

**UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM**

**OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR STEMMING NIGERIA'S
RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE**

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MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Ladies and gentlemen, welcome – good afternoon. Thank you for coming. My name is Michael Cromartie, and I'm the vice-chairman of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. The commission, as you know, is an independent, official U.S.-government commission created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor religious freedom worldwide, and to provide policy recommendations to the president, the secretary of state and to Congress on ways in which American foreign policy can better protect and promote religious freedom worldwide.

One way we help monitor and address religious freedom is to conduct briefings like this on Capitol Hill. And we thank you for coming today to this briefing, which is titled "Opportunities and Challenges for Stemming Nigeria's Religious Violence."

Now, we're very fortunate to have with us two outstanding leaders from Nigeria: His Eminence Muhammad Sa'ad Abubakar III, the sultan of Sokoto, and His Grace, the archbishop of Abuja, the Reverend John Onaiyekan. Please forgive me beforehand for destroying your name.

The sultan is widely recognized as being the spiritual leader of Nigeria's Muslim community. Prior to his becoming the sultan, His Eminence was a brigadier general in Nigeria's army, and he's held various military commands, ranging from commanding peacekeeping forces in West Africa to being military attaché to Pakistan.

The archbishop, in addition to his significant duties as the Roman Catholic bishop of Nigeria's capital city, was recently elected as president of the Christian Association of Nigeria, the predominant umbrella organization representing all of Nigeria's Christian community, including Roman Catholic, Protestant, evangelical, Pentecostal and indigenous Christian communities.

Together it can be said, clearly, that these two figures represent many of the faithful in Nigeria. Having heard about the religious dynamism in Nigeria, we know you have an awesome responsibility. Recognizing the importance of relations between these communities, in 1999 the Nigerian government created the Nigeria Interreligious Council, or NIREC, and the sultan and the archbishop are currently co-chairs of this important council. NIREC was formed as a platform for dialogue between Muslim and Christian leaders, and it's comprised of 25 leaders from each faith tradition.

Traditionally, the sultan of Sokoto and the president of the Christian Association of Nigeria has served as co-chairs of NIREC. With the assumption of the current Sultan and the archbishop to co-chairmen of NIREC, the Council has reportedly been reinvigorated. And I'm told these two men have been very proactive in peace-and-reconciliation efforts throughout Nigeria. We look forward to hearing about the changes they have brought to NIREC, and their vision for the future of NIREC.

And, yet, as Nigeria's recent history indicates, tensions between Muslim and Christian community in the country still exist. Despite the best efforts and intentions of such fine leaders as we have here today, episodic sectarian violence and atrocities are still occurring. This was most recently seen on a massive scale in the Nigerian city of Jos, where, in November 2008 anywhere from several hundred to as many as 3,000 people were killed, and numerous churches, mosques and other buildings were burned.

Our commission recently visited Nigeria, and some of our views from that trip will be reflected in the release of our annual report next Friday, May the 1st – to which you're all invited. We met survivors and eyewitnesses to this violence – we saw the burnt churches and mosque – and our commission has been concerned about what appears to be rising tensions between faith communities, and the continued failure of the Nigerian government to hold perpetrators of violence accountable.

Since 1999, virtually no one has been prosecuted or convicted for the numerous bouts of communal and sectarian violence that have erupted there. Due to its persistent concerns about continuing violent communal conflicts along religious lines, in which more than 12,000 people have been killed since 1999, the commission has retained Nigeria on its watch-list since 2002, when it was created.

Now, as many of you know, Nigeria is a populous country – is the most populous country in Africa, and one of the few countries in the world with such a large and almost equal Muslim and Christian population. Few nations have a similar composition, which makes relations between these two giant faith traditions even more important.

So, ladies and gentlemen, we're honored to have two distinguished leaders with us today. And we look forward to hearing about the opportunities and the challenges you and your country face in addressing the recurring sectarian violence. Your views on the ways to move forward, and the ongoing dynamics between the Muslim and Christian community in Nigeria, will be very useful for us to hear. Our audience will also benefit from hearing about your efforts to reinvigorate the Nigerian Inter Religious Council, and also about your outstanding leadership with the Council.

We would appreciate 10 minutes of comments from each of you, and then we will have a moderated question-and-answer session with the commissioners and with you, the audience. So please join me in welcoming the sultan and the archbishop. The sultan will go first. Thank you, sir.

MUHAMMAD SA'AD ABUBAKAR: (In Arabic.) I bring greetings to you, and prayers, for a very peaceful world, where justice reigns supreme through all nooks and crannies of this globe.

I thought we were supposed to have an – (inaudible) – session with the audience here, and I didn't, therefore, prepare any write-up. But some month back, I believe I was in U.S., at the invitation of the Council on Foreign Relations, where I delivered a paper at – (inaudible).

