

## Violence in the Name of God: Politics of Religion and Conflict in Nigeria

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### **Abstract**

The nature of religion as an integral means of identity construction, power legitimating and a determining factor in socio-economic control can be traced back to the history of pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial Nigeria. The competing and conflicting religious identities, power, space and control have often triggered violence between the dominant religious groups, helping to accentuate regional and ethnic distinctions. Through processes of globalisation, events occurring in other parts of the world have often heightened the tensions between existing religious groups. This paper examines the multi-layered dimension of religious violence within Nigeria. It explores the religious history of Nigeria and its interconnectedness with politics and contest for control of economy, power and social space.

Keywords: Violence; Nigeria; Islam, Christianity; Colonialism.

### **Introduction**

No sooner had Nigeria (especially the Northern States) recovered from the shock of the *Boko Haram's* (translated: 'Western or non-Islamic education is sin') crisis of July 2009, another volatile crisis ensued. This time it was between the Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN) and the police force on 18th September 2009. The crisis arose following attempts by the security forces to stop the procession of the IMN, which it considered a threat to the peace of Kofar Doka, an area in Zaria town of Kaduna State (Akhaine and Abuah, 2009). The IMN under the

leadership of Sheikh Ibraheem Ya'qub Zakzaky has for the past thirty years commemorated the International Quds Day in support of the Palestinians. This annual event was established by the founder of the Islamic revolution in Iran, Ayatollah Ruhullah Al-Musawi Al-Khomeinin and has become a yearly ritual across different parts of the world. However, in Nigeria during this year's procession three persons died, while sixty persons were injured. This clash like previous ones caused panic among residents who fear reprisal attacks.

Nigeria is a multi-religious, multi-ethnic, and multi-cultural society with enormous potential for socio-economic and democratic development. Contemporary Nigeria seems to have produced the most profound religious vitality, with interaction of the indigenous religions, Christianity and Islam producing new religious constellations that have attracted more scholarly attention than anywhere else on the African continent. Although several religions exist in Nigeria, religious affiliation appears to be characterised with rather distinct regional divisions, thus helping to accentuate regional and ethnic distinctions. Nigeria is usually characterized as being deeply divided, where major political or socio-economic issues are often vigorously contested along the lines of complex ethnic, religious and regional bases. This paper examines the historical factors that cause religious violence in Nigeria and tease out their emerging patterns of manifestation. It argues that religion, politics, economy, violence and conflict do not occur in a historical vacuum. Thus the paper highlights the connections between religiously motivated violence, on the one hand, and economic, political, social and international contexts, on the other hand.

### **Religion and Conflict**

Samuel Huntington argues that in the post Cold War era, cultural and religious difference would replace ideology as the more probable cause of conflict (Huntington 1996:254). Juergensmeyer (1993:1-8) in response to Huntington notes a rise in religious nationalism as a reaction to the failure of secular nationalism to deal with corruption, excessive materialism, and the decline in moral values and state inefficiency. Juergensmeyer notes that in the early period of post-colonial independence, after the Second World War, nationalism was seen as a secular phenomenon. But now religious nationalism has come to the fore. The religious nationalist, according to Juergensmeyer sees no divide between faith and politics or need for the separation of Church and State. Religious nationalists thus tend to view their religious traditions as so tied to their nation or their land, that any threat to one of these is a threat to their existence. Within this scenario, religious nationalists respond to threats to their religions by seeking political groups in which their religion is privileged at the expense of others.

However, the relationship between religion and conflict is in fact, a complex one. McTernan (2003:20) notes two possible perspectives on the role of religion in conflict. According to him, people either exaggerate religion's role, denouncing it as the root cause of all conflicts, or they deny that 'real' religion could be responsible in any way for indiscriminate violence. McTernan observes that a

historical overview of both Christianity and Islam highlights how each of the faith communities has often interpreted their basic teachings to accommodate and sanction violence in the face of threat of extinction. Thus, in each of the faith traditions one can find ambiguity in its texts and stories to justify killing to the glory of God (McTernan, 2003:76). Furthermore, each of the religions also has its heroes who saw themselves as acting on divine mandate as they plotted the destruction of those they perceived to be enemies of God. This resonates the increasingly problematic as to whether those who engage in violence do so for God or in defence of God.

