

PERSECUTIONS OF CHRISTIANS IN AFRICA: **CONTEXTS, CONTENTS & OPPORTUNITIES.**

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Let me thank Professor John Cavadini for the honour of the invitation to join you for this most timely discussion on the persecution of the Church around the world. We must acknowledge the wonderful work that the **Church In Need** has done over the years especially in collaboration with Eternal Word Television Network, EWTN, to highlight the conditions and situations of these persecutions around the world¹. However, the persecution of Christians must be taken together with other forms of persecutions and assault on the dignity of the human person especially in the developing world so as to place the issues in proper context. Therefore, we must also acknowledge the work of other collaborators in the defense of the dignity of the human person such as *United Nations Commission on Human Rights, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International*, among many others. The idea behind all this is for us to appreciate that we are living in dangerous times and that this battle cannot be won if we do not unite against what is the gradual devaluation of the essence of our common humanity.

Your Conference background profile poses some very interesting questions as to why the western media and academia has paid so little attention to the issues of the injustice around the persecution of Christians. Why for example, the United States Government and other western governments have paid hardly any attention to the notion of the persecution of Christians as an issue especially in the course of its adventures into developing countries and them Middle East. In keeping with the objective of the Conference, I will try to explore these questions as they relate, first to Nigeria, and also to other African countries. I must acknowledge the fact that the quality and background of the speakers that you have assembled has made my job much easier. Therefore, my paper will concern itself with four things.

First, I will briefly look at the origins of religious persecution and perhaps the historical circumstances that have predisposed Christians to the violence they now suffer in countries such as Nigeria, Sudan, other North African countries such as Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, and a host of others. **Secondly**, I will try to distinguish other forms of persecutions and the context in which they occur. **Thirdly**, I will try to examine the phenomena and other forces that shape the persecution of Christians and how they are manifested. **Finally**, I will examine the opportunities that exist for addressing the issues of persecution of Christians in Africa on the one hand and institutionalizing a culture of human dignity on the other.

¹ The television programme, the Persecuted Church, which has highlighted these persecutions by incisive reports and interviews has become quite popular with many viewers of the channel.

1: Persecution of Christians and Other Persecutions: A historical Overview:

What is persecution? My apple dictionary defines it as: *victimization, maltreatment, ill-treatment, mistreatment, abuse, ill-usage, discrimination, tyranny; informal witch hunt*. If we take this as a working definition, the next question might be, how do we categorise this persecution or how does it express itself? Clearly, the way it manifests itself in one place may not be the same with the way it does in another place.

When we speak of the persecution of Christians, our minds might quickly go to what Muslims or atheistic countries do to Christians because of their beliefs. This is misleading because indeed, as I will show, persecutions of one group of Christians can occur even in Christian lands. For example, the Pilgrim Fathers who founded America not fleeing from Muslim crusaders, but from perceived persecution by the other Christian denominations with whom they did not agree in Europe. Catholics were severely persecuted in the United Kingdom for many centuries and till date, being Catholic is an obstacle to political ambition in the British politics. Today, with the European Union denying its Christian roots, the Churches have come under persecution by virtue of some of policies being adopted in Brussels². There is persecution against Christians that arise from the kind of policies we see in places like Saudi Arabia, Iran and many countries in the Middle East. This is different from the persecution of Christians in places like China, the former Soviet Union, or North Korea which is based on the state's atheistic belief and ideology.

The next question is to examine the reasons for the persecution of Christians. Persecutions of Christians in Muslim lands are sometimes based on wrong notions of history but more importantly, the belief by Muslims that Islam is the true religion which has replaced Christianity. In other situations, as in Northern Nigeria or in parts of the Middle East, Christians in areas with predominant Muslim populations are often seen as *settlers, strangers, or traitors* who have adopted a *foreign religion*³. In the United States of America and the United Kingdom, along with a few other European countries, Catholics have often been treated with suspicion in public life especially politics. They have suffered discrimination on the grounds of the perceived likelihood of the influence of the Vatican in the internal affairs of these countries. These are forms of persecutions and as such, they have limited the capacity of Catholics to participate in public life in these countries. We could say the same of the Protestants in Catholic Ireland for example. I hope to return to some of the issues I have raised here later in the paper.

In a way, I believe that persecution has always been part of the DNA of our faith as Christians. It is so central to the understanding or appreciation of Christianity that it is part of the what we might call the *scandal* of our faith. Persecution is what the cross of Jesus symbolizes and represents. However, because in the cross is our salvation, the challenge is for us to come to a proper understanding of the meaning of suffering especially in a world that has become convulsed and sucked into a culture of arrogance, power and hedonism.

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³ Due to its long history in Africa, some uninformed Muslims have come to see Islam as indigenous to Africa while Christianity is presented as having come from the West, along with colonialism! The joke here is that those Muslims who hold these views ignore the Arabian roots of Islam itself.

