

Islamic Contradiction on Its Teaching on Peace, Life and Property Protection in the Nigerian Context

by

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The massive outbreak of religious violence in northern Nigeria has continued unabated like a hurricane in the last three decades. In this violence, Islam has always been on the offensive against all non-Muslims. But it has generally been claimed that Islam is a religion of peace. This essay critically analyses such claims, pointing out the problem of consistency in the Islamic teaching on peace, life and property protection and it challenges it to demonstrate its claims indiscriminately. I would like to argue that though Islam is a religion in its own right, with possibly some positive teachings, its adherents contradict its claims of being a religion of peace by the violent destruction of lives and property. By this, it can hardly persuade any one of its true redemptive character since there is no free offer of the gospel in it. The purpose of this essay is to challenge Muslims to a new religious orientation that promotes genuine peace, tolerance and transformation through persuasion in order to achieve both spiritual renovations and national development.

Before the advent of Christianity and Islam, the indigenes in Nigeria had a religion that is commonly called African Traditional Religion. African Traditional Religion is not an organized religion with a founder and set goals and objectives comparable to the two major organized religions that we have. With the advent of these organized religions, African Traditional Religion has been relegated to the background. The major reasons for the influence of the two religions are among other things the accompanying literacy, civilization and development that they bring over and above the more primitive content of African Traditional Religion.

As far as the Nigerian context is concerned, we can count the positive effects of these two religions in a number of ways. But recently, Islamic extremists in Nigeria have created an enigmatic nightmare for the whole nation. When violence, whether provoked or unprovoked, becomes a dominant practical symbol of a religion, then its claim of peace becomes suspect since it cannot categorically separate itself from such violence.

Islam came to northern Nigeria in the 19th century (1804-1808) when Usman Dan Fodio launched the jihad against the Hausas and other minority tribes and established the Sokoto caliphate in 1809. In southern Nigeria of Yoruba land, Islam came around 1860, especially when Ilorin fell to the Islamic invaders. Generally, it has been stated that Islam is a religion of peace. Nevertheless history does not actually vindicate this claim. The early beginning and expansions were through military conquests. The case in Nigeria especially stands against this assertion. Since 1987 there have been a series of unprovoked religious attacks on non-Muslims particularly where thousands have lost their lives and property worth millions of naira destroyed. The question that presses for answer is why are Muslims not able to keep faith with the teachings of Islam if indeed it is a religion of peace?

The Islamic Law: The Sharia and Life and Property Protection

The most important aspect of Islam is the Sharia law. It encompasses the interpretation of the Quran and Islamic doctrines because it occupies the central place in Islamic religion and regulates the conduct of Muslims with its spiritual and penal sanctions. Therefore obedience to the stipulations of the Sharia is an uncompromising spiritual demand and the final authority.

Among other things that Sharia protects is personal property. Monzer Kahf (1995) asserts thus:

Sharia in Islam is the divine law whose essential landmarks and principles are given in the divine revelation and whose details are worked out by human beings on the basis of the godly revelation as manifested in the Qur'ān and the traditions of Prophet Muhammad. Therefore, a Sharia protection is an eternal protection, according to the Islamic system. This protection stands against any possible transgression from the government as well as from other persons (p. 362).

In other words, what Sharia protects is equivalent to God's protection so that contradicting what Sharia protects is a direct affront to God. Furthermore, "property rights are free of any prejudice on the basis of sex, religion, or ethnicity. The Islamic Sharia equalized men and women with regard to property rights, preceding most other legal systems and cultures" (*ibid.*). If this interpretation of Sharia is correct, then it conflicts with the very reality that we see in Nigeria. With the establishment of Sharia in some northern states in Nigeria, destruction of lives and property has been on the rise. This destruction demonstrates the bias against people of other religions, especially Christians, who own property in those places, contrary to the understanding of what Sharia stipulates.

In his review of *The Rights of Non-Muslims in Society: A Reading of Al-Qaradawi*, Mass'oud Sabri says:

In Islam, the primary right of the People of the Book [Jews and Christians] is to be protected and safeguarded against any foreign aggression, and Muslims are compelled to protect them in the event such a transgression falls against them. Al-Qaradawi bases his standpoint about this on jurisprudential texts and the position of Imam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) while speaking to Qultoo Shah—a Tartar—regarding the freeing of prisoners of war (POWs) (<http://www.islam-australia.net>).

Furthermore, "Islam regards whatever property or money considered by non-Muslims as valuables—according to their faiths—and pledges to protect them, even if they pose no real value to Muslims." Sabri further claims without qualification, that

Islam, throughout history, has safeguarded and protected houses of worship for non-Muslims and sanctified their religious rituals. When the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) wrote the peace treaty to the people of Najran, he asserted to them that they should receive the protection of Allah and His Prophet on their property, faith, and choices. Similarly, `Umar's letter to the people of Iliya in Palestine, upon the Muslim conquest, promised them the liberty to choose the faith they deemed appropriate; in addition there are analogous accounts attributed to Khalid ibn Al-Waleed."

