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The Greatest Threat to the Church Isn't Islam—It's Us

A leading Nigerian theologian believes the real danger to Christianity in Africa is in the church.
SUNDAY BOBAI AGANG / POSTED APRIL 21, 2017



Image: Brian Stauffer

A good pickpocket works with a partner who will distract the “mark” while the pickpocket steals his wallet, camera, or passport. Sometimes the distraction will be an unwanted conversation, an aggressive sales pitch, or an “accidental” collision in a crowded area—at which point the pickpocket does his work. Right now, Christians are being swindled.

We hear a lot about the threat of radical fundamentalist Islam. Some believe there is an

“Islamization agenda” at work that is trying to undermine traditional institutions and replace them with a new Islamic order. To be sure, many horrible acts have been committed under the banner of radical Islam, and there is a real danger. But the truth is this: Overblown fears about a supposed “Islamization agenda” may actually be distracting Christians from the true threat that is stealing away the authentic witness and authority of Christianity.

The Islamization Agenda

Like in many other countries in Africa, the belief in an Islamization agenda is potent, alive, and well in Nigeria. Since the early 1980s, Nigerian Christians have been deeply concerned about the possibility of a secret plan to conform the country to the dictates of Islam.

The seed of this idea goes back to the jihad led by Usman dan Fodio in 1804. His goal was to “dip the Qur’an into the Atlantic Ocean,” meaning that he intended to impose Islam upon the entire nation of Nigeria. Although he died without realizing his vision, dan Fodio left a legacy that the Muslim *umma* (community) in Nigeria has continued to pursue. Many Nigerian Christians believe that any time a Muslim is president of Nigeria, the Muslims will use that as a platform to pursue their agenda and intensify their efforts to impose Islam on the entire country.

Alongside religiosity, corruption in its many shapes and sizes is booming in Nigeria.

The rhetoric around this conspiracy theory is currently at a fever pitch because the current president of Nigeria, Muhammadu Buhari, is a Muslim. Some Christians have pointed out that his past statements indicate that he is a radical Muslim. Everywhere one turns, Christians are talking about a secret plan to supplant Christianity with Islam in Nigeria. For example, pastor Isaac Valentine Olori writes, “We are apprehensive because [President] Buhari’s agenda is tilted towards Islamization of this country.” Olori contends that “[a]ny Christian who thinks he is safe from the terror of the sword of Islam is joking.” To those peddling the conspiracy theories, the recent activities of Fulani herdsmen, the prevalence of Boko Haram sects, and the opening of Islamic banks across the nation are seen as confirmation of Islamization.

Recently, a learned colleague wanted to know my take on this concern. I reflected carefully because this was the latest of a growing number of well-respected statesmen and stateswomen in the country who have expressed concern that the Islamization agenda might be true. I cautiously responded that I think Christians in Nigeria should be afraid of something more dangerous than the Islamization agenda: the ethical and moral decadence eroding Christian public life.

It is not that I don’t believe in the possibility of the Muslims planning to Islamize the world. We Christians are often concerned about our political influence, so why should we expect any different from Muslims? Rather, 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. Our greatest threat is the sin in our own lives. That sin—any sin—is indeed lethal. We need to put our house in order. History is filled with narratives of great empires and churches that fell due to self-indulgence and moral excess. So, when faced with fears of Islamization, we must not forget the greater danger of sin.

Sliding Into Decay

Christians in Nigeria are dancing on the brink of moral and ethical collapse. Many Christians who hold public office have become corrupt or immoral, betraying their public Christian testimony. They lack integrity and cannot present a strong moral and ethical witness. They lack the virtue of honesty in public life.

Nigeria is considered a very religious country. Christianity is not limited to churches and prayer meetings. Prayer and Bible readings are found in boardrooms and government offices. Billboards announce upcoming crusades, and exclamations like “to God be the glory” and “praise the Lord” easily fall from the lips of Nigerian Christians, even in public.

But as the well-known and respected Catholic priest George Ehusani has noted,

Alongside religiosity, corruption in its many shapes and sizes is booming in Nigeria—from the petty bribery taken by the clerk in the office or the policeman at the checkpoint, to the grand corruption by which huge project contracts are hurriedly awarded, not for the sake of the common good, but because of the greed of the awarding official, who requires some money via contract “kickbacks.”

He also notes that activities like embezzling and cheating—ranging from school children to high-profile public figures—often go hand in hand with outward expressions of piety. Many Nigerians obtain fraudulent medical certificates, as well as fake birth and citizenship certificates, to be admitted to good schools or to get choice jobs. They evade taxes, over- and under-invoice customers, perform fake audits, and on and on. He concludes, “All these practices are so commonplace and so widespread that many young Nigerians are unable to distinguish between good and evil or between right and wrong.”

