

BLAMING THE GODS: CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS PROPAGANDA IN THE NIGERIA–BIAFRA WAR*

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ABSTRACT: The consensus among many analysts of the Nigeria–Biafra War is that the conflict cannot be reduced to a mono-causal explanation. The tragedy that befell the West African country from 1966 to 1970 was a combination of many factors, which were political, ethnic, religious, social, and economic in nature. Yet the conflict was unduly cast as a religious war between Christians and Muslims. Utilizing newly available archival materials from within and outside Nigeria, this article endeavours to unravel the underlying forces in the religious war rhetoric of the mainly Christian breakaway region and its Western sympathizers. Among other things, it demonstrates that, while the religious war proposition was good for the relief efforts of the international humanitarian organizations, it inevitably alienated the Nigerian Christians and made them unsympathetic to the Biafran cause.

KEY WORDS: Nigeria, civil war, colonialism, human rights, religion.

INTRODUCTION

FOLLOWING the 1966 uprisings in Northern Nigeria, during which thousands of the mainly Christian Easterners resident there lost their lives, deliberate attempts were made to give the conflict a religious colouration. The handy terms ‘Muslim north’ and ‘Christian south’ began to make their way into press and radio, especially in the Eastern region. When war finally broke out in July 1967, religious rhetoric was widely and effectively used as war propaganda.

Even in the absence of a valid census in Nigeria, it is fair to say that there is no religious homogeneity with regard to the north–south geopolitical regions of the country. There is in the former Western region a large Muslim population. The same can be said of the Northern region in respect of the Christian population, especially in the Middle Belt. The failure by the Eastern Nigerian Christians and the international Christian bodies to recognize and respect this reality during the civil war caused great disaffection among Nigerian Christians and threatened the very existence of the Church in Nigeria.

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It is noteworthy, however, that the Muslim vs. Christian rhetoric in discussions on Nigeria's north–south religious divide has its roots in the country's colonial and missionary history. Basing their position largely on a controversial promise by Lord Lugard in 1903 in Sokoto of non-interference with Islam, subsequent colonial administrators vigorously resisted Christian proselytization in the northern provinces, especially in the emirates. When Christian missions were eventually allowed among the Muslims, it was largely 'to heal, not to preach'.¹ Despite opposition from the first generation of British administrators, however, there was in all parts of Northern Nigeria, contrary to the 'presumptive homogeneity of the emirates',² a strong Christian presence during the colonial period. By the time the war broke out in 1967, there were numerous Christian foundations in Kano, Sokoto, Kaduna, Katsina, and all the major cities of the North. However, this did not change the clichéd image of a Muslim north and a Christian south. The British had succeeded in dividing Nigeria religiously in popular perception, irrespective of their insistence in 1914 on a merger of the two separate colonial possessions in a political union.

Critics of the amalgamation, in both colonial and postcolonial times, have tended to highlight the social, economic, and political differences between the north and the south.³ During the civil war, however, the debate gravitated more towards the religious side of the spectrum. In its campaign to win Christian support for its separatist movement, the break-away region highlighted the religious divide of the two geopolitical regions as a factor militating against a unitary state. The amalgamation of the Islamic north with the largely Christian and pagan south was likened to 'putting Egypt and Ireland together and calling the combination a nation'.⁴ Cardinal Heenan, the Catholic Archbishop of Westminster and an ardent supporter of Biafran independence, advanced the argument even more forcefully:

The problem is quite simply how to integrate the ancient emirates of the North into the rest of the country to form a unitary state. It is a simple matter of fact that nowhere in the world has it been possible to combine satisfactorily under a single central government, except in the cases of imperial domination, Mohammedan and non Mohammedan states.⁵

The Christian Igbo vs. Muslim Hausa/Fulani stereotype of the civil war collapses under scrutiny. The head of state and supreme commander of the Nigerian armed forces, General Yakubu Gowon, was a committed Christian, just as a good number of the field commanders were. He is quoted as saying: 'There is no question of religious warfare and as a Christian and the son of a Methodist minister, if there were, I should be fighting on the Christian side'.⁶ His code of conduct for the war did, in fact, endeavour to dispel the

¹ A. E. Barnes, 'Religious insults: Christian critiques of Islam and the government in colonial Northern Nigeria', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 34 (2004), 78.

² D. Anthony, "'Resourceful and progressive blackmen": modernity and race in Biafra, 1967–70', *Journal of African History*, 51:1 (2010), 46.

³ See R. A. Olaniran (ed.), *The Amalgamation and its Enemies: An Interpretative History of Modern Nigeria* (Ile-Ife, 2003).

⁴ *The Nation*, 9 Oct. 1967.

⁵ J. C. Heenan, 'A memorandum on Nigeria', submitted to Prime Minister H. Wilson, 6 Dec. 1969, quoted in C. Uche, 'Oil, British interests and the Nigerian civil war', *Journal of African History*, 49 (2008), 114, n. 13.

⁶ *Herald Tribune*, 31 Oct. 1967.

religious war myth. 'You are not fighting a war against a foreign enemy', he wrote, 'nor are you fighting a religious war or jihad'.⁷ The majority of the foot soldiers on the federal side were drawn from the Tiv Middle Belt region, which was overwhelmingly Christian. The Eastern Region was at the time one of three Catholic ecclesiastical provinces in Nigeria, the other two being Lagos and Kaduna. These facts do not fit into the garb of religious wars. Yet the religious war rhetoric remained a formidable force in the Nigeria-Biafra propaganda war not only in Biafra but also among its foreign Christian sympathizers.

THE AFTERMATH OF THE 1966 DISTURBANCES IN THE NORTH

The religious war discourse makes little sense unless it is seen against the background of the pogroms of 1966. Following the return to the Eastern region of millions of its people resident not only in the North but also in other parts of Nigeria, security for the Igbo became a major concern, which featured in all the attempts at a negotiated settlement. Like every other Biafran leader, state or church, Archbishop Arinze recommended 'arrangements for co-operation with Nigeria in every field, except security for Biafrans'.⁸ Biafran propaganda got its appeal from, and was sustained by, its ability to explain the fear for Igbo security within Nigeria as the result of the Northern massacres and the killings in other parts of the federation. The prominence given to religion and religious themes at this time was informed by the fact that 'a self-conscious Christian profession was part of the self-identity of Biafra'.⁹ The former eastern region of Nigeria could lay claim on a Christian identity in a way no other region of the federation could. As a religiously self-conscious community, therefore, it could no longer see, after the events of 1966, any guarantee for its survival and that of its faith in a united Nigeria.

In the main, two major events were regarded by the Biafrans as serious threats to their religious self-expression. Top of the list were the pogroms of 1966 in the North. Even before the war started, the Easterners had come to see their religion as being under threat. When the crisis resulted in war, it was immediately regarded as a conflict between Islam and Christianity, a belief that did not give any consideration whatsoever to the faith of the Nigerian Christians. Thus, Francis Ibiam, a respected Igbo statesman, could say: 'If the world, especially the churches, do not help us, we shall all die and Christianity in Nigeria shall die with us'.¹⁰

The second event that was perceived by the Biafrans as a threat to their Christian self-identity was the Sardauna's pre-1966 proselytization campaigns. The strong man of the North, who by 1963 was widely regarded as *Sarkin Arewa* (Emir of the North), epitomized the new aristocratic elite,

⁷ Quoted in P. A. Anwunah, *The Nigeria-Biafra War, 1967-1970* (Ibadan, 2007), 202.

⁸ Archives of German Caritas, Freiburg in Breslau (AGC), 187.1 biaf-01 A-F, 'Reflections on the Nigeria-Biafra war'.

⁹ A. F. Walls, 'Religion and the press in "the Enclave" in the Nigerian civil war', in Edward Fashole-Luke, *et al.* (eds.), *Christianity in Independent Africa* (Ibadan, 1978), 209.

