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"Blaming the Gods: Religious Propaganda in the Nigeria-Biafra War"¹

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Abstract

In the Bible, as in many classical books, the vicissitudes of war and peace are often attributed to divine intervention.² In other words, religion is not new to conflicts, and vice versa, as more wars have been fought and more blood shed in the name of religion than for any other reason. Because of the complex nature of the causes of the Nigerian civil war, the precise role of religion has remained a hotly disputed proposition. The overarching attention given to both asserting and disproving the charge that the conflict had religious undertones has emerged as one of the puzzles of the civil war given all the evidence to the contrary.

This paper reflects on the religious ramifications of the civil war, especially as these portray a willingness to use religion as a propaganda tool. In doing this, it seeks to understand the vagaries of the conflict which insisted on emphasising the North-South religious dichotomy despite the involvement of the Southern Christians in the effort to safeguard Nigerian unity.

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² For more details on the religious dimension of armed conflicts, see Douglas Johnston and Cynthia Sampson, eds. Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1994).
The Exploitation of the North-South Religious Divide

The origin of the intense religious debate in present day Nigeria, especially the controversial introduction of the Islamic Sharia code of law, can be traced to the Nigerian civil war. As long as the various regions of the federation were granted considerable autonomy in pursuit of their religious, political and social aspirations, there was a near absence of religious intolerance and controversies in Nigeria. Not even the celebrated Islamic proselytization crusades of the Sardauna of Sokoto, Sir Ahmadu Bello, led him to change the religious status quo of the Northern Region. All that changed following the January coup of 1966, the pogroms, the forceful dissolution of the regional system, and the ensuing armed conflict. Thenceforth, deliberate and irresponsible attempts were made to give the conflict a religious colouration. The handy terms “Moslem North” and “Christian East” began to make their way into press and radio. While some Northern leaders set out to appeal to Islam’s military traditions and spoke of a Holy war against the East, Biafran leaders eagerly took the bait and urged the Christians to fight in defence of their religion.

The parameters of Nigeria’s unending capacity for schism have their roots in the country’s colonial past. On the religious level, the *divide et impera* policy of British imperialism found expression in indirect rule in the North and direct rule in the South. While the one-hundred-year old theocracy established in the Sokoto Caliphate was allowed an uninterrupted existence after Lugard’s conquest in 1903, the pre-colonial political, social and religious institutions in the South were forcibly dismounted. While Christian education and evangelism were promoted in the South, they were restricted, and in part prohibited, in the Moslem North.³ While Colonial administrators in the North did not hide their

obsessive dislike of Western and missionary educated Southerners, those in the South joined the missionaries in warning about the evils of Islam. Consequently, "two opposing and extreme views resulted in religious bigotry and chauvinism in the two halves of the country, and it surfaced as a major issue for propaganda during the Nigeria-Biafra debacle—Christian Biafra versus Moslem North."\(^4\) This religious dichotomy in the thinking of the populace defied all informed logic during the war and has continued to militate against efforts at national integration.

The Christian Igbo vs. Moslem Hausa/Fulani stereotype of the civil war can easily be discountenanced by a simple analysis of the composition of the Nigerian army. The Head of State and Supreme Commander of the Nigerian armed forces, General Yakubu Gowon was a committed Christian just as a good number of the commanders were. "There is no question of religious warfare," he once said, noting that as a Christian and the son of a Methodist minister, "if there were, I should be fighting on the Christian side."\(^5\) His code of conduct for the war did in fact endeavour to dispel the religious war myth. "You are not fighting a war against a foreign enemy," he wrote, "nor are you fighting a religious war or jihad. You are only subduing the rebellion of Lt-Col. [name] and his clique."\(^6\) The majority of the foot soldiers were drawn from the Tiv Middle Belt region which was overwhelmingly Christian. More significantly, the war was between the Igbo and the rest of Nigeria, the population of which is divided equally between adherents of Christianity and those of Islam. Besides, the Eastern Region was at the time one of three Catholic ecclesiastical provinces in Nigeria, the other two being Lagos and Kaduna. These facts do not fit into the garb of religious wars.

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\(^5\) Quoted in *Herald Tribune*, 31 October, 1967.

Yet, the religious stereotype remained a formidable force in the Nigeria-Biafra propaganda war not only in Biafra, but also among its foreign sympathizers. The General Assembly of the Church of England, for instance, while condemning the British Government’s supply of arms to Nigeria, alleged that it was “helping an attack on Biafra by a mainly Muslim Army.” Help was initially refused the Igbo refugees by the German Caritas on religious grounds. Such a help, it was argued, would be “a support for secession and a support for the holy war of the Christians against Islam.”

Against the background of this misconception, A.H.M. Kirk-Greene has emphasized that ethnicity, rather than religion, was the radix malorum of the Nigerian crisis. “The so-called Islamic factor,” he said, “was far more of a cultural and social one, a way of life, rather than that of militant proselytism.”

This way of life was given free rein in the conduct of the masses in both camps of the religious and ethnic divide. In the North, the call for a jihad received instant and enthusiastic hearing. Reporting on the 1966 pogroms in Northern Nigeria, Walter-Partington, a correspondent of the Daily Express of London, gave an account of a Hausa man in the suburbs of Zaria who declared: “we killed 250 of them here by the will of Allah!” This echoes the mood and the motivation of those who took active part in the pogroms and makes it hard to determine to what extent the Igbo were killed for their ethnicity and to what extent for their religion. At the same time, it provides an explanation for the astonishing

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7 *West Africa*, 1 June 1968: 649.
8 *Fluechtlingsproblem in Nigeria*, Freiburg, 30 October 1967.
10 6 October, 1966; see also F. Bonneville, *The Death of Biafra* (Gamma Agency, 1968; Translation from the French by Ikechukwu Orjinta, 2000), p. 84.
zealousness with which even women and children took part in
the murder of so many of their fellow citizens. The actual position
of Northern Christians with regard to the pogroms of 1966 is not
immediately clear. Some have suggested that they took part in the
killing of Igbos, thus exemplifying the notion that ethnicity, rather
than religion, was at the core of the crisis.\textsuperscript{11}

Furthermore, ethnic hatred, rather than any notable religious
grievance, was behind the May riots in Northern Nigeria following
General Ironsi’s broadcast on 23 May 1966 in which he proclaimed
a unitary government in the place of the regions, the unification of
the civil services, and the banning of political parties and tribal
unions. Some of the placards carried by the irate demonstrators
during the ensuing riots read: “Let There Be Secession,” “We do
not want Military Government,” “No Unitary Government without
Referendum,” and “Down with Ironsi.”\textsuperscript{12} Not one of the placards
called for a jihad or gave indication of a religious grievance. Although the issues raised in these placards were purely political, reports from Gusau and Sokoto said that Roman Catholic Churches
led by American missionaries were torched and gave a death toll of
sixty.\textsuperscript{13}

It is generally believed that the May riots of 1966 were
instigated by politicians who were disappointed “in their
expectation that they would soon be returning to the fruits of
office.”\textsuperscript{14} A unitary government run by an Igbo Head of State ran
contrary to these political expectations. Despite the attacks on
Christians and their places of worship, religion had by May 1966
not been invoked as a pretext for violence. But the situation
changed dramatically following the intervention of global Islam.

Following the Islamic terrorist attack on the twin towers of
the World Trade Centre on 11 September 2001 in New York and

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{West Africa}, 4 June, 1966: 639.
\textsuperscript{13} See ibid.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid: 619.
the Mohammed Cartoon Controversy of 2006, the world has now come to appreciate the complexities of trans-national Moslem solidarity. At the beginning of the Nigeria-Biafra conflict in 1966, the solidarity of global Islam was no less compelling in fanning the embers of religious violence and hatred.