Two of the main papers were on Islam and democracy in Nigeria, where I touched on so many salient issues, which a lot of non-Muslims sort of didn't know.

And the second one are the United States Institute of Peace, in Washington, D.C., on the Muslim-Christian relationship in Nigeria. And such papers – (inaudible) – and are on the Internet – which, I believe, you could reach out to them. So I don't intend to spend so much time talking about religious crisis in Nigeria, because we all know what type of crisis we have – always been having in Nigeria.

Most times, over 70, 80, 90 percent of such crises were not religious – were political, but given religious connotation. We all know the level of poverty in Africa, and also in our country, Nigeria. And – (inaudible) – politicians now use jobless youth for their own political means or political gains, and there's a crisis, such crisis is given the connotation of religious crisis.

When the Muslim loves a Christian, or a Christian loves a Muslim, and the two start fighting, and then their friends joined, now becomes religious crisis. And this is what we keep on saying: It's not true.

People manipulate youth, in particular, in the name of religion. And we believe the leaders have a duty to get to the root of all this and stop it. And that's what the Nigerian Interreligious Council is doing – and which myself, and the archbishop are co-chairing. We've travelled around the country, and some parts of the world – like the U.S. here. Last July we were in Los Angeles, and we shared our views with those who listened.

Some few weeks back, your commission was in Nigeria, and had a meeting with us, and I believe you must have – it must have been an eye-opener to you, because what you had while you here in U.S. was quite different what you have seen, based on your impressions with the Muslim and Christian leaders there. And even some state governors. Before you are coming, I am sure you were told that the Joss crisis, which was the most recent, was based on the forceful implementation of sharia system in that city. But it was far, far from that. But I'm sure – (inaudible) – Muslim leaders during your meetings with them, I think you must have known the truth by now.

One issue that's been biting, and is still biting, is the implementation of sharia legal system in the country. Where – (inaudible) – have been saying it time without number, and I will not stop saying it until people come to agree with me. Every Muslim, wherever he is – not only in Nigeria – leads his life according to sharia, as a Muslim. So I don't have to get up to force anybody to live, or lead his life, according to sharia. You are born and brought up in that aspect.

What's brought the controversy was the implementation of the hudud aspect – that is the punishment aspect of the sharia. And I have said it times without number: sharia hudud aspect, or sharia legal system, is only applicable to Muslims. Go around anywhere in Nigeria – you will not see a Christian being sent to sharia, our courts, because he was caught drinking alcohol. But, of course, based on the number or the population of a particular state – let me take example Sokoto, which is about three-and-a-half million people. And a majority of these three-and-a-half

million people are Muslims. And, therefore, the state government now says: You must respect certain religious, or certain Islamic injunction in this part of the town.

For example, where I live, nobody is going to raise an eyebrow and say: Why? It's just that you must respect somebody's religion; you must respect somebody's culture and tradition. And these are the issues that we are still grappling with, on how to get a very good answer. And that's why the Christians, the Muslims, and even the nonbelievers – which, of course, we have. There are people who are not Christians, who are not Muslims. So these are issues that we are still grappling with. And I believe, based on our commitment of the Inter Religious Council, we will definitely – Insha'Allah (ph) – (inaudible) – come to a solid agreement on what it is or what it's not.

Most of the time when we go for meetings, and the two of us are to speak, we'll normally allow one person to speak. And the times when two of us – that's myself and the archbishop – speak, you'll find 90 percent similarities on what we've said to the public. He will add to that one. And, therefore, we are working together, because we believe in one thing: that we're all human beings, created by God Almighty; we're all free to practice which religion we want to practice, without any hindrance; and we're all free to do what we want, according to the laws of the land.

And, with that – because I know a lot of questions will come up, which, maybe, I haven't covered before. In my earlier papers I presented – and I'll be ready to take such questions from anybody in the audience. So, once more, thank you for the invitation to come and share our views – to see us together, sitting once more, talking to you as a group – as one group – and also to hear what we have to say to you. And then listen to your questions, which, hopefully, hopefully, will give you satisfactory answers.

So thank you for listening, and –

MR. CROMARTIE: Thank you.

MR. ABUBAKAR: – may God continue to bless all of us.

MR. CROMARTIE: Thank you, Your Eminence – thank you very much. Archbishop?

ARCHBISHOP JOHN ONAIYEKAN: I'm grateful for this opportunity once again to sit together with His Eminence the sultan, to at least tell our story. I'm looking at the topic that is put here – “Opportunities and Challenges for Stemming Nigeria's Religious Violence.” I must say that I didn't come with that kind of theme in mind.