Within Nigeria the issues that often generate the fiercest disagreement between members of the religious groups include those that are considered fundamental to the corporate existence and legitimacy of the country. Over such matters the competing groups tend to adopt exclusionary, 'winner takes all' strategies. This often involves attempts to control national power, resource allocation and citizenship (Adogame, 2005:133). Consequently, already divided groups tend to be more fragile and unstable because, almost by definition, there are fewer points of convergence and consensus among the constituent groups. Underlying such violence is the question of religious dominance and authenticity; some adherents or proponents of the competing religious groups attempt to unseat the rival religion, impose their values and to control the state. Related to this is a battle for supremacy between Muslims and Christians in the political and socio-economic space of the country. This process has led to the politicisation of religion including Christianity. Before the 1970s, there was a wide view that Christians

should distance themselves from partisan politics. However, this idea has long since changed with an increasing pursuit for political participation across the main religions, along with varying opinions that religion and politics are mixable.

### **Islam in Nigeria within Global Context**

The Muslim-Christian relationship is as old as Islam and traceable to about 610CE at Mecca. It began with Muhammad, seeking the advice of his Christian wife's cousin, Waraqa Ibn Nawfal on what to do in regard to the revelation he received on Mount Hira. Nawfal congratulated Muhammad on being a chosen messenger of God and assured him of his support. Nawfal also warned him about possible rejection by his people (Meccan) which later came true. Fearing the socio-economic repercussions of Muhammad's preaching against the deities worshipped by pilgrims at Mecca's central shrine, the Ka'ba, the leading families of the city persecuted Muhammad and his followers (Ling, 1983:44). In the face of his rejection, Muhammad and his followers migrated and sought refuge with Christian King Negus in Abyssinia (Ethiopia) across the Red Sea. Based on this visit to Abyssinia, Sodiq (1994:279-306) contends that Islam reached Africa before reaching Medina in Arabia. The two occasions mark the cordial relationship between Muslims and Christians during the first century of Islam. Furthermore, Islam considers Christians and Jews as *people of the book* who should be respected, as long as they do not harm Muslims or prevent them from spreading Islam.

As earlier noted Islam penetrated to Africa around 615 CE. Kanem the present Bornu State), as in the seventh and eight centuries had already had close interaction with Islam through the Saharan trade. The rulers of Kanem were converted to Islam during the reign of Mai (King) Idris Alooma (1571-1603), thus their subjects became Muslims too (Mortin, 1987:179-189). Islam spread to neighbouring areas such as Kano, Kaduna, Katsina, and gradually southward and Westward into Yoruba. Although some leaders in those areas were Muslims, it seems that their knowledge of Islam was considered minimal due to lack of education about Islam and influence of the indigenous practices (Sodiq, 1992:85-90). Thus Islamic practices were limited to daily rituals, naming ceremonies, Friday prayers, and annual festivals.

Consequently, Islam played minimal role in the socio-economic affairs of the people. In addition there were cases of injustices and malpractices among Muslim scholars, as they were often manipulated by their rulers. A situation of social repression, oppression, insecurity and lack of commitment to Islam prompted Usman Dan Fodio (1754-1817), to revolt against the ruling class at the end of the eighteenth century. Fodio was a teacher of the Maliki School of Law, and the Quadriyyah Order of Sufism. He lived in Gobir until 1802 when, motivated by his Reformist ideas in the face of increased repression by local authorities, he led his followers into exile. In Gudu, Fodio was proclaimed *Amir al-Muminin* or leader of the faithful in Gudu. This therefore made Fodio both a political as well as a religious leader. Fodio began a *Jihad* in Gobir from 1804 -1808 which later stretched to Kano, Katsina, Zaria, Borno, Gombe, Adamawa, Nupe, Illorin and

finally the establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate in 1809 (Clarke, 1982:60, Sulaiman, 1986:1-6 and Falola, 1998:26).

According to Dan Fodio the primary aim of the *Jihad* was to inspire and increase the vitality and application of Islamic laws to all Muslims. While some perceived the *Jihad* as a struggle by the peasantry who felt oppressed and over-taxed by their leaders, Dan Fodio saw it as a call from God that led to the establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate (Clarke, 1982:158-159). The Caliphate became one of the most powerful empires in sub-Saharan Africa prior to the British conquest and colonisation. Following the establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate, Islam spread rapidly in Northern Nigeria from 1808-1903, thus becoming the religion and unifying factor of the state and central authority for both Hausa and Fulani. During the period, adherents of the indigenous religions were barely tolerated and were subjected to socio-economic pressures.

