



Referat
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„Zur Lage der Religionsfreiheit“

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1. Nigeria in the News:

Nigeria has been very much in the international news media in the last few years, and this unfortunately for reasons that are far from being positive. The news has been centered around the violent activities of an Islamic terrorist group popularly called the *Boko Haram (BH)*, a nick name which loosely translates as “Western education is an abomination.” I say “nick name” because the group has a different name for themselves, in Arabic, namely: *Jama’atu Ahlis Sunnah lil Dawa’ati wal Jihad*. This long name loosely translates as “The Association of Suni Muslims for the Propagation of the faith (da’awah) and for the Struggle for Islam, (Jihad)”. Whatever their name, what has hit the headlines is their series of violent activities, mainly in the Northern parts of Nigeria.

We live in a violent world, and our country Nigeria has had more than her fair share of such violence. For quite sometime, we have had the challenge of rampant armed robbery and kidnappings, ethnic clashes, socio-political militancy in the Niger Delta and other forms of social unrest. But the BH has brought something new and sinister into our experience of violence at least in two ways:

- a) It is unusually virulent in its attacks, targeting defenceless innocent people, including school children, and at times using **suicide** terrorist tactics.
- b) It makes claims of acting in the name of God, often deliberately targeting Christians and their institutions presumably for the promotion of Islam.

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Although the members are few and constitute a small minority within the Nigerian Muslim community, they are a real danger to the entire Nigerian community because they are fanatics, with warped logic and twisted minds. They have almost succeeded in polarizing our nation along religious lines, hitting at our fragile harmony built over many years of patient efforts and trying to make us enemies of one another. They have definitely succeeded in giving us the bad name of a nation that is unstable and unsafe, where Christians are being persecuted and people indiscriminately killed with impunity by freely rampaging Muslim terrorists. This is probably why I have been invited to this program on “Religious Freedom”.

In my rather frequent travels abroad, especially in Europe, I have had many occasions to be queried about what is happening in our country. Especially in Christian circles, concerns have been raised about the impact of this terrorist phenomenon on our freedom of religion. The declared intention of the BH is to make Nigeria an Islamic state under their own brand of the Sharia, a project that clearly excludes religious freedom, even for Muslims, who do not agree with them. Fortunately, the situation on the ground is not nearly as drastic. I am therefore glad to have this opportunity to share with this audience some consideration that would put the seemingly brutal and hopeless situation into a more balanced perspective.

I intend to show that despite the virulence of the BH, they represent an anomaly in our socio-religious environment, an anomaly that efforts are being made to positively address. I will then demonstrate the generally good state of religious freedom in Nigeria, at least from a constitutional point of view. I will also point at some problems that still defy adequate solution, indicating some outstanding issues that need to be clarified for a better future. I shall conclude with some reflections on the imperative of honest religious dialogue for the survival and progress of our nation.

2. An Anomaly that is being addressed:

The leadership of the Islamic establishment in Nigeria have long distanced itself from the activities of the BH. We often hear it said that the BH are not true Muslims. The vast majority of Nigerian Muslims cannot understand what religious motivation pushes people to carry out the kind of atrocities that the group proudly lays claims to. They are therefore an unfortunate anomaly in our country which I hope we shall be able to contain and eliminate in a hopefully not too distant future.

In the past couple of years, especially since the main arena of operations of the group in the North East corner of Nigeria has been placed under an emergency rule, a robust military response has been rolled out against them. There is no doubt that this has made a great impact. They are no longer rampaging all over the nation with impunity. Their exploits are clearly contained within the North East zone of Yobe, Bornu and Adamawa states, on the borders with Chad and Cameroon. Many of their camps have been effectively dismantled and it is said that many of their combatants and commanders have been eliminated in confrontation with

the Nigerian forces. The details of these successes are not generally available. This makes Nigerians generally sceptical of the pronouncements of government spokespersons in this regard.

In fact, on the surface, it seems that they are eluding the massive military onslaught of the Nigerian security agencies. They are still on the prowl, hitting soft targets in many places in the far North-East. We are appalled at their recent attacks on defenceless villages and even schools where they have massacred young school children, to the horror and outrage of the entire Nigerian nation of all faiths. It is said that they undertake such atrocities simply to make the case to the world out there that they are still around. Unfortunately, it is well-nigh impossible to cover the entire region with armed soldiers that will effectively stop every activity of marauders without uniform, melting into the countryside and villages in a hit and run tactic. All this proves that the military response, useful as it may be, needs to be complemented by other strategies that would somehow convince the terrorists to give up their violent intentions.

