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## **PERSECUTION OR NEGLIGENCE? AN ANALYSIS OF CHRISTIANS' SUFFERING IN NORTHERN NIGERIA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

A lot has been written on the subject of Christian suffering in Nigeria, with particular reference to the northern parts of the country. This work analyzes Christians' suffering particularly as it concerns the Northern Part of Nigeria. Christians' suffering in this part of the country is as a result of negligence on the parts of the Christians for various reasons such as their character disposition; moral decadence, prayerlessness, division, political apathy, lack of aggressive evangelism and church planting among others. The

paper takes a retrospective look at the situation the church in northern Nigeria is going through. The researcher follows the footsteps of great minds who said that Christians in Nigeria should not see Islam and her agenda as the major threat to the church's existence, but Christians' lifestyles as the problem. Also part of reasons for this negligence, as highlighted in the article is because of wrong teaching. The paper is not an indictment or outright condemnation of the Nigerian church; far from it, but a wake-up call for Christians particularly in northern Nigeria to look inwardly rather than focusing on Islamist agenda and Islamic fundamentalists as the threat to the existence of the Church. An enemy within is more dangerous than enemy without. If Nigerian church can conquer the enemy within they will come to a full realization that the enemy without is no enemy at all.

**Key words:** Persecution, Negligence, Analysis, Christian, Suffering, Northern Nigeria.

## INTRODUCTION

One may not be wrong to say that a lot has been written on the subject of Christianity and persecution in Nigeria, with particular reference to the suffering of Christians in northern parts of the country. Uncountable numbers of Christians have lost their lives and property as a result of the conflicts between Christians and Muslims or against the Church. Many scholars, analysts and Christians' organizations in the north and outside the shores of

Nigeria have seen Christian minority status as major cause or reason for the irrational intolerance from the opposite faith and the quest to eliminate it. Different authors have done well to chronicle the conflicts which began more than fifty years ago. Some of the researchers have pointed out the root causes of these crises and conflicts and thereby proffer possible solutions. Yusufu Turaki has researched a lot and written intensively and extensively on the root causes of conflicts between Muslims and non-Muslims in northern Nigeria before, during and after colonization<sup>1</sup> while Bishop Joseph Bagobiri of blessed memory chronicles the conflicts between Christians and Muslims since the early 1980s. Christians are said to be the major victims. Recently, a press release from Christian Association of Nigeria corroborates, “for years now, our Christian community has borne the brunt of the religious violence in the country.”<sup>2</sup> Although the press release does not deny the fact that non-Christians; Muslims are also victims but their casualties are not as much as Christians.

Many have examined and suggested possible solutions the conflicts. Also governments of different States in this part of the country have at various times set up different committees to ascertain the immediate and remote causes of the clashes; these committees have also submitted white papers to these states governments for necessary action. In most occasions, governments have been accused for not implementing recommendations of the various committees.

Christians in northern Nigeria have always seen these conflicts from the perspective of persecution because they are the minority in the North, even in States where they are termed as the majority, for instance, Plateau, Taraba, Nasarawa, Benue etc. Harvestman posits, “Christians are being killed all the time in Southern Kaduna, Benue, Plateau and Taraba States where Christians are the majority because of the religious control agenda.”<sup>3</sup> Although, Christians in the North are being killed by the Muslims fanatics, but the question begging for an honest answer is, what is the cause of these conflicts- persecution or negligence on the part of the Christians?

In this work, the researcher analyzes the suffering of Christians in northern Nigeria, to find out if it is truly purely persecution of the church or negligence. The researcher is not unaware of the heavy criticism this work will attract. The reason is because for long many church leaders, theologians and scholars have written articles, books, and have been preaching that what is happening is purely persecution of Christian and sign of end of the age. But the reader is kindly requested to keep emotion aside and build objectivity with the researcher. In the Bible, God's people suffered as consequences of the actions or inactions. Now can it be possible that the suffering of Christians in northern Nigeria is self-made; meaning they caused it for themselves? Food for thought!