I was thinking more about issues of religious freedom, and to religious freedom and the states of religious freedom in Nigeria, and I thought that would be the major focus of interest. And having lost my flight yesterday morning from Abuja, I had thought I wouldn't even be here today. So I went back to room and drafted a small paper, which I sent by e-mail to David, should, at least, I will be present. But now that I'm here, live, I am not going to read the paper, but I feel free to distribute it to anybody who cares. I'll just make some general remarks.

I wanted to, again, confirm what the sultan has said, that most of the violence, conflicts, that are called “religious” in Nigeria are simply not so, per se. Also, because there’s a lot of violence in our country – there’s violence in the Niger Delta; there’s violence, sometimes, in the West; there’s violence even within Hebrewland. And nobody ever talks of religious violence in those places – maybe because there are no Christians and Muslims fighting over any particular issues.

But once there’s violence in Joss; in Kaduna; Kafranchan, and, especially, when the violence is also largely connected with long-standing rivalries between different ethnic groups – different interest groups. And especially when this line of division happened to also coincide with the line of Muslim and Christian, then it becomes much easier for those who analyze the situation to simply say: The Muslims and the Christians are at it again.

I think it is important to continue to say that these so-called “religious violence” are hardly ever for religious purposes. I always say that we have never fought in Nigeria over whether Jesus is God or not. And in my opinion, that is a major religious issue that differentiates a Christian from a Muslim. Nor have we ever really fought over whether Muhammad is a true prophet or not.

The things that people fight over is who wins election and who doesn’t; whose – (inaudible) – cows and goods, and who doesn’t; sometimes, too, how many people does a government sponsor for sponsorship to Mecca, and how many to Rome? Or maybe even issues about: Do we get land for church or not? Or land for – the matters that are not specifically religious. They are matters that has to do with simply rivalries between people, between groups, about what they consider their own interests. I imagine it is very difficult to separate the two, but we shall continue to say so.

And I think the rule of us as religious leaders is to try, as much as we can, to liberate religion from these issues – and come out clearly, and let people see what it is they are fighting over. Remove the mask, so they’ll clearly see the real thing.

And especially where you find that those who claim to be champions of religious violence are often not very good specimens of their religion. Sometimes that’s why in the front line of the fight in the Christian-Muslim quarrel are not very good Christians, when you look at them carefully – and, therefore, probably not very good Muslims, either. And if we look at things in that direction, then we may – we’ll be able to separate things.

And I don’t think this is a problem that we have only in Nigeria – it’s the story of humanity from the world, from time gone by. The Crusades that left Europe to the Middle East, to liberate the Holy Land – we all know how it – the whole story. Just as the response from the Islamic community – the jihads against the Crusades. At the end of the day, you find that it is human beings fighting over control of resources, power, greed.

And so my feeling is that if we can manage to organize our community in a way that, at least, there’s a minimum of good order. His Eminence has mentioned rampant poverty –

unemployment of youth. You can manage to organize our community in a more decent fashion, a lot of these so-called “religious riots,” or even other riots, will greatly reduce, if there’s more education of the people – because there’s nothing wrong – indeed, as a Nigerian, I’m very proud of the fact that we Nigerians take our religion very seriously, whether Christian or Muslim. And maybe precisely because of that, mischievous people easily manipulate these legitimately strong emotions that we have about our faith.

For example, political. Politicians are very adept at manipulating emotions. If you want to win an election, you look around your community. You find that they are mostly majority Muslim, and you calculate: If I can get all the Muslims on my side, I will win the election. So the message is clear: Can’t you see that I’m a good Muslim? Vote for me. And especially if his opponent is a Christian: Don’t vote for that man. But it’s nothing to do with religion. It will use the same argument if it was ethnic belonging.

And so the task that we have before us is to do our best to constantly let people know what religion is all about, and maybe go beyond this effort to douse tensions or resolve conflicts – because conflicts will always be there. Go beyond it, to the kind of thing we are trying to do now – namely, working together in a positive direction to tackle common concerns, as Christians and Muslims.

May I say that normally Nigeria – we live very well together. And I think we have a good record in that country, where you have 70 million Christians, 70 million Muslims living together. And managing – more or less, managing. Go to Nigeria – you’ll see us together in the same offices; the same schools; even, sometimes, in the same family. Where the same armed forces – His Eminence the sultan was in the Nigerian army. It cannot be – we’ve never had our soldiers fighting one another because one is Muslim and one is Christian. So we have, really, appreciably succeeded in living well together. Never mind our moments of madness, which is caused by a whole lot of other things.

Before I leave room for the general discussion, I also see a major problem with the level of the state responsibility. It was mentioned here that when there’s all this big crisis, government runs around – set up commissions of inquiry. But nothing ever comes out of it. Sometimes people are fingered – names are mentioned – where they say: No, you can’t touch them. No – oh, you can’t. Nobody’s ever arrested. Well, for as long as we continue like that, people will take advantage of the situation.

