



GENUINE RELIGIOUS HARMONY: CARDINAL ONAIYEKAN OUTLINES AREAS OF CONCERN

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ABUJA, NIGERIA -

The Catholic Archbishop of Abuja, John Cardinal Onaiyekan has articulated issues that could enhance genuine and lasting religious harmony in the country. The cardinal's remarks were contained in his presentation to the German Bishops' Conference, during the programme: Study Day on Religious Freedom, held recently in Muenster, Germany.

Premising his presentation on the Nigerian situation Cardinal Onaiyekan spoke extensively on the relative peace in the country and the occasional clashes between Moslems and Christians which has now snowballed into a sustained action, as a result of the Boko Haram insurgency.

He remarked: "This now demands that we update our general perception of religion and violence in Nigeria. It is noteworthy that, beyond verbal tirades by some pastors, so far I am not aware of any violent groups claiming Christian inspiration. This seems to me to put a significant responsibility on our Islamic community to do more about "reining in their mad dogs". It is not immediately clear how much they are doing in this regard."

The cardinal continued: "All this seems to me to have exposed deeper factors often ignored or taken for granted which we now must face. It is not enough to hope to go back to the status quo ante. There are issues that we should dig up and address if we are to achieve genuine and lasting religious harmony in Nigeria."

The issues raised in respect of the above position of the cardinal included: the parallel communal life of the Christians and Moslems which has graduated to an integrated community, with difficulty associated with this integration; the Nigerian citizenship and the challenge of the national unity. Also identified is the need one legal system which does not give preference to any particular religion or group of people.

“The role and place of the Sharia in its many forms have been a matter of much debate and strong controversy in Nigeria. This is a major part of the problem of national integration mentioned above”, the cardinal noted.

He continued: “One lesson we should have learnt from the Boko Haram tragedy is that we should not encourage extremist and divisive religious attitudes in our community. In a multi-religious nation such as ours, we will do well to fashion our laws in such a way that every citizen is at home and equal before the same law of the land. This can be achieved respecting two complimentary principles, with a minimum of good will.”

He added: “First, it is not necessary for the law of the land to enforce every religious injunction. All that is required is that everyone is free to practice his or her religion, within the demands of the maintenance of good order in the community. Secondly, it is not necessary for the law of the land to legislate against any religious prohibition, provided no-one is forced by law to carry out such an action. I am among those who believe that our country will not enjoy lasting religious peace if we do not work towards the principle of “one nation one law”, and gradually leave religious laws to the religious communities to handle”

Cardinal Onaiyekan also mentioned that the issues of: conversion and mutual respect for each others religion, religion and politics, propagation through proposition and the imperative dialogue without imposition of any religion, should be adequately addressed before the country can boast of genuine religious harmony and peaceful coexistence.

He concluded: “What it means is that we need to insist on our rights and the rights of others in this regard. In Nigeria,

a majority religion in one place is a minority in another. It is therefore in the ultimate best interests of everyone if we all defend and uphold the rights of each to religious freedom, the second most important right after the right to life itself. This is the way of the future. Our nation cannot afford to lag behind.”