

POLITICAL WEAPONIZATION OF CHRISTIANITY IN THE NORTH EAST OF NIGERIA: A PROPHETIC THEOLOGICAL RESPONSE

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Abstract

Political weaponizing of Christian faith in the north east is the revelation about long time fact of unjust treatment. It is political because the state government uses its tool to suppress the relevance of Christianity in cultural communities of the north east. The purpose of this study is to investigate the experiences of persecution of Christians in North East of Nigeria, their responses to persecution. This paper aims to discuss the large varieties of political weaponization of Christian communities and the silence of the state government to protect the Christian faith. The strategy employed here is deductive and inductive in nature within the context of social exclusion theory.

Keywords: Political, Weaponization, Exclusion, Christianity, Persecution, Prophetic

Introduction

The political space of Nigeria is highly manipulated by religion. Political leaders use religion as a means to mobilize the people behind them. They also use religious organizations to bring in resources for the political party.¹ The leaders of Christian groups are in constant rivalry with the leaders of Islamic groups for political power. In some instances, religious organizations have taken on the identity of political parties. One of the big debates that arose as a result of religious differences is whether Nigeria should adopt the Islam law of Sharia. Non-Muslims, especially the Christians of Nigeria realize that once Nigeria becomes an Islamic state, they will have to adopt Islam as their religion otherwise they will be alienated or even killed if they refuse. As a result, the Christians have been determined for many years, through protests and violence, to refuse the government to declare Nigeria an Islamic state and to implement Sharia as the ultimate law.

¹ Aguwa, J. C. "Religious Conflict in Nigeria: Impact on Nation Building." *Dialectical Anthropology*, Vol 22, 1997, 336.

The Christians have a number of issues that they have always to complain about. They complained about discrimination in jobs, political appointments, land allocation, infrastructural policies, national services, education, and access to radio broadcasting, and the takeover of their schools. Falola argue that one of the most major concerns of Christians at that time was that they feared that the Muslims were trying to turn Abuja, the capital into an Islamic city. Their fears were justified by the building of a National Mosque close to the presidential mansion and the building of other mosques around the city.²

Understanding the Meaning of Weaponization

Religion is at the heart of a community's value system in most parts of the world, so people who practice a different religion are easily labelled as worthless³. A threat to one's beliefs is also a threat to one's very being and that is why people are willing to fight for their religious beliefs. The author uses the term weaponization to refer to political oppression by exclusion of Christians in the various structures of governance in the northeast. This exclusion is factor as a result to persecute Christian faith in this region. Such persecution can be in the form of psychological, socioeconomic and physical harm. Sauer and Howell define as unjust action against a believer or group of believers of a certain religious view. This may be by systematic oppression, genocide, discrimination, annoyance and denial. Religious persecution has religion as its primary motivation, though other factors can be involved.⁴ Persecution of Christians is a form of religious persecution by which victims are targeted primarily because of their religious identity.

The Theory of Social Exclusion

I consider social exclusion theory relevant to explain how Christians in the North East experience weaponization. Social exclusion as a theory relates not simply to a lack of material resources, but also to matters like inadequate social participation, lack of cultural and educational capital, inadequate access to social services and lack of power. In other words, the idea of social exclusion attempts to capture the complexity of powerlessness in modern society rather than simply focusing on one of its outcomes. Social exclusion is a broader concept than poverty, encompassing not only low material means but the inability to participate effectively in economic, social, political and cultural life and in some

² Falola, T. *The History of Nigeria*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999, 1.

³ Goldstein, J.S. *International Relations*. New York: HarperCollins College Publishers, 1994,159.

⁴ Sauer, C. & Howell, R (Editors). *Suffering, Persecution and Martyrdom: Theological Reflection*. Religious Freedom series Vol. 2. Johannesburg: Acadsa Publication, 2010.

characterizations alienation and distance from mainstream society”.⁵ Within this framework, the term social exclusion has also been most generally used to refer to persistent and systematic multiple deprivation, as opposed to poverty or disadvantage experienced for short periods of time.⁶ In this respect, the concept of exclusion is also important because it captures the processes of disempowerment and alienation, which explains perfectly the situation of most Christian communities in North East of Nigeria.

