FREEDOM OF BELIEF AND PERSECUTION IN AFRICA TODAY: A CRITICAL THEOLOGICAL AND SOCIO-POLITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the state of religious freedom and the dynamics of Christian persecution in contemporary Africa, with particular emphasis on Nigeria as a representative case study. Despite constitutional guarantees and international human rights commitments, empirical evidence reveals persistent patterns of violence, displacement, insecurity, and social exclusion affecting Christian communities across several regions of Nigeria. The study argues that persecution in Nigeria is neither accidental nor episodic, but structurally embedded within a complex interaction of governance failure, religious extremism, ethno-political competition, economic inequality, climate-induced pressures, and historical grievances. Through qualitative and analytical engagement with documented incidents in the North-East, North-Central, North-West, and parts of the South-West, the paper demonstrates that violence against Christians in Nigeria has evolved into a geographically widespread phenomenon with national implications. Theologically, the paper interrogates traditional interpretations of persecution and martyrdom that emphasise passive endurance while neglecting justice, advocacy, and public responsibility. It proposes a contextual public theology rooted in justice, reconciliation, peacebuilding, and social engagement. The paper concludes that sustainable protection of religious freedom in Nigeria requires an integrated framework involving state accountability, interreligious dialogue, security reform, economic justice, and theological renewal.

Keywords: Religious freedom, Christian persecution, Nigeria, Boko Haram, Middle Belt violence, public theology, ethno-religious conflict

1. Introduction

Religious freedom remains one of the most fundamental principles of democratic governance and international human rights discourse. The right to profess, practise, manifest, and propagate one's faith without coercion is recognised globally as an essential component of human dignity and civil liberty. International legal instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (1981) all affirm the protection of religious liberty as a universal human right. Nigeria, as a signatory to these international frameworks, constitutionally guarantees freedom of religion under Section 38 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

However, the practical realities within Nigeria reveal a disturbing contradiction between constitutional guarantees and lived experience. Across several regions of the country, especially in the North-East, North-Central, and parts of the North-West, Christian communities continue to experience recurrent attacks, displacement, intimidation, kidnappings, destruction of worship centres, and killings. These incidents have generated widespread concern both nationally and internationally regarding the deteriorating condition of religious freedom in Nigeria.

The Nigerian situation reflects a broader continental challenge confronting Africa in the twenty-first century. While Africa remains one of the most religious continents in the world, it has simultaneously become a theatre of violent extremism, ethno-religious conflicts, and political instability. From the Sahel region to the Horn of Africa, religious identity increasingly intersects with governance crises, economic deprivation, environmental stress, and political contestation.

Nigeria occupies a particularly significant position within this discourse because of its demographic, political, and religious complexity. With over two hundred million people, Nigeria is Africa's most populous country and one of the most religiously plural societies in the world. Islam and Christianity constitute the dominant religious traditions, while indigenous beliefs continue to shape social and cultural life. Yet this diversity has often become a source of tension rather than cohesion.

The persistence of violence in Nigeria has generated competing interpretations. Some analysts argue that the violence is primarily economic and environmental, especially regarding farmer-herder conflicts. Others emphasise religious extremism and ideological hostility towards Christian communities. A more balanced interpretation suggests that persecution in Nigeria cannot be reduced to a single causal factor. Rather, it emerges from the interaction of religion, politics, ethnicity, governance failure, historical grievances, and socio-economic pressures.

This paper therefore argues that religious persecution in Nigeria is structurally embedded within broader systems of political fragility and identity contestation. It further contends that traditional theological responses that emphasise passive endurance are inadequate in contexts characterised by systemic violence and institutional failure. Consequently, the paper advocates a contextual public theology that integrates resilience with justice, advocacy, peacebuilding, and social transformation.

Methodologically, the paper adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary approach, drawing upon theological scholarship, sociological analysis, historical studies, policy reports, media documentation, and empirical evidence from recent events across Nigeria. Particular attention is given to developments in Borno, Plateau, Benue, Kaduna, Nasarawa, Niger, Taraba, and Ondo States.

