The Precarious Agenda: Christian-Muslim Relations in Contemporary Nigeria

Akintunde E. Akinade, High Point University
High Point, North Carolina

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The task of mapping out the contemporary challenges to, cleavages within, and contours of Christianity is indeed daunting. Philip Jenkins has recently written a persuasive monograph on the constant flux and fluidity within "the next Christendom." I agree with him that one of the most persistent challenges for contemporary Christianity is how to respond to the compelling presence of Islam in many parts of the world today. He rightly maintains, "Christian-Muslim conflict may in fact prove one of the closest analogies between the Christian world that was and the one coming into being."[1] This paper examines the contemporary paradigms and models of Christian-Muslim relations in contemporary Nigeria.

With a population of over 120 million people, Nigeria has been described by Archbishop Teissier of Algiers as "the greatest Islamo-Christian nation in the world."[2] By this he means that there is no other nation where so many Christians and Muslims live side-by-side. This reality makes Nigeria an important test case for developing patterns of Christian-Muslim relations in Africa. Nigeria provides a rich context for understanding the cultural, social, economic, and political issues that are involved in the Christian-Muslim encounter.

Relations between Christianity and Islam over a period of fourteen centuries have ranged from conflict to concord, from polemics to dialogue, from commercial cooperation to open confrontation. Christian-Muslim relations, however they manifest, constitute an important global phenomenon and affect the future of vast multitudes of people. With Christians and Muslims accounting for sixty percent of the world's population, relations between the two religions demand serious study and engagement as we enter a new millennium. Over the past half century, Christian-Muslim dialogue has become especially popular. Conferences, meetings, oral and written exchanges and round-table discussions have taken place in nearly every corner of the globe. Yet most of these discussions are more monologues than dialogues. They usually represent a predominantly Western perspective and often are unapologetically liberal in their outlook and their idealist models of how Christian-Muslim relations ought to be. In addition, they smack of Western guilt and remorse for past failures and shortcomings. I strongly affirm the importance of moving beyond what Lamin Sanneh has described as "a paralyzing guilt complex"[3] to fully grapple with the real life experiences of Christians and Muslims in different cultural contexts.

The African Dimension

The most important point of departure for understanding Christian-Muslim relations in Africa is the recognition that the two communities have been engaged in many fruitful encounters and much dialogue. Since the nineteenth century, says Andrew Walls, Africa has been a theatre for meaningful and constructive encounter between Christians and Muslims.[4] Yet, this rich African legacy of inter-religious exchange remains a *terra incognita* for many people in the West. For centuries, African Muslims and Christians have been living side-by-side and have acknowledged commonalities as well as differences. Within many African civil societies, African Christians and Muslims continue to challenge idealized perspectives of Christian-Muslim relations. The day- to-day lived experience of members of the two communities flies in the face of dogmatic presuppositions imposed from outside.

This reality makes clear the importance of utilizing a contextual approach in the study of Christian-Muslim relations. The contextual approach respects the authenticity and uniqueness of people's particular experience. It also serves as a legitimate protest against the tendency to impose a universal paradigm or totalizing agenda in Christian-Muslim relations. Contextualization involves the ways in which the interaction between Christians and Muslims is conceived and experienced indigenously within specific African societies. Kwame Anthony Appiah in his book, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* has used an Akan proverb that states that "the crocodile does not die

under the water so that we can call the monkey to celebrate its funeral"[5] to further emphasize the imperative of respecting people's contextual situation and experience in any intellectual discourse.

Both Christianity and Islam are well established in Africa. In fact, with the amazing growth of both faiths across Africa, each religion has become indigenous to the African continent. Lamin Sanneh has correctly affirmed that we need to

Assess the respective impact of Christianity and Islam through the eyes of African religions, and in so doing release these two missionary faiths from the fixed, motionless time frame in which they have been frozen and submit them to the animated surge of history where nothing stands still.[6]

The character of Christianity and Islam in Africa is markedly different from other manifestations of these religions around the world because each has been re-interpreted through the idioms and precepts of African cultures and worldviews. African people have embraced these two religions and put on them their own unique stamp and affirmation. It is simply cliche to say that Africans were passive recipients of these religions. The fact that Africans themselves have historically been religious agents in the transmission of Christianity and Islam is very important; for it forces us to modify the misrepresentation that they were imposed by outside agents without any African initiative. The main problem with such an approach is that it "assumes that religious truth is simply a straight line from imposed doctrine to dramatic conversion, and back again."[7] African traditional ethos and culture have penetrated both religions and endowed them with tolerant spirits. This fact undergirds what I have called the cultural dimension of Christian-Muslim engagement in Nigeria and many parts of Africa. My interest is not to romanticize African culture, but to affirm that within African civil societies, the traditional ethos has contributed to interreligious elasticity and tolerance between Christians and Muslims. In the words of Wande Abimbola:

