



THE CHALLENGES OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN NIGERIA

Nov 27, 2018

ABUJA, NIGERIA -

A TALK DELIVERED BY MOST REV. IGNATIUS A. KAIGAMA, ARCHBISHOP OF JOS, 24TH NOVEMBER, 2018, AT THE
PRESIDENTIAL PALACE, MALTA

Your Excellency, Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, the President of Malta,

Your Excellency Most Rev. Charles J. Scicluna, the Archbishop of Malta

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

PREAMBLE

May I begin by thanking you very heartily for your gracious welcome to Malta (especially to the Presidential Palace)

and for the opportunity offered me to share thoughts about religious freedom in Nigeria. I pray that we shall have the privilege of hosting Your Excellency in Nigeria soon. My gratitude to Aid to the Church in Need (ACN) in Malta for inviting me and facilitating this visit; to be a part of the launch of the 2018 Religious Freedom report. A little over four years ago I was here to witness the birth of ACN Malta, whose mission to the suffering and needy Church and indeed to humanity has since then been positively impactful. Thank you for your solidarity and fraternal communion expressed in spiritual and material terms with us in Africa and beyond. God bless ACN for touching lives positively.

INTRODUCTION

Any talk about religious freedom in Nigeria, must necessarily refer to Islam and Christianity, the two dominant religions which both arrived with a burning desire for the conversion of multitudes from the traditional religions. Islam's first documented presence in Nigeria was in Kanem Bornu Empire in the 9th century, but its presence became more pronounced between the 11th and 12th centuries, while Christianity came in the 15th century through Catholic Augustinian missionaries from Portugal. The origin of Islam is accredited to the Prophet Muhammed, after whose death in 632, the Islamic Empire expanded rapidly in the 7th and 8th centuries, largely by military conquests, influencing the spread of Islam to parts of Asia, Africa, Middle East, Europe, etc. These military conquests brought about the capture of the Holy Land (Jerusalem and the Holy Sepulcher). The Crusades, an effort to liberate or reclaim the Holy Land from Muslim rule, began in 1095 lasting over a period of two hundred years. This take over of the Christian Holy Land by Muslims and the Christian effort during the Crusades to reclaim it are unfortunately at the root of the very sad history of inter-religious tensions and relationship between adherents of Christianity and Islam.

The uneasy relationship these two religions had elsewhere, before their arrival in Nigeria, has influenced the competitive spirit, inexplicable tension, suspicious and sometimes hostile relationship between the Christian and Muslim adherents. Ever since these two religions met in Nigeria, the struggle has often been for increased

membership, territorial expansion or the use of religion to gain political capital. Unfortunately, this not-too-cordial-relationship has continued to grow in intensity with attendant negative consequences. Even many centuries after those bitter encounters between adherents of Islam and Christianity, we in Nigeria continue to feel the hangover as attested to by the way the umbrella Muslim organization, Jama'atu Nasril Islam (JNI) and the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) behave and act towards each other. One can see from the actions and utterances of the leaders of these organizations that instead of focusing on how their religious values can complement each other to build their followers and by extension the nation spiritually and morally, they have been more concerned about promoting narrow religious interests, engaging in mutual verbal attacks and sometimes making inflammatory statements that threaten peace and harmony which is what sometimes gives the impression that the nation is at the brink of a religious war!

In this presentation some of the issues that threaten religious freedom, are identified. We shall not however, dwell on enumerating the well known incidences of massive destruction to lives and property by the Boko Haram insurgents or militant Fulani herdsmen etc. Such incidences also include the abduction of the Chibok and Dapchi girls, the suffering of the internally displaced persons; denial of rights and privileges to Christians in some parts of the North, disallowing the teaching of Christian Religious Knowledge in some Northern States, the kidnapping of Catholic Priests and Sisters, fear and the psychological trauma induced by fanatics or militants, just to mention a few. Other subtle actions and policies that qualify as persecution even if without bloodshed; factors that fuel the tension and hostility between Christians and Muslims, which rob the nation of a calm atmosphere of peaceful coexistence, are also considered. Some incidences in Jos and our effort at inter-religious initiatives at the Dialogue, Reconciliation and Peace (DREP) Centre, Jos, are mentioned before concluding with the positive views of Prof. Sani Abubakar Lugga, the Waziri of Katsina, on the need for the Christians and Muslims who form more than 90% of the Nigerian population not only to profess religiosity through Mosque and Church services, but by putting into practice the values of their respective religions, including religious freedom.