Political Weaponization of Christianity in the North East

The fact of systematic persecution of Christianity in northern Nigeria and in particular in the focus of this writeup in the north east did not begin with the emergence of Boko Haram in 2009. While before this time, there has been insidious mild persecution of Christian in the areas of job discrimination, whereby Muslim applicants are preferred over against Christian folks even when they possess superior qualifications and expertise. This strategy is applied to all other sectors such as education, political appointments, and democratic leadership, promotions in public services and provision of social amenities in Borno, Yobe, Adamawa, Gombe and Bauchi states. These common practices of persecution accentuate the domination-subordination relationship between Muslims majority and Christian minority in Borno and Yobe states and even Adamawa state where Christianity is in the majority.⁷

I consider this form of persecution mild because it involves, all forms of discrimination, denial of rights, and oppressions. Christians in post-colonial Northern Nigeria have suffered persecution in varying degrees from the Muslims who predominate the region. In an interaction with a cross section of Christian leaders such as clergy men and church elders expressed their experiences of Christian persecution cutting across Yobe to Borno, Adamawa, Gombe and Bauchi States. In these states Christians suffer discrimination and other forms of injustice. It is a known fact that Christians and non-Muslim minorities of Northern Nigeria are beneficiaries of mission education, which should have elevated their status in business and public service, but the Islamic forces have used discrimination to frustrate the region’s highly trained work force on the basis of religion and ethnicity.

⁵ Duffy, K. *Social Exclusion and Human Dignity in Europe*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 1995.

⁶ Walker, A. “Introduction: the strategy of inequality” A. Walker and C. Walker (Eds.). *Britain divided: The Growth of Social Exclusion in the 1980s and 1990s*. London: Child Poverty Action Group, 1997.

⁷ Abba, K. William. “A Systematic Persecution of Christians and the Church in Northern Nigeria: The Church’s Response.” *Nigerian Journal of Religion and Society (JORAS)* Vol. 11, July 2022, 34.

In a chat interview with Dominic Manzo, a native of Feka, Yobe state expressed his hardship as a class room teacher from Government Girls College Potiskum to Yobe state University Damaturu where he has worked as an assistant lecturer for more than 20 years and has never being promoted from this position. And even after being awarded a doctoral degree from Ahmadu Bello University Zaria, Kaduna, his new status has not been considered for promotion till his retirement. As an indigenous man with a PhD, he was denied promotion as a senior lecturer because of his Christian identity.

Catechist Michael Kuka, a long time serving religious leader further reiterated his frustration that the persecution of Christians in North East Nigeria is in every sector of the government. If your name is identified with Christianity, you are in for it. You may never be promoted; in some cases, you may never even be employed. He revealed that his son was enlisted among 21 best candidates for the Nigerian army from Yobe state but being the only Christian among his colleagues was denied because of Christian identity. In an interaction with a couple of Christians in Borno and Yobe states where Christianity faces extinction because of insidious persecution, the individuals interviewed expressed how parents are forced to take up Islamic names such as Bello, Musa, Bukar, Audu attached to their Christian names for acceptability to gain admission into tertiary institutions, to secure jobs with the state government, to be enrolled into the Nigerian armed forces, to acceleration promotions in the civil service, and educational career. These strategies employed by minority Christians in Borno and Yobe states is similar in Adamawa, Bauchi and Gombe states respectively. Culturally, native Christians of these states seldom practice their religious values openly. They find themselves displaying the Kanuri or Fulani cultures of dance, dress code, and even language. Christians in these states hardly identified for traditional titles and position. To ascend to traditional titles or chieftain, one is required to become a Muslim, or the minority Muslims are chosen for such chieftaincies. Social amenities such as roads, healthcare centers, electricity, are provided based on religious community background or identity.

Discrimination is suffered by both the young and old as evidenced in the interview with Bulama Galadima from Gombe state who lamented on how his children were denied the courses they wanted to read in the university and are qualified for. He decried that certain courses that are marketable are not given to Christians. Many young men and women in the north who are Christians are “reading” courses they never wanted to because they were not given the courses that would have led to their desired life career.

The background for the oppression of non-Muslim minorities can be traced back to the pre- colonial, colonial, and post-colonial era in Northern Nigeria. The Hausa-Fulani Muslim rulers plundered the minority tribes before the coming of Christianity, and such

this relationship is continued even when the northern minorities have embraced Christianity and Western education. Cosmas Kwalla expressed his ordeal as a young man in Michika of Adamawa state. He lamented the inhuman treatment of non-Muslims in Northern Nigeria who suffered under the Muslim emirate system. He claimed that their parents and grandparents were forced to farm for the Muslim rulers and had their farmlands and harvest forcefully taken. Those who refused to be converted to Islam were made to pay heavy taxes with their farm produce and animals. He narrated how in Michika market, when Christians brought their farm produce to the market, they were forced to sell at cheaper price to Kanuri of Borno state or experience some form of raids.