## **PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS IN NORTHERN NIGERIA**

Nigerians is a religious country.<sup>4</sup> There are three major religions in the country- Christianity, Islam and Africa Traditional Religions (ATR), however, Christianity and Islam are the most widely recognized religions with churches and mosques visible in every city, town and village.<sup>5</sup> Christians and Muslims have often time resorted to serious conflicts that has resulted in the loss of lives and property. Islam and of course Muslims are seen as being responsible for the suffering of Christians. Muslims are therefore viewed as the greatest enemies.

On the global scale, Christians have been reported to be victims of executions. Christians have been enslaved. Christian children have been forcefully recruited and transferred to other groups. Women and girls have also been subjected to various forms of sexual violence such as rape, forced marriages, and human trafficking. Churches and other religious historical sites have been destroyed. Christian towns, villages and cities have been devastated. Christians have suffered the interruption of humanitarian aid supplies and the bombardment of their homes and places of residence. Dogara Gwamna said that beginning from the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States of America (USA) highly motivated the September 11 attack in Jos, Plateau State by the Al Qaida networks and today, on daily basis people are being killed by these Islamic fundamentalists in

virtually every parts of northern Nigeria.<sup>6</sup> The Church is the target. The relationship between Christians and Muslims has been characterized by mutual distrust, suspicion, fears, bitterness, hatred, discrimination etc. This is rather unfortunately, contrary to the ideal situation where religion should be a path to resolving conflicts, and focus on teaching about love, humility, forgiveness, compassion, respect for individual, sanctity of life, foster unity, peaceful co-existence etc. “traditionally, religions have been moats of separation rather than bridges of understanding between people.”<sup>7</sup> Actually, the scenario describes by Samartha is the situation in northern Nigeria; it is characterized by violence, conflicts, crises and destruction of lives and property. This is to say that in spite of peace potential of religion in northern Nigeria, it has not been able to preach peace and prevent conflicts or control religious passions once they have been aroused.

## **ANALYSIS OF CHRISTIANS' SUFFERING IN NORTHERN NIGERIA**

One may not be wrong to say emphatically that Christians in the northern Nigeria have been going through difficulties and challenges. Many lives and property have been lost. Bagobiri observes that the Church in northern Nigeria in the past 100 years has enjoyed astronomical growth in all spheres of her life. It grew from a zero percent presence in 1900 to constituting about 32% of the northern Nigeria's population in 2014. However, the persecution of Christians in northern Nigeria is so severe that

within 10 years; from 2006 to 2014, 12, 000 Christians were killed, 1.3 million displaced and 13,000 churches were either destroyed or abandoned.<sup>12</sup> unfortunately, even when Christians are being attacked and killed by the enemies of the Cross, government officials in most cases refused to come to the rescue of the victims by sending security agents like Police, military and provide food, clothing, shelter and other humanitarian assistance. This is a threat to the Church of Jesus Christ in northern Nigeria and the world at large. “The activities of Al Qaida, Boko Haram, Taliban and Hezbollah across the world attest to this fact. The United Arabs League is pumping oil money into different countries for the propagation of Islam.”<sup>8</sup>

However, this research work identifies the following factors as the major causes of Christians suffering in the northern parts of Nigeria, not the other way round.

### **1. High Level of Moral Decadence among Christians**

While many Christian scholars and writers have viewed the killings and destruction of property belonging to Christians as persecution, lately some few scholars have seen the situation from the opposite direction. Hence the question, is the killing of Christians in northern parts of the country persecution or Christians' negligence? The researcher has taken time to humbly ask several thought provoking questions and also sample opinions about suffering of Christians basically in northern Nigeria.

