

CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT AND THE STRUGGLE FOR CIVIL LIBERTIES IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Religion in Nigeria is both a political force and a moral authority. Christianity, one of the two dominant religions, has historically spoken with the state on issues of rights, justice, and governance. The role of religion in the human rights arena is sometimes seen as problematic, as religious and secular human rights actors may disagree in certain areas. Since independence, civil liberties in Nigeria, including freedom of religion, expression, association, and due process, have been debated. A major religion, Christianity, has always been a critic and collaborator in this struggle with the state. The study sets out the historical context of Christian engagement, how Christians have engaged in civil struggle, with a focus on key cases and issues, the challenges facing Christian religious engagement, and the impact of civil engagement, opportunities, and strategies for effective civil engagement. This article examines Christian religious engagements and their role in the struggle for civil liberties in Nigeria. Based on historical and doctrinal analysis, constitutional law, and secondary literature, it argues that Nigerian Christian institutions and leaders have engaged in prophetic advocacy and have served as critics, mediators, and mobilisers in the defence of freedom of religion, speech, assembly, and association. This engagement has led to democratic accountability, but it has also created tensions with the state and conflicts among religions. The paper concludes that for civil liberties to be preserved, the engagement must move from sectarian defence to pluralistic defence of rights for every citizen regardless of faith. It also advocates for a pluralistic rights-based approach to Christian public engagement to secure the liberties of all Nigerians.

KEYWORDS: Christian Engagement, Civil Liberties, Nigeria, Religion, and Politics.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is one of the most religiously vibrant societies in Africa. Religion influences virtually every sphere of national life, including politics, education, economics, and social relations. Christianity and Islam constitute the two dominant faith traditions, while indigenous religions continue to influence cultural and social practices. Christianity occupies a particularly significant place in Nigeria's public domain due to its extensive institutional presence through churches, schools, hospitals, media organisations, and charitable foundations (Marshal, 2009). As a result, Christian institutions have become important actors in shaping public discourse and influencing

policy debates. Christian engagement in public life has often extended beyond worship and evangelism to include advocacy for justice, human rights, and democratic governance (Falola, 2021).

Civil liberties refer to fundamental rights and freedoms guaranteed to individuals against arbitrary interference by the state or other institutions (Heywood, 2021). These liberties include freedom of religion, expression, association, and due process, all of which are guaranteed under Sections 33-46 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. This section guarantees fundamental rights, including life, dignity, and personal liberty, freedom of thought, conscience, religion, expression, and assembly. Yet their realisation has been uneven, shaped by military rule, ethnic conflict, and religious contestation. Christianity as a religion has been deeply involved in these struggles. Churches, Christian NGOs, and intellectuals have spoken against authoritarianism, advocated for the rule of law, and mobilised citizens. In Nigeria, the struggle for civil liberties has been shaped by colonialism, military rule, religious tensions, and democratic transitions. The intersection of religion and civil liberties in Nigeria has become increasingly prominent amidst political, social, and economic challenges. As one of the most religiously diverse nations in the world, Nigeria faces significant struggles regarding the engagement of religious groups, particularly Christians, in advocating for civil liberties.

Christianity entered Nigeria's public sphere through missionary education and health services in the 19th century, producing elites that later championed anti-colonial and pro-democracy struggles. After independence, Christian leaders and organisations have continued to engage the state on rights issues. The relationship between Christianity and civil liberties in Nigeria has attracted increasing scholarly attention due to the significant role played by religious institutions in shaping political discourse, promoting human rights, and advancing democratic governance. Christianity has evolved beyond its traditional spiritual functions to become an important factor in civil society, advocating justice, accountability, and the protection of fundamental freedoms. Kukah (2011) argues that Christian organisations, churches, and faith-based groups have historically participated in efforts to protect citizens from oppression and injustice. Their involvement reflects biblical teachings on justice, human dignity, and protection of the vulnerable. As a result, Christian religious engagement has become a critical component of Nigeria's civil society and democratic development.

CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Christianity

McGrath (2023) defines Christianity as a faith tradition based on the person and work of Jesus Christ, emphasising the relationship between God and humanity through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. It encompasses beliefs, doctrines, worship practices, and ethical teachings that guide the lives of believers. Cox (2022) further defines Christianity as a global religious movement that centres on the teachings of Jesus Christ and seeks to transform individuals and societies through faith, love, justice, and service to humanity.

