

Chapter Five

Islamic Challenges in African Christianity

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INTRODUCTION

The legacy of Christian-Muslim encounter in Africa is well established and thoroughly documented.¹¹² The interaction between the two Abrahamic faiths has gone through several historical incarnations. It has taken the shape of dialogue, open exchanges, vitriolic conflicts, and violence. It is a history sated with meaningful engagements and baffling ambiguities. This chapter examines several case studies and historical landmarks that will enable students to understand the dynamics and the dynamism of the Christian-Muslim encounter in Africa. I will analyze the various patterns of Islamization in Africa and the variety of ways Christians have responded to the Islamic challenge in Africa. In addition, this work will offer some heuristic devices for comprehending both historical and contemporary issues that relate to the interaction of the two religions on the African continent; a continent known to Arab geographers and historians as *Bilad al-Sudan* (land of the black people). These vignettes from different nations will provide insights into the various ways that Christians and Muslims relate to one another within the African context. Phillip Jenkins has

¹¹² See Andrew WALLS, "African as the Theatre of Christian Engagement with Islam in the Nineteenth Century", in *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 1999, 29,2, 155-74; Lamin SANNEH, *Piety and Power: Muslims and Christians in West Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996); J. HAAFKENS, *Islam and Christianity in Africa* (Nairobi: Procmura, 1992); Lissi RASMUSSEN, *Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa: The Cases of Northern Nigeria and Tanzania Compared* (London & New York: British Academic Press, 1993); and Noel Q. KING, *Christian and Muslim in Africa* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1971).

correctly declared that one of crucial challenges of Christianity in the twenty-first century is how to relate to Islam, especially as the latter is the fastest growing religion in the world today. According to Jenkins, “Christian-Muslim conflict may in fact prove one of the closest analogies between the Christian world that was and the one coming into being.”¹¹³ This realization is crucial to contemporary Africa. In fact, the continent provides a veritable laboratory for analyzing a host of emerging themes relevant to relations between the two faiths.

I. THE GENESIS OF THE ENCOUNTER AND THE NORTH AFRICAN EXPERIENCE

Africa has a long connection with Islam. When the early followers of the Prophet Muhammad were facing persecution in Mecca, he advised many of them to seek refuge across the Red Sea in Axum (which is in modern day Ethiopia). In the Muslim tradition, this remarkable event is known as the first *hijrah*, or migration. Iman Buhari reported in his *Sahih Buhari* that these Muslim refugees later went back to Arabia after Muhammad had won the peninsula over to Islam. Islamic legends call those who returned to Medina the “people of the ship”.

Islam would quickly return to Africa. In 639, just seven years after Muhammad’s death, an Arab army invaded Egypt. The rapidity of the Islamic advance across northern Africa was breathtaking and sensational. In fact, within two generations, an Arab hegemony extended across the entire Maghrib to the Atlantic Ocean. The assistance of several important people, most notably Cyprus, the Melkite Patriarch of Alexandria, and a Byzantine governor who surrendered the fortress of Alexandria, greatly contributed to the success of the Arab conquest. For their part, the Arabs recognized the heretofore-persecuted Monophysite church, and the Copts received the *dhimmi*, or religious protection, accorded to the “people of the book” (*Ahl al-Kitab*) in return for paying poll tax. The Arabs not only valued the Copts as taxpayers but as civil servants. There was even a stern order that prevented their conversion to Islam.

In northern Africa, Arab Muslims met a moribund and internally divided Christianity, which collapsed like a house of cards. While Christians constituted a majority in Egypt until the tenth century, their relative number declined as a result of incessant waves of Arab

¹¹³ Philip JENKINS, “A New Christendom” in *The Chronicle Review*, Section 2, March 29, 2002, B.10.

immigration. Intense persecution under the Mamluks from the mid-thirteenth to the early-sixteenth century further undermined Egyptian Christianity. Likewise, in the tenth century, most Egyptian Christians spoke Coptic, but by the end of the twelfth century, most had adopted Arabic and Christian literature was translated into Arabic. The fact that Arabic was the language of administration and commerce further contributed to the Arabization of Egypt. The same changes occurred all across Muslim-occupied North Africa.¹¹⁴

The Arab conquest led to state formation and the organization of North African society into Muslim communities. Tunisia in the eighth century, Morocco in the eleventh, and Algeria in the sixteenth acquired territorial autonomy. The conquests also resulted in the institutionalization of Islam for all and sundry. Starting in the eighth century, the Maliki School of jurisprudence became entrenched throughout North Africa, and remained the basis of law, education, and government until the nineteenth century. From about the twelfth century, Sufism too became a way of life for multitudes of people, especially in the outlying areas. Sufis became the leaders in rural communities in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia.

II. RELIGIOUS TRANSMISSION AND APPROPRIATION IN AFRICA

The spread of Christianity and Islam in Africa has continued to generate interesting insights that relate to the character of each faith. As already has been seen, both confessions have a long and a distinguished history in Africa. The two religions have engendered passionate piety and yet have maintained their unique character and form. The origin and metamorphosis of both religions in Africa lend considerable credence to the role local agency and indigenous appropriation plays in religious transmission. As Lamin Sanneh has argued, it is important to:¹¹⁵

“Assess the respective impact of Christianity and Islam through the eyes of African religions, and in so doing release these two missionary faiths from the fixed, motionless time-frame in which

¹¹⁴ See Sulayman S. NYANG, *Islam, Christianity, and African Identity* (Vermont: Amana, 1984) for an excellent discussion on the twin processes of Arabization and Islamization in Africa. Lamin Sanneh has however cautioned that Sudan is the only black African country where these two processes worked effectively. He affirms that in the rest of the continent, one can only speak of the use of the sacred Arabic language as the most visible sign of Islamization.