¹⁰ A. Ibiam, 'A paper presented to the workshop on human rights', Bonn, 21 Jan. 1968.

whose thinking and actions were guided by an intense religious fundamentalism. An abiding theme in the fundamentalist agenda has been identified as 'a belief in a historical "Golden Age" that serves as a model for all times and is to be reconstructed, replicated, or at least have its basic principles re-applied today'.¹¹ In Nigeria, the historical 'golden age' par excellence was the Fulani Empire established by Uthman Dan Fodio. At the peak of his premiership, the Sardauna felt the historic expansionist urge to complete the mission of the jihad and extend the empire's dominance to the sea. His spirited proselytization tours and massive conversions on the eve of the civil war struck a discordant note in the religious sensibilities of Christians, not only in the North but also in the South. If there was anything that united the Eastern Nigerian Christians and Christians of the rest of the federation during the 1966 disturbances, it was the perceived threat of an undisguised militant Islam, which the proselytization activities of the Sardauna had invoked. This concern was mirrored in the utterances of the Biafran leadership and some Western sympathizers. Ojukwu spoke of 'Arab-Muslim expansionism' as a menace to the black race.¹² Meanwhile, like most Biafran supporters abroad, Helene Larbig drew on Biafran rhetoric in her comment on the war:

Let no one deceive you! This is a war between Muslims and Christians ... the leaders of the North, the Emirs, are hardened Muslims. Their former leader Ahmadu Bello once said that the British stopped the march of the Muslims at Ilorin and that now the Muslims will march to the sea, to Port Harcourt, to Warri and to Lagos. Anyone who says the war is not a religious war is either ignorant or extremely malicious.¹³

Despite the attacks on Christians and destruction of their places of worship, religion had not, by May 1966, been invoked as a pretext for violence. On 23 May 1966, Ironsi issued a 'Unification Decree' that, among other things, abolished the former regions, banned political parties, and unified the civil service. This triggered off a wave of mass protests throughout the Northern region. Some of the placards carried by the irate demonstrators read: 'Let There Be Secession'; 'We do not want Military Government'; 'No Unitary Government with Referendum', and 'Down with Ironsi'.¹⁴ Not a single placard called for a jihad or gave indication of a religious grievance. The backdrops to the turn of events at this point were rather economic and regional considerations.

Unfortunately, subsequent uprisings in 1966 saw the amplification of religion and religious themes. In a country already saturated with danger, fantastic and irresponsible incitements and rumours invoking the Muslim holy war theory aggravated the situation. The uprisings in the North assumed alarming proportions following inflammatory commentaries in the news media of Nigeria's Islamic neighbours. From Khartoum, the Sudanese capital, the Sardauna, Sir Ahmadu Bello (who was the vice-president of the

¹¹ D. Zeiden, *The Resurgence of Religion: A Comparative Study of Selected Themes in Christian and Islamic Fundamentalist Discourses* (Leiden, 2003), 166.

¹² E. Ojukwu, *The Ahiara Declaration: The Principles of the Biafran Revolution* (Geneva, 1969), 12–14.

¹³ AGC, 187.1 biaf-01 L-R (my translation from German original).

¹⁴ *West Africa*, 4 June 1966, 639.

Islamic World League), was described as ‘an Islamic Hero’ and the military coup as ‘a pestilential stench of Christian fanaticism and Zionist conspiracy’, which was aimed only at ‘clipping the jaws of the Moslems in Nigeria’.¹⁵ The second wave of killings in September and October 1966 was in fact triggered off by a false radio announcement from Cotonou, which was monitored and relayed in radio stations in Kaduna, that Northern Muslims were being massacred in Eastern Nigeria.¹⁶ In a special message to the people of Northern Nigeria broadcast in English and Hausa, Lieut.-Colonel Yakubu Gowon made the following passionate appeal to the rampaging masses:

I receive complaints daily that up till now [October 1966] Easterners living in the North are being killed and molested and their property looted We should put a stop to this. It appears that it is going beyond reason and is now at a point of recklessness and irresponsibility. We must remember that we shall be answerable to God We should not believe rumours that are unfounded, and also we should not believe all the talk that other countries or their radio stations make without full analysis. We should be the people to tell them about our country, and not they to tell us about our country.¹⁷

Generally speaking, the coup of 15 January was welcomed by a large majority of Nigerians with enormous relief.¹⁸ In the North, the sweeping away of the former political leadership was most conspicuously welcomed not only by the ruling Northern Peoples Congress (NPC), albeit half-heartedly, but also by the older political leadership, or the religious group that Kirk-Greene calls ‘the emiratis’.¹⁹ Together with the masses, they heeded the appeal to the Muslim population by Ironsi at the end of Ramadan 1966 to keep calm and cooperate with him in the restoration of law and order. As a result, the Eid-el-Fitr celebration marking the end of Ramadan passed off peacefully without incident, despite the official announcement of the death in the coup of the prime minister, Alhaji Tafawa Balewa.²⁰ The major newspapers reported cases of celebrations in the streets and of normal business activities in the markets just a day after the coup. A leading Northern politician, Aminu Kano, even counselled that the ‘Sardauna should be forgotten’.²¹ This remarkable allegiance to keeping calm and restoring law and order was abandoned only after the Unification Decree and the appeal to religious sentiments. It was at this point that the concept of a Christian vs. Muslim conflict was nurtured by the Easterners, a notion that was strengthened by the behaviour and utterances of the perpetrators of the pogroms.²² Indeed, some of Biafra’s Western Christian sympathizers began at this stage to see the events of 1966 in a Christian vs. Muslim perspective. German Caritas,

¹⁵ Quoted in W. Hoffmann, ‘Kirche im heutigen Nigeria (The Church in today’s Nigeria)’, typescript, n.d. ¹⁶ *West Africa*, 8 Oct. 1966, 1140. ¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ An article in the *Nigerian Spokesman* described it as ‘God-sent’ (25 Apr. 1966).

¹⁹ A. H. M. Kirk-Greene, *Research Report No. 27* (Uppsala, 1975), 5.

²⁰ *West Africa*, 5 Feb. 1966, 155.

²¹ Quoted in M. H. Kukah, *Religion, Politics and Power in Northern Nigeria* (Ibadan, 1993), 38.

²² Most of those who took part in the pogroms believed that the killing of non-Muslims was a duty to Allah: see the London *Daily Express*, 6 Oct. 1966; see also F. Bonneville, *The Death of Biafra*, trans. I. Orjinta (Enugu, 2000; original French edition Paris, 1968), 84.

for instance, was very reluctant at the beginning of the crisis to get involved because it believed that any help for the Igbo would be interpreted as 'a support for secession and a support for a holy war of the Christians against Islam'.²³

The position of the Northern Christians with regard to the pogroms of 1966 is not immediately apparent. There is ample evidence, however, that Christian solidarity crumbled under the weight of the animosity generated by the always latent anti-Igbo sentiment in the region. Some have suggested that the Christians took part in the killing of the largely Christian Easterners.²⁴ Citing what it calls 'reliable intelligence reports', an article in a news service of the Press Department of the US Catholic Conference claimed that the Northern soldiers who mutinied in Kano in October 1966 were mostly Christians and animists.²⁵ More significantly, a delegation of Nigerian Christians who toured western Europe and North America in 1968 to counter the religious war propaganda of the Biafrans emphasized the fact that, in many Northern towns, 'Northern Moslems and Northern Christians vented their anger on the Ibos resident in the North'.²⁶ These references point to a joint action that was dictated more by ethnic animosity than religious indignation.

However, it is important to stress that the bond of fellowship forged by religion was not obliterated by ethnic resentment. The Archbishop of Kaduna spoke of the terrible things that 'our people' had suffered recently and hoped that those who had left would come back.²⁷ Expressions of gratitude were sent to the bishops, fathers, and sisters in the North by Bishop Okoye of Port Harcourt for the assistance rendered to the Easterners by

²³ AGC, 187.1 biaf-02/1, 30 Oct. 1967. German Caritas ultimately became a major player in the Biafran airlift. After a brief and discredited practice of buying loading space in Biafra's gun-running planes, the two German relief organizations, Deutsche Caritas (Catholic) and Diakonisches Werk (Protestant) purchased four relief planes of their own for the exclusive use of the airlift to Biafra. Out of this pioneer venture emerged the 'Joint Church Aid' for Biafra (JCA), the greatest ecumenical venture of the twentieth century, involving some 33 Christian and Jewish humanitarian organizations. The press centre of this consortium was based in Geneva, and from there large collections of primary sources on the Nigeria-Biafra War were sent to German Caritas, as well as to the other members of JCA. These include minutes of meetings of JCA executives, press releases, weekly reports from Sao Thomé, news bulletins and guidelines from Caritas Internationalis, the Vatican coordinator of all Catholic charities around the world, etc. Furthermore, the investment of German Caritas in the civil war went beyond its huge commitment to JCA to include independent projects within and outside the breakaway region. Among these were a modern paediatrics hospital and extensive agr projects inside Biafra. Outside the enclave, it provided large quantities of relief materials to the liberated areas through the Nigerian Red Cross and the Catholic Secretariat in Lagos. Together with Diakonisches Werk, it established a children's village in Libreville, the Gabonese capital, for evacuated Biafran children. These activities greatly enhanced the diversity and the international make-up of the archives of German Caritas in Freiburg and explain the preponderance of German sources in this article.