May I make a final correction? Unfortunately to say, a mistake, an error I keep hearing, that NIREC was established by the government. The Nigerian Inter Religious Council was not established by the Nigerian government. It was established by the leadership of Christians and Muslims, who, freely among themselves, decided to meet and start talking.

This intention got to the attention of government, and they enthusiastically welcomed it. You might say – I wouldn’t use the word “government-sponsored” – I would say “government-supported.” But we have no apologies for getting government support for the work that we are doing, because we think it is a valuable service for our community. And that is what our common fronts are meant for, anyway.

So it is important to note that this is not a government – (inaudible) – not a government agency, or like your USC –

MR. CROMARTIE: U.S. commission.

ARCHBISHOP ONAIYEKAN: U.S. commission – it is not that at all. It is a decision on the part of the two bodies to meet.

I know, and I can say this with all sense of authority, because I was party to the actual – the idea on how the whole NIREC took off, between the current leadership and the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs. And we have been working along those lines.

And we believe that that is the best way to be able to really work together. Because once a government agency, you're dependent, totally on government. Not only for your activities and your programs, but maybe also for the results of your activities. Thank you.

MR. CROMARTIE: Thank you, Archbishop. We would like to get you in on the questions in a moment, but first the commissioners have several questions. And then we'll invite you to ask questions of your own.

I'd like to begin, then, for the archbishop. You say most of the violence – it's not religious, per se, and it hardly ever is for religious purposes. What, then, do you see are the root causes of the recurring violence? What are the root causes?

ARCHBISHOP ONAIYEKAN: The root causes – violence, obviously, very often come out of grievances that have not been addressed. Grievances for, maybe, perceived injustice, whether true or false. Sometimes, too, I must say, we must agree that at times, too, there are utterances of certain religious – not even leaders, so much as preachers – that could provoke anger, annoyance. And when that is thrown to the level of ordinary people, who are not so well-educated, they can easily be charged to take the kind of violent action.

But in those cases where violence comes because there is fanatical religious utterances, there are relatively few. Most of the time it is that people are already angry, one against the other, for other reasons: political, economic, social.

MR. CROMARTIE: And just a quick follow-up then. What is being done by the state and federal governments to hold these people accountable?

ARCHBISHOP ONAIYEKAN: I'm glad that the sultan, himself, is here – after the Bauchi incident. The Sultan and I co-signed a document, a statement, which specifically charged government to be consistent and to be definite; to address the issue about who – not only who are the hoodlums on the streets that are burning churches. Those are just hoodlums. But who is sending them? Who are those behind them? Who are those whose utterances is firing them up? And make those people also equally accountable.

Now, what seems to have been the case up till now is that whenever such investigation is carried out, and it lands at the foot of some very important person, they said: No, we can't proceed. Or governments sometimes say: If we go and address this imam, or this bishop, there will be a major – whatever.

But what we say is that: If me – Archbishop Onaiyekan – sends a group of you to go and kill anybody, I am a murderer. Full stop. And it should be treated as it is. Those who burn houses, churches – they're arsonists, and we have laws. We don't have to design new laws, special laws, to deal with so-called "religious riots." It's a matter of simply implementing the law of the land – which, unfortunately, is not being implemented. Maybe it is part and parcel of the culture of impunity that is, unfortunately, rather rampant in our country.

MR. CROMARTIE: Commissioner Shea – do you have a question? And then Imam, after Commissioner Shea.

NINA SHEA: Yeah. I was – thank you both. I'm very glad that you were able to join us in Washington today. And His Eminence the sultan raised the issue of the sharia law in the North, and I was curious about how that has evolved. It's been in place for about 10 years now, and how would you described the application of the sharia law today? And how has that affected, either negatively or positively, Muslim-Christian relations in Nigeria? And if, you know, both of you would like to answer, that would be fine.

MR. ABUBAKAR: I think there's still this misconception of sharia being for everybody. And let me say, for the 10 years of the sharia being brought to forefront by the then-governor of one of the Northern states, Zamfara state – that's where I think the whole noise have started.

As I said in my opening remarks on sharia, we have always known to be sharia-compliant in our activities as Muslims in Nigeria. But when the Zamfara governor brought it out, that's when, I think, a lot of noise started.

Therefore, to really sit down and evaluate the success or otherwise of the sharia – or the impact on the populace of those states that are supposed to be practicing sharia – you know, it will be a futile exercise. Unless you go around these states and then talk to people.

But let me tell you one thing – and so, for our state itself, let me say that's where the sharia controversy started. When you go to Zamfara, you will still see ladies going about wearing their jeans; not covering their heads. Those non-Muslims I'm talking of. Not covering their heads; wearing their jeans; riding on commercial motorcycles – which is the main means of transport in most cities in Nigeria now, due to the poverty level.

