

## **OWO CHURCH KILLINGS: THE QUESTION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN NIGERIA**

**Polycarp Okafor PhD.**  
**Westfälische Wilhelms University, Münster, Germany**

### **Abstract**

The practice of religious freedom and rights in the world over is becoming a great challenge especially in African countries. In Nigeria of today, for example, there has been an ongoing battle which borders on religious freedom among others. Religious violence of Muslims against Christians has become the order of the day. The rate at which the Muslim terrorists kill Christians is unimaginable. Christians are killed in various parts of Nigeria daily and there is no pro-active action by the government to forestall future occurrence. In other words, people suffer because they belong to a particular religion or because they practice or believe in a particular religion in Nigeria. How can a Country where human rights especially the right to freedom of religion is enshrined in her constitution be comfortable in the midst of daily killings of Christians by the Muslim terrorists? On the Pentecost day, 5<sup>th</sup> of June, 2022, there was a mass shooting and bomb attack at St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church, Owo, Ondo State, South West of Nigeria. This was a coordinated attack against Christians by the members of Boko Haram and Muslim terrorists. This leaves one to question: Is there Religious freedom in Nigeria? This write up is aimed at presenting the issues of violation of religious rights of Christians, its dangers, effects and steps to be taken for possible restoration of religious freedom in Nigeria.

**Keywords: religious freedom, Nigeria, Christians, Muslims,**

## **Religious Freedom; a Conceptual analysis.**

Freedom means the quality or state of being free; such as: the absence of necessity, coercion, or constraint in choice or action, liberation from slavery or power of another. When we talk about religious freedom, the first thing that comes to mind is the right of an individual to act in accordance with conscience beliefs, to worship or not to worship freely, and to be able to enjoy life in the society without discrimination on the basis of such beliefs. Religious freedom, thus, can be defined as the freedom of the individual or groups to take decisions, make determination about their beliefs and to act upon those beliefs without infringing other people's rights be it civil or legal. In a broad sense, freedom of religion as John Witte puts it, can be conceived as: "a number of fundamental principles of religious liberty- freedom of conscience, exercise, speech, association, worship, diet, dress, and evangelism; freedom from religious discrimination, coercion, and unequal treatment; freedom of religious and moral education; and freedom of religious travel, pilgrimage, association with coreligionists abroad."<sup>1</sup> John Witte further argues that religious freedom also "involves number of fundamental principles of corporate religious liberty – freedom of religious groups to organize their own polity and leadership; to hold and use corporate property; to define their own creed, cult, confessional community, and code of conduct; to establish institutions of worship, education, charity, and outreach; ant to set standards of admission, participation, and discipline for their members and leaders."<sup>2</sup>

Thus, religious freedom is a basic right of an individual in a society; in fact, it is a fundamental human right in every society, including Nigerian society. Vincent Phillip Munoz holds that religious freedom is a natural right of an individual or group.<sup>3</sup> Religious freedom protects people's rights to live, speak and act according to their beliefs peacefully and publicly. It protects the people's ability to be themselves in the work place, in the class, and at social activities. It is important to note that religious freedom is a fundamental human right and the first among the rights that is guaranteed by the Nigerian Constitution. In Chapter 4, Section 38(1) it says: "every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom (either alone or in community

---

<sup>1</sup> John Witte Jr., "The Right of Freedom of Religion: An Historical Perspective from the West," et.al., Routledge Handbook on Freedom of Religion and Belief" (London: Routledge, 2020), 10.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p.10

<sup>3</sup> Vincent Phillip Munoz, Religious Liberty and the American Founding, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago: 2022, p. 11.

with others, and in public or in private) to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance.”<sup>4</sup> Such right is a central right set out not only in Nigeria but also in entire African Union<sup>5</sup>, in the European Union<sup>6</sup> and United States of America and world over. For example, the 1948 Universal Declaration provided the foundation for religious freedom as a human right. John Witte argues “that four international instruments contain the most critical protections of religious rights and liberties: (1) the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (“ICCPR”), (2) the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religious Belief (“the 1981 Declaration on Religion and Belief”), (3) the Concluding Document of the Vienna Follow-up Meeting of Representatives of the Participating States of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (the “1989 Vienna Concluding Document”), and (4) the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious, and Linguistic Minorities (“the 1992 Minorities Declaration”).”<sup>7</sup>