The claim of oppression of non-Muslims by Muslim rulers from pre-colonial to post-colonial era form the bedrock for the continued oppression and persecution of the Christian minority in North East Nigeria. The Hausa-Fulani seek to continue this oppression while the Christian majority or minorities are fighting for emancipation. This tension is often one of the major causes of violence in the North East region.

Larai U. had a similar experience of discrimination in the workplace. She is the national secretary of the Women Fellowship of the Ekklesiyar ‘Yanuwa a Nigeria (EYN). She suffered discrimination of unpaid retirement benefits after leaving the civil service and is still following up her entitlements to be paid while her Muslim colleagues who retired at the same time have long been paid. At the time of the interview, she had yet to be paid and did not know when that would take place.⁸

Another form of mild insidious persecution experienced by Christians in North East Nigeria is the usage of political apparatus or power tool at the disposal of Muslim leaders to deny Christians and Christian communities the government services due to them. These kinds of actions show clearly that the denial of such services is because the individual or community belong to the Christian faith. In a trip to Chibok exposed one to some of the worst treatment of Christians in that part of Nigeria. The road to Chibok is most the neglected local governments in Borno by the state government. For over forty years of the existence of Chibok Local Government, their roads have never been tarred. One of the researcher’s informants, who is in his sixties, said he has been hearing the rumors about the construction of Chibok road since he was fifteen years old, and until now it has not been constructed. Some Muslim politicians have used the construction of the roads all

⁸ U, Larai. Interview with Author. Personal Interview. Chibok, Chibok Local Government, Borno State, November 21, 2018 at 10:00 pm. The EYN Church is the Indigenous work of the Church of the Brethren. Ekklesiyar Yanuwa is the Hausa version of Church of the Brethren.
<https://place.asburyseminary.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2492&context=ecommonsatsdissertations>. Accessed 15/10/2022.

these years as campaign promises to get votes from the people of Chibok but have never fulfilled those promises. This explains why Chibok girls were abducted and many still missing since April 2014.

Another experience of denial of government services in some Christian communities is that they do not have schools. Christian children have to walk several miles to attend school in Muslim communities. In addition, clinics and hospitals are rarely built in Christian communities, and they often have no roads, no water, and no electricity. During electioneering campaigns, these communities are wooed with promises, but the politicians forget about those communities once they win the election. The only hope most of these communities have is the efforts of missionaries, churches, and non-governmental organizations who go to such rural communities to sink wells, build schools, provide teachers, train them in new techniques of farming, and build clinics, hospitals, or other health services. The good thing about the Christian community services is that they do not discriminate. The services are often provided for both Christians and Muslims.

Christians in North East Nigeria experience denial of rights as part of persecution. These denials of rights contravene the constitution of Nigeria, which in section thirty-eight, subsection one, guarantees religious freedom to Nigerian citizens. The Constitution says, "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, teaching, practice and observance."

Contrary to the provision of the constitution, in many states in North East Nigeria, Christians are often denied lands and places of worship. It is considered a crime to sell lands to Christians for the purpose of building a church. In places where the converted indigenous person owns inherited lands, he or she is not allowed to sell or donate such land for the purpose of building a church. Christians have to buy houses and begin to worship in them amidst hostility; sometimes they are chased out or beaten and sometimes dragged to the authorities. After several repeated experiences, some of the churches survive but some do not.

Another dimension to the weaponization is in the denial of Certificates of Occupancy for church buildings, which is a right for all citizens, except if used for illegal activities. Christians are denied the Certificate of Occupancy even when they own the piece of land where they are able to build the church. In some cases, the Certificates of Occupancy that

were issued during the colonial period are revoked. Christian churches occupy lands that have no legal government permission because they were denied legal documents.⁹

Another form of denial of rights is in the provision of religious education. The government of Nigeria permits primary and secondary institutions teaching Christian and Islamic religious knowledge to students who come from such backgrounds. In North East Nigeria, the authorities will normally employ teachers to teach Islamic religion and refuse to employ teachers to teach the Christian religious knowledge. In some cases, the Christian students are forced to attend Islamic religious knowledge classes, which is in violation of their constitutional rights. In tertiary institutions, Christian students are denied land to build chapels for worship while there are gigantic mosques and other smaller ones all over such campuses, a special case is the Yobe state University Damaturu. In some places where Christian chapels were built for worship, the students and Christian teachers have to fight both legal and physical battles to build and sustain those places of worship.¹⁰ It is easier to find land to build restaurant, hotel cinema houses than to build churches.