This statement obviously is too sweeping which does not seem to be abreast with facts around the world. If this is true of Islam in the Arab world, then the Nigerian version is a serious contradiction to that claim. Among the main targets that are usually devoted to destruction by

Muslims in Nigeria are worship houses. Many a time, Muslims claim provocation and go on the offensive against Christians, destroying churches, homes, business centers and the lives of Christians and other non-Muslims. For instance, in 2005, a cartoon of Muhammad in far away Denmark by a local newspaper which had no connection with Nigeria ignited a nightmare for Christians in Nigeria as Muslims went on rampage against them with great destruction. Bassi expresses this surprise: “The most tragic event was in Nigeria, where innocent Christians with no connection to the cartoons whatsoever were killed and their churches burned down by enraged Muslims” (FaithFreedom.org, cited Feb. 2, 2010). And most recently on January 17, 2010 it was Muslims that attacked Christians in two churches during Sunday worship in the city of Jos without any known provocation. This ignited a series of reaction and counter reactions from the natives and Muslims that left about 1000 people dead. There has been no record on the side of Christians being the first to attack Muslims for any reason in Nigeria.

But the Quran, like the Bible, teaches God’s concern for justice. Sūrah al-Mā’idah (5:8) enjoins Muslims to be “witnesses to fair dealing, and let not the hatred of others to you make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice. Be just: that is next to piety, and fear Allah.” This means even provocation should not make a Muslim resort or “swerve to wrong” as against lawful conduct. And where there is no real provocation one should expect tranquility. Similarly, the Bible condemns injustice against others in several passages and positively enjoins justice in relation to others (cf. Ps. 10; Isa. 56:1-2; Jer. 8:4-17; Ezek. 7:10; Amos 5; Micah 3). The “others” in view are not necessarily those who share the same faith with one but even those who are other in faith and practice; justice is due them as God’s supreme command.

Atabani (1995) argues against terrorizing people of different faith: “The Quran states in absolute and final terms that ‘there shall be no compulsion in religion.’ People are free to have or not have faith in God. The true reckoning is deferred to the hereafter where one will be punished or rewarded according to his belief and needs” (p. 63). This is found in Surah al Baqara 2:256 and Surah Yunus 10:99. Punishment or rewards for those who accept or reject a religion’s message is the prerogative God if he truly establishes such religion. Whether Islamic scholars and preachers in Nigeria know this fact remains conjectural unless their own interpretation differs.

Some experts in the Quran argue that Islam teaches peaceful co-existence with non-Muslims and even the extension of compassion to them in times of need. Accordingly, the non-Muslims referred to as the *dhimmiyīn* are to be protected by the Muslims, as the Prophet Muhammad himself said: “whoever harasses a *dhimmi* I shall be his adversary, and of whomever I become the adversary, I shall prosecute him in the Doomsday” (Atabani, 65). Again: “He who harms a non-Muslim who keeps a peace treaty with Muslims has harmed me, and he who harms me has harmed Allah” (At-Tabarani in *Al-Awsat*). In support of the Prophet’s view, an orthodox caliph stated that the blood of the *dhimmi* is “like our blood and his religion is like our religion” so that “they [*dhimmiyīn*] are entitled to what we are entitled to and duty-bound to what we are duty bound” (*ibid.* 66). These equal rights and privileges are in the areas of civil rights, economic rights, cultural rights and political rights (*ibid.* 66-7). Sabri follows from Al-Qaradawi on what the Muslims are supposed to also protect: “Protection of body and blood. Al-Qaradawi asserts the consensus among scholars to protect the blood of non-Muslim minorities living within a Muslim state, and he explains that violating their blood is considered one of the gravest of sins. This is due to the hadith by the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him)” (<http://www.islam-australia.net>).

This means those Muslims who harass people in Nigeria as elsewhere in the world will face the wrath of the Holy Prophet. They are actually anti-Muhammad because they disobey him, even though they sometimes claim to be enraged at others who have insulted the Holy Prophet. They insult him the more by disregarding his words of peace as they destroy the very thing they are supposed to protect, namely, body and blood which are constituents of life. The question remains as to whether Muhammad was sincere about this statement because all his military expeditions and treatment of his captives could hardly justify this. I believe Muslims today do contrary to what he said because he probably did not mean what he said. All Muslims strongly believe in going to “heaven,” and if Muhammad was serious with this statement they would not go against what would prevent them from getting there.

