

Volume 1, Issue 2 (December 2024)
ISSN 3049-9704

Journal of Religion

and Public Life



OCRPL

Oxford Centre for
Religion and Public Life



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Freedom of Religion Tomorrow? A View from Northern Nigeria

The Most Rev. Benjamin Kwashi ¹

Abstract: This article is written from a Christian standpoint. After a brief look at history and its ongoing effects, the situation today will be outlined. Nigeria is now said to be one of the most dangerous places in the world for Christians, as in recent years persecution has led to thousands being killed and many thousands being rendered homeless. We therefore ask: what does the Bible, and particularly the gospel of Christ, teach us about persecution? As we learn from that, the questions arise as to what the role of the church is today; how Christians should live and conduct themselves in the current situation, and how pastors can effectively lead their people forward into tomorrow.

Keywords: Gospel, Good News, Resurrection, Church, Persecution, Ongoing Oppression, Hostility

Key Concepts

Gospel: The “Good News” of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; its significance and implications for the world today.

Church: The gathering of Christians in a particular locality, and also world-wide.

Persecution: Intense, ongoing oppression and hostility, generally with the desire to eliminate a particular group or movement.

Introduction

Persecution is not new! That fact should be very obvious to every Christian and every student of history, but today many people still seem to think that life is supposed to be good and easy and prosperous – and peaceful! Any area of life which does not conform to that description must therefore somehow be “deformed” or deficient. For an increasing number of Christians from all around the world, persecution is a dire reality of everyday life, and thousands of Christians this year alone have lost their lives, their families, homes, farms, animals, and livelihoods. Many who are spared physical

¹ The Most Rev. Benjamin Kwashi is former Archbishop of Jos in the Church of Nigeria, Anglican Communion.

violence have to cope with abuse, bitterness, anger, lawsuits, rejection, ejection from property and so on.

Northern Nigeria is said to be one of the most dangerous places in the world for Christians. This article we shall look briefly at the background to this statement, and at the truth of the situation today. Guided by Biblical examples and teaching we shall suggest strategies for the future development of this growing church.

The Shadow of the Past

Although a Christian presence had been established in North Africa in the days of St. Augustine (354-430) this did not lead to the conversion of the continent, and Christianity only reached Nigeria in the first half of the nineteenth century. Nigeria is a vast country with many different tribes, traditions, cultures and approximately 400 languages. When Samuel Ajayi Crowther (who later became the first black African Anglican Bishop) began his great work in the south west in the 1840's he had to deal with each particular ethnic group as he met them; some were friendly, other were treacherous. Inter-tribal wars were frequent in the pre-colonial period, and like most other societies in the world Nigeria has experienced intermittent internal conflicts as a significant feature of its process of growth and development.

Over the years, travel conditions and communications have developed; Nigeria became independent in 1960, and today there is a Federal Government with its seat in Abuja. The 36 States and Federal Capital Territory which now make up the Federation each have their own Governor and State legislature. The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria has provision for freedom of worship; section 38 states:

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, preaching, practice and observance. (1999, p.22).

Nevertheless, crises between Muslims and Christians are ongoing, and the attempts by Nigerian Muslims forcefully to apply the principles of the 1804 Jihad spearheaded by Usman Dan Fodio on the present day Nigeria seem to be one of the main factors responsible for these conflicts. This view is indicated in the words of Governor Ahmed Sani Yerima of Zamfara State, when he defied the Nigerian constitution and

proponents of the secularity of the Nigerian state, to proclaim Sharia as the official legal system of the state on Wednesday, October 27, 1999. He said:

The Muslim *ummah* in this nation had for too long been dormant, inactive and indeed, in a state of slumber which had given the impression that we are silent majority. The Muslims have for long yearned for the freedom to exercise their full rights since the period they were invaded and colonised by the British. We only partially achieved victory with independence but our neglect of planning robbed us the fruits of our struggles... The struggle had not gone in vain for the Islamic order we envisaged has now emerged. What we have embarked upon now is the continuation of the struggle started by our foresighted leader, the late Sarduna of Sokoto, Sir Ahamadu Bello of blessed memory.²

Following Zamfara's lead, ten further states in Northern Nigeria also made Sharia their official legal system. Today it has to be said that despite the words of the Federal Constitution, the degree of religious liberty a citizen enjoys differs according to their State of residence. Such a situation has aggravated the challenges of Islam to Christianity in the north and has called into question the whole idea of a united and peaceful nation. This notwithstanding, the Christians have gone out of their way to solicit for peace. In most of the crises, the Christians were very tolerant. The Muslims close the major roads on which their mosques are located every Friday in many Northern cities, converting the roads to prayer grounds. Yet the Christians do not generally protest nor complain. In fact, on some occasions the Christian Association of Nigeria, (C.A.N.) would intervene when Christians are killed to ensure that the Christian Youths did not retaliate. This was the case in Jos, Plateau State in October 1991 and February 1992, when the two young men were killed. The Christians only took the corpses and buried them.

