

Sharia and Christian-Muslim mutual relations in Nigeria

Joseph Sangosanya, executive director, Christian Foundation for Social Justice and Equity, Jos

Shariah for many Muslims encompasses the entire set of rules and guidelines which governs its day to day conduct in terms of social relations, private life and ethical codes.

Christian-Muslim mutual relations entail or suggest that there should be mutual respect for and absence of antagonism toward those who have a different opinion about the best way to worship God. Christian-Muslim mutual relations in Nigeria therefore entail the abilities and capabilities of both Christians and Muslims in Nigeria to readily work out the best way to rightly understand the fundamentals of their beliefs, faiths and principles, and to observe them without infringing on each others rights to freedom of worship. This should be done in an atmosphere of peaceful co-existence, in an enabling environment of harmonious relations. Even where and when differences do exist a workable, acceptable and enforceable resolution should be worked out by both religious groups.

Sharia and historical development in Nigeria

Sharia has been in force for many years in Northern Nigeria where the majority of the population are Muslim, but until 2000 its scope was limited to personal status and civil law. The manner in which the criminal aspect of Sharia law was introduced and applied since 2000 in the twelve states of Northern Nigeria coupled with fears and suspicion of many Christians in Nigeria therefore raises a serious concern for the need to initiate, strengthen, enhance and promote Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria so that Muslims can observe the tenet and practice of sharia without infringing upon Christians' rights, while the Christian will also respect the right of the Muslim to effectively practice their faith unhindered.

Adoption of the criminal aspect of the Sharia law in Northern Nigeria

The first governor to introduce the criminal aspect of the sharia law in Nigeria was *Ahmad Sanni Yarima* Governor of Zamfara State. The establishment of the law was introduced in Zamfara State on October 27, 1999, and it came to force on January 27, 2000. The Zamfara experiences were later followed by the governors of the other eleven states in Northern Nigeria.

In most of the twelve northern states a process to amend the existing legislation was ensured to make it shariah compliant while separate Shariah penal code or criminal procedures were not introduced.

In many of these instances, the shariah legislation was rushed through in a hurried and uncompleted way for political reasons. In some of the states the state governments set up structures and groups like the *hisbah* to ensure the implementation of the shariah. In many of the states these groups were used to carry out arrests.

Apart from some of the areas of disagreement in the provision of shariah laws as operational in Nigeria, the activities of these *hisbah* groups have largely been a source of suspicion, anxiety and violent clashes between the Muslims and Christians in Nigeria, especially in Northern Nigeria.

Freedom of conscience and religion and the impact of Shariah on Christians

Some church representatives and Christian organizations have either complained or petitioned against instances of discrimination and marginalization before the introduction of shariah in 2000. But these complaints have increased since the scope of shariah was extended. For instance in recent times there have been several serious explosions of violence, clashes between Muslims and Christians, often triggered by seemingly minor disputes. These have led to thousands of deaths and wanton destruction of properties in the Northern and Central Nigeria Region.

It has also resulted to religious tension in Kano, Jigawa, Bauchi, Kaduna, Nassarawa, Plateau State etc. The introduction of shariah criminal law has in effect created fears, anxiety, suspicion, hardening position and has accentuated the polarization between Muslims and Christians.

Some church leaders in Zamfara have complained of difficulties in obtaining land and accommodation. At best the Anglican leader in Gusau was made to pay double of the expected rent.

Christians have also complained of delays in securing permission to build churches, nursery and accommodation. In some instances churches have been demolished on the pretext that they were illegally constructed and did not have the correct certificates. There were also complaints that Christians were denied air time in some of the state radios, and there were complaints that Christians were not adequately and fairly represented in the constitution of strategic political appointments and privileges in some of the shariah states.

Freedom of Expression and the introduction of shariah in Northern Nigeria

The introduction of shariah in some of the states of Northern Nigeria have led to further clampdown on freedom of expression in the North. The introduction has created a climate in which people are reluctant to voice criticism of shariah and, by extension, the policies and performance of the state governments that proclaim to be pro-shariah. Open debates of the advantages and disadvantages of the introducing of shariah were strongly discouraged and in some instances suppressed.