However, with the conquest of Sokoto in March 1903 by the British colonial administration, Islam experienced a setback. The authority of its leaders was slashed, as they became accountable to the British Resident Officers appointed by Lord Fredrick Lugard (Sodiq, 1994:279-306). However, this new relationship was not without some ambiguities. The oath of allegiance sworn by the Emirs also included a provision that they would not do anything contrary to the laws of Islam. The oath states thus:

I swear, in the name of Allah and Mohammed his Prophet, to serve well and truly his Majesty King Edward VII, and his representative, the High Commissioner of Northern Nigeria, to obey the laws of the Protectorate and the lawful commands of the High

Commissioner, and of the Resident, provided that they are not contrary to my religion. And if they are so contrary I will at once inform the Resident for the information of the High Commissioner...And as I carry out this oath, so may Allah judge me (Shaw, 1905, reprint 1964:457-458).

Although it remains in doubt the extent to which Emirs exercised such freedom, the oath makes provision for the basis on which the Emirs were to submit to the British colonial administration. Lugard was impressed by the quality of their administrative machinery and ability; as such he left the Emirates to continue exercising their powers, subject only to certain broad limitations. Lugard's action was informed by his concern to address the fears of the Islamic elites; as such he continued to recognise them, and retained them in their political and religious positions, only offering administrative advice as needed. Falola therefore argues thus:

It was not necessary to persuade colonial officers of the importance of Islam's role; what they wanted was to tap its advantages for their own benefit through the policy of paternalism. Muslims were regarded as more intelligent and civilized than adherents to traditional religion (1998:26-27).

Muslims also took advantage of the complex relationship and through their provision of trade and services they settled in other communities. Some Muslims were appointed by the colonial government as Emirs and Chiefs over non-Muslim communities, a situation which now is being contested by some of the affected ethnic groups. Although, the attitude of the colonial government towards Islam was ambivalent, many Muslims in Nigeria were consistent in their belief that an

irrational treatment of Muslims would stand in the way of colonial objectives and interests.

### **History of Christianity in Nigeria**

The history of Christianity falls within the larger picture of European establishment in Africa. Earliest attempts to establish Christianity in Nigeria was undertaken by the Spanish and Italian Capuchin Fathers who arrived at Benin in August 1515 and the Portuguese Augustinian monks from Sao Tome who entered Warri in 1570s. However, at the dawn of the eighteenth century there was little to show for these earlier missionary endeavours. Only a few relics like huge cross in the centre of Warri, a few church decorations surviving among the indigenous ritual space and a few memories preserved in oral tradition (Ajayi, 1965:3-4, Kalu, 1980, Eriwwo, 1979, Crampton, 1975).

With the nineteenth century missionary awakening in Europe, precipitated by the abolition of slave trade, several freed slaves including some Europeans made efforts to establish Christianity in Nigeria. The leaders of the missionary movements were much concerned about the failure of the sixteenth century missions and were determined to make a cultural impact on the coastal part of Nigeria. However, the failure of the August – October, 1841 Niger Expedition at an estimated cost of about £100,000 further raised doubts among some of the missionary movements as to the success of undertaking missionary work to Nigeria (Ifemesia, 1962:291-310). Although, the expedition failed, the following years saw unprecedented missionary expansion in Nigeria.

The missionary societies appear to have set out to accomplish the programme outlined by Buxton for the ‘civilization’ of Africa which the Expedition lunched by the government could not accomplish (Buxton, 1939). In 1842 the Wesleyan Methodists in Gold Coast and the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in Sierra Leone extended their missionary works to Badagry. On 10th April 1846, the Scottish Presbyterians through a missionary enthusiasm from Jamaica established at Calabar. Furthermore, in 1850, the Southern Baptist Convention began work in Nigeria and in 1853 some Brazilian emigrants, who were mostly Portuguese-speaking Roman Catholics, gathered together and acquired a piece of land for a church in Lagos. By 1863 when a Roman Catholic Father first visited Lagos, a church had already been established, but it was not until 1867 that the first resident Father arrived to take charge of the church.