And there also may be other issues. You still see them on these machines. They go about doing their jobs. Nobody forced them or order them to cover their heads, or don't wear jeans. You must dress up all – I mean, like Muslim sisters.

So if you go through Zamfara and you don't see that, how do you evaluate the strength of sharia there? Or – (inaudible) – sit down with the governor, who has the commission of looking

after that. So, as far as I'm concerned, that's left to the state government, in particular, to implement what they term to be the law they want for their states.

We're supposed to be operating a federal republic, but are we really operating a federal republic? Take the case of the United States here, the 50 states in America: Each state is sort of independent. You have your own laws, though you have the command of federal laws. But it's not the same in Nigeria.

So it's difficult to evaluate, to say, yes, the sharia is positive or negative. All I know is, like the archbishop said, we've been living together, going about our businesses daily basis.

Let me just quickly add to the last question: root causes of recurring violence, as the archbishop tried to explain. Let me just add this: provocation by preachers, which must be tackled by the governments.

When I was a participant at the National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies, the highest policy institute in Nigeria before my accession to this position, my research paper which I wrote was "Religious Extremism as a National Security Problem: Strategies for Sustainable Solutions." That was the topic I picked out to write on as a colonel in the Nigerian army at that time.

Now, after what I went through, I was asking people questions. And I found out the main problem, just like the archbishop said, provocation, somebody who does get up in his church and starts abusing everybody, including his own church leaders. An imam will go to the mosque and start giving a sermon and insulting people. And that's – I think the two major religions do not allow this.

In Islam – let me speak for Islam – it's not written anywhere where somebody will get up and start preaching, insulting another person. That is not the aim of preaching in Islam. So he has completely gone off the road. And, also, lapses by security agencies who don't really know maybe what they're supposed to do, being a security man myself, these lapses contributed to this continuous recurrence of this crisis because they only report what they want to report.

They know the actuality, but they don't even know how to find the information. So that problem is there and must be addressed by the government. Another one also is failure of leadership at all levels because if we're up and doing, such problems will not come up.

And the most important one, those who were ever found to be guilty or to have a hand in such crises were never, ever punished. And so they will do it again. And if you check those so-called "big men," you can never catch them, you can never see them. You don't see their children in such riots because their children are in schools in America and London and Switzerland. But they push the children of the less privileged, those who are poverty stricken, give them some pittance of money and then they will go and start carrying placards or start carrying petrol cans and go and burn a church, go and burn a mosque – and now it's given – (inaudible).

These are the issues that we know and we are looking at how do we really handle them. So we have to keep on talking to the government whilst our voices are very strong. We are not a government agency like the archbishop said. So when we see wrong things happening, we say it very loud and clear; we don't care whether the government will be happy about it or not. And that's the direction we are facing.

MR. CROMARTIE: He also wanted to add to his answer?

MR. ONAIYEKAN: I didn't talk about sharia because I wanted to avoid it, but since you brought it up, my own reading of the situation and my interaction with my fellow Christians in Nigeria is that the issue of the sharia is not over yet and that there is still to be said. The fact is that since I was a child, they have followed the sharia cause in Nigeria. So it's not as if sharia is new.

We always had sharia in Nigeria. There was a sharia court of appeal in Kwara state, in all of the northern states they had sharia court of appeals which handled cases from the sharia courts at the lower level. That created no problem for anybody. Why was it that there was a crisis in 1999? Because we suddenly got this guy from Zamfara and, by the way, not a religious leader, eh? He was a governor.

So, again, you are seeing here; it is not a religious leader; it is a governor. So it is a political move. Who decides that in his state there will be sharia legislation? And what followed after that seemed – my own opinion went much beyond what he thought. And it was obviously very popular with the people on the ground, especially as they were sure that with the sharia there would be no more corruption, no more stealing, everything would be fine – in 10 years, like he says.

I mean, that said, we are free to assess in terms of reality on the ground how much this has happened. What we do know was that that event gave rise to a major crisis: riots, thousands of lives were destroyed and property. Therefore, it must be that it generated very strong emotions. The fact that the sharia was no longer at the level it was, it dealt with civil matters, marriage, inheritance and so on and went up to the level of criminal law. That is the first point.

The other point is, when it comes to whether sharia, how does sharia affect non-Muslims? We ought to listen to non-Muslims – (chuckles) – to see whether it affects them or not. And what I'm hearing is that it did affect them. Of course, they will not be dragged to sharia court over stealing, for example.

