

Nigeria

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The relationship between religion and politics, between church and state, has been a well rehearsed issue in Muslim thought and practice, because Islam emerged fully into history as a dual tradition of church and state, and because as such Muslims have been less sanguine than Europeans about making a rigid separation between the secular and the sacred, or between the public and private domain. By virtue of such history and by reason of the subsequent Western secular expansion in the Muslim world, there is widespread reaction to the legitimacy of national secular governments among contemporary Muslims. Some of that reaction goes back to the effects of colonial rule.

The Colonial Legacy

The Western colonial encounter with Muslim Africa had a direct impact on the pre-colonial legacy of church-state relations. In general the encounter helped strengthen the tradition of Muslim religious and political integration, either through direct provocation or through conciliation and collaboration. Thus the British invasion of north Nigeria provoked resistance among the guardians of the Muslim theocratic state founded in 1804, forcing the British to use conciliation and concessions to overcome that resistance and legitimize their power. The British proceeded to cut a deal with Muslim leaders: there would be no undue interference in religious institutions and local customs, but instead the colonial administration would work through those religious structures to govern the people. In effect, Muslims would become co-partners in the colonial enterprise.

The French colonial policy was a variation of the British one. In theory, the French demanded total surrender and commitment from their Muslim subjects, setting up the colonial bureaucratic state to reformulate and regulate Muslim affairs, with military muscle added for demonstrated effect. In practice, however, bureaucratic or military confrontation was too costly a way to achieve permanent subjugation, and so the French decided to invest in the Muslim rosary and the ink pot to reach the hearts of the people. As a result, pious saintly figures were courted and patronized; they were invited to state functions, sent on pilgrimage to Mecca at state expense, and treated to lavish official blandishments. Muslim learning was endowed, schools supported, colonial administrators trained in Arabic language and literature and in Islamic subjects, Arabic works collected and translated, and libraries furnished with Islamic books, manuscripts and journals. By thus identifying themselves with Islam's intellectual and educational heritage, the French hoped to earn the lasting gratitude and respect of their Muslim subjects, which in many significant places they were able to do.

Yet it became clear that this policy of colonial reinforcement was contradictory, because the justification of colonial rule as the transmitter of Western enlightenment and progress sat awkwardly with the contrasting logic of the colonial system as the propagator of Islam. Ultimately, colonial rule would have to abdicate to the Muslim agents it had successfully raised and trained, handing over to them the fruits of power and the machinery of a modern state.

Thus both in the British and French cases, the Muslim religious and political impulse was strengthened with the decision to conciliate and reward. A certain identity of interest came to exist between administrators and Muslim leaders, allowing the imperial overlords to press one of two options: either colonial rule could continue through strategic alliance with Muslim structures and institutions, or else it could cease formally through an equally strategic handing over to predisposed Muslim elites. In so far as Britain had an official Muslim policy, one colonial authority described it in the 1870s as follows: 'The Mohammedan question is regarded by the Government as one of the most important in the

future of west and Central Africa. If Islam is properly understood, if its youth inoculated with British civilisation and British ideas are utilised by British administrators and merchants, it will give England a wider and more permanent influence upon the millions of the Sudan than can possibly be wielded by any other agency.¹ In the particular case of north Nigeria and its large and significant Muslim population, the British targeted the Muslim political elites, the emirs, as indispensable to this Islamic policy. The administrators reasoned that 'the placing at the disposal of the Emirs of the resources of an ordered State inevitably strengthened and developed all Moslem institutions in Northern Nigeria.'²

Colonialism became the Muslim shield, and the riposte to the West's religious minimalism. In one example in British administered Adamawa in Nigeria, the resident colonial officer presided over a meeting called by Muslims who headed the Native Authorities set up by the British. The meeting would receive charges from the Muslims against the Danish missionaries of the province for allowing the classes for religious instruction to be taken by village catechists in mission schools. The meeting, held at Yola, the provincial headquarters, considered how these classes were in fact political platforms producing 'young rebels', i.e., a class of young people not under the direct influence of the Muslim Native Authorities. The colonial administration backed the Muslim demands against missionary objections, for abolishing the religious instruction classes.³ Thus colonialism became the Muslim shield, and the guarantor of Islam as the public alternative to Christianity for Africans.

The Roots of Controversy: Integration or Separation?

The issue of integrating religion and politics plunged post-independent Nigeria into a major constitutional controversy when the military government of General Babangida, who ruled from 1985 to 1993, enrolled Nigeria as a member of the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC). To challenge that decision the Christian association of Nigeria (CAN) was formed in 1986 as an ecumenical grouping of Protestants, Catholics and African Independent Churches. CAN issued a statement protesting the federal government backing for *shari'ah* courts in north Nigeria and asking for an identical public status for Christianity. Yet CAN's strategy of demanding privileges for Christians comparable to those being offered to Muslims set it on the Muslim side of the fault line, with Christians wheeling and dealing on a stage Muslims constructed for their own purpose. For example, the Kaduna Branch of CAN published a statement asking the government to offset any concessions to the *shari'ah* with similar concessions to Christians by establishing a Christian constitution based on ecclesiastical courts.⁴ Muslims welcomed CAN's platform, forcing a catch-22 upon Christians by challenging them to say which they preferred, ecclesiastical canon law, English Common Law, or secular law. The debate as it has been conducted in Nigeria has been a one-sided affair in which Muslims have taken the offensive and Christians have reacted with high decibel slogans about pluralism and multi-culturalism, and with strategies of ecumenical unity striking for their ephemeral, tactical skittishness. If, by contrast, the example of Christendom and its disastrous consequences for genuine pluralism and multi-

culturalism were available to Muslims, it might calm passions and provide instructive lessons about the liabilities of religious territoriality in Africa or elsewhere. In that case, the secular state, shorn of its anti-religious bias and conceived as a pluralist apparatus, might be less objectionable, and might thus remove any conspiratorial odor from Christian support for such a state. It turns out, however, that events have pre-empted the issue, with the regime of General Babangida acting in 1989 to allow *shari'ah* court jurisdiction in the north, thus setting aside the position taken by Christians.