Indeed, today, in most of the developing world, the growth and popularity of the new sects and Pentecostal churches lie in the fact that they deny the centrality of the cross and believe that suffering is not the portion of any Christian. We are told that a real child of God should receive His blessings, prosper and have nothing to do with suffering. Given the conflation of issues that cause suffering today in many developing nations (misery, poverty, corruption, sickness, wars, violence, tragedies etc) it is understandable why we Christians are tempted to shun suffering. And what is more, none of us in our right senses can look forward to our personal suffering or that of any loved ones.

However, the discussion about the persecution of the Christians must be properly anchored on the theme of the New Evangelisation⁴. This is important because as we see in the Acts of Apostles especially, the periods of persecution also coincided with the periods of the growth and the strengthening of the Church. There are lessons to be learnt in how the early Christian community coped with persecution through the applications of prayer, encouragement, solidarity and prayer. The new evangelization to which we as Church are called today, particularly in the secularized West but also in many parts of the world where the Christian message of Love and Communion is absent must try to reclaim these ideals. We also need to be honest enough to look back at our history, what others suffered in our hands, the mistakes that we have made through alignment with secular power and its consequences on the real message of Love, the essence of our faith.

For us in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular, the history of the persecution of the Church can be located in two phases. First, it will be necessary to refer to the persecution of the early Christians by the traditional community who saw the presence of the faith as a fracture in the community. Here, the communities did not attack or persecute missionaries directly. Their worry was often with the new converts who were perceived betraying the culture and endangering the future of the community. In some parts of Africa where there were existing kingdoms or strong city states, such as what is today Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Sudan, Uganda, South Africa or Zimbabwe, the scars of conquest have left a bitter legacy that still affects relations with Christians.

This is the drama well enacted in some of the novels written by the first generation of African writers. Such titles as *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease*, *The Arrow of God*, *The River Between*, *The White Man of God*, *Mission to Kala*, *One Man*, *One Matchet*, all tried to present narratives of the experience of early Christianity with the traditional world. But, somehow, in these stories, we see the triumph of the *new way*, as being Christian was often referred to. When the missionaries began to open up schools, provide social and medical services and community life began to change dramatically, things began to change in terms of the nature of the relationship.

The second phase of the persecution of Christians would be located within the context of the emergence of the colonial state and the modern African state. Here, the issues relate to access to power public and political life to the attempt by the conquered kingdoms to retain power. I will explore this later on in the paper.

⁴ The Synod on the Middle East, the many messages of encouragement to the Christians by the Holy Father, and his visit to Lebanon, should be seen as part of the preparation for the Synod on the New Evangelisation.

In the late 1980s, with funding from the Arab states, Professor Ali Mazrui, a very respected and influential African academician did a documentary titled, **The Africans: A Triple Heritage**. The bias of the film was palpable. It portrayed Islam as essentially an African heritage and presented Christianity as an intruding religion into the African space. What was quite misleading about the documentary was the fact that it built on a popular but false reading of history which presented the West as being synonymous with Christianity. In the process, it further deepened the long held view that somehow, since Christian missionaries were from the same countries as the colonialists, and since they were of the same culture, they were by extension Christians and that indeed, the purpose of the colonial project was to supplant Islam and build a Christian empire of sorts. Against the backdrop of the tragic stories of the Crusades, the secular and Socialist readings of African history, the notion of Christianity as a foreign religion was further entrenched. With African history not being part of the Seminary curricula, African church leaders have often not been able to address these issues appropriately.

Western education, and by extension Christianity, became a source of great attraction and liberation because they empowered the lower classes of non-Muslims in areas with predominantly populations who had been subjected to second-class status. Outside these areas, the same stories abound in many communities where discrimination existed against women, caste groups, the weak and slaves. In the colonial states, it was the products of the missionary education who first began a campaign for human dignity and independence. Thus, when the colonial state found that the first products of missionary education posed a threat to their power and control, they turned to the rump of the caliphate for support. This alliance between the state and feudalism still looms large in African politics till date. Let us now turn our attention to the next challenge and look at the context of persecution of Christians, with a particular reference to Nigeria today.

2: Content, Forms and Context of Persecutions of Christians:

Perhaps, it might be true to say that, like love, persecution may actually be in the eyes of the beholder. To appreciate the context of this theme for the purpose of our reflection, I think it is important to first disaggregate what we might call shades and forms of persecution with a view to examining which of them fits our discussion.

For example, the shades of persecution that the Christians in Lebanon, Iraq, Libya, Jordan, or Syria and other parts of the Middle East suffer is different from what the Christians in Nigeria or other parts of Africa may be experiencing. What the non-Muslims of Southern Sudan were experiencing for example is different from what the Christians in say Gambia, Senegal and in most parts of Nigeria, experience. In places like Angola, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa or Zimbabwe where Marxism reigned during and immediately after the struggles for freedom, the experiences of Christians were quite different. Their churches were not physically attacked, but their freedoms to practice and propagate the faith were restricted, often through the application of state power and various branches of the bureaucracy.