¹¹⁵ Lamin SANNEH, *West African Christianity: The Religious Impact* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Book, 1983), xvi.

they have been frozen and submit them to the animated surge of history where nothing stands still.”

This is a significant affirmation. It is imperative to see both Christianity and Islam as African religions. Indeed, Africans have stamped their indelible prints on the two religions, and they rightly continue to claim both religions as their own. Religious chronology is important, but this must not blind us to the different ways in which African people have appropriated and re-interpreted these two religions. It is through the second process that African creativity and genius can come to the fore.

The Ghanaian Pan-Africanist, Kwame Nkrumah, captured this idea well when he declared:¹¹⁶

“Our society is not the ancient society but a new society broadened by Euro-Christian and Islamic influences. So, a new ideology is necessary, an ideology that can be stated in a philosophical definition, but which is at the same time an ideology which does not abandon Africa’s original and human principles ... an ideology whose aims will be to contain the African experience of the Islamic and Euro-Christian presence as well as the experience of African traditional society.”

Nkrumah’s statement underscores the central place of religion for Africans. He saw African society as deeply entrenched in African traditional religion and further broadened by Islam and Christianity. Nkrumah asserted that Islamic civilization and Christianity are both part of the historical experience of pre-colonial Africa. They constitute significant changes that have left indelible prints in the minds and psyches of Africans. He strongly believed that African people needed successfully to appropriate values and ideas from the outside world, but then creatively add an authentic African dimension to create a new worldview.

Nkrumah’s optimistic vision largely rests on the attitudes that the followers of the two Abrahamic religions in Africa have towards each other. Traditional African religion has proven to be receptive towards Islam and Christianity (indeed, more so than they have been of it). Such a hospitable African milieu has provided the soil for both religions to flourish and even develop a commanding presence in parts of the continent. The cross and the crescent thus have found a permanent place within Africa’s

¹¹⁶ Kwame NKUMAH, *Conscientism* (London: Heinemann, 1964), 93-94.

wide landscape. The character of Islam and Christianity in Africa is different from other manifestations of these religions around the world because each has been reinterpreted through the idioms and precepts of African culture and worldview. Africans have embraced both religions and put their own unique stamp and affirmation on them. This perspective is very useful for understanding the distinctive African contribution to interfaith discourse.

III. ISLAMIC MOVEMENTS IN AFRICA:

SEVERAL REGIONAL EXAMPLES

From the seventh to the twelfth century, Arab warriors and merchants introduced Islam to many areas in Africa. The expansion of Islam involved different agents and catalysts. In North Africa, nomadic Arabs introduced the faith. In West Africa, the religion spread by peaceful negotiations among merchants and missionaries. In some situations, the spread of Islam depended upon its adoption by the ruling elite; in others, urban groups found it attractive. Occasionally, political and economic benefits enhanced its appeal, and sometimes spirituality and culture were the main attraction. In the Saharan and Sudanic regions of Africa, Arab and Berber traders and settlers introduced Islam. Along the East African coast, the religion was propagated by Arab and Persian settlers, while in West Africa, missionaries, Arab Dyula traders and teachers helped spread the faith. In Sudanic Africa, colonies of Muslim traders cooperated with the governing élites, and encouraged the rulers of the African states of Ghana, Mali, Songhay, Kanem-Borno, and Dogomba to convert to Islam.

Conversion to Islam became the veritable avenue to consolidate political power, guarantee commercial patronage, and mobilize spiritual powers in favor of the politically influential. Just like in North Africa, adherence to Islam provided for the legitimization of states as well as for alliances among diverse group and the organization of commercial ventures. Within Muslim states, an *ulama*, or group of religious authorities, arose. In essence, Islam became the religion of the political and commercial elite. In West Africa, Arab traders encouraged these governing classes to convert to Islam. In East Africa, Arab merchants gained political leadership of small states. In Somalia and Ethiopia, Arab leaders assimilated into local lineages and gained control of many tribal coalitions and groups. In East African societies, Arab settlers and merchants inter-married with local peoples and became dominant elite of the coastal Swahili societies.

Muslim communities gradually emerged with the integration of peoples and the formation of new cultural identities. In the Sudan, the

spread of Arabic and contacts with northern Africa helped to establish Islam among the masses. By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in West Africa, the consolidation of Muslim trading networks connected by lineage, trade, and Sufi brotherhoods had reached a crescendo and this enabled Muslims to wield tremendous political influence and power. Throughout Africa, the spread of Islam led not only to the creation of new communities but also to the re-configuration of existing communities and empires based on Islamic models.

The literature on conversion to Islam in Africa is very extensive. Scholars have proffered many theories to explain the massive conversion of Africans to the faith. Thus, Lamin Sanneh contends that the success of Islam as a missionary religion lies in the perpetuation of the sacred Arabic text. The fundamental missionary institution of Islam is the Qur'anic school. There, young people learn by committing to memory passages in Arabic from the sacred text. Memorization becomes the avenue for Islamic expansion in sub-Saharan Africa. Muslims describe Arabic as a revealed language, and it is, of course, the medium of the Qur'an.

