

PSALMS 2 AND THE TREND OF PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

There are just over 98 million Christians in Nigeria – that is almost half of the country of about 211.5 million populations. The persecution facing Christians in Nigeria is extreme and often brutally violent, as Islamic militants and armed bandits attack with increasing impunity. This mostly affects believers living in the Muslim-majority north and Christian majority Middle Belt, but it's also spreading to the south. Although all civilians are subject to threats and violence, Christians are often specifically targeted because of their faith. Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), for example, wants to eliminate the presence of Christianity in Nigeria. Men and boys are often specifically targeted by extremist groups, with the aim of destroying livelihoods and stifling Christian population growth. Christian women and girls in northern Nigeria, and increasingly further south, is vulnerable to persecution for their faith and gender. Also, discrimination against Christian men has also been reported within the government armed forces, with Christian soldiers believed to be constantly sent to the most dangerous areas where they are acutely at risk of being killed by Boko Haram or other extremist groups. In northern states that operate under Sharia (Islamic law), Christians can be treated as second-class citizens, whilst Christians who convert from Islam are also at risk of pressure and persecution. It is this menace that this paper seeks to investigate into (its reality) and portray the responses to Nigerian persecution of Christians.

Introduction

Wole Soyinka said, “Nigeria currently grapples with an unprecedented spate of sectarian violence, which continues to take a debilitating toll on the people” (n.pg). Although the country is no stranger to communal violence related to religion, which in the last twelve years has claimed thousands of lives, the present situation is unique in terms of the nature, geographical scope and terrorist dimension of the violent insurrection led by, but not limited to, the militant Islamist sect Boko Haram. The mass exodus of people from the troubled northern areas to the southern region and the mounting clamour by mostly southerners for a Sovereign National Conference, in which the different ethnic and religious groups would come together to reassess the basis of their living together, are indications that the ongoing sectarian violence is a sign of a national tragedy with far-reaching ramifications. The purpose of this paper is to show that the present religious crisis in Nigeria is a part of an enduring and evolving wave of religious rights violations that continue to thrive unabated. It argues that both structural and direct violence against Christians in northern Nigeria are linked. The paper also highlights the responses of the Nigerian Christian community to persecution. In the final analysis, it is important to acknowledge that there are many among Christians and Muslims who share the vision of living in peace with one another. This can be encouraged if the two religions work to discard stereotypes against each other. By doing so, the clamour for greater religious freedom is likely to become a joint project for adherents of both religions and other citizens who embrace the possibility of peaceful coexistence.

Keywords: Persecution, Christians, Boko Haram, Religious crisis/violence.

Persecution of Christians in Nigeria

Nigeria comprises 36 States, 774 local government areas and more than 250 ethnic groups. The main groups include the Hausa-Fulani Muslims-Christians (north), the Yoruba, both Christians and Muslims (south-west) and the Igbo, mostly Christians (south-east). The population of Nigeria is about 182.3 million. There are

approximately 89 million Christians in Nigeria. Although Christians comprise 49 per cent of the population, the persecution of Christians is very high. Because of the ongoing persecution of Christians Nigeria was rated 12th on the 2016 *World Watch List*, which ranks the top 50 countries where Christians are persecuted (*Oxford Research Group*, n.pg).

The area where Christians are persecuted the most is Northern Nigeria. Northern Nigeria is split between the Muslim north and non-Muslim Middle Belt (which is predominantly Christian). Christians are considered a minority in Northern Nigeria. There are over 30 million Christians in Northern Nigeria, comprising 31.12 per cent of the population (Yakubu, n.pg).

In 2014 Christians were the majority in six northern states (Adamawa, Benue, Kogi, Nasarawa, Plateau, Taraba) and were a sizeable minority, 25–50 per cent, in seven Northern states. However, as a result of the ongoing persecution Christians became extinct in many regions of Northern Nigeria.