For example, the liberation struggles cast Christianity in a different mould, almost the same but far more pervasive than what I referred to in the case of Nigeria. In Angola, Mozambique, South Africa and Zimbabwe, white settlers had posed a serious problem for the black population over the issues of land and power. Given that these whites were from various parts of Europe and also claimed to be Christians, the scenario of Christians seen as collaborators also emerged. In Angola, Ethiopia and Mozambique especially, the Marxist Leninist regimes that came to power literally wanted to wipe out Christianity, seeing it as a dark force. The battles continued in the first ten or so years after independence. The emergence of some radical clerics such as, Rev. Trevor Huddleston, Archbishop Dennis Hurley, Rev. Canaan Banana, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Frank Chikane, later helped to cast the Church in favourable mould as collaborators in the struggle for a good society. Later, ethnicity would later displace ideology in the struggle for power in some of these countries.

Here the problem was not so much a case of direct hatred for Christianity as such. It was simply a case of whose side Christianity was on. Thus, whenever these regimes found support from some Christian religious leaders, they were often more than ready and willing to soft pedal. For example, while President Mugabe had no problem in appointing President Canaan Banana, a Methodist prelate as a President, he would later resort to blackmail to contain Archbishop Ncube whom he had come to perceive as a threat to his ethnic exploits in Matabeleland. Earlier, even Prime Minister Ian Smith turned to the Church when he picked Rev. Albert Muzorewa as an ally. Today, we can hardly speak of persecution of Christians in these countries.

In the case of Nigeria, the relations between Christians have been a source of serious concern since independence. A pro longed period of military rule, the struggle for power, the effects of a three year civil war, corruption and inequalities have placed the nation on the boil. The result has been a powder keg of frustration which often explodes at the slightest provocation based on anything from arguments over the results of elections by politicians, students, ethnic groups or any other social formation on the landscape.

The outburst of violence in the last one or two years under the aegis of a faceless group of criminal elements, allegedly members of a Salafist movement known as *Jama'atu, Ahlis Sunna Ladda'awatih wal-jihad*. The group has however come to be called by a default name, Boko Haram, arising from their rejection of what they see as the pervasive and corrupting influences of western values and ideas and the impact on Islam⁵. Over the years, perhaps the thorniest issue that has continued to cause the greatest tension in relations between Christians and Muslims has been the issue of the status of Islamic law, known as Sharia in Nigeria's public life. Beyond the political mileage and the hypocrisy by Nigerian politicians, a majority of Nigerians simply want to live their lives and practice their religion in peace. Indeed, this may be the reason why Boko Haram continues to hide its criminality by claiming it wishes to establish Sharia law in Nigeria.

They have wrecked havoc across the country and churches have come under the purview of their dastardly acts. Although the attacks on Churches in Nigeria has been going on for

⁵ Matthew Hassan Kukah; [Boko Haram: Some reflections on Causes and Effects](#). (Missio 34, Human Rights Monograph Series, 2009)

over twenty years, Boko Haram's resort to suicide bombings and the targeting of Churches during worship have raised the levels of concern to a different level.

Taken together with other developments around the world, allegations of the persecution of Christians are now rife in Nigeria. Although this issue is quite sensitive among Nigerian Christians, we must nevertheless not subject the matter to emotions. We have to carefully examine the issues so we can rightly call the devil by his proper name so we can cast it out.

I personally have serious reservations as to whether we can classify what is happening in Nigeria as the persecution of Christians in the way and manner that this conference frames the issues. Furthermore, the claims and attribution of martyrdom to the victims seems to be too hasty and does not do justice to the theology of martyrdom as we understand it.

To appreciate the Nigerian situation, it is important to note the nature of the configuration and balkanization of the Nigerian state from colonial times to the present. This is not the place to engage in such an exercise. However, we must appreciate the context of the convulsion and the violence that has become part and parcel of life in Nigeria. We must see it as part of the process of development and growth, avoidable and unacceptable as the violence is.

As I have noted above, much of the nation's problems today are tied to the efforts at unraveling all the distortions created by the colonial state. In his book, *Strategic Vision: America and the Crisis of Global Power*, Zbigniew Brzezinski, a former National Security Adviser to President Jimmy Carter, made a very interesting observation when he stated: *As societies evolve further and literacy increases, more and more participants enter the political dialogue....still, the populace at large remain politically disengaged and dormant, except for periodic outbreaks of violent but largely anarchistic outrage*⁶. Against this backdrop, we must see the violence as part of the birth pangs of a nation.

This quotation speaks to the issues surrounding the correlation between what was described in development theories of the late 50s as, *the revolution of rising expectations*⁷. This idea applies to our situation because most of the tensions and violence across Africa in general and Nigeria in particular have arisen from higher levels of education and consciousness which naturally increase the feeling of self worth and human capabilities of individuals and communities. It can therefore be argued that indeed, the crisis of religion and power in Nigeria in general has been tied to the post-colonial structure of the Nigerian state. Ahead of independence for example, there were serious agitations among the non-Muslim minorities across the country over claims of domination by the three big ethnic groups in Nigeria. Sadly, colonial state however used these three ethnic blocks to design a tripartite regional structure of power.⁸

⁶ Zbigniew Brzezinski: *Strategic Vision: America and the Crisis of Global Power* (Basic Books. New York. 2012) P27. Although he speaks of evolving societies, I have decided to quote the text but presenting it in the present tense because of how timely it speaks to our situation.

