

Original Paper

Persecution in the Early Church and Nigerian Church

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Received: December 10, 2022 Accepted: February 2, 2022 Online Published: February 10, 2023

doi:10.22158/ijssse.v3n1p1

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/ijssse.v3n1p1>

Abstract

The church has suffered much security challenges from people of opposing religious faith, who felt threatened by the unique presence of God, convincing miracles, dominating spirituality, unparalleled missionary spirit, as well as her particularistic doctrinal claims. The experience of Christians in the first few centuries of the Christian church was characterized by great persecutions. Also, Christian persecution in contemporary time is a serious challenge. Many faithful Christians who were unwilling to compromise their faith were martyred in the process in a most horrible manner. The current state of Nigeria is inherently reflected in the mirror of the early church. The contemporary Christians in Nigeria benefit a great deal from the early Church's experience and response to persecution. Employing a descriptive methodology, persecution is analyzed in the context of the early Church mirroring the Nigerian Church.

Keywords

Christians, Christianity, Church, Early Church, Nigeria, Persecution

1. Introduction

From its founding, persecution has been associated with Christianity (Heredia, 2007, p. 187). Shortly after Christ's crucifixion, Christians were persecuted by Jewish religious authorities, Roman magistrates and emperors (Frend, 1965, p. 514). In Acts, one of the first Christian martyrs was Stephen, a member of the early church who was brought before the Sanhedrin, the assembly of Jewish religious leaders, on charges of blasphemy (Bombay, 1998, p. 165). Stephen was subsequently stoned, touching off a mass persecution of Christians led by Saul of Tarsus. After claiming to have received a vision of Jesus, his new faith would subject him to various imprisonments and beatings, some of which he recounted in New Testament writings (Marshall & Gilbert, 1997, p. 87).

The first organized Roman persecution of Christians was ordered by Emperor Nero in 64 A.D. Nero blamed Christians for the Great Fire of Rome, although it is speculated by some historians that Nero

was responsible for setting the fire in the first place (Penner, 2004, p. 12). Christian persecution after Nero's reign was sporadic carried out by local Roman magistrates responding to local prejudices (Royal, 2000, p. 87). Because Christians did not worship the Roman gods, they were blamed for calamities that befell the empire, such as famines, draught and pestilence (Clark, 1997, p. 152). Christian missionaries and converts have been target of persecution, sometimes to the point of being martyred for their faith.

In Nigeria and many other parts of Africa, the persecution of Christians has long been familiar; its successive waves characterized only by several levels of violence, numerous Christians have been killed. Series of crises reported daily on local, national and international media on the destruction of Christians and properties is alarming. The fact that the Early Church situation is different in some key respects to the contemporary Nigerian situation cannot be denied; therefore, this piece educates Christians on persecution in Nigeria through the biblical framework of the early Church. Although many Christians today enjoy greater religious freedom in many countries, Christian persecution remains a fact of life in several places in the world, especially in Nigeria.

The article addresses the following issues:

- a. The nature of persecution in the early Church and Nigerian Church
- b. The Early Church persecution experience as a yardstick for Nigeria Christianity
- c. The Response of the Nigerian Church to persecution

2. Persecution in the Early Church

When Christianity first came, it was considerably favored by the Roman policy (Fatokun, 1999, p. 198). It was originally considered a synonym of Judaism, and so, it enjoyed considerable sympathy. The Romans could not probably understand the disparity between the Jews who practiced Judaism and the Christian Jew in the empire (Acts 18, pp. 12-17) (Burge, 1980, p. 10). Later, there was conflict when it was seen as enigmatic religion (Jackson, Dave, & Neta, 2005, p. 17). Due to jealousy by the Jews concerning the rapid spread of Christianity, they made known to the Roman authorities the difference between the followers of the Mosaic Law and the followers of Jesus (Mukenzie, 1997, p. 67). Fatokun quoted by Adamu explained that the Judaisers saw the growth of Christians as unduly fanatical as they tended to segregate themselves from the general public, abstaining from mundane things of life, they would not attend public shows. They maintained a very sound moral rectitude (Ajamu, 2015, p. 87). Christianity is then seen as a threat to the peace of the empire (Doukhan, 2002, p. 13). The resultant effect of this was persecution.

