

Sharia and the Press in Nigeria: Islam versus Western Christian Civilization

Ibrahim Ado-Kurawa

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Over the decades, Nigerian political elites have devised various constitutional and administrative arrangements to cope with the country's complex ethnic and religious pluralism. Yet, peace and stability have been elusive, as the country continues to experience severe religious and communal conflicts. These are reflected in the highly polemical book in which Ado-Kurawa tries to trace the origin and nature of what he calls the hostility of western Christian representatives towards Islam.

In the book, Ado-Karuwa attempts to argue that the secular public space is too inflected with Christian values to make a claim to neutrality, and he uses Nigeria as a case study. He begins by noting that historically, Islam in Europe was tolerant and accommodative of the Christian religion, but this was not reciprocated when the Crusades were launched and "Muslims ... received the worst treatment imaginable." According to him, the failure of the armed campaign prompted Christian clerics to embark on an intellectual attack that entailed the negative representation of Islam in scholarly writings. What emerged, according to him, was a body of knowledge that explained the superiority of the West over the Islamic world. Contemporary global dominance by the West has also opened the door for academic institutions in Europe and America to strangulate Islam under the guise of promoting universal science.

Ado-Karuwa relates the above to Nigeria by noting that, within the country, both Christian intellectuals and some British-trained Muslims act as agents of the West by promoting a secularism that marginalizes Islam. After a lengthy polemic about orientalism, colonialism, and American imperialism, the author returns to the issue of secularism, which he discusses generally without relating it concretely to Nigeria. He does not show how secularism in Nigeria marginalizes Islam; neither does he make efforts to show that secularism is tainted by Christian doctrines, in the manner done by Louis Dumont. Instead, he undermines his project by arguing that Christianity declined in Europe after secularism was enthroned by the Reformation and the Renaissance, and that in Sweden attendance in the Lutheran Church is only 5 percent. If it is true, as he argues, that the

Enlightenment was an emancipation movement directed against Christianity, and that Europe has become less spiritual ever since, then Christianity should be regarded as marginalized.

Turning to Nigeria, the author argues in a highly polemical language that the country's print media is dominated by Yoruba Christians who conspire to mount propaganda against Islam and to use their influence to deny fair representation of Muslims in the headship of national institutions. To show how the institution has become a "Christianized Army of Nigeria," he produces a list of positions in the army occupied by officers of the Christian faith since the inception of the democratically elected regime of Olusegun Obasanjo. Students of Nigerian politics might fault the author by pointing to a report of the Senate's Federal Character Committee on Political Appointment, which showed that President Obasanjo's political appointments have been representative of the six geopolitical zones into which the country has been divided for purposes of fair political representation. The report indicates that the northwest, a predominantly Muslim zone, had forty top positions, while each of the remaining five, some of which are also partly Muslim, had positions ranging between thirty-two and thirty-five.

Still on the issue of Sharia, Ado-Kurawa argues that the British colonizers undermined it by subjecting it to the validity (repugnancy) test, limiting it to civil cases, and finally degrading its observance and enforcement to native courts. Furthermore, the legal system was emptied of Sharia when the Northern Region's government, under economic pressure from Europe, adopted a compromise penal code in 1959 that entailed the establishment of Sharia Court of Appeal that had appellate jurisdiction for Muslim personal law only. He notes that confining Islamic law to the personal level, and subordinating it to English law, is a conscious attempt to promote Christian civilization over Islamic civilization. This conclusion might not withstand interrogation, given the author's earlier argument that Christianity endorses the separation of Church and State, and that this religion declined in Europe when secularism became a practical reality.

In any case, Ado-Karuwa's position enables him to defend the current public adoption of Sharia law by several states in northern Nigeria, arguing that this is meant to redress the marginalization of Islamic law. He dismisses arguments by Kayode Eso, a retired justice of the Supreme Court of Nigeria, that the country's constitution limits Sharia to personal law and that the expansion of the Sharia to cover criminal cases amounts to adopting a

state religion. The author's claim that Sharia is meant to apply to Muslims only has turned out to be inaccurate, as recent events have shown. For example, governors of Zamfara and Kano states, to mention a few, have reneged on their earlier promise that the law will not apply to non-Muslims. In these two states there have been cases of some Igbo traders receiving various sentences for being in possession of alcohol.

On the whole, the author has a good thesis, but it should be argued logically in a less adversarial and accusative language. Many pages, in some cases a hundred at a stretch, are pure rhetoric. Removing these pages would help focus the argument. Also, there are too many quotations and very often they are presented as substitutes for arguments. It would be better if the author allowed his arguments to stand on their own feet. Finally, the typesetting is poorly done, as the right margins cut off sentences and page numberings.

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