A recent report *Crushed but not defeated* by Open Doors and the Christians Association of Nigeria concluded that:

1. Christians in Northern Nigeria face violence from different sides;
2. A minimum of 9,000-11,500 Christians have been killed;
3. 1.3 million Christians have become internally displaced or forced to relocate elsewhere, since 2000;
4. Many churches have seen a steep decline in their memberships, 13,000 churches have been closed or destroyed altogether;
5. Thousands of Christian businesses, houses and other property have been destroyed;
6. Distrust and fear of Christians towards Muslims have hugely increased, leading to more segregation;
7. Christians in Northern Nigeria frequently face marginalization and discrimination, especially in the Sharia states in the Far North, but also in the Middle Belt states;
8. Participation in church activities as well as the private life of Christians have been severely affected. There has been a steep decline due to insecurity and migration, but there is also an increased commitment amongst the Christians that have stayed behind;
9. All over Northern Nigeria, the impact of persistent violence on Christian communities is enormous (decrease in numbers, traumatization, being overwhelmed by the influx of displaced and relocating Christian, loss of property and lack of resources)
10. Christians affected by targeted violence have been left severely traumatized.

It was reported that between 2006 and 2014 over 45 278 people were killed. The exact number of Christians killed in Northern Nigeria is not known. Open Doors estimated that 11 500 Christians were killed in the region between 2006 and 2014. In March 2015, over 1.24 million people were displaced in Northern Nigeria. 92 per cent of the displacements were caused by Boko Haram and 8 per cent were due to attacks carried out by Muslim Fulani herdsmen. It was assessed that over half a million Christians in Northern Nigeria were displaced because of targeting by the respective Islamic extremist groups. Over 13 000 churches were destroyed, abandoned, or closed in Northern Nigeria between 2000 and 2014 (Sanusi 30-34).

Background of the Text: Psalms 2

The psalm conveys this central theme through a complex polyphonic structure. In fact, the text of Psalm 2 contains no less than three discrete voices: the voice of God, the voice of the rulers of the earth, and the voice of God's anointed king, who in turn quotes God and speaks directly to all the other rulers of the earth. To understand the discursive nature of the psalm, one must attend carefully to its constituent parts.

According to LeMon, the first section (verses 1-3) describes a world in which God has established order through a divinely sponsored king. However, the entire world is currently in an uproar, with the kings of the earth plotting rebellion against God's rule. By employing the terms "nations" (*goyim*) and "people" (*ummim*) in verse 1, the psalm suggests, in fact, that everyone seeks to overthrow God's order (n.pg).

The world is rebelling not simply against God, but against God's anointed one (verse 2b), God's *meshiach* - a Hebrew word that comes to us in anglicized form as messiah; its Greek translation *christos* is preserved in English as Christ. To be anointed, to have costly oil poured over one's head, signified a change in status. An anointed one was aligned with God in a powerful way in order to perform a special prophetic, priestly,

or kingly function. Given that God's power resided uniquely with the anointed one, it should be no surprise that the fury of the nations is directed at the king as well.

Psalms 2 provides critical background for understanding both what it means and what it meant to recognize Jesus as messiah (i.e., the Christ) and Lord. In Matthew 17:1-9, the gospel reading for this Sunday of the Transfiguration of our Lord, the disciples catch a glimpse of the glory and power of the Jesus. Jesus' special status as king and divine son are suddenly revealed, but only for a moment and only to select few. Given the expectations that attended the office of kingship, Jesus' true identity as messiah would surely be misinterpreted. Indeed, throughout the New Testament, the kingship of the Christ defies expectation. Jesus' power outstrips that of any king, ancient or modern. However it comes not through military might but through emptying himself of power -- through suffering, humiliation, despair, even the death of criminal. In our own time, the message resonates as well. We feel the psalm's fundamental tension as to whether the world is actually under God's ultimate control (verses 1-3) or whether God's order has yet to be realized fully (verses 10-11). Yet we also hear God's clear response to the chaos and strife that fill the earth. God's word to the word comes through one man, the anointed king, God's son: "Blessed are all of those who take refuge in him" (verse 11).