The African point of view is one in which there is respect for all the religious traditions of humankind. While we hold steadfastly to our beliefs, we respect the right of others to practice their own religions in their own ways, provided they do not infringe on the rights of others. [i]

J.DY. Peel's comprehensive study of the Christian and Muslim presence in nineteenth century Yorubaland has also revealed that Yoruba people "responded to Christianity and Islam as alternative variants of the same phenomenon, to be assessed by a common criterion of their effectiveness in mediating between God and man."[ii] Peel's affirmation underscores the ecumenical character of African culture. It is therefore not plausible to speak about the encounter between Christians and Muslims within African civil societies without reference to the cultural yardsticks that guarantee and condition this relationship. For instance, in Yorubaland, Christians and Muslims live side-by-side, celebrate their differences and do not see doctrinal cleavages as constituting a formidable barrier to interfaith encounters and relations. The result is not a lazy pluralism, where the particularity of each religion is obliterated for the sake of 'getting along.' I submit that one of the significant points of departure in interfaith encounter on the level of civil society among the Yoruba people is the acceptance of the presence and legitimacy of other religions as symbolic mediators of the sacred encounter. This understanding of other religions is not derived from an evaluation of them as abstract systems or structures. Rather, it is based on an unequivocal appreciation of the experience of people who practice them and of the activity of God in their lives as portrayed in their ethical and spiritual commitments.

The Importance of PROCMURA in Post-Independence Africa

With independence, a deeper understanding of Islam became an important aspect of Christian responsibility in sub-Saharan Africa. In 1959, this desire manifested itself in the establishment of the Islam in Africa Project,[iii] or, as it came to be known in 1987, the Project for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa (PROCMURA). The project started with the bold determination to understand Islam and utilize the resources within the African traditional worldview to create a better understanding between Christians and Muslims in Africa. PROCMURA also developed out of the need for churches to educate their people so that they can carry out their responsibilities toward their Muslim neighbors, with the compelling demand to nurture interreligious understanding. The primary purpose of the project was,

To keep before the churches in Africa their responsibility for understanding Islam and the Muslims of their region in view of the churches' task of interpreting faithfully in the Muslim world the Gospel of Jesus Christ.[iv]

Under the auspices of PROCMURA, area committees were established in Ghana, Sierra Leone, Benin, Nigeria, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Malawi. In a number of countries, Muslims participated in PROCMURA programs and helped participants gain a better understanding of Islam. The type of relationship with Muslims that the project envisaged is reflected in the words of Rev. F.O. Segun, who later became Bishop of Lagos, from the 1962 report

"Christian Responsibility in an Independent Nigeria." He says that: "The approach… should always be by love, by readiness for deeper understanding of each other's point of view, and above all, by living what we profess and leaving the issues in God's hands."[v] PROCMURA has enabled Christians and Muslims to come together to discuss theological issues and work together on joint projects. It has continued to provide a new sense of orientation and awareness in Christian-Muslim relations in West Africa. While the project has not succeeded in eliminating all forms of interreligious prejudice or suspicion, it has consistently maintained that the only way forward for African Christians and Muslims is to change their orientation from rivalry and discord to an emphasis on life-in-community.

PROCMURA has helped engender an impressive interreligious awareness among Africans. In many places in West Africa, churches and mosques are maintained in friendly proximity to each other. Sanneh observes that "nothing dramatizes that fact better than the widespread attitude of Muslim and Christian Africans supporting each other's faith with donations, labor, personal visits, and participation in each other's feasts."[vi] In the post independence era, PROCMURA has tapped into Africa's legacy of hospitality, tolerance and generosity to deepen interreligious understanding in both Francophone and Anglophone in Africa. I find it compelling that PROCMURA has decided that is it in the best interest of Christians and Muslims that local religious leaders take the lead in fostering knowledge and respect for each other's religious traditions. Pierre Benious, a French missionary and founding father of the project, has described this as "the practice of decentralization" within PROCMURA.

The Dialogue of Life

In a 1993 article for the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Bishop Kenneth Cragg lamented, "dialogue is often elitist and exceptional, despite its popularity and the spate of books about it."[vii] Charles Amjad Ali also maintains that most of the discourse on Christian-Muslim relations has refused to address the needs of Christians in the South. He writes that "the present parameters of dialogue in the West mean nothing to those of us who live and breathe in an Islamic atmosphere where we are forced everyday to ask what the meaning of incarnation and God's reign is."[viii] Amjad Ali provides a very useful critique of the epistemological presuppositions undergirding Western theologies of dialogue. One is the glorification of cognitive knowledge, based on Descartes' dictum, "I think, therefore I am," with its emphasis on reason as the primary means of achieving a knowledge that claims to transcend particulars and achieve universality. Another is liberal political theory, as well, which celebrates individual freedoms and choice over community rights and religious identity. All these factors have led to metalogue, or the "search for a transcendent way beyond the particulars of the dialogue partners."[ix]

