



The Weaponization of Religious Identity: A View from Africa

Bishop Matthew Hassan Kukah (Nigeria)

Presented to the G20 Religion Forum (R20)
Bali, Indonesia, 2 – 3 November 2022

1: In a presentation elsewhere, I summed up my great country Nigeria in the following words:

*From its inception as an independent nation, Nigeria has remained a volatile country. Home to over two hundred million people.... Highly resourced, but endemically corrupt, a combination of serious governance missteps, series of military coups, years of maladministration, a culture of violence has seriously slowed down what should have been one of the greatest nations on earth. It has left its people vulnerable to poverty, disease, violence and death. Here is the enigma: Amidst all of this, in 2014, **The World Value Survey** ranked Nigerians the happiest people on earth.*

2: Today, a combination local and global factors of terrorism, have further pushed the country to the precipice. After well over ten years of battling Boko Haram, insurgency, banditry, and ethno-religious violence, our weary citizens are absorbed in self-doubt, their natural happiness clouded by a dark and deep despair. Every day, news of abductions, armed robberies, kidnappings for ransom, murders and assassinations of our innocent citizens persists. Our sacred spaces have become killing grounds. Hundreds of worshippers have been murdered in mosques and Churches across the country. In response much of the world shrugs its shoulders and moves on, as if this cauldron of violence in Africa's most populated country will never reach comfortable people elsewhere.

3: Against this background, I applaud this Conference for taking the historic step to address these issues directly. I specifically commend the goal: to prevent the weaponization of identity and combat the spread of Hatred. In the reality which confronts so many of us here today, hatred feeds on the weaponization of identity, marginalizes the other, and creates the conditions for their dehumanization, and inevitably takes us down the dark road to the justification of violence, and ultimately murder. I speak now to this theme against the backdrop of my own country.

4: The Nigerian story of the weaponization of religion has been characterized by the manipulation of historical narratives between Christians and Muslims and setting ethnic groups against one another. Most Muslims in northern Nigeria have continued to re-echo sentiments of the old caliphate (1804-1903) which views Christianity as a foreign religion – while dismissing that Islam itself originated from the Arab peninsula – and instead treating Islam because of its relative longevity (present in some parts of Nigeria since the 11th century) as an African religion! In northern Nigeria, Muslim elite have tended to see the institutions of the



modern state as an alien imposition that attempts to displace their own religion, with western education as a foreign enemy to Islam. They thus consider the present Constitution and secular laws as fundamentally subordinate to Islam, and in practice ignore the written laws of the land as they see fit. The Nigerian elite, even at a political level have not been able to find consensus around how to address key issues of the sacredness of the Constitution.

5. The result amongst Christians in Northern Nigeria today is that their faith is very much in danger, both physically and socially, even within developed municipalities. Christian religious tradition and history is prohibited in most public schools, whereas Islamic religious fundamentals are everywhere required in these same schools. Therefore, except for the very poor, Christians do not send their children to public schools. Deserving Christian students are systematically denied admission to university placements. Employment and promotion for non-Muslims in the state civil services is essentially non-existent. Likewise, Christians cannot expect any type of fair or equal treatment from law enforcement or the courts. The result is that conditions are created for self-doubt, fear, and anxiety among children of diverse faiths.

6: Compounding this structural persecution of Christians in northern Nigeria, we have also witnessed a growing culture of overt Islamic violence spanning over the last decades, a form of violence that now threatens much of Africa. This violence has been manifested in Nigeria in two distinct phases. First, is the intra-religious violence such as that between the different sects in Islam, namely: Sunni, Shi'ites, Izala, Boko Haram, ISWAP and a few others. Second is the violence by Muslim extremists that directly target Christians or their infrastructure such as Churches, presbyteries, Convents, schools, hospitals and even social infrastructure for public use such as Pastoral Centres. We suffered this fate most recently in my Diocese of Sokoto in the aftermath of the brutal mob-killing of Ms. Deborah, a young Christian university student accused of blasphemy and publicly murdered on campus in May this year by her fellow Muslim students for having complained of the forced introduction of religion into an academic study group. Far from universal condemnation of this horrific act, Islamist extremists throughout the north applauded the murder, claiming it was justified, and calling for additional violence against any who might ask for legal justice against the perpetrators.