THE REALITY OF RELIGIOUS HYPER SENSITIVITY AND INTOLERANCE IN NIGERIA

It is not contested that more Muslims populate the northern part of Nigeria while the South is more populated by Christians even though there are significant and vibrant Christian and Muslim groups in both the Northern and Southern part respectively. Their significant numbers cannot and should not be underestimated, glossed over or ignored. Doing so is what ignites serious inter-religious tension and squabbles. It is also noteworthy that there is more openness to peaceful coexistence, inter-religious marriages and common celebrations of feasts between Muslims and Christians in the southern part of the country than in the North where a hypersensitivity to the issues of religion exists so much so that the mere mention of a word that is thought to be blasphemy could lead to great conflagration and loss of lives. The Miss World contest in 2002, when about 200 lives were needlessly lost because of the disapproval of some who felt that the whole exercise was unethical and the publication of the cartoon of Prophet Muhammad in far away Denmark in 2005 which led to many deaths and before it the new dimension of Sharia introduced in 1999 and propagated by the former Governor of Zamfara State, Alhaji Ahmad Sani Yerima, which almost polarized the nation, are cases in point.

One may ask why the competitive spirit and even the hostility and intolerance between the two main religious

groups in Nigeria? Perhaps it is because Islam was the first to arrive and the arrival of Christianity much later which like Islam, sought significant and visible presence among local populations as well as strong and fast numerical increase of its members triggered the unhealthy rivalry.

Another reason for uneasy relationship between Christians and Muslims is the fact that the British Colonial authorities favored the North in their policy of "indirect rule". The Hausa and Arabic languages were used just as Muslim chiefs were imposed to rule over non-Muslim populations. This in no small way aided the penetration of Islam and the Islamization of what is today Northern Nigeria. The "indirect rule" arrangement by the colonial authorities somewhat gave birth to the notion that political power is the exclusive preserve of the northern Fulani/Hausa Muslims, even decades after the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates in 1914.

Another factor that fueled mutual distrust between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria is the fact that Christianity came along with a functional Western education that developed the capacity, knowledge and skills of the people as compared to the Muslim Koranic or Arabic education which, apart from spiritual empowerment, did little to empower the children, the youth and the women. Furthermore the almajiri system, whereby children were allowed to escape parental control and wander on the streets in faraway villages or towns to acquire Koranic knowledge, was seemingly encouraged. Western education propagated by Christianity, on the other hand, sort of "opened the eyes" of non-Muslim ethnic groups and they were no longer ready to play the second fiddle or remain unconditionally subjugated to northern Muslim interests and culture because of the critical and autonomous thinking which western education provided.

Some ethnic groups in Northern Nigeria today feel greatly deprived of their rights and privileges on grounds of their refusal to accommodate and accept Islam. No wonder, it is obvious that Northern Muslims have produced more Presidents and influential members of government than any part of the country. The Yoruba of Western Nigeria have dominated the educational sector with the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria prominently in the lead in matters of commerce and other economic ventures. The over three hundred ethnic minorities feel they are suffocating under a system that

allows only big ethnic or religious groups to thrive. The reaction to this feeling of suppression, marginalization and unfair treatment is what results in pockets of violence that erupt obviously for economic or political reasons but because the Nigerian population is almost evenly divided between Christians and Muslims, any such crisis is interpreted as religious.

TENSION, VIOLENCE AND POLARIZATION

What may be the reason for tension and violence today between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria is perhaps the perception by Christians that Northern Muslims in Nigeria seem to consider their culture and religion to be superior to theirs which they refer to as pagan peoples (infidels), who must be subjected to Islamic rules and institutions. This sort of negative stereotyping gives rise to tension and eventual violence.

Many Muslims maintain that there is no compulsion to convert anyone to Islam, but many Christians agree that while as a principle there may be no coercion to convert to Islam, there is a subtle and sometimes severe discrimination against non-Muslims where the latter is a minority. This can be seen from the plight of the Maguzawa, a sub group of the Hausa tribe, primarily found in Kano and Katsina and also in Kaduna, Zamfara and Jigawa States. Their experience obviously shows that, even though ethnically affiliated to the Hausa ethnic group, and as their given name "Maguzawa" suggests "those who run away from Islam", they have suffered and continue to suffer political, economic and social discrimination. This is partly the result of the colonial policy which imposed Islamic institutions and laws on minorities in the North.

THE NIGERIAN CONSTITUTION AND THE FREEDOM OF RELIGION

The Nigerian Constitution guarantees freedom of religion as a basic right for its citizens. Article 38, section 1 of the Nigerian Constitution reads:

Every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom (either alone or in community with others, and in public or in private) to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance.