The unparalleled eloquence of the Qur'an has a venerable status in Islam. The famous African missionary, Dr. Edward Blyden, eloquently wrote about the importance of the Qur'an to African Islam in 1875, when he affirmed that for Africans,¹¹⁷

“The Koran is, in its measure, an important educator. It exerts ... a wonderful influence. It has furnished to the adherents of its teaching in Africa a ground of union which has contributed vastly to their progress. Hausas, Foulahs, Mandingoes, Soosoos, Akus (Creoles of Yoruba extraction) can all read the same books and mingle in worship together, and there is to all one common authority and one ultimate umpirage. They are united by a common religious sentiment, by a reverence and esteem. And even where the ideas are not fully understood, the words seem to possess for them a nameless beauty and music, a subtle and indefinable charm, incomprehensible to those acquainted only with European languages. It is easy for those not acquainted with the language in which the Koran was written, and therefore, judging altogether as outsiders, to indulge in depreciating its merits. Such critics lose sight of the fact that the Koran is a

¹¹⁷ Quoted in Lamin SANNEH, “Translatability in Islam and in Christianity in Africa: A Thematic Approach”, in Thomas D. BLAKELY, Walter E.A. VAN BECK & Dennis L THOMSON (eds), *Religion in Africa* (London: John Curry Ltd., 1994), 25.

poetical composition, and a poetical composition of the earliest ... kind, and that therefore its ideas and the language in which they are conveyed cannot well be separated.”

The sacred language of Arabic became the canon of orthodoxy. It was also the basis of religious reform within Islamic communities in Africa. It propelled religious developments and brought African Muslims closer to their faith. Muslims were not discouraged from learning other languages, but these tongues were inconsequential in the Islamic dispensation. African Muslims learned Arabic by rote, and this played a remarkable role in the missionary expansion of Islam.

IV. OTHER ATTRACTIONS TO ISLAM

There were several reasons why Africans accepted Islam.¹¹⁸ There is no gainsaying the fact that Islam gave some benefits to new converts. Many Sub-Saharan African rulers used the religion to establish diplomatic connections with North Africa, to secure positive economic connections and to win new associates. As a Muslim may not enslave another Muslim, personal conversion was a reliable way of protecting oneself against being captured and sold into slavery. Such was the case especially along East African trade routes. On another level, Islam allowed converts to continue with some old practices. For instance, converts could still marry more than one wife. Consequently, conversion to Islam did not entail substantial changes in day-to-day religious practices because Islamic practices often existed side by side with indigenous religious beliefs.

At an institutional level, Islam introduced new ideas into African societies. The arrival of Muslim clerics into an African society often signaled the establishment of *madrassah*, or Qur’anic schools. Such institutions arose to paramountcy in many African societies. In most cases, they co-existed with indigenous centers of learning. Another important contribution of the Islamization process in Africa was the introduction of *tariqas*, or Sufi brotherhoods (the mystical tradition in Islam). Nehemia Levtzion has noted, however, that these brotherhoods became significant in the West Sudan only in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In addition,

¹¹⁸ On conversion to Islam in Africa, see the two articles H.J. FISHER, “Conversion Reconsidered: Some Historical Aspects of Religious Conversion in Black Africa,” in *Africa*, 1973, 43, 2, 27-40; and ID, “The Juggernaut’s Apologia: Conversion to Islam in Black Africa,” in *Africa*, 1985, 55,2, 153-70. N. LEVTZION (ed.). *Conversion to Islam* (New York and London: Holmes & Meier, 1979), is also an important study.

the introduction of the Sufi brotherhoods engendered Islamic jihads in Africa south of the Sahara. Led by people such as Uthman Dan Fodio, Maba Jahu, Sati Mati, Foday Kaba, Shaikh Muhammad, Abdille Hassan, and Muhammad Ahmad ibn Abdallah, these movements fuelled the flame of religious fervor among their followers. Some of the advocates of jihad felt that they have been given divine responsibility to purge Islam of corruption and heretical innovations.

In the western Sudan, Islamic cities such as Timbuktu, Gao, Katsina, and Kano emerged and became significant commercial and religious centers. These urban sites attracted many Muslim immigrants, including scholars, scientists, and lawyers. This was the genesis of a Muslim intellectual élite in West Africa. Islam placed considerable emphasis on the training of clerics, as well as scholars, lawyers, doctors, and administrators. Missionaries were active as early as the tenth century in the city of Gao, and by the eleventh century, there were many active missionaries throughout the western Sudan. Islamic schools emerged during the fourteenth century in the empire of Mali and, by the end of fifteenth century, there were *madrasseh* in Songhay. At the close of the sixteenth century, Timbuktu had about 180 Qur'anic schools and thousands of students who came from all over the Sudan and Sahel regions.¹¹⁹

Islam also offered a new worldview. In many instances, it was helpful that there was what Peter Clarke has called a "significant equivalence" between Islamic and African conceptions of crucial issues relating to ethics and society. The belief systems further shared perspectives concerning the explanation of natural and sacred events. For example, Humphrey Fisher has revealed that there is a strong affinity between Islam and African traditional religion in the interpretation of dreams and visions. Fisher contends that the "dream may have been an avenue for the acceptance of new ideas or objects, or even of religious beliefs, being thus in itself a channel of conversion."¹²⁰

On the political front, the introduction of Islam promoted centralization and the creation of a large, administrative organization. As a politico-religious system, Islam provided a generally accepted norm for legitimate authority for African societies. Moreover, in the western Sudanese states, political leaders used the services of Islamic scholars as

¹¹⁹ S.I. CISSOKO, "The Songhay from the 12th to the 16th Century", in D.T. NIANE (ed.), *Africa from the Twelfth to the Sixteenth Century* (London: Heinemann, 1984), 209.

¹²⁰ Quoted in Peter B. CLARKE *West African and Islam* (London: Edward Arnold Publishers, 1982), 260.

secretaries, jurists, and advisers. Sudanese rulers such as Askiya Mohammed of Songhay, Mansa Musa of Mali, and Idris Aloma of Borno, employed Islamic scholars as political consultants and counsels. One such renowned scholar, Muhammad al-Maghili, wrote *The Obligations of the Princes*, which discusses the nature of Islamic government and provides an important code of conduct for Muslim rulers.