Religious Engagement

Religious engagement refers to the active involvement of religious individuals or institutions in social, political, economic, and cultural issues affecting society. It includes advocacy, social welfare services, peacebuilding, and participation in public discourse (Haynes, 2020). Putnam & Campbell (2010) further defined religious engagement as the active participation of individuals or groups in religious beliefs, practices, institutions, and faith-based activities that influence their social, moral, and civic behaviour.

Civil Liberties

According to Heywood (2021), civil liberties refer to the fundamental freedoms guaranteed to individuals and protected against arbitrary interference by the state. These freedoms include freedom of religion and belief, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, freedom of association, freedom of movement, freedom from discrimination, and political participation rights. Civil liberties are essential components of democratic governance because they enable citizens to participate freely in public affairs, expressing dissenting opinions, and holding governments accountable (Donnelly, 2023).

Liberation Theology Theory

Liberation theology emerged in Latin America during the 1960s and 1970s through the works of theologians such as Gustavo Gutierrez and Leonardo Boff. The theory argues that the Church should not remain neutral in the face of oppression, injustice, poverty, and human rights violations. Instead, Christians have a moral obligation to actively work for the liberation of oppressed people and the transformation of unjust social structures. According to Gutierrez (1973), Christian faith must be expressed through concrete actions aimed at promoting social justice, defending human dignity, and challenging systems that perpetuate inequality and oppression.

This theory is relevant to this study because it explains why churches and Christian leaders become involved in public affairs and civil liberty campaigns rather than limiting themselves to spiritual matters. It also provides a suitable explanation for Christian participation in the promotion of civil liberties in Nigeria. The theory emphasises the responsibility of religious institutions to challenge injustice, defend the oppressed, and contribute to social transformation. Christian engagement in human rights advocacy, democratic struggles, peacebuilding, and social justice initiatives in Nigeria reflects the principles of liberation theology.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF CHRISTIAN ENGAGEMENT

The history of Christianity in Nigeria dates to the 19th century with the arrival of European missionaries. Missionary activities led to the establishment of schools, hospitals, and social welfare institutions that contributed significantly to societal development. The establishment of mission schools produced many of Nigeria's early

political leaders and intellectuals who later spearheaded nationalist movements against colonial rule (Ajayi, 1965). During the colonial period, Christian missions not only evangelised, but they also went beyond evangelisation to advocate for educational and social reforms. They also introduced values associated with social reform, human dignity, and educational advancement. These initiatives laid important foundations for later struggles concerning citizenship rights and democratic participation. Consequently, Christianity became closely associated with social transformation and political consciousness (Falola, 1998). During the military dictatorship, particularly between 1966 and 1999, Christian leaders frequently criticised human rights abuses, political repression, and corruption. Churches served as platforms for mobilising public opinion against authoritarian rule and advocating democratic governance (Kukah, 1993).

Although missionary activities were often intertwined with colonial structures, churches occasionally provided spaces where indigenous populations articulated grievances against colonial injustices. Christian-educated elites became national figures in nationalist movements advocating self-determination and political independence. The Church's involvement in social reform contributed to the emergence of politically conscious citizenry capable of challenging oppressive structures (Ihonvbere, 2000). This historical experience established a precedent for later Christian engagement in human rights advocacy and domestic struggles.

According to Kukah (1998), Nigeria experienced prolonged periods of military governance between 1966 and 1999. During this era, civil liberties were often restricted through censorship, arbitrary arrests, detention without trial, and suppression of political opposition. Many Christian leaders emerged as outspoken Christian critics of authoritarian governance. Churches condemned corruption, electoral manipulation, and human rights abuses. Religious leaders utilised sermons, pastoral letters, and public statements to challenge military excesses and advocate democratic reforms. Studies on the Nigerian Church indicate that religious institutions became major civil society actors during democratic struggles and significantly contributed to the eventual restoration of civilian rule (Marshall, 2009).

CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT IN CIVIL STRUGGLE

Christian religious engagements in civil struggles will be discussed in these forms;

Human Rights Advocacy

One of the most important contributions of Christianity to civil liberties in Nigeria is human rights advocacy. Christian organisations consistently defend principles of justice, equality, and human dignity. Churches frequently issue public statements condemning human rights violations and demanding government accountability. Studies on Christianity and human rights in Nigeria demonstrate that Christian teachings provide a moral framework for opposing abuses of power and promoting responsible governance. Christian organisations have consistently advocated respect for constitutional rights and the rule of law. The church's human rights advocacy extends to issues such as unlawful detention, torture, electoral

violence, extrajudicial killings, restrictions on freedom of expression, corruption, and abuse of vulnerable populations. Through pastoral interventions and public campaigns, Christian leaders have sought to ensure that governance remains consistent with principles of justice and human dignity. Kukah (1993) further explains that the Catholic Church, through the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria (CBCN), has issued numerous statements condemning injustice, corruption, and poor governance. Similarly, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) has frequently advocated policies aimed at protecting citizens' rights and promoting democratic accountability. Christian teachings emphasise that all human beings are created in the image of God and therefore possess inherent dignity and rights. This theological principle has inspired many Christian leaders to challenge systems that tend to violate human dignity and social justice (Boff & Boff, 1997).

Defence of Religious Freedom

According to Harris as captured by Usim (2025:55), "Freedom is the liberty given to humans for the exercise of one's rights, powers, desires, and wishes, according to one's desires, without external restraints, while freewill is the human power to act without the constraint of necessity, fate, prior causes, or divine intervention, as one acts out of his/her discretion." Such a distinction would make one understand the current situation in Nigeria. One can say that Nigeria is in the eye of the storm for insecurity and persecution, where the rights of minorities, including Christians, are violated with reckless abandon. Nigeria is now a country where being a Christian is synonymous with martyrdom. Beyond the figures reported in the media, issues of religious freedom in the country are real and grave (Cornerstone Series, 2022). Freedom of religion remains a central civil liberty issue in Nigeria. Religion, represented by churches, religious communities, and other actors, is also a significant factor in the protection and promotion of human rights in the world. The central understanding of the human being starts with the idea that God was the creator of all things. He made man in His image and likeness; this image of God in man means that whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed (Matthew & Solomon, 2025). Leaders within the Christian community have repeatedly emphasised the importance of maintaining Nigeria's secular constitutional framework and protecting religious pluralism. Churches have drawn attention to incidents of religious discrimination, attacks on places of worship, and restrictions on religious practice. Their advocacy has contributed significantly to national and international discussions concerning religious freedom in Nigeria.

Promotion of Democratic Governance

Studies have shown that religion can strengthen democracy by promoting values such as fairness, justice, accountability, pluralism, and the protection of minority rights. Religious institutions often encourage civic engagement and contribute to democratic consolidation through advocacy and public education. Christian leaders have also spoken against electoral fraud, corruption, and abuse of

public office (Falola, 2021). By demanding transparency and accountability, churches contribute to strengthening democratic institutions and protecting citizens' rights.

Social Justice and Welfare Advocacy

Civil liberty extends beyond legal freedoms to include social conditions necessary for human flourishing. Christian organisations contribute significantly to social welfare through educational institutions, healthcare facilities, poverty alleviation programmes, humanitarian assistance, and community development projects (Ter Haar, 2011). Churches provide humanitarian support in conflict-affected areas to support internally displaced people, victims of violence, widows, orphans, and marginalised communities. Haynes (2020) explains that these interventions enhance social inclusion and promote human dignity. Such activities demonstrate that Christian engagement in civil liberties consists of both advocacy for legal rights and practical efforts to improve citizens' quality of life.

NATURE OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN NIGERIA

The Cornerstone Series (2022) posits that Nigeria has more than 400 languages and 250 ethnicities, as well as rich cultural and religious identities. As such, Section 10 of the 1999 Constitution states that Nigeria is a "secular state." Nwauche (2008) further states that the Constitution also prohibits both States and the Federal Government from adopting any religion as a state religion; and guarantees to everyone the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, as well as the right to freedom from discrimination on grounds of religion. Yet, under the fundamental objectives and directive principles of the state policy, Chapter II of the Constitution enjoins the state to provide facilities for, among other things, religious life. This, in addition to the provision of the Sharia penal code in the Constitution, provides a cover for the apparent superiority of one religion over others and the mindless disregard for religious liberty the nation is currently witnessing. Ogbu, as cited in Cornerstone Series (2022), observes that "while most Christians argue for the separation of the Nigerian state from religion, most Muslims advocate the fusion of religion, the state, and the law." To many of them, the Sharia ought to govern the totality of the life of a Muslim from cradle to grave." The happenings today reveal that there is never a time in the history of this nation when ideological divisions have widened and weakened the common ground and the nation's civic life. This selective perception and treatment meted out to Christians is rooted in religious superiority and policy somersaults.

