

**A THEOLOGICAL DISCOURSE ON CHURCH'S RESPONSE TO  
FUNDAMENTALISTS' ASSAULT ON HER MISSION AND MEMBERS:  
THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE**

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**Abstract**

How the Church should respond to violent attacks on her mission and members by those whose actions do not wish her well has been generating arguments because mission tasks is based on the love of God. Some Christians have argued that people should not respond to violence with violence based on biblical teachings, but majority of those who had experienced the bitter pill of attacks generally express contrary opinions. There seems to be a feeling that society needs a redefinition of biblical passages that teach on how to respond to attacks. The paper took a retrospective look at the paradoxical relationship existing between Christians and Muslims who profess one creator God and had common ancestry in Abraham. It also looked at some of the violent attacks on the Church particularly by the Boko Haram sect and some of the insinuations of a possible move by some governments in Nigeria to Islamize the country. To guide Christians in responding in a theologically appropriate manner the paper suggested self defense and adequate Christian education. It also recommended that churches should unite, teach converts to become intelligent believers who practice their faith reasonably. While not becoming offensive for any reason, they should be pro-active in their approach to self-defense against violent attacks.

**Keywords:** Theological Discourse, Church, Fundamentalists, Mission, Experience.

**Introduction**

Many contemporary social issues in Africa provide basis for theological discussions mainly because of the religious attachment with which Africans treat almost everything in life. This paper takes a Christian perspective using the descriptive approach to examine what should be an appropriate response to violent attacks by Islamic fundamentalists on the Church, her mission and members.<sup>1</sup> The purpose is to contribute to efforts at assisting Christians resolve confusions about what steps to take when under attack and also bring about a well integrated nationhood where religious freedom is exercised in letter and practice. The relevance of this discourse cannot be over emphasized when it is observed that Christians find it almost impossible to reach consensus on theological positions for social issues. Examples of which are, how should

the church respond to violent attacks on her; what should be the universal position of the church on homosexual marriage; what should be done with the increasing number of young widows in the church? How should the problem of ageing young unmarried girls in the church be treated? More importantly is the attempt to generalize the way by which eternal salvation is guaranteed on the basis of religious practices.

The paper believed that self-defense and adequate Christian education are the twin tools for responding to attacks on the Church and carrying out her mission. This is because there is richness in diversities and when relationship is made to function in the context of wisdom, compassion, goodwill exemplified in respect for life, courtesy, truthfulness, selflessness and clarity of intentions; there can be harmony that will usher in a period of peace and joint efforts toward the pursuit of noble purposes beneficial to the larger population of the people.<sup>2</sup> Christians should contend for their faith<sup>3</sup> in the most acceptable and non-violent way while utilizing their natural and legal right to self defense.

Church in this paper refers to the physical structure and the gathering of individuals who confess Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, pursuing a mission to worship God in prayers, study and lovingly practice biblical teachings, preach the good news about Jesus Christ to enlist new members and live as responsible citizens in their communities. The paper observes that the Christian church as it currently operates, finds it difficult to take a universal theological position on many social issues due to denominational emphases which came about as a result of schisms. This is in spite of the fact that Christ is not divided, the heaven which saved souls would occupy after their exit from earth is one and the Holy Spirit who assists and empowers Christians to live godly lives in the physical body is one.<sup>4</sup> Fundamentalist which is the noun form of fundamentalism refers to particularly the Boko Haram Islamic sect that believed in literal interpretation of Islamic doctrines and teachings. The paper took a reflective look at the paradoxical relationship between Muslims and Christians; mission of the Church, Islamic motivated attacks on Nigerian Church; Church response to violent and theological discuss on Church response and concluded offering some recommendations.