V. JIHAD, REFORM, AND RENEWAL IN ISLAM

No survey of Islam in Africa is complete without an examination of the movements that have endeavored to reform the faith and return it to its pristine position during the seventh century. Several factors fueled the embers and led to the religious revitalization in African Islam. These included the perceived need to safeguard the oneness of God, the maltreatment of believers, and the religious compromises that some Muslims accepted. The dominant impetus for the reformers of Islam was the distinct religious stamp created in the African milieu. Such zealots believed that they followed a divine injunction to purify Islam of alien practices, unbelief, polytheism, and corruption.

The term jihad is often interpreted as holy war, the word is derived from a word root meaning “to strive” or “to make an effort” on behalf or for the sake of something. The word jihad is usually followed by the Arabic expression *fi sabil illah*, meaning “in the path of God”. The concept has many manifestations: the jihad of the sword (*jihad bi-al-sayf*); the jihad of the tongue, preaching jihad (*jihad al-qawl*); or the jihad of the heart, jihad against one’s sinful propensities (*jihad bi al-nafs*). The last form of jihad is exalted with the mystical Sufi tradition. The Sunni tradition of jihad is enshrined in bifurcation of the world into *Dar al-Islam*, the House of Islam, in which the teachings of Allah prevailed, and *Dar al-Harb*, the House of war, the domain of infidels.¹²¹

The earliest jihads occurred in Mauritania and the Senegambia region in the late-seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The jihad in Mauritania originated as part of the resistance of Berbers to the hegemony of the Arab Banu Ma’qil. Their spokesperson, Nasir al-Din, condemned the rulers for their religious laxity and oppression. He proclaimed the end of time and the

¹²¹ For a comprehensive discussion on the jihad and reform movements in Islam see J. KELSAY & J.J. TURNER, *Just War and Jihad: Historical and Theoretical Perspectives on War and Peace in Western and Islamic Traditions* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991); and N. LEVTZION & J.O. VOLL (eds), *Eighteenth-Century Renewal and Reform in Islam* (New York: Syracuse University, 1987).

coming of the Madhi, or the rightly guided one, and demanded that his followers conform to the teachings of the Qur'an. In Senegambia, jihad began with the efforts of Muslims to overthrow local rulers and establish autonomous states. Elsewhere, in central Sudan, Jibril b. 'Umar encouraged Muslims to establish an Islamic society based on the life of the Prophet Muhammad and his early successors. 'Umar taught the doctrine of "double jihad", which entailed the internal jihad, or struggle against all evil inclinations, and which preceded the external jihad, or war against infidels and corrupt Muslim governments.

Mervyn Hiskett's magnum opus, *The Sword of Truth* gives a compelling analysis of the legacy of Uthman Dan Fodio's jihad movement against the Hausa in nineteenth-century northern Nigeria. Building on the pioneering work of Murray Last, Hiskett presents the jihad tradition as a reform movement orchestrated around bringing about an authentic Islam that is bereft of innovation and corruption. Dan Fodio (1754-1817), the creator of the nineteenth-century caliphate of Sokoto, was the scion of a family renowned for intellectual accomplishments and piety.¹²² He was well conversant with the writings of other reformers, especially those of Al-Maghili, a Tunisian jurist. Concerning his own *modus operandi*, Dan Fodio declared:¹²³

"To make war upon the king who is an apostate, and who has abandoned the religion of Islam for the religion of the heathendom is obligatory by assent, and that to make war against the king who is an apostate—who has not abandoned the religion of Islam as far as the profession of it is concerned, but who mingles the observances of Islam with the observances of heathendom, like the kings of Hausaland for the most—is also obligatory by assent, and that to take government from him is obligatory by assent."

Uthman Dan Fodio's revitalization movement can be traced back to 1794 when he had a dream in which he was given "the sword of Islam" to defend his people and society. Between 1804 and 1808, the jihad of Dan Fodio defeated most of the rulers of the Hausa states and founded a new capital at Sokoto in 1809. Concurrent revolts throughout Hausaland

¹²² See S.U. BALOGUN, "Arabic Intellectualism in West Africa: The Role of the Sokoto Caliphate", in *Journal Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs*, July 1985, 6, 2, 394-411.

¹²³ Thomas HODGKIN, *Nigerian Perspectives: An Historical Anthology* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 247-248.

involving pockets of Fulani, Tuareg, and Hausa populations culminated in the establishment of the largest political community in West Africa since the fall of the Songhay Empire in 1591. The Sokoto Caliphate exercised political hegemony over a wide region comprising an area of 180,000 square miles. Eventually, fifteen loosely confederated emirates arose with each emir affirming the religio-political leadership of Dan Fodio as the “commander of the faithful”.

The tradition of reform and revival that Dan Fodio proclaimed was deeply entrenched in African Islam. Already in the fifteenth century, Al-Maghili had condemned the corrupt and un-Islamic practices of West African Muslim élites. He denounced unjust taxation, the seizure of personal properties, and “venal” clerics who served rulers without any knowledge of Arabic or Islam. Al-Maghili advocated the implementation of *shar’ia*, or Muslim law, by serious Muslim leaders, and introduced into West African Islam the concept of the *mujahid*, or fighter in the path of God.