Sadly, this constitutional provision is only partially translated into reality. Religious freedom in Nigeria is somehow allowed if one considers that the Muslims have Sharia courts established up to the Court of Appeal with judges paid from government coffers; Muslims have enjoyed official government patronage for pilgrimages long before their Christian counterpart. While Christians observe Sunday as a work-free day and celebrate Easter and Christmas as public holidays, the Muslims too enjoy their Sallah as national public holidays whenever it occurs.

There is no doubt that religious freedom as a principle is accepted in Nigeria. That is not in question. The bone of contention is the difficulty to curb the excesses of some religious groups which infringe with impunity on the rights of others to freedom of worship and to peacefully live and work in any part of Nigeria. Insurgency, radicalization and religious indoctrination are real. The emergence of the Maitatsine militant Islamist and fanatical group between 1980 and 1985, attempting to purify Islam by violent means shows how freedom was carried too far. Gratefully, the group was stopped by the then ruling Muslim Head of State, General Muhammadu Buhari, but the harm had been done, as it became the first major Northern Nigerian wave of religiously-inspired violence which created in no small way a serious religious tension between Muslims and Christians.

That there is religious pluralism is clear in the fact that Nigeria has diplomatic relations with the Vatican and equally is a member of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC). One sees Churches and Mosques dominating space in

Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory and elsewhere, and the call to prayers through loud Church bells and amplified public address system in Mosques; itinerant Christian preachers also freely do their preaching in buses, motor parks, markets, etc. That the Shiite Islamic group on the 12th of December 2015, could block the way in Zaria to stop the Chief of Army Staff, Lt Gen. Tukur Buratai, from passage to perform his official and legitimate duties is also evidence of the negative exercise of religious freedom. On Sundays and Fridays roads are blocked and travelers have to wait patiently or take alternative routes! That Boko Haram had the audacity to confront the Federal Government and to kidnap, kill, destroy properties and proclaim a Republic within the same country shows how free they were to act on matters of religion. Despite once being tagged the most religious people in the world, what could be the causes of religiously inspired violence especially in northern Nigeria?

FALL-OUT FROM THE JIHAD OF 1804

Since the jihad of 1804, traditional leaders have been imposed on minority groups that do not wish to share in the Islamic faith, culture or traditions. This reflects in the contemporary dominance of Muslims at the political level. The example of Gombe, Adamawa, Kaduna, Nassarawa States, etc come to mind. Even though there is a high non-Muslim population, the non-Muslim find access to the leadership of political power extremely difficult. Out of 19 Governors in Northern Nigeria, for example, there are only three Christian Governors! Such imbalance creates frequent tension and violence occurs masqueraded as religious conflicts.

I know of a former very fervent Catholic Catechist, Mr. John Sanda, who was very instrumental to the spread of

Christianity in significant parts of the Chamba tribe of Adamawa State in Northern Nigeria. To gain the position of the paramount leader, the Gangwari of Ganye, he had to forfeit Christianity to embrace Islam as part of the silent demand Muslim authorities in Adamawa State made of him. He became Alhaji Adamu Sanda after renouncing Christianity. His son, Mr. Bernard Sanda remained a practising Catholic Christian validly wedded by a Catholic priest in 1980, but he was also pressured into abandoning Christianity for Islam so that he could succeed his father to the throne as the Gangwari of Ganye. Now he is Alhaji Umaru Sanda. Most of the present district heads in Chamba land today are Muslims even though the majority of the Chamba is Christian. The District heads of Jada, Kojoli and Toungo are imposed Fulani leaders.

The Mumuye of Zing in Taraba State who practise the Mumuye traditional religion, have a high Christian population too, but it has become an unwritten rule that they must have a Muslim as a chief even if he is a Mumuye person. The earlier Mumuye chiefs were Traditionalists but since the era of Alhaji Ibrahim Sambo, to date, the chiefs have been Muslims.

My Jukun people of Kona near Jalingo in Taraba State refused conversion to Islam since the jihad of Usman Dan Fodio. The Fulani attempted their forceful conversion but could not subdue the people after several failed attempts. Under the Emir of Muri Muhammadu Nya in 1892, a French Navy Lieutenant Louis Mizon, with more advanced weapons of warfare helped the Fulani to conquer the Jukun Kona people who only relied on arrows and spears. After their conquest they were put under Fulani Muslim rule and since they would not accept Islam they had to suffer social deprivation and were denied infrastructural development until the Catholic missionaries arrived in 1945 and provided them with Western education. But for the Catholic Augustinian missionaries, you would not have seen me here not to talk of being educated and even becoming an Archbishop in the Catholic Church! Recently, justice was done when the incumbent Christian Governor empowered the Kona people by giving them a second class chieftom to the chagrin and dissatisfaction of the Fulani Muslims who are now allegedly doing all possible to legally undo this act of justice.