Christians have been killed by angry mobs for reportedly defaming Islam, insulting the Prophet, or committing blasphemy with impunity. Evangelist Eunice Elisha was killed on July 9, 2016, for preaching in Kubwa, Abuja, FCT. Mrs. Bridget Abgahime was beheaded in the same year by a mob of religious extremists who accused her of defaming the Islamic religion. In March 2021, Talle Mai Ruwa was killed and burned by youths in Sade, Bauchi State, for allegedly insulting the Prophet of Islam. In May 2022, Deborah Yakubu, a female student of the Shehu Shagari College of Education in Sokoto, was murdered and burnt alive on blasphemy claims.

A Muslim, Ahmad Usman, was recently stoned and burnt alive in Abuja after being accused of blasphemy.

Researchers at Open Doors UK recorded the killing of more than 4,650 Christians in Nigeria in 2021 alone – making the country one of the most dangerous places for Christians. These persecutions in Nigeria take the form of torture, harassment, beheading, loss of ancestral home, imprisonment, beating, kidnapping, threats, rape, and loss of family. Christians are also marginalised by government policies and practices. Discrimination against Nigerian Christians through the enactment of laws, policies, and government-led initiatives – particularly in the north – indicates a strong preference for the Muslim population and further restricts the full exercise of religious freedom for non-Muslims. Northern Christians are subjugated under the Fulani Emirate System and denied freedom of worship or land acquisition for church buildings.

This ill treatment is in addition to the denial of equal rights to education, specifically admission into public institutions and employment opportunities. Some government policies are enacted to give an advantage to Muslims. A clear example was in 2019, when some Arewa youths under the Coalition of Northern Groups (CNG) gave southern leaders 30 days to accept the Rural Grazing Area (RUGA) policy intended to favour Fulani herders in peace and a 30-day ultimatum for President Buhari to implement it. The Punch Newspaper reported that the project was suspended after a public outrage. On August 7, 2020, President Buhari signed the Companies and Allied Matters Bill into law to regulate the activities of religious bodies, including investigating their finances. This law excluded the Islamic institutions, which were covered by Sharia law's penal code. Nwauche (2008) posits that a religious organization is allowed by law to operate and exist in an unincorporated form, as any form of registration will most likely be unconstitutional. In similar circumstances, Christian parents woke to attempts by the Ministry of Education to merge Christian Religious Knowledge (CRK) and Islamic Religious Knowledge (IRK) in the basic curriculum in 2017. While all students are forced to take Arabic and Islamic studies as compulsory courses, Islamic students do not take CRK where it is taught. Christians saw this merger as a ploy to enforce the teaching of Islam on Christians. Nwauche (2008) further asserts that in the northern part of the country, IRK is taught and promoted as opposed to CRK, while the reverse is the case in Southern Nigeria.

CHALLENGES TO CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT

Nigeria is ranked seventh on the 2025 World Watch list as one of the worst places for Christians to live. Radical ideologies, weak institutions, and deep-rooted social divisions have created an atmosphere where individuals, particularly religious minorities, are at constant risk. Extremist groups often manipulate religious beliefs to justify violence, recruit followers, and stoke divisions (Wiberforce, 2025). Meanwhile, government efforts to address these threats are frequently underfunded or inconsistent, sometimes eroding public trust. The lack of justice for victims of religiously motivated attacks only worsens the cycle of fear and retaliation. Despite its

contributions, Christian engagement in civil liberty struggles faces several challenges. Below are some challenges to the Church's efforts to advance religious freedom as discussed by the Cornerstone Series (2022).

Inconsistent International Engagement

Although there are attacks and kidnappings of Christians across Nigeria, no consistent strategy to address these systemic and recurring challenges to religious freedom in the country. The U.S. Department of State designated Nigeria as a "Country of Particular Concern" due to religious freedom violations perpetrated or allowed in the country. This was the first of such designations. However, the State Department removed this designation from Nigeria in 2021, despite continued religious freedom violations across the country. Despite the Church's broad international engagement, the lack of consistent and strategic international initiatives on religious freedom concerns has relegated the issue to a matter of domestic politics.

Limited Public Engagement/Protest

Although the CBCN organised two significant protests to draw attention to the persecution of Christians in Nigeria, these protests were not sustained. Very few Christians, including members of the clergy, participated in these protests because of security concerns.