But let me take a very bad example. I say bad example because it might give (badness ?). Many people in all of those states made their legitimate earnings running pubs, selling all kinds of drinks including beer and so on, which, in Nigeria, is a legitimate business. Then, suddenly, a law comes saying you can no longer operate that business.

The Christian who runs this business can no longer operate that business. Many had to relocate. In fact, many relocated, left the place. And so it is not – they will not feel that this has not affected them; it has affected them. It has affected them. And the question we are raising is,

does part of our federal character, is it right for a Nigerian to be – not to be able to exercise his freedom in a particular area that is admitted by the Nigerian law because of where he lives?

And I say it's a bad example because we are picking alcohol as the example. But no matter how – there are many Christians who do not like alcohol either. There are many Christians who believe that it's evil, wrong to drink alcohol. I am a Roman Catholic and we are known to have no problem with alcohol, not that we are all drunkards, but we do not think that if you drink a bottle of beer you have done something wrong. For us it is okay.

Like the sultan says, oh, if I go to Sokoto, I can still get my bottle of beer. But I am told that they have to go and get it from some people who go around the law. The question is, what then is the law doing? So this is part of the problem, I would say.

Now, that – (inaudible) – Your Eminence, the issue that we have been discussing about provocation, which also includes the whole question about what can we admit in a particular area, to what extent can we talk about – to respect the sensitivities of the people around? And how far does that limit the freedom of others. For example, what is it that – I should say, with someone who says, I am provoked, unfortunately, it is the person who says he is provoked to determine what provokes him.

I believe that if we are able, as religious leaders, to come out with some basic principles – and I would say, more or less, preach your religion positively, don't attack anybody's faith, don't insult anybody's religion, preach your religion. But it also means that when I am preaching my religion and I am saying what my religion says, let nobody say he is provoked by what I'm saying because I'm saying what I believe.

But our problem is sometimes you are saying what your religion says, somebody feels provoked because it doesn't match his own religion and this is where often we have problems. Let me give you a typical example.

MR. CROMARTIE: I do need to get –

MR. ONAIYEKAN: Okay, yes, okay.

MR. CROMARTIE: Can we do that?

MR. ONAIYEKAN: Yes, yes, okay.

MR. CROMARTIE: (Inaudible, off mike) – too, and we've only got 10 minutes. So, go ahead.

MR. EID: All right. Thank you. I appreciate both of you coming. You know, I'm Lebanese by birth and I grew up in Lebanon where we have Christians and Muslims. And we never raised the issue of the position of Jesus Christ or anything. But, despite that, the two communities grew up with great tension and lack of trust. And this led in 1975 to a civil war that destroyed government facilities and led to militia, establishment of militias. In my recent visit to

Nigeria, I visited Kano and Kaduna and Abuja. I did notice a great level of mistrust and distrust between the Christian and the Muslim communities. And the issue of the criminal codes of sharia law and the implementation of the criminal codes of sharia law, I did notice that it negatively affected the relations between Muslims and Christians.

So my question is to you: What the government is doing to restore trust between the Christians and the Muslims? And, also, what have you done regarding pastors and imams who incite violence in ceremonies? And, also, I notice that the views of national Muslim and Christian leaders differ from those of local religious officials.

Now, how can these relations be also improved? And, finally, what recommendations have you made to the U.S. government in order to help the situation of Nigeria? And what can the U.S. government do to support the programs to promote religious freedom and prevent communal violence in Nigeria?

MR. CROMARTIE: That's for both of you.

MR. ABUBAKAR: Well, my own, it's like – I will take only this one and leave the other two for Archbishop, who is in Abuja with the government. You said you visited Kano, Kaduna, Abuja and you noticed a lot of mistrust or distrust. How did you come to the disposition this level of – how you get this knowledge that there is a lot of mistrust? When you say a lot of mistrust, you are using words that are sort of like – they are very negative and we live in those areas.

And the Kaduna, the Kano and the Abuja you are talking of, let me just say Kano, for example, Kano, Kaduna, they belong to an area of Sokoto Caliphate, which was established over 205 years ago and of which I am the current head, extending beyond the shores of Nigeria as of now. And that's what made the sultan of Sokoto – he was the sultan of Sokoto no matter how young (he is ?), the spiritual head of Muslims.

But using these words – “a lot of mistrust” – I know what Kano is doing in particular. We have 365 days in a year. And for only 10 days of this year, we've been having problems between A and B and C. But the rest, 355 days, I have not heard anything. It means something good had been happening those 355 days.

That's just my analogy because the “lot of mistrust,” the archbishop just made a comment, somebody had been having a beer parlor. Now they now come and say, you cannot sell beer here in this area. If you want to sell beer, you have to move to another area – so you have to move. The inconvenience is there, but it's business, and you now move.