There is ample evidence to show that the heightened tension in Northern Nigeria following the unfortunate killing of some prominent Moslem leaders in the January coup was exacerbated by inflammatory commentaries in the news media of Nigeria’s Islamic neighbours. As soon as he became Military Head of State, Ironsí sent a four-man delegation to North Africa and some capital cities in the Middle East to explain that the January coup was not a Christian uprising against the Moslems. But the sharp reaction of the Arab world could not be ameliorated. A radio station in the United Arab Republic described the military coup as a Christian “Holy War” and called on the “Moslem Brothers in Northern Nigeria” to resist it. From Khartoum, the Sudanese capital, the Sardauna, Sir Ahmadu Bello, who was the Vice President of the Islamic World League, was described as “an Islamic Hero,” and the military coup as “a pestilential stench of Christian fanaticism and Zionist conspiracy,” which was aimed only at “clipping the jaws of the Moslems in Nigeria.”

Sudan was fighting a bloody war at the time against secessionist Christians in the South and such inflammatory commentaries found willing ears not only in Sudan, but also in Northern Nigeria to which they were directed. The second wave of killings in September 1966 was in fact triggered off by a false radio announcement from Cotonou that Northern Moslems were being massacred in Eastern Nigeria. In a special message to the people of Northern Nigeria broadcast in English and Hausa, Lt. Colonel Yakubu Gowon, the Head of State and Commander-in-Chief of the

Armed Forces, made the following passionate appeal to the rampaging masses:

I receive complaints daily that up till now [October 1966] Easterners living in the North are being killed and molested and their property looted. I am very unhappy about this. We should put a stop to this. It appears that it is going beyond reason and is now at a point of recklessness and irresponsibility. We must remember that we shall be answerable to God....We should not believe rumours that are unfounded, and also we should not believe all the talk that other countries or their radio stations make without full analysis. We should be the people to tell them about our country, and not they to tell us about our country.  

It is believed that a total of 30,000 Easterners were killed in the pogroms of 1966. An overwhelming majority of the victims lost their lives in the September and October uprisings which were based on false rumours with strong religious colouration. It has been observed that “in a country where fantastic rumour-mongering aggravates a situation already saturated with danger, the Moslem Holy War theory is probably the most disturbing, if not the most credible.”

Nothing in the conduct of the masses and of their political and religious leaders in the days following the coup suggested that it

17 Quoted in West Africa, 8 October, 1966: 1140; despite his avowed concern, Gowon must be held accountable for the shame brought on the Nigerian state by the pogrom because the act was perpetuated under his regime and massively executed by regular soldiers for whom he was commander-in-chief; he did nothing to stop the killings but rather refused “to face up to the stark facts of the scale of brutalities in the North, and the extent of the Army’s positive responsibilities for them.” Memorandum from British High Commissioner to Sir Morris James of the Commonwealth Office, 1 Oct. 1966, quoted in Chibuike Uche, “Oil, British interests and the Nigerian Civil War,” Journal of African History 49 (2008): 120.

was seen in the North as “a pestilential stench of Christian fanaticism and Zionist conspiracy,” with the aim of “clipping the jaws of the Moslems in Nigeria.” On the contrary, the January 15 coup was welcomed by a great majority of Nigerians “with the greatest outburst of national enthusiasm ever seen in the country.”

In the North the sweeping away of the former political leadership was most conspicuously welcomed not only by the ruling Northern Peoples Congress, NPC, but even by the older political leadership, or the religious group that Kirk-Greene calls “the emiratists.” These were the feudal lords and their descendants who had acted as the custodians of political and religious authority since the time of the Sokoto caliphate. Together with the masses, they heeded the appeal to the Moslem population by Ironsi at the end of Ramadan 1966 to keep calm and cooperate with him in the restoration of law and order. As a result, the Eid-el-Fitr celebration marking the end of Ramadan passed off peacefully without incident, despite the official announcement of the death in the coup of the Prime Minister, Alhaji Tafawa Balewa.

The major newspapers reported cases of celebrations in the streets and of normal business activities in the markets just a day after the coup. A leading Northern politician, Aminu Kano, even counselled that the “Sardauna should be forgotten.” Not even the Premier’s lieutenants and close associates remembered at this point that he was “an Islamic Hero.” This remarkable allegiance to keeping calm and restoring law and order was abandoned only after outside intervention, first by British propaganda, which made the coup look like a move towards Igbo domination of the country, and

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22 Quoted in M.H. Kukah, *Religion, Politics and Power in Northern Nigeria* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 1993: 38. It an irony of fate that a Roman Catholic priest, Michael Audu Buba, was one of the few who went to the Sardauna’s house to pray for the repose of his soul; see ibid. 59, note 21.
secondly by the appeal to Moslem brotherhood by global Islam. A leading figure in the Northern ruling class, Alhaji Ali Akilu, did not mince words about the extraneous causes of the turning point which nearly caused the demise of the Nigerian state. “We would have gone with things,” he said, “but for the fact that we realised that by May, we were being manipulated.” Much of that manipulation came from Nigeria’s Islamic neighbours, and the admixture of ethnicity and religion that followed did the damage.

It is worthy of note that the outbreak of the Nigerian civil war in July 1967 coincided with the Arab-Israeli “six days war” of the same year and the significance of this was not overlooked in the religious propaganda war in Nigeria. The charge of a Zionist conspiracy theory became loud and when shooting war finally broke out between Nigeria and the secessionist region, volunteers from Sudan, Niger, Chad and Egypt fought in the federal army purely on religious grounds. The most cowardly and brutal bombings of civilian targets, which included churches, schools, hospitals and markets, were carried out by Egyptian pilots. It is doubtful whether they would have engaged in such acts of barbarism if they had been Christians themselves. Being Moslems, they apparently felt no guilt in the killing of the “infidels.”

The membership of Jewish humanitarian organisations in the mainly Christian “Joint Church Aid” which ran the airlift for Biafra strengthened the Zionist conspiracy theory, and the charge was made that “the tragic plight of millions of Arab refugees languishing in the deserts has never evoked the sympathy of the World Council of Churches.”

The twist in this indictment was that it was made by a Christian, one Ademola Thomas. He described what he called “the hypocritical stand taken by the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church in presenting the civil war as a religious strife between Moslems and Christians,” as being

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23 Quoted in ibid: 38.
in sharp contrast with the "non-interference of the World Moslem Movement."\(^{25}\)

It is important to note that by the close of 1966, the Nigerian crisis had developed principally into an ideological confrontation between the Northern Moslems and the Christian Easterners, which included the Ibibio and the Efik. The involvement of the other Southern Christians in the struggle to uphold the unity of Nigeria did not change that thinking, thanks largely to the formidable propaganda machinery of the Biafran government. In the words of Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, the Biafran leader, the Biafrans were a terrified and frustrated people who had to grasp at every opportunity to secure sympathy. Religious propaganda, he said, was used in order to achieve a dual purpose, namely, to galvanise a common identity and motivation among Easterners, and to secure the sympathy and recognition of the Christian world.\(^{26}\) The strategy worked superbly: a great majority of Biafrans indeed believed that they were fighting to preserve the Christian religion, and the Christian West, infinitely obsessed by Islamic 'treachery' lent sympathy and support.

As A.F. Walls has rightly commented, "a self-conscious Christian profession was part of the self-identity of Biafra."\(^{27}\) To the ordinary citizen of the region, this self-identity was adversely challenged by the pre-1966 conversion tours of the Sardauna which was generally viewed as an unprecedented threat from militant Islam. Accordingly, the war was viewed as a religious war right from the onset. On the foreign scene, the Sardauna's proselytization mission also featured in the propaganda efforts of some of Biafra's diehard supporters. Thus, Miss Helen Larbig was able to call attention in the following report to the age-long

\(^{25}\) Ibid.