Among the ethnic groups in Southern Kaduna one still sees a situation where a non native Muslim chief is imposed on a tribe, which explains why Kafanchan, one of the big Christian cities of southern Kaduna is under the first class Hausa/Fulani Muslim Emir. No wonder, conflicts have been very frequent there. The abduction and killing of a Christian chief, Agwom Adara, Maiwada Raphael Galadima, recently along Kaduna-Kachia road is not unconnected with the struggle by the non-Muslim ethnic groups against political and religious subjugation. The mentality that the leader of a minority tribe must be a Muslim is what causes disquiet among ethnic minorities. Some of the crises interpreted as religious are actually an attempt by the non-Muslim tribes to remove themselves from the shackles of domination and marginalization.

POLITICS AND RELIGION IN NIGERIA

In Nigeria today under the present democratic dispensation, registered political parties even though numbering 91, only two principal ones seem to be recognized and people see them as Christian and Muslim parties. The APC ruling party is seen as a Muslim party even though its first and present chairmen are Catholics and two of its 24 Governors are Catholics. The PDP is perceived to be Christian. There is so much religious politics and people are known to have won elections based on religious sentiments and propaganda.

Christians lament the concentration of powerful and strategic offices in the hands of Muslims and mostly of Hausa/Fulani stock. In the present dispensation, with the exception of the Chief of Defence Staff and the Chief of Naval Staff, most of those in charge of security are Muslims: Chief of Army staff, Chief of Air Staff, Director General of Department of State Services, National Security Adviser, Inspector General of Police, Director General of National Intelligence Agency, Comptroller General of Customs, Comptroller of Immigration, Comptroller of Prisons, etc are all

Muslims. Apart from the Security Chiefs, the leadership in the Ministry of Education and bodies such as Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB), National Universities Commission (NUC) are all dominated by Muslims. It has been noted also that recruitment into the military and paramilitary is always in favour of Muslims just as the appointment of Judges to the Appeal or Supreme Courts. Some Federal universities like ABU Zaria, University of Maiduguri, Bayero University, Kano, etc cannot dream of having a Christian Vice Chancellor and chaplaincy services enjoyed by Muslim students are hardly adequately provided for Christian students. In a Christian dominated State like Taraba, the former Vice Chancellor, a Muslim, allowed and supported the construction of several Mosques within the University. Land allocation to Christians for worship in some Northern States is so difficult. As for marriage, while a Muslim can marry a Christian woman, it is unacceptable for a Christian to marry a Muslim. Under President Muhammadu Buhari, who is himself a Fulani, militant Fulani herdsmen kill at will, believing they are covered by the powers that be, extending their nefarious activities to the South East and South West. In our Archdiocese of Jos it is ten years now since we openly celebrated in procession the feast of Christ the King while midnight Christmas or Easter Masses are celebrated at day time for fear of violent attacks.

ALLEGED DISCRIMINATION AGAINST MUSLIMS IN SOUTHERN NIGERIA

Muslims contend that because of their minority population in Southern Nigeria, they suffer more discrimination than Christians. In fact in response to a paper by Bishop Matthew Kukah, the National Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NASCIA) said among other things that:

Islam is reduced to the status of an unwanted visitor as successive Governors in cahoots with the intolerant religious leadership there ensure that no breathing space is allowed Muslims. CAN leaders in the South openly sign statements in support of one candidate or the other whereas if a Muslim does that in the North, heaven will be let loose. The Governors in the South-east and South-south can conveniently spend millions of Naira on covering live

church activities on television from public funds without a whimper from the rabble-rousers but if a Muslim Governor elsewhere sponsors a pilgrim with a fraction, they are quick to mount the rooftops and shout of Nigeria's secularity. "In other words, in the whole South-east and South-south geopolitical zones, including some parts of the South-west, Muslims are treated like lepers. They are denied and their ramshackle places of worship are routinely destroyed. Yet, Muslims have not been using every available podium to castigate and demonize their Christian tormentors even when they are aware that Kano alone has thousands of churches operating without let or hindrance, just like many other places in the North.... "