²⁴ C. Ikeazor, *Nigeria 1966: The Turning Point* (London, 1997), 193.

²⁵ P. Riley, 'Refugee problem in Eastern Nigeria', *NC News Service* (of the US Catholic Conference), 24 May 1967.

²⁶ AGC, 187.1 biaf-11/2, 'Background note on the Nigerian situation'.

²⁷ Archives of the Catholic Diocese of Enugu (CDE), John MacCarthy to Bishop Okoye, Kaduna, 8 June 1966.

Northern Christians during the mayhem.²⁸ The fact that many Northern Christians risked their lives to save Easterners was not generally known to the public and this was largely because reports of the events in the North of 1966 were conspicuously absent in church news media. This lacuna was explained as an editorial policy aimed at minimizing tribal hatred and shielding the Northern Christians from danger as a result of their assistance to the Easterners.²⁹ A Consultation of Christian Laity, a group of Christian men and women, Catholic and Protestant, drawn from people from all parts of Nigeria resident in Lagos, was formed expressly to render material and spiritual assistance to the victims of the pogrom. They acknowledged their failure to speak out clearly against the violence and the killings and regretted their failure to support those members of the clergy who did speak out.³⁰ As we shall see later, these accounts of support and solidarity stand in sharp contrast to some of the 'clarifications' given to the outside world by the same Christian groups, who, by 1968, had been alienated by the religious war propaganda. It was thanks largely to their belated response that the international Christian bodies and individuals reconsidered the positions they had previously held concerning the religious nature of the conflict and began to give greater consideration to the future of the Church in Nigeria as a whole.

THE CHURCH AND BIAFRAN WAR PROPAGANDA

Principally, church–state relations during the civil war centred on the effort of the governments on both sides of the conflict to integrate the churches and religious bodies into their war efforts. In Biafra, the need to mobilize public opinion in support of the war effort was particularly urgent. The necessity to 'carry the people with us', as Ojukwu put it, required much more than the news media. The creation of six propaganda 'fronts' in October 1968 was geared towards the achievement of this broader objective, and they included the 'Churches Front', 'Youths Front', 'Farmers Front', 'Traders Front', 'Community Efforts Front', and 'Workers Front'. The Ministry of Information of the new republic set up these organizations as 'compact propaganda platforms' to see to

the level of dedication of the masses and their organisations to Biafra's war of survival, their depth of understanding of what Biafra stands for, our type of war, their role in this war, a quick and right interpretation and assimilation of all Government statements, etc.³¹

A committee of the Ministry of Information known as the 'Political Orientation Committee', popularly called the 'thinking house' of the Ministry, produced the guidelines that led to the creation of the propaganda fronts. Among them was a minority group that saw the separation of church and state as an absolute necessity and therefore called for the exclusion of the

²⁸ CDE, 'Minutes of the annual meeting of the Administrative Board of the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria 17th–18th Jan. 1979'.

²⁹ Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, Lagos, 'Report of the Press Department to the Administrative Board of the Catholic Secretariat for the year 1966'.

³⁰ CDE, communiqué from the Consultation of Christian Laity, 14 Aug. 1966.

³¹ CDE, 'The Churches Front: a brief'.

Churches Front from the propaganda organs. However, religion in the enclave had, by 1968, become a major rallying point for the disillusioned and disorientated populace. The overriding significance of the churches' control over the masses was such that government could ill afford to exclude the Christian churches from its propaganda outfit. Consequently, the majority of the Political Orientation Committee members insisted on including the Churches Front among the propaganda platforms. A blueprint was worked out for it which required it not only to maintain a spiritual balance, such as providing chaplains for the army and organizing prayer sessions for the new nation, but also to 'ensure that the Churches through their peculiar organizations promote the Biafran ideals whose corner-stone is social justice'.³² However, the Catholic bishops of Biafra refused vehemently to be represented by the Churches Front, with the argument that its aims and objectives smacked of communism.³³ Even before the Russians pitched their camp on the Nigerian side, the fear of communism was a major concern for the Catholic bishops of Biafra.

The true reason for the opposition of the Catholic bishops of Biafra to the Biafran government's Churches Front is, however, to be sought outside the aims and objectives of the propaganda outfit. As attested to by the representative of the Catholic Church in the organization, who happened to be the front's Deputy National Chairman, there was nothing in its agenda that was incompatible with the war efforts of the Church itself, particularly as it was 'an organ for conveying information to every segment of the Biafran community in such a manner as to help sustain high morale during this crisis'. He urged the Catholic hierarchy in Biafra 'to realize clearly that what the Church does in practice is more relevant to any situation than any number of statements of principle', and saw the Churches Front as 'a factor that could easily forge minor links of Church and State relationship'.³⁴

The bishops were not convinced, and they resolved that their representative's role in the organization 'should be guided by the attitude of their Lordships towards it, vis-à-vis the organisation's threat to the security of the Church'.³⁵ They seemed to be distrustful of the existence of a separate body with which the government preferred to have direct dealings. For instance, the Churches Front was, among other things, calling for prayers for the new nation, a directive that was seen as an exclusive preserve of the religious leaders. The creation of the Churches Front was perceived as a ploy 'to subjugate the church and make it a powerful mouth-piece of the Ministry of Information'.³⁶ With this conviction, therefore, the church leaders resolved not to be 'subservient to any government or organisation' because the church was 'divinely constituted and an *autonomous front* owing no allegiance to any earthly power and whose sole aim was to continue the mission of Christ on earth'.³⁷

The refusal of the Catholic Church in Biafra to belong to a state-instituted propaganda outfit did not preclude its readiness to act as 'an autonomous front' that was desirous of making valuable contributions to the war effort. Not a few of the expatriate missionaries earnestly wished that the secession

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ CDE, 'Minutes of Bishops' Meeting held at the Mission House Ugiri, Umuahia, on Friday, 18 July, 1969'.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.* (emphasis added).

had never happened. This could not be said of the native clergy. The Christian religion was the established religion of the new republic and in the Weberian sociological category, the church 'accommodates the values and goals of civic society, legitimating the affairs of state and providing ceremonial backing for state events'.³⁸ It was John Anyiogwu, the Catholic Bishop of Enugu, who preached the sermon in an interdenominational service organized for God's protection of the new state. It was he who blessed the new Biafran flag, the most visible sign of the region's newly won statehood. The contributions made by the Catholic Church to the war effort included not only the provision of army chaplains and praying for divine intervention, but also the willingness to give the 'true picture' of the war at home and abroad.

Although there was never a collective statement from their Lordships to the effect that the war was religiously motivated, individual opinions in that direction did surface. In February 1968, Bishops Godfrey Okoye of Port Harcourt and Moynagh of Calabar submitted a memorandum to the Pope. In it they said: 'We believe and have much evidence to support this view, that the forces which have inspired and are carrying on this conflict are militant Mohammedanism and Marxist Communism'.³⁹ Another high-ranking church leader described the conflict as 'a struggle between Christians and the devil', and urged the Biafrans to 'fight hard to ensure the preservation of their religion and culture'.⁴⁰

On the Protestant side, the religious ticket was even more forcefully employed. Francis Akanu Ibiam, governor of the former Eastern Region and special advisor to the Biafran Military Governor was perhaps the most prominent religious propagandist for the secessionist cause. During several trips and conferences in Europe and America, he emphasized the religious dimension of the war in very strong terms and made no distinction between a predominantly Muslim Northern Nigeria and Nigeria as a multiethnic and multi-religious country. 'It is simply staggering', he said, 'for a Christian Country like Britain to help a Moslem country militarily to crush another Christian country like Biafra'.⁴¹ Such extreme views led some Nigerian Christians to wonder 'whether the Church on either side of the Niger has not become a tool in the propaganda machinery of the military administrations'.⁴²

The willingness of the Christian churches to act as a front for the war effort independently or in conjunction with the government was perhaps the greatest boon for the secessionist cause. It all started with the historic visit to the Biafran enclave in February 1968 of a papal delegation. The visit afforded the beleaguered secessionists an important link with the outside world. It gave rise to a chain of events in Biafra: the visit of the All England Churches Delegation, the intervention of Caritas Internationalis and the World Council

³⁸ G. D. Chryssides, *Exploring New Religions* (London, 1999), 4.

³⁹ Quoted in K. Longworth, *James Moynagh, 1903-1985: First Bishop of Calabar*, n.d.

⁴⁰ Quoted in *Biafra Sun*, 18 Dec. 1967.