A good number of the Christian preachers preach peace from their pulpits and discourage their members from retaliating.³ (For example Kwashi, B.A, (2000), *The Bishop's Charge*, Jos, Nigeria, np). The Northern Bishops of the Anglican church made their feelings about the declaration of Sharia known in a communiqué and sued for peace, after meeting at the Cathedral Church of St. John Jimeta, Yola, Adamawa State from 24th – 26th January 2001:

It should be noted that Sharia practice, contrary to the claim of the proprietors, affects all and not Muslims alone. Its practice also facilitates violence and

² Yerima, A.S. in Osa D. 1999), 'Sharia Time Bomb...' *Tell, Nigeria's Independent Weekly*, pp.12-13

disharmony which is not only opposed to democracy and humanity but God's sovereign will that we should live in peace and love with one another⁴

The Reality of Today

In spite of pleas for peace, attempts to avoid retaliation, and many determined and time-consuming efforts at dialogue, the attacks have multiplied, now particularly through the activities of Boko-Haram and Fulani Herdsmen. Each of the many attacks has inflicted serious injuries on the personal, family, community and economic life of the people living in the north of Nigeria, subjecting them to the mass murder of men, women and children, bereavement, physical and mental suffering, loss of homes, farms and properties worth millions of Naira. As a result, the number of orphans, widows, homeless and vulnerable people has multiplied, with thousands in camps for Internally Displaced Persons (IDP's).

Today the attacks on urban communities to inflict large casualties have somewhat subsided, but the persistent annihilation of villages, small groups and individuals continues to spread across the central regions of Southern Kaduna, Benue, Plateau and Taraba States. So far during 2023 over 6,000 people have been killed by Islamist Fulani militia groups and more killed by Boko Haram Jihadi terrorist groups.⁵ The Fulani militia groups tried to force Christian villages to pay millions of Naira in order not to be attacked, but even when some paid, the terrorist groups still attacked them, especially in southern Kaduna. Many Christians have also been kidnapped, leaving poor rural Christian communities searching for huge sums of money to pay for their release.⁶ Many farmlands have been deliberately destroyed by the Fulani in order to force the villages either to flee or starve.

Nigeria is now reckoned to be one of the most dangerous places in the world for Christians. As reported in Christianity Today, the 2023 Open Doors report noted:

Violence against Christians... is most extreme in Nigeria where militants from the Fulani, Boko Haram, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and others conduct raids on Christian communities, killing, maiming, raping and kidnapping for ransom or sexual slavery. This year has also seen this violence

⁴ Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion, Province III), (20010, *Communiqué of the "Meeting of Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) Province III held at the Cathedral Church of St. John's Jimeta, Yola – Adamawa State"*.. np

⁵ <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2023-04/over-50000-christians-killed-in-nigeria-by-islamist-extremists.html>
<https://www.heritage.org/africa/commentary/slaughter-nigerian-christians-warrants-international-attention>

⁶ <https://www.churchinneed.org/kidnapping-of-priests-still-rampant-in-nigeria/>
<https://globalchristianrelief.org/christian-persecution/stories/persecuted-christian-from-nigeria-kidnapped-by-extremists/>

spill over into the Christian-majority south of the nation.... Nigeria's government continues to deny this is religious persecution, so violations of Christians' rights are carried out with impunity.

Repeating last year's performance, Africa's most populous nation ranked No. 1 in the WWL subcategories of Christians killed, abducted, sexually assaulted or harassed, forcibly married, or physically or mentally abused, as well as ranked No. 1 in homes and businesses attacked for faith-based reasons. It again ranked No. 2 in the subcategories of church attacks and internal displacement. Violations of religious freedom in Nigeria are emblematic of a rapidly growing Islamist presence in Sub-Saharan Africa.⁷

A Biblical Viewpoint

Before we become overwhelmed by the magnitude of the problem today, however, two basic facts should be clearly stated:

1. persecution is not new;
2. persecution has never killed the church, and persecution will never kill the church.

