

# Faith under Fire: A Look at the Multifaceted Persecution of Christians in Nigeria

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## Abstract

Persecution has often been seen as a means of pulling down people who have determined to stick to their differing beliefs. Many Christians have over the years been persecuted because they believe in Jesus Christ. When persecution persists, it could lead to many Christians withdrawing their allegiance to Jesus Christ and the religion at large. Nevertheless, instead of retrogressing, many Christians who are often faced with one persecution or the other have been seen to have continued unabated and unshamedly. What precipitated this was the assurance of having an 'unfading crown' waiting for them in heaven. Thus, using socio-historical analysis, this article examined the various persecutions that Christians face in Nigeria. It looked at attacks from the government, inter-religion, and intra-Christianity where Christians face persecution from fellow Christians and the issue of family. The gains of persecutions were also highlighted which are to point towards the fact that persecution is to make Christians continue to wax stronger and not diminish.

**Keywords:** Persecution, Christianity, Church Growth, Missionaries.

## 1. Introduction

Evangelisation is seen as one of the key areas of Christianising the world. Missionaries have spread their tentacles to enter into 'forbidden' areas not minding the obstacles that may befall them. Nevertheless, missionary work today is very different from what it was a hundred years ago. Yet, there are still pioneer fields where heroism is demonstrated and persecution rages. Trails there are that have never yet been blazed, whose suffering is still a lot of those who venture [1]. Looking back at the inception during the time of Jesus, many believed (mostly Jews) that he was bringing in a "new way", which never started as a religion in its origination. After his (Jesus) death, the disciples continued to hold fort the legacies that their leader had laid down.

They stayed together in Jerusalem until the fulfilment of the promise of the coming of the Holy Ghost. After the descent of the Holy Ghost on not only the disciples but also on more than 120 believers (Acts 1:15; 2:1-4), they began to work on the Great Commission to make disciples of all people. With signs and wonders being accomplished by the hands of these people (the apostles and the believers), the Sanhedrin (highest Jewish Council) began the persecution that even led to the martyrdom of Stephen, one of the seven (7) deacons. This singular event led to the dispersion of the believers to other parts of the world, preaching, healing and converting many to the new religion that later became

known as Christianity. The persecution that was vented on the believers did not take the believers unawares as Jesus himself has foretold it, saying.

Behold, I send you forth as sheep amid wolves... for they will deliver you up to the councils, and they will scourge you in their synagogues; and ye shall be brought before governors and kings for my sake, for a testimony against them and the Gentiles... And the brother shall deliver up brother to death, and the father the child: and the children shall rise against parents, and cause them to be put to death. And ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake: but he that endureth to the end, the same shall be saved (Matthew 10:16-22).

These sayings of Jesus have prepared the believers ahead of any kind of persecution that may want to come their way. Instead of trying to run away from it (persecution), Christians have endured. With this staunch endurance, there has been continuous growth in the Church and the answer to the call of Christianity.

In Nigeria, the case is no different. Many missionaries on the field have hitherto faced one form of persecution or the other that has tested their faith in Jesus and the continuous spread of Christianity. On July 15, 2020, a particular headline reported that 1,202 Nigerian Christians were killed in the first six months of 2020 [2]. Before this report, an earlier

report has shown that over 11,500 Christians have been killed since June 2015 [3]. Different scholars have also researched the different ways in which Christians have been killed, maimed, their houses torched, many rendered useless, abducted, enslaved and so on [3-11]. However, this article tends to examine the various persecutions that Christians face in Nigeria. It looked at attacks from the government, inter-religion, intra-Christianity where Christians face persecution from fellow Christians and the issue of family. The gains of persecution were also highlighted.

## 2. Research Method

Data were sourced majorly from secondary sources, which include, books, journal articles, encyclopaedias and the Internet. The data collected were analysed using a socio-historical approach.

### 2.1. Persecution

In etymologising the word "persecution", both the Hebrew and the Greek words would be made use of. The primary Hebrew word for persecution, *radap*, and the Greek words, *dioko/diogmos* (*diwvkw/diwgmov*), both emphasise the concept of pursue, press on; their meanings can be extended to include pursuing or pressing on, to oppress, harass, and also to bring to judgment or punishment. Two other Greek words, also sometimes used to mean "oppress" and "persecute", are *thlipsis* [*qlivyi*] (oppression, affliction) and *thlibo* [*qlivbw*] (press on, oppress; in the passive, to be oppressed, persecuted). The Catholic Encyclopaedia defines persecution in general as the unlawful coercion of another's liberty or his unlawful punishment. It goes further by saying that persecution means unlawful coercion or punishment for religion's sake [12]. In a little further to this definition, former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams says true persecution was "systematic brutality and often murderous hostility that means that every morning you wonder if you and your children are going to live through the day" [13]. These two definitions have brought to the fore the menace in the word 'persecution'. Christians are being persecuted because of their staunch belief in Jesus the non-renouncement of their faith and the spread of the Gospel. No doubt, for Christians to live godly in Christ Jesus, it is a known fact that they will suffer persecution (II Timothy 3:12). More reason Kukah noted that "persecution has always been part of the DNA of our faith as Christians [5]." Thus, it is inevitable that the truly righteous Christians must face it, and they have been exhorted to respond positively whenever they are being persecuted.