In the southern part of Nigeria, where missionary work was most concentrated, the Protestant missions, (especially the CMS) maintained an unchallenged missionary influence. However, in 1885 the Roman Catholic missionaries began work in the Lower Niger. The establishment of the French Roman Catholic Church raised a challenge to what was perceived as the ‘unquestionable spheres of English national life’ (Ekechi, 1971:70-71). The CMS saw Roman Catholic penetration into the Niger as a continuation of the French drive to challenge British interests. France had for several decades attempted to establish a foothold on the Lower Niger, but the British government had repeatedly foiled such attempts. Nonetheless, French firms, in spite of the objections from the United Africa Company (UAC) later called

Royal Niger Company (RNC), succeeded in breaking the company on the Niger. This scenario created space for religious intolerance and uneasiness among the missionaries as they scrambled for space.

Furthermore, the colonial scramble for Africa (1880-1914) coincided with a generational shift in African missions. Following the Berlin Conference of 15th November 1884 to 26<sup>th</sup> February 1885, the continent of Africa was partitioned among the imperial colonial bodies into artificial zones for Western convenience (de Blij and Muller, 1997:340, Jeal, 1993). Robinson, Gallagher and Denny (1961; Fage, Flint and Oliver, 2001) offer meaningful insight for understanding the motives of British expansion across Africa. The Berlin Act confirmed Britain's control of vast areas of Africa including Calabar. According to Hardage (2008:117; Robison and Gallagher, 1961:593-640) the British used 'protection treaties' to expand their control in Calabar, which extended to the mid-twentieth century. Owing to the increased interest in Africa due the scramble for the continent, the number of missionaries and mission agencies grew exponentially through the last part of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries.

The mission churches embellished the outcome of the conference with denominational stripes, thereby destroying the fragile inter-denominational cooperation that had existed among mission agencies. It is therefore fair to contend that the Berlin conference institutionalised denominationalism in Nigeria. It marked the beginning of competition and rivalry between Roman Catholic Church and Protestants on one hand and between the different Protestant missions on the other hand as they scrambled for space. The establishment of the

Roman Catholic in Nigeria reinforced the age-long prejudice between Roman Catholics and Protestant and inaugurated the era of missionary conflict. The Berlin **Conference** was therefore both a political and religious partition in which imperial powers nationalised mission bodies and denominations along colonial spheres of influence. The legacy of this boundary demarcation along religious lines is still visible within the regions of Nigeria and other parts of Africa.

Much of the missionary efforts as earlier noted were undertaken in the South-west and South-eastern parts of Nigeria. Thus at independence in 1960, Christianity had emerged as the dominant religion in the south. However, Christianity in Nigeria since independence has continued to witness rivalry and competition amongst the mission churches, the African Independent Churches (AICs), and the newer Pentecostal/Charismatic churches. Such intra-religious competitions appears to be a continuation of the seed sown and nurtured by the nineteenth century missions and has informed several conflicts.

The establishment of Christianity in the northern part of Nigeria was largely undertaken by the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM), which began its missionary work in 1893. The Sudan Interior Mission headed for Kano, but members were unable to settle there. They finally established their first mission station in 1901 at Pategi (Omoyajowo, 1983:9). Their work was led by Rowland Bingham, Thomas Kent and Walter Gowans. In 1954, SIM churches were incorporated as Evangelical Churches of West Africa (E.C.W.A). Next was the Sudan Pioneer Mission (SPM), which was established in Nigeria in 1895 through missionary work led by Karl Kumm. The name of the mission

was changed to Sudan United Mission (SUM) in 1904 (Casaleggio, 1964:5-8). SUM aimed at establishing a chain of mission stations across Africa, especially in places where Islam and indigenous religions coexisted. The SUM allowed different denominations from overseas to work under its oversight as independent branches and to raise funds and recruit personnel. SUM established different churches, and founded an association which served as an umbrella for ecclesiastical fellowship for the churches called *Tarayar Ekklesiyoyin Kristi a Nigeria* (The Fellowship of the Churches of Christ in Nigeria), or TEKAN.

From 1901 to 1903, the British colonial government conquered the Sokoto Caliphate. Lugard was surprised with the organised and centralised system of administration based on Islam across Kano, Kaduna, Zaria and Sokoto; as such he allowed them to govern themselves through indirect rule. Missionaries (especially the CMS) welcomed the British colonial conquest, and saw it as an open door for the evangelisation of the Northern states. However, Lugard was hesitant as he had promised the Islamic leaders not to interfere with their religion thus:

The attitude which the British Government have endeavoured to assume is that of strict neutrality, impartiality and tolerance in all religious matters (unless) any particular form of religion sanctions or enforces acts which are contrary to humanity or good order (Luggard, 1923:594).