Apart from the above mentioned selected few mild insidious persecutions of Christians in the North East Nigeria, Christians also face extreme or elevated persecution as rightly identified This form of persecution was before now intermittent, but in recent times has become more entrenched and is evolving lethal persecution. This persecution should be understood as the type that results in the loss of many lives and a lot of property. Extreme persecution started in a large scale in the 1980s with mob violence that later transformed into terrorism in the 2000s where the key players are Boko Haram and Fulani herdsmen. Extreme or elevated persecution is employed by extremists such as Boko Haram, bandits, ISWAP, Fulani herders' terrorists.

Violent religious and ethnic crises in post-colonial Nigeria began earnestly in the 1980s with mob violence. The first is the Maitatsine violence in the city of Kano, Nigeria, in 1980. The Maitatsine saga continued in some parts of the north like Bulunkutu, Jimeta Yola, Bauchi, and Kaduna. Maitatsine riots were more of intra-religious violence within

⁹ Yakubu Tanko Jakada. *Early Christian Responses to Persecution and Their Implications for Christians in Northern Nigeria*. Unpublished PhD Dissertation Presented to the Faculty of Asbury Theological Seminary, Wilmore, Kentucky, March 2020, 106.
<https://place.asburyseminary.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2492&context=ecommonsatsdissertations>. Accessed 16/10/2022.

¹⁰ Yakubu Tanko Jakada. *Early Christian Responses to Persecution and their Implications for Christians in Northern Nigeria*. Unpublished PhD Dissertation Presented to the Faculty of Asbury Theological Seminary, Wilmore, Kentucky, March 2020, 107.
<https://place.asburyseminary.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2492&context=ecommonsatsdissertations>. Accessed 17/10/2022.

Islam that involved security agents, although some Christians and churches also suffered. Mob violence against Christians also occurred when a man from Denmark by the name of Kurt Westergaard drew a cartoon of Muhammad, the prophet of Islam. Most people from Borno State, both Christians and Muslims, did not know his name or whether he was a Christian or not. There were protests in the Muslim world about the cartoon, but for Christians in Northern Nigeria, it was a different thing. Informants in Borno State shared their experiences of what happened on February 18, 2006. The author interviewed Mark J., the current chairman of the Christian Association of Nigeria, Borno State Branch about the crisis, and he said that during the cartoon violence 56 churches were burned within 45 minutes and also families were burned alive in their homes.¹¹ This figure is confirmed by *Christianity in Crisis*, a report published on the Danish cartoon violence by the Christian Association of Nigeria, Borno State Chapter. This report stated that 56 churches were burned, 51 Christians killed, and about N1.5 billion (one-and-a-half-billion Naira) worth of property destroyed. Another person interviewed who shared his experience of the Danish cartoon violence was Collins T. He said that in Maiduguri, some young Muslim men came to his house with a gun to shoot him. Fortunately for him, he was not at home. He had to relocate his residence from that area for security reasons and the safety of his family. In the case of Desmond, a young pastor who was interviewed, he was a young boy when the Danish cartoon crisis took place, but what he saw was very traumatic for him. The fact that 56 churches were burned within the period of 45 minutes suggested a planned, well-coordinated attack. Christians were being attacked and killed for what one may consider unreasonable and unthinkable excuses. Recall also the protest against Nigeria's hosting of Miss World beauty pageant in 2002. One cannot forget also remember the protest that erupted in Europe and cascaded into Northern states of Nigeria on account of Pope Benedict XVI's Regensburg lecture in September 2006.¹²

Extreme or elevated persecution in the 12 years or more has taken another pattern in the north East. Book Haram is seeking to establish and entrench a strict form of Sharia and to establish Islamic or state of Nigeria. The result of this extreme persecution against Christians is greeted by the silence of the state governments.

¹¹ Barron, James. "Artist who Set Off Muslim Fury Visits City." *New York Times*. Sept. 29, 2009. [Nytimes.com/2009/09/30/nyregion/30cartoon.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/30/nyregion/30cartoon.html) Accessed 16/10/2022.

¹² Abba, William Kaura. "A Systematic Persecution of Christians and the Church in Northern Nigeria: The Church's Response." *Nigerian Journal of Religion and Society (JORAS)* Vol. 11, July 2022, 35.