⁴¹ Quoted in *Kwenu*, special edition (Bloomfield, 1997), 12.

⁴² Christian Council of Nigeria, *Christian Concern in the Nigerian Civil War: A Collection of Articles which have appeared in Issues of the Nigerian Christian from April 1967 to 1969* (Ibadan, 1969), 111.

of Churches with relief materials, and diplomatic reactions and recognitions. But, the involvement of the Christian churches and their relief agencies also heightened the religious war controversy.

The papal envoys were the first independent and neutral observers to visit Nigeria and Biafra at the early stage of the conflict. Having visited Nigeria in December 1967, and after consultations with political and church leaders there, they were able afterwards to confirm that the civil war in Nigeria had no religious underpinnings. That verdict was fundamental in shaping official Catholic policy towards the breakaway region. At no point during the three-year conflict did the Catholic hierarchy affirm that the Nigeria–Biafra War was religiously motivated. All pronouncements to that effect were made primarily by individuals and groupings over which the Church had no direct control.

THE ROLE OF THE PRESS

On inception, the Republic of Biafra inherited all the organs of mass communication of the former Eastern Region. These included the Eastern Nigeria Radio Corporation, a TV station, a government press, and the newspaper, *Nigerian Outlook*. These mass-communication outfits were put at the disposal of the influential Ministry of Information, which, during the war, was staffed with brilliant academic personnel such as Dr Ifegwu Eke, its commissioner, Cyprian Ekwensi, and Uche Chukwumeriji, to mention only a few. A multiplicity of other print media sprang up after secession and during the war, with the *Biafran Sun* and the *Daily Flash* as the most popular.

One remarkable ‘coup’ through which Biafra outsmarted Nigeria in the propaganda war was the early use of public relations firms, the most notable being the Geneva-based Markpress. The firm depended mainly, rather to its discredit, on information supplied by the overseas press service of the Directorate of Propaganda of Biafra’s Ministry of Information, which relished in referring to it as ‘our post office’.⁴³ The problem was that Radio Biafra, as well as the numerous local print media in Biafra, was concerned chiefly with internal propaganda, the content of which has been described as ‘frequently vitriolic, fiery, bellicose, morale-boosting, or fear-arousing, and as a result, hardly a trustworthy guide to reality’.⁴⁴

Two important moral-boosting or fear-arousing propaganda subject matters were genocide and the religious war proposition. It was on these two chains that Biafran propaganda was forged. The rationale for clinging tenaciously to these two subjects has been best explicated by Ojukwu, the Biafran leader, himself. According to him, the Biafrans were a terrified and frustrated people, who had to use every opportunity to secure sympathy whenever one presented itself. They had to express their fears and disappointment to their religious masters and teachers – the missionaries – whenever they saw one on a visit.⁴⁵ The missionaries and Christian aid workers did visit Biafra in their hundreds, and the propaganda subjects of choice did spread accordingly.

⁴³ M. Davis, *Interpreters for Nigeria: The Third World and International Public Relations* (Urbana, IL, 1977), 135.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 125.

⁴⁵ Personal interview with Ojukwu, Enugu, 21 Nov. 1998.

A lead article in a Nigerian newspaper called attention to ‘billions of posters’ around Catholic churches throughout the Western countries and quoted one as saying: ‘Help your Brothers in Christ who are suffering for the sake of their Freedom Fight. Help the “biafrans”. Donate generously.’⁴⁶

The reference to fear and disappointment by Ojukwu is significant. The impact of the massacres in the North on the people of Biafra was stunning. The debilitating war that followed, during which the massacres continued in 1967 – at Ibagwa on 10 July, in Ogoja about the same time, and the mass killings in Asaba and Calabar in October – imposed a high level of psychological trauma on the general populace.⁴⁷ The government was under pressure to provide answers as to why its people were being subjected to this fearful ordeal. It fell back on the one prominent answer provided by the killers themselves. As one pro-Biafra British member of parliament put it, Biafran propaganda might be discredited but the statement credited to Colonel Benjamin Adekunle, which said: ‘Shoot everything at sight whether it moves or not’, did not come from Biafran sources.⁴⁸ The declared intention of Biafran propaganda, therefore, was to explain to the people that the enemy was out to exterminate them as a people on account of their religion, and the fact that Benjamin Adekunle was himself a Christian did not change anything.

The Biafrans were disappointed that the Christian world did not come to their aid in the hour of their greatest tribulation. The conspiracy of silence with which the Western governments greeted the Biafran debacle was based on the ‘quick kill theory’, which was generally regarded as the best ‘humane solution’ to the problem.⁴⁹ When Biafra survived the pangs of birth, and famine and mass deaths forced a rethink and led to the humanitarian intervention of the Christian churches, the religious war proposition was found to be propitious to the relief effort. It was not surprising, therefore, that the religious crusade was most intensive in foreign print media, especially those circulated by the numerous clandestine groupings that raised funds for the airlift. It was the foreign news media that often read religious meanings into political, and sometimes criminal, incidents.

A typical example was an incident that took place on 23 May 1968, when one Johnson Banjo, a member of a Nigerian delegation to Commonwealth peace talks in Kampala, mysteriously disappeared from his hotel room. Uganda was supporting the Christian southern Sudanese, who were also fighting a secessionist civil war. Thus, the abduction and subsequent killing of a Nigerian delegate led to wild speculations. While most newspapers in Nigeria, including the northern-based *New Nigerian*, spoke of foul play by ‘rebel agents’,⁵⁰ some foreign news media blamed the incident on ‘anti-Islamic south Sudanese immigrants in Uganda’.⁵¹

⁴⁶ *Morning Post*, 3 Jan. 1969. The word ‘Biafra’ was derogatorily written in lower case in most Nigerian newspapers.

⁴⁷ For an account of these massacres, see *New York Times*, 21 July 1967; J. A. Daly and A. G. Saville, ‘The history of Jointchurchaid’, vol. 1 (unpublished ‘White Paper’), 50.

⁴⁸ Davis, *Interpreters*, 125.

⁴⁹ See J. E. Thompson, *American Policy and African Famine: The Nigeria-Biafra War, 1966-1970* (New York, 1990), 108; see also *International Herald Tribune*, 1 Jan. 1969.

⁵⁰ *New Nigerian*, 6 and 8 June 1968; *Daily Times*, 21 June 1968.

⁵¹ *Prisma der Welt*, 28 May 1968.

Rather belatedly, the Federal Military Government intensified the propaganda war on two fronts – through press releases from its diplomatic missions overseas and through pressure on the Christian leaders at home. As we shall see later, the pressure on the Christian leaders to undertake world-wide counter-measures against the religious war propaganda proved very effective. Within Nigeria itself, Christian writers spearheaded the media onslaught on the Caritas-led humanitarian organizations. Remarkably, they tended to see every action or pronouncement of the Pope and the aid agencies against the background of the religious war proposition. One example is noteworthy.

On 21 July 1968, Pope Paul VI officially declared that food and medicine had been flown into blockaded Biafra. Seen from the point of view of the Federal Government, it was necessary to raise four main objections to this statement. First, the mention of ‘Biafra’ in the Pope’s statement implied a tacit recognition of the secession. Secondly, breaching the blockade was a deliberate disregard of Nigeria’s territorial sovereignty. Thirdly, the gesture was interpreted as the Pope having succumbed to the propaganda that the war was religiously motivated. Fourthly, by praising the Igbo Christians, the Pope was seen to reduce the Catholics of the other regions to second-class Christians.

For the Pope and Caritas Internationalis, the third and fourth objections were hardly worth battling words over. Through the evidence given by his envoys, the Pope and the Catholic Church ruled out religion as the cause of the war and, throughout the conflict, Caritas was aiding victims of the war on both sides. The first and second objections, however, caused considerable concern in Rome. The word ‘Biafra’ was never again used by the Pope and the Vatican. Moreover, the Pope admitted to breaching the blockade with the argument that ‘the moral obligation of assisting starving people was greater than the political obligation of maintaining a good relationship with the Federal Government’.⁵²

Curiously the flurry of media attention with which the Pope’s revelation was received centred exclusively on the religious war interpretation. The *Daily Times* accused him of taking the attitude that the crisis was a religious war. In a front-page comment, the *Nigerian Tribune* began by saying that the Pope’s public admission ‘implicitly confirmed the suspicions of many that the Vatican has succumbed to the rebel propaganda that the Nigerian civil war is a religious war between Hausa Muslims and Ibo Christians’.⁵³ The greatest opprobrium came from the Ibadan-based *Sketch*:

The Catholic Church is subscribing to the untruth that the war in Nigeria is mainly religious. To work in this fashion at a time when even the Church is fighting strenuously for world-wide unity is to plead guilty to a charge of hypocrisy It is also bound to raise, in many minds, the question how well-intentioned and informed after all, are the reforms hitherto carried out by the Pope.⁵⁴

The question may be asked as to why these newspapers in Nigeria singled out the religious war propaganda as an appropriate response to the Pope’s

⁵² AGC, 187.1 biaf-11/2.