According to Schlossberg, persecution is subject to the ebb and flow of time. It occurs in a certain place at a certain moment [14]. Then, as conditions change, persecution will shift to another area, perhaps at a different time. Consequently, the persecutions of the Christians proceeded first from the Jews, and afterwards from the Gentiles. The Christians were stoned to death; some were enticed with tempting offers requesting that they renounce their faith, while others were put to death by the sword. This is why Schaff noted that [15].

History reports no mightier, longer and deadlier conflict than this war of extermination waged by heathen Rome against defenceless Christianity. It was a most unequal struggle, a struggle of the sword and the cross; carnal power all on one side, moral power all on the other. It was a struggle for life and death. Persecution hinges on two types. One type involves personal physical attack, including acts of violence, imprisonment, torture and even death. The second type involves words, that attack, ridicule, belittle and otherwise show contempt for the persecuted [15].

It is on these types of persecution that the various forms of Christian persecution in Nigeria would be based.

### 2.2. Forms of Christians' Persecution in Nigeria

**Government-Led Persecution:** The state-wide persecution is one of the topmost forms of persecution that are habitually open to people. This is so because this form of persecution has to do with policies and laws that tend to set one religion far above the other. It is the opinion of many that the major form of persecution of the Christians is the one from the government. This is not farfetched as most of the persecutions Christians have witnessed from the time of the Early Christians were government-driven.

Examples are the various Roman emperors who persecuted the Christians before the proclamation of the Edict of Milan of 313AD that brought about tolerance with the Christians. Fawole noted that "The early Christians suffered persecution by some of the Roman Emperors, on political grounds, since they were believed to be enemies of the State [16]."

In this 21<sup>st</sup> century which is being dominated by democratic governance, governments are supposed to be very democratic in their activities; they are not expected to take sides. They are to be a mediator in instances relating to religion, race, ethnicity, sex etc. However, this is not the case in some certain countries that are religiously inclined. Instead of upholding the constitutional rights of every citizen with the right to live, they are the architects of a 'crackdown'. They are used to perpetuate the evil of 'destroying' Christians.

In Nigeria, two major religious groups dominate the country – Islam in the northern states and Christianity in the southern states. Other religions are only but a few. The country is home to one of the world's largest Muslim populations, vying with, and likely outpacing, Egypt as the largest on the continent [17]. The north is predominately Sunni Muslim, and twelve (12) northern states use Islamic Shari'ah law to adjudicate criminal and civil matters for Muslims. The northerners are also mostly found in the governance of the country. They constitute mostly half of the legislative house and they tend to make laws or support a motion that will augur well and be for the betterment of their people who are the northerners (mostly Muslims). Most of the presidents/military heads of state in the country had been northerners.

A situation where the majority of the presidents and heads of state had been northern Muslims is a call to note that Christianity would tend to face many persecutions.

According to Kukah, “Christianity over the years has tended to emphasise the separation of religion and politics [4]. However, the fact that most of the leaders in Nigeria since independence have been Muslims has pushed Christians to agree that there is an increasing tendency towards what has come to be known as the Islamisation of the country”. Nmah and Amunnadi noted that Sir Ahmadu Bello, the Sarduna of Sokoto who was the Premier of the northern region adopted the policy of Islamising the region by forming Jama’atu Nasril Islam (JNI), an Islamic movement entrusted with the specific task of enforcing Islam on every northerner [18]. This, according to the scholars was the genesis of persecution of the Christians in the north during the first republic.

Notwithstanding, over the years, persecution has taken different shapes. In this wise, it is the promulgation of religious laws. In every country, various laws serve as a guiding principle and Nigeria is not an exception. The constitution of the Federal Government of Nigeria does not allow any government to be biased when it comes to religion. Section 10 of the 1999 constitution (including the 1979 constitution) states that: “The Government of the Federation or a State shall not adopt any religion as state religion [19]. In addition, the Guardian editorial of 20th March, 1987 noted that, where there are many contending faiths, as in Nigeria, secularism is the most prudent policy of the state. Our constitution recognises this fundamental truth. It guarantees freedom of worship and states categorically that there shall be no state religion. What this means is not that the state should treat all religions equally but that it should be indifferent to all religions. The more assistance the government grants religious organisations, the more it tends to assume the state of official state religion, and the more militant its disciples become [20].