It is important to note some of the emperors who persecuted Christians during their reign: Emperor Nero (c.37-69 A.D), Emperor Vespasian (c. 49-79 A.D), Emperor Titus (c.30-81 A.D), Emperor Galba, Otho and Vitellius (c.45- 89A.D), and Emperor Domitian (c.51-96 A.D) (Austin, 1983, p. 189; Bradley, & Muller, 1995, p. 57; McKim, 1996, p. 578). The Jews were numerous, wealthy and influential whereas Christians were few and inconsequential, many of them belonging to the lowest rung of social strata in the society (Boer, 2003, p. 44). Jews were protected by the Roman government to practice

their religion (Cairns, 1996, p. 133). The Roman Empire branded Christianity as “*religio illicit*”, Christians were not desirous to participate in state religion (Adams, 1986, p. 16). They scorned the Roman gods as mere handworks of men and helpless idols. They refused to burn incense or offer sacrifice to the Emperor (Prince & Collins, 1999, p. 178). This scenario provided the stage for the great persecution of Christians under Emperor Nero (Jackson, Dave, & Neta, 2005, p. 87).

Just like other zealous Jews, Paul who was determined to stop the spread of the Christianity which he believed was heresy became a Christian (Acts 9:3-6) and has great historical impact on the life and thought of the Church (Eckman, 2002, p. 154). Moynahan refers to Paul as “the colossus of the church, the most striking and powerful human being in its history” (Moynahan, 2002, p. 25). Many of the believers were forced to leave Jerusalem because of persecution. It, however, did not extinguish the fire of persecution (Karr, 1956, p. 96).

Rather than joined the Roman army, Christians referred to themselves as “Soldiers of Christ” (Orchard & Riley, 1987, p. 111). They were seen as trying to equate themselves with the Roman authorities (Carl, 1985, p. 14). Before Christians execution, they were used to amuse the people—some were dressed in furs to be killed by dogs, some crucified, some beheaded, some burnt alive, some exposed to wild beasts. The persecution of Christians in the early church was quite intriguing. Peter was crucified (upside down) and Paul beheaded (Josephus, n.d, 105).

3. Christian Persecution in Nigeria

The persecution of Nigerian Christians can be dated back to the days when missionaries were often harassed, captured and detained, disrupting their evangelical assignment. The main series of Christian persecution outbreaks took place during the second wave of European expansion (1848-1916), which British colonial rule was becoming firmly established and initiating what can be called counter-persecution of traditional Nigerian religions (Benner, 2003, p. 89).

The persecution of converts is even evident when African Church leaders sprang up; an example is Prophet Joseph Ayo Babalola (Olayiwola, 1995, p. 45). He retreated to his home town in Odo-Owa for more spiritual strength. While he was at Odo-Owa, a warrant of arrest was issued from Ilorin. He was arrested for preaching against witches, a practice which had caused some trouble in Otuo in present Bendel state (now Edo State). He was sentenced to jail for six months in Benin City on March, 1932. After serving the jail term, he went back to Efon-Alaye, where he continued with ministry.

In 1980s, there was a dangerous re-awaking of persecution, which assumed a serious dimension. Religious conflicts and associated violence translated into inter-religious confrontation in some areas as well as assigned an ethnic and regional character (Coleman, 1958, p. 18). Christians from all walks of life face sundry persecution challenges by fanatical Muslims and some adherents of other religious faiths and philosophical ideologies. Both print and electronic media are full of reports of gruesome murders of Christians, especially in Muslim dominated villages, towns, and cities in Nigeria (Heaton, 2008, p. 98).

On Sunday, 13th October, 1867, all the denominational churches in Abeokuta were not only attacked but the members who were ready for services were stripped. This was nothing short of rampage carried out in the manner that was outrageously immodest. It was called Ifole War, the missionaries fled the town. The wave of persecution later spread to Bonny (Benner, 2003, p. 76). Notable is the Jos crisis in 2001 which led to the loss of lives and destruction of properties of many Christians (Owodayo, 1995, p. 89). Bishop Ajayi Crowther faced hostility from local natives and commercial companies (Owodayo, 1995, p. 162). Persecution of missionaries was also done by African religion adherents who felt that Christianity came to usurp their adherents. Meanwhile, leading figures of the African religion had clients who consult them on fees.

