

DJHSM

DYNAMIC JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES, SOCIAL AND MANAGEMENT SCIENCES,
RICHMOND, INDIANA UNITED STATES

Volume 1, Issue 1, 2022, ISSN:2834-0418

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CHRISTIANS IN THE MIDST OF GUNS: A NIGERIAN STORY OF PERSECUTION

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ABSTRACT

The peace of the world is more threatened now than ever due to growing activities of terrorist and militia groups. It is also evident that most of these activities are linked to religion which is supposed to propagate and promote peace and peaceful coexistence. The under developed world is the most affected by the activities of these militia and terrorist groups, ironically, it is also the most 'religious' region. On a daily basis in Nigeria you hear reports of armed bandits, terrorist groups, and or herdsmen kidnapping and or killing people. There are debates among Christians especially in Nigeria on what they should do to protect themselves and practice their faith; some are of the view that Christians should buy guns in order to defend themselves, while others are against Christians buying guns. Some Christians have returned to their traditional religion seeking protection through charms, etc and some have become syncretistic in their religious views. What is the way out of this ugly situation? The method this paper adopts is historical analysis method. The findings of this paper are that buying of guns has led to proliferation of guns,

thereby making the situation worse, people have lost confidence in religion and have become lukewarm in their religious persuasions, and there is suspicion and decline in trust level among people. Therefore, the paper concludes that two wrongs cannot make right. The key recommendation of this paper is that a biblical or scriptural approach to the problem is the way out.

Key words: Christians, gun, Persecution, Terrorism,

INTRODUCTION

Since the burning of the Jos international market on September 7, 2001 just 4 days before the bombing of the World Trade Centre in USA and the activities (bombings) of the Boko Haram terrorists the sound of guns has become very familiar. Prior to these events, when people hear the sound of guns they for safety; however, recently, even children when they hear the sound of gun they would want to know what is happening instead of running to place of safety. Another disturbing or side of this development is how places of worship especially churches have become targets of these terrorists. For the past thirteen years Christians have been

worshiping under tight security which affects their concentration and devotion during such worship services. In some places Christians have used money that could have been used for evangelism and other diaconal services to purchase guns in preparation for any eventual onslaught on them; hence the situation could be aptly described as “Christians in the midst of guns”. The other part of the topic has to do with what gave rise to the proliferation of arms in the country including in the churches and among some Christians, namely persecution.

This paper shall attempt to describe the situation in Nigeria before the sounds of guns mostly targeted or used against Christians, the condition of Christians in the midst of guns and then tell the story of Nigerian persecution before drawing some lessons for the church and conclusion.

NIGERIA BEFORE THE PROLIFERATION OF GUNS

Nigeria is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society; however, despite these diverse orientations and outlook, Nigerians once lived in peace with one another leading to inter-tribal and inter-religious marriages. In one family one will find followers of all the

three major religions namely: Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion; yet despite their religious differences they lived in peace and harmony. It was this picture that gave birth to the motto of “Unity in Diversity”. There was respect for human persons as beings created in the image and likeness of God. Friendships were established across tribal and religious affiliations without fear of being betrayed because of either religious or tribal differences. However, this does not mean that there were no pockets of skirmishes here and there either due to religious differences or tribal differences; however, when these are compared to the current state of things in the country , one will not be wrong to say we were living in paradise on earth.

THE CONDITION OF CHRISTIANS IN THE MIDST OF GUNS

The late 20th and early 21st centuries witnessed the proliferation of various terrorist organizations whose activities are transnational. It seems there is no nation in the entire globe left that has not experienced one form of terrorism or the other. Africa and Asia

seem to be the epicentres and the theatres for mass killings and destruction due to terrorist organizations fighting for the full actualization of their ideologies. The resultant effect of these acts of terrorism is generally described as insecurity. Insecurity is “the state of being subject in every respect to terror, threat, risk, molestation, bullying, harassment, etc.”¹

In Nigeria, the Matatsine crisis started as an intra-religious riot in Kano in the 1980's but gradually metamorphosed into an inter-religious crisis that spread across many Northern states such as Bauchi, Maiduguri, Gongola, Kaduna, and later Gombe to mention but a few.² Other religious crises took place in Amadu Bello University Zaria. Since that time, Zaria, Kaduna and Kafanchan became very vulnerable spots for religious crises until the emergence of the Boko Haram terrorist group in 2009. Gwamna posits that “The Kafanchan religious riots shook the foundation of inter-religious peace in Kaduna State and some Northern parts of Nigeria.”³ Other happenings that helped in sparking the embers of religious conflict/crises include: the

protest/riot in Kaduna because of Mohammed cartoon by a Danish cartoonist in connection to the Miss World Beauty contest, the Shariah issue in Tafawa Balewa and other parts of the North, Osama Bin Laden crisis, Zangon Kataf crisis and the Jos crisis in 2008.⁴