Prophetic Theological Response to Political Weaponizations

Political weaponization or persecution as encountered by Christians says Douglas was nothing new, but it was part of their Jewish heritage.¹³ The statistics of persecution and violence against Christians world-wide is becoming disturbing in recent times. For instance, the period 2010-2017 witnessed the worst forms of persecutions against Christians in modern times, both in terms of severity and magnitude.¹⁴ The persecutions which Christians face globally are most carried out by fanatics and fundamentalist Muslims, members of other religious affiliations and members of anti-Christian philosophical ideologies. The martyrs of today are more than the martyrs of the first centuries. The martyrs gave their lives and accompany us on our pilgrimage of faith. In the journey of the Church, since the early martyr Stephen, the blood shed by Christians has always been considered food and support for the entire community, a source of inspiration and life, and this continues to do over the centuries. Martyrdom is the greatest testimony of faith, because it faithfully reproduces Christ, giving his life so that others can have life in abundance. The witness of these Martyrs is manifested by the growth of Church participation of the remnant.

In the naked face of persecutions, many Christians chose death instead of recanting their faith. Such Christians are known as martyrs, which means witnesses. This attitude is known as seeking or glorifying Martyrdom. This heroic act of call to discipleship is experienced in the lives of both the death and the living with persecution of different forms in North East of Nigeria. A comparative analysis of persecution in the early church and present realities in Nigeria observed Abba shows a lot of similarities and differences. On the question of attitude, a lot of debates are ongoing. First, others advocate endurance, patience, prayerfulness, watchfulness, witnessing and expectancy of the Parousia. Second, sustained acts of campaigns and peaceful demonstrations of Christians under the auspices of Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) has been advocated by Christian leadership to protest against organized persecution by Islamic religious fanatics.¹⁵

There are various approaches or responses in which people face certain realities of life. In the instance of persecution in the early church, some members apostasized in the face of pain or death and accepted pagan practices which were at variance with their religious beliefs. In the times of Boko Haram, we have not recorded any who abandoned their faith. An essential part of the training Jesus provided to his disciples was preparing them for

¹³ Douglas, J.D. *The New Bible Dictionary*. Leicester: Inter-varsity Press, 1980.

¹⁴ Datau Fidelis & Ndubuaku Anthony. "Christian Questioning in the Face of Suffering and Persecution." *Journal of African Theology* Vol. 28, April 2019, 85-102.

¹⁵ Abba William Kaura, 40.

persecution (Mt 10:33-42). The natural human responses to persecution are worry and fear, leading to the dangers of which Jesus warns the believers, namely denying him, loving one's family or one's life more than him, and refusing to receive those who are wanted because of their witness (Mt 10:33-42). Many Christians suffered spiritually, physically and psychologically during the Boko Haram insurgency. What sustained the faith of these victims who were internally displaced, and others who were refugees in the Cameroons was prayer and fasting.

These Christian practices have remained the pillars for evangelization as Christians are made not born says Tertullian. The bible makes it clear that there are two types of persecution in the world; persecution as a result of sin, and persecution as a result of hatred emanating from one's belief, as well as in the practice of righteousness (1Peter 4:12-14).

Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, declares that "the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the people of our times, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in anyway, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well" (GS 1). The church on her part has the responsibility of showing Christ who is the light of humanity to the world full of darkness and bad news through her pastoral interventions. The church must recognize the deepest desires and yearnings of God in the hearts of his people who are broken and are in need of the consolation of God. This act of consolation towards the broken hearted, can be made visible especially through the witness-of presence of its shepherds and the entire people that make up the body of Christ. Being present to the traumatized flock was what the chief shepherd of the diocese did during these turbulent times.

Prayer and Fasting in the Christian Warfare

Outside of obedience to God's Word, fasting is the greatest spiritual discipline (weapon) for seeking God's intervention. Combined with prayer they together make up the most critical weapons of spiritual warfare and deliverance in our lives. Both prayer and fasting are supernatural weapons of spiritual warfare, and when used together, they cause us to become lethal to the enemy's plans formed against us. With every New Year comes a renewed zeal to achieve "breakthroughs" in certain or every area of our lives – we seek for breakthrough in our marriages and our businesses, we seek for victory over disappointments or failures of the past, we seek for victory over enemies and adversaries and so much more. To achieve desired results in all the cases listed above, a commitment to prayer and fasting will certainly be very helpful (Matt. 17: 21). Prominent among the tools of Christians in times of persecution is prayer. Since prayer is a live wire and blood

of a Christian and of the church, ceaseless prayer and fasting should be a habit of all believers to avert or overcome persecutions of all sorts. Christian association of Nigeria (CAN) leadership encourage Christians to use prayer and fasting as a tool to combat weaponization of their Christian faith in the North East.