In the contemporary time, the major persecutors of Christians are essentially Muslims, and this is predicated on the age-long enmity (O. Okonkwo, <https://qz.com/africa/1776736/islamic-state-kills-11-nigerian-christians-pressure-on-buhari/> An Islamic State Christmas Killing of 11 Hostages in Nigeria threatens to flare up religious tensions (Accessed on 11th Jan, 2020). The level of persecution by Boko Haram has reached unprecedented height especially in the Northern part of Nigeria. Though Nigeria is constitutionally a secular state with freedom of religion; the northern ruling elite give preferential treatment to Muslims and discriminate Christians (U. Inemesit, *FG to Leave Islamic Bodies alone*, <https://www.pulse.ng/communities/religion/adeboye-oyedepo-pastors-and-other-christian-leaders-urge-fg-to-leave-islamic-bodies/nqj3vmd> (Accessed on 29th Jan, 2019).

While the world has been consumed by news about Iran, China and conflicts in other regions, Nigeria's militant and extremist groups have waged a campaign of death and devastation against Christians. On 19th of January, the Islamic State of West Africa released a video of a child who is around 10 years old executing a Christian man in Borno, Nigeria (V. Brewer, *A Militant Group You May not know kills Hundreds of Christians every year* <https://thehill.com/opinion/civil-rights/482859-a-militant-group-you-may-not-know-kills-hundreds-of-christians-every> (Accessed 31st May, 2020). A few days later, on Jan. 22, a Nigerian pastor, the Rev. Lawan Andimi, was beheaded by Boko Haram's militants. This murder triggered protests in 28 of Nigeria's 36 states, drawing an estimated 5 million people to denounce violence against Christians.

Persecution-monitoring groups such as Open Doors and U.K.-based Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust estimate that more than 7,000 Nigerian Christians have been killed for their faith in the past five years. The brazen, bloody attacks by Boko Haram and ISIS-affiliated militants tragically have made these groups into household names. But there is another extremist group operating in Nigeria that is just as deadly.

In the recent time, hundreds of Nigerian Christians are being assaulted, tortured and killed by Fulani extremists in the Middle Belt region of the nation. In 2019 alone, an estimated 1,350 Christians were killed by militant Islamic groups in Nigeria, according to Open Doors. Reports from the ground indicate that the Fulani were responsible for at least 500 of these deaths. Most recently, on Jan. 26 and

27, the Fulani attacked two villages, setting a church building ablaze and killing at least 26 people. According to World Watch Monitor, the Fulani are the “world’s largest nomadic group,” and they believe they have the right to take land in Nigeria to graze their cattle. In view of this, the Fulani engaged in jihad against Christian farmers. “It is a concept in Islam called ‘sacred space,’” said one Nigerian pastor. “According to this concept, all land has been given by Allah to the Muslims, and the Muslims have a right to claim any piece of land. And most of the areas that the Fulani are attacking are Christian communities, so it is very easy to see that what is happening is ethnic cleansing to advance the cause of jihad (World Watch Monitor, *Who are the Fulani?* <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/who-are-the-fulani/> Accessed on 11th June, 2020). In the shadow of Boko Haram’s campaign, which began in 2009, to impose Islamic law across Nigeria, Fulani conflicts with farming villages have become more sinister than simple land disputes that boil over into violence. Instead, armed Fulani have planned and executed operations that have killed and chased away thousands of Christians.

A suicide bomber linked as *Boko Haram* agent forced himself into the gates of the Church of Christ in Nigeria (COCIN) headquarters’ church on Sunday, 26 February 2012. On the evening of Sunday, January 26, 2020, 14 people were killed in the village market square by Fulani jihadists in Bokkos local government area of Plateau State. 20th January, 2020 news about the murder of Lawan Andimi was also received. The Church of the Brethren pastor was beheaded by *Boko Haram* after having been abducted on January 3, 2020 (M. Faith, *Global Christian Persecution*, <https://juicyecumenism.com/2020/01/30/as-horrific-persecution-against-nigerias-christians-continues-ir-d-joins-in-urging-for-special-envoy/> (Accessed on 11th Jan, 2020). They do not only kill Christians, but also burn down Churches (Olutona & Fatokun, 2012, p. 40). The persecution of Christians has been ceaseless. It would be strange if the Christian community in Nigerian numbering today well over millions should have emerged without any record of persecution.