Self censorship and the introduction of shariah in Nigeria

The consequences of this self-censorship have been virtual silence on the part of Northern civil society about the more controversial aspects of shariah including some of the human rights abuses. The absence of genuine and open public debate resulted to most of the public criticism of shariah being predominantly from Christian civil society groups. This effect has led to an increased polarization of opinion and wrong perception that Christians are leading the attack against shariah.

The politicization of religion and the introduction and implementation of shariah in Northern Nigeria.

The true spirit and original principle of shariah and the religion was reduced to a political tool because of the way it was hastily introduced and implemented. The different state governments in their rush to introduce shariah to score a political point disregarded certain fundamental

principles of the state's responsibility toward its population and the generosity, compassion and forgiveness which shariah advocates toward those accused of crimes were relegated to the background. In its introduction and implementation criticism of Northern governors is labelled as criticism of Islam even when it is not connected to issues of religion or religious law. In the aftermath of the 1999 election credible opposition in the North was described as anti Islam. Subsequently political alliances and political platforms were dictated by their different disposition to the shariah agenda of the politician. Some of these non-performing politicians only lay claims or pretend to be shariah advocates at the detriment of good governance and dividend of democracy to their people.

The reaction of Christians to the introduction of Shariah Law in Northern Nigeria

The reaction of Christians and other non-Muslim sectors of the public were mostly negative. Christians across the country strongly opposed it. Several Christian leaders and representatives openly spoke against the move, fearing that it might herald the expansionist policy of Islam in Northern Nigeria.

Some Christians also feared the political consequences as it might strengthen the hold of power of the Northern Muslim elite and the relevance of the federal government to challenge the "legality" or "illegality" of the introduction.

Some Christian civil society groups like human rights groups from the south opposed the introduction on the grounds that the introduction of shariah might contain inherent infringement of fundamental human rights as it was incompatible with the existing operational law in Nigeria.

Secularism

Secularism refers to total separation of religious practices from governance or public life and that no religion should be adopted as a state religion. It also portends that public money and policies must not be used at the detriment of another religion. It is therefore against the spirit of the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria for any of the arms to take up expense of any religious activities like hajj or pilgrimages to Jerusalem. It is therefore wrong of the government to fund any religious obligation.

The Christian perspective holds in Roman 12: 1-2. *I beseech you brethren by the mercies of God that you present your bodies a living sacrifice holy acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conforming to this world but be you transformed by the renewing of your mind that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect of God.*

This passage teaches that much as a Christian is separated by God as a chosen nation and royal priesthood, it is also obligated of all Christians not to be conformed to the dictate and principle of life that does not lay claim to the ultimate God. Christians are not expected to sell out their birthright, but to hold and profess their faith without any form of limitations.

Christians and Muslims must therefore stand against anything that seeks to hinder the promotion and propagation of their faith. They must preserve the practice of their faiths; Christians and Muslims must align on the issue of secularity.

Recommendation for religious leaders

Where rights of their followers are violated religious leaders should exploit the possibility of resolving the differences, remedy the effect or exploit the use of the court system, even if it means adjudication to the highest judicial levels.

They should also promote the positive part of the other religion, thus bringing to the limelight the strength and the lesson thereof to promote exemplary acts and action in the two religions. It should also promote good part of both faiths as it relates to the provision of sharia, as this will breed reconciliation and compromise.

Religious leaders of both faiths must defend their beliefs and obligations to their religions by being in the forefront of religious matters like the sharia issue, rather than allow for the over politicization of religious matters by hypocritical politicians.

The leaders should promote healthy inter faith mission and vision within and with the other religion's groups as this will enhance networking, collaboration and solidarity on specific issues that border on moral values, promote religious tolerance, peaceful co-habiting of the two religions, while enhancing the practice of accountability and transparency in governance.

In the application of sharia the Muslim leaders should be in the forefront to demand for a review of the content and application of the sharia to the effect that the principles and spirit of sharia will not be politicized.

The areas of the implementation should be strengthened to enforce equity, fairness and justice to both Muslims, Christians and other non Muslim groups. Both religions should protect the right of the minority in their domain emphasizing the need to love, respect and co-operation in their relations with other minority and religious groups.

The religious leaders must jointly canvass for the liberalization of the political space to accommodate faith based parties with clear religious programmes so that Nigerians can adequately and rightly make their choice among the competing alternatives parties.

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