\(^{26}\) "Interview at his Enugu Residence," 21 November, 1998.

\(^{27}\) "Religion and the Press in 'the Enclave' in the Nigerian Civil War."

Let no one deceive you! This is a war between Muslems and Christians. That does not mean that everyone in Northern Nigeria is a Moslem (for instance Lt-Col Yakubu Gowon himself is a Protestant) or that everyone in Biafra is a Christian. But one thing is certain: the leaders of the North, the Emirs, are hardened Muslems. Their former leader Ahmadu Bello once said that the British stopped the [Southwards] march of the Muslems at Ilorin and that now the Muslems will march to the sea, to Port Harcourt, to Warri and to Lagos. Anyone who says the war is not a religious war is either ignorant or extremely malicious.  

**Church-State Relations**

Principally, church-state relations during the civil war centred on the effort of the governments on both sides of the conflict to integrate the missions and religious bodies into their war efforts. In Biafra, the need to mobilize public opinion in support of the war effort was particularly urgent. It is to the credit of the secessionist government’s ingenuity that the masses experienced the war vicariously through war news and propaganda despite the constraints placed on the news media in the enclave. Radio Biafra never went off the air throughout the war and the print media somehow managed to weather a precarious existence. When paper could no longer be found, ruled college exercise books came to the rescue.

However, the need to “carry the people with us,” as Ojukwu put it, needed much more than the news media. The creation of six propaganda ‘fronts’ in October 1968 was geared towards the

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28 AGC: 187.1 biaf- 01 L-R, Helen Maria Larbig, “Genocide in West Africa,” p.4. The translation from the German original is mine.
achievement of this objective, and they included: the ‘Churches Front,’ ‘Youths Front,’ ‘Farmers Front,’ ‘Traders Front,’ ‘Community Efforts Front,’ and ‘Workers Front.’ The Ministry of Information of the new Republic set up these organisations as “compact propaganda platforms” to see to “the level of dedication of the masses and their organisations to Biafra’s war of survival, their depth of understanding of what Biafra stands for, our type of war, their role in this war, a quick and right interpretation and assimilation of all Government statements, etc.”

A committee of the Ministry of Information known as the Political Orientation Committee and popularly called the ‘thinking House’ of the Ministry, produced the guidelines which led to the creation of the propaganda fronts. Among them was a minority group which saw the separation of Church and State as an absolute necessity and therefore called for the exclusion of the Churches Front from the propaganda organs. However, religion in the enclave had, by 1968, become about the only rallying point for hope and spiritual comfort for the disillusioned and disorientated populace. The overriding significance of the churches’ control over the masses was such that government could ill afford to exclude the Christian churches from its propaganda outfit. Consequently, the majority of the Political Orientation Committee members insisted on including the Churches Front among the propaganda platforms. A blue-print was worked out for it which required it not only to maintain a spiritual balance, among other things, but also to “ensure that the Churches through their peculiar organizations promote the Biafran ideals whose corner-stone is social justice.”

However, the Catholic bishops of Biafra refused vehemently to be represented by the Churches Front with the argument that its aims and objectives smacked of communism. Until the Russians

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30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
Blaming the Gods: Religious Propaganda in Nigeria-Biafra War 53
pitched their camp on the Nigerian side, the fear of Communism
was a major concern for the Catholic bishops of Biafra.

There are some compelling evidence to support the
conception of the Churches Front, and indeed of all the propaganda
fronts, as having leftist leanings. The early 1960s was a time of
nationalist political struggles across Africa. These movements were
predominantly leftist in orientation. At the height of the cold war, it
was usual for socialist countries of the Soviet Bloc to eagerly lend
their support to known freedom fighters. A newspaper in Prague
claimed that Ojukwu was of the opinion at the beginning of 1967
that “socialism was the only fitting ideology for the developing
countries.”32 Another foreign newspaper, the Neues Deutschland,
said that Ojukwu sent envoys to the socialist states to express
Biafra’s determination to embrace socialism.33 There are no
independent sources to ascertain the veracity of these claims, but
early in the armed conflict and long before the creation of the
propaganda fronts, the bishops of the Onitsha Ecclesiastical Province
had passed a unanimous decision not to support “any
brand of Communism no matter how plausible the motives might
appear.”34

The training and career of the leader of the Youths Front,
Major Philip Alale, provided further room for suspicion. He
obtained his degree in economics from Moscow University, and
during the rule of Kwame Nkrumah, was a senior member of the
Ghanaian government in charge of the Nkrumah Brigade and
various labour movements.35 As Chairman of the Youth Movement
in Biafra, his influence on the workers’ movements and indeed on
almost all the propaganda apparatus of the government before and
during the armed conflict was enormous. It is safe to assume that as

32 Volkszeitung, 19 April, 1968.
34 EDA: Minutes of the Meeting of the Bishops of Onitsha Ecclesiastical
Province Held at Bishop’s House Ikot-Ekpene on Friday, 24 November, 1967.
35 NC News Service (of the U.S. Catholic Conference), Tuesday,
30 May, 1967.
a driving force in the Political Orientation Committee of the Ministry of information, he provided the conceptual and ideological underpinnings of all the propaganda fronts, including the churches front. Seen against this background, therefore, the charge that Communism was deeply at work at the Churches front is a legitimate assumption. In fact, in one of its invitation letters to the bishops, the churches front requested the church leaders to send representatives to a seminar on the “Ahiara Declaration,” a document which has been described as a desperate but unsuccessful effort of Colonel Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu to insert a kind of Christian utopianism into his ideological code for the war.36

However, the true reason for the opposition of the Catholic Bishops of Biafra to the Biafran Government’s Churches Front is to be sought outside the aims and objectives of the propaganda outfit. As attested to by the representative of the Catholic Church in the organisation, who happened to be the front’s Deputy National Chairman, there was nothing in its agenda that was incompatible with the war efforts of the Church itself, particularly as it was “an organ for conveying information to every segment of the Biafran community in such a manner as to help sustain high morale during this crisis.” He urged the Catholic hierarchy in Biafra “to realize clearly that what the Church does in practice is more relevant to any situation than any number of statements of principle,” and saw the Churches Front as “a factor that could easily forge minor links of Church and State relationship.”37

The Bishops were not convinced, and they resolved that their representative’s role in the organisation “should be guided by the attitude of their Lordships towards it, vis-à-vis the organisation’s threat to the security of the Church.”38 They seemed to be

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38 EDA: “Minutes of Bishops’ Meeting held at the Mission House Ugiri, Umuahia, on Friday, 18 July, 1969.
Blaming the Gods: Religious Propaganda in Nigeria-Biafra War

distrustful of the existence of a separate body with which the government preferred to have direct dealings. For instance, the Churches Front was, among other things, calling for prayers for the new nation, a directive which was seen as an exclusive preserve of the religious leaders.

The reference to the “security of the Church” was hardly surprising, given the friction which had arisen in the relation between the Catholic Church and the Biafran government. Two areas of friction deserve special mention. Firstly, the frequent attempts of the government instituted Rehabilitation Commission to control Caritas relief materials was totally unacceptable to the bishops and they thought it opportune “to remind the Commission that the Church should not be considered an arm of the Government for any motives whatsoever.”

The second instance concerned government policy moves towards the administration and control of schools in post-war Biafra. The Catholic Church, which was a major player in the educational sector, was not invited to discussions on this traditionally sensitive issue. Not surprisingly, the creation of the Churches Front was perceived as a ploy “to subjugate the church and make it a powerful mouth-piece of the Ministry of Information.”

