

Responding to Islamization, Marginalisation, Victimisation and Intimidation –

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The Issues facing Christians in Sudan today are many. The problems are believed to stem from history. Christianity in Sudan predates both the colonial era and the Muslim era. It goes back to the days of Christian kingdoms in northern Sudan. "Every village had a Christian church in the 5th century". "Nubians had crosses in their town squares".¹ Archaeological ruins from this time are to be seen in Khartoum's Sudan National Museum.

By 580 A.D.² Christianity became the official religion of the three Nubian kingdoms along the river Nile: Nobatia – around Aswan, Makouria – around Faras, and Alwa – around and south of Dongola. This remained so until 638 A.D. when Roman Egypt was conquered by Muslim Arabs. The Arabs came as far south as Dongola. A treaty of non-aggression was signed, with the border put around Aswan.

Christianity began to experience halting border clashes between Nubia and Egypt. Occasionally religious differences became part of the strained relationship between these countries. Christians were not excluded from these problems in their daily lives.

As in the past so it is today. With a Muslim heading the state there is a tendency to coerce the Islamization of the whole state. This is happening right across Sudan. Of course we accept that during the earlier spread of Christianity, kingdoms that embraced Christianity often did so through their respective heads. Heads coerced the people they ruled to accept Christianity as their own personal faith since it was already considered the faith of the state.

Akolde M. Tier, professor of law at the University of Khartoum, stated in one of his presentations: "It is just as Yusuf Fadl Hassan observed. Islamization of the kingly office was probably the gravest blow the Christian faith had yet suffered".³ The king was the only person

¹ Roland Werner Sudan National Museum, Khartoum, tourist commentary 2nd February 2003.

² A.D. is short for anno Domini, Latin for "the year of our Lord". Also known as C.E., Common Era.

³ Yusuf Fadl Hassan Religion and Conflict in Sudan (Nairobi: Pauline publications, Faith in Sudan series) 2002. see also his The Arabs & Sudan (Khartoum University Press).

capable of inspiring his subjects to resist foreign invasion. If he did not do it, the kingdom would fall.

In Sudan's recent era of the Government of National Salvation Revolution (G.N.S.R.), many non-Muslims have been attracted to Islam. Also many Muslims have been persuaded to cross the other way, from Islam to Christianity. Many of these people live in fear for their future.

Muslims hardly tolerate the existence of crossed persons whose background is Islam. Those persons with origins in northern Sudan suffer rejection in their home areas, if they are not exterminated. Others who live where Christians are in the majority, as in southern Sudan, may also face complications. Their identification as Arabs makes southerners look at them with much suspicion.

Christians who cross to Islam live normally among Muslims but are suspected by the southerners of betraying the southern cause. At the same time they may be suspected of spying on the Arab cause by the Arab Muslims they live among!

Whether Sudan remains united or divides during the current peace process and referenda, it cannot resolve this kind of situation easily. Most probably these problems will become sharper than they are now. All of this adds to the issues facing Christians in today's Sudan.

The objective of this writing is to highlight some of the troubling issues, the agents that cause them, and to motivate the readers to suggest solutions.

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (C.P.A.) says in the first paragraph about state and religion that " Sudan is a multi-cultural, multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-religion and multi-lingual country...".⁴ It is worth also remarking that it is a multi-problem state, in which Christians comprise a legitimate part of the society. Christians have faced and still face many political, economic, social and technological issues.

⁴ www.unmis.org/English/documents/cpa-en.pdf

Politics

Political evidence implies that the position of head of state is the monopoly of Muslim citizens. Christians can only be favoured for the deputy position. The late Al Zubeir Mohamed Salih, deputy chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council, was vice-president to president Omer Hassan Ahmed Al Bashir. Zubeir himself had a Christian deputy named George Kongor. Zubeir died while president Bashir was out of the country.⁵ The Sudanese audience, especially Christians and in particular the watching southern Sudanese, were expecting George Kongor to assume the presidency, until president Bashir returned home. But he was not allowed to take the position, even for a short time.