2. Conceptualising Religious Freedom and Persecution

2.1 Religious Freedom: Legal Ideal versus Social Reality

Religious freedom is commonly understood as the right of individuals and communities to hold, change, practise, and publicly express religious beliefs without coercion or discrimination. Liberal democratic traditions generally conceptualise religion as a matter of individual conscience. However, African societies often understand religion in more communal and socio-cultural terms.

Makau Mutua (1999) argues that Western liberal frameworks inadequately capture the communal realities of African societies where religion functions not merely as private belief but as a collective identity shaping political relationships, cultural belonging, and social organisation. In Nigeria, religious affiliation frequently determines access to political opportunities, educational institutions, economic resources, and communal protection.

The implementation of Sharia law in several Northern Nigerian states after 1999 intensified debates concerning secularism, citizenship, and minority rights. Although supporters maintained that Sharia applied primarily to Muslims, critics argued that its broader social and political implications affected Christian minorities and deepened perceptions of exclusion.

Consequently, violations of religious freedom in Nigeria frequently occur through indirect mechanisms rather than explicit constitutional restrictions. These mechanisms include communal violence, social intimidation, political exclusion, discriminatory practices, and insecurity.

The Nigerian experience demonstrates that constitutional guarantees alone cannot ensure genuine religious liberty where state institutions remain weak and identity politics dominate public life.

2.2 Defining Persecution in Analytical Terms

The concept of persecution requires analytical precision. Tieszen (2009) defines persecution as sustained hostility directed at individuals or groups specifically because of their religious identity or beliefs. Persecution differs from general insecurity because it involves targeted victimisation linked to religious affiliation.

In the Nigerian context, persecution may involve:

- Deliberate attacks on churches and worship centres;
- Killings during religious gatherings;
- Kidnapping of clergy and worshippers;
- Destruction of Christian villages;
- Forced displacement of faith communities;
- Intimidation preventing religious practice;
- Systematic discrimination and exclusion.

The distinction between persecution and generalised violence remains important because Nigeria experiences multiple forms of insecurity affecting both Christians and Muslims. Banditry, organised criminality, insurgency, and kidnapping are widespread national problems. Nevertheless, empirical evidence demonstrates that certain communities experience violence in patterns closely connected to religious identity.

Recent attacks in Plateau, Benue, Southern Kaduna, and parts of Niger State have disproportionately affected predominantly Christian farming communities. Churches, pastors, mission schools, and worship gatherings are frequently targeted alongside civilian populations. Such patterns indicate that religion functions as a significant marker within broader conflicts.

Furthermore, attacks often occur in contexts where affected communities perceive state responses as inadequate, delayed, or selective. This perception contributes to feelings of abandonment and reinforces narratives of systemic marginalisation.

3. Empirical Patterns of Violence across Nigeria

3.1 North-East: Insurgency and Ideological Violence

The North-East region of Nigeria represents the clearest example of ideologically driven religious violence. Boko Haram emerged prominently around 2009 and rapidly transformed Nigeria's security landscape.

The group, formally known as Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad, opposes Western education and seeks to establish governance based upon its interpretation of Islamic law. Agbiboa (2013) explains that Boko Haram combines anti-Western ideology, religious extremism, socio-economic grievances, and political frustration.

States such as Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa became epicentres of insurgent violence. Thousands of civilians were killed, villages destroyed, and millions displaced. Christian communities became particular targets because the group associated Christianity and Western education with moral corruption and foreign influence.

One of the most internationally recognised incidents occurred in April 2014 when Boko Haram abducted over 270 schoolgirls from Chibok in Borno State. The Chibok abduction symbolised both the vulnerability of civilians and the ideological hostility towards Western education and female empowerment.

Beyond Chibok, Boko Haram repeatedly bombed churches, attacked worship services, assassinated clergy, and destroyed mission schools. Suicide bombings in Maiduguri, Damaturu, Gwoza, and other locations generated widespread fear among Christian communities.