Consequently, people's religious and cultural particularities have been sacrificed and theology has become divorced from its historical moorings. Such an approach reduces dialogue to "mentally constructed laboratories of objectivity"[x] which are alien to human situations. The intellectual exercise described by Amjad Ali pays scant attention to the experiences of people who are the participants of any interreligious encounter. Most of the discourse within the "interfaith industry"--- to borrow a useful phrase from Lesslie Newbigin -- has been characterized by what I call a 'submit mentality.' The result is that it is removed from the experiences of the masses.

In many parts of southern Nigeria, there is a form of dialogue of life that operates on practical and day-to-day terms. Christians and Muslims live next to each other, mingle freely in all aspects of human endeavor, meeting in the market place and on the streets, in schools and other institutions. Both Christians and Muslims are awakened every morning by the strident voice of the muezzin from the minaret of the mosque, urging faithful believers that "it is better to pray than to sleep." Christians receive Christmas and Easter greeting cards from their Muslim friends, neighbors, and relatives. Muslims are present in churches for the baptism, wedding, or burial of relatives and friends. In this dialogue of life, Christians and Muslims are enriched by each other's experience and spirituality, and strengthened by certain features of the faith of the other.

For African Christians, living with people of other faiths is a fact of life. We share the same culture, way of life and worldview. We operate within the same economic and political system. The web of economic and political tyranny that surrounds African people does not differentiate between people on the basis of religious affiliation. There is an on-going dialogue of life that has enabled Africans to respond to their existential situation.

Most studies and paradigms in ecumenical dialogue to date have focused on theological concerns, or have explored the ideological dimensions of religion. Western theories of dialogue tend to be text-centered, doctrinally-oriented, and concerned with issues of the *lex credendi*. The lived character of dialogue in places like Ghana, Yorubaland and the Gambia and in many other places in West Africa offers a more grassroots example for consideration. The religious understanding that has emerged from this popular experience is no less significant in its accomplishments than the gains made from more formal projects. In the words of Pope John Paul II:

The dialogue between ordinary believers, harmonious and constructive sharing in the situations of daily contacts is truly a basic form of dialogue, and the one which lays the foundation for more specialized encounters. [xi]

During a visit to Gambia in February 1992, Pope John Paul said: "I know I have come to a country which has a proud tradition of peaceful co-existence among its people, a country in which the ideals of tolerance, justice and freedom are held in the highest regard."te" class="MsoEndnoteReference">[xii] The Pope, who was received at the airport by both Christian and Muslim leaders, was impressed by the influence of *teranga*, the Wolof word for hospitality and respect in society. After his return to Rome, the Holy Father sent Cardinal Francis Arinze, a Nigerian who is the head of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue at the Vatican, to express his gratefulness to the Muslim leaders. In his missive, Cardinal Arinze encouraged Christians in the area to continue the dialogue of life which is pervasive in the country and elsewhere in West Africa and concluded that "if a dialogue with Islam is possible anywhere, it should be here."[xiii]

The dialogue of life can help draw participants out of their cocoons of mutual mistrust and engender an atmosphere of deeper understanding, mutual esteem and respect. Beyond this, I will also argue that the dialogue of life offers us a more effective way of addressing issues of moral philosophy, which lies at the heart of the African sacred cosmos. When people the share the same economic, political, and cultural situation, such a basic dialogue is essential for the promotion of common human and spiritual values in the process of building a community of justice, solidarity, and peace. To be in this permanent dialogue is to be responding to the multiple voices from outside the circle of one's identity, voices calling one to cross over the boundaries and limitations of one's own experience and learn from others. This is why the Akan of Ghana say "one head does not make a consultation."

It is interesting to note that Lateef Adegbite, a Yoruba Muslim and one of the most vociferous advocates of the implementation of the Shari'ah in Nigeria, once remarked that "no responsible Nigerians, certainly not the Muslims would precipitate a religious war today realizing that one's kith and kin, spouse, or close friend could be on the other side of the battlefield."[xiv] This statement is consistent with the pervasive religious attitude among the Yoruba people. In his book, *Hegemony and Culture: Politics and Religious Change Among the Yoruba,* David Laitin vigorously argues for the de-politicization of religion among the Yoruba people. Laitin's thesis fits with the Yoruba way of life and also explains how Yoruba people remained in solidarity with one another during and after the advent of Islam and Christianity in their domains. It also shows that the impact of these incoming religions did not dissolve the *ebi* values, [xv] which permeated traditional society. This spirit of group solidarity, similar to what the medieval Muslim cultural historian, Ibn Khaldun called 'asabiya' guarantees mutual openness, respect and cooperation among all Yoruba people.

