary posture is oriented towards the West and they emphasise their distinctiveness from Arab and Islamic identity. They see the main threat to Christians as not the West, or Israel, but Islam.

3. **Economic Quest:** The Middle Eastern Christians are migrating in thousands to Europe, America and Australia. The main reasons are not religious, but economic. They are certainly conscious of increasing pressure from Islamists in different countries. But the main reason why they migrate is that they can’t find work, can’t pay their bills for housing, education and medical care, and don’t see a great deal of hope for the future.

- 4. Dynamism of Faith Relations:** Here we need to underline the point that while there are things that are common for all Christians in the region, every country has a different history, different proportions of Muslims and Christians and a different dynamic in Christian-Muslim relations. Generalizations are not very helpful in this context.

THE ARAB NATIONS INTER-FAITH INDICES

Egypt: It is important, however, to recognise the considerable diversity among Muslims associated with political Islam. For example, The Muslim Brotherhood have created a party to resist having a Coptic Christian intellectual as one of its vice-presidents. There are about 100 Christians among its founding members. If these represent more moderate Muslims, they have to be distinguished from the Wahhabi or Salafi Muslims who have a much more extremist political agenda. The Muslim Brotherhood are the ones causing serious unrest with the military removal of Morsi, as the head of state. The Brotherhood want to make Egypt an Islamic state. **Religions: Muslim today are mostly Sunni, 94%, Coptic Christians 6% - (Geographica –Atlas p.324)**

Syria: The Assad family has ruled the country for 40 years with iron-fist. They come from the Alawite community (an offshoot of Sh'ite Islam), which numbers about 10% of the population. Though they are a minority community, they are in power and they have a special sympathy for the Christian community which is also around 10% of the population. In

recent months Christians have faced a cruel dilemma: do they support the government or do they side with the opposition? For now the situation in Syria is dangerous with the use of chemical weapons by Assad government against the opposition. The civil war affects both Muslims and Christians alike. **Religions: Sunni Moslems 74%, other Muslim sects 16%, Christians 10%. (*Geographica –Atlas p.184*).**

Iraq: The Christian community in Iraq felt reasonably secure under Saddam Hussein and his secular Arab Nationalist ideology. In fact Saddam Hussein was once described by an Armenian Christian as ‘the best possible protector of Christians’ As a result of the war in Iraq in 2003, Christians have experienced what can only be described as ethnic cleansing. **The religious situation has a majority of Shiite Muslims, but the ruling elite are the Sunnis Muslims 97% (Shiite 60 -65%, Sunni 32-37%), Christians and others 3%. (*Geographica –Atlas p.164*)**

Lebanon: was created in 1920 by the French. At the time of its creation, the proportion of Christians to Muslims was 6:5, and by setting up an elaborate system of proportional representation (with a Maronite President, a Sunni Prime Minister and a Shi’ite Speaker), they were able to maintain an uneasy balance – with a Christian majority – for some decades. Then the presence of around 300, 000 Palestinian refugees upset the balance and the country was plunged into 15 years of civil war from 1975-1990. The situation of Christians in Lebanon has therefore been very unique. They have felt that this was the only country in the region in

which Christians could feel secure as a community and be politically involved. But the decreasing numbers of Christians and the increase in the power and influence of Hizbullah have made Christians feel very much less secure, and they have the feeling that their country has been turned into the battleground in the Middle East. **Religions: Muslims 70%, Christians 30%. Ethnic groups: Arab 95%, Armenian and others 5%. (Geographica –Atlas p.171)**

Israel/Palestine: Many who speak on behalf of the Christian community in Israel/Palestine say that Muslims and Christians stand shoulder to shoulder because they face exactly the same pressures from the continuing illegal occupation. The real situation, however, is probably more complex. One Palestinian Christian is reported to have said: ‘we feel caught between the extremist Muslims on the one hand and extremist Jews on the other. **Religions: Jewish 82%, Muslims 14%, Druze 2%, Christians 2%. (Geographica –Atlas p.165)**

Algeria: A French colony from 1848, won independence in 1962. Roman Catholic missionaries and their many different institutions played a very significant role during most of the 19th and 20th centuries. This witness and service continued, although in a drastically reduced form, after Independence and even after the civil war in the 1990s. There has been remarkable church growth in the last fifteen years or so, and it is estimated that there may be as many as 20, 000 to 40, 000 Algerians, mostly berbers, who have become Christians. Some of these have sought official recognition for their churches from the government, while others

have felt that the price they would have to pay for official government recognition would be too high. The official language is Arabic, Religion mainly sunni Muslims. **Religions: Sunni Muslim 99%, Christian & Jewish 1%. Ethnic Groups: Arab-Berber 99%, European 1%. (Geographica-Atlas p 314).**