The Church leaders therefore resolved not to be “subservient to any government or organisation” because she was “divinely constituted and an autonomous front

39 EDA: ‘Minutes of the Meeting of the Bishops of Biafra Held at the Mission House at Amimo, Owerri on 30 Monday, 1968’
41 EDA: “Minutes of the Bishops’ Meeting held at the Mission House, Ugiri, Umuahia, Friday, 18 July, 1969.”
owing no allegiance to any earthly power and whose sole aim was to continue the mission of Christ on earth."^^42

There are parallels in church-state relations in the 1960s in Biafra and Tanzania, one of the four African countries that accorded diplomatic recognition to the break-away region. Its president, Julius Nyerere, was the prime architect of a political project called the *ujamaa*, an African radical socialism with a considerable amount of religious freedom.^^43 The Christian Churches in Tanzania, like their Biafran counterparts, voiced their opposition for fear of communism, and of losing their influence on society.

There is a controversy over the actual motive behind Nyerere's recognition of Biafra. The man himself took every opportunity to explain that his decision was informed by humanitarian imperatives and by the logic that a policy which recognises starvation as "a legitimate war weapon against an enemy," perforce recognizes that victory by one side "leads to conquest and domination."^^44 Unity, he believed, can only be based on a willing consent of the parties involved. But when a substantial part of a political union ceases to believe that a state and its government are there for it, then "this union ceases to exist."^^45 For the *New Nigerian*, the official media voice of the North, however, the Tanzanian leader acted in political self-interest, and the argument proffered was, as would be expected, clothed in a religious garb. It claimed that Nyerere was brought up by the Presbyterians, "a sect which is singularly intolerant and dogmatic."^^46 The truth is that Nyerere was Catholic but his deputy

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^^42Ibid. The emphasis is mine.
^^46Friday, 3 May 1968.
and political rival, Oscar Kambona, was Presbyterian. The latter was offered an executive job at the World Council of Churches headquarters in Geneva where Francis Ibiam, former Governor of the Eastern Region and special adviser to Ojukwu, was one of the six presidents. The *New Nigerian* argues that an alliance with Ibiam and by extension with the Presbyterian world would give Kambona a political edge over Nyerere. Therefore, “if recognizing the rebellion in Nigeria could...stem the tide of the fury of Ibiam and his organization and deny Kambona a base, [Nyerere] would do it. And he did it.” Whatever the truth may be, Nyerere may have seen in Ojukwu’s Ahiara declaration some enticing parallels to his *ujamaa* political movement, albeit in a less radical form. In other words, ideological affinity may have in some way influenced his decision to support Ojukwu’s revolution.

The refusal of the Catholic Church in Biafra to belong to a state-instituted propaganda front did not preclude its readiness to act as “an autonomous front” that was desirous of making valuable contributions to the war effort. Not a few of the expatriate missionaries earnestly wised that the secession had never happened. This could not be said of the native clergy. The Christian religion was the established religion of the new republic and in the Weberian sociological category, the church “accommodates the values and goals of civic society, legitimating the affairs of state and providing ceremonial backing for state events.” It was John Anyiogwu, the Catholic Bishop of Enugu, who preached the sermon in an inter-denominational service organized for God’s protection of the new state. It was he who blessed the new Biafran flag, the most visible sign of the region’s newly won statehood. The contributions made by the Catholic Church to the war effort included therefore not only the provision of army chaplains and praying for divine intervention, but also the willingness to highlight the religious dimension of the war in their bid to give “the true

47 Ibid.
picture” of the war at home and abroad. Although there was never a collective statement from their Lordships to the effect that the war was religious, individual opinions in that direction did surface. For instance, the one that described the conflict as “a struggle between Christians and the devil,” and urged the Biafrans to “fight hard to ensure the preservation of their religion and culture.”

On the Protestant side, the religious ticket was expectedly more forcefully employed. Both the defunct Regional Government and the Biafran Military Government were overwhelmingly Protestant and cordial Church-state relations in both cases were rather taken for granted. Francis Akanu Ibiam, Governor of the former Eastern Region was special advisor to the Biafran Military Governor. His position as one of the six Presidents of the World Council of Churches and as a missionary medical official of the Presbyterian Church made it difficult to differentiate between his private opinion and those of the organisations he worked for. During the war, he became perhaps the most prominent religious propagandist for the secessionist cause. In several trips and conferences in Europe and America, he emphasized the religious dimension of the war in very strong terms. In a protest letter to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II in which he renounced the Knighthood and other Honours bestowed on him by the British Government, he held the view that “it is an ardent desire of the Hausa/Fulani and Moslem Northern Nigeria to subjugate Biafra and kill Christianity in our country.”

In the passionately worded letter, the former Governor made no distinction between Moslem Northern Nigeria and Nigeria as a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country. “It is simply staggering,” he said, “for a Christian Country like Britain to help a Moslem country militarily to crush another Christian country like Biafra.” During his Goodwill tour of Europe and North America in January and February 1968, he declared that “If the

49 Quoted in Biafra Sun, Monday, 18 December, 1967.
51 Ibid.
Blaming the Gods: Religious Propaganda in Nigeria-Biafra War  59

world, especially the churches, do not help us, we shall all die and Christianity in Nigeria shall die with us.”\(^{52}\)

Such extreme views led many to wonder “whether the Church on either side of the Niger has not become a tool in the propaganda machinery of the military administrations.”\(^{53}\) Dr. Ibiam was able to arouse not only the interests of the world Christians in the happenings in Biafra, but also the attention of the world press. While he was still in Germany, in February 1968, the Nordddeutscher Rundfunk (Northern German Radio) announced that Biafra was threatened with genocide. On the same day, a TV series, “Aus der christlichen Welt (From the Christian World) aired an interview with two Biafrans living in Germany who said that the main cause of the war was the more than twenty years long religious conflict between the Muslims in the North and the Christians in the South.\(^{54}\)

The willingness of the Christian churches to act as a front for the war effort independently or in conjunction with the government was perhaps the greatest boon for the secessionist cause. It all started with the historic visit to the Biafran enclave in February 1968 of a Papal delegation. An editorial in the Biafra Sun described the visit as “a beam of light with which Biafra saw the light of salvation in her current war of survival.”\(^{55}\) What was actually meant by “light of salvation” could be deduced from the next line which says that “this made it impossible for Mr. Harold Wilson and his criminal collaborators to accomplish the total extermination of the people of Biafra before the outside world could know what was


\(^{55}\) Biafra Sun, Thursday, 28 November, 1968.
The visit of the Papal Delegation afforded the beleaguered secessionists an important link with the outside world. It gave rise to a chain of events in Biafra: the visit of all England Churches Delegation, the intervention of Caritas Internationalis and the World Council of Churches with relief materials, diplomatic reactions and recognitions.

The Papal envoys were the first independent and neutral observers to visit Nigeria and Biafra at the early stage of the conflict. Having first visited Nigeria in December 1967, and after consultations with political and church leaders there, they were able afterwards to confirm that the civil war in Nigeria had no religious underpinnings. That verdict was fundamental in shaping official Catholic policy towards the breakaway region. At no point during the three-year conflict did the Catholic hierarchy affirm that the Nigeria/Biafra war was religiously motivated. But, as we shall see below, that visit and the subsequent humanitarian intervention by the Pope and Caritas Internationalis, the Vatican co-ordinator of all Catholic charities around the world, did heighten the religious debate in Nigeria. Numerous newspaper articles and editorials began to call for the expulsion of foreign missionaries and for the creation of a Nigerian National Church. It was at this stage that religion was accorded a dominant place in national politics. The Christians were generally viewed as enemies of the nation by Moslems and the frustrated Federal Military Government accused the Christian churches of prolonging the war by giving relief aid to the secessionists. These charges and the religious debates they generated placed the Christians on the Nigerian side in an ambiguous position.