That can happen in Kano; that can happen in Kaduna; that can happen – no, in Kaduna, no. Kaduna is not implementing sharia because there are a lot of Christians there. That can happen in Sokoto, same thing in Zamfara.

So if you are asked to move to a place within the same area and you feel inconvenienced and you still moved – and, now, of course, when you are asked a question from somebody

coming from outside Nigeria, you will say, yes. You will tell him in the negative, yes, I have been harassed by this thing, but how many – was there any opinion poll? Were there questions sent out to people?

So I totally disagree with what you said about this “lot of mistrust.” There’s no “lot of mistrust” in Kaduna, Kano and Abuja all between Christians and Muslims. Of course we have mistrust, like what we all know, what we keep on saying. We go around the country for our meetings and we invite all of the religious and traditional leaders and political leaders of the particular zone where we’re holding our meeting, this interreligious council, for them to come and tell us what their problems are.

And when I try to solve – because we have access to the governments. And one area which the archbishop brought up, in some places, someone could apply for a plot of land and he wants to build a church. They will say, no, you cannot build a church here. They will give you a paper – they will give you a land, but they say, no church, no brothel, no beer parlor. So what do you build? You have to build your own house there.

So, of course, when you ask that person, he will say, yes, I have been pushed to the wall, that I am against these people. Of course, it’s human nature. So I don’t agree with that. I think there is – maybe you need to come back to Nigeria and spend another time and then we’ll sponsor you to go around and go around widely and then listen to people and then come up with actual situations of Muslim-Christian relations in Nigeria.

And I will send you a copy of the paper I wrote, which I gave at Institute of Peace. Try and read it, please. Thank you.

MR. CROMARTIE: Let me call on the audience. Does anyone in the audience have any questions? We’d be glad to hear from you. We have – we’ll go a little bit over time, if you have the time. We have the time? Good. So do we. Anyone? If not, I’ll –

MR. ONAIYEKAN: Let me say something about –

MR. CROMARTIE: Please, on this.

MR. ONAIYEKAN: Distrust between Christians and Muslims – it depends on whom you are talking to. Let me put it differently: I find myself very often in Europe – especially Europe, not so much in America – I find myself very often in Europe debunking all kinds of stories from fellow Christians who are going around looking for support and especially raising funds on the thesis that Christians are under serious persecution in Nigeria. And they tell all kinds of stories – including lies – in order to elicit the sympathies of poor Catholics in the pews who then say, oh, so you are suffering; you are not allowed to practice your religion – and they support them.

I find myself debunking those stories. Sometimes I sit in my house and I get a letter from Canada from an attorney who sends me this story of somebody seeking political asylum, about

how he and his family have all been wiped out in the last riots in Benin City. He said it's because he's a Christian.

From the letter you know that the man is telling lies. Now, I'm not saying that the people that you spoke to are people of this nature, but all I'm saying is that depending on whom you are talking to, there are people who feel very much the way you are saying. But I like to believe that, on the level of the ordinary people in Nigeria – I'm talking, go to the markets, to the schools, go to the civil service – I don't know what's happening at the embassy in Nigeria because they are Nigerians there in the embassy, whether this kind of strong feeling is there.

I feel we are managing. Those who have personally had problems, who have had a rough deal, for whatever reason, feel that – and I think we are working hard at it. As for what advice we have for you, the United States government, I really don't have any advice, just to encourage our efforts to do what we're doing.

MR. CROMARTIE: Yes, sir? A little louder, please, sir.

Q: (Off mike.)

MR. CROMARTIE: Well, we'll try to repeat the question, but I don't think I'm going to be able to pull that off, Tom, other than to ask the gentlemen to tell us what you're doing to try to do to own up to the problems that the gentlemen says are in Nigeria. The archbishop first?

MR. ONAIYEKAN: I think here we must allow access to – first of all, people should be free to express their views as they see. And I think it is good to be slow in ascribing insincerity to anybody. That there are problems in Nigeria, I don't have to say it; everybody knows. The issue we are raising is whether these problems are religious, that is corruption, that there is distrust among Nigerians, not just between Christians and Muslims; distrust between different segments of the society; distrust between the rulers and the ruled.

I don't think I can be accused of keeping quiet over the problems of Nigeria. So it is not a question of coming to whitewash our faith; we're talking of religion. And those who come to my church are not only Catholics; they are also members of PDP; they are also Urobas and Edos and Ibos. They have a whole lot of other identities and interests.

So to say that because Christians, somebody who has a Christian name is doing something bad therefore the fault is with the Christian leader who has not trained him well; that is going a little bit too far. Ditto for Islam.

