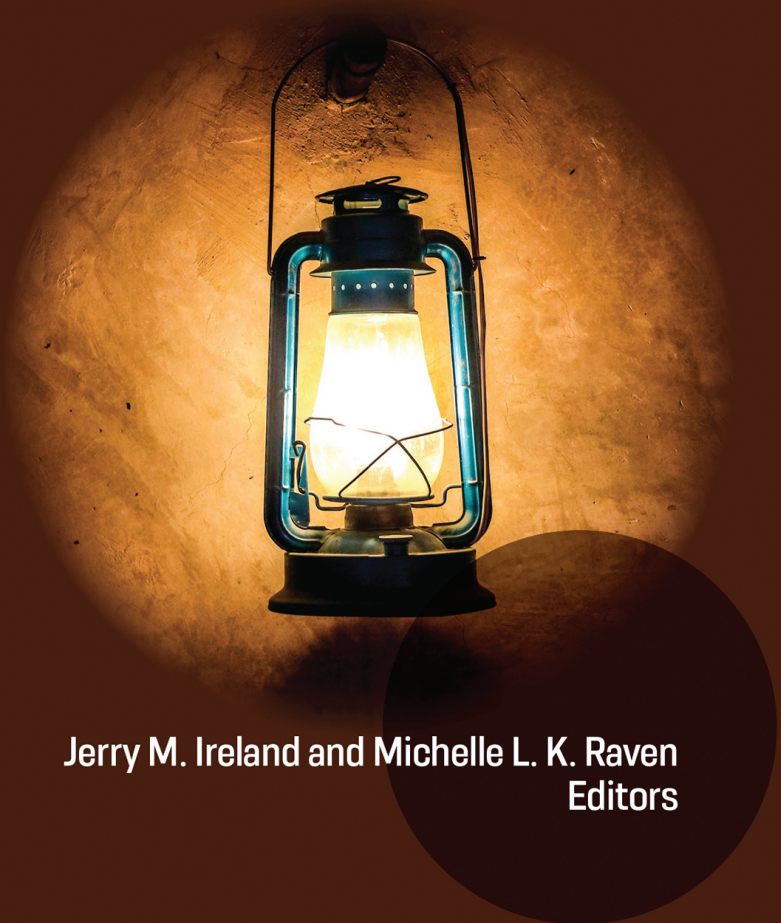
Evangelical Missiological Society Series

no. 28

Practicing Hope

Missions and Global Crises



Jerry M. Ireland and Michelle L. K. Raven
Editors

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Published by William Carey Publishing
10 W. Dry Creek Cir
Littleton, CO 80120 | www.missionbooks.org

William Carey Publishing is a ministry of Frontier Ventures
Pasadena, CA 91104 | www.frontierventures.org

Mike Riester, cover and interior design
Melissa Hicks, copyeditor

ISBNs: 978-1-64508-293-4 (paperback)
978-1-64508-295-8 (mobi)
978-1-64508-296-5 (epub)

Printed Worldwide

24 23 22 21 20 1 2 3 4 5 IN

Library of Congress data on file with publisher.

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Chapter 1

Singing about Suffering: A Vernacular Theology of the Cross in Nigeria's Middle Belt

Zachariah Chinne and Kenneth Nehrbass

An impressively produced music video from Nigeria's Middle Belt begins with a young man looking out his window in distress. Next, a woman is seated against a wall, dejected. The man, now seated in his old car, throws his hands up in frustration. They both sing "waiyo"—an expression of suffering in the Hausa language. The tune—a popular chorus—is upbeat and set to a synthesizer in the style of the 1980s. As an outsider, the first time I (Ken) saw the music video, I imagined the story was about the heartache of relationship woes, or even car troubles. But as the music video progressed, it juxtaposed clips of military slaughters and women seated in mourning. I realized that the suffering of these young people in Nigeria is vastly different from my own cultural context. The chorus of the song went like this:

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Waiyo waiyo wahalan duniyan nan, yaushe ne za ka dawo ka kai mu can a gidan ka,

Waiyo waiyo wahalan duniyan nan, yaushe za ka dawo doimin mu huta,

(Oh the sufferings of this world, when will you [Jesus] come to take us to your home?)

(Oh the sufferings of this world, when will you [Jesus] come so we can rest?)