The Role of the Press

On inception, the Republic of Biafra inherited all the organs of mass communication of the former Eastern Region. These included

56 Ibid.
the Eastern Nigeria Radio Corporation, a TV station, a government press and the newspaper, the Nigerian Outlook. These mass communication outfits were put at the disposal of the influential Ministry of Information which, during the war, was staffed with brilliant academic personnel like Dr. Ifegwu Eke, its commissioner, Cyprain Ekwensi and Uche Chukwumeriji, just to mention a few. A multiplicity of other print media sprang up after secession and during the war with the Biafran Sun and the Daily Flash being the most popular.

One remarkable ‘coup’ through which Biafra outsmarted Nigeria in the propaganda war was the early use of public relations firms. Two such firms were already in the employment of the Eastern Region by the time secession took place, namely, Ruder & Finn in New York and External Development Services in London. These were traditional public relations outfits that specialized in attracting peacetime investments and loans from abroad. They were seen as unsuitable for the new dispensation of struggle for sovereignty and recognition. By the end of 1967, they had been replaced by Goldstein Enterprises and Markpress, two agencies that employed broad outsider strategies that appealed to public opinion through mass media.57 Mr. Goldstein was publicity expert of a Jewish organization for the defence of the rights of oppressed minorities and it was through Fr. Kennedy, a former missionary in Eastern Nigeria, that he came to work for Biafra. His firm, Goldstein Enterprises based in California, specialized in press and television public relations and it was it that arranged for the first crew of journalists that came into Biafra on 26 January 1968.

Mr. Bernstein, the owner of the Geneva based Markpress, had no prior training in political public relations. Markpress, depended, rather to its discredit, mainly on information supplied by the overseas press service of the Directorate of Propaganda of the Ministry of Information which relished in referring to it as “our

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The problem was that Radio Biafra as well as the numerous local print media were concerned chiefly with internal propaganda the content of which has been described as "frequently vitriolic, fiery, bellicose, morale-boosting, or fear-arousing, and as a result, hardly a trustworthy guide to reality." 59

Two important moral-boosting or fear-arousing propaganda subject matters were the issues of genocide and the religious war proposition. The rationale for clinging tenaciously to these two subjects has been best explicated by Ojukwu, the Biafran leader, himself. According to him, the Biafrans were a terrified and frustrated people, who had to use every opportunity to secure sympathy whenever it presented itself. They had to express their fears and disappointment to their religious masters and teachers—the missionaries—whenever they saw one on a visit. 60 The missionaries and Christian aid workers did visit Biafra in their hundreds and the propaganda subjects of choice did spread accordingly.

The reference to fear and disappointment is significant. The impact of the massacres in the North on the people of Biafra was stunning. The debilitating war that followed during which the massacres continued in 1967—at Ibagwa on 10 July, in Ogoja about the same time, the mass killings in Asaba and Calabar in October—imposed a great deal of psychological trauma on the general populace. The government was under pressure to provide answers as to why its people were subjected to this fearful ordeal. It fell back on the one prominent answer provided by the killers themselves—the liquidation of the infidels. As one pro-Biafra British member of parliament put it, Biafran propaganda may be discredited, but the statement credited to Colonel Benjamin Adekunle which said: "Shoot everything at sight whether it moves or not," did not come from Biafran sources. 61

58 Ibid., p.135.
59 Ibid., p. 125.
60 Personal Interview, Enugu, 21 November, 1998.
61 Davis, Interpreters, p. 125.
Blaming the Gods: Religious Propaganda in Nigeria-Biafra War

The people of Biafra were disappointed that the Christian world did not come to their aid at the hour of their greatest tribulation. The conspiracy of silence with which the Western governments greeted the Biafran debacle was based on the quick kill theory which was generally regarded as the best humane solution to the problem. When Biafra survived the pangs of birth, and famine and mass deaths forced a rethink, and led to the humanitarian intervention of the Christian churches, the religious war proposition was found to be propitious to the relief effort. It was not surprising therefore, that the religious crusade was most intensive in foreign print media, especially those circulated by the numerous clandestine groupings that raised funds for the airlift. It was the foreign news media which often read religious meanings into political, and sometimes criminal, incidents.

A typical example was an incident that took place on 23 May 1968, when one Johnson Banjo, a member of a Nigerian delegation to Commonwealth peace talks in Kampala, the Ugandan capital, mysteriously disappeared from his hotel room. Uganda was supporting the southern Sudanese who were also fighting a secessionist civil war. The abduction and subsequent killing of a Nigerian delegation led to wild speculations. While most newspapers in Nigeria, including the Northern pro-Islam New Nigerian, spoke of foul play by "rebel agents," some foreign news media blamed the incident on "anti-Islamic south Sudanese immigrants in Uganda." The fact that the search for Banjo was concentrated mainly on the houses of this group and in Jewish quarters in Kampala reinforced this speculation.

Sometimes, even propaganda outcry against genocide in Biafra was couched in religious rhetoric, like this imagery that appeared in the Spiegel, a reputable German magazine. "God," it said "could one day be accused of racism because all the seats in heaven have been occupied by 'black souls,' namely, those who

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62 New Nigerian, Thursday, 6 and Saturday, 8 June 1968; Daily Times, Friday, 21 June, 1968
63 Prisma der Welt, Tuesday, 28 May, 1968.
Nicholas Ibeawuchi Omenka

had to die just because the Christian nations out of indolence and political calculations wallowed in their own sins.”

Meanwhile, Nigeria was losing the propaganda war to the chagrin of both its non-Christian citizens and its foreign supporters. This is how one British MP put it:

...recently the High Commissioner in London, Brigadier Ogundipe, informed us that about a year ago, when he was advised by various people here that he ought to do something about the flood of propaganda in favour of the so-called Biafrans and ought to engage some public relations firm of equal standing to take up the Federal cause, [he] received from General Gowon in reply an emphatic negative. General Gowon said: “I was trained in the British tradition, and I believe that in the end the truth will prevail. I do not want any public relations firm to help me do this.” My Lords, events have moved in the direction of showing that, noble as those sentiments are, apparently in the wicked world as it is today if you want to battle with highly-skilled perversions of the truth you must engage people who are trained in that technique.

Nigeria did employ the services of public relations firms like the London based Galitzine and Partners. But as the statement above shows, they were ineffective in swaying public opinion. Rather belatedly the FMG intensified the propaganda war on two fronts—through press releases from its diplomatic missions abroad and through pressure on the Christian leaders at home. As we shall see later the pressure on the Christian leaders to undertake world-wide counter measures against the religious war theory proved very effective. Within Nigeria itself, Christian writers spearheaded the media onslaught on the Caritas led humanitarian organizations.

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64 Vol. 22, no. 29 (July, 1968).
65 Quoted in Davis, *Interpreters*, p. 144.
Blaming the Gods: Religious Propaganda in Nigeria-Biafra War

Remarkably, they tended to see every action or pronouncement of the Pope and of the aid agencies against the background of the religious propaganda. Bizarre as this may appear, it can only be understood against the background of the obsessive worry and mindset of the political leaders over the religious war crusade. One example is noteworthy.

On 21 July 1968, Pope Paul VI officially declared that food and medicine had been flown into blockaded Biafra. Seen from the point of view of the Federal Government, four main objections were raised, firstly, the mention of "Biafra" in the Pope's statement implied a tacit recognition of the secession. Secondly, breaching the blockade was a deliberate disregard of Nigeria's territorial sovereignty. Thirdly, the gesture was interpreted that the Pope had succumbed to the propaganda that the war was religiously motivated. Fourthly, by praising the Igbo Christians, the Pope was seen to reduce the Catholics of the other regions to second-class Christians.

For the Pope and Caritas Internationalis, the third and fourth objections were hardly worth losing word over. At the time of the Pope's statement and throughout the war, Caritas was aiding victims of the war on both sides. The first and second objections were what caused a great deal of concern in Rome. The word Biafra was never again used by the Pope and the Vatican. As for the charge of political involvement, the Pope would say that he never engaged in politics "in the proper sense of the term." Through Caritas, he broke the blockade with the argument that "the moral obligation of assisting starving people was greater than the political obligation of maintaining good relationship with the Federal Government."  