It is the states that you run the nation well. It is not the job of me, religious leaders. I am not the police. We don't have the – we see a lot of corruption, and don't let nobody tell me that I must identify them from my church. That's not my job, you see. So I think the matter of what is the purpose of our gathering from the point of view of religion, and I still maintain that the problems we have are there, but the basic problem is not religious. That is my honest position about it. And if Christians and Muslims in some places have tension between them, look more carefully. You will find other reasons for those tensions and the problems. That's why

impunity, disregard for fundamental human rights to general impoverishment of our nation. They know it here, we don't – there's no dirty linen. Our linen is well-known all over the world.

MR. ABUBAKAR: I just want to concur – just want to support what the archbishop said and also add that no matter how bad you know somebody is, no matter how corrupt the person is, you can never – you don't have any right as a Muslim leader to stop him from coming to the mosque to pray. We have a different, sort of, line of communication in the Islamic world. We only go into the mosque to say our prayers five times a day. On Fridays, the imam comes and preaches his sermon before the Friday prayers, and that is all.

So you cannot come and screen, like we're being screened going through the capital here, you can't screen anybody to know, is your heart clean or not? Or maybe you never had been on the papers as a corrupt governor, and they want you to come into the mosque – I'll put my own – (inaudible). They don't let him go into the mosque, because he is coming to say his prayers. No, he's an Islamic. The only thing we can do is keep on calling on Muslims to be aboveboard. Live your life according to Islam, period.

And Islam is a way of life. It teaches you everything. There's no religion that tells you to be corrupt, go and steal public fund. What's happening on the delta is not a religious crisis you have, but you are bringing it here. No, the issue is a different thing, and like, as the archbishop said, look deep in all this crisis – supposed to be a religious crisis, you will see much, much more than that. You will see so many other factors hidden deep under, but given religious connotation. Why? Because Nigerians are very, very religious. We are very religious.

That one is – there's no – it's not an honest judgment, and therefore we have to accept these facts. We are not washing our dirty linen. All the funds the so-called political leaders stole, where are they? They are in western world. They know how much money being transferred from Nigeria to U.S. or Switzerland or whatever. We will not – (inaudible) – here. We are not hiding anything. Even if I know – (inaudible), what effect will it have on the work I do? Mine is to lead people and tell them to do the right thing. I cannot force you to do those right things. I cannot. So that's just what I am – what I want to add. Thank you.

MR. CROMARTIE: James? Imam?

MR. EID: Yeah, I just want to comment. You know, I never meant to offend any of you, I apologize. You may feel that I'm exaggerated or something, but you know, the fact is, I see here that there are 12,000 people died since 1999 in sectarian violence. Those were Christians and Muslims. Churches, mosques were burned. So what I need to emphasize here is the importance of establishing common grounds between Christians and Muslims in addition to fighting corruption, and that thing can be done only through government efforts and leaders.

MR. CROMARTIE: You may have the last question.

MR. STANDISH: Okay. Well, once again, thank you so much for taking the time to meet with us, and we had a very interesting time in Nigeria, and it's good to continue the conversation. One of the themes that came up repeatedly is this idea of impunity, that people

have murdered, that they have assaulted and that they have committed acts of arson and that they have done so without any adequate investigation or prosecution.

And when I was in Nigeria and probed that, the answer that we often got or that I took away from our trip was that there isn't the political will to go after those who commit these acts. And my question would be, why do you think – if that is true, why do you think there's a lack of political will, and what steps can be taken to ensure that no matter what the cause, but if it is – when somebody murders another individual or assaults them or commits an act of arson that they are investigated, prosecuted and that they do have the results of their actions meted out to them.

MR. ONAIYEKAN: Well, I visit a prison often. Who do I meet there? Poorly two devils, rascals, poor boys, you know, most of them young boys who have stolen a few things. Some who went in armed robbery, all right. I never meet those who have stolen those billions that this whole town is talking about. And their names have been mentioned. In fact, recently, some of the names have appeared in court cases outside the country and still it's not been done. Is that the fault of the archbishop of Abuja, of the chief imam of the central mosque?

And maybe here, we can also say, the foreign nations too, who constantly give the lesson to whatever happens, provided you are in charge of government – may also have the answer to – the Nigerian people are not quiet. We have been complaining, but we are in – my brother, who you say, for 18 years, my brother from Port Harcourt, he worked with the human rights things. I did, I have done and I am doing it still. Haven't we been complaining? It's not as if we've been keeping quiet. But the fact is that you can shout as long as you like. Nothing will happen. So when will the culture of impunity change? That will change when we have proper government, as far as I am concerned. Period.

MR. CROMARTIE: When you have what kind of government?

Mr. ONAIYEKAN: Proper government.

MR. CROMARTIE: Ladies and gentlemen, we're very grateful for His Eminence and the archbishop for joining us today. We're grateful that you came, thank you for coming, and join me in thanking both of these gentlemen.

(Applause.)

(END)