This is not just a bit of tribal rivalry; the scenario of maiming has been on spasmodically with government doing little or absolutely nothing about it. And since the bigots are not sternly checked, they rather carry out their heinous acts with impunity. In fact, they have taken the massacre of Christians as something that should be carried out probably spontaneously, mindful of the very fact that it would be done without any repercussion (Onwubiko, 2005). It is surprising that offenders are not punished in any form. Instead, the government only compensates the affected group when necessary (Akinade, 2002, p. 134). They believe Christians will not take-up arms, so they sought to consistently put them under hegemony (Fredrick, 2002, p. 261).

The Nigerian Federal government has released a statement that Boko Haram and its affiliate, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), are now specifically targeting Christians. The statement, made by the Minister of Information and Culture, Alhaji Lai Mohammed, said that though this was not the case historically, Boko Haram has clearly started targeting Christians. With the current happenings, Mohammed is correct in his assessment that Boko Haram has a renewed vigor for killing Christians.

They have started targeting Christians and Christian villages for a specific reason, which is to trigger a religious war and throw the nation into chaos.” However, the Nigerian government might be done trying to say that Christians are not being targeted (Nigerian Government Admits Boko-Haram targeting Christians, <https://www.persecution.org/2020/02/28/nigerian-government-admits-boko-haram-targeting-christians/>. Accessed on 11th June, 2020).

Peter Aboki, president of the Gbagyi Development Union in Kaduna State, told Morning Star the government has not defended Christians against the attacks. Herdsmen occupy the villages, preventing Christians from returning. He further stated; “we want the government to do something urgently, because Christians are being killed or abducted almost on a daily basis,” Morning Star quoted Aboki. “Those areas are becoming a no-go area as a result of the deadly activities of herdsmen, and we want the government to do everything possible to stop this frequent loss of lives and destruction of property, thousands of people are killed and tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of people are displaced (Diana Chandler, *More than Two Dozen Christians killed in Nigeria*, <https://www.baptiststandard.com/news/world/more-than-two-dozen-christians-killed-in-nigeria/>. Accessed on 1st June, 2020).

The research posits that not all Fulani herders are involved in these kinds of attacks. Therefore, trying to identify an entire ethnic group as terrorists is dangerous and could lead to even worse. Despite this, there are definitely groups of militants who hide among the Fulani people or use that identity as a way to attack Christians.

4. Comparism of Persecution in Early Church and Nigerian Church

The Early Church situation is different in some key respects to the contemporary Nigerian situation. The Early church suffered from persecution in the hands of the Greco-Roman rulers because of the misunderstanding engineered by the Jews to render Christians illegal persons, to the extent that civil authority had the power and intention to wipe out this Jewish sect. This was partly because Christians did not respect the authority of the Caesars as absolute, nor were they sons of the Gods. In other words, there was a philosophical or theological clash of claims considering the socio pathological status-quo of the Greco-Roman emperors. The church was not willing to take its place among the sanctioned religions in some places (Brawer, 1981, p. 301). The egalitarian inclusion in the early church of the next to higher but not the ruling classes and the slave class was a complete affront to Greco-Roman ideas of the good society and the respectable citizen. Such overt practices of economic sharing threatened the social foundations upon which the empire stood (Acts 5).

The rivalry between Christianity and Islam is glaring in the nation Nigeria (Aboul-Enein, 2011, p. 98). In spite of the numerous security agencies put in place in Nigeria, there seems to be nothing to write home about the security situation (Wurmbrand, 1988, p. 187). However, Christians are often at the receiving end. Numerous Christians have been Murdered by Fulani herdsmen or Boko Haram. Fulani herdsmen are nomadic people who principally raise livestock (B. Casey, *The Continuing Persecution of*

Nigerian

Christians

<https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/the-continuing-persecution-of-nigerian-christians>. Accessed on 18th June, 2019). In some states, increasing numbers of Christians are dressing like Muslims to make their faith less obvious and reduce the chances of attack. Young people who are Christians in these states are frequently denied access to higher education, and Christians have been asked to give up their faith in order to be given work. Christian women and girls are in danger of being abducted and forced to marry. When Christians are displaced by the violence in the region, they face discrimination when government aid is distributed because of their faith (Hackett, 1999, p. 246). Meanwhile, Nigerian government has been negligent in seeking to bring the perpetrators to justice.