Jesus faced opposition and persecution throughout his life. The religious leaders who, it might have been thought, should have been the ones to help, guide and support him, tried to disgrace him in public by asking trick questions while parading their own supposed 'holiness', especially in their relations with the 'common' people.

Later, of course, Jesus was betrayed, arrested, tortured, put through an illegal trial, and crucified. But he rose from the dead! That is the one reason why we can confidently say that persecution will never kill the church. Jesus has conquered the powers of death, sin and Satan! We may not see that victory work itself out in our particular locality during our own lifetime, but as we look forward and work towards the coming of the Kingdom of God, we know the One Day...

Not long after Pentecost Stephen, who had been elected as one of the seven deacons, was stoned to death; others also died. Paul's sufferings, imprisonments and ultimate beheading are legendary:

⁷ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2021/january/christian-persecution-2021-countries-open-doors-watch-list.html>

Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant? (2 Cor. 11:24-29)

From the Book of Revelation it is clear that many Christians, including those in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum and Philadelphia were suffering and struggling. From the Epistles it is obvious that many communities were suffering. For example, Peter wrote to the Christians:

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. (1 Peter 4:12-16)

Provocation and persecution are no excuse for revenge or vengeance or retaliation. God in his sovereignty has always executed judgement and justice for the persecuted. In the book of Esther and in Acts Chapters 5 and 12 we see a few of the many sovereign acts of God on behalf of those who put their trust in him.

Nonetheless, the list of martyrs is endless and extends throughout the ages right up to and including today. But we should not fail to notice one vital point. Neither Jesus Christ nor his followers retaliated, stone for stone, blackmail for blackmail, bomb for bomb . . .

Nevertheless, each wave of persecution was followed by an upsurge of mission, and the church spread!

Effects of Persecution

Persecution shakes the institutionalism of the church and proves to us that there is no lasting home in this world. Persecution has also increased the love, the sharing, and the caring of people for each other. We do not love the persecution itself, but it has caused in our churches a practical demonstration of the gospel of Jesus Christ, generating kindness and practical love on a local and global scale. Strong churches move in to help people and take them in. Camps for Internally Displaced Persons need, food, clothing, medicines, education materials and all that flows from a genuine demonstration of the love of Christ. Persecution enables us to see ever more clearly the urgency of serving communities with health care, helping children with education, protecting them from abuse, providing shelter for homeless orphans, and giving support to the widows, the poor, and the vulnerable.

The notable thing is that persecution helps us to set right our priorities in life, sharpening our focus on Gospel priorities. Persecution makes very clear before our face the futility of amassing wealth and accumulating earthly properties: these just become excess baggage which hinder the pilgrim's progress. Persecution opens our hearts and minds to those who have suffered most, indeed the Christian church is usually at its most generous at such times. In these ways persecution redirects our attention away from the persecution itself to the plight of those affected and those who may well soon become victims, and thus pushes us to consider urgently the ministry, mission and advance of the gospel.

Has anyone taken the gospel to the most vulnerable villages? Who is their pastor, or is there a pastor in the area? What provisions have been made in that area for clean water, basic health care and education? The situation on ground makes it startlingly clear that although administrative arrangements may have to be made, this must be done immediately and quickly; the mission is in the Doing and the Living of the gospel – and a response is needed now!!

A Personal Example

In March 1987 I was Vicar of St. Andrew's Church Zaria. Our church and vicarage were completely burnt down in March that year, with the loss of all photographs, books and possessions, including our wedding gifts. My young wife, Gloria, was visiting her family some eight hours drive away and I was concerned as to how she would react when she returned. She came. She looked at the ruins and she looked at me. She said, "Ben, you are a preacher. You preach that heaven and earth will pass away, but God's word will remain. It has to start with you, or the people will not believe you. We will just continue

God's work." I bent down and scooped up some of the ashes from the vicarage and from the church. I took them home and put them in a perspex "coffin" which hangs on the wall of our parlour wherever we are: a constant reminder and yet also an encouragement.

Throughout the following years we have had a few more experiences of a close shave with death. In 2006 I was away in the UK when our house was attacked by over thirty unknown, unidentified killers. Their target was Bishop Kwashi. As I was not at home, they mercilessly abused Gloria and left her partially blind with a broken rib and injuries on her legs and toes. Thanks to the help of various Christian brothers and sisters she underwent several surgeries in San Antonio, Texas. Miraculously she recovered.