7: With this rise of Islamic extremism, we have seen a spread in the abductions and kidnapping of clerics across the board. While we have had cases of the abductions of very visible Muslim clerics in parts of the North-East and North-West, the abductions of senior Christian Church men have been far more pronounced, targeted and vicious. In my Diocese of Sokoto, we have had four Priests kidnapped for ransom. One was killed in the process, another was held for two weeks and the other two were held for 33 days. In all of these, huge ransoms were paid to secure their release. This is the violence which we face today, a violence which degrades us all and robs us of our fundamental dignity as human beings.

8: In conclusion let me make a few particular and then general comments about the way forward as I see it for my country, other parts of Africa and the world.

First for us in Africa, the weak infrastructure of the state has predisposed our public office holders to corruption on a truly monumental scale. Governance is seen as state capture where the politicians share patronage based on their cynical exploitation of the fault lines of religion or ethnicity. Nepotism becomes a weapon of mass corruption. In Africa when politicians present themselves as champions of their ethnicity or religion, naturally, their supporters expect that the rewards of winning an election would mean power to their base alone. This exploitation prevents the true democratization of development across the board.

Second, governments must develop the culture of a strong legal basis for common citizenship with the Constitution as the supreme law of the land. In this case, innocent citizens cannot lose their lives due to cultural or religious claims that are contrary to the laws of natural justice, or subjected with impunity to spurious religious claims when we are not in a theocracy. So, as we see in Nigeria and elsewhere, no citizen should have the right to take the life of another or cause injury on grounds of any sort of divine claim. Decisive punishments must be meted out to those who kill in the name of faith! Religious leaders of the faith being used must put pressure on their states to follow the rule of law and not be afraid of being targeted by extremists. Silence in this case is taken for approval, whether intended or not.

Thirdly, it is clear to us now that we are all at risk from the hands of these terrorists who use ethnicity or religion to destroy humanity. Whether they are Boko Haram, ISIS, or other ethnically or racially based groups, we must all stand together to insist that injury to one is injury to all. We must all accept that we are all citizens of one human nation, that no religion or ethnic group is superior to the other.

Fourthly, a comprehensive, integrated programme of education remains the cure for extremism. It is not enough for leaders of faith to continue to engage in mere moral rhetoric or meaningless "dialogue" designed to appease donors while leaving our people as victims. As I have seen in Nigeria and elsewhere, the first victims of religiously inspired violence by extremists is always their own people. In today's world, these victims are so often Muslims. In Northern Nigeria, majority of those who have died in the hands of Boko Haram, ISWAP, bandits or kidnappers have been Muslims. In the ISIS war in Iraq, the majority of victims were Muslims. This should sound the alarm that it is not about just religion but about our common humanity. We must admit that even if mass killings of people of faith may not be an overt state policy, still, we cannot ignore situations where there are people in the highest levels of government whose inaction and impunity clearly align with genocidal intentions.

In closing, I again commend this initiative. However, beyond Conferences, we must develop a coherent programme of lessons and agreed principles that we can learn and accept from one another. This cancer of the weaponization of religion threatens us all. History shows us that empires and emperors have had their day. The world will always be full of men and women with grand delusions about how they have been divinely sent to create a new world at the cost of human blood. However, we must work hard to cure them of their delusions by taking them out of circulation. Here, developing nations must do more than merely append their signatures to international laws that protect human rights. Religious bodies, in collaboration with civil society must work together to ensure a fairer world for all.

A fundamental belief in human dignity and the sacred nature of the family binds us all together, every one of us here today. There is a future in that for the world and for all our people if we can seize it. The weaponization of religion is our darkest of enemies in this. It is very far past time that we recognize it and face it openly.