⁷ Andreas Zenthofer: *Revolution of Rising Expectations*. (March 1, 2011) (www.tilburguniversity.edu/research/institutes-and-research-groups/ebc/events/2011/economics_workshop/zenthofer.pdf).

⁸ In 1914, the Northern and Southern protectorates were merged to form a united Nigeria. Subsequently, the country was divided into three Regions, North (Hausa Fulani), West (Yoruba) and East (Igbo).

In response, the over 400 ethnic minorities spread across the country began to agitate for freedom. However, the protests in the North were based on the non-Muslim minorities insisting on difference in culture, religion and territorial space. Ahead of independence, the colonial government responded by setting up what is called the *Commission to Enquire into the Fears of Minorities and the Means to Allay Them*. The colonial government made some halfhearted efforts at redressing these agitations in the South, but deferred taking any decision regarding the conditions, fears and anxieties of the non-Muslim minorities of Northern Nigeria. These groups had focused their fears on the political, economic and cultural domination by the Hausa-Fulani ruling class which the colonial government had foisted on the country. By offering the Northern ruling class about two thirds of the land mass and of the population of the entire country, the colonial state gave birth to the incubus, or should I say the virus, that would ensure the volatility of the Nigerian state.⁹

It is this struggle for power that provided the convulsion that spun the country into a civil war (1967-1970). The dominance of Islam as a factor in the monopoly of power after independence made it attractive for the Igbos to peddle an attractive but false notion that the civil war had something to do with the North seeking to exterminate the Igbos because they were Christians. This is the subject of another debate but, for now, all we can say is that at that time, the nation was struggling to find its feet as a united country, a job that the political elite were working very hard and honestly to achieve. It is of course significant that both the leader of the coup of 1966, Major Kaduna Nzeogwu and the leader of the rebellion (Col Odumegwu Ojukwu) had both warmed their way into the hearts of the Northern leaders themselves¹⁰ So, ethnicity rather than religion played a role in the events leading up to the civil war. What is more, the spectacular decision by a delegation of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria, made up of bishops from across the country, was to reject the notion that the country was fighting a war that had anything to do with religion¹¹.

In my view, tragic as these issues are, they often do not constitute what I will call the direct persecution of Christians in the way and manner that this happens in some parts of the Middle East. When people claim that these attacks are evidence of the persecution of Christians, we must also ask why the violence has been restricted only to the Northern states. We must also ask why a religious war would not even discriminate in favour of Muslims. I will return to this point at the conclusion. For now, let me identify what I can consider to be discrimination (as opposed to persecution) of Christians in the Northern states of Nigeria for the purpose of our reflections.

⁹ Matthew Hassan Kukah: *Religion, Politics and Power in Northern Nigeria* (Spectrum Books. Ibadan. 1993)

¹⁰ The leader of the coup of January 15th, 1966 had been born in the northern city of Kaduna and was actually named, Kaduna, by his Igbo parents. Col Ojukwu who led the rebellion was actually stationed in Kano and had developed a very warm relationship with the Emir of Kano, relationship that survived the war till his death.

¹¹ Charles Emokhai (ed): *A History of the Catholic Church in Nigeria*

(Longmans. Ibadan) The delegation had Archbishop Francis Arinze (Archbishop of Onitsha), Bishop Edmund Fitzgibbon (Bishop of Minna), and Gabriel Ganaka (Secretary General of the Catholic Secretariat)

3: Persecution of Christians in Nigeria:

The issues that generate violence and can be considered as persecution against Christians in places like Nigeria and most parts of Africa, have to do with issues around law and order, Constitutionalism and freedom. In many respects, what we may today identify as persecution may in actual fact be the result of the failure to apply the principles of the Constitution or to design the kind of laws that privilege human rights and trump citizenship over any other form of identity. If these issues are framed as rights, then we can take them away from the purview of politics and use the judicial processes to seek remedy when there are infractions whether based on any religion, or gender, ethnic or other identities. Let me cite a few examples of some of the key issues that require resolution in Northern Nigeria.

i): Denial of access to Land for the building of Churches

In many major cities in the Northern states of Nigeria, the state continues to see Christians as strangers, settlers and non-indigenes. Some state governors have openly stated that there are no settlers in their states, but they are still to provide the real framework. To this end, most of the Churches have remained locked in areas that the colonial administration designated as **strangers' quarters**. These areas first housed a huge non-Muslim population of southern artisans, traders, and civil servants who laid the foundation for the postcolonial bureaucracy in the late 50s and 60s. These areas were considered to be the habitats of non-Muslims whose cultural practices, such as music, consumption of alcohol and other social practices were considered un-Islamic. However, things have changed and urbanization has ensured that people are now living side by side. Despite the huge populations, Christians spread around the cities have no new places of worship. In places like Kano and Kaduna, it is not uncommon to find over 20 churches of different denominations on one street because of the restrictions.

ii): Denial of freedom to embrace Christianity

Under a very strange belief that, somehow, Christianity is a foreign religion, some Muslims continue to tout the notion that it is impossible for a Muslim to convert to Christianity or any other religion. Despite the clear provisions in the Constitution, Muslims wishing to convert to Christianity are occasionally threatened with death on the grounds that it is not possible to abandon the faith. These claims fly in the face of the much-touted Koranic injunction which says that *there is no compulsion in Religion*¹². They also fly in the face of the freedom of conscience and the freedom to change religion that are also provided for in the Constitution¹³.