The emergence of Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) further complicated the insurgency. Although tactical differences emerged between Boko Haram and ISWAP, both organisations contributed significantly to insecurity and displacement.

Recent years have continued to witness attacks on villages, churches, humanitarian workers, and travellers despite repeated government claims of military success. Rural Christian communities remain particularly vulnerable due to limited security presence and geographical isolation.

The North-East crisis demonstrates how extremist ideology can intersect with poverty, corruption, weak governance, and institutional fragility to sustain prolonged violence.

3.2 North-Central (Middle Belt): Communal Violence and Massacres

The Middle Belt has emerged as one of the most volatile regions in Nigeria. States such as Plateau, Benue, Nasarawa, Niger, and Taraba have experienced repeated cycles of communal violence involving village raids, mass killings, displacement, and destruction of property.

The region occupies a strategic position between predominantly Muslim Northern Nigeria and predominantly Christian Southern Nigeria. Consequently, conflicts frequently acquire religious dimensions alongside ethnic and economic factors.

Benue State

Benue State has experienced recurrent attacks on farming communities in areas such as Guma, Logo, Agatu, Ukum, and Kwande Local Government Areas. Armed groups identified as suspected Fulani militias frequently attack rural settlements, leading to widespread casualties and displacement.

These attacks have severely disrupted agricultural production, local economies, and community structures. Thousands of internally displaced persons now reside in camps under difficult humanitarian conditions.

In 2025 and 2026, renewed attacks in Yelwata, Agatu, and Ukum generated national outrage. Villages were burned, churches destroyed, and residents killed during coordinated assaults. Amnesty International documented severe destruction affecting schools, clinics, homes, and worship centres.

While economic and environmental factors contribute to these conflicts, the repeated targeting of predominantly Christian farming communities reinforces perceptions of religious persecution.

3.3 Plateau State

Plateau State remains historically significant within discussions of ethno-religious violence in Nigeria. Jos and surrounding communities have experienced recurrent crises since the early 2000s.

Krause (2011) describes the violence as a deadly cycle sustained by revenge attacks, political exclusion, historical grievances, and identity politics. Issues surrounding indigene rights, land ownership, and political representation continue to fuel tensions.

In December 2023, coordinated attacks across Bokkos and Barkin Ladi Local Government Areas resulted in extensive casualties. Entire communities were destroyed, forcing residents into displacement camps.

Additional attacks occurred during Easter celebrations in 2025 and 2026, heightening fears among Christian populations. Such incidents demonstrate the persistence of insecurity despite repeated government interventions.

3.4 Southern Kaduna and the North-West

Southern Kaduna represents one of the most contested regions in Nigeria's religious conflict discourse. Predominantly Christian minority communities within Kaduna State have repeatedly reported attacks involving killings, kidnappings, destruction of villages, and displacement.

Communities in Zangon Kataf, Kauru, Kajuru, Kaura, and Jema'a Local Government Areas have experienced recurring violence over several years. Churches, clergy, and Christian settlements are frequently targeted.

Barkindo (2020) argues that violence in Southern Kaduna reflects broader struggles over land, identity, political control, and historical domination.

In January 2026, reports emerged concerning mass abductions during church gatherings in parts of Kaduna State. Worshippers were kidnapped during services, intensifying concerns regarding the vulnerability of religious gatherings.

The prolonged insecurity in Southern Kaduna has disrupted farming, education, worship, and social life. Many communities now live under constant fear of attack.

3.5 Expansion into the South-West

Although Northern Nigeria and the Middle Belt remain the most affected regions, insecurity has increasingly spread into parts of Southern Nigeria.

The attack on St Francis Catholic Church in Owo, Ondo State, in June 2022 shocked the nation. Worshippers attending Sunday Mass were killed and injured during the attack, demonstrating that organised violence could penetrate previously stable regions.