Lugard saw no point in antagonising the Emirs and the Islamic political elites, who were needed to jointly run the administration under indirect rule system. In essence, he gave the emirs power over granting access to the Christian missionaries. Lugard was cautious about introducing

any policy that would displease the Muslims and which had little connection to colonial objectives and interests.

Lugard considered that granting permission to Christian missionaries to introduce Christianity publicly in the area was an intrusion and breach of contract and so tactfully avoided it. In addition Muslim leaders discouraged their people from associating with Christians and from attending Christian Schools, which they considered as a means of conversion. The different constituencies perceived and the responded to the colonial stance on religious matters in diverse ways. Although there appears to be a visible collaboration between Islam and the colonial administration in Nigeria, the claim that colonialism and Christianity worked hand in glove to subdue Islam remains acceptable to and is widespread among many Nigerian Muslims. Both Christianity and Western values are criticised for making Nigeria excessively materialistic, undignified, and morally decadent. Orthodox Islamic movements that emerged during the colonial period advocated the rejection of Western dress, language, and values (Falola, 1998:74). Those movements urged Muslims not to compromise their religion by cooperating with Christians in politics. These have resulted in an uneasy relationship between Muslims and Christians and an increase in religious conflict.

### **Historising Religious Violence in Nigeria**

Nigeria has a population of more than 150 million, and three dominant religions including Islam, Christianity and indigenous religions. While three major religions exist in Nigeria, cases of violence have largely

revolved around the different traditions of Islam and Christianity. Although adherents of the three main religions are found in each component region, the population of Nigeria divides along religious and ethnic lines. Thus Islam is often considered to dominate the Northern States, with Christianity and indigenous religions more widespread among the South-western and South-eastern States (Omoyajowo, 1983:1-10). Further to this geographical distribution, it is crucial to note the integral role of religions in the daily experiences of Nigerians and how it permeates different sectors of the country. This scenario requires further reflection on the dilemma facing Nigeria as it seeks to govern itself by a secular constitution, while many of its citizens organise their lives according to religious codes (Falola, 1998:9). These citizens include ethnically and religiously biased political agents who at the same time attempt to administer secular systems.

Religious violence in Nigeria can be traced to the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial history of the country. The regions of modern Nigeria had been partitioned on 1st January 1900 into the Northern and Southern Protectorates with Lagos joined to the South on 16th February 1906. The Berlin conference already discussed granted the Northern colony to Britain on the basis of their already existing protectorates in the Southern Nigeria. Lugard was appointed by the British government to oversee the protectorates. At the time not even Lugard, nor any other British officials or Nigerians themselves saw the two protectorates as constituting a potential national unit. The North and South were considered to be culturally and radically different from each other. However, on 1st January 1914 Lugard decided to merge the two

protectorates for economic and administrative convenience (Nwoli, 1992:75). The two protectorates were then called 'Nigeria' by Flora Shaw (who later became the wife of Lugard). She derived the name from River Niger which runs through Nigeria.

Under an umbrella government for all Nigeria, the North and South continued to have their own separate administrations and each had its own Lieutenant Generals answerable to Lugard and his successors. This process gave room for separate developments among the constituent groups. The British colonial government failed to pay due attention to the regional, cultural and political differences and inequalities, instead employing the principle of 'divide and rule' to their colonial advantage. Standing security agencies (including armed forces) were formed to protect colonial trading companies and other interests (Imobighe, 2003:5). However, following the 1950s rise of Nationalism amongst Nigerians (especially the Southern elites), the country was granted independence on 1st October 1960 from the British colonial government.

Religious pluralism and ethnocentrism have remained influential factors for violence within Nigeria. In view of the Nigerian situation it is arguable that societies that are divided along religious and ethnic lines appear to be more prone to intense and prolonged conflict. This contention is based on the explanation that many religious adherents in Nigeria often believe in a strict adherence to their religion as a prerequisite for attaining self-purification and divine acceptance. Consequently, religious convictions can be so strongly held that, to some adherents it becomes a matter of life and death. Religion is

therefore used as a tool to differentiate oneself from the other, especially in the face of competition for scarce resources. Reflections on the links between religion, politics and violence involve focusing on the process of ‘othering’ and assertions of identity that may result in using violence as a strategy. Thus violence produces and enhances social solidarity in the group’s quest not only for recognition but also for entitlement to rights (Al-Rasheed and Sheterin, 2009:pxx).