### **The Paradoxical Relationship between Muslims and Christians**

History of the relationship between Muslims and Christians has been that of hostility, antagonism, ignorance and appalling misunderstanding and suspicion which can best be described as a paradox that involved people so connected and yet so disconnected; "brothers and rivals" at the same time.<sup>5</sup> Muslims and Christians have many things in common; for instance there is a common ancestral background in Abraham, profession of a monotheistic faith in one God who creates all things, sustains the created order and watches the creation which steadily progresses towards an ultimate fulfillment. Both are the only religions that lay claim to "absolute superiority and exclusive universal legitimacy as means of attaining God's salvation."<sup>6</sup> Both teach about death, hell-fire, Satan, Angels, doing acts of mercy and heaven but rather than adherents allow the

elements common to them create mutual understanding, respect, peaceful and harmonious co-existence, there is most times bitter hatred between them. It has been suggested that principal to the unhealthy relationship between adherents of these religions is leadership which has been self-absorbed, self-obsessed and self-serving. These leaders have built in adherents "religious prejudice" which is linked with thirst for power and resource control consequently allowing self-interest to prevail over the greater human good.<sup>7</sup>

There is also the view that the greatest differences between the religions are traced to the pioneers of the faiths.<sup>8</sup> Christians claim that Jesus Christ is God and savior of humanity from eternal damnation but Mohammed is just a prophet of God. The only blood that Jesus shed while on his mission on physical earth was his own blood and he did it for redemption of humanity but Mohammed shed the blood of many people in his wars for expansion of Islam and political power.<sup>9</sup> Whereas Jesus used peaceful means to convince people to join the faith he brought.

With regard to salvation, Islam teaches that the wishes and mercies of Allah is the final arbiter even though, good works can give hope for heaven.<sup>10</sup> Christianity however, hold strongly to the biblical teaching that God loved the world and gave his son Jesus Christ to die for humanity,<sup>11</sup> one has to believe in him to gain eternal life being the only name given among men for their salvation.<sup>12</sup> Whoever has Jesus Christ in his life is already assured of eternal life while still existing physically.<sup>13</sup> In essence, salvation is a past completed action by God through the birth, life, work, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is also a present reality in that a believer has the assurance of eternal life and is enjoying the benefits of such assurance while still on earth.

### **Mission of the Church**

Like many other issues that involve Christian organizations and groups, there appear to be divergent views about what exactly should be the mission of the Church of Christ on earth which necessitates asking the question, are Christians on the same or different mission? The misunderstanding being generated is basically linked to the increasing and complex nature of the challenges confronting the contemporary church. It is reasoned that some of these challenges were not present during the time when the scripture was written hence, could not have been adequately addressed by the provisions of the Bible. The argument being forwarded may be put in focus as; should the mission of the church be the same in focus and scope with what was obtained during the time when Jesus Christ gave the church a mission task or should it be different? Should the focus and mission of the church be the same for all kinds of people in all places in spite of the varied experiences which they are passing through? With the emergence of religions that have grown to become forces to be reckoned among human population; should their claims to divine rightness be neglected? Responses to these questions contribute to the divergent views concerning the mission of the church in the contemporary world.

It has been rightly observed that our understanding of religion collectively and individually has meeting point in the conviction that God is the object of worship, love and obedience which as consequence leads to practical piety and morality.<sup>14</sup> God is recognized as the beginning and end of all human existence and basic to mission of the Christian church is the Bible passage where Jesus called to himself twelve of his followers to be with him and to send them out for preaching so that other people could come into the saving knowledge of Christ the Lord.<sup>15</sup> Again, God wishes that all human beings become saved<sup>16</sup> moreover, Jesus Christ referred to his disciples as “salt of the earth and light of the world.”<sup>17</sup> This is a description that necessitates a duty to introduce sweetness into otherwise bitter conditions and aspects of the lives of people and also prepare the society to drive away its darkness in all its different ramifications.