Kidnappings of priests, seminarians, and church workers have also increased in Ondo, Ekiti, Ogun, and Osun States. Criminal networks increasingly target religious institutions because of perceived ransom opportunities.

The spread of insecurity into the South-West suggests that Nigeria faces a broader national crisis with serious implications for religious freedom and national stability.

3.6 The Emerging Security Crisis in Kwara State

Kwara State, historically regarded as one of the more peaceful states in North-Central Nigeria, has recently witnessed alarming developments linked to extremist infiltration, rural insecurity, and armed violence.

In February 2026, coordinated attacks on Woro and Nuku communities in Kaiama Local Government Area resulted in one of the deadliest massacres recorded in Nigeria outside the North-East in recent years. Reports indicated that over 160 persons were killed, while many others were abducted, injured, or displaced. (Wikipedia)

The attackers reportedly invaded the communities over several hours, burning homes, killing civilians, and forcing residents to flee into surrounding forests. Amnesty International and local reports documented incidents of close-range executions, mutilation of victims, destruction of homes, and attacks on community leaders. (Wikipedia)

Particularly disturbing were reports that extremist elements had previously distributed warning letters and attempted ideological indoctrination within surrounding communities before the attacks occurred. Survivors claimed that some residents were threatened for refusing to accept extremist religious teachings and for resisting attempts to impose alternative systems of authority. (Wikipedia)

The Kwara attacks demonstrate the changing geography of insecurity in Nigeria. Violence associated with extremist groups and armed militias is no longer confined to the North-East. Forest corridors stretching through Niger, Kwara, Kogi, and parts of the South-West increasingly provide operational spaces for armed groups, kidnappers, and ideological militants.

The attacks also reveal the porous nature of Nigeria's internal security architecture. Despite warnings and growing fears among local populations, preventive security measures proved insufficient. The delayed response reinforced public perceptions that rural communities remain largely unprotected.

3.7 Oyo State and the Expansion of Violence into the South-West

Perhaps even more alarming is the recent escalation of violence in Oyo State, a region traditionally perceived as safer than Northern Nigeria. In May 2026, armed kidnappers attacked schools in Oriire Local Government Area of Oyo State, abducting pupils, teachers, and school workers. (AP News)

The attacks targeted Community Grammar School, Baptist Nursery and Primary School, and L.A. Primary School in the Ahoro-Esinele axis. Reports indicated that dozens of students and several teachers were kidnapped during the coordinated assaults. (Punch Newspapers)

The incident generated widespread national outrage after reports emerged that one of the abducted teachers, identified as Michael Oyedokun, was allegedly beheaded by the kidnappers while still in captivity. (Businessday NG)

The killing intensified fears among residents and heightened concerns regarding the vulnerability of educational and Christian communities within South-West Nigeria. Teachers in Oriire Local Government reportedly organised protests demanding immediate government intervention and the rescue of remaining abductees. Schools within the affected areas became largely deserted as fear spread among parents and local residents. (Punch Newspapers)

Statements released by the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) in Oyo State condemned the attacks and emphasised the growing insecurity affecting Christian institutions and communities. Religious leaders described the attacks as evidence that organised violence had significantly expanded beyond the traditional theatres of conflict in Northern Nigeria. (Al Jazeera)

The Oyo incident carries important implications for understanding persecution and insecurity in contemporary Nigeria.

First, it demonstrates that the South-West is no longer insulated from the broader national security crisis. Second, it highlights the increasing targeting of schools and Christian-affiliated institutions by kidnappers and armed groups. Third, it reveals how insecurity has evolved from isolated incidents into coordinated attacks capable of paralysing entire communities.

The attack in Oriire also illustrates the psychological dimension of persecution and violence. The trauma experienced by abducted children, teachers, worshippers, and families extends beyond immediate physical harm. Communities increasingly live under conditions of fear, uncertainty, and social disruption.