The role of religion in regional and national politics is aptly demonstrated in the politics of the post-independence Nigeria. The role of successive governments after independence demonstrates the contradictions or continuity of religious and ethnocentric politics while at the same time propagating the principles of ‘unity in diversity’. Sir Ahmadu Bello (12th June 1910 – 15th January 1966) was the first Premier of Northern Nigeria (1954-1966), and also the Sarkin Sokoto. Bello’s grandfather was the revered Utman Dan Fodio, and he was the leader of the Northern People’s Congress (NPC). His Party formed an alliance with the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroon (NCNC), to form the first post-colonial indigenous government of Nigeria. Bello though was the President of his party (NPC) he chose to remain the Premier of Northern Nigeria, and his Deputy Abubaka Tafawa Balewa was appointed the Prime Minister with Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe of the NCNC as the Head of Government (Bello, 1962:1-20). As the Vice-President of the World Muslim League, Bello strove to draw Nigeria in the mainstream of Islam and the crusade of conversion among small non-Muslim groups in Northern Nigeria (Hickey, 1984:251).

Southerners accused the Northern elites of indirectly attempting to revive and enlarge the sphere of Sokoto Caliphate's control. As such national issues were pushed to the background of ethnic, regional and religious politics. Disagreement in the Federal House and brazen disregard for the unity of the country by the political elites provided grounds of the first military coup led by Major Chukwuma Nzeogwu on 15<sup>th</sup> January 1966. The Northerners saw the coup as having a Southern (Igbo) agenda as it claimed the lives of several Northern political elites including Ahmadu Bello and Abubaka Balewa.

The entry of the military into the politics of Nigeria rather than resolving the problem opened another phase of conflict. Negative hostile intentions were read into the actions of the then Head of the military, Major General J. T. U. Aguiyi Ironsi of Southern Nigeria. Ironsi had tried to promulgate decrees to address the divisive tendencies in the country and to check the slow pace of the development of federal constituency framework. Northerners interpreted his 'Unification Decree of 1966' as a Southern conspiracy to dominate the north (Ahanotu, 1992:12). Ironsi was therefore killed on 19<sup>th</sup> July 1966 during a coup after six months of his regime. His death heightened the existing political, economic and ethnic tensions. The discriminative killing of mainly the Christian Southerners especially the Igbo, fuelled the perception that the northerners were intent on unleashing a pogrom. This situation paved way for the Nigerian-Biafra war (civil war), which was the first national conflict to challenge the nation (Nwolise, 1992:74).

The war signalled that religion and ethnicity would remain the two decisive features that challenge the corporate existence of Nigeria. Religion became an integral part in the construction of both the Biafran and Nigerian identities. While Islam was bestowed on the Federal government, the Biafrans whipped Christian sentiments to garner both local and international support. However, the Biafrans criticised the levels of support which some so called 'Christian countries' gave to the Nigerian army. At another level, the African Independent Churches (including the Aladura) exploited spiritualism. The resulting sense of insecurity and vulnerability played into the hands of those who exercised spiritual powers. Kalu (2003:272) further notes that the war triggered a cultural renaissance, as a survival technique, it also gave fillip to those aspects of indigenous practices which lay emphasis on the prediction, prescription and control of space time events. The rhetoric of religion therefore pervaded both local and international discourses of the war. Since the end of the war at the beginning of 1970, Nigeria has experienced considerable religious violence of varying degrees.

Nigeria returned to civil rule in 1979, with a constitution which provided for a secular state. However, some members of the Izala Movement and the Muslim Students Society rejected the Constitution and advocated the establishment of an Islamic State. This gave room for an alliance of conservative Muslim groups, which drew huge support from the *Jama'atu Nasril Islam*, an organised political-religious body established in 1962. Most of the Emirs and their councils belong to the traditional conservative establishments of Islam, whereas the newer groups like Izala (movement against innovations and for orthodoxy)

and Maitatsine ('he who curses others'), see violence as a means of achieving their desired purity of Islam and the establishment of an Islamic state.