### **Why is Religious Freedom Important?**

Religious freedom is important because it protects rights of all groups and individuals, including the most vulnerable, whether religious or not. It also prevents the cultural majority from using the power of the state to impose their beliefs on others. Thus, religious freedom protects everyone alike- religious and non-religious, and it ensures that rights of religion of people or groups are guaranteed in a state, or country in such a way that no one will abuse or infringe in the right of freedom of one another’s religion. Jonathan Fox argues that religious freedom is important because it is central, important, and beneficial, and more so, promotes a stable and free society thereby reducing terror and violence.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, religious freedom is important in order to protect people or groups from the abuse or violation of their religious rights. However, in Nigeria, as will be seen in this write up, there are cases of abuse or violation of religious rights that needs to be discussed in order to find a lasting solution to its menace.

---

<sup>4</sup> The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999.

<sup>5</sup> Berthrand G. Ramcharan, *Africa and the Universality of Human Rights*, Brill Nijhoff Publishers, Leiden: July 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Carolyn Evans, *Freedom of Religion under the European Convention and Human Rights*, Oxford ECHR Series, 2023.

<sup>7</sup> John Witte Jr and M. Christian Green, “Religious Freedom, Democracy, and International Human Rights” in *Emory International Law Review*, 23, (2009): 588-589.

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Fox, “What is Religious Freedom and who has it?”, in *Social Compass*, vol. 68(3), (2021): 322.

## **Principles of Religious Freedom:**

John Witte Jr., Joel A. Nichols, and Richard W. Garnett, argues that general principles of religious freedom in America emerged from four major groups- Puritans, Evangelicals, Enlightenment Liberals and Civic Republicans who tried to debate, define and defend religious freedom based on their preferred principles.<sup>9</sup> Thus, they further argue that there are six principles of religious freedom:

1. Liberty of Conscience
2. Free Exercise of Religion
3. Religious Pluralism
4. Religious Equality
5. Separation of Church and State and
6. No establishment of a national Religion.<sup>10</sup>

Based on this American principle which is a universally accepted standard, one should expect that there should be religious co-existence among people of all tribes, cultures, religions and traditions. But in Nigeria, there are existing challenges in the practice of religious beliefs and well known cases of violation of religious freedom which calls for concerted action.

## **The Killings of Christians in St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church Owo in Ondo State:**

The attack of Christians in the Catholic Church by the Muslim terrorists during the Mass on the Pentecost day, 5<sup>th</sup> June 2022 is one of the climax of the killings of Christians in Nigeria. The attack occurred during the Holy Mass of Pentecost at about 11:30am as the people of God were in the Church. Notably, a group of gun men entered the Church disguised as the members of the congregation, carrying bags which contained firearms. Another group took positions outside the church. The terrorists brought the explosives devices that were detonated outside of the Church and both groups started firing guns on worshippers. Those who were outside the Church shot sporadically; those who were inside the Church fired gun at people; many scampered for

---

<sup>9</sup> John Witte, jr., Joel A. Nichols, and Richard W. Garnett, "Religion and the American Constitutional Experiment" in 5th Ed. (Oxford University Press, 2022) 2.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p.2.

safety, in the process many people died and many sustained injuries leaving the church with the pool of blood. After the attack, these Muslim terrorists left the scene.

### **The Effects of the Attacks:**

The effects of the attacks are enormous. The first resultant effect of the attack was loss of lives. As at 17<sup>th</sup> June, 2022 during the Funeral Mass which the Diocese of Ondo conducted for the victims of the attacks, the number of recorded deaths is about 55 persons and about hundred were injured. More so, the Church was not only desecrated but was also damaged in the process. Some properties near the church were also destroyed. The attack caused great shock among the people in the community that many are now living in great fear, displacement of the victims' families from their homes, increase of hunger and poverty among the families of victims. Fundamentally, the right to religious freedom which is enshrined in the constitution of Nigeria was violated.