Exegetical Study of Psalms 2

The rage of nations and the laugh of God (Vss. 1-3)

The psalmist seems genuinely mystified. The nations have no reason to rage against God, and they have no benefit in raging against Him. Their opposition against God is nothing but a vain thing. Since the time of Babel, men have continued to band themselves together against God. Their mistaken belief is that two or more men united against God have a better chance than one man set against God.

They oppose both the LORD and His Anointed. Anointed speaks of the Christ, the Anointed One. Since Jesus is the perfect representation of the Father (John 10:30, 14:9), opposing God the Father, is to oppose Jesus. If you are against Jesus, you are against God the Father. Those who oppose the LORD and His Anointed think of God as a bondage-bringer. This attitude is evidence of spiritual insanity, because God is a bondage-breaker, not a bondage-bringer (Guzik, n.pg).

"To a graceless neck the yoke of Christ is intolerable, but to the saved sinner it is easy and light.... We may judge ourselves by this, do we love that yoke, or do we wish to cast it from us?" (Spurgeon, n.pg)

The LORD's laugh from heaven (Vss. 4-6)

God looks at the way man plots against Him and He laughs. God isn't afraid or confused or depressed about the opposition of man (Guzik n.pg). God laughs at it. God laughs because He sits in the heavens. He sits as the Great King on a glorious throne. He isn't pacing back and forth in the throne room of heaven, wondering what He should do next. God sits in perfect peace and assurance. God laughs because He sits in the heavens. It isn't an earthly throne He occupies; it is the throne of heaven with authority over all creation. What does heaven have to fear from earth? "God does not tremble. He does not hide behind a vast celestial rampart, counting the enemy and calculating whether or not he has sufficient force to counter this new challenge to his kingdom. He does not even rise from where he is sitting. He simply 'laughs' at these great imbeciles." (Boice, 12)

According to Morgan, "This derisive laughter of God is the comfort of all those who love righteousness. It is the laughter of the might of holiness; it is the laughter of the strength of love. God does not exult over the sufferings of sinning men. He does hold in derision all the proud boastings and violence of such as seek to prevent His accomplishment of His will." (62).

The LORD shall hold them in derision: Through the centuries, many have opposed God and His Kingdom in Jesus Christ. Each one of these opponents shall be frustrated and crushed.

Guzik posed an example: Diocletian Jovian Maximian Herculeus Caesares Augusti for having everywhere abolished the superstition of Christ for having extended the worship of the gods. Diocletian is dead and gone,

a footnote on the pages of history. The fame and glory of Jesus Christ is spread over all the earth. The LORD shall hold them in derision.

God shall speak to them in His wrath: God laughs in heaven, but He doesn't remain inactive. He laughs, but He doesn't only laugh. Before He acts against defiant mankind, He first speaks to rebellious humanity. This shows the great mercy of God. He has every reason and every right to simply act against defiant men. Love and mercy compel God to speak a word of warning before He acts. I have set My King on My holy hill of Zion: God wants defiant mankind to know that He has established a King. The defiant men closest in view in the psalm are kings and rulers, and God especially wants them to know there is a King greater than they are. God's King is established (set), and established in Jerusalem (Zion).

The decree of the Son. (Vss. 7-9)

The following passage indicates that this is the LORD's Anointed Himself speaking. He will declare the decree that God the Father spoke to Him. The LORD's Anointed recalls what God the Father spoke to Him, identifying Him as the Son of the Father and emphasizing His standing as begotten of the Father. The writer to the Hebrews quotes this passage in Hebrews 1:5 as evidence of the deity of Jesus and superiority to all angels. He mentions the more excellent name Jesus received, greater than all the angels. This is the "name" Son. While angels are sometimes called the sons of God in a generic sense (Job 1:6), the Father never said "My Son" to any angel in a specific sense. That is reserved for God the Son, the Second Person of the Trinity (Guzik,n.pg).