At a second level, there is the issue of marriage between members of the two faiths. Some Muslims continue to believe that whereas Muslim men can marry non-Muslim women

¹² *There is no compulsion in religion. Truth stands out clear from error* (Quran 2: 256).

¹³ Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (Government Printer. Lagos. 1999) ch 4, 38(1)

(and convert them to Islam), Muslim women cannot marry non-Muslim men again on the grounds that this is contrary to the Religion. It is to be noted however, that these tendencies are by far more common among the Muslims in Northern Nigeria. Muslims who contemplate embracing Christianity have to do so either silently or leave the immediate environment¹⁴.

iii): Denial of the rights of inheritance to Christian women who marry Muslims and remain Christians:

Perhaps more than any social institution, marriage is the greatest glue that holds diverse peoples together whether they are divided by faith, region, or race. In the south west of Nigeria and in many other countries around Africa, such as the Gambia and Senegal among others, marriages between Muslims and Christians happen as a matter of course and are very much celebrated as a means of bringing families and communities together. In South-western Nigeria this is also very common. But in Northern Nigeria, whereas many Christians have married Muslims, it is considered a taboo for a non-Muslim to marry a Muslim woman even with assurances of practicing her faith. This is one of the reasons why the north has remained closed and consequently combustible where people live in ignorance and fear of one another. The few Muslims who have married Christian women and have allowed them to practice their faith (very few, but largely professional women), prefer to keep their head low and not show their action as a best practice.

iv): Denial of access to the State Media

In some states of the Northern part of Nigeria, access to the media by Christians is severely restricted. Occasionally, you might get the usual thirty-minute slot that is offered as a token to the Christians, or some pastor might buy up some time from the Television station, though this is rare. Whereas it is not uncommon to see offensive programmes that caricature Christianity on State Television, it is almost impossible to find a full one-hour programme on Christianity on television in most of the Northern states. It has been taken as the norm for example that the headship of these media institutions, whether federal or state, will be by Muslims. Even in the case of a place like Kaduna, from the 60s till date, no non-Muslim has ever headed such federal organs like the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN), and the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA)¹⁵. This creates the wrong impression about the federal ownership of these institutions.

v): Denial of access to state employment

In many states in the North where Christians are indigenous some individuals often complain that are often denied job placements on the grounds that the States are Muslim states. In most of these states, it is almost impossible to find a Christian holding a senior position such as the Head of a state parastatal, or the position of a Director or Permanent Secretary in the State Civil Service. Christians complain that often when individuals convert to Islam, their social and economic status changes almost immediately.

vi): Denial of access to state patronage

Christian businessmen and women complain that they are also often denied state patronage in the area of the award of Contracts and other forms of government patronage.

¹⁴ A friend of mine who does a radio programme told me of a few Muslim men who have approached him seeking further clarifications about Jesus after listening to him. Some have given their life to Christ, but they have decided to do that in secret, a secret that they have kept away even from their wives!

¹⁵ Maryam, a convert from Christianity by marriage headed the NTA in Kaduna. But full name.

vii): Non payments of compensation for destroyed Churches and Institutions.

From the middle of the 80s when the issue of urban violence and attack against places of worship started, Christians, their churches and businesses have suffered the most. At the beginning, a few state governments such as Kaduna, offered some token compensation, but this is no longer the case. Perhaps this is right since it tended to wrongly encourage dubious claims from individuals while creating a sense of impunity among the criminals. However, since neither federal nor state governments have brought anyone to trial for their involvement in these crimes, Christians feel bitter and victims of persecution. This has led to the deepening of grievances and the decision by non-Muslims youth to occasionally wage preemptive or reprisal attacks since it is clear that the state governments will not address the issues of compensation of their properties nor go after and punish the culprits.

viii): Skewed location of federal presence in the Northern states:

There are concerns among Christians that citing of state and federal projects by way of infrastructure is often skewed in favour of Muslim dominated areas. In States like Adamawa, Bauchi, Kaduna, Katsina, Kano, Kebbi, federal structures such as tertiary institutions (Universities, Polytechnics, Colleges of Education etc), General hospitals which are allocated to states, are never sited anywhere outside the Muslim dominated communities. These facts are verifiable. Non Muslim minorities such as the non Muslim Maguzawa communities complain of lack of schools, health services or roads.

