

# Secularism and Sharia in Nigeria

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In vols. 4-5 of *Studies in Christian-Muslim Relations*, Jan Boer discusses the views held of secularism: *Muslims: Why We Reject Secularism* (2005) and *Christians: Secularism – Yes and No* (2006), while in vols. 6-7, he reviews the perspectives on sharia – *Muslims: Why Muslim Sharia Law* (2007) and *Christians: Why We Reject Muslim Law* (2008). The topics are closely linked; in fact, secularism could be regarded as a subset of sharia.

## **Muslim Perspectives**

Both are part of a Muslim revival spirit that created a new self-awareness that was upbeat, self-affirming, self-righteous and very angry. They are partly a reaction against the colonialism that reduced their scope, introduced repugnant concepts, and undermined Islam. One such repugnant concept was secularism, a demonic virus. From the Muslim perspective, the major context of the riots is the colonial imposition of a Christian-secular establishment that has deranged Nigerian Muslim spirituality and institutions. Muslims often equate secularism with Christianity, who often equate it with neutrality, as in neutral education, neutral government. But as Boer points out, “neutral objectivity is a secular myth.” (4:21) Since Christians and Muslims understand secularism differently, there is much confusion, misunderstanding and ignorance. Admittedly, some Muslims accept secularism, mainly those who lean towards a Marxist perspective. I don’t discuss them any further, but it is important to realize that the Muslim community is not unified in its views. Most Muslims would characterize it as the supremacy of reason over divine revelation, the subordination of religion to temporal authority, and the elevation of material fulfillment over spiritual needs. They regard it as the great enemy and the antithesis of Islam. That the concept is foreign is apparent in that the Hausa don’t have a term for it. For Muslims, humans are in the first place religious beings. For them, secularism trivializes religion, making it a private matter. While Christians favor a secular government, implied by the constitution, Muslims argue that secularism becomes the religion of a secular state, an ideology with an absolute set of values. Boer posits that “wholism” is the heart of Islam, meaning there can be no separation between the sacred and the profane. Human life is

seen as an organic whole. Breaking this whole means assaulting the integrity of Islam and declaring war on Islam (4:99). Since secularism (like a red flag to a bull) is equated with the imperial West and Christianity, Muslims try to devise alternatives to government (democracy), education, etc. The “wall of separation” between church and state as formulated in Amendment 1 to the American Constitution is incomprehensible to faithful Muslims.

### **Christian Perspectives**

On secularism Muslims are closer to Kuyperians than many Christians, who, influenced by American missionaries, frequently hold dualistic views. This dualism is partly due to a Lutheran two kingdom theology (Boer sometimes sees Lutheran influence where there is none) and partly as a way to avoid Muslim domination. Put differently, secularism is their solution to protect their religion and their liberty. But what they mean exactly by secularism is not always clear. Boer provides two helpful definitions: secularity is the attitude of neutrality and indifference to religion and religious considerations; secularism is a philosophy that seeks to eradicate the concept of religion and all religious considerations from public life (5:26). It becomes evident that most Christians favor secularity rather than secularism, but Muslims are confused by the terminology and refuse to acknowledge the distinction. They have a point: the constitution seems to imply that religion is a private matter. Moreover, secularism has not procured long-term peace; in other words, it is not the solution Christians hoped it to be. It may be noted that tribal religion is also wholistic; thus Muslims are closer to the Nigerians’ roots than many Christians. Part 2 of vol. 5 discusses the origin and nature of secularism, for which Boer has an interesting description: “chameleon ideology.” Rather than discussing this chameleon ideology I want to invite the readers to comment on the terms secular, secularity and secularism.

### **Sharia, a Way of Life**

Sharia, meaning “a straight path that leads to a certain destination,” and secularism came to the fore in 1977 in the discussions of the Constituent Assembly. They were reinforced in 1986 by the debate about joining the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) and the acceptance of sharia in 1999 by several northern states. Many readers think about sharia in connection with stoning, cutting off heads, etc. But the law aspect of sharia comprises only about 10 percent. Sharia is really a way of life, ordained by Allah and derived from the Quran, the Hadith and the Sunna and covers all of life, from political, social, economic, spiritual to intellectual spheres. It contains all legal injunctions for regulating conduct and is meant to shape life. While it preaches

peace, justice, fairness and equality, its opponents don't see it that way. It is the state's duty to enforce sharia, although many Muslims ignore sharia in their daily life.

Sharia outlaws subservience and dependence, implying that Muslims must be masters and not servants. Politically this means that they should be the rulers of the country. This implies the subordination of Christians: their schools and hospitals would be taken over, they could not be full citizens, they would have no political rights, they could hold no key positions, they would be taxed more heavily, they would be treated as stateless. Moreover, Bibles would be prohibited, Christian literature would be banned, Christian activities would be curtailed and missionaries would be resisted.

The regulations include what kind of uniforms nurses can wear (Western uniforms are indecent). Women's sportswear is also indecent. Western women's fashion, deemed to be degrading, touches upon the mixing of genders, morality, honor, and participation. For some, the failure to wear a *hijab* would lead straight to hell. Ignoring such rules is regarded as a form of destruction of Islam. When sharia was enacted in 1999 in Zamfara state, the governor made the growing of beards compulsory, thus linking sharia with extremism, such as the Taliban, and discriminating against those without a beard.

At the end of May 2009 some economic consequences became apparent when Standard & Poor introduced a sharia-compliant TSX index, deleting companies involved with alcohol, entertainment, pork-related products, tobacco and financial services. Muslims may not take interest and object therefore to capitalism, yet they expect to earn interest and invest in capitalistic enterprises!

Law may be a small portion of sharia, but it is important, especially since Allah has endeared law to mankind. Moreover, to submit to a law other than prescribed by Allah is to submit to another god beside Allah. Thus, when lawyers practice sharia, they are engaged in an act of worship. And it cannot be applied in a fragmentary manner. When properly practiced, it elevates and purifies human conduct and gives unity and cohesion to human life. However, where society is prevented from adhering to sharia, it is prevented from exercising its full humanity. There is a legal problem with sharia, for it doesn't spell out exact punishments, which is left to the discretion of sharia judges, who are often incompetent and corrupt. Some of the rules remind me of the rules the Pharisees instituted.

For Muslims sharia is fundamental to Islam: "There can never be true Muslims without sharia." (6:32) Boer does an admirable job showing how fundamental it is, yet at the same time indicates the various problems, not only with the Muslims themselves, but also for the Christians. From the few details I have provided it is understandable that Christians object to

sharia, but it should not be forgotten that there has also been considerable Muslim critique and opposition to sharia.

Recently *Christian Courier* carried an article arguing that “governments have a responsibility to legislate moral issues” (May 11). After reading Boer’s volumes and knowing a little more about sharia one can’t be so positive. From a Kuyperian perspective, the state should not be subject to the direct control of the church/mosque. In effect that is what sharia does. If you decide you can afford buying only one volume, I recommend vol. 6.