Missionary activity has been described as a manifestation and realization of God’s plan in the world; it is that by which God clearly brings to its conclusion the history of salvation.<sup>18</sup> It has been argued that the major task of mission is to confront injustice and alleviate suffering because such activities do more to express God’s love in the world.<sup>19</sup> This view of concentrating on social issues has been criticized for its potential to make the Church be in danger of losing its’ God-centeredness which requires that proclamation of the gospel be the real mission. This is in view of the reply which the apostles gave when the issue of disaffections with regard to food distribution arose in the church. Resolution to the issue led to selection of the first set of deacons in Acts 6. Another view of the mission of the Church is that emphases should be placed on developing a true and loving community such that the gospel message is lived out in the relationship maintained among members. It is the relationship which observers may see that serves as the powerful attractive force that pull others to joining the community of faith.<sup>20</sup> The earliest Christians did this by praying, fellowshiping and sharing together and as consequence, God daily added to their number saved people.<sup>21</sup>

Traditionally, the mission of the Church has always been limited to proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom of God; teaching, baptizing and maturing of new believers; responding to human needs through loving care; seeking to transform unjust structures of the society by challenging violence and pursuing peace and reconciliation; and striving to safeguard the integrity of creation.<sup>22</sup> Evangelicals see the Great Commission in Matt. 28: 18-20 as the most important factor while acts of mercy are just a part of the mission.<sup>23</sup> In essence, the mission of the Church is not political, not entirely social but primarily to preach the gospel, teach the saved persons and provide the spiritual atmosphere for them to develop and bring joy to humanity. It also includes participating in the social dynamics of the society with the intent of fostering ideal situations. Under no circumstance should the mission of the Church be negotiated or abandoned.

### Islamic Motivated Violent Attacks on the Nigerian Church

Media channels are replete with reports of incidences of fundamentalist's violent attacks on Christian churches, homes, businesses, schools and places of interest very dear and important to them. Records of some of such attacks are highlighted below. It was reported that in Gombe 25 worshippers were killed at a Deeper Life Bible Church while attending a Bible study session.<sup>24</sup> Similarly 40 people were killed at St Theresa Catholic Church in Madallah near Abuja while attending a Bible study session.<sup>25</sup> Another Deeper Life Bible Church in Otite on the outskirts of Okene, Kogi State was attacked when holding a Bible study session and 19 worshippers were killed. On June 17<sup>th</sup> 2012 at least 12 people were killed and 80 wounded when three Churches in Wusassa, Sabon-Gari and Kaduna were attacked<sup>26</sup> and worshippers suffered a four hour siege in which at least 22 worshippers were killed.<sup>27</sup> Again, attacks were carried out on Christian dominated village of Sangev in Gwer West Local Government area of Benue State in which at least 200 innocent citizens lost their lives and their homes razed down by fire.<sup>28</sup>

The extent of violent attacks on Nigerian Christians and their interests has been alarming such that Emmanuel<sup>29</sup> described it as "genocide."<sup>30</sup> He further pointed out that, the Nigerian 1999 constitution was biased in favour of Islamic religion. According to him, in the 1999 constitution, *Shari'ah* which is the Islamic legal code was mentioned 73 times; Grand Kadi, a top legal officer in the Islamic legal system was mentioned 54 times; Islam was mentioned 28 times and Muslims was mentioned 10 times. However no single mention was made of Christ, Christian, Christianity or Church, a situation that creates the false impression that Nigeria is an Islamic country.<sup>31</sup> He furthermore said, he came from Plateau State which suffered from many Islamic attacks a consequence of which saw a women fellowship group that had 500 registered members in 2001 having 25,000 widows as members by February, 2014. It is disheartening to witness death of husbands through unwarranted murders and this paper argues it is a situation that should not be allowed to continue.

There even appear to be subtle moves by the central and certain state governments over the years to promote a state religion by sponsoring student members to study abroad and then give them government paid employments. In what seems to be a painful complaint, Oritsejofor commented on a Federal Government Executive Council's decision to establish grazing reserves for Fulani cattle rearing all over Nigeria. He said "it is a subtle move to Islamize the country"<sup>32</sup> adding, grazing reserves should only be introduced in lands that belong to the Fulani people.

### Church's Response to Violent Attacks

Discussions on Church response to violent attacks is approached from two perspectives of polarized theological view points and permitted inhibitions to effective response.

