

The Most Rev. Dr. Benjamin Argak Kwashi



The Most Rev. Dr. Benjamin Argak Kwashi is Bishop of the Anglican Diocese of Jos and Archbishop of the Ecclesiastical Province of Jos in the Church of Nigeria. He and his wife, Gloria, live in Jos, Plateau State, in Northern Nigeria. They have six children: one is a doctor and one a priest; others are still studying. They also have 50 orphans living with them in their home. Bishop Kwashi was born in Amper village (Plateau State), Nigeria, in 1955. He grew up in a Christian home; his father was a noted teacher. He attended the Nigerian Military School, but when he received a clear call to go into ministry, he turned his back on a military career. After ordination and marriage he served in a variety of rural and urban parishes, and then as Rector of a Theological College. He was consecrated and enthroned as Bishop of Jos in 1992.

COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

Benjamin-Jos

INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

The Federal Republic of Nigeria has provision for freedom of worship. According to section 38 of the 1999 constitution:

Every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom (either alone or in community with others, and in public or in private) to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, preaching, practice and observance.¹

Today, however, it has to be admitted that despite the words of the Federal Constitution, the degree of religious liberty a citizen enjoys differs according to the State in which he/she is resident.

Nigeria like any other society in the world has experienced intermittent conflicts as a significant feature of its process of development. Some of these conflicts were politically motivated while others were communal clashes, protests by labour unions or student bodies and religious disturbances. Although these crises have occurred at different points in history, starting from pre-colonial period when there were constant inter-tribal wars, there have been more frequent and increasing conflict situations in the country since 1980. Most of these conflicts

¹ The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999, p.22.

have taken place in the north and many have been religiously motivated. The two major religions involved in these crises are Islam and Christianity.

THE WAY AHEAD: FACTORS TO CONSIDER

1. EDUCATION

Education has a key role to play. Education is concerned with enabling the person to live in the world in the best possible way, using the resources of the world, improving the resources of the world, and assisting all other people to do likewise. Education is concerned with character building, with equipping the person to live a full life, and becoming a valued member of the family, of the community and of society as a whole.

Education is a big tool and a gift to humanity to help the human being contribute meaningfully in the community. When a person is not educated, that person loses the opportunity to be gainfully employed. The person limits himself or herself as regards the opportunities available in life. It is by education that diseases are prevented, communities developed and modern standards of life maintained. Education is essential in every sector of human development.

2. YOUTH

The youths are the foundation of our society. Their energy, inventiveness, character and orientation define the pace of development and the security of a nation. Through their creative talents and labour power, a nation makes giant strides in economic development and socio-political attainments. In their dreams and hopes a nation finds her motivations; on their energies, she builds her vitality and purpose. It is also on the basis of their dreams and aspirations that the future of the nation is assured.

Unfortunately, however, the youth also present an extremely fertile ground for those who desire to stir up trouble. For example Nigeria as a nation has a large and ever-increasing army of leader-less, law-less, unemployable, unemployed, demoralised and near hope-less youth. This, to my mind, is the big security issue which the governments at Local, State and Federal levels are not taking seriously. For example, every crisis in Nigeria in the last ten years has been executed by this generation of young people. Indeed, recent empirical studies suggest that the youths are prosecutors of 90-95% of violent conflicts in Nigeria. With each passing year, they perfect their skills and when they run out of a supply of money, or when they become bored with any situation, then any opportunity for action gives them

satisfaction. This army has no religion, but can choose to go under the name of religion to achieve its motives. They are uneducated and so their values are totally different, as are their ways of handling weapons or choosing how issues be settled.

There is therefore an urgent need to involve our youth in decision making at appropriate levels, develop for them a comprehensive programme of education/socialisation, and make them good and productive citizens. We must also provide for them opportunities for vocational training geared towards self-employment and self-reliance, as well as the spirit of adventure, resourcefulness, inventiveness and the virtues of patriotism, discipline, selfless service, honesty and integrity. We hope that this will inculcate in them a sense of discipline geared towards making them socially responsible and accountable.

The range, extent and magnitude of the problems which confront the youth require a committed and determined effort on the part of the Church and all stakeholders in order to help them to achieve their potential and to make them appropriate partners in the task of national development. These problems need to be addressed urgently so that the youth can be adequately empowered and enabled to play active roles as participants in the shaping of their own destiny as well as in the building and development of the Nigerian Nation.

