

THOUGHTS ON THE FUTURE OF RELIGION IN NIGERIA'S POLITICS:

(Draft Text of a Keynote Address at the Conference on, The Muslim Agenda For Nigeria: Challenges of Development and Good Governance, organised by the ISLAMIC WELFARE FOUNDATION at the Fountain University, Osogbo, 22-25th, November 2015, By Bishop Matthew Hassan KUKAH, Catholic Bishop of Sokoto Diocese)

First of all, let me thank the organisers of this Conference, the Islamic Welfare Foundation at the Fountain University for inviting me to this Conference. I feel quite honoured by this kind invitation. On the surface, one would ask, what has a Catholic Bishop got to offer in a Conference that seeks to chart a way for an Islamic agenda for Nigeria? I am not a scholar of Islam, but I believe that I do have some of my own ideas and convictions about the role of religion, any religion for that matter in public life.

I notice from your programme that you will be discussing almost all facets of Islamic life: Administration, Development, Economics, Education, Power, Pluralism, Science among other themes. I want to commend you for this. I believe that the challenges that we face are challenges of national development. It is important for us all to note that whatever may be the situation, we are faced with a predicament which was captured in Rev. Jesse Jackson's concession speech to Michael Dukakis in the 1988 Presidential Convention. In his speech, Jesse Jackson said to Mr. Dukakis, Your great grand parents may have come to this country in ships of privilege while mine came in ships of slavery. However, whatever ships may have brought our great grand parents, we are in the same boat tonight! Similarly, Christian or Muslim, we are all in the same boat called Nigerian.

Today, Religion faces a serious crisis of identity around the world. Although conflict has been a part and parcel of the narrative of most religions, events in the last few years have created so much anxiety that it seems safe to say that ordinary believers and non believers are visibly terrified by what is being done in the name of religion. The key actors who have turned religion from a weapon of love to an arsenal of fear and savagery claim that they are acting in the name of the religion. They believe that they are acting to expand the frontiers of power and authority of their religion. They believe they are defending the religion and working for God. As it is, they have become the worst advertisement for both their Religions and how non-believers see both.

In most situations around the world, these crises have thrown a spanner in the already troubled relationships between Islam and Christianity. In almost all situations today, the wars fought in the name of religion are largely based on the unresolved issues in the larger questions of geopolitics and power play by the super powers. These wars, from Africa to the Middle East are first of all fought on the lands of the poor people of the world. They are also fought for the control of our resources. So, we all from Africa and

the Middle East face a double jeopardy: first, we are losing our people and their properties and also losing access and control of over our own resources.

Locally here in Nigeria, the situation is almost the same only that it is related to the machinations of the political classes. Right before our very eyes, what we call religious crises are often crises over unresolved antagonisms within the political classes. In their political exploitations, they cross the boundaries of religion and ethnicity. But in real life, our people are being held hostage by the darker forces of politics as politicians generate and deploy hostile narratives to divide our people. The challenge in all this is that we who are believers in the two universal faiths need to sit up with greater honesty and commitment so that we can build a world that is in image and likeness of our Creator. To do, this, I will list ten themes that require some reflections on our path as citizens and believers.

1: The scared face of Religion and Boko Haram:

Although we all seem to pretend that Boko Haram has caught us unawares, the worst thing is that we continue to hide our heads in the sands of selfdeception by further denying the roots of this ugly side of our humanity. That Boko Haram, its disciples and its victims are localized to Northern Nigeria should be instructive. What this calls for us an honest review of what the root causes are and what it is about the past or the present that has led us to this ugly path.

It is my considered view that northern Islam has to confront the realities of taking its religion into the modern world of Democracy. Muslims in northern Nigeria cannot accept Democracy and reject the inclusive nature of its philosophy. The driving force of Democracy is that it presents us with the best instruments for managing our diversity, creating inclusiveness and breaking down the boundaries of exclusion. Unfortunately, northern Islam has continued to privilege religion as a source of identity, power and control.

We must locate the current crisis of Boko Haram within the context of the inability of the northern Muslim elite to live by their own dubious creed. They preached Sharia Law, but only for the poor. They preach a religion that encourages education, yet their own people are held in the bondage of ignorance. They came to power on the basis of a Democratic society, but they turned around and declared Sharia to generate a false consciousness among the poor. They did not wish to live by the same standards, so they decided to live their own Islam in the capitals of the world away from the prying eyes of their own people. Boko Haram began as a revolt against this hypocrisy.

Now, I hear Muslims in northern Nigeria hiding under the cover of the facts by saying: *These people are not Muslims. Well, if they are not Muslims, what are they? They are Muslims.* The only question we should ask is, what did we do to produce these kinds of children? And the answers are on the streets of northern Nigeria where we have almost

15 million children out of school. The answers lies in the millions of children who are taught all kinds of heinous lessons about other religions and peoples in unsupervised Koranic schools across the northern states. The answers to the kidnapping of young girls lie in the society that has accepted child marriages, mostly forced as we have today.