⁵³ *Nigerian Tribune*, 1 Aug. 1968.

⁵⁴ *Daily Sketch*, 23 July 1968. The reference to reforms was to the Second Vatican Council, which ended in 1965.

humanitarian intervention. The papers quoted above got their story from the same source – Mr Edwin Ogbu, Nigeria's Ambassador to the United Nations. As soon as the Pope made his relief efforts in the Biafran enclave public, the ambassador gave a press conference that opened with the words:

We have protested to the Pope through the Papal delegate in Lagos that he is taking the attitude that this is a religious war, which it is not We feel that the whole attitude of introducing religion into the civil war is completely unfortunate.⁵⁵

As the best possible counter-measure against the religious crusade, government officials urged Christians to take up the challenge themselves. This they did through the Christian-dominated southern news media.

The voices of Christians were also raised through the northern-based newspaper, the *New Nigerian*, against the roles of their churches overseas. Ambrose Gapsule, a Catholic and president of the Ahmadu Bello University Students' Union, Zaria, expressed surprise 'to see a high hierarchy falling victim to the rebels' propaganda'.⁵⁶ He was referring to Cardinal Heenan's pro-Biafra sermon in Westminster Cathedral in June 1968. 'We in this part of the country', he said 'are perhaps more "Catholic" than people he described as "Biafrans"'.⁵⁷ Another Christian, Thomas Ademola, called attention to the plight of Arab refugees in the Middle East and the policy of non-interference of the World Muslim Movement.⁵⁸ When the Pope intervened on behalf of the Italian oil-workers captured by Biafran forces in 1969, the *New Nigerian* added its own voice to the flurry of media attacks that accosted the pontiff's action. In an editorial, the paper criticized the uproar that the capture and sentencing to death of the oil-men caused in the Western world and the hasty way that the Pope despatched an envoy to Ojukwu for their release. 'The Vatican's disproportionate activities in this episode', it said, 'will render their protestation that all Christians are equal suspect. Nigerians will believe that blood is thicker than sacramental water.'⁵⁹ These media attacks reveal just how alienated the Christians had become on account of the actions and utterances of their fellow Christians in Biafra and in the Western world.

CHRISTIANS IN THE PROPAGANDA WAR

Generally speaking, the angst over the religious self-expression of the Easterners was a feeling that the Christian religious leaders shared with the people of the region. However, a measure of contrariety overshadowed this religious outlook as soon as two largely Christian armies faced each other in July 1967. The situation was exacerbated when the Biafran government gave priority attention to religion in its propaganda war. The Catholic bishops in particular suddenly found themselves neither affirming nor denying the religious nature of the war. Archbishop Francis Arinze was the president of the Biafran Bishops Conference during the war. With his appointment in July 1967 as metropolitan of the Onitsha Ecclesiastical Province at the age of 35, he became one of the youngest archbishops of the Catholic Church. Like all the church leaders, he was primarily appalled by the mass famine deaths,

⁵⁵ *Daily Times*, 31 July 1968.

⁵⁶ *New Nigerian*, 14 June 1968.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *New Nigerian*, 22 June 1968.

⁵⁹ *New Nigerian*, 2 June 1968.

which, in his estimation, had assumed genocidal proportions in the summer of 1968.⁶⁰ Without being unequivocal about the religious war rhetoric, he regarded its discourse as totally irrelevant in the face of the appalling condition in the enclave. This position comes out clearly in his brief report on the war, part of which reads as follows:

Some people say that the war is not religious and that therefore the Africans should be left to solve their tribal quarrels. The answer is that there is not one single cause of the war. There are many causes: political, tribal, economic, British interests, religious and cultural. Granted that the war is not religious, does it then follow that the Biafrans should be massacred? Have they none at all of the fundamental human rights?⁶¹

Like many Biafrans, the archbishop expected that the religion of the Western nations should have swayed the decisions of their leaders in favour of Biafra. He wrote that:

The Biafrans are shocked that even governments of Christian countries can be so selfish, heartless, and unchristian. Are the Biafrans wrong to regard many statesmen in Italy, France, Spain, America and even Ireland as afraid to allow their Christianity to influence their politics?⁶²

The emphasis on Ireland is significant and deserves a brief commentary. Of all the nations of Europe and North America, Ireland was the country that had the closest relationship with the former Eastern region of Nigeria. Its nationals, men and women, were the missionaries of the region and, as in Germany (a Christian nation not mentioned in the archbishop's list), its citizens were deeply committed to the relief effort in Biafra. Expectations were therefore very high in the region that Ireland would grant recognition to Biafran independence.

Ironically, the strongest opposition to any rapprochement between Biafra and the Irish government came from within church circles in Ireland. In 1968, for instance, a team of cameramen was sent to Biafra by Irish Television to make a film on the war, but was recalled from Lisbon en route. The official reason given for the recall was that the team would face too many risks, but it was later revealed that a prior programme about Biafra aired in Irish television made Irish missionaries 'bitterly angry' because of what they perceived as a pro-Biafra bias of the Irish government.⁶³ The change of heart by Irish Television was induced by intense pressure from the authorities of the Holy Ghost Congregation and other religious societies who had many members working in Nigeria. Efforts by Irish missionaries who had returned to Europe and North America from Biafra to bring publicity to bear on the war situation had generated an obsessive fear of reprisals against their comrades working on the Nigerian side of the conflict. When Bishop Okoye assumed the title 'Head of Caritas Internationalis in Biafra', for instance, Father Tony Byrne, the chief executive of the airlift in Sao Thomé and himself an Irish missionary, was infuriated because of the implications such a title held for his colleagues and the Church in Nigeria. 'Using this title', he said, 'makes it impossible for us to avoid trouble in Nigeria ... where our

⁶⁰ AGC, 187.1 biaf-01 A-F, Francis Arinze, 'Reflections on the Nigeria-Biafra War'.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *West Africa*, 9 March 1968.

Missionaries are having problems'.⁶⁴ Since the Irish missionaries were deeply involved in the activities of Caritas Internationalis inside Biafra and overseas, anybody suspected of having links with its 'Head' in Biafra was subject to possible reprisals in Nigeria. Expulsion, as Father Byrne rightly pointed out, was the most feared likelihood. Referring to Bishop Okoye, he said that

his statements are far from neutral and one would not blame Nigeria for their disfavour of Caritas and indeed the Church. He should be aware that the Missionaries are barely tolerated in Nigeria and try to avoid saying anything which might have them expelled.⁶⁵

The Irish missionaries had more than their fair share of verbal attacks by the government and Christians of Nigeria. A widely publicized case was the controversial evidence given by Reverend Daniel Lyons, a Jesuit priest, during an MBC television series, *Meeting of Minds*, on 8 September 1968. Among other things, he claimed that his source of information on cases of genocide in Biafra and persecution of Christians in Nigeria came from Irish missionaries who had left the secessionist areas and who in turn got their information from the Catholic Secretariat in Lagos.⁶⁶ In a statement that condemned the Irish missionaries for allowing themselves to be used for 'political and religious propaganda', the Catholic Secretariat described Father Lyons's accusations as 'a gross slander' capable of sowing 'the seeds of misunderstanding, bitterness and recrimination between Moslems and Christians, between Catholics and other Christians in the Federation'.⁶⁷

It is paramount to put the predicament of the Irish missionaries in proper perspective. As a group who had lived and worked among the Biafrans for the greater part of their productive lives, they were psychologically devastated by the human tragedy that befell the region. They called Biafra 'home', and when they were eventually expelled from the former Eastern region at the end of the war, they said that their only regret in retrospect was 'having to leave our people'.⁶⁸ This natural bond fostered by religion led them to ignore the strict orders by their superiors not to speak out about the horrific situation inside the Biafran enclave.⁶⁹ When Port Harcourt fell in May 1968, the blockade of the enclave became total and the already volatile nutritional situation of the densely populated region quickly degenerated into a human catastrophe. According to the International Committee of the Red Cross observers inside Biafra, by the summer of 1968, an estimated 3,000 famine deaths occurred daily in the Biafran enclave.⁷⁰ It was the Irish missionaries who, through newspaper publications, lectures, and press conferences, first called the world's attention to the famine deaths. Through their pioneer efforts, by October 1968 the Christian churches around the globe had put in place the 'Joint Church Aid', a consortium of over 33 charities that undertook the largest airlift anywhere since the Berlin airlift. By the end of the

⁶⁴ AGC, 187.1 biaf-11/2, 'Weekly progress report, 8-14 Sept. 1969'.