THE TRAGIC EXPERIENCE OF JOS AND THE REST OF THE MIDDLE BELT

Many Christians believe that the unfinished plan of the jihad of 1804 to Islamize Nigeria is still on, with the frantic effort to capture the Middle Belt regions. The crises in Jos are attributed to or interpreted as a gradual attempt to infiltrate the power base and religious practices there with Hausa- Fulani-Islamic traditions. The crises which started since 2001 have not stopped but metamorphosed from land issue, to political control, and now to herdsmen and farmers clashes. It is the same in Benue, Taraba, Adamawa and Nassarawa States. Even the most recent seemingly unending violent attacks in Jos between the Irigwe and the Fulani, Berom and the Fulani, Anaguta and the Fulani, Rukuba and the Fulani, Bokkos and the Fulani, etc. are being viewed by Christians as part of a coordinated agenda to achieve what could not be achieved during the jihad. The recent unfortunate killing of a Muslim retired Army General, Major General Idris Alkali, in Du near Jos, has complicated inter-religious relations. This is all part of the inter-ethnic and inter-religious hostilities which have led to vehicles on the high ways being stopped arbitrarily in reprisal and people fished out and killed depending on what religion they profess.

EFFORTS TO ACCEPT AND PROMOTE RELIGIOUS PLURALITY AND FREEDOM

Today in Nigeria, there are fervent and frantic efforts made by adherents of both Islam and Christianity to encourage sustainable peace. There was a time when the silence of some notable personalities was deafening especially when members of the opposite religion were the victims. The Nigeria Inter Religious Council has been very vocal about peace and harmony. The activities of the Federation of Muslim Women Association in Nigeria (FOMWAN), the Interfaith Mediation Centre in Kaduna headed by a Pastor and an Imam, the recent conferences being hosted by State Governments seeking common action to end insurgency and many other initiatives of NGOs are all positive indicators that it is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness.

Our Dialogue, Reconciliation and Peace Centre which we started in the Archdiocese of Jos in 2013, has continued to grow and foster trust, harmony and better understanding among Christians and Muslims. Proactive meetings are held periodically with religious/traditional elders, youths, women and training for peace building have been carried out over the years.

The Centre proactively responds to the incessant destruction of lives and property, the polarization of Christian and Muslim settlements in Jos and environs, the 'revenge' mentality among youths, and the gap created by prejudice and ignorance of religion as it also provides a serene and conducive space for dialogue.

We have recently held meetings with the Fulani and Irigwe ethnic groups to strategize on how to avert further killings and also organized an interfaith prayer session in August this year and more recently, we held an extraordinary meeting with paramount traditional rulers to address the issue of recurring crises and reprisals in the state.

In 2010, the Interfaith Youth Vocational Centre in Bokkos was established by the Archdiocese of Jos, dedicated to the training of Muslim and Christian youths for a period of two years in vocational skills and the culture of dialogue and peaceful coexistence so that they return to their villages as ambassadors of peace.

The Justice, Development, Peace and Caritas (JDPC) Commission of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria operating at the Provincial, Diocesan and Parish levels also promote inter-ethnic and inter-religious harmony. Many Muslim organizations, like other numerous NGOs are now seriously promoting interreligious harmony and the need for sustainable peace.

CONCLUSION

- 1) No doubt, religion plays a very crucial role in the lives of Nigerians.
 - 2) The unhealthy rivalry between adherents of Islam and Christianity always pushes the nation to religiously inspired violence especially in the North.
 - 3) Violence has occurred in the name of religion, but deep at the roots there are social, economic, political and ethnic discontent by minority groups begging for attention.
 - 4) There are religious leaders who ignite and fuel fires, while other moderate preachers attempt to quench the fires.
 - 5) Even though there may be no physical persecution in some cases, the discrimination suffered by minority ethnic and religious groups through deprivation of their rights do not contribute to peaceful and harmonious coexistence.
- May I request the kind support of Madam President of Malta to raise her voice strongly at the United Nations in favour

of ethnic or religious minorities discriminated against.

6) We must continue to work together transcending religious divides in collaboration with bodies such as Aid to the Church in Need and other organizations of goodwill to support persecuted persons, the millions of internally displaced persons and positively strengthening faith communities.

7) Kindly permit me to conclude with the words of Pope Francis at the Meeting for Religious Liberty held in Philadelphia, USA in September 2015: Let us preserve freedom. Let us cherish freedom: Freedom of conscience, religious freedom, the freedom of every person, family and nation.