Hence, my argument is that an understanding of the individual's responsibility *vis-à-vis* the community has profound implications for the way Christians and Muslims interact with each other in Yorubaland. Yoruba people share a belief in a dynamic and interdependent relationship between the individual and the community. The latter defines the former. To be human is to stand in connection with the larger community of invisible ancestors, God, and the visible community.

The cultural aspect of Christian-Muslim engagement in Yorubaland has confidently affirmed that the plurality of religions should not be seen as the failure of Christian mission or Islamic *da'wah*. On the contrary, the existence of plurality of religions expresses the spirit of God "which blows where it wills." This is what I call the unobstructiveness of God. The crux of the issue is whether the challenges of modernity, globalization, and the pressures of the modern state can have negative repercussions on what Stuart Brown has described as the "agenda of affection" among Christians and Muslims in Africa.

A Dangerous Awakening: Religion, Politics and Violence

The cynical manipulation of religion by the Nigerian state has led to a combative dimension in Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria. Complicating matters, ambitious individuals have also acted as demagogues as they exploited deep-seated prejudices for personal benefit. Thus, Christians and Muslims have become embroiled in an acerbic struggle for ascendancy over the Nigerian body politic. A great many different kinds of religio-political conspiracies have engulfed Nigeria since the 1980s, and these have ultimately destabilized civil society in many parts of the country.[xvi] In a country that is already fragile and constantly teetering on the verge of dissolution, religious crisis presents a considerable challenge. The intense politicization of religion in contemporary Nigeria has continued to aggravate the deepening antagonism between Christians and Muslims all over the country. Currently, Nigerians are passionately questioning whether their country should remain united as one entity. Some argue that they should seek

a federal solution to Nigeria's problems based on several autonomous regions while others wish to jettison the colonial borders altogether and create new states. Incendiary strife between Christians and Muslims has added more weight and credence to the secessionist agenda.

The political culture in Nigeria since independence in 1960 has been dominated by the northern elite, initially by the northern political class during the first republic (1960-66), and later by the northern military class. Shortly after independence, the Northern Peoples Congress (NPC) adopted a grand policy of Islamization. The Premier, Alhaji Sir Ahmadu Bello, who was the Sardaunna of Sokoto (the center of the former Islamic Caliphate) "asserted himself as the Apostle of Islam, and Islam became the gateway to Northern political fortunes and the sole criterion of who was a true Northerner." [xvii] In 1961, the Sardauna established the Jama'tu Nasril Islam (Society for the Support of Islam) to coordinate the systematic Islamization of Nigeria. The society was designed to carry out the missionary task of the Umma and to "establish and run schools, hospitals, dispensaries, public enlightenment through seminars, lectures and conferences and so on." [xviii] With stupendous dexterity and considerable aplomb, the Saurdauna designed programs to restore the glory of the Sokoto Caliphate. He gave out free copies of the Qur'an and other Islamic literatures, rewarded people within his religio-political purview with civil service positions, and trained a new class of intellectuals to replace the moribund ulamas in northern Nigeria.

By the time of the fall of the First Republic in January 1966, the country was suffocating under tremendous ethno-regional, religious and cultural problems. Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogu, again a Northerner but now the quintessential representation of the northern military cabal, spearheaded the military coup. The prospect of continued northern hegemony was one of the factors that led to a thirty month Biafra war.

Since Biafra has a predominantly Christian population, many commentators see the Nigerian civil war in terms of Christian-Muslim conflict, the Muslim north against the Christian east. There were many other orchestrated moves from 1966 to 1979 to accentuate Islamic influences in Nigeria's national and international policies. The oil boom in the 1970s further encouraged the government to align itself with other Islamic nations through its membership of OPEC - the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries. The affiliation with OPEC led to a resurgence of what Okafor has described as a "jihad of diplomacy" [xix] in Nigeria's foreign policy. In July 1978, the Yan Izala movement was formed to further the course of Islam in Nigeria. Malam Ismaila Idris established the movement as a form of protest against innovation (*bida*). Sheikh Gumi, who was a close associate of Sir Ahmadu Bello, effectively used his *tafsir* (Qur'anic exegesis) on the radio and his polemical articles in Nigerian newspapers to teach about the true meaning of Islam and attack the *tariqa* (Sufi brotherhoods). Other Islamic movements that emerged at this period include the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (SCIA) and the Muslim Students' Society (MSS). The MSS is a university organization responsible for the total well being of Muslims in all Nigerian universities. The MSS is particularly disillusioned with what it has defined as a decadent society inherited from the West. For them, an Islamic state would be the viable solution to the problems in Nigeria. With the increasing deterioration in Christian-Muslim relations in the 1980s, the MSS has become more militant, often at loggerheads with Christian fundamentalist youth organizations on campuses. Christians became violent in their resistance to the onslaught of Islamic revivalism and militancy in Nigeria. Ogbu Kalu gives a telling account of a Nigerian pastor who said, "the bible advises that when someone slaps you, you should turn the other cheek. When he slaps you for the second time, the bible is silent; so you should now do everything possible to ensure that your cheek is intact for preaching the gospel of the kingdom." [xx] The die is cast, and the center can no longer hold. The diabolic manipulation of religious sentiment and the inconsistencies of a predatory state have replaced the common ground for Christian-Muslim engagement at the level civil of society. In 1973, Nigeria sought and was granted observer status in the organization of the Islamic conference. All these developments continue to fuel the embers of religious discord in Nigeria. The political moves to make Nigeria an Islamic state were seen by Nigerian Christians as a contradiction of Nigeria's secular constitution.