⁶⁵ AGC, 187.1 biaf-11/2, 'Weekly progress report, 29 Sept.-5 Oct. 1969'.

⁶⁶ National Archives, Ibadan (NAI), RCM BD1/168. ⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ T. Byrne, *Airlift to Biafra: Breaching the Blockade* (Dublin, 1997), 193.

⁶⁹ See Daly and Saville, 'History', 50.

⁷⁰ Thompson, *American Policy*, 59; see also *L'Osservatore Romano*, 29 June 1968; *Washington Post*, 18 Nov. 1968.

year, the massive famine deaths had been reduced significantly. In pursuit of their large-scale donation drives for Biafra, diverse groups and individuals discovered that maximum results came largely from the use of the twin tickets of genocide and religious war propaganda. But, while the religious crusade undertaken tacitly by the Christian churches overseas was good for the relief effort, it created problems for the Christians and the Church on the Nigerian side of the conflict.

The dilemma for the Nigerian Christians, especially their leaders, was how to publicly support, or contribute to, the humanitarian endeavours of their mother churches amid the mounting media attacks in Nigeria. The general public and the various levels of government deplored the perceived passivity of the Nigerian Christian churches, both Catholic and Protestant, in the face of the successful but destructive religious propaganda of their Biafran counterparts. The *Morning Post*, arguably the most critical of the churches during the war, described them in an editorial as being 'as unpatriotic as the politicians of the First Republic'.⁷¹ In the Nigeria of the 1960s, this was not a particularly pleasant association. In a goodwill message to the Nigerian Catholic bishops meeting in conference in September 1969, General Gowon, the head of state, extolled the achievements of the Catholic Church in Nigeria but at the same time expressed his 'dismay and disappointment' over the 'anti-Nigeria acts' of some members of the Catholic Church overseas, who had, among other things, 'dubbed our present crisis a religious war'.⁷² He expected the bishops as spiritual leaders to give unflinching support to the struggle for a united Nigeria. 'All we want of you', he said, 'is for you to tell the wide world the truth of our situation'.⁷³

A similar official coercive demand was also made on the leadership of the Protestant churches by the military governor of the Midwest, Lieut.-Colonel Samuel Ogbemudia, to get more involved in the national struggle. While addressing the 55th Baptist Convention in May 1968, he had this to say:

While Christian leaders in Britain and Ireland had been writing dangerously biased letters in newspapers and periodicals, Nigeria's Christian leaders have said nothing in reply. Instead, they have given the impression that their silence is a confirmation that the lies inspired in the World Council of Churches against the Federal Government by Sir Francis Ibiam are true For instance, if our own Christian leaders had the courage, early enough, to rebut the allegation that the Moslem North was trying to exterminate the Christian East, the rebels would not have received the moral, religious and financial support which has so enabled them to resist lawful authority for so long Just two weeks ago, when the bad had been done, *and after a lot of prodding*, the Nigerian Council of Churches belatedly came out, through their secretary, the Rev. Canon J.A. Falope, with a statement which even at this stage of the War was too feeble to give categorical support to the Federal Government.⁷⁴

By the middle of 1968, the Christian leaders in Nigeria had come to the general realization that their silence was jeopardizing the future of the

⁷¹ *Morning Post*, 26 July 1969.

⁷² AGC, 187.1 nige-02/1, 'Goodwill message by His Excellency Major-General Gowon to the Roman Catholic Episcopal Conference of Nigeria, 30 September, 1969'.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Quoted in *New Nigerian*, 8 May 1968 (emphasis added).

Church in Nigeria. Just how precarious life in Nigeria had become for the Catholic Church in particular is evident in the following report from Ibadan:

A crisis over involvement of Catholics in the Nigerian civil war that has been smouldering for some time has suddenly blown up to serious proportions. Sharp criticism of Caritas and of certain missionary priests has mounted in Press, on Radio and on TV. Some commentators have sought to bring the whole Catholic Church under censure and have even called for the expulsion of missionaries, citing the example of Guinea. A picture of Pope Paul VI has appeared in the daily newspaper, *The Morning Post*, captioned 'He is aiding the rebels' Such criticisms have brought acute and dangerous embarrassment to Catholics in the Federal area of Nigeria, and there are many fears as to the possible consequences. Members of the Legion of Mary report that in the course of their visitation duty they are being turned away from houses as 'the people who love war'.⁷⁵

On the Protestant side, the situation was no less precarious. Most members of the Christian Council of Nigeria, a registered member of the World Council of Churches (WCC), were on the Nigerian side of the conflict. The involvement of the WCC in the Biafran crisis, especially as it concerned the religious war propaganda, was received with deep concern in Nigeria, where all the Christians, both Catholic and Protestant, faced daily bashing in the press and radio. Nigerian delegations to any WCC international meeting therefore took it as a duty to make this concern known to the world body.

In the summer of 1968, a WCC conference was held in Uppsala and the Nigerian delegation, P. T. Odumosu and Bola Ige, representing the Christian Council of Nigeria, persuaded the Credential Committee to expunge the name 'Biafra' from all accreditation papers and made sure that a meeting scheduled to discuss 'Nigeria-Biafra' was never held.⁷⁶ A similar move was also made in 1969 at the All Africa Conference of the Roman Catholic Bishops in Kampala. In that meeting, Archbishop Aggey, the leader of the Nigerian delegation, 'made sure that no political matter was introduced'.⁷⁷ Given the overall yearning for a peaceful resolution of the conflict, these moves against the discussion of peace in international Christian gatherings appear rather puzzling. For Bola Ige, a trained legal practitioner, the opposition may have been formalistic. The Biafran delegates and observers at the WCC meeting came as representatives of the Christian Council of Biafra, an organization that was not a registered member of the WCC. Once that fact had been established, it followed that the delegates were not legally qualified to be partners in any peace discussion of the world body.

For Archbishop Aggey, on the other hand, the opposition accrued from considerations far more significant than the dictates of protocol.⁷⁸ Given the general pro-Biafra sentiments of the Christian world at the time, the possibility was that any discussion on Nigeria-Biafra could lead to some sort of

⁷⁵ International Fides Service (a news agency sponsored by the Pontifical Mission Society for the Propagation of the Faith), no. 2150, 11 Dec. 1968.

⁷⁶ Bola Ige, *People, Politics, and Politicians of Nigeria, 1940-1979* (Ibadan, 1995), 342.

⁷⁷ AGC, nige-02/1, 'Aggey opposes Church independent of Vatican'.

⁷⁸ The Biafran delegation to the conference, Archbishop Arinze and Bishop Godfrey Okoye, were officially invited to the gathering, but were regarded as observers and were not allowed to speak to the meeting: CDE, 'Minutes of Bishops' meeting held at the mission house, Ugiri, Umuahia, 17 Sept. 1969.

support for the breakaway region. Archbishop Aggey knew more than anyone else what such support would mean for the Catholic Church in Nigeria. The call for a National Church in Nigeria was loud and recurrent. In June 1969, a meeting of the West Africa Committee of the Anglican Bishops was held at Takoradi in Ghana, just a few weeks before the Catholic gathering in Kampala. During the Takoradi meeting, the Nigeria–Biafra crisis was discussed. Afterwards, the Nigerian church leaders who took part in the conference were castigated by the Christian Laity of Nigeria for the ‘tacit recognition’ given to Biafra. The leader of the Lagos branch of the association, Rev. S. A. Osaba, referred to the call for a National Church of Nigeria as ‘joyfully welcomed by all Christians’.⁷⁹ An editorial in the *Morning Post* entitled ‘Voice of the churches’, said that what the Nigerian churches needed was ‘their Henry VIII to break foreign incursion disguised as religion’.⁸⁰ The first question posed to Archbishop Aggey by journalists at the airport on arrival from Kampala was whether he would support the idea of a National Church of Nigeria. In his response, he said that he would prefer having his head chopped off to severing his loyalty to the Roman Catholic Church.⁸¹ The fact was that he had already saved his head in Kampala. Political talk on Nigeria–Biafra did take place in Kampala but, as Anthony Enahoro later revealed, there was an agreement not to talk about the Pope’s intervention publicly.⁸²