An obligation of a *dhimmi* is payment of taxes to the government which the Nigerian *dhimmis* do in the predominant Islamic states whether as business people or as civil servants. They deserve protection from all Muslims, not only by the government. But the baffling question is why Muslims in Nigeria do not keep faith with the right attitude towards the *dhimmis*. Are they truly disobeying Muhammad? The history of Islam is full of contradictions in its teaching and practice. In many lands that were captured by Islam, *dhimmis* were at times subjected to untold discrimination, torture and denial of due process of law. This reality originated with Muhammad himself. According to Bat Ye’or, (2002), Muhammad demonstrated this insincerity against the people of Khaybar with whom he made a treaty to protect but on the condition that they gave half of their produce to him, though he could change his mind and expel them at will. This form of betrayal was imbibed into the Islamic culture in subsequent developments. The Nigeria experience is a grand demonstration of this inconsistency of doctrine and practice.

What is the Meaning of Peace in Islam?

Is peace a cardinal teaching in Islam? If so what exactly is peace to a Muslim? Abdalati (1996) argues that the words “Islam” and “peace” are synonymous because they derive from the same root. Also peace is a dominant theme in Islam as it permeates Muslim prayers, greetings and expressions. Even so “the adjective ‘Muslim’ means, in a sense, peaceful.” But how is it that the Nigerian Muslims do not have this in their practical lives? Do they not approach God through Islam? Abdalati gives another insight when he says: “The daily salutations *among the Muslims* are expressions of peace” (*ibid*, emphasis mine). It is clear from this view that the peaceful expressions by Muslims are restricted to Muslims, so that apparent peaceful expressions to non-Muslims cannot be trusted as genuine.

According to Zamfara State government, Sharia “preaches peace, justice, fairness and equality” (9 Nov/99; cited by Jan Boer, 2007:35). Yet the same government gave impetus to the Islamic violence against Christians in Zamfara which spread to some other northern states. The truth is that everyone, whether Muslim or not, is supposed to be judged by Sharia since it is the law of Allah. Sulaiman (2005) also argues, “The Sharia imposes on us the duty to safeguard, preserve and defend the ‘six universal principles’: namely, faith, life, lineage, intellect, honour and property.” Life is one of the important things in the teaching of Islam which deserves full protection. Interestingly the Nigerian theological view is the same with the above scholars of the Arab world. The question that remains is whether this is mere intellectual acknowledgment without practical value since the Nigerian experience is contrary to such theoretical understanding. At least, it seems the Arab understanding has more practical impact than what happens in Nigeria because it is only in Nigeria that Muslims rise up any day to destroy Christian lives and property without any tangible cause. What they are supposed to

protect, namely life and property, among other things are the very things that they subject to wanton destruction. It is therefore hard to prove, demonstrate or justify Islam as a religion of peace. Rather it has consistently been shown to be a religion of violence and terrorism. If Islam is to be truly a religion of peace, then its symbol of double sword would have to be removed. The double sword represents a philosophy of existence which means it thrives by military conquests. The meaning of sword is not peace but violence. It explains why Christ said that those who live by the sword die by it because violence begets violence which consequently consumes those who share in it.

Islamic leaders who claim that Islamic philosophy is cultured in tolerance and peaceful co-existence with non-Muslims have a gigantic task to reconcile such claims with the practical contradiction in the Nigerian context. Quite a number of times, some of the conflicts have political and ethnic domination agenda which are eventually turned to religious, and Muslims have always been on the offensive against Christians. A particular case of violence in the city of Jos bears the semblance of al Qaeda ideology even as its leader in North Africa, Abdelmalek Droukdel, has offered to train and also equip Nigerian Muslims to fight against Christians (*Nigerian Tribune*, Feb. 2, 2010). Some Muslims that try to remake the image of Islam as a peaceful religion have never succeeded in curbing the growing monstrosity of religious violence that is perpetrated by their extremists. What is seen tells more than what is heard.

In explaining the reasons for religious extremists' acts of violence, Sharon Erickson Nepstad (2004) says:

First, they consider contemporary forms of religion as weakened versions of the true, authentic faith. These terrorists embrace a more demanding, 'hard' religion that requires sacrifice. Second, they refuse to compromise with secular institutions, critiquing 'soft' religions for readily accommodating to the mainstream culture... These activists feel justified in defying laws since they view their responsibilities as citizens as secondary to their faith and religious obligations.