Curiously, however, the flurry of media onslaught with which the Pope's revelation was received centred exclusively on the religious war interpretation. The Daily Times accused the Pope of taking the attitude that the crisis was a religious war. It highlighted

67 AGC: 187.1 biaf-11/2, "History of the Relief Programme to Biafra."
the call of the Lagos branch of the Catholic Youth Organization on the Catholic priests "throughout the world" to always consult with the Catholic Archbishop of Lagos before making their stories public.\(^{68}\) In a front-page comment, the *Nigerian Tribune* began by saying that the Pope’s public admission "implicitly confirmed the suspicions of many that the Vatican has succumbed to the rebel propaganda that the Nigerian civil war is a religious war between Hausa Muslims and Ibo Christians."\(^{69}\) It then went over to lampoon Caritas for not showing equal concern for the Christians in the liberated areas.

The worst opprobrium came from the Ibadan based *Sketch*. "The Catholic Church," it said, "is subscribing to the untruth that the war in Nigeria is mainly religious. To work in this fashion at a time when even the Church is fighting strenuously for world-wide unity is to plead guilty to a charge of hypocrisy....It is also bound to raise, in many minds, the question of how well-intentioned and informed after all, are the reforms hitherto carried out by the Pope."\(^{70}\)

The question may be asked how it came about that virtually every mass media in Nigeria singled out the religious war propaganda as an appropriate response the Pope’s humanitarian intervention. The answer lies in the mindset of the FMG. Faulty perceptions are common in war. They were the norm in the Federal Government’s dealings with the Vatican. The papers quoted above got their story from the same source—Mr Edwin Ogbu, Nigeria’s Ambassador to the United Nations. As soon as the Pope made his relief efforts in the Biafran enclave public, the Ambassador gave a press conference which opened with: "We have protested to the Pope through the Papal delegate in Lagos that he is taking the attitude that this is a religious war, which it is not....We feel that the whole attitude of introducing religion into the civil war is

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\(^{68}\) Wednesday, 31 July, 1968.
\(^{69}\) Thursday, 1 August, 1968.
\(^{70}\) 23 July, 1968. The reference to “reforms” was to the Second Vatican Council which ended in 1965.
Blaming the Gods: Religious Propaganda in Nigeria-Biafra War 67

completely unfortunate.” As the best possible counter measure against the religious crusade, government officials urged Christians to take up the challenge themselves.

Sometimes the methods of media attacks employed were intended to ridicule rather than inform, like this one from the Daily Times:

Dr. Mbadiwe whom the rebels styled their ‘Minister of Trade’ went to the United States recently and told Americans that he ‘resigned from the Federal Government in 1965 when he and his Christian colleagues discovered a plan by corrupt Moslem leaders to declare Nigeria a Moslem country and to involve her against Israel in the Arab-Israeli conflict.’ He also said that there was ‘a plan to close all Catholic schools in the country and that several were actually closed. After the coup of January 1966, this plan was foiled and the Moslems in anger waged war on Catholic Ibos killing more than 30,000 in two days. As all the Ibos were Catholics it became impossible for them to continue in Nigeria hence they seceded.’

Muslim contribution to the whole religious debate was noticeably absent for good reason: the slightest attack on the Pope or the Christian relief agencies would have given instant credence to the charge that the war had religious underpinnings. Instead, the Christians were encouraged to spearhead the campaign in the Christian dominated Southern news media. The few occasions the issue of religion was raised in the New Nigerian, the pro-Islam voice of the North, it was Christians who spoke on behalf of Muslims. Thus it was a Christian, Thomas Ademola, who called attention to the plight of Arab refugees in the Middle East and the policy of non-interference of the World Moslem

72 Wednesday, 12 June, 1968.
Nicholas Ibeawuchi Omenka

Movement. Another Catholic, Ambrose Gapsule, President of the Ahmadu Bello University Students’ Union Zaria, expressed surprise “to see a high hierarchy falling victim to the rebels’ propaganda.” He was referring to Cardinal Heenan’s pro-Biafra sermon in Westminster Cathedral in June of 1968. “We in this part of the country,” he said “are perhaps more ‘Catholic’ than people he described as ‘Biafrans’.”

Whenever the *New Nigerian* attacked Rome directly, it did so on behalf of the Christians. This was the case when the Pope intervened on behalf of the Italian oil workers captured by Biafran forces in 1969. In an editorial, the paper criticized the uproar this caused in the Western world and the hasty way the Pope despatched an envoy to Ojukwu for their release. “The Vatican’s disproportionate activities in this episode,” it said, “will render their protestation that all Christians are equal suspect. Nigerians will believe that blood is thicker than sacramental water.”

**Christians in the Propaganda War**

Right from the beginning of the Nigerian Crisis the bishops of the Onitsha Ecclesiastical Province did not have a view concerning the religious nature of the conflict that was contrary to the perception of the general public. It is important to bear in mind that from the beginning of the pogroms in May 1966 to the outbreak of the war in July 1967, the conflict was primarily, if not exclusively, between the Moslem North and the Christian Easterners. In other words, for more than one year, the impression generated by the racist pogroms which were directed exclusively against the Igbo was that of the Moslem North killing the Christian Igbo. Killing the infidels in the name of Allah was the overarching motivation for the majority of

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74 *New Nigerian*, Friday, 14 June, 1968.
75 Ibid.
76 Monday, 2 June 1968.
Blaming the Gods: Religious Propaganda in Nigeria-Biafra War 69

the masses who took part in the pogroms in the North and they declared this openly. The bishops of Biafra as religious leaders could not overlook this religious dimension which was prevalent in the perception of the people in the region.

However, a measure of contrariety overshadowed this religious outlook as soon as two largely Christian armies faced each other in July 1967. The situation was exacerbated when the Biafran Government raised religion to a pivotal level in its propaganda war. The bishops suddenly found themselves neither affirming nor denying the religious nature of the war. Archbishop Francis Arinze was the President of the Biafran Bishops Conference during the war. With his appointment in July 1967 as metropolitan of the Onitsha Ecclesiastical Province at the age of 35, he became one of the youngest archbishops of the Catholic Church. Like all the church leaders, he was primarily appalled by the mass killings which to all intents and purposes assumed genocidal proportions as the siege of the enclave progressed. Without being un-equivocable about the religious propaganda, he regarded its discourse as totally irrelevant. This position comes out clearly in a short report he sent to Bishop H. Tenhumberg of the German Catholic Office in Bonn:

Some people say that the war is not religious and that therefore the Africans should be left to solve their tribal quarrels. The answer is that there is not one single cause of the war. There are many causes: political, tribal, economic, British interests, religious and cultural. Granted that the war is not religious, does it then follow that the Biafrans should be massacred? Have they none at all of the fundamental human rights? 77

However, like many Biafrans he expected that the religion of the Western nations and their leaders should have swayed their

decisions in favour of Biafra: “The Biafrans,” he said, “are shocked that even governments of Christian countries can be so selfish, heartless, and unchristian. Are the Biafrans wrong to regard many statesmen in Italy, France, Spain, America and even Ireland as afraid to allow their Christianity to influence their politics?” Insights such as these were crucial in swaying the sympathy of the world’s Christians for Biafra. The total blockade of the Eastern Region by the federal government had had devastating effects in the area even before the start of the war. The eastern region has one of the world’s largest population densities and the nutritional situation there was always volatile. Its protein need depended almost entirely on import, and total blockade of the region by mid 1968, when Port Harcourt was captured, precipitated the worst famine the world has ever known. An estimated 10,000 people, mostly children, were dying daily in the Biafran enclave by June and July 1968. It was against this background that Archbishop Arinze made his remarks in July. By October 1968 the Christian churches around the globe had put in place the “Joint Church Aid,” a consortium of over 33 charities that undertook the largest airlift anywhere since the Berlin airlift. In pursuit of their large-scale donation drives for Biafra, diverse groups and individuals discovered that maximum results came largely from the use of the twin tickets of genocide and religious war propaganda.