### **The Christian Massacre at Owo and the question of Religious freedom in Nigeria:**

In Nigeria, there is an increasing violence from Muslims against Christians, The attack has been consistent that leaves one to wonder if there is religious freedom in Nigeria. The Christian Massacre at Owo in the Church, on the Pentecost day- the feast of the birth of the Church leaves one to ponder if the religious there is freedom in Nigeria and if there is to what extent this freedom of religion is practiced.

Thus, the religious freedom in Nigeria is a not only a questionable matter but a contemporary issue because of incessant killings of Christians by Muslim religious fundamentalists. Notably, the rate at which Muslims kill Christians in Nigeria leaves one to question if there is religious freedom. Apart from the killings in Owo Catholic Church, there are also many killings of Christians across Nigeria by these Muslim Fundamentalists. In 2020, Abankula reported that 3,462 Nigerian Christians have been killed by Nigerian jihadist, Fulani Muslim terrorists in 200 days and the Nigerian State is not doing anything to forestall future occurrence.<sup>11</sup> In Everyday news Nigeria of August 2, 2022, "a thematic analysis shows that 7,222 were killed by Muslim terrorists in seven months and 3,823 individuals across the country Nigeria between January 1

---

<sup>11</sup> Abankula, "3,462 Nigerian Christians Killed by Herdsmen, Jihadists in 200 days" in PM News, July 18, 2021, Available at: <https://pmnewsnigeria.com/2021/07/18/3462-nigerian-christians-killed-by-herdsmen-jihadists-in-200-days/> (Accessed: 04.08.2022)

and July 29, 2022.”<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, in the statistics, it shows that in the North West 180 fatalities, South West 10.5% fatalities, South East 9.2 fatalities, and South-South 4.7 fatalities. It argues that 75.6 of the fatalities for June 2022 affected the Northern Nigeria.<sup>13</sup>

It is worthy to note that the terrorists target at Christians. In southern Kaduna where Christians are predominant, there have been constant attacks of the Muslim fundamentalists against Christians. The Southern Kaduna Forum said that within 6 years, 148 communities were attacked in Southern Kaduna by Muslim terrorists while 200,000 natives were displaced.<sup>14</sup>

In these Muslim terrorists attack on Christians, the catholic Priests were not left out. In the year 2022 alone, at least 18 Priests have been kidnapped across Nigeria<sup>15</sup> including a Catholic Bishop and a Methodist bishop by these Muslim terrorists. About 10 Priests have died in their hands. For example, on 15<sup>th</sup> July, two Nigerian Priests of Kafanchan Diocese were kidnapped in their parish rectory, Rev. Fr John Mark Cheitnum and Rev. Fr Donatus Cleopas of Christ the King Catholic Church were abducted from the Parish Rectory at 5:45 pm. On the 19<sup>th</sup> of July, Fr Cleopas managed to escape from the hands of the kidnappers, but Rev. Father Mark Cheitnum was killed.<sup>16</sup>

The greatest challenge with Owo masscare of Christians is the Government’s failure to protect lives and properties of people which is the basic duty of every good government. In the homily delivered by Bishop Emmanuel Badejo at the burial of those who were killed in St Francis Xavier Catholic Church Owo, he told the Government, wake up, sit up and act up to secure lives and properties all over Nigeria. He called on them to wake up from slumber.<sup>17</sup> He urged the Government of Nigeria to enhance right to freedom of religion. Bishop Jude Arogundade of the Catholic Diocese of Ondo, who is also the chief mourner criticized the administration of the President Muhammadu Buhari for being good at empty promises regarding security and