This is why we see the need to open the room for discussion. It was an open secret that some of those who lost out in the last elections were still licking their wounds. If they were not facilitating the activities of the BH, neither were they ready to lift a finger to assist government in dealing with the terrorists. On its part, government was pointing accusing fingers at the opposition parties, accusing them of sponsoring and abetting terrorism. It would seem that better reason is now prevailing. All the political forces have now realised that we are facing a common menace and all need to join hands to deal with it. We are hearing of “dialogue”, if not directly with the BH, at least with those who can reach out to them. We are still to hear about the details and the results of any such contacts. In any case, it is agreed that talking is better than fighting, and even fighting would at last eventually and inevitably be ended by talking.

Because the BH has a clearly religious dimension, it was expected that the religious leaders would play a key role in bringing about peace and reconciliation. Unfortunately, this has not happened. The apex Christian/Muslim contact group, the Nigerian Interreligious Council (NIREC), was gravely handicapped, perhaps mainly because of the charged atmosphere of religious tension. Until now it has not been able to convene, let alone issue any common statement or carry out any joint action for peace.

But this does not mean that religious leaders and groups have been doing nothing. At different levels and in various parts of the country a spate of interfaith actions and initiatives has been sprouting up. Individual religious leaders, women, and youth groups have been reaching out to one another to say “no” to religious polarization. Only last Saturday, 8th of March, the wife of the president, Mrs Patience Jonathan, accompanied by many religious leaders, joined a big “Youth for Peace” rally in the Abuja central square, pleading almost in tears that the youth should stop killing one another. Who knows how far her pleas will go.

3. Religious Freedom in Nigeria:

Despite all we have said above about the activities of BH, it has always been, and still is, my conviction that there is a basic atmosphere of religious freedom in Nigeria. The very constitution of Nigeria makes two important points. The first is that religion is recognised as an important element in our nation, as it states that we are committed to build a united and prosperous nation “under God”. The other point is that neither the Federal government nor the government of any state shall adopt any religion as state religion. Furthermore, the general principles of fundamental freedoms clearly spell out the freedom of every Nigerian, according to the provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations to freedom of belief and thought. Our constitution provides for not only the freedom to adhere to any religion of ones choice, but to also change ones faith if one so desires.

This prohibition of state religion has been interpreted in some quarters to mean that Nigeria is a “secular state”, a terminology that has generated a lot of controversy in terms of what exactly it means. From the debate at the constituent assembly, that expression was dropped from the draft in difference to those who rejected it on the ground that it could be construed to mean that Nigeria is a “godless” nation. That Nigeria is NOT a “godless nation” is a point on which Christians and Muslims would generally agree. The clause on prohibition of state religion came as a compromise formulation to satisfy both sides.

However, disagreements, sometimes serious, have arisen as regards what constitutes making a religion a “state religion”. How far can the government go in sponsoring the religious concerns and agenda of any particular religion? An important case in point is the place of the Islamic Shari’ah in our legal system. This has generated a lot of debate that is still to be resolved to the satisfaction of all concerned. The call of the BH for an Islamic State, with full blown Shari’ah, has been roundly rejected not only by Christians, but by the main stream of Islam in Nigeria. In fact, the recognised leaders of Islam in Nigeria, under the Sultan of Sokoto, Sa’ad Abubakar, have consistently denounced the BH sect as not according to the correct tenets of the Islamic faith. It would seem that even those Muslims, who may secretly nurse the desire for such a situation, are realistic enough to see that such a desire is futile in the face of the realities on the ground.

The reality is that the about 170 million inhabitants of Nigeria are fairly equally divided into Muslims and Christians. This has made our nation the “greatest Islamo-Christian nation in the world”. By this, I mean that there is no other nation with so many Christians living with so many Muslims in the same nation, in mutual equality and respect. One or the other of the two religions may be dominant in some places, but both are present everywhere, to some extent. To continue to speak of “the Muslim North and the Christian South” is grossly misleading to the point of inaccuracy, convenient though it may be for the journalist. If the far North and the South East are respectively predominantly Muslim and Christian, the Middle Belt and the

South West are quite mixed. That is why any talk of dividing Nigeria into a Muslim North and a Christian South not only makes little or no sense, but is also a veritable recipe for chaos.

Because of our occasional and sporadic outburst of ethno-religious violent clashes, there is the unfortunate tendency to overlook the very important fact that in the normal lives of our people, there is a commendable measure of peaceful and harmonious living together across religious lines. Apart from Fridays and Sundays, when we go our different ways for weekly worship, we live most of our lives as citizens of the same nation, living and struggling to live under the same socio-economic conditions and sometimes members of the same family. One only needs to visit any government office, market or business premises to appreciate this fact.