Efforts by Muslims to add the Shari'ah in the Nigerian Constitution in 1978, 1989, and 1991 have had negative repercussions on Christian-Muslim relations in the nation. This development can be clearly interpreted as "a dangerous awakening," to borrow a phrase from Enwerem, in Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria. Nigeria was also plunged into another crisis when the military government of General Ibrahim Babangida enrolled Nigeria as a member of the Organization of Islamic Countries in 1986. The Christian Students' Movement and other radical Christian bodies said that membership of the OIC was synonymous with the Islamization of the country and warned that this could lead to religious war. To challenge this move by the federal government, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) was formed in 1986 as an ecumenical body of Protestants, Catholics, and African Independent Churches. Enwerem sees the emergence of CAN as an amalgamation of distinct southern and northern strands. Its closest forerunner was the Northern Christian Association established in 1964 at the time of the Sarduanna's Islamization campaigns. With the Islamic threat in the air, there was a need to have a permanent Christian body organized in every state as well as nationally to respond to the Islamic threat in Nigeria. Right from the start, CAN

was militant in orientation and focus. Its favorite hymns are "Stand up, Stand up for Jesus" and "Onward Christian Soldiers."

In the early twentieth century, there was a concerted effort by Christians to battle the perceived Islamic cancer that has metastasized in the nation and was ready to consume the Christians within it. CAN claimed that though the Shari'ah legal system has always existed in Nigeria, the constitution only recognizes the customary and personal aspects of the Islamic legal system. Shari'ah can offer direction on such issues as marriage, divorce, or implementation of a personal will. The legal system cannot be used for the adjudication of criminal issues in a religiously pluralistic society like northern Nigeria. Muslims, on the other hand, claimed that Shari'ah law is superior to the Nigerian constitution. Enwerem has however alluded to the titanic contradictions in CAN's agenda. On the one hand, CAN insists that the Nigerian state should stick to its secular principle of neutrality concerning religious advocacy and support. On the other, CAN is also competing with other Muslim groups like the Jama'atu Nasril Islam (JNI) for state benefits such as subsidies for pilgrimages and religious buildings. In spite of this shortcoming, there is no gainsaying the fact that CAN was able to bring Christians in the north and south together in order to present a united resistance to the scourge of Islamization in Nigeria. The religious situation during the military era was more volatile because according to Hassan Kukah,

By its nature, military rule denies access to all other channels of organized Opposition; for many fundamentalists, military rule imposes all kinds of Limitations on their ability to negotiate with the state; discontent finds Expression in religious violence in speech and action. [xxi]

During Abacha's reign of terror, the Shari'ah issue was completely forgotten. The situation changed with the election of Olusegun Obasanjo to power in May 1999. The 1979 constitution recognized the jurisdiction of the Shari'ah over civil matters. This position was also affirmed in the 1999 amendment to the constitution. The Shari'ah question took a rather radical turn with the announcement on October 22, 1999, of the adoption of Shari'ah rule in the Zamfara state by its exuberant governor, Ahmed Sani Yerima. Yerima received the moral and financial backing of the Arab world for his action. He was given a grant of 500 million Naira by Arab nations to underwrite his program for the implementation of the Shari'ah in the Zamfara state. CAN spoke with a unified voice in its opposition to Yerima's move. The stage is now set for the ultimate showdown between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria. Other states like Kano, Kaduna and Niger States immediately pondered following Yerima's example and this led to heightened tension in the country. In 2000, interreligious riots erupted in Kaduna and this led to the death of over 1,000 people. During this very tense situation, the Nigerian Nobel Laureate, Wole Soyinka remarked that there is no religious basis for Yerima's theocratic madness, saying the program is motivated mainly by politics. He further echoed the dominant feeling of southern Christians that the northern Muslim elite, finding themselves out of political favor, decided to create a religio-political albatross for Obasanjo by creating a religious pretext for their dashed political hopes. Soyinka continues in his usual unequivocal stance:

I am neither a Christian nor a Moslem. Definitely, if I have a religion at all, it is our traditional Yoruba Orisa. As far as I am concerned, both Islam and Christianity are interlopers in African spirituality. This is my position. Even though I say that I am neither a Christian nor a Moslem, let me make it clear that I studied comparative religions and so I know quite a bit of the Qur'an. We are not totally ignorant even though we are 'infidels' and 'Kafirs.' We are not totally ignorant about the provisions of the Qur'an. And we are saying that some of these people (Shari'ah advocates) are lying, misusing, and abusing the Qur'an. And we also know that we have studied the religious sociology of many countries even in contemporary times and we know very well that their own interpretation of the Shari'ah is at least different from the one which is being imposed on this country. So let them stop claiming some kind of special knowledgibility. They are abusing knowledge. They are abusing faith. They are abusing piety and they are showing themselves to be nothing but real impious secularists who are merely manipulating religion for political ends. [xxii]

This manipulation thesis vis-à-vis the imposition of the Shari'ah in northern Nigeria has been applauded by other pundits and commentators on the Nigerian situation. In the words of Femi Ojo-Ade,

With the so-called power shift, which the self-chosen masters cannot accept even in its patent superficiality, some states have religion their constitutional centerpiece, to spite others, or to goad them to react in a manner that would cause chaos. [xxiii]

Adebayo Williams has also added more salvo to the manipulation thesis. In his characteristic forthright manner, he proffers that,

Once it became obvious that Obasanjo would marginally tinker with the status quo to ensure some measure of authority and legitimacy for his own minimalist agenda, the northern power mafia opted for the sharia gambit and thereby severely undermined the authority and legitimacy of the state. [xxiv]

The adoption of Shari'ah law in its legal totality by thirteen northern Nigerian states since the beginning of the fourth republic, coupled with powerlessness of the state to contain it has engendered serious religious tension in Nigeria. Christians under the banners of CAN and the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria (CBAN) claim that the imposition of the Shari'ah is a pernicious assault on Nigeria's federal and secular constitution. The ardent proponents of the Shari'ah, on the other hand, see its implementation as a fulfillment of the same constitution, which guarantees them freedom of religion and worship. Muslims have tenaciously affirmed that there is no distinction between the public and religious spheres. The explosive dimension of the Shari'ah issue displays how religion can overlap with politics.[xxv] The danger in the situation is that the adoption of Shari'ah as criminal law has the effect of reducing religion to an instrument of state power, which will ultimately limit the power of religion as a force for freedom. I do agree with Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im that:

Muslims must appreciate the moral and political untenableness of a modern state based on traditional Shari'ah; creative and vigorous debate and reformulation on Islamic jurisprudence and political philosophy cannot begin until the false prophets of Islamic self -determination through the Shari'ah are exposed and discredited.[xxvi]

Abdullahi An-Na'im's thesis about the distinction between the "eternal Shari'ah" and the "historical Shari'ah" also sheds more light on the need to have an institutional separation of religion and state. According to him, eternal Shari'ah is "the direct expression of the perfection of divine revelation that is immune from human desire, whims, and error."[xxvii] This form of Shari'ah has been implemented by Muslim individuals and communities through personal commitment and voluntary practice rather than through coersion by the state. Historical Shari'ah, on the other hand, represents by a particular generation of Islamic society to use "human reason and the accumulated wisdom of human experience"[xxviii] to interpret and apply divine stipulations to human life. This is a form of mediated Shari'ah "conditioned by the concrete experience of specific societies and it can only be human and secular."[xxix] It is therefore inappropriate to call a state where the traditional formulations of Shari'ah are practiced an "Islamic state." Those who do so deny "the reality of the great diversity of Islamic religious and political thought" thereby monopolizing "religious legitimacy for a particular and necessarily limited human conception."[xxx] An-Naim's thesis elaborates on the ferocious ambiguity in the implementation of the Shari'ah. This Sudanese legal scholar has written extensively about human rights as a basis for appropriate religious practice and qualified state jurisdiction. Religion is too involved in human life for us to privatize it completely and politics too interwoven with issues of justice for us to exclude religion from it. But we have to be aware of joining the two. Ibn Khaldun once remarked that people should reject the simplistic notion that religion and politics belong together lest we "patch our worldly affairs by tearing our religion to pieces. Thus neither our religion lasts nor the worldly affairs we have been patching."[xxxi] Lamin Sanneh, in his *The Crown and The Turban: Muslims and West African Pluralism,* has also described the pitfalls of an absolute, authoritarian, and leviathan state. According to him:

The state authority aspired to the status of a metaphysical absolute, in which the will of the nation state became omnipotent and definitive of truth about human beings. ...Such a claim turns the state into an explicit rival religion bolstered by an impregnable system of rewards and inducements, as well as sanctions and penalties.[xxxii]