A year later another group of killers, this time numbering just under forty, surrounded the house, then took me outside to kill me. Standing in front of the designated killer, their leader screamed that they should carry out the killing in my bedroom. They took me back inside, and I asked for an opportunity to pray. They agreed. A few minutes later I felt the cold hands of Gloria holding mine as she joined me in prayers. After another few minutes I heard the footsteps of my son who said to me, "Daddy, they've gone."

Eternity alone will reveal why I have not been killed. It is, however, as a result of these happenings that my wife and I have been ignited afresh for the gospel. We see ever more clearly the urgency of serving communities with health care, helping children with education, protecting them from abuse, providing shelter for homeless orphans, giving support to widows and the poor, and opportunities to the vulnerable. At the moment we have adopted 75 children who live with us in our compound, and we are also providing free education, health care, clothing and feeding for over 400 children. Only in this life do we have the opportunity to shine the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and we are more convinced than ever before that the call to bring that light to those who sit in darkness must be answered now!

Looking Forward

Those who carry the message of this gospel will not always be welcomed; there may be intimidation, humiliation and suffering. St. Paul experienced all of these, but he refused to give up. He searched out people of all faiths: Jews, worshippers of pagan idols, and those who served an "unknown god". Always, under all circumstances, his concern, his aim and his reason for living was to "press on" with this gospel (Phil.3:12), the gospel which had so caught and transformed him, that he knew that no-one was beyond its power. Courage comes from following Jesus.

The persecution of the church may not come upon the whole church in all the different parts of the world at the same time, but what will not stop until Jesus returns is the persecution of the church. Jesus himself warned about this, “But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. This will be your opportunity to bear witness” (Luke 21:12-13). This implies that just as persecution will not stop, so also evangelism and the mission of the gospel should not stop. We cannot wait for persecution to end before we begin the mission and ministry of the gospel of Jesus Christ! Jesus’ promise must never be forgotten: “In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

I believe strongly that if the church engages the society, no matter how hostile that society may be, with love, care, compassion and life changing programmes as Jesus did, persecution may not stop immediately, but persecutors will have a conscience to deal with for a life-time.

It is common knowledge, however, that in many countries today religion, whether Muslim, Christian or any other, has fallen short of its original vision and intention. Sadly, in many places today the Church has been caught in the game of numbers instead of faithfulness in preaching the gospel. Indeed, there is a rising trend of preaching an impersonal gospel that is not interested in problem solving but in simply doing a job. This kind of preaching tends towards a political presentation of Christianity. We must honestly seek to restore and bring back to the path of truth what has gone wrong. Any religion that is not promoting peaceful co-existence, dialogue, human development, contributing to the capital development of its community, seeking to establish righteousness and justice and providing care for the poor, for strangers, for orphans and widows - such a religion is suspect. We are inheritors of great and wonderful practices of religion: the establishment of schools, health care facilities, and the provision of a strong, vibrant work-force in both public and private sectors. The effect of this was that in community building and projects for societal development there was no hard line division between the peoples of different religions: all worked together. Over time, however, this is in danger of being lost. Pastors must rise to restore and promote honest religious practices which contribute meaningfully to the development of people in all spheres of life.

[The Role of the Pastor](#)

It is clear that what many people today (and especially the youth) are looking for is a clear presentation of the gospel, and not a vague outlining of various ways, any of which could perhaps lead to God. There is an urgent need for the total ministry of the gospel of our

Lord Jesus Christ, kindled by zeal and by the fire of the Holy Spirit, and upholding the authority of Scripture for the whole of life. This position is both the defence and the mission of the church. Experience shows that a living, vibrant witness to the Lord Jesus Christ is highly respected even by unbelievers, including the Muslim community. The theologian N.T.Wright set a big challenge when he wrote:

What Jesus was to Israel, the church must now be to the world. Everything we discover about what Jesus did and said within the Judaism of his day must be thought through in terms of what it would look like for the church to do and be this for the world.⁸ (1999, p.530)

The church must as a matter of the utmost concern "Seek first the Kingdom of God, and his righteousness" (Matthew 6:33). In this verse there are set out clearly our priority and our agenda for today and tomorrow - or rather, not our agenda, but God's. Those who seek first the Kingdom of God are totally committing themselves to the establishment of the rule of God Almighty. They will therefore seek to establish a Kingdom where Jesus will rule in the hearts and affairs of mankind.

