


5-1995

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Recommended Citation

Njoku, Timothy C.M. (1995) "Christians and Muslims in Nigeria," *Vincentiana*: Vol. 39 : No. 3 , Article 9.
Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vincentiana/vol39/iss3/9>

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CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS IN NIGERIA

Timothy Njoku CM

A Short History

Islam came into Nigeria before Christianity. The first Muslims that brought Islam came from Egypt about the 9th century. These were mainly Arab and Berber traders. The more substantial introduction of Islam came through Fulani Muslims who migrated into Nigeria following the fall of the ancient kingdom of Songhay in the 15th century. This period coincided with the Portuguese exploration of West Africa.

Christianity did not extend beyond the coastal areas where the explorers settled. The second attempt to establish Christianity took place in the middle of the 19th century. Christianity followed the repatriation of African slaves from Europe and America, as a result of the principles of the American War of Independence and the aftermath of the French Revolution. Converted ex-slaves and evangelical missionaries established themselves in Sierra Leone and, after some years of theological training, were sent mainly to the south-west of Nigeria. It was not until 1885 that the Catholic presence was established in Eastern Nigeria.

The Fulani have been the principal actors in Islamic religion in Nigeria. They are the most numerous nomadic group in the whole world. Their acceptance of Islam, and propagation of it, from their early contacts with the Berbers in Futa Jalon of West Africa, has raised their social status. Through Islamic education, especially in Timbuctu, the ancient city of Islamic learning in West Africa, the Fulani became an aristocratic group to be reckoned with in the shaping of West African religious history. They have, since the 17th century, master-minded every religious revolution that sacked the existing social, economic and political order in West Africa.

They have always seen Islam as a religion of the rulers, a religion of the privileged, a religion of political power. For this reason, they have always associated themselves in the whole of West African political history, with the powers that be, the power base. They believed that by converting traditional rulers to Islam, Muslims would be assured of political power. Where such

strategies failed, as in Songhay, they resorted to overthrowing the existing political systems under the pretext of failing to apply the Sharia (Islamic law) in their legal system.

The Fulani migrated to Nigeria and settled among the Hausa around the 15th century. At the start of the 19th century, when their number had increased, they overthrew the Hausa kings and installed Fulani Muslim rulers in their places. Uthman dan Fodio led this revolution in 1804, and established an Islamic State in Northern Nigeria.

Colonialism and Christianity

The repatriation of the African ex-slaves renewed the European economic and political interests in Nigeria and West Africa. Missionaries offered Western education to the southern part of Nigeria. At the request of Muslim leaders Christianity was restricted from advancing into the Muslim heartland of the north. As a result, the north was shielded from modern education and technology. Only a privileged few were educated at few government-established schools in the north. Since then, the educational imbalance between the north and the south has widened.

Period after Independence

Muslims and Christians had always lived peacefully together until the late 1970s, or more particularly till the Iranian revolution. This period witnessed a renewed drive for the propagation of Islam in Nigeria. Nigerians witnessed for the first time a threat to convert as many as possible to Islam, and the possibility of refashioning Nigeria according to Islamic principles -- in government, legal system, culture, financial institutions, etc. These aspects of religious intolerance seem to have been introduced into local Sunna Islam by groups coming from outside. These Islamic fundamentalists infiltrated university campuses and incited Muslim students to burn down Christian chapels and churches. Christians were often attacked for preaching openly, and their churches burnt. The riots spread like wildfire from one town to another in northern Nigeria. Christians were killed in their thousands.

The Role of the Government

The failure of the military government to control the religious riots, or bring to justice those responsible for the mass killing of Christians, led to many suspicions. The suspicion deepened when the government enrolled Nigeria as a member of the Organization of the Islamic Conference. The news led to a massive protest from Christians. Since then, Christians have looked with suspicion on every action of the government. This is particularly so when we

recall that Muslim military officers have been in power since 1983, when the last civilian government was overthrown. There is a strong suspicion that the Caliphate based in Sokoto Nigeria is using Muslim army officers to run the affairs of the country through decrees. The national constitution has been suspended since the military take-over. The situation has been disquieting for Christians, who feel that Muslims are indirectly ruling the country through the back door, with one Muslim army officer exchanging the political baton with another. The Muslims have not, since the military take-over, shown any disapproval of the rape of democracy in Nigeria.

The Situation Today

A constitutional conference is currently (December 1994) going on in Nigeria. Many issues are being discussed. Among such issues is power-sharing. A motion has been adopted that the presidency will rotate between the north and the south in the future Nigeria. For the hard-core Muslims this has not been easy to accept, since political power has compensated for their backwardness in education and industry. The failure of the Caliphate to accept this new political experiment may cost the north a fortune. Following the annulment of the last civilian election, which a Yoruba Muslim was believed to have won, there is every indication that the whole of southern Nigeria may turn the tables against the north. The mineral oil, which constitutes about 90% of Nigeria's external earnings, is tapped from the south. For economic reasons, it would be safer for the Muslims to forego political power at intervals.

The average Nigerian is living peacefully with people of other religions different from his own. Unfortunately religious leaders and military dictators have used religion to incite people to kill each other on grounds of beliefs. The truth is becoming clearer that co-existence and tolerance is the best way for Nigeria.