4. Explaining the Drivers of Persecution

4.1 Governance Failure and State Weakness

A major factor sustaining violence and persecution in Nigeria is the weakness of state institutions. The inability of the Nigerian state to provide adequate security, effective intelligence gathering, rapid emergency response, and impartial justice has created an atmosphere of fear and impunity.

Mlambo (2017) argues that state fragility enables extremist groups, armed militias, kidnappers, and criminal syndicates to flourish within vulnerable regions. Communities repeatedly report that security agencies either arrive long after attacks have occurred or fail to respond adequately despite prior intelligence warnings.

This institutional weakness has become increasingly visible beyond the traditional conflict zones of the North-East and Middle Belt. In recent years, states previously regarded as relatively secure, including Kwara and Oyo States, have experienced growing levels of organised violence, kidnappings, and attacks on educational and religious institutions.

4.2 Religious Extremism and Ideological Mobilisation

Religious extremism remains a major contributor to insecurity within several parts of Nigeria. Boko Haram and ISWAP continue to utilise theological rhetoric and ideological propaganda to justify violence against perceived enemies.

Abah (2021) explains that extremist organisations manipulate religious narratives to legitimise attacks against Christians, Western institutions, secular governance, and moderate Muslim communities. Educational institutions, churches, mission schools, and humanitarian organisations frequently become symbolic targets because they represent alternative social and ideological systems.

However, it is important to recognise that extremist violence in Nigeria increasingly intersects with organised criminality. Kidnapping for ransom, cattle rustling, illegal mining, and arms trafficking now form part of the broader political economy of violence.

Consequently, many attacks simultaneously contain ideological, economic, ethnic, and criminal dimensions.

4.5 Socio-Economic and Environmental Pressures

Climate change and environmental degradation have intensified conflict across Nigeria, particularly within agrarian communities.

Desertification, shrinking water resources, deforestation, and population growth continue to increase migration pressures among pastoralist groups moving southwards in search of grazing land. These movements frequently generate tensions with sedentary farming populations.

Adebajo (2022) observes that economic disputes over land and water often become transformed into ethno-religious conflicts because affected communities interpret violence through identity frameworks already shaped by historical suspicion and political division.

In states such as Benue, Plateau, Southern Kaduna, and Nasarawa, farming communities frequently identify attacks as deliberate attempts to displace Christian populations from ancestral lands. Whether all attacks are explicitly religious remains debated, yet the perception of targeted victimisation significantly shapes community responses and social memory.

Poverty and unemployment further aggravate insecurity. Young people facing economic hopelessness become vulnerable to recruitment by extremist organisations, criminal gangs, and armed militias.

4.6 Identity Politics and Historical Legacies

Nigeria’s colonial history continues to influence contemporary conflicts. British indirect rule institutionalised regional inequalities and reinforced divisions based on ethnicity and religion.

Omoigberale et al. (2025) argue that postcolonial Nigeria inherited deeply fragmented political structures in which religious identity became closely connected to access to power, territory, and state resources.

The distinction between “indigenes” and “settlers” remains especially problematic in Plateau State and parts of the Middle Belt. Communities perceived as non-indigenous frequently experience exclusion from political participation, employment opportunities, and traditional structures.

Political elites often manipulate these tensions for electoral advantage, further intensifying communal divisions.

Religion therefore functions not merely as belief but as a powerful instrument of political mobilisation and identity formation.

5. Theological Engagement: Rethinking Persecution

5.1 Biblical and Historical Understanding of Persecution

Christian theology has historically understood persecution as an inevitable dimension of faithful discipleship. Biblical passages such as Matthew 5:10–12, John 15:18–20, Romans 8:35–39, and 2 Timothy 3:12 present suffering as inseparable from Christian witness.

The early church developed a rich theology of martyrdom rooted in endurance, faithfulness, and participation in the sufferings of Christ. Christians persecuted under Roman imperial rule often interpreted suffering as evidence of spiritual authenticity.