The Izala movement was founded in Jos by Sheikh Ismaila Idris in 1978. The movement's principal concern is for the cleansing of Islam and the abolition of practices that are not original to the Qur'an and Sunnah. They are active in the propagation of Islam and much of their violence is often between them and fellow Muslims and Islamic sects. On the other hand, the Maitatsine group was founded by Alhaji Marwa Maitatsine in the late 1970s and has been in operation throughout the 1980s. The group is driven by the socio-economic disadvantages suffered by the marginalised and poor vis-à-vis the rich members of the society. According to them, both the traditional authorities and contemporary politicians have betrayed Islam and deserve death. Its members exhibit intense hatred for agents of the state including the police and members of the armed forces, perhaps because of their own repeated violent encounters with the police. The group inspired the horrific uprisings in Kano in 1980, Bauchi in 1982 and Yola in 1984 (Kenny, 1992:46-58). Although their leader was killed during the Kano violence, subsequent events show that religious violence is yet to be contained in Nigeria.

Following those uprisings there has been considerable religious violence between Christians and Muslims. While it could be argued that there has not been a Christian group like the Izala and Maitatsine movements, Christians especially since the 1960s have always come out in mass to defend their faith whenever there is violence. Many

Christians especially those in the volatile Northern States appear to have forgotten the Biblical teaching of turning the right and left cheeks to an enemy; consequently, rediscovering the ‘theology of the third slap’. They have re-appropriated the Old Testament code: an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. This Islamic and Christian militancy is becoming more widespread and leading to more religious violence.

The official establishment of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) in 1976 marked a turning point in the Christian – Muslim relationship in Nigeria. The association has thus become a rallying point in reaction to Islamic politics in Nigeria (Falola, 1998:108). CAN has State and Local Government chapters which are expected to notify the national office about burning local political and religious issues. Since its formation CAN has thus become intensely a political organisation. Some of CAN’s political objectives include: the continued insistence on Nigeria’s secular state; the prevention of Islamisation; and the acquisition of power and resources for Christian constituencies. In addition to this is a scramble for roles by Christians in the national public space. CAN have often berated Christians for their complacency and charges them not only to be politically informed, but to participate actively in partisan politics.

CAN with its subsidiary bodies (like the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria, PFN) seek to serve as the watch-dog against Islamic resurgence. On the other hand, CAN appears to function as an unregistered opposition party to the government, especially in regard to those policies that it considers as undermining Christian freedom. In 1986 the then Head of State General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida

changed Nigeria's status in the Organisation of Islamic Congress (OIC) from that of observer to full membership. The action was interpreted by CAN as a consummation of the Islamisation process that late General Murtala Muhammad had begun in 1975. Furthermore, in 1997, Late General Sani Abacha registered Nigeria as a member of the Developing-8 Muslim nations popularly known as D-8. This organisation has its secretariat in Istanbul, Turkey, and is made up of eight Islamic countries including: Egypt, Malaysia, Indonesia, Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, Nigeria and Bangladesh. Although socio-economic and political gain (including debt relief) were given as the benefits of Nigerian membership of those bodies, these actions received the condemnation of CAN, which sees itself as the defender of secular Nigeria.

The result of this is that the struggle between Islam and Christianity appears to have political and socio-economic dimensions. Thus Kenny argues that "Religion in the politics of the 1970 onwards was basically a tool which the politicians used for secular interests" (1992:46-58). Both Muslims and Christians have used religion as a tool to serve their political interests. Therefore religion is used as a platform to advance their shared political values in order to get a collective or an individual share of the national cake. The mutual suspicion and distrust engendered by religious factionalism and the evolution of religious and ethnic intolerance continues to impact the country. Religion therefore assumes political significance and often generates tension.

In 2002 for instance, a reporter of a popular Nigerian newspaper, *This Day*, wrote an article arguing that Muslims should

restrain from protesting against Nigeria's hosting of the Miss World contest in Kaduna. The report suggested that perhaps if Muhammad were alive he might probably take a wife from among the contestants. The statement was a comment from a reporter, not representing a Christian view and was contained in a newspaper which is neither Christian nor represents Christian theology. Yet it ignited a wave of violence between Christians and Muslims leading to the loss of over 200 lives (Astill, 2002).