Sudan: For many decades Sudanese Christians in the South felt that they had been on the receiving end of a deliberate policy of Arabisation and Islamisation from the government in Khartoum. They were therefore ecstatic about the creation of an independent South Sudan. At the same time the Christians from the South who have been living in the North because of two decades of civil war are fearful that the government may want to impose shari'a law and make their situation as Christians, very much harder. And in recent months Christians in the Nuba Mountains in the southern part of the North have been appealing desperately for help because of what they see as a deliberate policy of ethnic cleansing carried out by the government, similar to what happened in Darfur. **Ethnic groups: Religions: Sunni Muslims 70%, Indigenous beliefs 25%, Christians 5%. Ethnic Groups: African 52%, Arab 39%, Beja 6% others 3%. (Geographica- Atlas p 348).**

THE ARAB SPRING DYNAMICS

This is a new phenomenon in the Arab world where a spontaneous protest against autocratic Arab/Islamic regimes, marked by corruption, poverty and unemployment, rule their states as if it were a police state. According to Rami Khoury, a Jordanian American Journalist, in an

article captioned “The Arab Freedom Epic”, he submits that what is taking place in the Arab world today, started with changing rules and regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, with others sure to follow. This development marks a process of genuine self-determination by Arab citizens who desire to speak and act for themselves for the first time in modern history. They are in effect revolting against their leaders whose policies have dehumanized, pauperized, victimized and marginalized them.

In fact, never before has the entire Arab population stood up to insist on naming their rulers, shaping their governmental system and defining the values that should drive their domestic and foreign policies. The revolt is also a revolt against major Western powers of Britain, France and Italy that created the modern Arab States and maintained them as security states after the 1970s.

CRITICAL QUESTIONS FACING MIDDLE EASTERN CHRISTIANS TODAY

Can Protestant Christianity ever be deeply rooted in the Middle East?

One of the reasons why Christianity virtually disappeared from North Africa following the Islamic conquests was that it had not become deeply rooted all over the country and its membership and leadership were largely foreign. Some (but not all). Protestant churches in the Middle East today look like carbon copies of the western churches which planted

them and exist almost on a financial life-support machine. It is probable that some Protestant churches in the course of time would wither away in the same way that the churches in North Africa did in the 7th and 8th centuries?

CAN CHURCHES DIE?

One of the merits of Jenken's research on this subject is the way it reminds us of the fact that the Eastern Churches flourished before many of the Churches came into existence in Europe. But today, most of the Churches have experienced severe decline and some have been completely extinguished. According to Jenkins "This older Christian world was destroyed so comprehensively that its memory is almost forgotten by all except academic specialists. In some places the blood of the Martyrs is the seed of the Church, while in other places and at other times, it has been the death of the Churches and Christian communities. In 1050 the population of Asian Minor was mainly Christian, but by 1450 Christians were only 10 -15% of the population. Also, between 1200 and 1500 the number of Asian Christians fell from 21 million to 3.4 million.

According to Jenkins as late as in 1900s Christians were about 11% of the population throughout the whole of the Middle East. Jenkins concludes as follows "For practical purposes, Middle Eastern Christianity has within living memory, all but disappeared as a living force".

CHRISTIAN RESPONSE IN THE LIGHT OF ABOVE HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

Thus far we have tried to cover centuries of history to see how history, politics and religion have inter-related in the Arab and Middle East countries. We are up against deeply theological questions like ‘How should Christians think about Islam?’ and ‘How do we understand the existence of Islam within the providence of God?’

Historically, the path of dialogue between Christianity and Islam has not worked out in practical terms mainly because of the fundamental belief of the Moslems in holy Jihad in which they are encouraged to continue until the entire world is beaten into submission to Allah and his law-sharia, is imposed on the whole world under Muslim dominion. They consider all those who are outside the house of submission (Dar-al-Islam) as part of the house of war (Dar-al-harb). In this respect, it could be said that Islam is in potential conflict with all who are not Muslims.

In view of this, it seems impossible to have dialogue with Islamists who are committed to violent Jihad. Islam, it should be noted, is not just a religion, on the contrary it is a complete political, economic, social, educational and religious network with its own forms of governance. It exercises its own laws, teaches the young and controls the society. Ideally, the Moslem Ummah or community encompasses all the Islamic nations which operate as one empire. The goal of Islamist idealists today, is to restore this union of Islamic peoples and then extend its power and control over the entire earth.