The late Zubeir lost his life while acting in the position of the president. George Kongor, by virtue of the established hierarchy, deserved to hold the position even if it was only for minutes. When this was not allowed to happen, multitudes of spectators were finally convinced that the position of president is the monopoly of Muslim citizens. The presidency of Sudan is not available for a Christian. Osman Mohamed Ali Taha was pushed into the position of the late vice-president Zubeir while Christian George Kongor was maintained in the third position.⁶

Throughout Sudanese history Christian southerners have deputised various Muslim presidents. The current situation (2008) allows Salva Kiir Mayardit to deputise for president Bashir. (Salva Kiir replaced the late Dr. John Garang de Mabior in 2005). Southern Sudan tends to maintain a Christian head to balance the centre's Muslim monopoly.

Economics

A recent research work entitled "Economic Factors in the Inter-African church of Sudan",⁷ indicated that not much attention had been paid to economics in the church context when compared to secular sectors of Sudan. This led to a deterioration of the socio-economic patterns for the lives of church members. The overall economic environment in Sudan has

⁵ in a military plane crash 21st September 1998.

⁶ called "Second Vice-President" www.embbiz.net/com/sudan/EN/sufi.htm Sudanese Embassy in China.

⁷ towards a Master of Arts in Peace and Development studies from Juba University, 2005.

aggravated the church's economic situation. Despite vision and mission the church fails to succeed economically. This adversely affects human welfare and development. Serious Christian consideration has not been given to economic factors in life. The church has neglected the call to look into its own economy. It does not often critique and eliminate things that are not life giving, life sustaining or life developing. This demonstrates something is seriously wrong with church management.

Under these stresses family and social units live with unhealthier conditions. Definitely no serious societal development can be seen emerging from our economically distressed and pressurised families. Since healthy family life is essential for a society to develop and prosper, this issue must be addressed. This economic factor is among the serious issues facing Christians in Sudan today.

Social

Socially, the majority of Sudanese Christians are from marginalised geographical areas like southern Sudan, southern Kordofan including Abyei, the eastern Sudan, western Sudan and north to Wadi Halfa. These people are vulnerable to social mobility. Their religious signs show the extent of their vulnerability. For example, the places where they worship their God comprise constructions made from feeble materials. Contrast this with the ancient era, the Nubian kingdom, where outstanding temples were well built. Today's church buildings in Sudan are poor and often temporary. Church constructions around the capital city Khartoum, particularly those of the inter-African church of Sudan, are evidence of this marginalisation.

Technology

Technology is still far away from the majority of Christians in Sudan. What is available and accessible requires Christians to struggle a lot in order to make it work positively. Good technology, well maintained and serviced, and used appropriately, can encourage Christian worship and witness. Christians in Sudan need to train and become experts in using radio, T.V., projectors, computers etc. The more expert we are the greater our use of technology can be. And the wider impact our ministry will have.

Secularism

On top of all these challenges modern day secularisation promotes an ungodly existence even among religious people. Muslims respond by wanting an Islamic state, where religious rules govern daily life. Christians, though aspiring for a secular state, express caution on the way that secular state would operate. For example, how do you find the balance between “personal freedom” and “abusing the values of human life”? This question of what are the acceptable limits is relevant all over Sudan, including the south and in Khartoum. How do Christians respond to the globalised secularism being imported into our country?

Oppression and intimidation

Christians in Sudan suffer the politicisation of religion for the exclusive gain of Islam. Many of the difficult times Christians have faced in recent days were caused by the G.N.S.R. The government has been led by an Islamic party known as the National Congress Party (N.C.P.). This party is believed to have been designed and structured by Dr. Hassan al Turabi.⁸

During the G.N.S.R. Christians have faced the confiscation of Christian properties. His Eminence Gabriel Zubeir Wako has explained in a booklet the circumstances which led to the forcible taking over of the Catholic club in Khartoum by the authorities of Khartoum state. He has also pointed clearly to the cry of Christians about the abusive approach used by government apparatus.⁹