Underdeveloped Reporting Process

Cases of abductions, killings, forceful conversions, and other violations are not consistently documented and reported. The underdeveloped reporting process often results in anecdotal stories without adequate documentation or factual analysis. For instance, the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria (CSN) is yet to have a full list and profile of all the priests and Christian adherents (male and female) who have either been killed or kidnapped in various parts of the country. As a result, the government, as well as international actors, are not compelled to respond decisively to violations.

Lack of Unified Christian Voice on Religious Freedom Concerns

Christians in Nigeria are unable to speak with one voice on matters relating to religious freedom. This lack of cohesion among denominations significantly undermines efforts to address challenges to religious freedom in Nigeria.

Limited Legal Strategy

Although a few significant cases, like that of Ese Duru, involved legal action, the Church in Nigeria is often concerned with moralising matters rather than resorting to legal action. The legal teams for defendants in cases, in contrast, can boast remarkable support. For example, more than 50 lawyers were in court to defend the suspected killers of Deborah Yakubu in 2022. 21Wilberforce (2025) further explains that Nigeria continues to face serious challenges in safeguarding religious freedom, especially in the face of rising extremism.

STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT

This work recommends the following strategies for effective engagement:

1. A universal rights frame should be adopted. Aside from biblical texts, arguments in the 1999 Constitution and international human rights law should be a basis for building broader coalitions.
2. International advocacy and human rights engagement should be explored. Churches should expand partnerships with civil society and human rights organisations, at home and abroad. Well-documented reports reach beyond Nigeria's borders. They inform global human rights organisations to rally support for the persecuted church. The church should take advantage of its diaspora population to get the West to invest in moral, logistical, and financial support towards advancing religious freedom.
3. The government should guarantee constitutional protections for freedom of religion and expression. Understanding and implementing the constitutional obligations to minority religions will assist in the reduction of religious intolerance.
4. Religious leaders should intensify interfaith peacebuilding initiatives. They should partner with Muslims and secular groups on issues like police reform and due process, as it affects all citizens. This can be achieved through education, dialogue series in inter- and intra-faith engagements, as well as other multimedia approaches.
5. Christian institutions should continue promoting democratic accountability and civic participation. Institutional accountability is needed to develop an internal mechanism to ensure Christian leaders are not co-opted by partisan politics. The church must not shy away from engaging in legal action where it is needed, especially in cases of forced marriage/conversion. Such litigation would draw public attention nationally and internationally. This responsibility lies solely with the Justice Development and Peace Commission (JDPC).
6. Holding the government accountable is also another strategy. When violence occurs, the public has a right to know what went wrong, and documenting these incidents with clarity and accuracy empowers communities to demand justice and reform. It also pressures authorities to take responsibility and protect citizens regardless of their faith. Christian organisations should strengthen human rights education among their members. To this end, the CAN national secretariat should create a research desk that accurately and consistently documents such incidents against Christians.

CONCLUSION

Christian religious engagement has remained an important component of Nigeria's struggle for civil liberties. Through advocacy, humanitarian action, peacebuilding, and civic education, Christian institutions have contributed

significantly to the protection of human rights and democratic development. The church's influence extends beyond spiritual matters into the broader pursuit of justice, accountability, and human dignity. Nevertheless, challenges such as insecurity, political interference, religious extremism, and internal fragmentation continue to limit the effectiveness of Christian advocacy. A credible path to religious harmony in Nigeria lies in the recognition of Nigeria's *de facto* religions and attendant constitutional obligations of equality and non-discrimination, which entail respect, recognition, and promotion of the beliefs, values, and practices of other religions. Many cases of religious intolerance in all parts of Nigeria stem from a lack of understanding of the practical consequences of the constitution. Nigeria's diversity is one of its greatest strengths, but only if people of different faiths and backgrounds can live together in peace and dignity. A more tolerant and peaceful Nigeria is achievable through collaboration and resilience. Legal protections for religious rights must be enforced, and security forces should be trained to act impartially. Community-led peace efforts and interfaith dialogue can heal divisions and build mutual understanding. Education that promotes civic responsibility and respect for diversity is also key. The Nigerian church must also deepen collaboration with civil society organisations, promote interfaith partnership, and maintain its commitment to justice and the common good. To achieve progress, these efforts must be supported by citizens, religious leaders and communities, the media, and the international community.

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