Father Ehusani is merely describing what is common knowledge to all Nigerians. These matters are more lethal to the Christian faith than any Islamization agenda.

The Corruption of Prosperity

In the 20th century, indigenously founded churches sprang up across Africa, particularly in Nigeria. After the Nigerian civil war (1967–70), Christians who saw the conflict as a sign of the end times embarked on a massive campaign to spread the Good News of Christ across Nigeria. Student associations and missionary movements sprang up. Nigerian Christians were determined to re-enact what happened in the Book of Acts: turning “the world upside down” (17:6 ESV).

Sadly, today the story has changed. Both mainline and Pentecostal Christianity in Nigeria are still committed to reaching out to the unreached, but the undue emphasis on health and wealth has permanently changed the face of Christianity in Africa and the world at large. Pastors and church members are now more interested in building beautiful and massive edifices than in reaching out to the unreached people groups of the world. Many pastors are obsessed with material possessions, sometimes owning one or more private jets! The corruption of Christian moral values has now given way to the worship of materialism and pleasure. Our real god is now mammon (Matt. 6:24). We have become devoted to what American theologian and social critic Reinhold Niebuhr called self-love, self-interest, and the will to power.

A Nigerian critic of the church spoke the truth when he summarized this problem:

Thieves are offered the front seats in church; recognition is accorded based on the size of one’s tithes and offerings; pastors now specify the exact amount of offerings they want, and members run over themselves to be the first to make the payments and “claim” their blessings. . . . Pastors have peddled the notion, to their own advantage, that prosperity and well-being are determined by how faithfully members pay their tithes and offerings; the amount of material possessions that one has is now perceived to be an indicator of one’s spiritual well-being.

Even more troubling are accusations of witchcraft that Christians perpetuate against one another. Investigating this disturbing trend in 2010, CNN interviewed Lucky Inyang, a project coordinator for Stepping Stones Ministry, dedicated to helping street children, who said,

Religious leaders capitalize on the ignorance of some parents in the villages just to make some money off them. They can say your child is a witch and if you bring the child to the church, we can deliver the child, but eventually they don’t deliver the children. . . . The parents go back to the pastor and say, “Why is it you have not been able to deliver the child?” and the pastor says, “Oh, this one has gone past deliverance; they’ve eaten too much flesh so you have to throw the child out.”

The CNN report found that most pastors charge a fee for deliverance—anywhere from \$300 to \$2,000.

So, African Christians are treading on costly contradictions when we speak of guarding our Christian faith against Islamization while simultaneously wallowing in deep immorality, materialism, and paganism.

The Future of African Christianity

In 2015, the Pew Research Center published a thorough study which projected a massive, worldwide religious shift by 2050. The study states that “Christianity has been the 800-pound gorilla on the world stage,” but is now “losing its edge.” The study projects that by 2050 Christianity will be only slightly larger than Islam, and by 2070 Islam will eclipse Christianity as the number one world religion.

Just because today Africa is the center of gravity for Christianity is no guarantee that it will continue to be so. Historically, Christianity has always been on the move. Yes, Christianity will increasingly become an African religion. Yes, Africa is already the largest Christian continent. But, in a 2011 study, the Pew Research Center documented the historical movement of Christianity from one location to another and predicted that it will continue.

I appreciate our Christian patriotic interest in guarding the Christian faith from being supplanted by Islam. However, the church should not allow that concern to distract it from keeping its house in order. God does not call us to compete with Islam. Rather, he calls us to holy living. “It is written, ‘Be holy, because I am holy’ ” (1 Pet. 1:16). As it is, the Christian faith in Nigeria is suffering public disgrace and disrepute because of our lack of self-control, ungodly living, and compromised integrity.

Jesus declared that he is the truth, the way to eternal life (John 14:6). Christians can be confident in our salvation by faith in our resurrected Lord Jesus Christ; we have nothing to fear. Our source of power and authority is God, the same power that raised Jesus from the dead (Eph. 1:18–20). We are given power and authority to combat satanic and demonic oppression, to destroy the works of the flesh, to heal obsession with material things, and to create just structures and systems that guarantee human flourishing. By the power and authority God has vested in us, we have nothing to fear and no excuse for failure. We have in us what we need to create fertile environments for social and spiritual transformation, in Nigeria and around the world.

The fear of an Islamization agenda is very real, but it must not be allowed to distract us from our primary concern: Christlikeness, holy living, hard work, and moral integrity. If we are concerned about the spread of Islam, let us be equally concerned about the lack of Christian public integrity and witness in our society. We must not allow fearmongering or conspiracy theories to prevent us from recognizing the true threat.

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