Looking at the state of the Church of Christ in the north, Nigeria and the world over, one may not be wrong to say that something is seriously wrong with the Church, not always those the church is pointing accusing finger on. This is to say that one of the reasons why this evil is befalling the Church today is because the Church has failed to live out her light to the world. The high level of moral decadence among Christians is very alarming. Christians have failed to display the character of Christ towards the outside world. Jesus said: “You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot” (Matthew 5:13NIV). To put this statement in proper perspective, Jesus was addressing his disciples not foreigners; believers not unbelievers. Therefore, this statement is directly applied to Christians today, Christians in northern Nigeria inclusive because,

True Christians are to be in the world like SALT. Now salt has a peculiar taste of its own, utterly unlike anything else. When mingled with other substances, it preserves them from corrupting. It imparts a portion of its taste to everything it is mixed with. It is useful so long as it preserves its savour, but no longer. Are we true Christians? Then behold here our place and duty.<sup>9</sup>

Please note that Ryre implies that Christians, irrespective of the generation and denomination found themselves like salt of the

earth. They are unique/special not to be compared with any other people else, in terms of character disposition. Christians are responsible for preserving the world from corruption. When Christians meet with sinners, they should influence the sinners positively, otherwise is very dangerous. Today's Christians have failed in this regard. Instead of the Church to influence the world, the world system is influencing the Church today. Therefore one may not be wrong to say that part of the reasons why wickedness is prevalent in northern Nigeria and its effect is severe is because, Christians have failed to influence the enemies of the Cross positively with their character. For this reason the system of the world is influencing humanity with its wickedness, but not limited to destruction of lives and property. The targets of course will be those who have refused to influence the Christians.

Subsequently, Jesus says, “You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:14-16 NIV). As a matter of continuation from verse 13, these verses also teach that “true Christians are to be like LIGHT. Now it is the property of light to be utterly distinct from darkness. The least spark in a dark room can be seen at once. Of all things created light is the most useful. It was

the first thing called into being. Without it the world would be a gloomy blank. Are we true Christians? Then behold again our position and its responsibilities!”<sup>10</sup> One will not be ashamed to say that the Church in Nigeria particularly is relatively powerless to halt social and moral decline within the nation. “As social and economic pressures assailed Nigeria starting during the growing prosperity of the, 70s, and increasingly so as the nation descended into economic chaos and decline in the '80s and '90s, the Church did too little to provide adequate moral guidance that was desperately needed to uplift its members,”<sup>11</sup> and influence the outside world positively. The Church in northern Nigeria is going through this ordeal basically because she has failed to influence the outside world with godly character. When Christians refuse to influence the outside world positively, the world will not fail to influence people to commit all manners of atrocities. Like is being experienced in northern Nigeria; destruction of lives and property daily.

Sunday Bobai Agang, critically observed that the greatest threat to the Church, particularly in northern Nigeria is not Islam but the believers themselves; there lifestyles. Though Jonah Samson asserts, “Islam appears to be a major threat to the existence of the church in the world most especially in sub-Saharan Africa, North Africa, and the Middle East.”<sup>12</sup> Agang says,

Christians in Nigeria should be afraid of something more dangerous than the

Islamization agenda: the ethical and moral decadence eroding Christian public life. . . I worry more about the serious moral decadence and ethical decline which now characterize Christianity in Nigeria and the African continent at large. Today, many Christians are deeply involved in corruption and flaunt decadent and immoral lifestyles. . . Christians in Nigeria are dancing on the brink of moral and ethical collapse.<sup>13</sup>

Islam and Islamic fundamentalism is not the threat; believers are. In his book, Harvestment testified that “Now, Islamic Terrorists thought the best way to penetrate everywhere is to kill Christians so that they can be scared and resort to Islam, little did they know that the more Christians are killed, the more determined they become to die for the sake of Christ.”<sup>14</sup>

Like Sunday Agang, Maxey and Ozodo among others, strongly believe that because Christians today have failed to function as the salt of the earth and the light of the world, in other words have not positively influence on their immediate environment, Satan has succeeded in influencing his agents against them. Similarly, A.W Tozer saw Christianity in turmoil and decline not as a result of the negative influence from enemies without but within, therefore he would always issue a clarion call for Christians to forsake the world and once again take up their crosses and follow Christ. He said, “We have sold out to carnal methods, carnal philosophies, carnal viewpoints, carnal gadgets and have lost the glory of God in

our midst. We're a starved generation that's never seen the glory of God.”<sup>15</sup> It is momentous at this moment to take retrospective approach to issues affecting the Church in northern Nigeria and said, the church needs to think twice and wake up from spiritual slumber. The rate of moral deficiency in the Church today in Nigeria and everywhere is a huge concern, and loophole satanic agents are leveraging on to cause havoc.