4. The Tasks ahead:

The rather positive picture painted above is not in any way meant to close our eyes to the many issues that still need to be clarified on the matter of religious relations in Nigeria. There is right now a project of a national dialogue aimed at discussing the burning issues of governance in Nigeria. One of these issues is certainly how to agree on the role and place of religion in our national life. I will list out some of these matters as follows:

a. Deceptive relative Peace

For a long time, we have lived in relative peace between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria. Very often in the past, we have insisted on this when we talk to people abroad. We maintained that despite the news of conflict between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria, the reality is that most Nigerian Christians and Muslims not only live in peace but are doing their best to maintain peace. We have therefore always presented the cases of religious conflict as an anomaly which takes place only a few days in the year. We have also observed that these conflicts were mostly caused by the actions and utterances of extremists on both sides of the divide or by the manipulation of politicians who are seeking cheap popularity. This scenario to some extent is still true.

However, the recent events seem to me to have exposed deeper factors often ignored or taken for granted which we now must face. It is not enough to hope to go back to the status quo ante. There are issues that we should dig up and address if we are to achieve genuine and lasting religious harmony in Nigeria. Let us look at some of them in more details.

b. From parallel to integrated Communities

For a long time, Muslims and Christians in Nigeria have lived in their own respective domains with little or no contact with one another, in a form of parallel communities. Even in the north where many Christians reside among Muslims, there has always been the tendency to live in ghettos, popularly called Sabon Gari. Now however, things are changing. Parallel communities are becoming integrated and we are finding it difficult to cope with the demands for such integration. In this regard, we see the crucial role of the concept of the Nigerian

citizenship, which should have priority over other identity considerations. The challenge of national unity is always before us, a nation that should also be one in law.

c. One Nation one Law

The role and place of the Sharia in its many forms have been a matter of much debate and strong controversy in Nigeria. This is a major part of the problem of national integration mentioned above. The British colonial powers met and absorbed a strong and well organized Islamic empire generally called the Sokoto Caliphate. In this system, the Sharia was the law of the land. The British not only accepted this system but in many ways consolidated it. The amalgamation of Northern and Southern Nigeria in 1914 resulted effectively in a situation of one nation with two legal systems. This was inherited by the nation at independence but it has remained a contentious matter in all efforts to streamline our constitution. It is not a matter of the right of Muslims to be guided by their religious laws in their daily lives. This must be guaranteed. It is a question of how far the nation can adopt such laws in a country that claims to have no religion as official religion. We note that there are many Muslims in Nigeria, especially in Yorubaland, who have been living happily with fellow Nigerian citizens under the same law while living their lives as Muslims without any molestation. As for the much touted assurance that the Sharia affects only Muslims, experience has shown that wherever the Sharia goes beyond personal matters to include public behavior, e.g. consumption of alcohol, the non-Muslim is forced against his will to comply. We note too that non-Muslims in Nigeria also have their own religious laws, which they have been handling without demanding any government intervention. Some Nigerian Christians are now asking that “Canon Law Courts” be introduced into the constitution to ensure equal treatment of Christians and Muslims in our legal system. One can only imagine the confusion that is brewing ahead of us in these matters.

One lesson we should have learnt from the Boko Haram tragedy is that we should not encourage extremist and divisive religious attitudes in our community. In a multi-religious nation such as ours, we will do well to fashion our laws in such a way that every citizen is at home and equal before the same law of the land. It is not necessary for the law of the land to enforce every religious injunction. All that is required is that everyone is free to practice his or her religion, within the demands of the maintenance of good order in the community. Nor is it necessary for the law of the land to legislate against any religious prohibition, provided no one is forced by law to carry out such an action. I am among those who believe that our country will not enjoy lasting religious peace if we do not work towards the principle of “one nation one law”, and gradually leave religious laws to the religious communities to handle.

d. From conversion to mutual respect

For a long time Christians and Muslims in line with the dictates of their respective faith have been carrying out vigorous programmes of conversion to both Christianity and Islam. For as long as there was a pool of followers of African Traditional Religion to target and convert, the game of conversion was possible as a peaceful rivalry between two conquering faiths.

However, in Nigeria today, practically everybody is either Christian or Muslim. That means therefore that we are facing each other eyeball to eyeball and we need to find a peaceful way to continue to seek to propagate our faith while avoiding violent clashes. To do this, there will be need to review the theology behind our religious activities. The theology of conversion tended to be that of claiming that “my religion is better than your own; therefore, you should abandon your religion and join me”. Such an attitude leaves little room for mutual respect. It is not easy for religious propagandists to abandon this position. And yet we need to seriously find ways of looking at each other in such a way that we believe that we have a lot of common grounds, starting from the fact that we have the same God. This means therefore that I should be able to tell my Muslim friend; “my God is your God and your God is my God”, to quote a beautiful song by the famous musician, Bongos Ikwe. Until we reach this stage, there will always be fears of conflict and peaceful propagation of the faith will always remain problematic.

e. Religion and Politics

Here we have the burden of history. In one way or the other, there have been elements of force in the expansion of our respective faiths. The history of the Jihad of Usman Danfodio presents us with a scenario where religion was promoted and expanded by political and social pressure, not excluding military campaigns. It is in this context too that we have to understand the position of Christians in the North who resent the institution of the Sharia in the northern States. Christianity had a slightly different situation. But it could be argued that the European colonialism which was a result of superior military force, provided an enabling environment for the spread of the Christian faith. This is not to forget the fact that the British colonial powers did not go out to spread the Christian faith per se. Indeed on some occasions, they did impede the activities of Christian missionaries whenever this was perceived as working against the colonial interests. The point we are making here however is that by and large the British colonial environment enabled and promoted the activities of Christian missionaries, who generally belonged to the same nationality or race as the colonial powers.