#### a). Polarized Theological View Points

Generally speaking, Church's responses to vicious attacks on her have been polarized on basically two parallel viewpoints spread under five positions. The first position is that of

being passive having regard to the pattern Jesus Christ used in carrying out his earthly ministry and the method utilized by his pioneer disciples. They did not respond with violence when they were persecuted, killed and pursued ceaselessly for evil while helping the community through healing sick people and giving them hope for present and future life. Fulfilling the prophecy in Isaiah which was re-echoed in Acts 8: 32 was topmost on the mind of Jesus. The passage stated, "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth."<sup>33</sup> Jesus Christ did not oppose those who killed him even when a disciple made attempts to fight back he stopped him.<sup>34</sup> He also taught his followers to "love your enemies, do good to those who mistreat you; if someone takes your cloak do not stop him from taking your tunic"<sup>35</sup> and told his disciples, "Go I am sending you out like lambs among wolves."<sup>36</sup> Above position teaches tolerance and that violence should not be replied with violence, rather believers should be victims of attacks even when the faith is at the point of being wiped out and their lives at risk.

The second position is that of acting in self-defense like the crusaders did when resisting attempts to forcefully Islamize Europe. The action of the crusaders has being viewed as disobedience to the instructions of Christ even though it was the only time when people in the name of Christianity shed human blood for the sake of the religion.<sup>37</sup> The action however, saved Europe from the traumatic experience of embracing a state religion. In Nigeria this position has been embraced by most Christians especially those who have survived an initial assault even though the position has not been able to completely stop repeated attacks. However, an optimistic view of such an approach is that attacks serve as source of unity among Christians in isolated areas and the fear of wiping out the faith is reduced. But at the same time there is evident gradual return to idolatry, cultism, use of fetish objects connected with demonic forces and traditional worship all of which serve as pointer that an agreement exists between the individual and forces of darkness led by Satan. Whereas the Bible teaches nothing should connect light with darkness.<sup>38</sup> The situation is a dilemma.

#### b). Permitted Inhibitions to Effective Church Response

Permitted inhibitions to effective Church response to acts of violence against her arise from factors that include: - the lack of unity among the different Christian denominations. The lack of unity could be seen in the sense of superiority which denominations show by their doctrines, way of worship and so forth to other groups. Disunity even stirred its ugly head when recently Macaulay commented about Christian representation on the national confab going on in Abuja. He said, "it is unfortunate that the present Christian leadership cannot represent the interest of all Christians in Nigeria: they are doctrinally biased, selfish and they do not have a common voice," he also claimed they are doctrinally detached.<sup>39</sup> A case in point was the disagreement among Nigerian Christians over designing a common Christian religious study syllabus for primary and Junior secondary schools. The Catholic Church had to design a separate one to serve her purposes.<sup>40</sup> There

is also the apparent weakness in the church's educational activities that do not produce believers in large number who are sound in Christian understanding and doctrinal issues. For instance so little number of Christians despite the many years they have practiced the faith know, and could explain the doctrine of trinity to inquirers, so are the doctrines of sanctification, adoption, infilling of the Holy Spirit, salvation and so forth. The seeming ignorance among the Christian population has been source of contempt by interested observers who capitalize on this weakness to see the Church as unserious.

Third is the evident lack of pro-active approach to counter violent attacks on churches. Hardly is any Church in Nigeria fully ready to defend violent attacks on her in the event that one occurs. There is also no concerted effort to unite denominations and churches to join forces in mapping out what they may do in self-defense in the event of attacks on them. This clearly shows how the Christian community in Nigerian has been living under illusory conditions when the obvious is clear that anyone can be under attack anytime. Fourth are the divided theological approaches to incidences of violent attacks which have evolved teachings that are irreconcilable. Lastly is the lack of practical application of Christian teaching to issues of leadership which few Christians who find themselves in political offices exhibit. Sometimes leadership under those identified as Christians is even worse than those who are not. In the view of William, many Christians suffer under governments claimed to be Christian.<sup>41</sup>