But, while the religious crusade undertaken tacitly by the Christian churches was good for the relief effort, it presented a dilemma for the Christians on the Nigerian side of the conflict. The problem was how to publicly criticize the humanitarian endeavours of their mother churches in an anti-Christian environment. The general public and the various levels of government deplored the perceived nonchalance of the Nigerian Christian churches, Catholic and Protestant, in the face of the successful but destructive religious propaganda of their Biafran counterparts. In a goodwill message to the Nigerian Catholic bishops meeting in conference,

78 Ibid.
General Gowon, the Head of State, extolled the records of the Catholic Church in Nigeria, but at the same time he expressed his "dismay and disappointment" over the "anti-Nigeria acts" of some members of the Catholic Church overseas, who have, among other things, "dubbed our present crisis a religious war." He expected them as spiritual leaders to give unflinching support to the struggle for a united Nigeria. "All we want of you," he said, "was to tell the wide world the truth of our situation."  

Similar official coercion was also exerted on the leadership of the Protestant churches. During the 55th Baptist convention in Benin, for instance, the Military Governor of the Midwest, Lt. Col. Samuel Ogbemudia, had the following to say:

While Christian leaders in Britain and Ireland had been writing dangerously biased letters in newspapers and periodicals, Nigeria’s Christian leaders have said nothing in reply. Instead, they have given the impression that their silence is a confirmation that the lies inspired in the World Council of Churches against the Federal Government by Sir Francis Ibiam are true….For instance, if our own Christian leaders had the courage, early enough, to rebut the allegation that the Moslem North was trying to exterminate the Christian East, the rebels would not have received the moral, religious and financial support which has so enabled them to resist lawful authority for so long….Just two weeks ago, when the bad had been done, and after a lot of prodding, the Nigerian Council of Churches belatedly came out, through their secretary, the Rev. Canon J.A. Falope, with a statement which even at this stage of the War was

AGC: 187.1 nige-02/1, "Goodwill Message By His Excellency Major-General Gowon, Head of the Federal Military Government, Commander-In-Chief of the Armed Forces To the Roman Catholic Episcopal Conference of Nigeria, 30 September, 1969."

Ibid.
too feeble to give categorical support to the Federal Government.  

This unrelenting "prodding" finally paid dividends in May 1968 when the Nigerian Council of Churches announced its resolve to send three separate delegations to the US, Canada and Western European countries "to explain the true acts of the Nigerian crisis." In the words of Bishop Kale, the Anglican bishop of Lagos, the delegation would, among other things, "counteract the world-wide opinion that the current crisis in the country is a religious one." Archbishop Aggey, the Chairman of the Nigerian Catholic Episcopal Conference was present during the joint declaration of the Nigerian Council of Churches in May and addressed a press conference during which he too reiterated the need to tell the outside world that the war in Nigeria had no religious connotation.

This centre stage accorded the religious war propaganda in the overall concern of the Nigerian Christians becomes all the more astonishing when viewed against the background of other serious allegations like genocide and the violation of human rights levelled against the Federal Military Government. The reason centred principally on a general concern among church leaders over the future of the church in Nigeria. The Joint Church Aid, regarded as the world's largest ecumenical venture, consisted largely of two main blocks—Caritas Internationalis, the coordinator of all Catholic charities around the globe, and the Protestant World Council of Churches (WCC). These two groupings were daily castigated over the radio and in the print media. Caritas and the Pope in particular were singled out for forceful denunciation for pioneering and sustaining the breaching of the Blockade. The call was made daily for the expulsion of the Catholic missionaries and for the establishment of a national church independent of the

81 Quoted in New Nigerian, Wednesday, 8 May 1968; the emphasis is mine.
82 Daily Times, Friday, 31 May 1968.
83 New Nigerian, Friday, 31 May 1968.
Blaming the Gods: Religious Propaganda in Nigeria-Biafra War  73

Vatican. Just how precarious life in Nigeria had become for the Catholic Church is evident in the following report from Ibadan:

A crisis over involvement of Catholics in the Nigerian civil war that has been smouldering for some time has suddenly blown up to serious proportions. Sharp criticism of Caritas and of certain missionary priests has mounted in Press, on Radio and on TV. Some commentators have sought to bring the whole Catholic Church under censure and have even called for the expulsion of missionaries, citing the example of Guinea. A picture of Pope Paul VI has appeared in the daily newspaper, The Morning Post, captioned ‘He is aiding the rebels’....Such criticisms have brought acute and dangerous embarrassment to Catholics in the Federal area of Nigeria, and there are many fears as to the possible consequences. Members of the Legion of Mary report that in the course of their visitation duty they are being turned away from houses as ‘the people who love war’.  

On the Protestant side, the situation was no less precarious. Akanu Ibiam may be one of the Presidents of the WCC, but the fact was that most members of the organization were on the Nigerian side of the conflict. The Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN) was a registered member of the WCC and its leaders were on the Nigerian side of the conflict. The involvement of the WCC in the Biafran crisis, especially as it concerned the religious war propaganda, was received with deep concern in Nigeria. Nigerian delegation to any WCC international meeting therefore took it as a duty to make this concern known to the world body. The WCC eventually withdrew from the airlift and cited as reason “the ambiguous position in which the tremendous effort has put

Christian people, Churches and agencies because of its political side-effects.\textsuperscript{85}

The Catholic bishops took their case to Rome on 4 December 1968 and their first port of call was the headquarters of Caritas Internationalis. The Secretary General of the organization, Msgr. Bayer, had no problems in convincing them that the religious war propaganda was never an issue in Catholic official policy. He reiterated what he had had occasion to state several times since the allegation emerged, namely, that “Since the inception of the relief programme, at the time of the Monsignori Conway and Rocheau’s mission, Caritas Internationalis avoided taking any such stand. Nor did Caritas ever affirm in any document that this was a religious war between Muslim Hausas and Christian Ibos. Caritas aids war victims on both sides.”\textsuperscript{86} When their lordships returned home from their Rome visit, they became fearless defenders of Caritas, the Pope and the humanitarian intervention in the break-away region.

The counter propaganda efforts of the Protestants also produced remarkable results. After speaking to the English base of the religious crusaders, opposition from the Anglican Church was relaxed. The Archbishop of Canterbury, a prominent advocate for Biafran independence, is quoted as writing a letter to the Observer in which he denied that the Nigeria-Biafra war was religiously motivated and that “the policy of the British Government was the best that could be pursued in the difficult situation.”\textsuperscript{87} This seismic

\textsuperscript{85} Joint Church Aid (JCA) Press Release no. 120, “Statement made at the 5\textsuperscript{th} JCA Plenary Session, Sandeford, Norway,” 8 December, 1969; see also The Times of London, 2 February, 1970.


\textsuperscript{87} William A. Ajibola, Foreign Policy and Public Opinion: A Case Study of British Foreign Policy over the Nigerian Civil War (Ibadan: Ibadan UP, 1978): 140.
policy reversal came only after the visit of the Nigerian Protestant church leaders.