Now however, the situation has changed. There is no more talk of “a jihad” in the form of spreading Islam by force of arms. The caliphate has been promoting a peaceful political position. On its own part, Christianity has no particular force any more to make its way in the society.

Finally, we must begin to accept in word and in deed the well-known adage that religion is to be proposed never to be imposed. This is easier said than done. There are certainly many who entertain nostalgia for when the civil authorities were available to promote religious agenda. This nostalgia will need to be put aside. All this does not in any way mean that we are not to take our faith seriously or indeed that we should give up the command that both Christians and Muslims have to preach their faith and seek to convert people. It is possible to do this without forcing people or disrespecting them. These issues have now come to the surface and can no longer be swept under the carpet or postponed. In a multi-religious society like

Nigeria, we must all embrace the principles and practice of religious freedom, if we are to have peace and harmony.

5. The Imperative of Dialogue.

To ensure religious freedom calls for sincere dialogue among religious communities. But in this regard, I regret that I have to start on a negative note: in the Nigeria of today, it is becoming more and more difficult to talk to Christians about dialogue with Muslims. The tragic experience of the “Boko Haram” and of other attacks against Christians has tended to turn many Nigerian Christians into enemies of Islam and of Muslims in general. Those who have suffered severe loss of loved ones and property, or have had to abandon their means of livelihood as they relocate to safer places may find it difficult to forgive the evil people who have attacked them without any justification or provocation. How can one dialogue with vicious murderers, faceless people merging with local populations whom they use as human shields; hardcore terrorists who have rejected any form of dialogue? Even more disturbing is the fact that although the members of Boko Haram are a tiny minority of the Nigerian Muslim community, the havoc they cause has affected practically the whole nation. Furthermore, the terrorists are the extreme end of a wide range of scenario basically hostile to Christianity and anything “non-Muslim”. This hostile sentiment needs to be identified and peacefully addressed.

There are some Christians who say that we should stop talking about dialogue and get ready to confront the Muslims in a once and for all decisive battle. I am still waiting to see the strategies for such an all-out war. Where are the troops? Who will mobilize, arm and lead them? Where will the line of battle be drawn? What is the expected outcome of such a war? Is it to impose one victorious religion over the other or to partition the nation into two religious states? I have seen nothing to convince me that this is the way to go.

It is clear to me that there is no viable alternative in our circumstances to making the effort to get close to each other through dialogue and cooperation for the common good of all. It is worthwhile making the effort. And if we look objectively at our nation, we have not done too badly in this regard, despite our occasional violent eruptions. This is not only a matter of political expediency. Our faith calls for it and our Church exhorts us to go in that direction. In particular with Islam, the Vatican II has given us very clear guidelines to follow. (cf. *Nostrae Aetate*) Despite the problems of the past, we are to put the sad history behind us and work for a better future, seeking common spiritual grounds, as we work together for the common good of mankind. We have no choice in the matter.

It is useful to state clearly what this dialogue does NOT mean. It does not mean being indifferent to our rights. We cannot keep quiet when our rights are being trampled upon. It is a matter of how we go about this. Violent confrontation is very rarely the best and only way open to us. After the right to life, the next most important right is the freedom of conscience

and religion. These rights are recognised by our Nigerian constitution, and we have both the right and the duty to ensure that they are respected. Nor does dialogue mean that we neglect our duty to evangelize. We have to preach to all about the message of Jesus for the salvation of all men and women. We do not impose our faith on anyone. But we retain the right to propose it to all, leaving everyone free to accept or reject it. Dialogue means seeking common grounds and working for the common good, in peace and harmony.

CONCLUSION:

From my own observation, I can say that our country is now experiencing a social turbulence due to much confusion in the parameters of our national institutions. This is clear in the political and socio-economic arena. But it is also true in the area of religion. Because of this, there is often a gap between what the constitution theoretically prescribes and the realities on the ground when we consider the question of religious freedom. What it means is that we need to insist on our rights and the rights of others in this regard. In Nigeria, a majority religion in one place is a minority in another. It is therefore in the ultimate best interests of everyone if we all defend and uphold the rights of each to religious freedom, the second most important right after the right to life itself. This is the way of the future. Our nation cannot afford to lag behind.