I am not unaware of the fact that these claims can be contested. However, most of what I have noted here is based on facts that I am personally familiar with and the claims are also verifiable. I have often asked the Muslims to also document their areas of persecution or marginalization whether within their communities or elsewhere in Nigeria where they are minorities so that these injustices can be addressed. Without trying to provide any excuses, it is interesting to note that in some states in the southern parts of Nigeria, Christian State Governors, seeking political mileage, have gone out of their way to build Mosques for the Muslim communities in places like Akwa Ibom, Abia, Benue, and Edo States.

ix): Kidnapping and forced marriages of non-Muslim girls

In parts of Northern Nigeria there has on various occasions been stories of the kidnapping of young non-Muslim girls who have been lured and forced into marriages to Muslims in some cities in Northern Nigeria. The vulnerability of the girl child is legendary in the Northern states where they are forced into marriages at early ages. A good number of these cases have been documented. Indeed, one of our Dioceses in the North has had to set up a private accommodation for some of the girls who have been rescued from these forced marriages¹⁶.

): Lack of access to Christian Religious Education in schools in the Northern states:

Although guaranteed in our Constitution, most public schools in the Northern states do not allow the teaching of Christian religious knowledge in Primary and Secondary schools. Even in the Tertiary institutions, the issues of Christian Chaplaincies are a serious challenge. Many Vice Chancellors of Universities, Provosts of College of Education or

¹⁶ In Kontagora, Kano and Sokoto Dioceses, we have had to provide these services for Maguzawa Boys and Girls. The Maguzawa are indigenous Hausas most of who have not converted to Islam. It is one of the surest ways of keeping the girls in schools and also keeping them safe.

Rectors or Polytechnics are outrightly hostile to the idea of Christian Chaplaincies. In most of these institutions, from inception many years ago, religious worship for the Christians takes place in classrooms. Indeed, in some of the federal institutions, even where provisions have been made for the building of these places of worship in the original plans, the heads of the institutions have remained adamant using different excuses of insecurity.¹⁷

The issues raised above may sound controversial and of course many Muslims in the Northern states may express surprise. To be sure, what we are dealing with is the accumulation of bad practices and abuse of power which was allowed to gestate for too long. Successive governments have hardly ever attempted to address these issues despite the fact that over the years, the Christian Association of Nigeria, CAN, at local and national levels have continued to bring up these issues. Clearly, what we require is enough commitment by politicians to adhere to the spirit and letter of the Constitution. It is also conceivable that, like other minority groups who suffer violations of their rights, religious whether as Muslims in the South or Christians in the North should begin to explore the best ways of claiming the rights enshrined in the Constitution of Nigeria.

4: Summary and Conclusion: Opportunities for addressing the issues

In your briefing note for this conference, you posed five questions. I have tried to answer the first two as to where these persecutions are and how they are manifested, focusing on Nigeria. The last three questions relate to what responses these persecutions demand from us, how we can form partnerships with people of other faiths to resolve these issues, and the most effective response from the Church. By way of summary and conclusion therefore, I will now try to answer these questions broadly.

In this presentation, I have tried to paint a sketch of the situation of the persecution of Christians in Nigeria in particular, making only some sketchy references to other countries largely due to the problem of space. Some of the issues I have raised can be juxtaposed in many African countries such as the Arab states in North Africa. In comparative terms, their conditions are far worse than the situation I have painted regarding Nigeria. However, as we try to round up, we must now ask the question, what next? Here, I will make four points.

First, sad as these times are, we must look forward with confidence and work hard to build strong institutions which can support and energise our Democracy. Democracy and its culture of accommodation and collaboration, consensus building and trust is at its infancy in many African countries. Corruption continues to deepen poverty and misery in the midst of plenty and various forms of violence continue to haunt our people. Despite all this, Democracy offers us the best chance of fully creating a harmonious, just and peaceful society. Political parties, when they project themselves beyond the limits of religion, region or ethnic group, can serve as a rallying point for men and women of good will in a plural society such as ours. We must therefore continue to encourage our politicians to bring the

¹⁷ It is instructive to note that after over 30 years of the establishment of Bayero University, all the Catholic who were killed were worshipping in the classrooms since they had been denied a place of worship in the University.

strengths of their religious convictions to the political space and to avoid the constant manipulation of religion for ephemeral political ends.

Second, the Catholic Church, drawing from its history and universal reach, must seek a greater role in the public space through Dialogue. It must encourage its politicians to lead by example while rallying other Christians towards the goals of ecumenical unity. Through the ages, religions have provided the moral foundations for civilisation. As our history shows, unnecessary wrangling between Christians and Muslims have diminished the efficacy and the cutting edge of the Christian faith. The persistence of violence in the name of religion has deepened fear and suspicion between Christians and Muslims, the two universal and dominant religions in Africa. It is important that both religions bring their moral weight to help their countries grow. In a country like Nigeria, the persistence of these conflicts have continue to erode peoples' confidence in both religions. Faced with the increasing and corrosive role of secularism, we must find common ground.