The proliferation of guns into Nigeria was through the instrumentality of several groups and poses great security challenge to the nation. Aliyu Tanko commenting on the security crises in Nigeria posits that there are five different security threats in Nigeria namely: Jihadism, clashes between herders and farmers, banditry and kidnapping, separatist insurgency, and oil militants.⁵ Some of the groups responsible for these security threats in Nigeria include: Oduwa People's Congress (OPC), Niger Delta Militants, the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), Fulani herders, armed bandits, and Boko Haram terrorist group. Also commenting on the state of insecurity in Nigeria Callistar K. Obi states, "The pattern of insecurity has been regionalized: militia groups in the south, insurgency in the north, kidnapping in the east and south [and now

north also], ritual killings in the east and west, political and non political calculated assassinations across the nation.”⁶ Though there is wide condemnation of these acts that constitute security challenge, the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association (MACBAN) seem to be defending herders responsible for acts of banditry as they stand as a civic group that engages in policy advocacy on behalf of Fulani.⁷

Most of the religious conflicts occurred in the North central region and the Middle Belt with few in North East and North West regions. However, with the turn of events as a result of the outbreak of the Boko Haram insurgency, the North East became the worst hit resulting in many deaths, loss of properties and displaced persons.

PERSECUTION

The term persecution can be applied to all spheres of human life endeavours. It is associated with the feeling of insecurity around the person or group being persecuted. The noun form of the term persecution means the act of persecuting or the state of being persecuted. **Persecution** is the systematic mistreatment of an

individual or group by another individual or group. *Persecution* is the act of harassing or oppressing a person or a group of people, especially because of their identity. **Persecution** is the act of harassing, oppressing, or killing people because of their difference from society and or religious persuasions. In the context of our topic, Christians are **persecuted** because their faith and belief in Jesus Christ as Saviour does not conform to the godlessness of a sinful world.⁹ Christian persecution is any hostility, experienced from the world, because of one's identification with Jesus Christ. This can include hostile feelings, attitudes, words and actions.

The scripture right from the Old Testament down to the New Testament is replete with accounts of persecution. The New Testament believers were not left in the dark with regards to the reaction of the society towards them, to the extent that they are surprised when they are not persecuted. Jesus made it clear that his followers will be persecuted; therefore, whoever wishes to follow him must deny themselves and take up their cross. Hence we could say, persecution is the cost of following Jesus as his disciples. Jesus said that, if they persecuted Him, they will also persecute His

followers (John 15:20). Jesus made it clear that those of the world will hate Christians because the world hates Christ. If Christians were like the world—vain, earthly, sensual, and given to pleasure, wealth, and ambition—the world would not oppose us. But Christians do not belong to the world, which is why the world engages in Christian persecution (see John 15:18–19). Christians are influenced by different principles from those of the world. We are motivated by the love of God and holiness, while the world is driven by the love of sin and pleasure. It is our very separation from the world that arouses the world's animosity towards us (1 Peter 4:3–4).

Persecution has become part and particle of the Christian life or the Church, it is not an extra. There is no doubt that persecution is a stark reality of living the Christian life. Christian persecution is to be expected: the apostle Paul warned that “everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12). Persecution has taken different forms and dimensions. According to World Watch List, a global organization, Nigeria is

ranked number 9th in global persecution index as of 4th August 2021.⁹ Thus it is not an exaggeration to say that Christians in Nigeria practice their faith in the midst of guns as they encounter one form of persecution or the other on a daily basis. How then should they respond to persecution?

REASONS FOR PERSECUTION

Those who persecute Christians often have a goal of humiliating them and making them believe the hatred toward them is justified. But Jesus told us ahead of time of their true motivation: “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you” (John 15:18–19). The numerous Christian martyrs throughout history were killed because they were chosen by Christ and do not belong to the world.

The persecutor is mostly driven by fear and suspicion of the persecuted, but going through the scriptures one discovers another side of the reason the persecutor persecutes. From the responses of

Jesus and Stephen, it is clear that the persecutor persecuted the Church out of ignorance. Two examples from Jesus reveal this: they will see it as an act of worship [rendering service to God] or devotion to God (John 16:2; Luke 21:12). They want to please God and look more devout religiously. The zealots and the Pharisees have this tendency as demonstrated by Saul of Tarsus (Acts 7: 58 – 8: 3; 9: 1- 2) and modern Islamic fundamentalists.

The Bible talks a lot about suffering for the sake of Christ. In the era in which the New Testament was written, followers of Jesus were often ostracized by their own families and communities. Some of the worst persecution came from the religious leaders (Acts 4:1–3). Jesus told His followers, "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:10). He reminded His disciples, "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first" (John 15:18).

