

On not throwing stones: Christian and Muslim conflict in Nigeria

by [Nelly Van Doorn-Harder](#) in the [February 8, 2003](#) issue

Will Amina Lawal Kurami be stoned to death for having a baby out of wedlock? Amina was sentenced to that punishment in northern Nigeria on August 20, 2002, in accordance with Islamic Shari'a law, which prescribes death by stoning for the sin of adultery. Her eight-month-old baby is the visible sign of her crime. The child's father has been exonerated because he denies having had sex with Amina.

Amina's sentence was a recurring topic during a recent conference on Muslim-Christian relations held in Jos in central Nigeria. The streets of that city are lined with the ruins of houses and carcasses of cars—signs of the religious and ethnic conflict that has burst into the open there.

Nigeria's Muslims insist that because Shari'a is the pure law revealed by God, humans cannot tamper with it. They are frustrated because the Nigerian government allows only partial implementation of this law, which the northern Hausa and Fulani tribes have followed on and off since the 11th century. Christians fear that if the Muslims gain political power throughout Nigeria, Christians will be reduced to second-class citizens. They point to countries like Saudi Arabia and Iran, where freedom of religion is severely restricted.

Muslim domination would also mean Hausa-Fulani domination, although these tribes are not the majority of the country's population. Central Nigeria has a mixed population of Muslim, Christian and indigenous believers, while the south has hardly any Muslims. Tribal rivalry and religious competition go hand in hand and are increasingly lethal, as was evident when violence erupted around the time of the Miss World competition, originally slated to be held in Nigeria.

In the aftermath of 9/11 the West has become acutely aware of a fundamentalist Muslim agenda. Missionaries paid by Saudi Arabia are traveling to all corners of the world, teaching a narrow vision of Islam. Many of the Muslims they address lack access to the broader tradition of Islam, which requires knowledge of Arabic and

decades of intensive study. Nigerian students of Islam inevitably end up in one of the conservative centers of learning in Saudi Arabia. When they return to Nigeria as religious leaders they support the home-grown Islamization agenda.

In reaction to increased Muslim activism, Christian militancy has also grown, and on September 7, 2001, the two forces faced off in what turned out to be six days of massive destruction and killing in Jos—what inhabitants now call “the crisis.” During the six-day rampage more than 500 Muslims and Christians lost their lives, and thousands were injured. Dozens of churches and mosques were burned to the ground.

Jos is the capital of the plateau state that borders on the northern provinces and is partly wedged between the Shari’a-ruled states of Kaduna, Kano and Bauchi. Though nobody had anticipated such large-scale destruction, tensions had run high before. During the past 70 years the original Christian population of Jos has become outnumbered by Muslim Hausa-Fulanis, whose polygamous marriages produce large numbers of children. Feeling underrepresented in governmental bodies, Muslims started to vie for power.

In the early 1990s, a visionary Lutheran archbishop, David Windibiziri of the 2.5-million-member Lutheran Church of Christ in Nigeria, called Muslim and Christian leaders together to discuss how to respond to the tensions. At first few were interested in the issue, preferring to maintain the usual pattern of separation—a psychological rather than a physical separation, since in middle Nigeria many families are a mix of Christians, Muslims and indigenous believers. The bishop did not give up. He kept organizing events, each time gaining more interest. He carefully invited Muslim and Christian leaders from all denominations, provinces and tribes.

After the tragedies of September 7 and September 11, 2001, interest in the meetings grew, and in September 2002 more than 150 leaders, pastors, teachers, imams and politicians met in Jos to consider what could be done to avert a religious civil war. Participants did not have to go far to gain an understanding of how the killing spree had evolved. The conference center adjoins the area where the rioting began. Jacob, the center’s Christian receptionist, was among the first to lose his family property—property that housed 20 families. Haruna, the center’s Muslim driver, lost his house and the video shop run by his wife. To perform the ritual Friday prayers, Muslims had blocked off the narrow street that led to the mosque in a

mostly Christian neighborhood, Jacob explained. This was partly a show of force against Christians who blocked off streets leading to churches on Sundays.