To overcome any problem, one needs to have faith and trust in God. In Matt 11: 28-29, Jesus said “come to me all who labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest”. Prayer was part of the ministry of Jesus Christ and he taught his disciples how to prayer (Matt 6:9-13, Luke 11:1-3). The early Christians continued with the doctrine of prayer (Rom. 12:12; Col 4:2). Christ prayed at critical moments of his life: at his baptism when his public ministry started (Luke 3:21); at the choosing of the twelve (Luke 6:12); at his transfiguration which follows momentous challenge and response at Caesarea Philippi (Luke 9:28); and at his agony in the Garden (Luke 13:39-45; Hebrew 5:7) (Martin 1974). Although prayer was very vital in the life of Christ, he did not only pray, he went about doing good, helping the rich and the poor, the young and the old. Thus, Christ although the son of God worshipped God truly and sincerely by his works and love for everyone, including his enemies. He asked his followers to do the same. This was the response embraced the Christian communities in the catholic diocese of Maiduguri during her most trouble times of Boko Haram.

There are good Examples of people that fasted in the bible. From various account in the bible, it is clear that David fasted on several occasions (Psa. 109: 24), on a particular occasion he fasted in an attempt to get God to change His mind over the child who was the product of adultery between him and Bathsheba (2 Sam. 12: 16). Nehemiah deployed the weapon of fasting and prayer to intercede for Jerusalem and for God’s people residing there, when news reached him that the walls surrounding the city has broken down. He also deployed the same weapon to ask for God’s favor before the Gentile king under whom he served as cupbearer (Neh. 1: 4-11). Esther and Mordecai both used prayer and fasting as weapon to find favor before the king and to overcome the evil counsel of Haman (Est. 4: 16). Daniel also used prayer and fasting as weapon to intercede for the nation of Israel (Dan. 9: 3). The disciples of John Matt. 9: 14 Anna, the prophetess used prayer and fasting as a weapon of worship and a weapon of service (Luke 2: 37).

Leonard Ravenhill observed that “no man is greater than his prayer. The Christian who is not praying is playing; the people who are not praying are straying”.¹⁶ This means that prayer and fasting hold the key to our success or failure. Christian are commanded to pray at all times and in every situation. This has been the clarion call of the leadership of (CAN) in the North East. According to John Eidsmor “not everyone can serve in the

¹⁶ Leonard Ravenhill. *Why Revival Tarrieinneapolis*. Bethany House Publisher, 1995, 23.

congress or lead troops into battle for his country. Not everyone can organize political campaigns or lobby for important issues. But there is one thing every Christian can do, and that is prayer”.¹⁷ The Christian is commanded to pray in 1Tim 2:1-2. When Christian pray, God turns the heart of the government officials, gives success to their efforts and leads them to make right decisions. Moreover, it is God that establishes civil government and assigns them roles and empowers them to punish violators of law.

In Acts 12:5, Peter was kept in the prison, but prayers were said for him by the church. The night before the day he was to be executed, he had a dream where he was quietly led out of prison by an angel of the Lord. This dream translated into a physical deliverance of Peter from the hand of Herod, an evidence of the power of prayer for self-defense. Without union with God, every attempt to strengthen the Church and the faith will be in vain. The Church that does not have prayer as its most precious treasure in its battle against the forces or storms of evil is headed for ruin.¹⁸

Indeed, prayer and fasting are not pious instruments by which we move God to support our dreams and aspirations. It is acquiring the strength and support from He who moves history and binds the powers that be. Apostles James concurring said that “the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much (James 5:16). The military expedition of Marcus Aurelius suffered great loss, as his major challenge was water supply. History recorded it that it was the Christians in his military team that prayed earnestly for rain. Before they got up from their knees, an upsurge of heavy rain came down and dislodged their enemies, as well as saved the ugly situation on ground.¹⁹

God has provided a way to turn certain defeat into awesome victory and demonic strongholds into highways of His love and power. When overwhelming defeat looks you in the face, whether the attack is physical or a spiritual or financial crisis, prayer and fasting hold keys that will unlock the resident power of the Holy Spirit within the believer at such moments of crises. Fasting is a way of humbling ourselves in face of pain and distress. It is a submission of one’s self to the power above. Prayer works in the life of a Christian who as well appreciates or practices the way of fasting. Fasting is abstaining from food and drinks for spiritual purpose. Hannah fasted and prayed, asking God for a son. Because of her genuine fasting, God granted her request. Nehemiah stood alone in prayer and fasting before rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. And that was the secret of his ability to accomplish the project of rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem. So also, Ezra

¹⁷ John Eidsmor. *God and Caesar: Christian Faith and Political Action*. Westchester; Illinois: Cross way Books, 1998, 25-29.