Incidentally, the idea of a National Church of Nigeria was conceived and spearheaded by Anthony Enahoro, the Federal Commissioner for Information. As a Roman Catholic, he was irked not only by Vatican intervention in the war but also by what he and other Nigerian Catholics perceived as a preferential concern for Igbo Catholics by the Pope and Christians of the Western world. Above all, the religious war propaganda did not take their allegiance to Christianity into account. As Msgr. Rodhain, the president of Caritas Internationalis, found out during his visit to Nigeria in February 1968, most of the daily attacks on the Catholic Church and the Pope in the press came from disaffected Catholics.⁸³ The propaganda rhetoric that the war was between Muslims and Christians had made them irritable and susceptible to spurious interpretations of official Catholic pronouncements. We have seen how the Pope’s revelation that he had sent relief materials into the enclave was interpreted as proof that he understood the conflict in Nigeria as between Christians and Muslims. A passing reference to ‘unbelievers’, by Cardinal Heenan in a sermon in Westminster Cathedral on 2 June 1968 as part of an interdenominational service on behalf of Biafra, caused a huge uproar in Nigeria. Again it was Enahoro who raised the dust at the time because, as he said, the Cardinal failed to appreciate the fact that he and several other cabinet members were Roman Catholics.⁸⁴

The activities of Nigerian students abroad are also worthy of note, especially in Europe and America. They were witnesses to the massive fundraising campaigns overseas in favour of Biafra. What disconcerted the Christian students the most was not only the flawed religious war

⁷⁹ *Morning Post*, 19 June 1969.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* 26 July 1969.

⁸¹ ‘Aggey opposes’.

⁸² *West Africa*, 9 Aug. 1969, 941.

⁸³ AGC, ‘Minutes of a Meeting of the Joint Church Aid’, Paris, 10 March 1969.

⁸⁴ *New Nigerian*, 10 June 1968.

propaganda but also what they perceived as one-sided support from the Pope and the Western Christian world. The Catholics among them were particularly worried about the involvement of the Pope and Caritas Internationalis. Like their counterparts in Nigeria, they spoke of 'inner conflicts' that had forced them 'to choose between the love for their country and the Catholic faith'. This was contained in a letter to the Pope by the Nigerian Union of Students in Germany, in which they announced their intention to send a delegation to Rome with the purpose of asking the pontiff to explain 'the Papal policy in Nigeria'.⁸⁵ Among other things, they described the Church's support for Biafra as 'a policy of indirect colonialism'.⁸⁶ The three-person delegation comprised Mr Etim Udoh, Mrs Adeola, and Mr Emmanuel Bello. By including a representative from each of the three main regions of Nigeria, the student body was sending a clear message that the whole Nigeria was united in its rejection of secession.

In May, 1968, the unrelenting 'prodding' of the Christians by government officials to counter the religious war propaganda in a united effort finally paid dividends when the Nigerian Council of Churches announced its resolve to send three separate delegations to the US, Canada, and western European countries 'to explain the true acts of the Nigerian crisis'.⁸⁷ In the words of Bishop Kale, the Anglican bishop of Lagos, the delegation would, among other things, 'counteract the world-wide opinion that the current crisis in the country is a religious one'.⁸⁸ Archbishop Aggey, the Chairman of the Nigerian Catholic Episcopal Conference, held a press conference on this occasion and also reiterated the need to tell the outside world that the war in Nigeria had no religious connotation.

A delegation of the Nigerian Council of Churches met the Lutheran Church Council in Hanover on 14 May 1968.⁸⁹ Top of the list of topics for discussion was the religious war propaganda, and this was dismissed with arguments that the conflict ran counter to the nature of religious wars. 'Our conflict', they stressed, 'is more complex than a religious war. Its roots are deep in history, culture, politics, economics, the miscalculations of statesmen, and the sheerest accident of circumstances'.⁹⁰ In sharp contrast to the sympathetic stance taken in 1966, details of the peace efforts of the Church and government of Nigeria were blended with accounts that were not designed to portray the Igbo in good light and that did not make any military or political sense.⁹¹ The Church in Germany was called upon to extend material assistance to the victims on both sides of the conflict and to provide a forum for discussions between Christians from both sides. From Hanover, contacts were made with the Vatican, the WCC, and the other German Protestant

⁸⁵ AGC, 187.1 biaf-01 A-F. 'The Nigerian Union of Students, Germany, to His Holiness, Pope Paul IV', Bonn, 24 Feb. 1969.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Daily Times*, 31 May 1968.

⁸⁸ *New Nigerian*, 31 May 1968.

⁸⁹ The delegation consisted of Rev. Father Sanusi (Catholic), Chief Ojo (Methodist), and Mr Onosode (Baptist); Archbishop Aboyade-Cole of the African Church missed the flight in Lagos and could not attend (AGC, 187.1 biaf-11/2).

⁹⁰ AGC, 187.1 biaf-11/2, 'A statement by the Christian Church in Nigeria on the current Nigerian situation'.

⁹¹ They suggested, for instance, that the July coup was to counter 'a further coup to eliminate officers in the army of Northern and Western origins who had escaped the January coup' (AGC, 187.1 biaf-11/2, 'Background notes on the Nigerian situation').

churches.⁹² Of weighty significance is the appraisal of the deputation and its mission by the German Lutheran Church Council, which reads as follows:

The delegation should be taken seriously on account of its membership and its message. While all the members have spoken objectively about specific political aspects of the conflict, they have nonetheless credibly and with much earnestness stressed that their mission is religious and not political and that their aim is the restoration of peace and the exposure of the truth.⁹³

A second delegation of Nigerian Protestant churches led by the Very Rev. F. O. Shegun, the Provost of the Anglican Cathedral in Lagos, visited Britain in June 1968. In a statement read to journalists, he reiterated the fact that there were more Christians in the rest of Nigeria than in the East, and that they had their right of place in government, the army, and the civil service. 'We emphasise this point', he said, 'because we feel that to read the war as religious does a disservice to the country and to the Church.'⁹⁴

In Britain, as in most Western countries, the religious crusaders on behalf of Biafra were drawn mainly from Catholic religious organizations and vibrant student Christian movements, who had come to regard the Nigerian conflict as religiously motivated following the 1966 massacres of Christians in the North. They were able to galvanize the support of high-ranking religious leaders such as Cardinal Heenan, Rt Rev. Butler, the Roman Catholic Bishop of London, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the Anglican Bishop of Birmingham.⁹⁵ Some of these church leaders were members of the House of Lords and the British government found their condemnation of its policy towards the conflict and its support for Biafra most embarrassing. While the Church of Scotland withdrew its support for Biafra at an early stage, the support of the Church of England did not wane until after the visit of the delegation of Nigerian Protestant church leaders. The Archbishop of Canterbury, who had earlier signed a petition promoted by the Committee for Peace in Nigeria, later made it public not only that the war in Nigeria had no religious connotation but also that he believed that the policy of the British government was 'the best that could be pursued in the difficult situation'.⁹⁶ This is in sharp contrast with his earlier view that the achievement of peace in Nigeria would become possible only when the British government 'openly recognises that Lord Lugard's artificial unity has disappeared politically beyond recall'.⁹⁷

By all accounts, the intervention by the Christian denominations had a positive impact on the federal government's conduct of the war. For the first time, the Christians themselves told the world bodies what to believe about

⁹² Father Sanusi visited Rome in person and submitted a brief statement on behalf of the delegation. In it he said: 'The Church is heartened by the knowledge that the world now acknowledges the fact that the war in Nigeria is not a religious one'. However, he considered it necessary to add that the Church 'deprecates the use of virulent publicity and the dissemination of half-truths calculated to inflame feelings rather than facilitate peaceful settlement and reconciliation' (AGC, 187.1 biaf-11/2).

⁹³ AGC, 187.1 biaf-11/2 (my translation from German original).

⁹⁴ *Daily Times*, 15 June 1968.

⁹⁵ William A. Ajibola, *Foreign Policy and Public Opinion: A Case Study of British Foreign Policy over the Nigerian Civil War* (Ibadan, 1978), 140.

⁹⁶ Quoted in *ibid.* 140; see also the *London Observer*, 7 Dec. 1969.