In this passage, begotten is used. Begotten is also an important idea, as a contrast to created. Jesus was not created; rather He created everything that was created (Colossians 1:16-17). Begotten describes a relationship between two beings of the same essential nature and being, but we create things of a different essential being and nature than ourselves. A man creates a statue but begets a child.

The LORD's Anointed holds the nations as His inheritance. He will rule over all nations and all judgment is committed to Him (John 5:22). Revelation 11:15 describes an exciting consummation of this inheritance: Then the seventh angel sounded: And there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!" also the LORD's Anointed has such power over the nations that they are like clay pots that he can shatter with a blow from a rod of iron. This shows why it is so foolish for the nations to defy the LORD and His Anointed. There is no reason and no benefit to their defiant opposition.

2. The decree to the nations about the Son (Vss. 10-12).

After the words of warning from the LORD's Anointed, the psalmist counsels the kings of the earth to give up their foolish defiance of the LORD. The psalmist calls the kings of the earth to surrender to God, giving Him proper reverence. In this submitted, surrendered place they can rejoice – yet with appropriate trembling. A phrase reads, "Kiss the Son": This primarily has in mind the kiss of submission, where a dignitary receives the humble kiss of an inferior. It also hints at the affection God wants in relationship to Him. God wants us to recognize our proper place before Him, but to also rejoice in Him and be affectionate in our relationship. "Kissing was the token of subjugation and friendship." (Clarke, n.pg) If the kings and judges of the earth are commanded to humble themselves before the LORD's Anointed, recognizing His total superiority, then what of the rest of us? Speaking to the kings and judges therefore includes all of humanity.

Blessed are all those who put their trust in Him: Those who defy God are broken, but those who depend on Him are blessed. The psalmist leaves the choice with everyone: broken or blessed?

Exegetical Conclusion

We are here told who would appear as adversaries to Christ. As this world is the kingdom of Satan, unconverted men, of every rank, party, and character, are stirred up by him to oppose the cause of God. But the rulers of the earth generally have been most active. The truths and precepts of Christianity are against ambitious projects and worldly lusts. We are told what they aim at in this opposition. They would break asunder the bands of conscience, and the cords of God's commandments; they will not receive, but cast them away as far as they can. These enemies can show no good cause for opposing so just and holy a government,

which, if received by all, would bring a heaven upon earth. They can hope for no success in so opposing so powerful a kingdom. The Lord Jesus has all power both in heaven and in earth, and is Head over all things to the church, notwithstanding the restless endeavours of his enemies. Christ's throne is set up in his church, that is, in the hearts of all believers.

Application

According to International Crisis Group, Christians in Nigeria have been systematically persecuted for many years (n.pg). However, this desperate situation gained wider publicity in 2014 after the terrorist group Boko Haram kidnapped girls from a secondary school, sparking the global campaign #BringBackOurGirls. The campaign brought international attention to the terrorist group's brutal activities and many hoped it would be a critical turning point to end their reign of terror. However, two years later the situation in Nigeria has deteriorated further still (Khataza., n.pg).

The main source of persecution of Christians in Nigeria is Islamist terrorists, namely Boko Haram. However, it has also been reported that religious freedom is restricted and/or violated by Northern Muslim political and religious elites, the Muslim Fulani herdsmen, and by the widespread culture of political violence as upheld by the states' practices and policies that discriminate against or otherwise disadvantage Christians. Reports of persecution, discrimination, and restrictions of religious freedom mostly come from the northern regions of Nigeria. Northern Nigeria is predominantly Muslim, with 12 sharia states and 7 non sharia states (Alao 47).

Boko Haram is a Salafi-jihadi Muslim group that emerged in 2003. Boko Haram is based in north-eastern Nigeria but is also active in Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. It was reported that Boko Haram has conducted attacks on civilian populations in Borno, Yobe, Katsina, Kaduna, Bauchi, Gombe, Kano States, Abuja, and Plateau State. Boko Haram specifically targets Christians as 'non believers'. The attacks of Boko Haram are not random and are directed against Christians, politicians, and Islamic leaders who oppose Boko Haram's ideologies.