¹⁸ Robert Sarah. *God or Nothing*. Ignatius Press, 2015,16.

¹⁹ Boer, H.R. *A Short History of the Early Church*. Michigan Grand Radicals, 1976, 100.

called on the nation to fast before returning to the land (Ez. 8:21). While material is important, the most effective form of fasting is the attitudinal fasting as advocated by the prophet Isaiah 58; end quarreling, hurtful words, resentment, seek to end injustice, lust, malicious speech, backbiting, gossip, oppression of the weak, cheating etc. Insecurity experienced by the people of God opened the doors of their hearts to seek reconciliation with one another and above all with their Maker.

Endurance as Antidote to Political Weaponization

The truth is that during the initial Boko Haram insurgency there was mass exodus of Christians from the ancestral homeland to places of safety especially in nearby urban areas across the North East. Of course, this was the wise, human and normal strategy to adopt. However, this development did not deter most of the displaced Christians from returning to their original homes. Had the Christian communities remained in their places of safety, the evil intends of the enemy would have won the battle. We do know from the scriptures that the early Church's believers were also persecuted by the Jewish leaders. They did all things possible to intimidate them through forceful imprisonments, tortures and exclusion in public services and amenities. They singled out and sought out Christians for persecution. It was done with the aim of stopping the spread of Christianity.

But willingness to endure persecution does not mean that we should passively undergo it. Rather, actively addressing persecution is also a non-negotiable principle. These two concepts are not contradictory; rather, one can accept hostility while at the same time actively seeking the Lord's guidance on how to respond to it. There are many possible responses to political weaponizing or persecution, but we should not fold our arms and wait apathetically.²⁰ Even if we believe the Lord is asking us to stay where we are and accept persecution, this should be the result of a conscious, prayerful decision. Actively engaging persecution is a direct extension of the biblical call to social transformation. The restoration of the fallen creation and all its components starts with the resurrection of Christ. It follows that all Christians are called to work towards the transformation of all spheres of life until Christ's redemptive work is completed (Rom 12:2). Thus, Christians should not neglect their calling to speak out against social injustice that is inherent to the gospel. This role is often ignored in large portions of Western Christianity that have tended to reduce the gospel to individual salvation and ignore its potential to transform the

²⁰ Dennis P. Petri. "Resilience to Persecution: A Practical and Methodological Investigation." *International Journal for Religious Freedom* 10, no. 1–2, 2017, 69–86.

<https://platformforsocialtransformation.org/download/religiousfreedom/Petri-BoydMacMillan-What-Persecution-To-Endure-To-Resist-or-To-Flee.pdf> Accessed 25/10/2022.

fallen creation, of which persecution is an outgrowth. If we want to be faithful Christians and truly be salt and light in the societies where we are placed, we should speak out on behalf of the dignity of victims of persecution and engage the corrupt social structures that are at the root of persecution or exclusion because of the other's faith.

The early Church grew in the face of the persecution. Church history has always revealed to us that the persecution of Christians, has always brought unity into the Body of Christ. Instead of tearing Christians apart, insurgency has always brought us stronger together in a much more powerful, effective and productive way. This was what happened to the Church at Jerusalem.

Prosperity came into the early Church at Jerusalem with the persecution that was being experienced. Boldness came upon the early believers in Christ like never before. The devil wanted them to be quiet, but he ended up getting them more energized and better equipped, as they became much more fruitful for the Lord. This has been the experience of Christian communities in the aftermath of insurgency.

The early Church grew in spiritual, numerical and structural strength; as the new believers in Christ gained the favor of those living around them. The miracles, signs and wonders were outstanding. No one could deny them. The testimony of Jesus was too powerful for those who were persecuting the Church. The growth of the early Church was unstoppable. The early Church refused to succumb to the threats from outside, to stop testifying about the miracle works of Jesus. The devil could not stop them. They stood up against the forces of darkness around them and prevailed. Similarly, the enduring spirit of the countless numbers of Christian communities remain a source of hope due to endurance given by the spirit. A lot of testimonies were being told by the survivors that gave them courage to live more moral and virtuous life even when they denied them human rights as citizens of Nigeria.

True followers of Christ don't ever retreat in the face of political weaponization. Persecution is in fact a positive thing, because it serves as a stepping stone into glory and prosperity in Christ Jesus. One will never be able to get to where God has destined for him or her without them. It is what manifests a greater weight of God's glory upon one's life (2 Corinthians 4:17-18).