International Muslim solidarity has aided and abetted national efforts, and has distracted local Christian attempts to respond to Muslim initiatives. After several years as an observer, Nigeria in 1986 joined the OIC. The OIC was set up following the Third Conference of Islamic Foreign Ministers in March, 1972 and was registered with the United Nations in February, 1974. A number of Islamic agencies was established within the OIC whose religious mandate was stated as the commitment 'to propagate Islam and acquaint the rest of the world with Islam, its issues and aspirations.'⁵ Membership in the OIC was limited to sovereign nation states which are Muslim by definition, although several states with minority Muslim populations have joined, including Benin, Sierra Leone and Uganda. However, somewhat incoherently, India and Lebanon, which have significant Muslim populations, have not been allowed to join. In other respects the OIC has applied stringent confessional criteria, from deciding on the venue of its meetings to granting economic assistance from its \$2 billion development fund and awarding scholarships.

However, such historical cooperation has not removed all Muslim grievances, so that their need for trans-national solidarity has pitted Muslims against the West as the source and guardian of the secular national state, a state that divides Muslims and sets at naught the just claims of the *ummah*.

Thus, in spite of differences of culture and language, and in spite of a common desire to succeed economically, such religious groups are, even in the West where they have chosen to immigrate, in the words of legal manuals, 'bound together by the common tie of Islam that as between themselves there is no difference of country, and they may therefore be said to compose but one *dar* [i.e., *dar al-Islam*, 'the abode of fraternal Islam']. And, in like manner, all who are not [Muslims], being accounted as of one faith, when opposed to them [i.e., Muslims], however much they may differ from each other in religious belief, they also may be said to be one *dar* [i.e., *dar al-harb*, 'the sphere of war and enmity']. The whole world, therefore, or so much of it as is inhabited and subject to regular government, may thus be divided' along these lines.⁶

Conclusion

The intellectual challenge to the modern West is whether it can conceive a modification of the separation of church and state to allow a degree of interdependence. Too much is at stake in the importance of the State as a non-corporate, non-doctrinaire institution to allow it to fall victim to Enlightenment scruples about not mixing religion and politics. The pragmatist liberal scruple that proceeds upon religion in the fashion of individual entitlement and free speech is in one sense the spoil

fruit of the original insight about keeping Caesar and God separate, about ensuring religious freedom against state power and jurisdiction. That insight became twisted into religion as individual enlightenment and free speech, as a rights issue under state jurisdiction, in fact as a matter of private, individual choice without public merit. So Muslim critics are correct that rights without God are meaningless, but mistaken to require from that a religious state. Muslims are right that if we only have human authority as final arbiter of human rights, then there simply is no basis for saying one individual has rights of person and property against the multitude: against the individual, the multitude's will is inexorable and final by reason merely of numerical preponderance. Human rights as such is meaningless in that environment precisely because the individual has been assured no God-given rights. That is why human rights must presume a public tribunal insulated from the tyranny of numbers by being grounded in faith in the divine right of personhood, a faith that fosters the twin culture of rights and obligations, of freedom and community. Yet we have to say that the religious view also needs qualifying. A church-state integration is bound to threaten civil society, so that in one move of state capture of religion the brakes are removed from political excess and in turn applied to freedom and commitment, in effect pressing political expediency into the service of a false absolute.

The modern West would do well to appreciate the crucial role of religion and politics in the Muslim world rather than to persist with the secular liberal preference of 'commodifying' religion for short-term political goals. Alexis de Tocqueville noted this tendency, saying government by habit preferred the useful to the moral and would, therefore, require the moral to be useful. Muslim tradition represents it differently, arguing for the proximity of church and state on the grounds that religion is too enmeshed in life to exclude it, though historical experience suggests that integrating the two damages both of them. Governments that anoint themselves with religious warrants endanger themselves. We need the safety wall of separation thus to tame the State and to create a public space for religion and also to foster pluralism and minority rights. ♦

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Notes

1. Cited in Lamin Sanneh (1997), *The Crown and the Turbans: Muslims and West African Pluralism*, Denver: Westview Press, p. 164.
2. Cited in Sanneh, *The Crown and the Turban*, p. 150.
3. Niels Kastfelt (1994), *Religion and Politics in Nigeria: A Study in Middle Belt Christianity*. London: British Academic Press, pp. 41-2.
4. Report in *Nigerian Tribune*, Friday, 21 October, 1988.
5. Cited in *The Guardian*, 27 January, 1986.
6. *Digest of Moohumadan Law: Containing the Doctrines of the Hanafee Code of Jurisprudence* (ed. & tr.) Neil B.E. Baillie (1869-75), reprinted, Lahore: Premier Book House, 1974, pp. 169-70.