It is becoming more and more difficult nowadays to identify a true Christian. This is because the lifestyles of many who claimed to be born again is sometimes worst than or the same with people of the world in different ways; they dress seductively and irresponsibly, watch pornographic films, engage in all forms of immorality, actively participate in all manners of corrupt activities publicly and privately. Christians in northern Nigeria and indeed all over the world must rise to their responsibility of becoming the salt of the earth and the light of the world, if they have declared for Christ, and these forms of mayhem will reduce drastically.

## **2. Division among Christians**

According to Advanced learners' dictionary, division is the “disagreement or difference in opinion, way of life etc., especially between members of a society or organization.” This is one of the key factors responsible for the suffering of Christians in northern Nigeria. The Body of Christ is divided. “The Nigerian church is faced with challenges and problems of division in present time.

The mind of God for believers is that they are united, that is the reason Jesus prayed in John 17 that his followers would be united, not divided.<sup>16</sup> John records that Jesus prayed in verses 20-23 thus, “I do not ask on behalf of these ones alone, but for those also who believe in me by their word, that they also may be in us, so that the world may know that you sent me, the glory which you have given me I have released to them, that they may be united, just as we are united; I in them and you in me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that you sent me, and loved them, even as you have loved me.” Jesus' prayer for his followers, past, present and future is to be united. Paul the apostle asked the believers in Rome to watch out for anyone who cause division among them, saying “I urge you brothers and sisters to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned, keep away from them” (Romans 16:17 NIV). True teachings of the Scriptures unite while wrong teachings divide believers.<sup>17</sup> Elsewhere, Paul appealed to believers to agree among themselves and say no to divisions. “I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought” (1 Corinthians 1:10 cf. 11:18; 12:25 NIV). Despite Jesus' prayer for his Church, Paul's appeal to watch out against divisions, unfortunately the 21<sup>st</sup> century Christianity particularly in Nigeria is characterized by divisions. This division is along denomination, doctrine, tribe,

section etc. This factor is very glaring. O'Donovan has rightfully observed that although having denominations on its own is not bad, but it becomes something else when different opinions on less important matters among the churches degenerates into division.<sup>18</sup>

In northern parts of Nigeria, like everywhere in the Christian world, Churches are divided theologically on the subject of spiritual gifts, food, clothes, system of administration, baptism, Holy Communion, Holy Spirit, doctrine of Christ etc. Today, churches and preachers are busy attacking and condemning one another's preaching and teaching on social media, radio, television, news paper etc. Satan is taking advantage of division among Christians to destroy them and their property one after another. Whenever enemies of the Cross rise against the Church, instead of Christians to come together and speak with one voice against it, they would not because of division. For long, enemies of the Cross have understood that the Christians are divided, therefore they are busy taking advantage of it to attacking them strategically, knowing that Christians elsewhere will not do anything about it. One of the strategies of Islam in different States of northern Nigeria against the church is outright refusal to sell land to Christians to build churches. Believers in northern Nigeria have not come together to speak with one voice against this gross violation of human right to worship, rather they call it persecution, knowing that it is as result of division. Don't be deceived, the church in northern Nigeria is divided, satanic powers are using it to

destroy Christians.