Unlike the Early Church, persecution of Christians in Nigeria is not official. The Nigerian government wants international respect as a secular power. They are complacent for sure in not adequately defending the Christian segment of the population; but this is not the sort of pogrom faced by the early church. Therefore, the reaction of the Nigeria government gives a clear understanding that they Christianity as a bad thing regardless of what they think of Christ and these militants are serving their desired goals though they never bring these to the surface officially. In fact, news about the persecution activities is being suppressed so that they still retain face in front of the global community.

5. The Reactions of Nigeria Christians to Persecution

While the present situation has made the tense relations between Christians and Muslims worse, initiatives aimed at promoting inter-faith dialogue have been sustained by the efforts of the leadership of both religions (Gondwe 2010, p. 81). The Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) and its state and local government equivalents, and numerous inter-faith initiatives have continued to serve as important platforms for Christians and Muslims to seek ways of improving mutual understanding and tolerance.

As Christians and places of worship become increasingly vulnerable to attacks, a number of security measures have been adopted by Nigerian Church. Security around Church buildings has been intensified. Churches are acquiring handheld metal detectors to screen people; in some churches women are barred from entering with handbags; cars are parked in designated areas, and roadblocks are mounted in areas to restrict access (Y. Osibanjo, Osibanjo Blasts Christian leaders and Reacts to the Plan of Islamization in Nigeria. Retrieved from <http://www.izobofolo.com.ng/tay/islamization-agenda-of-niger>, 2017. Accessed 3/2/2019).

Apart from physical security measures, the church has embarked on spiritual activities as prayer. At the level of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), days of fasting and prayers have been organized. In response to the killings, an estimated five million Nigerian Christians participated in a CAN sponsored fast for three days at the end of January. They protested as well, participating in prayer walks and calling on President Buhari to resign amid widespread disapproval of his ability to stop the violence. President Buhari defended his government's efforts, praising the military forces and assistance from British and American troops. He did concede that the battle was still not yet won, but

discounted accusations that he misled the public and the international community on the true nature of the violence. The protesters held signs proclaiming: “The Gospel of Christ will reign in Nigeria. Shed no blood. It cries to God. Mr. President stop these killings, please (L. Burkle, *No Place to Hide: Christianity in Northern Nigeria* <https://www.persecution.org/2020/03/02/no-place-hide-christians-northern-nigeria/> (Accessed 3rd March, 2020).

The Christian Association of Nigeria have also been providing relief materials to the victims of attacks in several places, and continues to speak in the media on behalf of Christians. Church leaders continue to preach peace and appeal for calm.

6. Conclusion

The Early Church was characterized by harrowing experiences. As the church grew, the fire of persecution raged. It was determined to root out Christianity, before it had opportunity to gain a firm footing on the Roman soil. There is no doubt that Christians are still facing persecutions in several parts of the world; including Nigeria. However, insights are gained from the way the Early Church responded to their traducers. The idea of martyrdom to many Christian is nauseating; it resonates with a feeling of abhorrence. Nevertheless, God uses persecution to refine His bride. Clearly seen, there are several problems and issues threatening Christianity in Nigeria. Thus, research recommends that:

- 1) The church in Nigeria should have strong faith in the power of God; the strength of the church lies in its effectiveness of spreading the good news.
- 2) Christians in Nigeria must have faith in God. Even in persecution, the Apostles had faith and strongly believed in the power of Jesus to be saved from oppressors.
- 3) Dishonest and shady divides the Church. Therefore, it is important that righteousness should prevail in the Christian circles in Nigeria. This is suggestive of the fact that Christians in politics should be Church agent for transformation.
- 4) The Nigerian Church should demonstrate love like that of early Apostles in other to adequately withstand the burden of persecution in all spheres.
- 5) The Nigerian Church must have a bold and strong voice that expressly speaks for the pain of Christians as important citizens who should not be maligned or sidelined.

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