A Christian woman heading home for lunch started to argue with people going to the mosque because she could not reach her house. Jacob witnessed the quarrel and noticed that some of the Muslim men were armed with knives and guns. He wondered why they were carrying arms to worship. Then a mob invaded his house, spread gasoline over the furniture and set it on fire. Jacob is grateful that all his family members escaped alive. Haruna's house was destroyed during the Christian retaliation that started the next day. In the end all hands were stained with blood.

Strong tribal elements underlie the unrest: the original Christian tribes want the Muslim "newcomers" to leave. Khadija, one of the Hausa Muslim conference participants, said about the Christian tribes: "They look at us as surplus. We established the metropolis of Jos, so we are indigenous. They say we disturb them with the adhan [call to prayer] and that we are trying to force Islam on them." The most frightening element for Christians was that the killing seemed planned. Jacob was not the only one who had seen the armed Muslims. Trucks had come in carrying "warriors" who shouted, "Allahu Akbar, the jihad has started."

So far the communities involved in the conflict have done little to promote peace. Abdallah, a Christian whose family is Muslim, blamed the conflict on economic realities: corruption is rampant throughout Nigeria, and "everyone is looking for a short cut to wealth."

Representing the government at the conference was Abdul-Lateef Adegbite of Egba tribal land, who introduced the Nigerian Inter-Religious Council, a committee consisting of 25 Muslims and the same number of Christians, all charged with promoting mutual understanding. He called for teaching children about each other's religion and instilling respect for each other's differences. He faulted "Christian impatience toward Islam and desire to forge uniformity in religious practice even where faiths differ manifestly." Possible projects of cooperation discussed during the conference included youth initiatives, studying each other's holy books, joining together to fight against AIDS, and promoting nonviolence.

While mentioning possible areas for cooperation, Muslims and Christians kept quoting their respective holy books and stressing that both religions preach peace. Few presenters crossed the theological gap between the glorious past when the

Christian and Muslim scriptures were formed and the current crisis. When real-life issues were brought up, the discussion “grew touchy,” as one participant observed.

Issues of Shari’a law led to especially heated discussions. A Catholic teacher asked, “If the Prophet Muhammad preached forgiveness, what about the cutting off of hands, and the stoning of a girl who has no real sin?” A Muslim speaker answered that being judged under Shari’a was far better than the fate of most thieves in Nigeria: the instant justice of being beaten to death or burned alive. Referring to the adultery case, he remarked that just thinking about the ravages caused by the AIDS epidemic was enough to justify stoning as a way of discouraging sexual license. He considered the outcry against stoning an insult to Islam, since its laws come straight from God.

Christians admitted fearing the Shari’a. They could not imagine how it would be fully implemented in Nigeria, where many areas beyond the north have Christian majorities. Muslims acknowledged feeling discriminated against. They are allowed to practice only part of the Shari’a, having to ignore the rules concerning apostasy, high treason and Islamic economic systems. For them, there is no distinction between what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God. The Muslim participants reiterated that Islam insists on sanctions for crime, but that Christians should not fear this system, since it would not be applied to them.

Several times Muslims brought up the difference between pure Shari’a, the law revealed by God as a blessing to humanity, and political Shari’a, the abuse of that law as a political tool to gain power. Political Shari’a should be feared, they said. Christians agreed. They fear that an Islamic plot to gain ultimate power in Northern Nigeria lies behind the riots and strife. As one participant remarked, “Who has the north has the whole of Nigeria. Who controls Nigeria can conquer the rest of Africa. This is in the mind of Islamists who want Islamic rule in the whole continent.”

So will Amina be stoned after her daughter is weaned at age two? The Islamic scholars at the conference were convinced that she will be freed by the appellate court. They had already sent the judge their recommendations, which cited a traditional story about how the Prophet Muhammad prevented the stoning of a woman whose child was not her husband’s. According to the scholars, this tradition shows that “the religion of Islam allows you to retaliate, but in the long run it will be better if you can offer forgiveness.”

Forgiveness is a necessary way out of the spiral of violence, as both Jacob and Haruna know. "We know who destroyed our houses, but retaliation will not bring them back. It is better to forgive," they argued.