### **3. Prayerlessness as a Factor Responsible for Christian Suffering**

Prayerlessness is another factor responsible for what Christians in northern Nigeria are passing through, not primarily persecution. Here, prayerlessness does not insinuate that Christians in this part of the country do not pray at all, but population of Christians who do attend prayer meetings regularly is nothing to ride home about, especially in mainline evangelical churches. Sunday Bwanhot laments that prayer is not a popular subject for Sunday messages, and very few church members turn up for prayer meetings, saying, “a church with 500 worshippers every Sunday cannot boast of 10-15 people showing up regularly for mid-week service. The Pastor and his family, one or two elders, couple of elderly people may be the only ones to show up- sometimes out of sheer duty unto God.”<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, check the prayer points of many churches that are termed prayerful: God bless me, bless my wife, bless my husband, bless my children, bless my business, bless my career, bless my money, give me fruit of the womb, give me job, give me admission, connect me to my helpers, let my enemies die etc. These are support to be secondary prayer points not primary. Jesus taught his disciples how to pray, “Let your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” It is also difficult for Christians irrespective of denominations to come together and pray against all manners of wickedness against the Church. The only time one would see such

great numbers of Christians coming to pray is during crusades where people are invited to come for their healing, deliverance, prosperity, breakthrough, divine upliftment or promotion. Do not forget, that when the early believers were being persecuted; Peter and John were put in jail, believers prayed until a great miracle of their freedom was realized. If Christians in this part of the country will join their hands to pray in spite of denominational differences God will turn things around (2 Chronicles 7:14).

#### **4. Christians lack of Participation in Politics and Governance**

Another factor responsible for Christians suffering in northern Nigeria is their lack of active participation in politics and governance. Christians have been divided when it comes to participation in politics until recently where it seems that they are unanimous on the subject politics and governance. In the year 1975, participants at the National Congress on Evangelisation from 27 denominations and other Christian organizations representing all the States of the Federal Republic of Nigeria lamented that Christians in the country have been withdrawing from politics which is described as unscriptural and unrealistic. The communiqué encouraged Christians to involve in the political, economic and social life of the nation, if vices like bribery, corruption, nepotism, tribalism, ostentations, persecution and the like must be minimized.<sup>20</sup> Why some Christians are still skeptical of participation in politics is because they still view it as a dirty game.<sup>21</sup> To them, politics is “dirty and nasty.”<sup>22</sup> Even with much

enlightenment going on in the Church today, some Christians see politics as a dirty game.

However, Musa Danladi found out that one of the reasons government policies in Nigeria, particularly in northern parts do not favour Christians is as a result of their poor participation in politics and governance, therefore he encouraged Christians to fully participate in politics and government to positively influence government policies on its citizenry, especially Christians.<sup>23</sup> O'Donovan strongly believes that Christians have solution to the political problems in Africa,<sup>24</sup> because Christians are called “the lights of the world” (Matthew 5:14). Eliaza Baba concurs, “When Children of God get into political positions, they usually influence policies positively.”<sup>25</sup> St. Aquinas adopted the four (4) cardinal virtues of Plato (justice, courage, temperance and prudence) and added to them the Christian virtues of “faith, hope, charity, goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, honesty, accountability, long-suffering, patience and faith.”<sup>26</sup> When these virtues are displayed in the political space in Nigeria, particularly in the north parts of the country by Christians in politics, politics will no long be described as “dirty and nasty.” Furthermore, Danladi gives example of godly men and women who served in the political sphere, both in the Old and New Testaments. This writer also strongly believes that Christians in northern Nigeria can bring a turn-around in the political situation of the zone and Nigeria as a whole.

Over time and especially now, many churches and Christians have recalled that it was a mistake to discourage Christians from getting involved in politics. This became very glaring at the advent of Islamic fundamentalism and fanaticism that led to riots, killing of Christians and destruction of church buildings in the northern parts of Nigeria beginning from 1980 with the Maitatsine riots in Kano. It was followed by the Kafachan riots in 1987, the Bauchi riots in 1990 and the Zangon Kataf riots in 1992. Government response to these riots was very slow and did result in the protection of lives of Christians and their property. There appeared to be deliberate attempt on the part of government to overlook or undermine the seriousness of the attacks on Christians. The Christian response to Islamic fanaticism led to the formation of the northern zone of CAN. CAN encouraged Christians to go into politics mainly to protect the interests of Christians. CAN published booklet around this time titled “Leadership in Nigeria.” The publication focused on the biblical basis for Christian involvement in politics, and how Christians are increasingly marginalized in the leadership of the country. They therefore encouraged Christians to go into politics and take up key leadership positions in the country. Many church denominations then started encouraging their members to go into politics.<sup>27</sup>

