

Religious factors in African conflicts analyzed

J. M. Dawson Institute of Church-State Studies (24.08. 2000)/ HRWF International Secretariat (28.08.2000) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - To what extent does religion play a role in intersocietal and international conflicts in the African subcontinent? A recent report issued by the J. M. Dawson Institute of Church State Studies suggests that, alongside economic and political factors, religious tensions contribute to the volatile situation in places such as Nigeria, Sudan, and the Horn of Africa.

In Nigeria, dissatisfaction among both Christians and Muslims with the notion of a secular state has led to increased debates over what sort of government is preferable for the multiethnic republic. The attempts to raise sharia (Muslim law) to the status of civil law in the north has, in turn, energized a number of Christian organizations, grouped together in the Christian Association of Nigeria, which seek to use the political process to achieve moral-political ends. As the report notes, "Religion is used to define identities, and religion is used to organize conflicts ... the conflict has multiple faces: the north-south (Islamic-Christian) conflict to control federal power; the intra-regional (intra-states) conflicts between minority groups and the dominant group; and there are the intra-religious and inter-ethnic dimensions of the crisis. This raises a serious question about Nigeria's unity as a nation."

Attempts to promote national unity through religious conformity provide the backdrop for the civil war in Sudan. However, to categorize it solely as a Muslim-Christian conflict along geographic lines can lead one to miss the fact that the conflict also concerns divergent interpretations of Islam and the relationship of Islamic values to a larger society. In its efforts to impose uniformity, the current regime has turned not only against non-Muslims, but also Muslims who hold to different opinions on how Islamic values should inform and guide society. Thus, the leading scholar Ustadh Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, executed in 1985 for "conspiracy," had advocated a view of Islam as having two overlapping messages, "an eternal and universal message that advocates equality and justice for all human beings irrespective of religion, creed, race, or gender ... and a transitional one, which dispenses relative justice among believers in relation to the quality of their belief." These views in the Sudanese Muslim community were based on the idea that the recent attempts at forcible imposition of a certain type of Islamic law on society is in fact an aberration to the norm of toleration that Sudan had known for centuries, and the recent creation of the Northern Democratic Alliance is a sign that some Muslim Sudanese northerners, as well as non-Muslims in the south, find the current regime's interpretation of Islam to be fundamentalist and oppressive.

While the present conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea is directly based on territorial issues, there are concerns as to how this conflict affects events in Sudan and Somalia and whether it strengthens the position of more radical Islamic movements, that in turn might lead to increased problems both in Eritrea, where a balance, forged out of the common struggle, exists between a population nearly equally divided among Christian and Muslim,

and in Ethiopia, where traditionally Muslim populations have felt discrimination at the hands of a largely Christian-based ruling class.