In the summer of 1968, a WCC conference was held in Uppsala, Sweden, and the Nigerian delegation, P.T. Odumosu and Bola Ige, got the Credential Committee to expunge the name “Biafra” from all accreditation papers and made sure that a meeting scheduled to discuss “Nigeria-Biafra” never held.88 A similar move was also made in 1969 at the All Africa Conference of the Roman Catholic Bishops in Kampala, Uganda. In that meeting, Archbishop Aggey, the leader of the Nigerian delegation, “made sure that no political matter was introduced.”89 Given the overall yearning for a peaceful resolution of the conflict, these moves against the discussion of peace in international Christian gatherings appear rather puzzling. For Bola Ige, a trained legal practitioner, the opposition may be formalistic. The Biafran delegates and observers at the WCC meeting came as representatives of the Christian Council of Biafra, an organization that was not a registered member of the WCC. Once that fact had been established, it followed that the delegates were not legally qualified to be partners in any peace discussion of the world body.

For Archbishop Aggey, on the other hand, the opposition accrued from considerations far more significant than the dictates of protocol.90 Given the general pro-Biafra sentiments of the Christian world at the time, the possibility was that any discussion on Nigeria-Biafra could lead to some sort of support for the breakaway region. Archbishop Aggey knew more than anyone else what such a support would mean for the Catholic Church in Nigeria. The call for a National Church in Nigeria was loud and recurrent. In June 1969, a meeting of the West Africa Committee of the Anglican Bishops was held at Takoradi, Ghana, just a few weeks

88 Ige, People, Politics, p. 342.
89 AGC: nige -02/1. “Aggey opposes Church Independent of Vatican,” a newspaper cutting.
90 The Biafran delegation to the conference, Archbishop Arinze and Bishop Godfrey Okoye, were officially invited to the gathering.
before the Catholic gathering in Kampala. During the Takoradi meeting the Nigeria-Biafra crisis was discussed. Afterwards the Nigerian church leaders who took part in the conference were castigated by the Christian Laity of Nigeria for the “tacit recognition” given to Biafra. The leader of the Lagos branch of the association, Rev. S.A. Osaba, referred to the call for a National Church of Nigeria as “joyfully welcomed by all Christians.” An editorial in the *Morning Post* entitled “Voice of the Churches,” said that what the Nigerian churches needed was “their Henry VIII to break foreign incursion disguised as religion.” The first question posed to Archbishop Aggey by journalists at the airport on arrival from Kampala was whether he would support the idea of a National Church of Nigeria. In his response, he said that he preferred having his head cut off to severing his loyalty to the Roman Catholic Church. The fact was that he had already saved his head in Kampala. Political talk on Nigeria-Biafra did take place in Kampala, but as Anthony Enahoro revealed, there was an agreement not to talk about the Pope’s intervention publicly.

Incidentally, the idea of a National Church of Nigeria was conceived and spearheaded by Anthony Enahoro, the Federal Commissioner for Information. As a Roman Catholic, he was irked not only by Vatican intervention in the war, but also by what he and other Nigerian Catholics perceived as a preferential care for Igbo Catholics by the Pope and Western Church leaders. Above all, the religious war propaganda did not take their allegiance to Christianity into account. As Msgr. Rodhain, the President of Caritas Internationalis, found out during his visit to Nigeria in February 1968, most of the daily attacks on the Catholic Church and the Pope in the press came mainly from disaffected Catholics. The propaganda rhetoric that the war was between

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92 Saturday, 26 July, 1969.
93 AGC: nige -02/1. “Aggey opposes Church Independent of Vatican.”
95 AGC: “Minutes of a Meeting of the Joint Church Aid,” Paris, 10 March 1969.
Blaming the Gods: Religious Propaganda in Nigeria-Biafra War

Muslims and Christians had made them irritable and susceptible to spurious interpretations of official Catholic pronouncements. We have seen how the Pope's revelation that he had sent relief materials into the enclave was interpreted as proof that he understood the conflict in Nigeria as between Christians and Muslims. A passing reference to "unbelievers" by Cardinal Heenan during a sermon in Westminster cathedral on 2 June during an interdenominational service on behalf of Biafra caused a huge uproar in Nigeria. Again it was Enahoro who raised the dust because, as he said, the Cardinal failed to appreciate the fact that he and several other cabinet members were Roman Catholics. 96

In the main, the civil war put God on trial in Nigeria and Biafra. The general perception among ordinary Biafrans was that God was on the side of Biafra. Many young people were heard saying that "if Biafra should lose this conflict we shall never come to Church again!" 97 The expectation was that since God was on the side of Biafra, he would never fail to come to the rescue of the new nation. Even Ojukwu himself was imbued with this thinking: "We cried out to God for help," he told a Caritas Official, "and the churches were the first to come to our aid. I see in that a sign that God will not allow his people to perish." 98 His famous Ahiara Declaration was ended in similar notes: "We believe that God, humanity and history are on our side, and that the Biafran revolution is indestructible and eternal." Thankfully, he conceded to God the very last words: "Oh God, not my will but Thine for ever." 99

On the other side of the conflict the people also prayed to the same God. In his radio message to the nation on 31 August, 1968,  

96 New Nigerian, Monday, 10 June, 1968.
Gowon announced the decision of the FMG to pursue a military defeat of the rebels with every means at its disposal. “God,” he said, “is with us. God will lead us to victory.”

It is not always words of bitterness and condemnation that come out of Christian groups on both sides of the conflict. Occasionally, words of peace and reconciliation were raised in conformity with generally accepted Christian values. Worthy of mention on the Nigerian side was Provost F. O. Segun, a church leader who wrote extensively on what the church’s attitude in the war should be. “We tend to forget,” he said “that God is the Father of all men, including our enemies. We are therefore in danger of praying for victory for our army in a way which suggests that God should utterly forsake our opponents and throw all His strength on our side.”

Words of peace and reconciliation were also heard in Biafra, such as those that came out of the Trinity Theological College, Umuahia, one of the only two educational institutions that remained open throughout the war, the other being the Catholic Bigard Memorial Seminary. During a visit by WCC officials in November 1968, the President of the Student Body expressed a wish which was representative of the mind of the majority of Christians in Biafra. “We do remember our Christian brothers in Nigeria,” he said, “and we pray that the time may come when we will be united as Christians; even though we may be politically different. We hope the time will come when we Christians in Biafra will also make our contribution to human compassion.”

Conclusion

The application and success of the religious war propaganda in the Nigeria-Biafra war has emerged as one of the most spectacular

100 Quoted in Rheinischer Merkur, Friday, 13 September 1968.
101 “Is God on Our Side?”, Christian Concern, p. 93.
102 AGC: 187.1 biaf- 04/2, ‘World Council of Churches Visit to Biafra, November 9-14, 1968, A Diary.’
Blaming the Gods: Religious Propaganda in Nigeria-Biafra War

phenomena of the entire conflict. Ojukwu, the Biafran leader, had just one regret—Biafra was not able to make enough use of it. According to him, there were two reasons for this constraint. Firstly, the religious propaganda pitted Christianity clearly against Islam. This could be said of the relationship between the East and a greater part of the North, but not of the rest of Nigeria where there was no clear-cut religious dichotomy. The second reason flows directly from the first, namely, the case of indecision and lack of co-operation from the Christians on the Nigerian side. In fact, the use of the religious propaganda produced the direct opposite of the anticipated result in this regard. It alienated the Nigerian Christians and made them unsympathetic to the Biafran cause.

The dictates of the war made the use of the religious propaganda inevitable. The Biafran Directorate of Propaganda could not use the pogrom to elicit the support of the entire Igbo nation for the war. A threat to their self-identity which their self-conscious Christian profession had become was the magic wand with which the propaganda outfit elicited the unflinching support of the masses for the war effort. From the advantage of hindsight, some people may disagree and disapprove. But, given the combined traumatic experience of the pogrom and a war of attrition, and given the most devastating man-made famine the world has ever known, the seemingly illogical religious war proposition becomes understandable. Innocuous as it may have seemed, it dominated political debate in Nigeria and polarised society throughout the war. Above all, it set the stage for the overarching dominance which religion has assumed in contemporary Nigerian national life.