G.N.S.R. has also succeeded in making use of internal conflicts among church denominations to help achieve its revolutionary goals. At a time the church of Sudan was expected to speak with one voice for the sake of stopping the war in southern Sudan, the G.N.S.R. had penetrated the churches and attracted some leading church members for its own gain. As the

⁸ The National Congress is the governing official political party of Sudan. It was created in 1998 by elements in the former National Islamic Front, as well as other politicians. A splinter group, the Popular National Congress Party broke off in 2000 after disagreements between President Omer al-Bashir and former Speaker of the Parliament Hassan al-Turabi. SOURCE: en.wikipedia.org

⁹ Archbishop Gabriel Zubeir Wako of the Roman Catholic Church, [What happened to the Catholic club?](#) Khartoum 12th February 1998.

churches of Sudan produced a position paper ¹⁰ saying together that we remain united in action for peace, those church members attracted by the G.N.S.R. spoke contrary to the position taken. Those churches that complied with the notions of the G.N.S.R. were called "national churches". They included the Reformed Episcopal Church of Sudan and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Sudan.

G.N.S.R. has been accused by Christians of deliberately interfering in the internal affairs of the churches in Sudan, for example the Sudan Church of Christ and the Presbyterian Church of Sudan. The president of the republic, Omer Hassan Ahmed El Bashir, was asked by Christians in a letter to intervene and to help stop such events by the G.N.S.R. authorities, but he was asked in vain.¹¹ The president's attention was drawn to the actions of the Ansar Islamic group. They deliberately used (and may yet abuse) Christians and the Christian faith. This is evidenced by their actions. On February 4th 1998 they acted against the Evangelical church. On February 8th 1999, during an exhibition launched by the Christian student association, they burned copies of the Bible and other church materials in the University of Khartoum. On March 19th the same year they staged trouble against the Coptic church in Street 15 Amarat. On August 8th 1999 they assaulted people at prayer in the Catholic centre of Doroshab which led to the closure of the centre by the government. President Bashir was made to note that Christians in Sudan are not feeling the essence of article 14 of the Sudan constitution relating to their religious freedom, given these consecutive conflicts.

A short time later Omdurman Islamic University Students Union, the Association of Islamic Thought, circulated a warning statement to all people through a leaflet issued to the public. The leaflet urged G.N.S.R. to cramp the movement of Christians and Christian mission in Sudan, otherwise Muslims would be obliged to stage coercive measures by themselves. The Christian Sahefa cemetery was the subject of confiscation. On 12th December 2000 the churches made a strong response to engineer Samsaa's letter and to the government authority responsible for the matter. Frustration continued when the Easter celebration for 2001 was obstructed by government authorities at a very late hour, with no time before the

¹⁰ published July 7th 1999.

¹¹ dated 13th October 1999.

planned start of the occasion. The German guest of honour, Dr. Reinhard Bonnke, returned home while Christians in Sudan continued to live with the violent consequences of the cancellation. There were both spiritual and material losses.

Legal rights

From the preceding it is seen that Christians have faced many issues and still do so today. The question of religious freedom has been monopolised by the G.N.S.R./N.C.P. Although the C.P.A. contains signs for resolving some problems, as yet the success of that cannot be easily evaluated.

Professor Akolda M. Tier has indicated that the Sudanese legal framework to evaluate the freedom of religion is fragmented and complex. Its basic resources are the Constitution and subsequent legislation, both primary and subsidiary. Since these two resources have to be interpreted and applied by the courts and other law enforcement agencies, the case law which is growing up around them provides a third resource.

Religious laws too, have a dual role to play. Firstly they have a direct role as the law to be applied in family matters and succession. Secondly, they cast a pervasive shadow over the whole legal system. It is obvious that the existence of separate religious groups, each living under the protection of its own law, indicates unresolved problems about the nature of the state. Some aspects of past history still affect present practices.

Al Sadig Al Mahdi, writing about religious co-existence in the Sudan, indicated that both within the religious creeds and between them, there is a legacy of intolerance.¹² This intolerance contributed massively to armed conflicts. It also sustained the view of many a secularist that religion – far from realising human salvation – causes human damnation!