Dan Fodio’s plan for reform was to restore the lost purity and prestige of Islam and to establish a renewed mode of Islamic piety. He did not support the idea that Muslims should live in *bilad al-harb*, or the territory of non-Muslims, because of what he considered the socio-religious decadence of Hausa society. After the creation of Sokoto, Dan Fodio advanced an ambitious agenda for reform declaring:¹²⁴

“Most of the people are ignorant of the Sharia, and it is obligatory that there should be, in every mosque and quarter in the town, a faqih [general knowledge] teaching of the people their religion. So also is it, in every village, obligatory on every faqih who has completed his fard’ayn [collective duty binding on Muslims] and has devoted himself to the fard kifaya [individual obligation without collective implication], that he should go out to the people neighboring on his town in order to teach them their religion and the obligatory parts of their Shar‘ [religious code]. If one person does this, sin falls off the remaining people: otherwise all of them will carry the sin together. As for the learned person, the sin will be because of his neglecting to go out [and preach]. But as for the ignorant, it will be because of his shortcomings in avoiding knowledge.”

¹²⁴ Quoted in SANNEH, “Translatibility in Islam”, 33-34.

Uthman Dan Fodio's legacy is impressive. He succeeded in uniting the peoples of Hausaland and many of the surrounding areas into a single unit. He established a high standard of literacy, publication, thought, and action that was unparalleled in the history of Islam in northern Nigeria. Dan Fodio's jihad also provided a new impetus for Islamic learning and literacy because Dan Fodio, his brother Abdullah, and his son Mohammed Bello were Islamic scholars as well as political leaders. Their scholarly endeavors arose out of the need to provide a rational explanation and justification for jihad and its concomitant political re-alignments. Through their efforts, Islamic intellectualism spread beyond the borders of the Fulani Muslim territories in northern Nigeria to different parts of West Africa. Arabic eventually became the official language of commerce, literacy, and correspondence. Arabic schools were established to promote Islamic religion and education. Finally, the Sokoto jihad provided the inspiration for other reformers in West Africa, especially the jihads of Seku Ahmadu and that of al-Hajj 'Umar. To this very day, the Sokoto Caliphate continues to have a strong religio-cultural influence in Nigeria.

Mervyn Hiskett originally contended that the jihadist model is very attractive to African Muslims "whether the Muslims involved came to Islam as a result of nineteenth century reformist ardor or were drawn in less spectacularly by slower influences during the colonial period."¹²⁵ While there is a kernel of truth in this assertion, one must be weary of the triumphant ideology that is inherent in such perspective. Hiskett's romantic view of jihad glosses over the perspective of those who suffered the anguish of the sword. Hiskett himself corrected this one-sided perspective in the second edition of *Sword of the Truth*. Thus, he wrote:

The non-Muslim, "pagan" point of view has been left largely untold. The brutality and intolerance of all "jihad of the sword", and especially that of the nineteenth-century western Sudan, has been veiled by an assumption of moral righteousness, based on the Muslim claim of divine revelation and a written law, that leaves no place for an approach from the point of view of the victims. The stark intransigence of this stance has not diminished over the generations.¹²⁶

There undoubtedly remains a need for a critical review of our understanding of the jihad movements in Africa. This revision will take religious ideals and vision into consideration. At the same time, the inglorious consequences of the jihad cannot be ignored. This approach is a

¹²⁵ Quoted in John Alembillah AZUMAH, *The Legacy of Arab-Islam in Africa: A Quest for Inter-Religious Dialogue* (Oxford: One World, 2001), 11-12.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

sine qua non in a religiously pluralistic context as Africa. As one scholar has pointed out:¹²⁷

“Not only as concrete examples of shifting perceptions of Islam in the region, but also as indicating the likely consequences of modern Islamism because of the similarities in the orientation and objectives of the two phenomena. Like the previous jihad, modern Islamism is not only committed to an exclusive, legalistic, intolerant and militant conception of Islam as sharia, but also actively seeks to transform the state and society to bring them into conformity with that model.”

Resurgent Islam takes many shapes and forms. One is a persistent call for return to the *shari'a* as the legal code for civil and criminal matters. This controversy has created a great brouhaha in contemporary Nigeria. The *shari'a* issue became particularly volatile with the announcement on October 22, 1999 of the adoption of Muslim law in Zamfara state by its governor, Ahmed Sani Yerima. Since Nigeria's population is roughly divided between Christians and Muslims, many pundits feared that the imposition of *shari'a* would further polarize the country. Yet, several states in northern Nigeria have also followed the example in Zamfara, and have adopted Muslim law.¹²⁸ Recent events in Nigeria have shown that one has to take a more critical look at Peter Clarke's assertion:¹²⁹

“Many Christians who see the contemporary revitalization of Islam in Nigeria as a threat and are not entirely confident it can be contained, are, however, inclined to exaggerate both its impact and the radicalism of its demands. Many of these demands are neither new nor radical in themselves. What is new . . . is the context in which the demands are made and the means used to obtain these demands.”

¹²⁷ A.A. AN-NA'IM, “Islam and Human Rights in Sahelian Africa”, in David WESTERLUND and E.E. ROSANDER (eds), *African Islam and Islam in Africa: Encounters between Sufis and Islamists* (London: Hurst, 1997), 83.

¹²⁸ The other states are Sokoto, Gombe, Kebbi, Niger, Katsina, Jigawa, Kano, Yobe, Borno, Bauchi, and Kaduna.

¹²⁹ Peter CLARKE, “Islamic Reform in Contemporary Nigeria: Methods and Aims”, in *Third World Quarterly*, 1988, 10, 2, 535.

Indeed, sectarian conflicts in Nigeria have reached alarming proportions. More than a thousand people died in the northern city of Kaduna in 2000 when Christians and Muslims clashed over plans to introduce *shari'a* in Kaduna state.¹³⁰ A frustrated President Obasanjo declared that the riots were the worst outbreak of mayhem in Nigeria since the civil war of the 1960s. Moreover, the strife in Kaduna triggered revenge killings of Muslims in southeastern Nigeria. A cycle of violence has developed since President Obasanjo came to power. In a more recent and widely publicized episode, more than two hundred people perished in clashes between Christians and Muslims in November 2002. These disturbances ultimately forced the relocation of the Miss World beauty pageant from Nigeria to London.