2: Contested Histories, Narratives and Identities:

Somehow, we have a problem of contested sense of history among our people especially in relation to British colonialism. For some strange reasons, scholars of history have often tried to create the impression that there was somehow a correlation between colonial exploitation and missionary activities. Sadly, an honest reading of the history leads to the conclusion that the colonial state was here to exploit our country and our resources. In the north, despite conquering the caliphate, they worked out a modus vivendi which first kept missionaries out of the Muslim areas while at the same time co-opting the rump of the caliphate.

In the process, the British left created what I have elsewhere called, the Anglo-Fulani hegemony. The rest is history but our people have never been the same. The rest of our history has been a fruitless attempt at resolving these problems. Rather than rebuilding our nation, we have spent a lot of time blaming and holding one another responsible for sins that are beyond us. There has grown a strange idea that somehow, Christianity and the West have a relationship of sorts. Yet, those who hold this theory do not extend the argument further by logically claiming that Islam and Arabism should be the same! Our task is to rebuild our shattered world together.

3: Managing Pluralism

Flowing from this has been the problem of Nigeria managing its plural identities. We still continue to see ourselves only as Christians and Muslims. Rather than focusing on our common citizenship, we behave as if our Islam and Christian identities dropped from heaven. While other people are living rationally and using these religious traditions to develop and grow, in our hands, religious identities have become tools for war and death. They have become tools for access to political and economic power. These identities have now become markers that seem to determine where we shall be and how far we can grow in our society. It will be a great tragedy if we are unable to roll back this ugly misuse of religion.

In your part of the country as in other parts of the world, I hear about families with Christians and Muslims living together, marrying and intermarrying and so on. In the North, this is anathema. Every time I bring this up, I hear people say that this is what Islam teaches, that the religion allows Muslim men to marry Christian girls(and hopefully make them Muslims) while Christian men cannot marry Muslim women. How

do we progress with this given that marriage is such a key institution for national integration? We must sift the chaff from the grain.

4: The Constitution, Bible and the Quran:

Nigerians behave as if our own brand of religious affiliations is different and distinct and somehow, our sacred books are superior to the Constitution. The Constitution which is what holds us together has assured us that Nigeria aspires to the ideals of a state where there is no favouritism of one religion over the other, or where people are discriminated against on the basis of religion. We spend a lot of time and energy debating over whether this is secularism, secularity or whatever. Whatever may be the case, we are running a Democracy not a Theocracy. The question is, how can the ideals of the Constitution guarantee the unity and common values of our citizens?

The Constitution guarantees us freedom of belief and this means believing what we wish, when we wish and how we wish, as long as it is not criminal. This Constitution allows us to exercise these freedoms within the confines of the law. It is the duty of the state to support this. It is also the duty of the state to support the exercise of these freedoms as a right to all citizens. It is the duty of the state to protect citizens when these rights are threatened or denied. Therefore, when Christians or Muslims are denied places to exercise their rights to worship or denied the rights to practice their religion, it should be the duty of all of us as believers to support one another. In this way, religion can play its role in society more effectively.

5: Interfaith Dialogue and Making Nigeria Safe for Religion:

As I said at the beginning, religion is in trouble if I may put it that way. We have a duty to rescue religion from the grip of secular forces who wish to use religion for empire building and power brokerage. We need to rescue religion so it can become a tool for harmony, development, the celebration of our differences and the nurturing of our common humanity.

I argued last week at a Conference with the National Institute of Legislative Studies that we should consider banning the usage of the words Christians and Muslims as categories of identity. They continue to convey a conflictual resonance and antagonism that keep us permanently divided. What I mean here is using these words to define us. We should be focusing more on our common human identity as citizens of Nigeria. This is not a Christian country. It is not a Muslim country. There is no place here that belongs to Muslims or Christians, rich people or poor people. There is no part of this country that belongs to Yorubas, Igbos, Ijaws or any ethnic groups for that matter. There is only a country called Nigeria made up of 925,000 square kilometers of land.

The soldiers who are dying in the North East are Nigerians, not Muslims or Kanuris. We need to become more imaginative in thinking about how to develop as a country. Religion has become an obstacle that now blurs our views of one another. We need to

move away from this and see what we can do together for the safety and growth of our citizens. I hope that as you explore the themes of what Islam can do to create a better society, you will face the reality that whatever the case may be, the resources for our development will not come from Islam or Muslims. They will come from a country called, Nigeria.

Our goal should be to create a great country where ordinary citizens can live in freedom, peace and security, where their humanity more than their religion will be the basis for their acceptance. For, in the end, we must have a country before we can live as Christians or Muslims. With no country, being Christian or Muslim will simply leave us in the precipice of life. Thank you very much for your attention and I wish you a most wonderful deliberation in the next few days.