Despite this assertion, the Babangida-led administration was at the forefront of Nigeria being admitted into the Organisation of Islamic Council (O.I.C) on January 6, 1986, as a permanent member. Christians saw this one event as being in support of Islam [16]. This does not end there, as the same administration (Babangida-led) promulgated Decree No. 26 of 1986 to expand the jurisdiction of the Shari’ah Court to embrace all civil proceedings involving questions of Islamic law. The decree was meant to ease the process of the Shari’ah Court system and facilitate prompt dispensation. The 1989 constitution endorsed the provisions of the 1986 Decree and upheld the expansion of the jurisdiction of the Shari’ah Court to all non-personal civil proceedings involving questions of Islamic law [21, 22].

The adoption of Shari’ah Law by the government of the Northern States after the transition from military rule to democracy in 1999 (which started in 2000), was in no way received with open arms by the Christians. However, the States operating full Shari’ah in this civilian administration argued that it is in line with the principle of federalism in a multi-religious and pluralistic state, but Adamolekun opined that, this type of state of affairs in Shari’ah state will curtail the expansion and propagation of other faiths [23]. It will curtail the Fundamental Human Rights of other religious

adherents, Christian-Muslim interaction will be reduced and freedom of worship curtailed or restricted.

The Shari’ah law in the northern States of the country is an Islamic law that governs both the Muslims and the Christians who are living in those States, even though it has often been claimed that it is meant for only Muslims in the States. It is a known fact that this Shari’ah Law does not allow Christians to fully exercise their rights as Nigerians because they are living in states that are predominantly Muslim. Just as in North Africa during the time of the foundation of the Christian Church, laws were made by the government to repel Christians from practising their faith. Emperor Decius (249-251) issued an edict in 250 A.D. that compelled Christians by torture, imprisonment, and fear of death to sacrifice to the gods and burn incense before the image of the emperor as a testimony of their infidel to him [7].

The Government of a nation has in time past served as an agent of persecution to the Christians. This can be seen from the words of the former Governor of Zamfara State – Ahmed Sani Yerima (the architect of Shari’ah Law in the state) at the launching of the Shari’ah Law in the state that it was aimed at Islamising Nigeria, which asserted from his address [24]. Supporting this claim, the Zamfara State Chapter of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) said, “Shari’ah is not a legal system per se, but an Islamic way of life that must be imposed on non-Muslim in the State [24]. Also, George Igbokwe, the Publicity Secretary of the Edo State Chapter of the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA), as noted by Fawole, said that the purport of the Shari’ah “is to make Zamfara State an Islamic State and this is in direct conflict with Section 10 of 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria [16].”

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), in its annual report released in 2012, designated 16 nations as “countries of particular concern” (CPC) for their flagrant and consistent human and religious rights violations. The Christian Freedom International (CFI) has carefully compiled a list of ten of the USCIRF’s top CPCs, where Christians are known to suffer extreme harassment, persecution, and even martyrdom. Nigeria is among nine other countries including North Korea, Iran, Pakistan, Egypt, China, Saudi Arabia, Uzbekistan, Vietnam, and Eritrea where Christians have suffered cruel persecution at the hands of their government. The UNCHR Compilation of Case Law on Refugee Protection in International Law states: “For the purposes of the 1951 Convention, persecution may be by bodies other than the state. Persecution is not limited to cases where a state carried out or tolerated the persecution; it encompasses instances where a state is unable to afford the necessary protection to its citizens” [25]. According to Irele, “the abrupt adoption of Shari’ah in a supposedly secular State (Nigeria) sparked off an unprecedented crisis that engulfed the whole of Kaduna, part of Kano and some places in the north where several lives were lost and many items of property were plundered [26].” So many Christians lost their lives from the taking up of Shari’ah Law in the northern States and scores of properties were lost.

It is no gainsaying that the Shari'ah Law, which is meant to cover Muslims, had equally been covering non-Muslims, especially Christians. Adediran and Alao noted that "In theory, the Shari'ah States guarantee the exclusion of non-Muslims from the operation of the Shari'ah, but in practice, there are indicators that the over-zealous Islamic vigilante groups do not recognise the fundamental rights of individuals. The case of Livinus Obi who was given fifty strokes of the cane by a group of miscreants who were enforcing the Shari'ah law readily comes to mind as one of the ways by which Shari'ah could be misapplied" [22]. Also, the ban on the public display of mannequins and sales and consumption of alcoholic drinks in these states affects not just Muslims, but also other people of other religions, especially Christians. These in effect are a result of the Islamic law and legal provisions that were most often introduced by authoritarian states as efforts at social transformation or as bargains with Islamist movements [27].

Notwithstanding, the government in Nigeria is believed to persecute Christians by some other means. These are itemised below:

- Embargo placed on missionaries from evangelising the North by the Lord Lugard-led colonial administration.
- Takeover of Christian Missionary Schools in the country.
- Ban on public preaching.