The *shari'a* issue has generated tremendous tension between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria. Christian minorities in the north and the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) vehemently oppose the implementation of Muslim law in Nigeria. They continue to argue that the 1999 constitution makes such a move illegal. On the other hand, Muslim leaders continue to claim that since the constitution guarantees freedom of religion, they have the legal right to implement *shari'a*. It is important to note that not all Muslims support the implementation of Muslim law in Nigeria. For example, Sheik Ibrahim El-Zakzaky on September 21, 1999 declared that establishing *shari'a* at the present time “might end up creating an instrument of oppression and exploitation in the hands of the leadership, particularly when they lack commitment and discipline.”¹³¹

¹³⁰ It is important to add here that in spite of the internecine Christian-Muslim conflicts in countries like Nigeria and the Sudan, Africa has a long legacy of peaceful co-existence between Christians and Muslims. Yorubaland in southwestern Nigeria and the Gambia are two compelling examples in this regard. Lamin Sanneh writes that “the Gambia is probably the first and only Muslim country in the world that has observed as national holidays Christian feasts such as Good Friday and the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin.”, in SANNEH, *Piety and Power*, 150. For a good discussion on the Yoruba example see David LAITIN, *Hegemony and Culture: Politics and Religious Change Among the Yoruba* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); Peter MCKENZIE, *Inter-religious Encounters in West Africa: Samuel Ajayi Crowther's Attitude to African Traditional Religions and Islam* (Leicester: Leicester University Bookshop, 1976); and J.D.Y. PEEL, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2003).

¹³¹ Quoted in Jonathan T. REYNOLDS, “Nigeria and Shari'a: Religion and Politics in a West African Nation”, in Meghan Appel O'MEARA (ed.), *History Behind the Headlines: The Origins of Conflicts Worldwide Vol. 2* (Farmington Hill, MI: Gale Group, 2001), 217.

Wole Soyinka, the Nigerian Noble Laureate, has likewise remarked that there is no religious basis for such theocratic madness, and says that the call for imposing *shari'a* is motivated mainly by politics. His remarks echo the dominant feeling of southern Christians that northern Muslim elite, finding themselves out of political favor, have decided to create religio-political problems for the government of Olusegun Obasanjo, who is a Christian from the south. In the words of Adebayo Williams:¹³²

“Once it became obvious that Obasanjo would marginally tinker with the status quo to ensure some measure of authority and legitimacy for his own minimalist agenda, the northern power mafia opted for the sharia gambit and thereby severely undermined the authority and legitimacy of the state.”

The issue of the constitutionality of implementing *shari'a* continues to rage in Nigeria. Nigeria, like most African countries, is still wrestling with the herculean task of creating a national consciousness among different ethnic groups that are divided by history, language, and religion. There are many dimensions to this issue. *Shari'a* has been locally appropriated in various societies under different circumstances over the centuries. Any attempt to restore it to its original form, or any other time for that matter, is to distort its inherent flexibility. As Sajida Sultana Alvi has rightly declared:¹³³

“Change is actually the essence of Islam—a very dominant and central feature. If you rob Islam of that dynamism and that capacity for change, then it becomes static. That is why there are so many difficulties in the minds of Muslims all over the world. They are trying to cope with the demands of modernity and looking for solutions within the scriptures.”

VI. THE IMPACT OF ISLAMIC ORGANIZATIONS

The Islamic challenge and agenda in Africa have been engineered and facilitated by numerous Islamic organizations and associations. These organizations have provided an avenue to promote the agenda of the

¹³² Adebayo WILLIAMS, “Transition Without Transformation”, <http://nigeriaworld.com>, July 8, 2001, p. 4.

¹³³ Quoted in Mary Pat FISHER, *Living Religions* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1999), 387.

Islamic ummah. These organizations have been particularly active in Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation. Archbishop Tessier from Algiers once described this country as the greatest Islamo-Christian nation in the world. Nigeria, with an almost equal percentage of Christians and Muslims living side by side provides an excellent resource for understanding the role and impact of Islamic organizations. A preeminent Islamic organization in the country is the Jama'atu Nasril Islam. Ahmadu Bello, the late Sarkin Sokoto, and Premier of the northern region established this body in January 1962. Its primary objective was to organize Muslim efforts in Nigeria. During the time of Ahmadu Bello, this Islamic organization was very active in building mosques, organizing conversion campaigns, and publishing newsletters. In contemporary Nigeria, this Islamic body still commands considerable power and influence. The Nigerian Muslim Brotherhood led by Ibrahim Zakzaky of Zaria is another organization that has been very prominent in Nigeria. Inspired by the thought of Sayyid Qutb and Hassan al-Banna of Egypt, the Nigerian Muslim Brothers have advocated for an Islamic state and the implementation of *shari'a* in Nigeria. They reject the Nigerian constitution and all other judicial institutions in the country.

The Supreme Council of Nigeria was established in 1973 to "cater for the interest of Islam throughout the federation, to serve as a channel of contact with the government of Nigeria on Islamic affairs, where necessary, and to serve as the only channel of contact on Islamic matters."¹³⁴ The organization has been very outspoken on the questions of *shari'a*, and religion and state.