The epistle of Second Timothy 3:12 say, "Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." As in biblical

times, many Christians today have found that making a public declaration of faith in Christ can result in imprisonment, beatings, torture, or death (Hebrews 11:32–38; 2 Corinthians 12:10; Philippians 3:8; Acts 5:40). Today there are thousands of Christians across the world that are suffering daily for the sake of Christ; some even pay with their lives.

CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO PERSECUTION [IN THE MIDST OF GUN]

It is very easy for Christians passing through or faced with persecution to be overwhelmed; however, our Lord has admonished us in the Holy Scriptures on how we should respond to persecution when they come. Below are a few of such ways of responding to persecution;

- **Prayer:** The scripture enjoins Christians to pray for those who persecute us for God to forgive them and we should also bless them not curse them. Jesus said “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you so that you may be sons [and daughters] of your Father who is in heaven....” (Matthew 5: 44 – 45). Jesus

prayed for those who crucified him saying, “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing (Luke 23: 34). Likewise Stephen also prayed for his persecutors, “Falling on his knees he cried out with a loud voice, Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60).

➤ **We need to put on the full armour of faith:** Persecution is more of a spiritual warfare against the Church physical. Whenever the Church and believers are persecuted we should see it beyond the physical and apply spiritual weaponry and strategy rather than physical weaponry and strategy. The scripture say “For our struggle [battle] is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground after you have done everything to stand” (Ephesians 6:12 – 13; 14 -18). Daniel experienced this first hand when his prayer was high jacked for 21 days (Daniel 10: 12 – 13).

➤ **Leave vengeance to God:** The scripture in Deuteronomy

32: 35 and Romans 12: 19 say, “It is mine to revenge; I will repay. In due time their foot will slip; their day of disaster is near and their doom rushes upon them.” Sometimes we find it very difficult to leave vengeance to the LORD; we like David think God is slow in avenging. He asks, “How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? ... (Psalm 13: 1 -2). Clarence L. Haymes Jr. gave three reasons why vengeance is the Lord's and why we should not seek revenge:

- i. We find it difficult to separate vengeance and anger. We want the other person to suffer the way we suffer in order to satisfy our anger, this is not God's way of vengeance.
- ii. God's vengeance is not reckless, rather it is redemptive. It always carries with it a redemptive value because He has no desire in the death of a sinner (Ezekiel 18: 23, 33: 1).
- iii. God's vengeance does not come from the seat of revenge like ours, but the seat of justice. The vengeance of the LORD always flows from a place of justice not a place of revenge.¹⁰

Conclusion

When Jesus Christ the founder of the Church established it he

made it clear that it will be persecuted. This means that suffering for Christ through persecution is always going to be a part of being a true follower of Jesus Christ. We must always live with the consciousness that following Jesus Christ comes with a cost; it means self denial, taking your cross which includes suffering persecution and dying for the faith. The apostles in their various epistles also stated that in the last days (which the time of guns); savage wolves will rise up against the Church and the elects of God. Paul writing to Timothy says, "yes, and all that would live godly lives in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3: 12). In whatever form suffering comes, we should embrace it as a badge of honor and a privilege that we, like the apostles, have "been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name." This is what Paul means while he wrote to the Philippians thus: "For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him" (Philippians 1:29). The word *granted* here means "shown favor, given freely as a gift." Paul does not present suffering as a curse, but as a benefit.

Therefore, by choosing to obey the Lord Jesus Christ, we are

setting ourselves at odds with the world. By closely adhering to the teachings of the Bible, we set ourselves up for rejection, mockery, loneliness, or betrayal. If we choose to take a stand for righteousness and biblical truth, we ensure that we will be misunderstood, mocked, or worse. We need to keep in mind that no threat of suffering deterred the apostles from preaching Christ, instead they pressed on because their eyes were set on the goal. In fact, Paul said that losing everything was worth it "that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death" (Philippians 3:10, NASB). Acts 5:40–41 describes the reaction of the apostles after they received another beating for preaching about Jesus: "The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name."

Jesus says we should watch and pray so that we are not caught unawares. For us to emerge victorious in the midst of these temptations and persecutions, we need to remain faithful to the end and not allow ourselves be swayed by the current and intensity of the persecution. We should remember the promise of the founder

of the Church that “And on this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16: 18). Even in the face of Christian persecution, we can press on. We can thank God for His grace and patience with us. We can express gratitude for those whom we love in the Lord and who stand with us in times of distress. And we can pray for those who would accuse, misuse, or abuse us (2 Corinthians 11:24; Romans 10:1) for we know, a time is coming when the persecuted church will be the Church at rest. May God grant us the grace to endeavour persevere to the end so that we will celebrate in the Church at rest.

Amen

ENDNOTES

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