This explains why Islamic fundamentalists in countries such as Iraq and Nigeria often attack themselves too. G.J.O. Moshay (2002) argues in his book that Allah is the source of Islamic violence and terrorism, and this is a spiritual demand. As a matter of fact, for Islam, "peace" is not achieved until Islam has swallowed a nation. Peace means total eradication of their enemies. It means subjugating, killing or swallowing all non-conformists." This consists with Surah 9: 5, 29 and 123. Surah 9: 29 most strikingly says, "Fight those who do not believe in Allah or the Last Day; nor hold that forbidden which has been forbidden by Allah and His Messenger; nor acknowledge the Religion of Truth, (even if they are) of the People of the Book, until they pay the Jizya with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued." It is clear to see that terrorism is built into the very Islamic fabric, so that its preachers and teachers cannot help to change the face of the religion so that attempts towards religious dialogue often more than not come to exercise in futility. This is why we experience terrorism in the hands of Islamic fundamentalists in Nigeria. But how can people be forced by any means to be converted to any religion at all in our civilized world today? If force is a means of conversion, does not that imply that such religion lacks the power of spiritual, psychological and moral change? Applied force has never truly brought change in human behavior, though it can incite fear of consequences. Our dispositions should be given positive orientation for the sake of the good rather than fear of consequences. Islam has not proved to be capable of character transformation in the sinful person.

Nepstad (2004) rightly captures what religion ought to be: “Religion can operate as a moral compass that values human life over ideas” (p. 297). One of the greatest gifts that God has given mankind is life and any true religion and true believer must strive to save life rather than destroy it. Abdalati (1996), an Islamic scholar concurs with this: “Life is a trust from God, and man is a trustee who should handle his trust with honesty and skill, with mindfulness of God and with consciousness of responsibility to Him.” A Muslim therefore is supposed to have peace with God and his fellow men, so that “viewing life in the Islamic perspective, men of good faith and principles cannot fail to make our world a better world, to regain human dignity, to achieve equality, to enjoy universal brotherhood, and to build a lasting peace” (ibid, 37). Nepstad further argues that the right religious attitude should be seeking truth rather than defending truth. Though his view has great insight as to the driving concern for religious violence when truth is to be defended, it may be argued that the defense of truth in itself is not necessarily bad. What can make a defense to be bad is the means employed for such defense. Just means of defense are dialogical, rather than physical violence.

When a religion is said to be of peace its goal is to convince everyone that it is more than tolerant but that it can also appreciate the differences that other religions have, except if peace is not understood literally in such terms. If understood in the normal daily language, peace is peace and nothing else. But if peace is proclaimed on the one hand and violence also eventually follows from the same source that proclaims peace on the other, then what King David says about those “who speak peace with their neighbors while evil is in their hearts” (Ps. 28:3b; cf. also Ps. 55:21; Jer. 9:8) properly describes the nature of truth and peace of such religion. When violence and peace seek to cancel one another in a religious system, then there is more to it than meets the eye.

Peace is a spiritual gift that comes by the Spirit of God, and must be exercised for the cause of the Gospel to his glory. When it is not effectively put into practice, even the believer is bound to lose his peace with God as he does with a fellow person. Where sin prevails, peace cannot be sustained because it lacks the ground upon which to thrive. This explains why the unbeliever’s principles of peace which do not center on God’s glory but personal glory collapse along with their peace proposal. John Calvin (1988: 368) explains that peace is a distinctive quality of a Christian life with expected good consequences and Christians have to pursue it:

Peaceableness and a life so ordered as to render us beloved by all, is no common gift in a Christian. If we desire to attain this, we must not only be endued with perfect uprightness, but also with very courteous and kind manners, which may not only conciliate the just and the good, but produce also a favorable impression on the hearts of the ungodly.

True godliness desires peaceful co-existence with one another. Yet this is not given to everyone who claims to be religious. It is only by the Spirit of God that a person can cultivate a heart of peace towards a fellow human being. The mind of the unregenerate is by nature hostile. This hostility has twin trajectory: the vertical as directed against the things of God in Christ and horizontal against fellow humans. Paul alludes to this fact: “And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds” (Col. 1:21) and “Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or faint-hearted” (Heb. 12:3). For Paul, hostility is a mark of sin in which unregenerate people pride. It is only the work of Christ that has broken down the wall of hostility because for those who are truly in Christ Jesus his peace reigns in their hearts (Eph. 2:14; Col. 3:15). This is the

message that all Muslims need to hear because it is only in Christ Jesus that there is power for experiencing genuine transformation that brings about peace which the world earnestly desires. Aside from this fact there cannot be consistency in Islam since it both teaches peace and violence.

Conclusion

I have tried to show that the Islamic claim of being a religion of peace is a practical contradiction in the Nigerian context. It fails to promote that peace in every situation. On the contrary it breeds and perpetrates violence at every given opportunity in the name of provocation. It cannot challenge anyone to experience change of heart and attitude for a better society and human development. If Islam is truly a religion of peace, then it has a great challenge of convincing peace loving Nigerians of this claim. The question that we are left to ponder about is whether the world can have its peace through Islam. It is at the point of this failure that Christ offers genuine peace and life transformation by his Spirit.

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