⁹⁷ Quoted in the *London Spectator*, 27 Dec. 1968.

the nature of the war and they began to listen. Among the most dramatic policy reversals was the one made by the WCC. At a meeting of the Joint Church Aid at Sandefjord, Norway, in December 1969, one of its divisions announced, to the utter astonishment of the delegates, its 'deep distress at the ambiguous position in which the tremendous effort [the airlift] has put Christian people, Churches and agencies because of its political side-effects'.⁹⁸ Shortly after this dramatic statement, the WCC pulled out of the Joint Aid for Biafra and advised its members in Biafra not to distribute relief materials in its name.

A separate Catholic delegation of Church leaders representing the ecclesiastical provinces of Lagos and Kaduna went to Rome in December 1968 to present the Nigerian position to the Pope and the Vatican, in accordance with the ecumenical decision reached by all Nigerian Christians in May 1968. The visit to Rome, which began on 4 December, generated extensive media attention both locally and internationally, and Archbishop Aggey took the occasion of a press conference at Ikeja airport to emphasize that the mission of the delegation was to promote in Rome some positive initiative for peace and reconciliation and not one of protest against the relief programme of Caritas, as was widely speculated.⁹⁹ This clarification had become necessary because of a public declaration in Lagos on 2 December by Bishop Finn of Ibadan that he and Aggey would soon travel to Rome in order to protest before the Pope against the involvement of the Catholic Church in the Nigeria–Biafra conflict. He lamented the fact that those he called 'deceived missionaries and organizations' were involved in military operations and hoped that the Pope would put an end to their activities.¹⁰⁰ By that time, the anti-Caritas and anti-Catholic media attacks had become so intense that the bishop was quoted as saying that 'if the Caritas relief to Biafra does not stop, my windows will be smashed'.¹⁰¹ In Rome, Msgr. Bayer, the secretary general of Caritas Internationalis, had no problems in convincing the delegation that the religious war propaganda was never an issue in Catholic official policy. He reiterated what he had had occasion to state several times since the allegation emerged, namely that:

Since the inception of the relief programme, at the time of the Monsignori Conway and Rocheau's mission, Caritas Internationalis avoided taking any such stand. Nor did Caritas ever affirm in any document that this was a religious war between Muslim Hausas and Christian Ibos.¹⁰²

When their lordships returned home from their visit to Rome on 16 December 1968, they became fearless defenders of Caritas, the Pope, and the humanitarian intervention of the churches in the breakaway

⁹⁸ JCA Press Release no. 120, 'Statement made at the 5th JCA Plenary Session, Sandefjord, Norway', 8 Dec. 1969; see also *The Times*, 2 Feb. 1970.

⁹⁹ *Daily Sketch*, 23 Apr. 1970.

¹⁰⁰ See *Afrika Presse Dienst (Africa Press Service)*, a newsheet circulated in German speaking countries), 2.68.

¹⁰¹ *Katholische Nachrichten Agentur*, a German version of 'Catholic News Agency', No. 15, 19 Dec. 1968.

¹⁰² NAI, RCM BD 1/168, 'Caritas Internationalis denies the charges formulated in the Press Release No. F.30001 of 26 November 1968 issued by the Federal Ministry of Information Lagos'.

region.¹⁰³ That was not exactly what the Nigerians expected of them and they made their feelings known. One newspaper article accused the bishops of 'adding more salt to injury' and wondered why they had to travel all the way to Rome in the first place.¹⁰⁴

While still in Rome, however, the Nigerian Catholic bishops did set in motion a process that led to the first instance of reconciliation during the Nigeria–Biafra War. They requested 'that serious and urgent consideration be given to the feasibility of a meeting of bishops representative of both sides in the conflict'.¹⁰⁵ In a subsequent letter of invitation to the Biafran bishops, the Vatican secretary of state, Cardinal Cicognani, expressed the hope that the meeting would 'serve to show forth the unity of the Episcopate in spite of the sad division from which those regions are suffering'.¹⁰⁶ On 3 February 1969, two delegates each from the three ecclesiastical provinces of Kaduna, Lagos, and Onitsha assembled in Rome for the much-publicized meeting. In an opening address, Msgr. Gallina, the secretary of civil affairs in charge of West Africa, emphasized the non-political stance and neutrality of the Pope in the Nigeria–Biafra conflict. 'The Holy See', he said, 'supports neither the Independence of Biafra nor the Unity of Nigeria.'¹⁰⁷ The Pope himself reiterated this dispassionate political stance in his address to the bishops at the end of their deliberations, when he let it be known that he had always approached the tragic events with what he called 'disinterested impartiality'.¹⁰⁸

During their deliberations, the bishops stressed the spiritual needs of their people, such as the sending of chaplains to accompany the invading Nigerian soldiers and pastoral activities in the liberated areas. The all-pervading discussion on whether or not the conflict had a religious connotation was given considerable attention. The Nigerian bishops, like the delegation from their Episcopal Conference in December 1968, wanted a statement that laid out unequivocally that the war was not a religious one. For their part, the Biafran bishops argued forcefully for the existence of some religious undertones in the conflict. In the end, a compromise was reached in a statement that was tellingly captioned, 'Unity of the hierarchy'. Among other things, it deplored the use of religion as an instrument of propaganda:

Our common concerns lift us above all separations made by men, and despite the efforts of those who would use religion as a weapon to divide us, we open our arms to embrace all our people in the bonds of friendship.¹⁰⁹

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As illogical as it may seem, the religious war rhetoric dominated political and religious debate in Nigeria and polarized society throughout the war.

¹⁰³ NAI, RCM BD 4/168. The joint statement issued by the bishops on arrival at Ikeja airport was in fact a resumé of a script submitted to them *sua sponte* (without being solicited) by Msgr. Dominic Conway, one of the papal envoys who had visited Nigeria and Biafra in Dec. 1967 and Feb. 1968 respectively. The Catholic hierarchy does not tolerate dissent among its ranks, as their lordships found out in Rome.

¹⁰⁴ *Morning Post*, 3 Jan. 1969.

¹⁰⁵ NAI, RCM BD 1/168, 'Memorandum on the Nigerian conflict'.

¹⁰⁶ AGC, 187.1 biaf-01 A-F, 'Cicognani to Arinze', Vatican City, 9 Jan. 1969.

¹⁰⁷ CDE, 'Meeting of the Bishops of Biafra at the mission house, Amichi, Onitsha, on Wednesday, the 26th February, 1969'. ¹⁰⁸ *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 61 (1969), 182.

¹⁰⁹ CDE, 'Unity of the hierarchy: bishops' statement from Rome', Feb. 1969.

Ojukwu said that he had just one regret in retrospect – that Biafra was not able to make enough use of the religious proposition.¹¹⁰ As he rightly admitted, there were two main constraining factors. First, the religious propaganda pitted Christianity clearly against Islam. To a large degree, this could be said of the relationship between the East and a greater part of the North, but certainly not of the rest of Nigeria where there was, and still is, no clear-cut religious dichotomy. Secondly, there was the case of disaffection and lack of cooperation from the Christians on the Nigerian side. The use of the religious propaganda, which ignored the faith and feelings of the Nigerian Christians, produced the direct opposite of the anticipated outcome: it alienated them and made them unsympathetic to the Biafran cause.

On the secessionist side, the dictates of the war gave thrust to the use of the religious propaganda. When the Biafran Directorate of Propaganda could not successfully use the pogrom of 1966 to elicit the support of the entire Igbo nation for the war effort, it quickly turned to a fancied threat to their collective self-identity, which their self-conscious Christian profession had become. This was the magic wand with which the propaganda outfit enlisted the unflinching support of the masses. It also became propitious to the relief campaigns of the international church organizations. According to Ojukwu, religious propaganda was used in order to achieve a dual purpose: namely, to galvanize a common identity and motivation among Easterners, and to secure the sympathy and recognition of the Christian world.¹¹¹ Indeed, the visits and support that Biafra received from international churchmen and organizations from the beginning of the war to its end helped to ‘reinforce the self-consciousness of a Christian state facing a Muslim *Jihad* supported by the household of faith’.¹¹²

The Nigeria–Biafra War, more than any other regional conflict in recent memory, demonstrated that relief cannot be separated from politics. In what is certainly more than a hint of political ambiguity, the Pope denied that the Church had engaged in politics ‘in the proper sense of the term’.¹¹³ This, in effect, is a tacit admission that, by violating the territorial sovereignty of Nigeria and by drumming up sympathy for the secessionist cause, the Church humanitarian organizations brought not only religion but also politics to bear on their relief efforts. The issues raised by Biafra, including the question of relief and religion and the whole idea of sans-frontierism, remain unresolved global concerns.

¹¹⁰ Interview with Ojukwu.

¹¹² Walls, ‘Religion’, 212.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹³ *West Africa*, 9 Aug. 1969, 941.