Christians have been called upon to participate in politics to bring sanity in politics and governance.<sup>28</sup> Although there has been much call on Christians in Nigeria to participate in politics and

governance, but the truth is that Christian's response to this clarion call is yet to be fully embraced by majority of Christians in the northern Nigeria, even in States where their population is considered very high. Secondly, it is very unfortunate that those who join politics and are involved in governance have been seen not to be living according to teaching of the Scripture; influencing political space positively and they seem to betray the Church.

## **5. Lack of Aggressive Evangelism and Church Planting**

Finally because of time and space, lack of aggressive evangelism and church planting is a factor responsible for the suffering of Christians in northern Nigeria. Although, according to Wilbur O'Donovan the second purpose of the church is evangelism and witness, saying “the church also exists to win people to Christ and to show the world how God wants people to live.”<sup>29</sup> Yet, it is at the back burner of many churches in northern Nigeria today. Even though, “evangelism remains the major tool regarding the propagation of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>30</sup>

G.S.Chukwuemeka further discussed spiritual effects of evangelism, one of which is terminating obnoxious practices generally in the society, such as traditional religious beliefs which advocates certain practices such as human sacrifice and the killing of twins whose birth was regarded as an evil omen. Christianity stood firm against such evil practices. One of the best ways to end all forms of antisocial behaviour including killing of Christians is

through aggressive evangelism and church planting in communities. In the opinion of the writer, killing of Christians and destruction of their property is antisocial. Through the influence of the church in this aspect, many unbelievers might give their lives to Jesus Christ.<sup>31</sup> In the humble opinion of the researcher, aggressive evangelism and massive church planting is lacking not only in northern Nigeria. John Stott concurs that one of the tragedies of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Christian Church is lack of true evangelism.<sup>32</sup> What many Christians call evangelism today is mere movement or migration of people from one church to another; it is called sheep stealing. According to Ilori, Islam is becoming more evangelistic when it comes to evangelism than Christianity. This is being achieved as Islamic theologians are consistently modifying their positions and making their religion more attractive than ever before. Islam like socialism is a practical religion. It invites its adherents to match commitment with practical action. It is only real, committed, practical Christianity that can meet the challenge of these ideologies,<sup>33</sup> practical in terms of aggressive evangelism and church planting among others. Because Christians are not living up to expectation in this regard, that is why some of the obnoxious practices are on the increase, such as kidnapping, killing; destruction of lives and property, Christians are seen to be the major victims. If Christians will take aggressive evangelism and church planting very serious, many of these wicked people will surrender to Jesus and forsake their evil ways, thus the destruction of lives and property, particularly of Christians will

drastically reduce as result of their conversion.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Christian Church in northern Nigeria is truly facing a lot of challenges; no doubt about that. These antagonizations are not unsummontable if Christians will take an inward look and repent where necessary; if Christians will begin to play their part as salt of the earth and light of the world; living a life that is worthy of their calling (Ephesians 4:1; 5:1), deal with division in the body of Christ in terms of denomination, doctrines, tribe or section, pray according to God's will (saying, let your will be done on earth as in heaven), join politics and occupy elective and appointive positions where they influence government policies positively, engage in aggressive evangelism and church planting among others, situations will definitely turn around for their own good and to God's glory. The paper concludes that Christians suffering in northern Nigeria therefore, is negligence on the part of Christians; therefore, Christians are responsible for their problem, rather than persecution because they refuse to play their roles as given to them by God almighty. The writer is very optimistic that if Christians in northern parts of Nigeria will rise to their responsibilities summarily discussed above, situations in the north and all over Nigeria will drastically and positively improved.

## END NOTES

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