Christians in Nigeria have responded to these organizations by forming an ecumenical body that can serve as a forum for Christians to table their complaints and present their own story. The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) was formed in 1976 as an ecumenical body of Protestants, Catholics, and African Independent Churches. Enwerem sees the formation as an amalgamation of distinct southern and northern strands. Its closest forerunner was the Northern Christian Association established in 1964 at the time of Sarduanna's Islamization policies. With the rising tide of Islamization, there was a need to have a permanent Christian organization to arrest this phenomenon. Since the 1980s, the violence between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria has escalated to an alarming

¹³⁴ Joseph KENNY, "Sharia and Christianity in Nigeria: Islam and a 'Secular' State", in *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 1996, 26, 4, 345.

proportion.¹³⁵ CAN's strategy has inevitably shifted from diplomacy to militancy. The body's political objectives moved to continue the assurance of Nigeria's secular status, and the procurement of resources for the Christian constituencies within the nation. In contemporary Nigeria, CAN has been very outspoken against the implementation of *shari'a* in some northern states. CAN continues to maintain that the implementation of *shari'a* to cover both civil and criminal matters is a blatant rejection of Nigeria's secular status. The body has issued many public statements against any overt or surreptitious moves to make Nigeria an Islamic state. CAN claims that although the *shari'a* legal system has always existed in Nigeria, the Constitution only recognizes the customary and personal aspects of the Islamic legal system. *Shari'a* can offer useful guidelines on such issues as marriage, divorce, or the execution of personal will; *shari'a* cannot be enforced in criminal matters especially in a religiously pluralistic society like Nigeria.

The Islamic Brotherhood (Al-Ikhwan Al-Muslimun) continues to have considerable influence in many countries in Africa. This reform movement was established in 1928 in Egypt by Hassan al-Banna. The Muslim Brotherhood embodied the revolutionary ideas of Al-Afghani, the revivalist jurisprudence of Muhammad Abduh, and the reformist vision of Rashid Rida. In response to the comatose state of the ummah over the past two centuries, al-Banna articulated the reasons for this decline in ways that added more depth and intellectual edge to the contributions of the pioneers of reform. He attributed the decline of the ummah to a number of factors including colonialism and an uncritical imitation of the West. In Egypt, the Brotherhood cooperated with other Islamic youth movements to reform education and fight poverty and ignorance. It campaigned for the establishment of an Islamic government based on the recommendations of the *ulama* (Islamic clerics) and the full application of the *shari'a*. The Brotherhood emerged out of al-Banna's passionate concern about the negative consequences of a Western secular form of modernization upon Islamic life and values and the inability of the government to tackle pervasive socio-economic inequalities in Egyptian society. In being consistent with other Islamic revivalist (*tajdid*) movements, al-Banna attributed societal problems to its rejection of the Islamic ideals as found in early Islam—during the time of the Prophet Muhammad and its followers. Therefore, he called for a return to Islamic sources—the Qur'an and the

¹³⁵ See Toyin FALOLA, *Violence in Nigeria: The Crisis of Religious Politics and Secular Ideologies* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 1998), for a discussion on the legacy of inter-religious conflicts in Nigeria.

Sunnah (examples and practices) of the Prophet. He underscored the political dimension of Islam and the urgent need for a proper state based on Islamic law and belief. For the Muslim Brotherhood and its allies, Islam presented the most authentic blueprint for a complete modern society and was the best ideological and political alternative to Communism. In less than twenty years of its establishment, al-Banna's movement gained popularity and credibility unparalleled in the religio-political history of Egypt. By then, he had followers all over North Africa. The movement is still the most influential movement in modern times. Many Muslims in Egypt, northern Nigeria, Sudan, Algeria, and Tunisia find spiritual succor and intellectual satisfaction in this organization. Many of the groups that are labeled by the West as fundamentalists¹³⁶ belong to this group.

VII. OTHER EASTERN AND SOUTHERN AFRICAN EXAMPLES

This section examines Christian-Muslim encounters in two African countries—Uganda and South Africa. Uganda with a population of over 23 million people is ostensibly a Christian country with 85 percent of the population being Christian and 11 percent Muslim. The remaining four percent follow other religions including African Traditional Religion. The bond of kinship has created positive relationships between Christians and Muslims in Uganda. It is common to see one single family that could be composed of people from different religious traditions. This is a condition that is very analogous to the experience of many countries in West Africa. In Uganda, this situation has contributed to the healthy relationship between Christians and Muslims, especially in the rural areas. Christians and Muslims have been able to team up to fight oppressive governments from 1980 to 1986, when the National Resistance Movement came to power under the leadership of Yoweri Museveni, the current President of Uganda. Uganda is a secular and a multi-religious state. The government has continued to promote a situation in which religious freedom would flourish. The government has also allowed many Muslim organizations

¹³⁶ It should be noted that Muslims believe that the term fundamentalism has a pejorative connotation. They strongly believe that it connotes ignorance and narrow-mindedness, and therefore do not believe it is appropriate to apply the term to genuine Islamic revival movements. Scholars like Frederick Denny, Bernard Lewis, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, and Riffat Hassan have objected to the application of the term to Muslims because of its Christian provenance. John Esposito, who, recognizing the problem with the term speaks of 'Islamic revivalism and Islamic activism.' See John ESPOSITO, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 7-8.

from the Muslim world to establish branches in the country in order to contribute to the country's socio-economic development. These Muslim organizations eventually provided the basis for the rise of militant Islam. The members of the Tabligh organization have had many violent confrontations with Christians. This organization gets considerable encouragement and inspiration from the radical message of Hassan Turabi from the Sudan. In spite of isolated cases of open confrontations and mutual suspicion on many political issues, Christian-Muslim relations in Uganda is very cordial. President Museveni continues to counsel the people of Uganda:¹³⁷

“The common enemy for both Christians and Muslims is neither Christianity nor Islam but those few corrupt Ugandans who embezzle public funds meant for the improvement of the country's infrastructure.”