During the immediate past administration, it was believed that the Buhari-led administration was unable to do anything substantial to tackle the problem of farmers/herders' clash. This clash has been described as a religion cum ethnic crisis with most of the farmers being Christians and the herders being Muslims in the Middle Belt of the country. Gilbert noted the ineptitude of Buhari must have been a result of the people involved in this crisis being of the same ethnic lineage as the president. Furthermore, she noted that [11].

In 2015, Muhammadu Buhari, a member of the Fulani tribe himself, was elected president of Nigeria. He has done virtually nothing to address the behaviour of his fellow tribesmen in the Middle Belt and the south of the country. Even after President Donald Trump publicly confronted him about violent attacks on Nigerian Christians, Buhari has not offered a substantive response to the crisis [11].

The above description is just one out of many uncaring, bigotry and nonchalant attitudes of the government in bringing to justice the perpetrators involved in killing and destroying lives. A case in hand is the one of Mrs Eunice Olawale Elisha, a Christian evangelist who was killed on 9<sup>th</sup> July, 2016 while evangelising in the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. To date, nothing has been done to bring to justice her killers. Also, the case of Leah Sharibu is another example that many Christians are still praying for her release from the captivity of the Islamic State of West Africa Province (ISWAP). She is the 14-year-old girl who was abducted along with other 109 students on 19<sup>th</sup> February, 2018 from Government Girls Science and Technical School in Dapchi, Yobe State. Though other students had been released, she has continued to be held captive because of her unwavering belief in Jesus and her inability to accept Islam as her abductors had wanted.

### 2.3. Inter Religious-led Persecution

Another form of persecution that Christians are faced with is the inter-religious persecution. This kind of persecution can be viewed as a 20<sup>th</sup> - 21<sup>st</sup> century persecution in which Christianity is being challenged; or better still, Christians are being faced with trials of their faith. In Nigeria, there is no how this form of persecution will not be found as Christianity is being seen as a usurper, who has come to take away people from already established religions (Indigenous religion and Islam). Despite the indigenous religion being accommodative of other religions, there are still instances of their persecution of the Christians. However, this is not the case with Islam which also has the proselytise motive with that of Christianity. There is constant friction between the two Abrahamic religions (Islam and Christianity) in the country, which has resulted in different accusations and counter-accusations from the two religions. One particular thing about this kind of persecution is the fact that many of the Muslims who persecute Christians do that out of their staunch motive of defending the religion at all costs. Some Islamic injunctions stipulate that Christians (or non-Muslims) be subjected to Islamic rule for living in an Islamic state. Part of these injunctions is a special tax known as *Jizya* or *Jizyah*. The Qur'anic verse says:

Fight those who believe not in Allah nor the Last Day, nor hold forbidden that which hath been forbidden by Allah and His Messenger, nor acknowledge the religion of Truth, (even if they are) of the People of the Book, until they pay the Jizyah with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued (Qur'an 9:29).

Though the *jizyah* (the extra tax) is imposed on non-Muslims (*Dhimmi*s) who live under Muslim rule according to the Qur'an, it is not being carried out in Nigeria in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Ordinarily, this should not apply in Nigeria as the country is a secular country, but TEKAN was able to point to at least an incident in which a Christian was forced to pay *jizyah*. The excerpt reads thus:

A Christian died in Jimeta. The sole judge of the area assessed the deceased's property at ₦10,000 and set the Muslim tax at ₦1,000. A court messenger, sent to deliver this message, broke into the deceased's home, forcibly removed ₦500 from a suitcase, and informed the relatives that the balance of ₦500 was to be brought by them. Nothing could be more shocking. The Chairman of CAN (Gongola State) wrote to the Chief Judge and the Attorney General but received no reply. However, the ₦500 was eventually returned to the family. To our knowledge, the court messenger was not punished for his action. There was no sympathy consideration for the deceased's family in their hour of sorrow and no respect for the dead [28].

With this, Christians are being faced with the challenge of having to pay extra taxes for staying in a Muslim-dominated state. These are being done in Nigeria even though Nigeria is not a Muslim country.

In addition, the word "fight" is an injunction that the Muslims

are expected to carry out on non-Muslims (Qur'an 9:29). This they do bearing in mind that they have "great reward" awaiting them in heaven. Many of the Muslims who carry out this act of "fight" do so from another verse of the Qur'an that says:

Let those (believers) Who sell the life of this world for the hereafter fight in the cause of Allah and whoso fights in the cause of Allah, - and is slain or gets victory, We shall bestow on him a great reward (Qur'an 4:74).

It is in this vein that the Islamic sect known as Boko Haram has been on the rampage. The sect set out to Islamise Nigeria. A series of attacks have been clamped down on Christians. Innocent Christians have been the point of attack. According to USCIRF, as many as 14,000 Nigerians have been killed since 1999 in sectarian violence, and the commissioners argue that the Nigerian government has tolerated the violence, creating a culture of impunity that has emboldened Boko Haram and its sympathizers. Their 2012 report noted the religious nature of the 2011 post-election violence, Boko Haram's attacks against Christians, and rising religiously charged rhetoric as areas of significant concern. Other experts point to increasingly well-armed militias, loosely organised along religious lines, in central and northern Nigeria.