---

<sup>12</sup> “Insecurity: Borno, Benue, Kaduna unsafe, as terrorists kill 7,222 in Seven Months” in Everyday News Nigeria, 2nd August, 2022, Available at: [https://everydaynewsngr.net/2022/08/02/insecurity-borno-benue-kaduna-unsafe-as-terrorists-kill-7222-in-seven-months/#goggle\\_vignette](https://everydaynewsngr.net/2022/08/02/insecurity-borno-benue-kaduna-unsafe-as-terrorists-kill-7222-in-seven-months/#goggle_vignette) (Accessed: 04.08.2022)

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibrahim Hassan-Wuyo, “148 Communities Attacked in 6 Years, 200,000 Persons Displaced in Southern Kaduna” in Vanguard daily Newspaper, April 28, 2022, Available at: <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2022/04/southern-kaduna-148>, (Accessed: 03.08.2022)

<sup>15</sup> Giovanni Die Piero, “Kidnapped Murdered Priests latest in Nigerian Persecution” in Juicy Ecumenism, (3, August 2022) The institute of Religion and Democracy, Washington, DC.

<sup>16</sup> Giovanni Die Piero, “Kidnapped Murdered Priests latest in Nigerian Persecution” in Juicy Ecumenism, (3, August 2022) The institute of Religion and Democracy, Washington, DC.

<sup>17</sup> Bamigbola Gbolagunte, “Owo Massacre: Victims buried amid tears, sorrow,” in The Sun Newspaper, June 17, 2022. Available at: <https://sunnewsonline.com/owo-massacre-victims-buried-amid-tears-sorrow/> (Accessed: 30.08.2022)

prevention of terrorism. He believes that the terrorists target the Catholic Church for strategic reasons. He said that “the promise of the Government to find the killers was an empty promise, which would not positive results and he maintained that he would continue to hold the leaders responsible.”<sup>18</sup> He also lamented on the lack of confidence in the government for proactive action.

The statistics of Edward Clancy of the Aid to the Church in Need International holds that in the last 13 years, roughly 45,000 Christians in Nigeria have been killed.<sup>19</sup> This leaves one to ask: Is there truly religious freedom in Nigeria? What has the Government done to protect religious freedom? Is the Government doing enough forestall future attack of Christians?

### **The Steps to restore Religious Freedom in Nigeria:**

Proactive action by the security agencies:

Security agencies like the Police, the Army, the Civil Defense and so on, should be proactive in safeguarding lives and properties. Notably, there are reported cases where these Muslim terrorist pre-informed that they would attack but there was no proactive action by the security forces. Thus, most often one questions if the Government is proactive in most cases. For example, Damilola Agbalajobi, commenting on the perpetuated Muslim-Christian religious violence in Kaduna state said that President Muhammadu Buhari during his campaign talked tough on fighting violence but he has not acted accordingly to ensure peace in Kaduna State.<sup>20</sup> She argues that there have not been proactive measures put in place for protection of religious right and religious freedom of Kaduna people. This is also applicable not only to Kaduna state but to the other states and even the security Agencies in Nigeria. They have refused to step up to their responsibilities of protection of rights and properties.

Intervention by the International Communities:

The International community should intervene in Nigeria to protect the freedom of religion which is a fundamental human right. It is on record that the present Nigerian Government has failed in this aspect because the President- Muhammadu Buhari, being a Muslim seems to be encouraging Muslims to be killing Christians. There are reported cases where there were

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Edward Clancy, Nigeria: More than 60 Christians Killed over two months in the State of Benue, Aid to the Church in Need, July 19, 2022. Available at: [acninternational.org](http://acninternational.org). (Accessed on 03.08.2022)

<sup>20</sup> Damilola Agbalajobi, “Factors that Foster Conflict in Nigeria’s Kaduna State” in *The Conversation*, February 18 2019, available at: <https://theconversation.com/explainer-factors-that-foster-conflict-in-nigerias-kaduna-state-109899>.

massive killings of Christians and the Federal Government did not condemn the act not to talk of seeking proactive ways to forestall such an incident. For example, Bishop Hassan Kukah argues that Boko Haram is targeted at Christian churches and institutions and the Government is not proactive to forestall further occurrence.<sup>21</sup> One may not be wrong to say that with special intervention from the International communities like European Union, United Nations, that there would be at least a step in the right direction towards elimination of religious violence in Nigeria thereby instilling religious freedom and religious rights in Nigeria.