Dialogue especially between Christians and Muslims works only in academic circles and among academic specialists. The unworkability of dialogue in a multi-religious nation like Nigeria, that is dominated by Christianity and Islam, two powerful international religions arises from the fact that each one of them claims a uniqueness and superiority of its own that they are not prepared to surrender even on the pain of death. In effect, the absoluteness of each religious tradition has served to provide a religious foundation for their intolerance of other faiths. What is needed therefore to promote human fellowship and relationship in a multi-religious state is not **dialogue** but **dia-praxis**. Dia-praxis is not about belief and the institutions that are raised to preserve and protect them, rather it is about human fellowships and relationships in which human beings share common **praxis** as in sports, commerce, in travelling and in their common response to natural disasters like flood and epidemics that are no respecter of religions or persons.

A SECULAR STATE TO THE RESCUE

In almost all democratic nations that are multi-religious, the way forward to ensure national stability in the midst of many religions within the nation state is through the principle of giving the state a secular status and not just dialogue. To propose the principle of inter-religious dialogue to address the problem of Nigeria's insecurity caused by Islamic extremists or fundamentalists is good but could be illusive and will not ultimately deal with the crux of the problem. The principle of dialogue has never worked effectively anywhere in ancient, modern or

contemporary history. To propose it could be an exercise in futility. In the third century, it was state power under Emperor Constantine that protected Christians from persecution. Even in Russia, it is stated in their Constitution that incitement of hostility or hatred on religious grounds is prohibited. This means that their Constitution protects the right of the individual irrespective of one's attitude towards religion. Article 34 of the Constitution says:

Citizens of USSR are equal before the law, without distinction of origin, social or property status, race or nationality, sex, education, language, attitude of religion ... The equal rights of citizens of USSR are guaranteed in all fields of economic, political, social and cultural life.

Thus, it is impossible to infringe on the rights of believers, to snub or insult them because of their religious faith. Secondly, it follows from the above mentioned principle, too, that it is not permitted to incite hostility between believers professing different religions. As soon as it came into being, the Soviet government abolished the privileges of some religious groups and restriction placed on others. The constitutional ban in the USSR on incitement of hostility and hatred on religious grounds points to the humane principles of the socialist way of life.

Articles 52, 34, and 39 of the Constitution express the basic principles of the socialist's conception of the freedom of conscience:

the right to profess any religion and to conduct religious worship; the right not to profess any religion and to conduct atheistic propaganda; equal rights of citizens irrespective of one's attitude to religion; equality of all religions before the law; total absence of coercion with regard to the profession or non-profession of religion; impermissibility of using religion to the detriment of society and the state or the individual citizens; non-interference of the state in the internal affairs of the Church; non-interference of the Church in state affairs. (*See* Shaukat Burkhanov & Vladilen Gusarov, *Soviet Power and Islam* Pp. 5-7).

The principle of having a secular state in Nigeria is embedded in the Nigerian Constitution in Chapter 1 Section 10 and in Chapter 4 Section 35. It is with reference to these sections of the Constitution that the secularity of the state is interpreted to mean that the political order has jurisdiction over the 'temporal' not 'spiritual' welfare of the citizens. In other words, temporal "security and welfare of the people shall be the primary purpose of government." Therefore,

- The state has no right to adopt or appear to adopt any religion as state religion.

- That state has no direct jurisdiction in purely religious and spiritual matters unless where such exercise of purely religious and spiritual matters endanger law and order and lead to loss of lives and properties.

- Between the state and religions, there is only relative separation or distinction of areas of jurisdiction.
- While the state and religious groups may co-operate for the common good of all the citizens, neither the state nor the religious groups may directly interfere in the internal affairs of the other.
- It is the duty of the state to uphold and enforce law and order in the interest of religious freedom in a religiously pluralistic society such as Nigeria.
- So in the interest of law and order, liberty and security of lives and properties, the state has the duty to curb most effectively the excesses of both religious and political extremists and fanatics.
- Finally, the state's relationship to "religion" and religious bodies shall be characterized by mutual recognition of the respective areas of jurisdiction; by impartiality, non-interference and co-operation in the interest of social order and peace.

Conclusion

The thrust of this paper has been to prove, through a graphic historical survey that the path to peaceful religious co-existence in a democratic polity like Nigeria is through the Constitutional provision of the principle

of secular state, not even through intra-religious dialogue. Therefore to propose inter-religious dialogue as a means to achieve peaceful co-existence in a multi-religious democratic polity and as a mechanism to address insecurity could be misleading and a specious argument that could undermine a constitutional peace process. The fact is that the issue of inter-religious dialogue thrives only in the realm of academic discourse and never in history – ancient, modern or contemporary. As a tool for social engagement it has never achieved its stated objectives.

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