It is to be noted that it is not only Boko Haram that has been ravaging Christians as a sect among Muslims. We also have the Maitatsine sect and Darul Islam of the early and mid-1980s. These sects have sometimes resorted to the use of violence in a bid to realise their ambitions on the wider Islamic and Nigerian populations as a whole [29]. In addition, we have the Kalo-Kato sect and the Arsuna Islamic sect, which had however been proscribed by the Oyo State Government [30]. However, Sundkler and Steed (2004:19) noted that "the Qur'an always recognised that Jews and Christians were 'People of the Book', who should be treated with a certain degree of toleration [31]." This has not been practised by the extremists and fanatics who have continued to disregard the tenets of the Qur'an, Sunnah and Hadiths of the Prophet Mohammed (S.A.W). Many Christians have been persecuted with no just cause, as they want to make Nigeria a Muslim country in every aspect [6]. These fanatics and extremists have taken the laws into their own hands to perpetuate evil against Christians. This is why the factional sect of Boko Haram, ISWAP promised to kill all Christians. Oladimeji noted that with the ascension of Abu Masab Al-Barnawi as the new leader of Boko Haram (before his faction became known as ISWAP), Al-Barnawi declared that, "Christians in Nigeria would be the new target of the sect's attacks, vowing that the sect will kill all Christians and "blow up every church that we can reach [32]."

It has become so worrisome the way many Muslims, particularly those from the northern states have been wrongly indoctrinated into the defence of their religion to the extent of killing whoever is deemed to have insulted the integrity of the Prophet Mohammed (S.A.W) and the Qur'an. These people kill at will whenever their holy and respected prophet has been deemed to have been insulted with

blasphemy. In 2006, many Christians were at the receiving end of an event that happened in Denmark. It was reported that a Danish cartoonist, Kurt Westergaard, had made a cartoon of the Prophet Mohammed which drew the ire of many of the Muslim northerners in Nigeria. Earlier in 1994, an Igbo Christian trader, Gideon Akaluka was said to have been beheaded by a group of Muslim extremists, who after hanging his head on a stick, paraded it around the streets of Kano.

It was claimed he desecrated the Qur'an which was later on found to be false. Also in March 2007, Christianah Oluwatoyin Oluwaseesin was said to have been lynched and killed for desecrating the Qur'an. Being a secondary school teacher in Gandu, Gombe state, it was claimed she had seized and thrown away a bag belonging to a student who had wanted to go into the examination hall with it, not knowing in the bag was a Qur'an. More recently, on Thursday, May 12, 2022, Deborah Emmanuel (mostly referred to as Deborah Samuel) was lynched, killed and burnt for blaspheming the Prophet Mohammed by some Muslims in Shehu Shagari College of Education, Sokoto. This act was vehemently supported by many Islamic leaders in the northern states, which shows their level of religious intolerance and the misinterpretation of the Qur'an. Many Islamic leaders, particularly in the south spoke against the killing and described it as "un-Islamic". True to this, the act was not following the Qur'an, Sunnah and Hadith of the Prophet. Even during the earthly ministry of the Prophet Mohammed, it was not recorded that he killed anyone for desecrating him. Many of these people usually do this erroneously believing they are defending their religion at the expense of humanity.

#### 2.4. Intra Religious-Led Persecution

As much as many people have not been able to see this aspect as persecution, it is also a very big hindrance to the growth of the church. Intra persecution is a persecution that is being perpetuated by the members of the same religion especially in Christianity but in different denominations. Many may want to be of different opinion about this but the fact remains that there are persecutions that stemmed from Christianity itself in Nigeria. Denominations like the Mainline churches (Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian) are being seen as "old-fashioned Christianity" or "nominal Christians". Also, the Aladura churches like the Cherubim and Seraphim (C&S) Church, Celestial Church of Christ (C.C.C), and the Church of the Lord (Aladura) are seen by the Pentecostal churches in Nigeria as being "fetish" and not serving the true God. There are several occasions whereby the 'White Garment' church members are being treated with disdain wherever they are being met by their fellow Christians. A situation whereby a white garment church member enters a public bus with his/her white garment on, and you see people especially fellow Christians running away from such a person, making way so as not to sit with such a person.

Moreso, the Deeper Christian Life Ministry (D.C.L.M) is being seen as 'an extreme religious sect'.