As religious minorities in Northern Nigeria, Christians are faced with the threat of extinction by Islamist Fulani herdsmen. To make matters worse, the deep-seated religious undercurrent for violence is often exacerbated by inaccurate news reports and stereotyping. At the grassroots level, the church has developed a comprehensive and practical *theologia crucis* expressed in the vernacular hymnody. A deeper understanding of missions amid religious conflicts can be gained by listening to Nigerian Christians' responses to this violence. Beginning with a brief history of the origins of the designation "Middle Belt" in the evolution of the Nigerian nation, this chapter discusses religious conflict and violence as reported in the media, followed by the Hausa hymnological vernacular *theologia crucis* and its role in the church's ongoing missions amid conflicts and violence. Here we discuss how "suffering songs" in Nigeria's Middle Belt have strengthened the church in this time of crisis in four ways: 1) by emphasizing the church's work of outreach in the midst of a corrupt world; 2) by defining the church's understanding of suffering; 3) by encouraging the church to persevere because of Christ's presence; and 4) by sowing hope for the church through eschatological promise. Last, we discuss how this vernacular hymnody from Nigeria's Middle Belt intersects with themes of suffering, sacrifice, and perseverance in Luther's *theologia crucis* and Bonhoeffer's *Costly Grace*.

Conflict in the Middle Belt

At the Wheaton College Theology Conference, Lamin Sanneh was asked why there was so much religious violence between Muslims and Christians in Africa. Sanneh commented,

> Nigeria is fairly unique in having violent clashes between Muslims and Christians. Nigeria has a legacy of a powerful Islamic theocracy in the nineteenth century. Nigeria was founded as a theocracy. The effect of religious revolution in Nigeria has made it difficult for Muslims to conceive of Islam in non-theocratic and political categories. (Wheaton 2011)

The Middle Belt is one of the regions where the failure to conceive of Islam in non-theocratic and political categories has been profoundly realized.

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In fact, Christianity has almost always existed in Nigeria's Middle Belt amid religious conflicts and violence. The seeds for these conflicts and violence were sown in the formation of Nigeria as an independent nation. The region is so replete with religious violence that consumers of nightly news are fatigued by hearing about the events. The murderous activities of these Fulani Herdsmen have been felt in twenty-two of Nigeria's thirty-six states (Akpor-Robaro & Lanre-Babalola 2018). These domestic terrorists have caused such intense conflict that on July 27, 2018, CNN described them as six times deadlier than Boko Haram.

However, such conflicts and violence suffer from acute underreporting, misreporting, and mischaracterization. In an effort to subvert the narrative that the events are fundamentally religiously-motivated, news outlets (parroting scholars) seem eager to construct any possible explanation for the violence, such as climate change (Adebayo 1991; Folami & Folami 2013), corruption (Nwankwo 2015), Marxist Theory of scarce resources (Os 2018), identity management (Os 2018), and so on. True, those who reduce the conflicts simply to religious violence suffer from naiveté; however, those who accept every factor *except* religion as a motivator for violence reveal their own gullibility.

In view of the danger of falling for either of the two, naiveté or gullibility, this chapter operates from the framework that given the plurality of factors which contribute to the nation's regular conflicts and violence, religion is central to the conflicts and violence in Nigeria's Middle Belt. Therefore, the acceptance of religious plurality is the only realistic pathway for allaying the violence. Christians in the Middle Belt intuitively understand this and have developed a hymnody rich with a theology of suffering to help them cope with the crisis.

The Emergence of the "Middle Belt"

Nigeria's Middle Belt lies at the intersection of the predominantly Muslim North and the predominantly Christian South. An elaborate description of the Middle Belt is beyond the scope of this chapter. Others have given a detailed history of the region, including Turaki's (1993) *The British Colonial Legacy in Northern Nigeria: A Social Ethical Analysis of the Colonial and Postcolonial Society and Politics in Nigeria*; Kukah's (1993) *Religion, Politics, and Power in Northern Nigeria;* and Ochonu's (2014) *Colonialism by Proxy: Hausa imperial Agents and Middle Belt Consciousness in Nigeria*. Here we will limit the discussion to the role that Christianity played in the *ad hoc* formation of the Middle Belt—a political identity that has never been granted political autonomy from the Muslim-majority in the North (Sklar 1964).