Jakada (2020) notes that early Christian communities combined spiritual resilience with communal solidarity. Martyr narratives inspired courage and reinforced collective identity during periods of oppression.

Within African Christianity, persecution theology frequently emphasises divine comfort, eternal hope, spiritual victory, and perseverance under suffering. These themes remain important sources of encouragement for communities facing violence and displacement.

5.2 Limitations of Passive Theology

Despite its spiritual value, a theology centred exclusively on passive endurance becomes problematic within contexts of systemic violence and institutional collapse.

A purely passive theology risks normalising injustice by encouraging silence rather than constructive resistance. Communities experiencing repeated massacres, kidnappings, displacement, and destruction require theological frameworks capable of addressing public ethics, justice, advocacy, and social transformation.

Excessive emphasis on heavenly reward may unintentionally discourage demands for accountability and institutional reform.

Furthermore, prolonged exposure to violence produces severe psychological consequences including trauma, grief, fear, anger, and hopelessness. Churches therefore require theological approaches that address emotional healing and social reconstruction in addition to spiritual endurance.

5.3 Towards a Public Theology of Justice

Contemporary realities in Nigeria demand a reconfiguration of theological responses to persecution and insecurity. The church can no longer limit its mission to spiritual consolation alone while ignoring systemic violence, political failures, and humanitarian crises affecting vulnerable populations.

Recent scholarship increasingly advocates what is commonly described as public theology. Public theology refers to theological engagement with social, political, economic, and cultural realities within society. Unlike purely devotional theology, public theology insists that Christian faith must address structures of injustice, violence, oppression, and social exclusion.

Ede (2018) argues that Christian responses to insecurity and displacement in Nigeria must integrate practical humanitarian engagement with prophetic advocacy. The church must therefore move beyond passive survival towards constructive participation in peacebuilding and social transformation.

A contextual public theology for Nigeria should incorporate several dimensions.

Justice and Accountability

Biblical theology consistently emphasises justice as central to divine concern. The prophetic traditions of the Old Testament repeatedly condemn oppression, violence, exploitation, and neglect of vulnerable populations. Prophets such as Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Micah challenged political authorities and demanded social righteousness.

In the Nigerian context, theological reflection on persecution must therefore include calls for accountability, institutional reform, and protection of vulnerable communities.

The Nigerian church must resist any theology that normalises violence or discourages legitimate demands for justice. Silence in the face of systematic killings and displacement contradicts the prophetic responsibility of the church.

Christian leaders increasingly speak against government failures, insecurity, and the culture of impunity surrounding violent attacks. The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), the Catholic

Bishops Conference of Nigeria (CBCN), and Pentecostal fellowships have repeatedly condemned attacks on churches, communities, and educational institutions.

However, prophetic denunciation alone remains insufficient without practical engagement in peacebuilding and social reconstruction.

Peacebuilding and Reconciliation

Nigeria's religious diversity makes peaceful coexistence essential for national stability. Christianity and Islam remain deeply rooted within Nigerian society, and neither community can realistically exist in isolation from the other.

Consequently, sustainable peace requires intentional interreligious engagement and reconciliation.

Public theology must therefore encourage dialogue rather than perpetual hostility. Christian and Muslim leaders possess enormous influence within their communities. Their cooperation can significantly reduce tensions, counter extremist propaganda, and strengthen peaceful coexistence.

Several interfaith initiatives across Plateau, Kaduna, Jos, and Abuja have demonstrated that religious leaders can successfully mediate conflicts and promote reconciliation. Community peace committees, youth engagement programmes, and interfaith forums have contributed to reducing violence in some local contexts.

Nevertheless, interreligious dialogue must avoid superficiality. Genuine reconciliation requires confronting painful historical memories, acknowledging injustice, and promoting fairness within political and social institutions.

Trauma Healing and Psychological Restoration

One of the most neglected dimensions of persecution in Nigeria is the psychological impact of violence upon survivors and communities.

