PENTECOSTALISM AND THE CHALLENGES FACING MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS IN NIGERIA

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Introduction

Nigeria, Africa’s most populous state, is a nation where interreligious conflict has claimed the lives of between seventy thousand and one hundred thousand Muslims and Christians within the past thirty years in more than forty separate interfaith riots. Countless people have been crippled, maimed, raped, left homeless, or have seen their churches, masjids, businesses, and homes burned to the ground in the name of a vengeful God. What role has Pentecostalism played in the creation or the alleviation of Nigeria’s problems? Is Nigeria the epicenter of a globalized clash of religious civilizations?

Nigeria is a veritable “Babel” of biblical proportions. It is home to more than 140 million people who are, according to official government statistics, almost evenly divided between Muslims and Christians (CIA World Fact Book 2006). The majority of Christians live either in the south or in the “Middle Belt.”1 Most ethnic Hausa and Fulani of northern Nigeria and about half of all Yoruba people in Nigeria’s Middle Belt are Muslims,2 and almost all of the Igbo tribes of southern Nigeria are Christian. Only a tiny number of the Hausa and Fulani of the north are Christians, and only a handful of the Igbo people are Muslims (Trimmingham 1980, 134).3 In addition to these four major ethnicities, there are over two hundred

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1 It was only recently that these ethnic terms had any political significance. The Yoruba, for example, until the era of British colonialism, did not use the general and over-arching term Yoruba to describe themselves. Usually, people identified themselves by their subgroups (such as the Ijebu, Oyo, Egba, or Ekiti) or, even more likely, by their village or area.

2 The Fulani are sometimes known as the Filani gida, or The House of Fulani. They were a traditional ruling class who led many of the northern emirates and had the full support of the British colonialists.

3 Trimmingham further notes that a few mosques in Igboland were burned in retaliation for the more than 10,000 Igbos who were slaughtered when the 1967 Civil War began. He suggests that the Civil War gave rise to “illiberal Islam” coming to increasingly dominate the Muslim north. Trimmingham feels that these killings were “an ethnic confrontation” but notes that the Igbo cause was widely supported by many missionary organizations.
minorities, many living along the fault lines of Muslim and Christian communities.

Based on contestable claims, some Pentecostals assert that extensive missionary efforts, combined with recent migrations, have dramatically raised the number of Christians in northern Nigeria, to as many as twenty-nine percent (Gaiya 2004, 354). Some observers have argued that Nigeria might be viewed as something of a “fault-line” between the globalized advances of proselytizing conservative Muslims and Pentecostal Christians. When riots began worldwide in 2006 over the publication of a series of Danish cartoons, it was in Nigeria where the most numbers of people were killed. While both Muslims and Christians assert to be the fastest growing religions in the world, there is no other context where these two claims collide with such violent force and in such large numbers. Nigeria is the heart of an expanding Muslim-Christian globalized contestation for those who claim religious supremacy.

**Pentecostals and Muslims in Nigeria**

The socio-religious situation is in dramatic flux after centuries of relative interreligious calm. In 1900, only four percent of Nigeria was Christian (and less than ten percent was Christian in 1960) (Allen 2007, 11). In contrast, one cannot travel far in the country today without seeing a banner announcing a Pentecostal prayer, revival, deliverance, or healing meeting. Businesses carry such names as *The Jesus Saves Aluminum Company* and *Power of the Holy Ghost Beauty Salon* (Allen 2007, 11). Organizations such as the *Holy Ghost Thunderbolt* and *God-Will-Do-It Ministries* announce meetings that promise seekers will have an “Unforgettable Encounter, Unprecedented Answers to Prayer, Fruitfulness and Spiritual Progress, Restoration and Renewal, Personal Revival and Divine Visitation” (Goddard, 235). In 2004, the British Broadcasting Company (BBC) declared Nigeria to be the most “religious nation on the earth” with over 91% of

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4 “Due to a lack of any other reliable data we would use Patrick Johnstone’s *Operation World* figures. He has the following religious statistics for northern Nigeria in the 2001 edition: out of the total population of 58,800,000, Muslim 29,446,000 (50%), Christian 17,094,000 (29%), and Traditional 12,266,000 (21%). These figures make northern Nigeria the most ethnically, religiously pluralistic part of Nigeria. One of the issues with these findings revolve around the meaning of the term “north” which Johnstone is using and seems to include Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory, and other more central states as “north.”