### **Theological Discuss on Church's Response**

In the view of this writer, the questions which should guide the appropriate responses of the Church to attacks on her include; what definition should be given for "contend for the faith" in Jude 1: 3? Would those who die defending themselves when attacked enter heaven or not? Would God desire that Christians defend themselves in moments of violent attacks on their homes, churches or businesses or not? Is it virtue for Christians to be caged in their cocoon when under violent attacks when God has given resources to prevent such? To whom shall the Christian faith be handed over in lands where the faith has become outlawed when opportunity to prevent such incidences from happening was not explored?

Basic to answering above questions is a reflection on the religious life of the children of Israel who were very passionate about the Temple where they worshiped Jehovah. The Temple was central to everything that Israel became or aspired to become as a nation. It became the sign for national identity and pride, the place where political leadership is authenticated and center for socialization and education. So much were the Jews passionate about the Temple that one of the accusations against Jesus was that he said, he would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days.<sup>42</sup> The claim was offensive to them, so much they viewed it as sufficient enough to warrant Jesus' condemnation to death by hanging on the cross. Even though, God does not dwell in temples built by hand,<sup>43</sup> for Israelites, the Temple was sacred enough to be defended with the last drop of their blood.

Actually, Christians after reaching heaven would have the heavenly temple as the central point of attraction.<sup>44</sup>

This paper contends that those who die in self-defense would still benefit from the mercies of God and gain eternal life. Their efforts with the assistance of God would be rewarded with successors that carry on the faith. Contending for the faith could include a physical aspect of self defense against assault on life and properties. God has equipped created beings to reasonably defend themselves. It should be noted that when Jesus Christ was on earth, the Church has not gained the influence, popularity and power she currently has and would be fatalistic for the few believers to resist attacks in self-defense; they rather scattered.

Adequate response in the view of this paper include providing “reengineered theological education”<sup>45</sup> which is a kind of theological education that enable theologians go deeper in application of scriptures to practical issues of daily living more than dealing with abstracts. It involves sharing of resources rather than engaging in arguments that add little or no value to the quality of a convert’s knowledge of the faith. The Church through its education programmes should develop in members an intelligent faith that is steadfast, committed and based on reason. Christians must be equipped to defend their faith with understanding openly discussing controversial issues; able to trust the contents of their Bibles and share their faith with people.

### **Conclusion**

This paper discussed the Nigerian Church’s approaches to fundamentalist’s motivated violent attacks on her from a theological view point. It took a retrospective look at the paradoxical relationship that has been existing between Islam and Christianity; religions that have common ancestral background in Abraham and teach a monotheistic faith in one God who created all things and sustains the created order as it moves steadily towards a certain end. The turn of events currently show that Christianity is under threat of fulfilling its mission tasks and worshipping God in a peaceful atmosphere. The writer is of the opinion that while the church must not abandon her mission responsibilities of being salt of the earth and light of the world; it should not sit passively though this is not suggesting taking an offensive position but prayerfully watching to embark on self defense when attacked.

### **Recommendations**

1. Christians should above every other consideration peacefully continue to preach the good news of Jesus Christ for the purpose of enlisting converts into God’s Kingdom, place less emphasis on building of Cathedrals for worship centers to minimize economic wastes.
2. Churches must prepare for how they would respond to attacks and emergencies. Preparations should include inviting security experts to help in proper planning,<sup>55</sup> rehearsals and assigning of responsibilities and share information beneficial to all.



3. Unity among Nigerian Christians and other peace loving Nigerians should be worked at, such that when any one is attacked all members begin to see themselves as under attack.
4. Church should take pro-active approach with regard to vigilance and monitoring of people or things that may constitute dangers and resolve that the faith must continue during their life-time.
5. The ecumenical body like Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) should dedicate a purse for assistance in the event of emergencies and speak out when government policies and laws seem to be against the expansion of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

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