Repeated attacks, kidnappings, massacres, and displacement produce profound emotional trauma. Children who witness killings, women who lose family members, displaced persons living in camps, abducted victims, and survivors of attacks often suffer long-term psychological consequences.

The beheading of abducted teacher Michael Oyedokun in Oriire Local Government Area of Oyo State in 2026 represents not only a physical tragedy but also a profound psychological assault upon educational institutions, Christian communities, and the wider society. Fear generated by such incidents affects entire populations far beyond the immediate victims.

Churches therefore require specialised ministries addressing trauma healing, grief counselling, emotional recovery, and social reintegration. Clergy and theological institutions must increasingly engage psychology, mental health studies, and humanitarian care within pastoral ministry.

A theology incapable of addressing trauma remains incomplete within violent societies.

Civic Engagement and Democratic Responsibility

Public theology also requires responsible civic participation. The church cannot remain disengaged from governance, public policy, security reform, electoral accountability, and social justice.

Corruption, institutional failure, political patronage, and weak governance significantly contribute to insecurity in Nigeria. Consequently, theological engagement with persecution must also address governance ethics and democratic responsibility.

Christian communities should encourage:

- Responsible political participation;
- Human rights advocacy;
- Electoral integrity;
- Anti-corruption initiatives;
- Community development;
- Youth empowerment;
- Educational reform.

Theological institutions similarly bear responsibility for training leaders capable of engaging contemporary social realities with intellectual depth and moral integrity.

5.4 The Church and Humanitarian Responsibility

Across Nigeria, churches have become major providers of humanitarian assistance during periods of violence and displacement.

Catholic dioceses, Protestant missions, evangelical organisations, and Pentecostal ministries have established relief programmes supporting internally displaced persons across Borno, Benue, Plateau, Kaduna, and other affected states.

Churches provide:

- Shelter for displaced persons;
- Food assistance;
- Educational support;

- Trauma counselling;
- Medical outreach;
- Rehabilitation programmes;
- Economic empowerment initiatives.

In many rural communities, churches remain among the few functioning institutions capable of providing social support during crises.

However, humanitarian engagement also exposes churches to additional risks. Clergy and aid workers increasingly become targets for kidnappers and armed groups because of their visibility and perceived access to resources.

The growing abduction of priests, pastors, seminarians, and church workers across Nigeria reflects this dangerous reality.

5.5 Theological Implications of Martyrdom in Contemporary Nigeria

The Nigerian experience raises important theological questions regarding martyrdom and Christian witness in violent societies.

Historically, martyrdom represented voluntary faithfulness under persecution. However, contemporary violence in Nigeria frequently involves indiscriminate attacks affecting women, children, farmers, students, and worshippers who possess little capacity for resistance.

Consequently, the language of martyrdom requires careful theological handling. Romanticising suffering may unintentionally glorify violence or discourage practical efforts towards protection and justice.

A balanced theology must affirm both spiritual endurance and the moral legitimacy of seeking security, justice, and institutional accountability.

Christian faith does not require passive acceptance of preventable violence. Rather, biblical traditions consistently affirm the value of human life, justice, peace, and communal responsibility.

6. The Role of Government and International Community

6.1 Security Reform and Protection of Vulnerable Communities

The Nigerian state bears primary responsibility for protecting religious freedom and ensuring citizen security.

However, repeated attacks across Borno, Plateau, Benue, Kaduna, Kwara, Niger, and Oyo States reveal serious deficiencies within the national security system.

Security reforms should prioritise:

- Improved intelligence gathering;
- Rapid emergency response systems;
- Professionalisation of security agencies;
- Community policing initiatives;
- Rural security protection;
- Border surveillance;
- Judicial accountability;
- Prosecution of perpetrators.

The failure to prosecute attackers contributes significantly to the culture of impunity surrounding violence in Nigeria. Communities frequently perceive that perpetrators operate without meaningful consequences.

Where justice systems appear ineffective or selective, public trust in government institutions declines further.