Upholding Christian Principles

Although it is generally wise to avoid outright confrontation and provocation, Christians should never renounce their principles, regardless of the consequences. The prophet Daniel is a good example. On two occasions, he remained true to his principles under

severe testing. First, when young, he refused to eat food that had been sacrificed to the gods, thereby remaining true to the dietary injunctions that he believed he should follow (Dan 1). Much later (probably around age 70 or 80, based on the rulers named), he refused to halt his daily prayers to God and was thrown into the lion's den (Dan 6). Each time, God honored him for his obedience. Daniel's friends were also tested. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to bow before King Nebuchadnezzar's golden image, fully aware of the consequences. They were miraculously preserved (Dan 3:8–30). This consideration is, in a way, a counterpart to the previous one. Some issues are simply not worth suffering for, such as ludicrous cultural customs or unnecessary acts of provocation. But when it comes to bowing before idols or renouncing prayer, we are called to stay faithful to our biblical principles no matter what the consequences may be. Paul was willing to endure the consequences of faithfulness, even death (Phil 1:20–26; 2:17). Despite knowing the risks, Paul believed he needed to go to Jerusalem and obeyed what he understood to be God's will (Acts 21:10–14). Jesus also set an example of fulfilling the will of God even at the cost of life itself.

In like manner, Christians who are threatened to renounce their faith for material things of this world should learn to respond like the patriarchs of ancient generation. This was the example of Chibok Christian girls who were kidnapped for their faith or of Deborah Samuel who was murdered in the Shehu Shagari College of education Sokoto State for her firm resolve for Christian faith in the face of threat to life.

Appeal to Legal and Political Action

Speaking out against injustice is a valid ministerial purpose and very much a biblical mandate (e.g. Prov 31:9; Is 1:17; Jer. 22:3; Mic 6:8). The Bible contains many examples of leaders who decried injustice, often at great risk to themselves. Perhaps the most dramatic instance is Esther, assisted by her uncle Mordecai, advocated for the rights of her people and prevented a genocide. To do so, she had to overcome her fear and approach the king without being summoned, potentially a capital offence. The prophet Nathan rebuked King David for his adultery with Bathsheba and arranging to have her husband killed on the battlefield, even though he knew fully well that giving this message from God could have resulted in his own death. John the Baptist told Herod a very inconvenient truth about him taking his brother's wife, for which John was jailed and subsequently beheaded. These are biblical characters whose examples of obedience to God and commitment to justice we are invited to follow. They remind us that speaking out against political persecution or weaponization though risky, is the profitable method to abate the unproductive way of living and advancing our potentials as one people. The aim of this prophetic response is to criticize and expose human rights abuses in order to reveal them

to parties who can advocate on their behalf—foreign governments and NGOs, for instance. They might also pursue court cases where they believe they might receive favorable judgments.

The use of Mainstream and Social Media

Another prophetic response to political weaponization of Christians in the northeast is through valuable use of the media. It is theological to voice protest of regimes and societal groups through non-violent demonstrations and public criticism in newspapers, television, and the Internet. The benefits of appealing to public opinion to prevent persecution are evident in a number of New Testament stories. On several occasions, people did not arrest Jesus because of their concern about the possible effect on the crowds (Mt 21:46). King Herod did not kill John the Baptist at first because ‘he was afraid of the people’ (Mt 14:5). Thus, there is biblical precedent for the strategic use of public opinion in advocacy. In modern practice, publicizing a story requires engaging with mainstream media. This is a specialized skill that requires understanding of how the media operate, proper terminology, what is likely to get attention, and professional journalistic ability. The use of social media for discipleship and teaching can support and strengthen the persecuted. One approach is broadcast media such as radio and television. Radio messages can be transmitted over long distances.

Conclusion

Political oppression, weaponization and exclusion as seen from the examples testified in this paper is a thing of concern for the unity of Nigeria as a country for all ethnic and religious groups. Christian weaponization is a trigger factor that has continued to exist from the colonial times where Islamic faith was favored over against Christianity. Political oppression reveals that religion has played a major role in the crises experienced in northern Nigeria generally. This culture of exclusion is political because no one is born into a family for this political and religious divide. Both the leaders and the led that is the citizens need transformation. Nigerians need moral re-generation. Nigerians need change of attitude as a resultant impact of prayer, fasting and endurance. We must use all within our power to speak against the persecution of Christians in Nigeria. The Church must continue to keep the government on its toes until our land is rid of the cruel execution of innocent members of the public in our nation. Christians should actively participate in socio-political activism at all levels. Otherwise, they will inadvertently bear the brunt of targeted exclusion from the corridors of power. Those already in the position of authority should not be ashamed to speak out against injustices meted out on religious and ethnic minority groups.