The South African religious context presents another fascinating paradigm in Christian-Muslim relations. The 1993 South African census states that the total number of Muslims is half a million, of whom 2.5 percent are Africans, 49.8 percent Coloureds, 47 percent Indians, and 7 percent Whites. This number will increase in the twenty-first century. Islam came to South Africa in two stages. The first (1652-1807) was led by Dutch colonialists. The second phase (1860-1914) was organized by British colonialists from India. Since the nineteenth century, South African Muslims have established movements and organizations to fight discrimination, injustice, and unjust governmental policies. In the 1970s and 1980s, South African Muslims were inspired by literature from the Middle East and Indian subcontinent, especially the writings of the Egyptian Sayyid Qutb, the Iranian Ali Shariati and the Pakistani Mawlana Abu al-Ala Mawdudi. The Durban-based Muslim Youth Movement of South Africa (MYMSA), which was established in 1970, has been essential in propagating Islamic values and teachings in South Africa. The MYMSA has given birth to other organizations such as the Islamic Medical Association, South African National Zakat Fund, Women's Islamic Movement, Muslim Students Association, and South African Association of Muslim Social Scientists.

Christians and Muslims in South Africa have co-operated on the political front. They have come together to fight obnoxious apartheid

¹³⁷ Solomon MUGYENZI, “Seeking Understanding in Uganda” in *Transformation* 2000, 17, 1, 42.

policies and proclamations. In a lecture delivered by Nelson Mandela in Oxford in July 1998, he praised the immense contribution of South African Muslims to the struggle against apartheid. He also applauded the Islamic contribution to the creation of an equal and just society. The South African context provides a good lesson in Christian-Muslim solidarity against injustice and oppression.

VIII. THE LEGACY OF PROCMURA IN AFRICA

This section of the chapter will focus on the movement that has boldly responded to the Islamic challenge in Africa. With independence, a new understanding of Islam became imperative for Christians in sub-Saharan Africa. In 1959, this need was realized with the creation of the Islam in Africa Project or the Project for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa Project (PROCMURA) as it came to be known in 1985. The Late Babs Mala, a professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Ibadan, suggested this name. The project was initiated in order for African Christians to understand Islam and ultimately create avenues and resources for Christian-Muslim dialogue. The program affirmed the importance of Islam in Africa and seeks to develop the need for churches to educate their members about their responsibilities toward their Muslim neighbors. The primary purpose of the project was:¹³⁸

“To keep before the churches in Africa their responsibility for understanding Islam and the Muslims of their region in view of the churches’ task of interpreting faithfully in the Muslim world the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to effect the research and education necessary for this.”

This initiative was fueled by an optimistic fervor. The optimism was not a naïve one, rather it was engendered by a new sense of Christian responsibility in Africa. In a statement drafted by the Christian Council of Nigeria in 1962 entitled *Christian Responsibility in an Independent Nigeria*, Nigerian Christians affirmed:¹³⁹

¹³⁸ Johann HAAFKENS, “The Direction of Christian-Muslim Relations in Sub-Saharan Africa”, in Yvonne Yazbeck HADDAD *et. al.* (eds), *Christian-Muslim Encounters* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1995), 306.

¹³⁹ J. HAAFKENS, “PROCUMURA and the Churches in Africa,” *Project for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa*, May/June 1994, 3, 3, 8.

“Closely related to the need for more Christian love in our approach is the need for evangelists among Muslims who have a thorough understanding of the Koran. We are critical of those who reject Christianity, as do the Muslims, without any real attempt to grasp the full significance of the Biblical message. Can we expect to have more success with the Muslim if we are ignorant of the social, political and spiritual teachings of the Koran and how these are interpreted today? Can we expect to have success if we are unwilling to become involved in face-to-face encounter in which Christian and Muslim share the most intimate concerns about their religion? Dialogue between Christian and Muslim is of little avail if we are not willing on our part to re-read and ‘rethink’ the Bible and re-examine our own theological presuppositions.”

Under the leadership of PROCMURA, area committees were established in Ghana, Sierra Leone, Benin, Nigeria, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Malawi. PROCMURA has organized many consultations and conferences in many countries. It has created the forum that has enabled Christians and Muslims to come together to discuss many issues that are germane to Christian-Muslim understanding and engagement in Africa. The project has been particularly helpful in encouraging Africans to tap into the legacy of dialogue of life that is very pervasive in many African nations. Within the dialogue of life, Christians and Muslims relate to one another without any theological impediments. In this context, African traditional ethos of hospitality and tolerance radiates in a compelling way. In the post independence era, PROCMURA tapped into Africa’s legacy of hospitality and tolerance to deepen inter-religious awareness in both Francophone and Anglophone countries in Africa.

CONCLUSION

The way forward in Christian-Muslim relations in Africa is to develop the capacity for dialogue that can mobilize Christians and Muslims to see beyond the manipulations of the nation-state and the vicious agenda of some self-proclaimed religious demagogues. Both Christianity and Islam contain value systems that can contribute to meaningful inter-religious dialogue within a pluralistic nation like Africa. Dialogue is not the elimination of religious particularities; rather, it is living together with the full recognition of the best in both religious traditions. This form of dialogue is not an abstract construct. It must be deeply rooted in the social, political, economic, and cultural realities of specific societies. This makes

the theme of contextualization very relevant to any discourse in Christian-Muslim relations. Dialogue can only be meaningful when the whole range of the human experience, context, and circumstances are taken into consideration. One of the primary objectives of dialogue is the common search for a workable paradigm of society and cooperation in building a human community that safeguards religious freedom and respects differences and particularities.

4. European Discovery of Africa between the 1400s and the 1700s