6.2 Addressing Structural Causes of Conflict

Military intervention alone cannot resolve Nigeria’s insecurity crisis. Sustainable peace requires addressing deeper structural drivers of violence.

These include:

- Poverty and unemployment;
- Climate change and environmental degradation;
- Rural underdevelopment;
- Educational inequality;
- Corruption;
- Political exclusion;
- Ethnic marginalisation;
- Weak institutions.

Agricultural reform remains particularly important within the Middle Belt where farmer-herder conflicts continue to intensify. Clear grazing policies, land management systems, and environmental protection measures are essential for reducing tensions.

Youth unemployment also represents a major security challenge. Armed groups, extremist organisations, and kidnapping syndicates frequently recruit unemployed young people lacking economic opportunities.

Educational investment therefore constitutes both a developmental and security necessity.

6.3 International Advocacy and Human Rights Monitoring

International organisations continue to monitor developments concerning religious freedom and insecurity in Nigeria.

Bodies such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Open Doors International, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, and the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom have repeatedly documented attacks affecting Christian communities.

International attention increased significantly following:

- The Chibok abductions;
- Repeated massacres in Plateau and Benue States;
- The Owo church attack;
- Kidnappings of clergy and worshippers;
- Mass displacement crises.

However, international engagement must avoid simplistic narratives. Portraying Nigeria solely as a theatre of religious war risks obscuring broader political, economic, and environmental dimensions.

Effective international advocacy requires nuanced understanding of Nigeria’s complex realities.

The international community should support:

- Humanitarian relief programmes;
- Peacebuilding initiatives;
- Educational development;
- Trauma healing projects;
- Security sector reform;
- Interfaith dialogue platforms.

7. Conclusion

This paper has critically examined the state of religious freedom and the dynamics of persecution within contemporary Nigeria. The study has demonstrated that persecution in Nigeria cannot be reduced to isolated incidents or explained solely through religious extremism. Rather, it emerges from a complex interaction of governance failure, ideological radicalisation, socio-economic inequality, environmental stress, historical grievances, identity politics, and institutional fragility.

Empirical evidence from the North-East, Middle Belt, Southern Kaduna, Kwara State, and parts of the South-West reveals the geographically widespread nature of insecurity affecting Christian communities and vulnerable populations across Nigeria.

The Boko Haram insurgency in Borno and Yobe States represents the clearest manifestation of ideologically motivated violence. However, repeated attacks in Plateau, Benue, Southern Kaduna, and more recently Kwara and Oyo States demonstrate that insecurity has evolved into a broader national crisis extending beyond traditional conflict zones.

The massacre in Kaiama Local Government Area of Kwara State and the beheading of abducted teacher Michael Oyedokun in Oriire Local Government Area of Oyo State reveal the alarming expansion of organised violence into regions previously regarded as relatively secure. These incidents further demonstrate the vulnerability of educational institutions, Christian communities, and rural populations within contemporary Nigeria.

Theologically, the paper has argued that traditional interpretations of persecution centred exclusively upon passive endurance remain insufficient within contexts of systemic violence and institutional collapse. Contemporary realities require a contextual public theology integrating resilience with justice, advocacy, peacebuilding, trauma healing, and civic engagement.

The Nigerian church therefore faces dual responsibilities. On one hand, it must continue providing spiritual encouragement, humanitarian assistance, and pastoral care for affected communities. On the other hand, it must actively engage public issues including governance accountability, peacebuilding, democratic participation, and social justice.

Religious freedom in Nigeria cannot be secured merely through constitutional declarations or military operations. Sustainable protection requires effective governance, impartial justice systems, economic reform, environmental management, educational investment, interreligious cooperation, and institutional accountability.

Ultimately, the future of religious freedom in Nigeria depends upon whether state institutions, religious communities, civil society organisations, and international partners can collectively confront the structural conditions sustaining violence and insecurity. Without such integrated engagement, the gap between constitutional ideals and lived realities will continue to widen, with profound implications for democracy, national unity, and human dignity.

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