Third, there is the issue of enthroning Constitutionalism, as an expression of the manifestation of the ethos of rule of law, due process and respect for human dignity. We have sunk deeper into crisis and violence, falsely pitching Christians and Muslims when in reality, what we face is the fact of a country living below the radar of Constitutionalism. Our democracies in Africa have been weakened by the corruption in the Judiciary and the lack of the political will to end impunity and enthrone the rule of law rather than the rule of men which was encapsulated in its long history of the oppression of big chiefs and military series of dictatorships. A robust and honest judiciary will punish criminals for their crimes no matter what they claim to be the reasons for their violence against other human beings or their properties. This is the only way to heal the festering wounds that have strained the relationship between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria.

Fourth, the Church must pursue more vigorously the culture of dialogue with Islam. As human beings, dialogue between Muslims and Christians has its challenges. However because we Christians have been entrusted with a message whose clarity and urgency are not in doubt, we must never surrender to the temptations of the moment which encourage us to seek revenge or complain of exhaustion with dialogue. We must project the fine principles of our faiths as they relate to Love, Trust, Honesty, and our common humanity. We Christians cannot wait for the response of the Other to determine how we shall behave according to the principles of our faith.

I believe that if we are faithful to Scripture, then we need to re-think our assumptions about seeing the persecution of Christians and Christianity as an evil wind that is blowing over us. At the risk of sounding insensitive, the truth is, as I have pointed out, that persecution is in our DNA as Christians. By virtue of this faith and the logic of the cross, Christianity has given us a new set of eyes to see almost every human event in a way that is sometimes completely different to the ways of the world, since *the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom*. The crucifixion of Jesus was the zenith and the fullest expression of this given especially that He was like *an innocent lamb, led to the slaughter* (Is 53: 7). In the face of it all, as He neared the Cross, Jesus submitted himself to the suffering as the will of God (Lk. 22: 42). Ahead of all this, He warned His apostles, that suffering would befall them because of the nature of their mission. In the story of the Sower, Jesus warns that His followers must have firm roots in the face of suffering. He said: *The one who received the*

seed that fell among the thorns is the one who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful (Mt 13:22). He had also warned His Apostles not to forget that: No servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also (Jn. 15:20). Jesus calls 'blessed' those who are persecuted in the cause of doing His will (Matt 5: 10). He encourages the persecuted to rejoice since their persecution is in line with what the prophets went through (Matt 5:12).

The Apostles did take this message seriously right after the death of Jesus. When they faced their first persecution, we are told that the Apostles left their torturers, *glad to have suffered for Christ (Acts 5: 41). Whatever may be the nature of these sufferings, St Paul said: I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us (Rom 8: 18). St Paul enjoined the Corinthians: We must carry in our bodies the death of Christ (2 Cor. 4:10). He considered this so important because, as he said: If we endure with Him, we shall reign with Him (2 Tim 2:12). What is more, he said, no matter what they may look like: Our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed to us (Rom 8:18).*

The Acts of Apostles is replete with this new phase of the life of the early Christians. We hear for example that: *Know that those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews (Acts 11: 19, 13:50, also Acts 8:1, 11:19, 13:50). What does this say to us today? We must repeat the words of St. Paul reminding us: We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body (2 Corinthians 4:7-10).*

What all this means is that the United States of America and Europe will have to re-examine their roles with a view to resolving the irony that surrounds the pursuit of its geopolitical and economic interests and how these lead to the sufferings and persecutions of Christians. The Christian community in the United States will have to bring its moral authority to bear and explore the prospects of deepening its concern for the fate of Christians in areas within the purview of its strategic interests. It is quite ironic that while the United States has rallied other European countries to dethrone dictatorships across the Arab world, the new Democracy has exposed Christians to greater danger and threat. These are the consequences of pursuing what former President George Bush referred to as the United States *being chosen by God and commissioned by history to be a model for the world*¹⁸.

Against this backdrop, the American Bishops Conference must find a way for greater dialogue with the Christians who are suffering persecution in such lands as China, the Arab world and some of the countries we have already mentioned in Africa. They should serve as the channel for helping the American Governments appreciate the ironic suffering that is visited upon Christians by those purported to have been *chosen by God*. It is worrisome the successive United States Governments have often shown too much concern with

¹⁸ Quoted in Zbigniew Brzezinski: Strategic Vision

feeding the greed of its citizens at great expense to the poor and weak people of the developing and resource endowed countries of the world. National interests are important and governments must defend them. However, I believe the Catholic Bishops Conference of America has a moral duty to speak truth to power about the consequences of these actions which are the best justification for the recruitment into the army of those who seek to destroy the Church and the civilized world.

Finally, while I believe that there is persecution of Christians around the world, I notice that Nigeria ranks as one of the countries where Christians are being persecuted. It is my view that we need to clarify the issues around what we face in Nigeria, some of which I have already mentioned above. We must not confuse the visible manifestations of the severe weakness of a failing state, shown visibly in its incapacity to restrain and punish the criminal aggressor and then use it to measure the relation between Christians and Muslims as it is often stated in the case of Nigeria. Let us cite a few examples based on the recent outburst of violence in Nigeria in the last two years.

For example, the Christmas day bombing of the Catholic Church in Madalla in Niger State was perhaps the highest expression of the crisis of the relations between Christians and Muslims. The media played out the drama in a way and manner that merely fed the prejudice about an inevitable conflict between Christians and Muslims. This arose from the popular but false notion that the Boko Haram violence was the manifestation of this conflict. But let us look at some of the realities following this incident.