¹² Religious Coexistence in the Sudan, a paper presented in the workshop on Freedom of Religion & Belief 5-6th December 2005 sponsored by the Oslo Coalition on Religion and Norwegian Church Aid, at El Amirei restaurant, Khartoum.

When we consider the three Abrahamic religions¹³ we have to admit the existence of texts and interpretations of those texts which make collision inevitable.

Such has been the nature of events in Sudan, stemming from aspects of past history and with a blend of newly incoming factors. A similar understanding has been believed by Ibrahim Mirghani Ibrahim, ambassador and permanent representative of Sudan to the United Nations in Geneva.¹⁴

Sudan is geographically situated in the midst of the most turbulent area in Africa. Like other countries in the region, Sudan has many problems stemming from aspects of history and the new storm of globalisation. Government at local and federal levels acknowledges the problems. But what can be done?

Culture clashes are indicative of responses made to respective community values. The G.N.S.R./N.C.P. have tried hard to fragment the Christians. They have had practical success through unwarranted interference. This has created intolerance throughout the most recent era. Several approaches have been used. Almost all provoke an unhappy situation for Christians. However, they do serve to illustrate the nature of issues Christians face in today's Sudan.

In early 2000/2001 the members of the Sudan Council of Churches (S.C.C.) envisioned a just, peaceful and godly Sudan for the realisation of its mission. Given the demonstration of events above, and the glimpses of issues facing Christians in Sudan today, all Sudanese and particularly Christian Sudanese will have to go the extra mile in the era of the C.P.A. for it to succeed. Problems are being managed, but management does not eradicate the issues.

These issues remain an unavoidable part of present life. Negotiating them Christianly is a worthy priority if our aspirations for a just, peaceful and godly Sudan are to be achieved.

¹³ Historically: Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

¹⁴ 14th March 2001.

Discussion guide

1. "Christians comprise a legitimate part of Sudanese society".

Share *local* examples where you feel this is (or is not) being applied today.

Consider *from the studies* below how legitimate Christian influence – both political and personal – can best be made.

Biblical considerations to help Christians respond to some points in this chapter:

Islamization

2. What was the early church asked to do towards the government of their day – the Romans who had conquered their lands?

See *Matthew 22:15-22; Romans 12:1-2; Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-17;*

Hebrews 12:14.

3. How were Christians to live amongst people from another religion (the Jews)?

1 Corinthians 9:19-23; Galatians 1:6-2:21; 2 Peter 2:11-12; Matthew 5:13-16;

Colossians 4:4-6.

Marginalisation

4. Are we too concerned with outward appearances? Where does ultimate authority lie?

1 Samuel 16:7; Matthew 11:25-26; 1 Corinthians 1:26-31; Romans 8:28;

Isaiah 46:9-10.

Victimisation

5. Facing the choice of defending yourself or submitting to others, where should your focus

be? *Matthew 5:38-42; Colossians 3:22-24 (outworking the principle of 3:1-2);*

Hebrews 12:1-3.

Intimidation

6. How can a church can be both accepting of people and yet carefully discerning about

them? *Acts 20:27-31; Matthew 7:14-23; 2 Timothy 3:1-17.*

Persecution

7. Consider what the first believers prayed, and what they did, when the authorities

threatened them: *Acts 4:18-31; Acts 5:17-42; Acts 8:1-4; Acts 16:22-25.*

8. How can persecution be embraced positively by the Christian?

2 Timothy 3:12; 1 Peter 1:3-9; Matthew 5:43-48; Matthew 5:10-12.

Poverty

9. How did the early church carefully plan relief distribution and encourage honest giving and receiving?

Acts 4:32-37; Acts 5:1-11; Acts 6:1-7; Acts 11:27-30; 2 Corinthians 8:1-15;

Matthew 6:1-4.

Fear and Suspicion

10. How did God use Ananias and Barnabas to bring the converted Saul into the meeting church? *Acts 9:10-19; Acts 9:19-31; Acts 11:22-26 Romans 14:1; Romans 14:13.*

Also consider the example of Aquila and Priscilla in *Acts 18:24-28.*