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The Middle Belt was first designated as the Non-Muslim Group (NMG), in direct oppositional relationship to the Muslim North, when the Northern House of Assembly called on the central colonial authorities to proscribe missionary activity in the North (Sklar 1964). Suleiman (2012) is right to say that the "Middle Belt identity is often politically constructed against Hausa-Fulani, Sokoto Caliphate Muslim identity" (18).

The region later morphed into the Middle Zone League (MZL) in 1950 "with the express purpose of challenging emirate sub-colonial rule and of blunting the politically dominant position of Hausa-Fulani Muslims in the future politics of a decolonized Northern Nigerian Region" (Ochonu 2014, 72). The rechristening of the NMG to MZL was initiated by mission-educated converts to Christianity from Southern Kaduna. The first President of the Middle Zone League was Pastor David Obadiah Vrenkat Lot, leaving no one in doubt as to the religious particularity of the region in relation to the Muslim North. Another name change took place in 1953, and now it is simply the Middle Belt.

It is pertinent to reiterate here that the Middle Belt was engendered due to fear of "cultural imperialism and political domination of the numerically preponderant Hausas of the upper North" (Sklar 1964, 348). Contrary to the assertion that the Middle Belt congress was supported by the Christian missionaries (ibid.), Barnes contests that as a coinage the Middle Belt was a local Christian religious and political initiative aimed at communicating Nigerians' own "formation of Christian consciousness" (2007, 591). It is thus erroneous to suggest that "in the absence of a strong history of cohesion, the non-Muslim communities resorted to religion in search of a common cultural denominator" (Suleiman 2012, 21). The framers of the Middle Belt were neither cowardly nor secretive about their religious identity.

Proponents of the creation of the Middle Belt held legitimate fears about their own survival in light of Muslim domination to the north. These fears were confirmed by the Richards Committee, which was saddled with the responsibility of determining the constitutional makeup of a decolonized Nigeria, when the request for a semi-autonomous region was denied under the pretense that the "sentiment for the creation of a Middle Belt State was merely sporadic" (Sklar 1964, 349). The promise of legal reforms to ameliorate power and structural imbalances created by the denial of the Middle Belt Region were never carried out, giving the Hausa Fulani Muslim North an edge over the minority peoples of the Middle Belt. Two major factors played significant roles in consolidating the gains of Islam in Northern Nigeria: the Fulani Jihads (Holy Wars) and colonialism. We will discuss both below.

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Fulani Jihads

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Uthman Dan Fodio carried out what is popularly known as the Fulani Jihads (1804–1808) to sanitize Islamic practices among the Hausas of the north, and to convert "pagan" minorities in the region. Through expansion, annexation, and consolidation, "the Caliphate consolidated its political, economic, cultural and religious power and hegemony over most of Central Sudan, including what is now Northern Nigeria, as far west as Burkina Faso and as far north as Agades" (Turaki 2010, 67). The Premier of Northern Nigeria, Sir Ahmadu Bello (1954–1966), a progeny of the Sokoto Caliphate, championed the cause of the Hausa/Fulani Muslim hegemony through his "northernization program." Twelve days after decolonization, the northern Newspaper, *Parrot*, on October 12, 1960 quoted Sir Ahmadu Bello Premier of the Northern Region as saying,

> The new nation called Nigeria should be an estate of our great grandfather Othman Dan Fodio. We must ruthlessly prevent a change of power. We use the minorities in the north as willing tools and the south as a conquered territory and never allow them to rule over us and never allow them to have control over their future.

Post-independence Nigeria was destined for religious conflict when the leaders aimed to use the minorities in the north as "willing tools" and the south as "conquered territory."

Colonial Bolstering of Islam

A second major contributor to the consolidation of Islam in Northern Nigeria was the colonial administration. Andrew Walls observed, ironically, that there were more conversions to Islam during the colonial era in Nigeria than there were during the Fulani Jihads of the nineteenth century. Turaki (1997) observed that the colonial administration bolstered Islam through the "policy of religious non-interference, support for the Muslim rulers, and exclusion of the missions from Muslim areas … throughout the Northern Protectorate" (Turaki 1997, 127). This observation was corroborated by Suleiman, albeit with an air of sarcasm, when he stated that, "paradoxically, instead of conferring on the non-Muslim groups a better status and recognition within the British colonial matrix, it stigmatized their status since Christianity was considered politically subversive by the colonial regime" (Suleiman 2012, 22). Unfortunately, the colonial era policy of non-interference precluded Christians from evangelizing but did not keep the Muslim North from exerting an influence across the region.

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