Out of the 44 persons who died from the bombing 26 were members of the parish while 18 were passersby. One of those killed was the Police Officer who had been detailed to guard the Church on that day. He was a Muslim. The international and local media turned the world's attention to this dastardly act and rightly so. However, the very next day, over 100 persons were killed in a midnight attack on a community in Ebonyi State, South Eastern Nigeria. The members of the community were of one clan, spoke the same language and were largely Christian. In a strange way, beyond the mere mention of it in the local media, this story generated almost no interest outside Nigeria.

The bombing of St. Monica's Catholic Church in Kaduna is the latest in the series of atrocities committed by alleged members of Boko Haram. In seeking out his target, the suicide bomber asked to be led to St. Rita's Catholic Church by an innocent motor cyclist who did. The bomb killed 8 people and wounded over one hundred children. Barely two days later, in a village in Kaduna state, armed bandits attacked a village and killed the village head and 14 others as they were coming out of a mosque after their morning prayers. All those murdered were Muslims. The following week, 17 villagers were murdered in a village in Zamfara State. The list, from Kaduna to Potiskum, Maiduguri to Yola is seemingly endless. We must however take these tragedies together and show them as the evidence of a weak state, rather than a conflict among citizens. Whatever, the case may be, what should worry us is the fact that citizens are dying and not the agents.

The greatest contribution that the international community can make is to genuinely come to the aid of countries that are suffering from unnecessary violence as we have in Africa today. Whether the violence is in the name of a false god such as perpetrated by Boko Haram or the Lord's Resistance Army, or the bandits fighting for diamonds, or the

kidnappers in Southern Nigeria, we require the kind of security that others have come to take for granted. Here, the battle against small arms, their manufacture and distribution must be waged relentlessly because our people are vulnerable and powerless.

It is instructive how Nigerians have often reacted to these bombings of Churches. On two occasions, I have been alerted about these bombings by text messages of solidarity and condolences from Muslim friends. Muslim leaders have stood up and condemned these explosions and they have said time and again that these people are not Muslims, but evil men. For example, in reaction to the latest bombing in Kaduna (St. Monica's Catholic Church), the Sultan of Sokoto, Alhaji Sa'ad Abubakar, the President of the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (SCIA), and Pastor Ayo Oritsejafor, President of the Christian Association of Nigeria, (CAN), held a meeting with the President under the banner of the Nigerian Inter-religious Council, NIREC. At the end of the meeting, the Secretary of NIREC, Professor Ishaq Oloyede told journalists: *We want all the people in this country to know that we are together in this boat and the boat should not be rocked and we should do everything possible to live harmoniously together because, if God had wished, He would have made us a monolithic nation. The plurality of this country is its strength and it should be made so.*¹⁹

With the Nigerian President being a practicing Christian, with some 22 out of 36 Governors being Christians (10 are Catholic), with the Security Chiefs almost all being Christian, it is difficult to speak about the persecution of Christians as if they were merely a vulnerable, defenseless and weak part of the society. As I said, the form of persecution that we have in Northern Nigeria can and will hopefully be remedied through honest dialogue with both federal and state governments in the country.²⁰

In August this year, the Governors of the 19 Northern States which are largely the theatre for the violence setup a Committee of persons drawn from the different states to examine the issues of the crises in the Northern states and to proffer solutions. It is for me instructive that I, a Catholic Bishop, have been appointed by the Governor of Sokoto State, the seat of the Caliphate as the Muslims like to say, to represent Sokoto State at the said Committee. Through out the entire crisis, all the Catholic Bishops in the affected areas have been unanimous in both condemning the violence but in also stating clearly that the violence is not about religion²¹.

Whatever may be our condition, we Christians, and all people of good will] must stand together and defend our faiths. As St Paul said: *Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death*

¹⁹ Daily Trust, Abuja, 30/10/12

²⁰ Matthew Kukah: *Memo to the Reconciliation Committee set up by the Northern Governors Forum to end Conflict in the Northern States* (September 9, 2012). In the memo, I addressed some of the issues listed above and suggested that the Committee Chairman ask Muslims to also present their own observations to the Committee.

²¹ The statements by Cardinal John Onaiyekan(Abuja), Ignatius Kaigama(Jos) and President of the Catholic Bishops' Conference, Matthew Ndagoso(Kaduna), Bishop Malachy Goltok(Bauchi), Stephen Mamza(Yola) and Oliver Doemen(Maiduguri) all bear witness to this. Despite the frustration of their flock especially the restless youth, they have all constantly called for restraint.

by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground (Heb 11: 36-38). These are times of great trials indeed. But we must remember the question posed by St. Paul: *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?* (Rom 8: 35). We must look ahead with confidence and courage. This Conference is timely and its fruits should be spread far and wide so that the world may know that the devil is still very much alive and yet, as the great Rev Martin Luther King said: *Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.* May the prince of peace and the source of Light be our guide and succour. Amen.