They are said to be extreme in their bid to be holy. Their restriction in the use of earrings, or any ornaments, covering their hair even to the extent of covering their ears, are seen by some people as being extreme; and so, they are being 'separated' from other Christians. Also, this church does not mingle with other churches as they are often seen as "unchristian" in the way they dress, sing and dance. Recently, the general overseer, William F. Kumuyi, made some adjustments to the way things are being done in the church and some of the members of the church kicked against such moves. By inviting Christian singers like Dunsin Oyekan, Don Moen, Nathaniel Bassey and so on to the church's crusades, it was believed by some of the members that Kumuyi had derailed. These Christian Gospel singers are seen as being "unconventional" since their modes of song ministrations differ from theirs.

In addition, one can talk about the death of fellow Christians at the hands of the so-called "good" Christians. Children suffocate in exorcism rituals and adults are left to die from untreated diabetes because it is "God's will". Vladimir Putin, the Russian president noted, "with alarm in many of the world's regions... inter-confessional tensions are mounting, and the rights of religious minorities are infringed, including Christians and Orthodox Christians" [33].

Even though a particular denomination of church is supposed to be persecution-free, such is not the case in Nigeria and even in other parts of the world. Denominational persecution is even on the increase. Members persecuting members which most times makes members leave such a denomination to another denomination. Also, members persecuted parish pastors which at some point in time had led to such a pastor being transferred to another place by the mother church. Several churches also use the issue of "transfer" as a form of persecution. When they see a pastor of a branch exceeding beyond "control", they transfer such to another part of the country (mostly to the interior). This can be gotten from the words of Sundkler and Steed says, "An African Catholic archbishop exercising his ministry in a Central African capital, serving also as a healer of the sick (to his great surprise he discovered that his hands could mediate a therapeutic power) was removed from his high office and transferred to Rome [31]."

Moreso, leaders of churches have been at the centre of attacks by fellow leaders of churches. These attacks have come in various modes. Some are done out of jealousy. While others do it out of 'no knowledge' of how pastors/ministers of God are bringing about miracles. Owoye, in analysing the persecution being meted on one Prophet E.O. Babalola, said [34]:

The people did not persecute the prophet because they hated him but because they thought he probably was using some means to hypnotise many people into believing that he was performing miracles... many believed that he was brainwashing people to indoctrinate them as his disciples. Moreover, some have brought about persecuting other leaders/founders of a church out of discrimination. The

founding of the Native Baptist Church, which later became known as the Ebenezer Baptist Church was because of the persecution that was vented on Moses Ladejo Stone. It was reported that 63 members of the First Baptist Church withdrew their membership when they saw that racial discrimination was clear evidence [35].

A careful look at the beginning of African Independent Churches tends to point to the fact that secession from many of the mainline churches was borne out of persecuting the charismatic leader. Garrick Sokari Braide was persecuted for leading a revival movement that spread through most of Southern Owerri province in less than a year. He was imprisoned on charges of sedition and extortion. This incident brought about the establishment of two churches namely: The Garrick Braide Church and the Christ Army Church [7]. Also, it was the persecution of Mojola Agbebi that led to the division of the American Baptist Church in Nigeria in 1888 (this was the first schism in Nigerian Christianity).

In the same vein, the zeal of some of the church founders to evangelise while still under another church has been 'misjudged' as being rebellious. The issue of William Folorunso Kumuyi of the Deeper Life Bible Church, an arm of Deeper Christian Life Ministry is one prominent case that comes to the fore. Ojo noted that the ministry of Kumuyi only started as a Bible Study group in the Apostolic Faith Church [36]. The expulsion of Kumuyi from the Apostolic Faith Church was the event above others that changed the amorphous Bible Study group into a concrete reality.

However, although most churches (especially their leaders) are in constant struggle with themselves, a reoccurrence of this persecution still lingers. As a leader of a church thought about his/her persecution and thus brought about secession, in one way or the other, a member of such a seceded church who is also filled with such passion for evangelism will come up one day. When such a person is not allowed to display his/her 'passion for the work of God', he/she would be persecuted. Kukah shed a great light on this when he asserted that.

The conflict here is that these new Christians, like the born-again of the seventies who seem to have targeted only the mainline churches, are now engaged in intra-and inter-denominational squabbles leading to expulsions, resignations and at times physical attacks on fellow founders of churches [4].

Intra-religious-led persecution has become very prominent among Christians in Nigeria. It has become cancerous and very alarming. Many have lost the faith. Many have stopped worshipping God. Nevertheless, while some are being downcast, so many are continuing with the propagation of the gospel.

## 2.5. Family-Led Persecution

Family, a basic social group united through bonds of kinship or marriage is present in all societies. Ideally, the family provides its members with protection, companionship,

security, and socialisation [37]. The structure of the family varies from one society to the other. In Nigeria, the nuclear family comprises the father, his wife (or wives in polygyny homes) and their children, and is the main unit in some societies. In others, it is a subordinate part of an extended family, which also consists of grandparents and other relatives. A third family unit is a single-parent family, in which children live with an unmarried, divorced, separated or widowed mother or father [37].

