

Summary: A Symposium on Religious Conflict in Nigeria
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Nigeria is the largest country in the world with an evenly split population of Christians and Muslims. According to research by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, this population is perhaps the most intensely religious in the world. In a recent symposium hosted by the Council on Foreign Relations, "Religious Conflict in Nigeria," Nigeria experts and religious scholars examined the political compromises that maintain relative stability in Africa's most populous country. "To understand where Nigeria is headed, we need to understand the religious dynamics in Nigeria," said **Timothy S. Shah**, adjunct senior fellow for religion and foreign policy at the Council on Foreign Relations. Organized by Shah and **Walter Russell Mead**, the Council's Henry A. Kissinger senior fellow for U.S. foreign policy, this event was the first in a series of symposia at the Council integrating the study of religion and foreign policy, thanks to a generous contribution from the Henry Luce Foundation.

Since colonial times, Nigeria has been divided between a Muslim north and a Christian south. This division became more important after the country's independence in 1960. Before that time, thirty percent of Nigerians were neither Christian nor Muslim. Now, that figure is only one percent. Both faiths have grown, but Christianity has risen dramatically from some twenty-one percent of the population in 1950 to about forty-eight percent today. This increase in numbers heightened Christian participation in Nigerian politics, said **Father Mathew Kukah**, vicar general of the Catholic archdiocese of Kaduna, Nigeria. It also increased religious tension between Christians and Muslims. The Nigerian government reports up to fifty thousand deaths from religious violence since the mid-1990s, though this figure is disputed by other sources.

"Nigeria is really the test case of the 'clash of civilizations,'" said **John N. Paden**, Clarence J. Robinson professor of international studies at George Mason University. Though there has been an uptick in violence between Christians and Muslims, interfaith cooperation is a cornerstone of the modern Nigerian state, which was founded on a political compromise between the north and the south. An informal power-sharing arrangement shifts the office of president between a northerner and a southerner. In the April 2007 elections, Olusegun Obasanjo, a Christian southerner, was replaced by Umaru Yar'Adua, a Muslim northerner.

Panelists in the first session discussed the recent elections and their implications for relations between Christians and Muslims, emphasizing that the vote, marred by widespread rigging and irregularities, was a setback for Nigerian democracy. They were a "travesty," said **Peter W. Lewis**, director of African studies at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University. "These elections were worse than the 2003 elections, which were recognized to have been deeply flawed." However, this year's elections did not precipitate any significant ethnic or religious conflict. Kukah says it is important to note that people identified themselves as members of a political party rather than as Christian or Muslim, an indication that religious tension has decreased in the past five years.

Other symposium findings included:

- **There is not as much religious conflict as one might expect.** Because Nigeria is often typecast as a country split on religious lines, there is an expectation of conflict between north and south. Such expectations oversimplify both faiths. “Policymakers are totally ignorant about the internal conversations that are going on within Christianity,” said Kukah. Paden stressed the role that traditional Muslim rulers played in interfaith conflict resolution, noting that Muslims believe Nigeria is a “community of destiny” in which different religions should coexist and learn from each other.
- **When religious conflicts do arise, they often have political or economic roots.** The growing political assertiveness of Christians in the 1980s precipitated increased conflict with Muslims. However, religion has not been a dominant issue in politics for the last several years because of a power-sharing agreement, or “grand compromise,” that effectively neutralized the issue.
- **There are many different “brands” within each faith.** In Nigeria, Christians are Catholics, Protestants, Anglicans, and Pentecostals. The Muslim establishment comprises four strands: two groups of Sufis, the Izala movement, and those who observe sharia law. There are also fringe groups challenging the northern Muslim establishment. These groups are not powerful right now, but panelists cautioned they could gain adherents in the coming years. Paden noted that historically the Muslim establishment has sought to incorporate these groups, but this has recently become more difficult due to the country’s internationalization. Many Nigerian Muslims now make pilgrimages to Mecca and bring back different ideas from all over the world.
- **Pentecostalism is growing in popularity.** Pentecostalism is gaining adherents by competing with traditional Christian denominations. It is also gaining a foothold within the Catholic and Protestant churches; six out of ten Protestants identify as Pentecostals. While Muslims tolerate Catholics, Protestants, and even evangelicals, they don’t get along with the so-called “health and wealth” churches that try to convert people in Muslim territories. There is some evidence Pentecostals are meeting with success: “About two percent of Nigerian Pentecostals identify themselves as having converted from Islam,” said Mead.
- **The rise of religion can be directly linked to the weakness of the Nigerian state.** The Pentecostal church, in particular, helps its adherents solve problems that the Nigerian state cannot deal with. It helps Nigerians find jobs, meet potential spouses, and secure political appointments. “They listen to what you might call really genuine African problems that people face,” said Kukah. The introduction of sharia law in twelve northern states in 2000 was also a reaction to the weak state, stemming more from the desire to impose the rule of law in the period after military rule than any religious hardening, said Paden.
- **Religion is only one of many Nigerian identities.** Nigerians also identify themselves by ethnicity, region, and more recently, political party. These many identities serve as a moderating mechanism. However, Paden noted, the all-consuming nature of Islamic identity does eclipse other identities.

- **There is no religious component to the conflict in the Niger Delta.** Several panelists expressed concern about widespread perceptions, particularly in the United States, that militant groups in the oil-rich Niger Delta have ties to radical Islam. This notion is completely incorrect, they stressed, and in fact religion is virtually invisible in the Delta.
- **However, oil wealth plays a role in religious tensions.** Oil has “lubricated tensions between north and south,” said Mead. Southerners are richer than people in the north, but perceive themselves as poorer. The oil-rich southern states receive larger sums of money from the federal government than the northern states under the constitution’s oil revenue sharing agreement. This could lead to resentment among northerners, particularly if southerners continue agitating for an even greater share of oil revenues.
- **The political system is designed to mitigate religious and ethnic conflict.** “If Nigeria muddles through, it will not be by accident, it will be by design,” said Paden. While the power shift is the most important political compromise, other political mechanisms—including the federal character of the government and the new capital in Abuja—also help build interfaith and interregional bridges. Kukah added, “The unity of Nigeria is like a Catholic marriage. It may not be happy but it doesn’t break up.”
- **The political system suffers from a crisis of governance as well as power sharing.** “There is no religious crisis in Nigeria,” said Kukah. Rather, there is a crisis about access to power and a credible system of sharing power. The widespread election irregularities and perception that the vote was manipulated by political elites using patronage and violence to gain office has produced an “atmosphere of resignation and cynicism,” said Lewis. Most Nigerians, including religious leaders, are loathe to protest the elections because they are aware that even those elites who lost elections will cut deals with those who won to gain political appointments.

In the third session, panelists **Helima Croft** of Lehman Brothers, **Jean Herskovits** of Purchase College (SUNY), and Mead assessed the future political and economic landscape in Nigeria, commenting on how the country’s changing religious dynamics might influence the consolidation of democracy. This session, presided over by **Mora L. McLean**, president of the Africa-America Institute, was not for attribution.

Nigeria’s political compromise provides a model for other countries with large Muslim and Christian populations that face difficult policy choices, the symposium found, but for Nigeria itself to move forward it must reexamine and build on that compromise.