As he seeks to lead the church, the focus of the pastor, or of any leader, must be on the Kingdom. That means that the whole church must allow the Bible to be their inspiration and their guide, and all must seek to live according to biblical standards and in obedience to our Lord Jesus Christ. The situation is urgent and therefore it is submitted that for a church to thrive and develop, even under persecution, and to have a real drive for mission there must be sound leadership and sound theological education which will be known for integrity in theology and in character.

The pastor is a leader; he has authority; but the authority of any Christian leader, and especially of an ordained person, is derived from and depends upon the authority of Christ. The authority is given; it is the authority of a servant; the source of that authority is invoked in prayer and worship; the one given the authority is to preach the gospel and to bring others to salvation. Thus it is within the context of worship that Christian spiritual leadership comes into focus. In such worship the source of the authority under which the leader lives and works is both acknowledged, worshipped and preached. The exercise of Christian ministry and leadership must be seen in the context of worship if it is to be authentic and meaningful. Christian leaders cannot stand on their own; they do not exercise their own authority - indeed, if they try to do so they are no longer following the way of Christ.

⁸ Wright, N.T., (1999) *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is*, Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP

As I have reflected on the challenges currently facing the church under persecution in a country with a strong Muslim population, I have found it helpful to enumerate six points which are vital to me and which show me a way of positively dealing with the challenges of today.

1. A pastor must focus on God and follow closely the teaching of Scripture on the nature and call to that office. It is the duty of a pastor to learn to lead in accordance with the Bible so that the church will be light to the world in its service and mission and bring glory to God: to resist not only the temptation to pride and power but also the temptation to be drawn away by administration and other "important" meetings and by wining and dining with the high and mighty, while ignoring the priority of the task and mission of the church.

2. It is required of a pastor to be faithful and loyal to God, the church and to his call. Therefore a pastor must follow the leadership pattern set by Jesus in serving, teaching, preaching, healing and leading by example. Those who have been called by God and have been blessed with much education, owe it to God, to the church and in particular to coming generations to hand on what they have received in its full content, hot and fresh.

3. For the church not to lose its mission in a world of success and achievement, a pastor should take time to contemplate on God's total gospel mission to each generation, through research, study and dialogue. With careful discernment a pastor will apply the findings of such research to the local community with a deliberate intention of bringing the kingdom of God into that situation. In order to achieve this, the establishment of a place of learning which exhibits godly and spiritual characteristics and has high academic standards will be of great benefit, and will help to further the world-wide mission of the church. Such a place of learning must be built on prayer and must concentrate on the Bible and the Holy Spirit's work and mission with emphasis on character development, discipleship, discipline and leadership.

4. There is the need now more than ever before for pastors to be not only teachers but also apologists for the faith. Because persecution will forever be the lot of the church, my vision is to prepare Christians who will not only be able to stand firmly on their faith in the time of persecution, but will energetically pursue the mission of the church at all times.

5. The pastor is a leader in mission, and the mission is the Lord's mission to the world. It is therefore the pastor's responsibility to train the church to be

missionaries in the world. The church in turn will make itself available to God for use in local contexts and wherever the Lord will lead in the world.

6. The pastor's vision, mission and aim should always be: to keep in focus the mission of God, heaven, eternal life, to live a full life and to finish well.

Conclusion

Persecution can bring heartbreak, frustration, suffering and discouragement, but let us never forget the words of Isaiah:

Those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength;
they will mount up with wings like eagles;
they will run and not be faint;
they will walk and not be weary. (Isaiah 40:31)

These words were addressed to the people of Israel in exile. The prophet showed them that they were in captivity largely because they had refused to acknowledge the presence and the power of God in their lives. The prophet now recalled God's promises to his people. Their circumstances were not easy, but the promise to them was that God would indeed keep them safe, even though they go through fire and water:

When you pass through water I shall be with you;
When you pass through rivers they will not overwhelm you;
walk through fire and you will not be scorched;
through flames and they will not burn you.
I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your deliverer. (Isaiah 43:2-3)

God does not promise to shelter his people so that they never experience the fire and the water. But God promises that he will lead his people through: they will not be overcome. Mission is possible and tomorrow is in the Lord's hands.

Disclosure Statements

The author has not reported any potential conflict of interest.

The author has not reported the use of generative AI in the research for and preparation of this paper.

This research received no specific funding.