Responses to Nigerian persecution of Christians

As Christians and their places of worship have become increasingly vulnerable to attacks, a number of security measures have been adopted by the churches. Security around church buildings has been intensified: Churches are acquiring hand-held metal detectors to screen people; in some churches women are barred from entering with handbags; cars are parked in designated areas, and roadblocks are mounted around some churches to restrict access. Even with such tight security, a suicide bomber forced himself into the gates of the Church of Christ in Nigeria (COCIN) headquarters' church on Sunday, 26 February 2012.

Apart from these physical security measures, the church has embarked on spiritual activities as prayer and fasting. At the level of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), the main umbrella organisation of churches including Catholics, Protestants and Pentecostals, days of fasting and prayers have been organised. CAN has also been providing relief materials to the victims of attacks in several places, and continues to speak in the media on behalf of Christians. The leaders of virtually all kinds of churches continue to preach peace and appeal for calm.

Many Christians interpret what is happening as signs of the end times, and therefore accept it as a price to pay for being followers of Christ. Others believe that Christians must rise up physically against the relentless assault on their religious freedom. Disappointed with the peaceful disposition of the church in general, in the face of apparent state failure to prevent these attacks, some people are reverting to traditional religious practices to seek security and have the inspiration to fight back. Unfortunately, the actions of this last category of individuals taint the image of the church, especially when the church fails to come out and dissociate itself from them. The issue of cannibalism, a reversion to barbaric practices, during the September 2011 violence in Jos, was an appalling development. We found in the course of our fieldwork that religious leaders of the different denominations did not feel obliged to issue a statement condemning it; instead they expected the Christian Association of Nigeria to do so. Clearly, the church stands to gain by condemning such actions that misrepresent its theological position.

To combat the persecution of Christians, Nigeria must ensure that the allegations of violations of domestic criminal law are duly investigated and prosecuted in accordance with due process. Nigeria must protect Christians and other religious groups from persecution and take steps to combat the Islamic extremism on its soil. Also, Nigeria must ensure that government practice does not limit the scope of the right to thought, conscience, and religion as provided for under Nigeria's constitution and international law. Nigerian law must reflect international standards. Therefore, Nigeria must ensure that any proposal that limits this right, such as the proposed 'Bill to Substitute the Kaduna State Religious Preaching Law of 1984,' is rejected. Nigeria must ensure that Christians and other religious minorities can freely exercise their right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, in their worship, observance, practice and teaching. This is especially important as any such limitation and discrimination can be used as a basis for violent persecution on a broad scale, ultimately leading to crimes against humanity.

Conclusion

Northern Nigeria offers a fascinating case study of the relationship between persecution and conflict. Events in the region illustrate that conflict can be used to advance the goals of persecution or to fast track them. The insidious persecution, with which Christians in northern Nigeria have long been familiar, appears to have been of limited efficacy. Consequently, a higher degree of persecution, elevated persecution, involving direct spontaneous attacks, violent confrontations and terror strikes, are increasingly being employed in the region. The failure of inter-religious dialogue, led by Christian and Muslim leaders, to tame the persistent tension between the two main religions in the country needs to be investigated. Since such a dialogue remains a viable option an interrogation of those factors that render it ineffective is required. One obvious factor that has affected the ability of leaders of the two religions to come together in the face of the renewed attacks by the Islamist sect Boko Haram is mutual distrust. This attitude has contributed more to finger-pointing, blaming and attribution instead of reflexive reframing of the conflicts in terms of common concerns and aspirations (cf. Rothman 1997). On both sides, there are many who share the vision of living in peace with one another. This can be encouraged if the two religions work to discard stereotypes against each other. By doing so, the clamour for greater religious freedom is likely to become a joint project for adherents of both religions and other citizens who embrace the possibility of peaceful coexistence.

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