Furthermore, the local-global import of violence in Nigeria is demonstrated in the case of the Danish cartoons, which included one showing Muhammad with a bomb-shaped turban and an ignited fuse. After the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* printed the caricatures on 30th September 2005 other Western newspapers (mostly in Europe) followed suit, asserting their values and the right to freedom of expression. Demonstration against the cartoon went global, and in Nigeria it developed into anti-Christian riots, leading to violence and the loss of lives and property. Muslims in Kano State burnt Danish and Norwegian flags and barred Danish companies from bidding for major construction contracts. Kano lawmakers further called on people of their state to boycott Danish goods. In Maiduguri, the protesters of the caricatures attacked Christians and burnt down churches, killing at least fifteen people (Musa, 2009; Reynolds, 2006).

The most recent is the violence led by the *Boko Haram* group ('Western or non-Islamic education is sin') (Boyle, 2009). The group was founded in 2002 in Maiduguri by Ustaz Mohammad Yusuf and their membership includes Muslims from the neighbouring Chad

Republic. They aim at imposing Sharia law throughout the thirty-Six states of Nigeria. In 2004 the group moved to Kanamma, Yobe State, where they set up a base called 'Afghanistan'; from there they launched their attack against a nearby police station, killing police officers. Yusuf and his group are hostile to the secular education system, Western culture and modern science. In Bauchi State the group refused to mix with local people. In July 2009 the Nigerian Police started investigating the group, following reports that they were arming themselves. Several leaders were arrested in Bauchi sparking off a deadly clash between the group and the Police force, leaving over seven hundred people dead. In Yobe State the militants used fuel-laden motorcycles and bows with poison arrows to attack the Police.

On 30<sup>th</sup> July 2009 it was reported that Yusuf had been killed by the security forces in his attempt to escape from Maiduguri. The death of Yusuf has been contested as some wonder if he was actually killed or another person. However, the Police force has continued to argue that he was killed, but not in custody as some human rights organisations allege. Although a panel of enquiry into the *Boko Haram's* uprising has been set up by the Presidency, there is no doubt that the crisis like the past ones has continued to generate fears, insecurity and uncertainty among the populace. This is confirmed by the previously mentioned clash between the security forces and the Islamic Movement in Nigerian on 18<sup>th</sup> September 2009, about two months after the *Boko Haram's* crisis.

The relationship between religion and violence remains a central question to social scientists. Regardless the reasons that cause

groups to resort to violent acts under religious rhetoric, it seems that violence in addition to empowering individuals and groups tends to empower religion itself. In this regard, violence has given religious organisations an idea of a public importance that they have not enjoyed, as it serves to increase their visibility. This visibility is mostly realised through the activities of the media, which often capture violent acts and disseminate them across the globe, thereby enhancing the visibility and identity of such religious groups. Media are not simply technologies that organisations, parties or individuals can choose to use or not to use; instead, a significant share of the influence media exert arises out of the fact that they have become an integral part of other institutions' operation, while they have also achieved a degree of self-determination and authority that forces other institutions and individuals, to submit to their logic. Contemporary societies are permeated by the media, to an extent that the media may no longer be conceived of being separate from cultural and other social institutions.

### **Conclusion**

The paper has shown that religious diversity is an intrinsic part of contemporary Nigeria and sometimes the role of religion as a means of peaceful co-existence and social cohesion remains ambivalent. It is evident that far from knocking down ethnic, socio-cultural and religious barriers, religion generally serves to maintain these historical divides and helps to develop new ones, thus religions in the Nigeria can serve as moral forces in freeing people but not in bringing them together as equals across ethnic and religious lines. As I have argued, there is an

intrinsic relationship between economy, politics, religion and violence in Nigeria. Undoubtedly, religion and politics (especially within Nigeria) are hardly mutually exclusive phenomena. Each of them therefore mutually shapes, and impacts on each other in ways that are either constructive or detrimental to the corporate and peaceful existence of the country. Therefore, a consideration of Nigeria and its religious development must be seen in relation with the global context and its patterns of negotiating global forces.

In the overall discourse about religious violence in Nigeria it appears that on one hand is the notion of identity used in collective discourse in order to create boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ in order to establish hierarchies of exclusion and inclusion, but also to claim collective rights for groups excluded from particular social systems. On the other hand, in daily practice individuals appropriate these collectively constructed identities and use them for their own personal ends. The question of power therefore remains crucial in identity constructions since they are constituted through discursive exclusion, in terms of binary oppositions, and in relation to their other. As demonstrated earlier, this power relation of self and identity often underpins religious violence in Nigeria. These factors are therefore crucial in accounting for interrelationships between individual and larger socio-cultural institutions and systems.

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