Many families in Nigeria belong to one religion or the other. Christianity, Islam and Indigenous religions are the major religions in which we find many families in Nigeria. Since it is very difficult to get the accurate percentage ratio of adherents of different religions in the country, it will be out of order to speculate the religion with the highest adherents. Lending credence to this, Adogame noted that [38].

In the past, the politicisation of the census on religious and ethnic grounds resulted in unreliable religio-ethnic demographic data in Nigeria, as population statistics were (and still are) often manipulated for political, economic, and religious ends, not least because such figures constitute one basis for the sharing of national revenue and other resources. That partly explains why religious indices were excluded from the recent national census.

Nonetheless, it is generally agreed that the two major religions in the country are Islam and Christianity, with indigenous religions and others having minute adherents, even though some adherents of both Islam and Christianity usually patronise these other religions, especially the indigenous religion. However, some citizens of Nigeria do not belong to any religion. These are few and are known either as atheists or freethinkers. When a child is born into a family, such a child is born into the religion of the family. For instance, if a family is characterised by Islam when a child is born, such a child normally becomes a Muslim. Such a child is expected to grow and develop into the knowledge of the family religion. So many Nigerians are made to believe that professing religion is a must and not a matter of choice. If such a child should leave the family religion for another religion, there is a tendency for persecution to be in action. Movement from one religion to the other in Nigeria has been in favour of Christianity. In a study carried out by Andrew McKinnon in 2021 on 11 different studies on the percentage ratio of religious adherents in Nigeria, he found out that Christians have been the majority in Nigeria. Still, Christians seem unlikely to maintain their place as the largest religious group in Nigeria for long [39]. This shows that the religion is amassing adherents to itself in the country through proselytization.

Families that are majorly Muslim have persecuted and are still persecuting their child(ren)/wife (wives) who were converted to Christianity. There have been a series of attacks on such child(ren)/wife (wives) to the extent that so many of these persons have been disowned by their family members. Agbaje highlighted one such instance when he opined, "There was a case of Alhaji Jagbemokeferi – a popular and

devoted Muslim, whom his first son miraculously accepted Christianity [40]. This issue sparked up serious problems among the Muslim fold and in the family of the Alhaji in particular. This Alhaji went to the extent of prosecuting the son in the court of law after his abortive attempts to terminate the life of the boy. He disowned the son and went further that the son's name should be struck out of his will." Another example cited by The Voice of the Martyrs (2016) was a Fulani man known as Dawo who converted to Christianity and was disowned and almost killed not just by his family, but also by the neighbours. These and many more are some of the persecutions that are family-led and this has no hope of being stopped, except proselytization stops.

## 2.6. Ways Christianity Have Developed from Persecutions in Nigeria

After the death of Jesus, the apostles and the believers were gathered in a particular place on the order given to them by Jesus that they should remain in Jerusalem until they received the promised gift (the Holy Spirit). An injunction: "But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth" (Acts 1:8). This injunction talks about the followers of Jesus moving from one place to another. Despite the believers all staying in a place even after receiving the promised gift (the Holy Spirit), persecution brought about their dispersion and the spread of evangelism.

Though not all churches emanated from persecution, a whole lot of others came from persecution, starting from the time of the persecution that led to the death of Stephen, which brought about the spread of the gospel to Samaria (Acts 7:1ff). His lawless execution was followed by "a great persecution" directed against the Christians in Jerusalem. This "great persecution" (Acts 8:1) scattered the members of the church, who fled to avoid bonds imprisonment and death [41]. At this time, Saul (Paul) signalled himself by his great activity, persecuting "this Way unto the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women" (Acts 22:4). The wave of that movement brought about the coming of Christianity first with a failed attempt in the country in the 15th Century. It was later in the 19th Century that the firm root of Christianity was planted in Nigeria through the missionary impacts of Thomas Birch Freeman and Henry Townsend, both of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (WMMS) and the Church Missionary Society (CMS) respectively [42]. They and so many other missionaries, however, were met with a series of difficulties. They had to make do with the incessant wars that were being fought in the Yorubaland. The wars fought by the Yoruba served as a major threat to the spread of Christianity in the Southwestern part of Nigeria [7]. In addition, even though the Baale Sodeke welcomed Christianity with an open arm, the traditionalists posed a great threat when they noticed that Christianity was standing as an obstacle to the growth of their religion.

... With the coming of Christianity additions to the things that could bring down the wrath of the spirits had increased. So, when a harmattan fire swept through Abeokuta in October

1867 it was taken as an expression of the anger of the gods because Christianity was continuing to thrive. A prohibition of Christianity for the indigenes of Abeokuta was proclaimed. The property of Churches and Christians were destroyed and the missionaries were held hostage in Abeokuta ... A church that was still under construction was demolished and two Christians were arrested [43].