The heart of the issue is that a rigid application of the Shari'ah in a multi-religious state like Nigeria may prove too dangerous and loaded with deleterious consequences. Nigerian Muslims must come to terms with the fact that any attempt to impose the form of Shari'ah designed for Prophet Muhammad's time or any other form from another period is a blatant denial of the spirit of flexibility in Islam. In the words of Sajida Sultana Alvi,

Change is actually the essence of Islam---a very dominant and central feature. If you rob Islam of that dynamism and that capacity for change, then it becomes static. That is why there are so many difficulties in the minds of Muslims all over the world. They are trying to cope with the demands of modernity and looking for the solutions within the scriptures. I don't mean that we should ignore the scriptures, but we are to interpret them in a way that supports changing with the times, in a way that would adapt and integrate the Muslim community.[xxxiii]

Nigeria is presently engulfed in a religious quagmire that threatens to destabilize the country. In order to get out of this cesspool of religious violence, there is a need to have a nation state that is sensitive to the demands and concerns of a multi-religious and multi-ethnic society. Christians and Muslims must also explore some of the key elements in their political values that support a pluralistic society. It is pertinent to mention here that in spite of the

"Islamic siege" in Nigeria, I still share the sentiments of John Esposito that "most Muslims are not Islamic political activists. In fact, such activists constitute a minority, albeit a significant minority."[xxxiv] The advocacy of this minority group is not in any way different from the "Africa for Christ" crusades of Reinhard Bonnke and his passionate evangelical followers.

In conclusion, I want to add that the gains of interreligious harmony on the level of civil society will become meaningless if Christians and Muslims in Nigeria cannot develop the capacity to live with the challenges of pluralism. The other challenge for Christians and Muslims in Nigeria and the rest of west Africa is to develop an ideology of dialogue that can mobilize them to see through the perfidy of the nation-state and the virulent machinations of self-proclaimed religious demagogues. Dialogue is not the obliteration of religious particularities; rather, it is living together with the full recognition of the best in both religious traditions. This form of dialogue is not an ideal construct. It must be deeply rooted in the social, political, economic, and cultural realities of specific societies. One of the primary aims of dialogue is the common search for a workable model of society and cooperation in building a human community which safeguards religious freedom and respects differences and particularities. Dialogue recognizes that plurality within the human family, including religious plurality, should not be allowed to be the source of conflict and crisis. I submit that interreligious dialogue presents the most credible way to control the noxious tide of religious fanaticism and philistinism sweeping across all Nigeria. It is also my sincere hope that Christians and Muslims in Nigeria will come together to address some of the many problems that confront them, regardless of their religious persuasion. This is what I have described as the "common enemy agenda" for Christians and Muslims in Nigeria today and in the future.

NOTES

[1] See Philip Jenkins, "A New Christendom, "*The Chronicle Review*, Section 2, March 29, 2002, p.B10.

[2] J.O. Onaiyekan, "Being the Church in an Islamo-Christian Society: Emerging Patterns of Christian/Muslim Relations in Africa—A Nigerian Perspective," in *Towards an African Synod*, ed. G. Alberigo and A. Mushete, Concilium, 1992, p.48.

[3] Lamin Sanneh, Peity and Power: Muslims and Christians in West Africa (New York: Orbis Books, 1996), p. 5.

[4] See Andrew Walls, "Africa as the Theatre of Christian Engagement with Islam in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 29, No. 2 (1999): pp.155-74.

[5] Kwame Anthony Appiah, In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p.180.

[6] Lamin Sanneh, *West African Christianity: The Religious Impact* (New York: Orbis Books, 1983), p.xvi.

[7] Lamin Sanneh, Piety and Power, op. cit. p. 1.

[i] Wande Abimbola, "The Attitude of Yoruba Religion Toward Non-Yoruba Religions," in *Attitudes of Religions and Ideologies*, ed. Leonard Swidler (Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), p. 145.

[ii] J.D.Y. Peel, "Engaging Islam in Nineteenth-Century Yorubaland," (NAMP Position Paper 27), pp.27-30.

[iii] On the development of the Islam in Africa Project, see J. Crossley, "The Islam in Africa Project," *International Review of Mission*, 61, 1972, pp. 150-160.

[iv] Johann Haafkens, "The Direction of Christian Muslim Relations in Sub-Saharan Africa,"in *Christian-Muslim Encounters*, ed. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad et al. (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1995), p.306.

[v] Ibid.

[vi] Lamin Sanneh, *Piety and Power*, op cit. pp.22-23.

[vii] Kenneth Cragg, "The riddle of man and the silence of God," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 17/4, 1993, p.160.