3. POLITICS

There is a need to caution politicians who believe that the only way to express their disaffection, disapproval or disagreement is by stirring up people to violence, destruction and disruption of peace. I am not saying that we should not show disapproval of bad governance, bad policies or even outright disagreements, but we should do so with a show of respect for the sanctity of human life, religion and institutions that God has given for the protection of life and property and most of all respect for law and order. It is impossible for us to say that in order for us to protect democracy we must destroy it, because that is precisely what so many politicians are predicting. The conviction of the church and indeed of all who are looking up to Jesus is that evil and wickedness will not prosper. We will militate against the forces of hell on our knees and we will not be docile as we watch and pray. We do so because we are looking unto Jesus and we are led by God and convinced that victory ultimately belongs to God and not to man.

God is interested in bringing about a turn-around and a lasting change that will bring progress and development for the people. The implication of this is that every true child of God should develop and form a habit of courage in all forms of righteous acts; should stand up for the truth and enthrone truth everywhere, and live a fruitful life for the benefit of others.

I am convinced that there is enough of everything in Africa, and especially Nigeria, to go round and to alleviate poverty, stamp out most diseases, make the hospitals work, create a conducive and affordable educational environment for all ages, make electricity and water supplies work efficiently, provide good road networks, with good rail and air travels which are affordable and available for most people. These resources have been given by God for the good of all, but many of those who have access to these resources have taken them to Europe, America and more recently South Africa, and they share a pittance to their kinsmen, tribesmen, thugs and sycophants. They exercise authority to train, develop and empower only their tribesmen and their sycophants.

4. THE MEDIA

In any situation of fear or conflict a downward spiral misinformation, rumour, gossip and misleading or even false media reports quickly lead to heightened fear and distress and to a worsening of relationships. For example in the crisis in Jos there were communities that have met together as Christians and Muslims and have chosen to seek understanding, mutual respect and community life together. The international media failed woefully in not reporting such laudable ventures within the city. Sadly the media choose instead to report various negative aspects which in themselves are not totally correct and which require further consideration.

Addressing West African journalists a few years ago in Ghana, Brigadier General Francis A. Agyemfra (retired), formerly one of the most senior military officers in Ghana, noted the high rate of internal conflicts in many West African countries and challenged the journalists to live up to the great responsibilities of their calling. He observed that the press are in the most vital position to persuade the minds of people, inform their opinions and point the way to go. If the media do not use their profession for good they betray their calling, mislead those who look to them for truth and expect valid interpretations from them.²

CONCLUSION

When such good governance is lost, bad governance gains a foothold, and then truth disappears, deceit, selfishness, looting and bribery take over. Enemies or rivals are to be eliminated and the media is bought over. Corruption is

² [http://allafrica.com/stories.printable.201005050776.html](http://allafrica.com/stories/printable.201005050776.html)

everywhere. The Foreign Affairs and International Trade of Canada (2010) said that:

No country is entirely free of corruption. But if corruption is deep enough it can hinder economic growth and good governance, and decay the fabric of society. Corruption is an obstacle to sustainable development, with the potential to enlarge economic gaps and breed organised crime. Unchecked corruption leaves little room for democracy to flourish; little room for freedom to expand; little room for justice to prevail.

The resulting downward spiral of corruption leads inevitably to destruction, and a society built on corruption will eventually destroy itself. This is so because such corruption permeates all aspects of life: it is not just concerned with finance, but it also infects human relationships in the family, the church, the society; there is no longer an accepted code of morality; trust and integrity have disappeared.

In such situations there are generally isolated voices calling for a return to righteousness, a return to godly living, a return to the way of the Lord. Time and again, however, those voices are ignored or silenced. History has many examples of people who became obstinate in their evil ways, who refused to listen to the voice of God, who ignored all warnings, and refused to do right.

The Road to Recovery begins with saying, "No" to all forms of evil and the present crop of youth leaders and the entire generation of youth must make up their minds to say "No" to political malpractice, social ills, unprovoked violence, occultism, exam malpractice, get-rich-quick syndrome, and all forms of vices in the days ahead. We have reached the rock bottom from where we can make a clean start. To go further than this would be total destruction.

As I end this paper, I feel strongly that I should suggest that members of this Conference determine to support and encourage good initiatives and practices which are local and indigenous, rather than bringing in a blueprint from another country which may or may not fit into the local needs so neatly. For example, there are already on ground now some honest media houses, some good educational and health care establishments: these may only be small in size, but they are beneficial to the people, the people can identify with them and they can be multiplied.

++The Most Rev. Dr. Benjamin A. Kwashi

Archbishop of Jos, Nigeria