#### Establishment of a Special Court:

This special court will take charge of Christian-Muslim Religious Conflict cases, that is, cases of Infringement of Religious Freedom Rights. In this case, International Lawyers will be involved so as to ensure justice and fairness. Edward Clancy of the Aid to the Church in Need International (ACN) agrees with this fact saying that: “In a Country with Muslim-Christian tensions and where the government is majority Muslim, you can’t get a fair hearing.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, International Lawyers will be collaborated with the Nigerian Lawyers. In this case, countries with great reputation like the Federal Republic of Germany, United States of America; etc. can send representatives that will be part of the constitution of this special court.

#### Intervention of the Government and the foreign agencies and compensation of the Victims:

There are many people who have been displaced, those who lost their homes as a result of religious attacks, those who ran out of their community, those who lost their properties, those who lost their lives or their loved ones, those whose businesses were destroyed, etc. This call for the action of Government in not only providing for them the basic necessities of life: food, shelter, water, and electricity; or even compensation as the case may be but also in ensuring that there is no future occurrence. This will enable the displaced people to have a sense of belonging and then be able to have the courage to live their normal life without fear of religious intimidation. Thus, on one hand, compensation of victims of religious conflicts would be a step in the right direction in consoling the victims and, on the other hand, such action enhances justice and fairness.

#### Establishment of a Research Institute:

---

<sup>21</sup> Matthew Hassan Kukah, *Islamic Extremist in the Northern Nigeria*, in *Tansi Splendour*, no 18, (2019-2020), 9.

<sup>22</sup> Giovanni Die Piero, “Kidnapped Murdered Priests latest in Nigerian Persecution” in *Juicy Ecumenism*, (3, August 2022) The institute of Religion and Democracy, Washington, DC.

This will enable free and fair delivery of information to the global world. Most often, the press people and media agencies are compromised in Nigeria that they do not report what actually happened. Sometimes when many people are killed, they report less the number because of fear of Government sanction. Sometimes, they are given bribe to report less number of people. With an establishment of a research institute, facts will be accessed first hand and reports will be given as it was found on ground.

The Research Institute will also have the primary obligation of fostering dialogue between Christians, Muslims and other religions. The Institute will also be a non-Governmental Organization that will ensure real education of the citizens on Individual rights to religious freedom and dangers of violence. The research Institute will also have the task of resolution of religious conflicts in towns, local government, state, regions and at the national level. This implies that lawyers, conflict resolution experts will be part of the programme.

**Inter-Religious dialogue:**

Inter-religious dialogue between Muslim and Christians can strengthen and foster co-existence of Christian and Muslims and thus reduce conflicts and killings. Even though there is Inter-religious dialogue already in Nigeria but the killings of Christians have persisted. In my own view, Inter-religious dialogue needs to be strengthened by having Inter-religious dialogue in every town, local Government and in every state and then at the national level. I believe that this will help to strengthen religious freedom and religious rights in Nigeria and more so, will lead to forgiveness, total reconciliation, justice and peace in Nigeria.

**Conclusion:**

The fundamental right to freedom of religion in Nigeria is being threatened daily by the violence of Muslim against Christians and it is high time it is looked into. Right to religion is one of the Universal Rights and its denial on citizens of a country calls for a pro-active step to be taken to forestall its reoccurrence. Nigerian Government on its part has failed in all its ramifications not only in the activities of protecting the right of religion of her citizens but in forestalling future occurrence. This article is meant to raise awareness globally on the infringement of the right to religion of Christians by Muslims in Nigeria and to proffer solution through collaborative efforts of stake holders, Nigerian Government, International communities and the world at large for good life, global justice and peace.