[viii] Charles Amjad-Ali, "Theological and Historical Rationality Behind Christian-Muslim Relations," in *Islam in Asia: Perspectives for Christian-Muslim Encounter*, ed. J.P. Rajashekar and H.S. Wilson (Geveva: Lutheran World Federation, 1992), p. 14.

[ix] Ibid. pp. 7-8.

[x] Ibid.

[xi] Pope John Paul II, "Address to participants in the Annual Meeting between the Secretariat for Non-Christians and the WCC Sub-Unit on Dialogue," *Bulletin*, 62, 1986, p.146.

[xii] See Cokkie Van't-Leven, "Africa's tradition of peaceful co-existence: threatened dream or lasting reality," in *Muslims and Christians in Europe: Breaking New Grounds*, ed. Dick Mulder, et al. (Kampen: Uitgeverik Kok, 1993), p.15.

[xiii] Ibid.

[xiv] Akintunde Akinade, *Christian-Muslim Dialogue in Yorubaland: An Ecumenical Critique*, Ph.D. Dissertation, Union Theological Seminary, New York, May 1996, p. 218.

[xv] The *Ebi* Commonwealth Social Theory has been used by Akinjogbin, a Yoruba historian to explain the strong family bond among Yoruba people. According to this theory, the feeling of belonging together and social cohesion are reinforced by the common acceptance that all Yoruba people descended from the same ancestral origin and are related by blood.

[xvi] See Toyin Falola, *Violence in Nigeria: The Crisis of Religious Politics and Secular Ideologies* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 1998) for a comprehensive analysis of interreligious conflicts in contemporary Nigeria.

[xvii] Yusufu Turaki, "The Social-Political Context of Christian-Muslim Encounter in Northern Nigeria," *Studies in World Christianity*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 1997, p. 133.

[xviii] Ogbu Kalu, *Power, Poverty and Prayer: The Challenges of Poverty and Pluralism in African Christianity, 1960-1996* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2000), p. 142.

[xix] See Gabriel Maduka Okafor, *Development of Christianity and Islam in Modern Nigeria: A Critical Appraisal of the Religious Forces of Christianity and Islam in Modern Nigeria*, (Wurzburg: Echter, 19992).

[xx] Ogbu Kalu, *Power, Poverty and Prayer*, op cit. p. 157.

[xxi] Hassan Kukah, *Religion, Politics and Power in Northern Nigeria*, (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Ltd., 1994), pp. 199-200.

[xxii] Wole Soyinka, "This is Prelude to War," *The News*, 2000, p. 10.

[xxiii] Femi Ojo-Ade, "Dividends of a Nascent Democracy," *The News*, June 23, 2001, p. 6.

[xxiv] Adebayo Williams, "Transition Without Transformation," http://nigeriaworld .com, July 8, 2001, p.4.

[xxv] For further discussion on the historical development and application of the Shari'ah in Nigeria, see Joseph Kenny, "Shari'ah in Nigeria: A Historical Survey," *Bulletin on Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa*, Vol. 1,

No.1, 1986, pp. 1-21; John Onaiyekan, "The Shariah in Nigeria: A Christian View," *Bulletin on Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa*, Vol. 5, No.3, 1987, pp. 1-17; David Laitin, "The Shari'ah Debate and the Origins of the Nigeria's Second Republic," *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 3, 1982, pp.411-430; Jonathan T. Reynolds, "Nigeria and Shari'ah: Religion and Politics in a West African Nation," in *History Behind the Headlines: The Origins of Conflicts Worldwide*, ed. Meghan O'Meara (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale Group, 2001), pp. 214-220 and John Hunwick, "An African Case Study of Political Islam: Nigeria," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 524, November 1992, pp. 149-155.

[xxvi] Abdullahi An-Naim, "Reforming Islam," *Harvard International Review*, Vol. 19, No. 2, 1997, p. 26.

[xxvii] Abdullahi An-Naim, "Political Islam in National Politics and International Relations," in *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, ed. Peter Berger (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 117.

[xxviii] Ibid. p. 116.

[xxix] Ibid. p. 117.

[xxx] Ibid.

[xxxi] See Franz Rosenthal, *Al-Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, Vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 427.

[xxxii] Lamin Sanneh, *The Crown and the Turban: Muslims and West African Pluralism* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1997), pp. 180-181.

[xxxiii] Sajida Sultana Alvi, quoted in Mary Pat Fisher, *Living Religions* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1999), p. 387.

[xxxiv] John Esposito, "Islam and Christianity Face to Face: An Old Conflict and Prospects for a New Ending," *Commonwealth*, January 31, 1997, pp. 14-15.

Akintunde E. Akinade, from Nigeria, received his Ph.D. in Ecumenical Studies from Union Theological Seminary in the city of New York. He is now teaching world religions at High Point University in High Point, North Carolina.