So many attacks were wrecked on the Christians. Worthy of note is the fact that it was the indigenous Christians who were mostly attacked by the traditionalists. Only non-indigenes were allowed to worship in the Christian fashion. Indigenous Christians were either captured or banished [43]. To make the matter worse, Walker noted that it was the traditional priests who allegedly poisoned Baale Sodeke [44]. This was done on the basis that it was the king who had welcomed and encouraged Christianity at Abeokuta. Nevertheless, Christianity was able to thrive in not only Abeokuta but in all other parts of Nigeria. Penner even enthused that, "Christ's Church not only grows despite persecution, but it even spreads because of it [45]." In this same way, the religious persecution of Christians fosters missionary outreach [46]. It is important to note, however, that this occurrence is in no way a normative, expected result of persecution. There is no such equation in which religious persecution equals the growth of the Church. This is demonstrated historically. At times, the Church did grow in response to or because of persecution, but in other places, it all but died out [47]. However, many Christians in Nigeria see persecution as a test of true discipleship. In the parable of the Sower, Jesus mentions this as one of the causes of defection among those who are Christians in outward appearance only. When affliction or persecution arises for the word's sake, immediately the stony-ground hearers are offended (Mark 4:17).

In addition, Christians have assumed that the persecution they face would be a sure means of gaining a blessing. They believe this from two of the words of Jesus from the Beatitudes, "Blessed are they that have been persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven"; and, "Blessed are ye when men shall reproach you, and persecute you .... for my sake" (Matt. 5:10, 11; see also Matt. 5:12). Persecutions have also kept Christians away from certain sins because it makes them more vividly aware of the impossibility of friendship with the world. Seeing they cannot have both the world and the Kingdom, it has helped some of them set their resolve to live righteously. In addition, the apostle Paul writes: "...but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope" (Romans 5:3-4).

Although Boko Haram and ISWAP have been terrorising many Christians in the northern parts of the country, many Christians are still counting it all joy. Christianity is thriving despite being dominated by Islam in these states. This shows that instead of retrogressing, the Church is progressing, albeit at a slow rate as many Christians are being killed daily. Some of the missionaries are still willing to go into the deep

and turbulent states to preach the gospel to all and sundry. However, it must be noted that some of these missionaries are converted members from other religions who are also sons and daughters of the soil. The fact that they are members of the community, they can know where to go and where not to go. Also, they can speak to their people in their language, thereby cutting away language barriers. More importantly, they are willing to continue to preach the gospel even with their last breath [48]. This is in line with the concept of church growth as espoused by McGavran cited in Thiga, Pam & Nkansah-Obrempong, who noted that evangelism is a top priority in the mission of the Church and it becomes very valid when it leads individuals to become committed to Jesus Christ [49].

Above all, persecution for Christ's sake brings Christians into fellowship with the sufferings of Jesus. Their love for Christ is so great that they rejoice that it has come upon them on Jesus' account. If he suffered so much to give them a great future, they believe that they are also going to suffer a little for him. Persecution magnifies the very name of Christ. Through this same glorification, believers are also able to experience the abundance of God's endless grace [46].

### 3. Conclusion

Although persecution has hindered the growth of the Church, one can authoritatively say that the development and growth of the church have come from the same persecution. As war brings out the heroic qualities of men, so do persecutions develop the patience, gentleness, the endurance of Christians, and prove the world-conquering power of faith. Christians' persecution took a powerful turn in the time of Emperor Nero when the emperor set out to exterminate Christianity and all its attributes but for the timely intervention of Constantine, Christianity was able to thrive. Despite this intervention of Constantine that gave Christianity an identity in the world, persecution has not come to a halt. Instead of these persecutions to retrogress, it has even progressed geometrically in the country (Nigeria), most especially in the northern. This has seen many Christians being killed gruesomely with no justice whatsoever being meted on their perpetrators in a supposed secular country [50-52].

Also, the existence of Islam with the aim of proselytisation with Christianity has not helped matters. This has brought about an unhealthy relationship and competition among the adherents of the two Abrahamic faiths. Apart from this, what about the inhumane treatment of Christians by fellow Christians? This shows that persecution is not just a thing of one religion against another but a human nature. However, Christians have been advised to always live at peace with all human beings (not minding the Christian extremists and fanatics) and to be of good cheer in the face of all forms of persecution whatsoever. These have called forth the virtues of Christian heroism and resulted in the consolidation and triumph of the religion. The philosophy of persecution is best expressed by the terse word of Tertullian, which says: "The blood of the Christians is the seed of the Church" [15]. In this way, persecution is a part of God's plan to effect the glorification of his name, strengthening believers through



his power, and demonstrating his superiority and victory both in the present kingdoms and in the Kingdom to come [47]. Christians are not to think persecution will to come to an end anytime soon; they should continue to expect more, as it has been predicted and experienced by Jesus and his followers.

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