

HISTORIC INTERFAITH STATEMENT On the victims of ISIS in Iraq

**Observations by H.E. John Cardinal Onaiyekan
Catholic Archbishop Emeritus of Abuja, Nigeria;
Honorary President, *Religions for Peace*
ZOOM Conference: 16 July 2020**

The “Historic Interfaith Statement,” facilitated by UNITAD in Iraq recently, is indeed a historic event. It is indeed a great achievement to get all the various religious leaders of Iraq to jointly sign such a document. Although the contents of the document are well known and seem obvious, the tragedy is that there seems to be still many people in the world today who reject them both in theory and practice. It is therefore significant that all these leaders of the main religious communities of Iraq have come together to openly jointly sign the document. Precisely because we cannot take it for granted that everyone accepts the document, there is need for a patient spreading of the good news. The final test of the document will be in its implementation on the practical level. On this, one can only wish them all the best.

The statement has been presented as a model that can be applied elsewhere. From the Nigerian perspective, the document will be a useful and timely reminder of the position that we have been taking in our tedious journey for inter-religious peace and harmony.

We must however recognize the not insignificant differences between our country and Iraq. Such differences are not only geographical but also historical. There is also an important difference in the composition of religious communities in both countries. While Iraq brought together at least five different religious groups, in Nigeria we are dealing with only two groups, Christians and Muslims, even though each of these two groups has its own internal differences. The fact that religious affiliation is often related to historic national identities in Iraq raises issues different from Nigeria where religious belonging is largely voluntary, and often cut across national and ethnic identities. By and large, in Nigeria, Nigerian Christians and Muslims are in the main second or third generation converts from the traditional religion.

Perhaps the major difference between Iraq and Nigeria is in the fact that while, in Iraq they are dealing with post-ISIS situation, in Nigeria, we are still in the midst of our crisis. While Iraq is in a Post-ISIS era, able to engage in a post mortem, seeking accountability and reconciliation, Nigeria is still in the midst of generalized insecurity. In the North East theatres of war with Boko Haram, armed engagement has so far proved inadequate. There are widespread allegations of poor and corrupt management of persons and resources within the Nigerian military establishment. Armed groups

continue to occupy well-known hills and forests in many parts of the country, from where they launch deadly attacks against poor villagers, and kidnap road users for ransom at illegal roadblocks. It has also been rumoured that the dreaded “Fulani armed herdsman” and militias have links with the Islamic terrorist groups.

Despite the differences mentioned above, there are many similarities and links between the terrorist groups in Nigeria and ISIS.

Boko Haram, (BH) uses the same methods and tactics as ISIS. At some point they even claim allegiance to the Caliphate of Al Bagdadi.

Many BH elements are veterans from the battlefields of ISIS and Al Qaeda. It is also said that elements of ISIS seem to have infiltrated the BH as “foreign fighters”. These foreign groups are also active today across not only West Africa, (eg. Mali, Burkino Faso and Niger) but also in Central and Eastern Africa, (eg Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Uganda, and even as far south as Angola.)

An important common element is the environment of a weak government unable to take firm control of the security of the nation. There is a persisting situation of generalised insecurity in Nigeria, with proliferation of armed groups under many names: terrorists, militias, bandits, armed robbers, kidnappers. All parts of the nation have been affected and infected. The Government continues to appear impotent.

Let me now raise a few burning issues that I believe need urgent attention with regard to violent religious extremism in our two nations.

The ISIS main base in Iraq has been dismantled. But their elements seem to have moved elsewhere, wreaking havoc. This is not only in Africa, as we have mentioned above, but in other parts of the Middle East, especially Syria. Who is behind mobilizing and deploying them? Are there some state entities, at times with the excuse and justification of supporting fighting against injustice? We must break the vicious circle of armed violence between states and opposition groups.

There has been frequent reference to the abuse of Islam in most of these situations of violence in the name of religion. The genuine leadership of Islam in our nation and world-wide has consistently and clearly dissociated the religion of Islam from the nefarious activities of these terrorists and criminals. All non-Muslims must listen to these messages of peace. Efforts must continue not only to deradicalize but also to reorient those attracted by religious extremism that is always a fertile soil for violence and crime. In this regard, there should be no neglect, less still denial of the responsibility of the global Islamic community – in collaboration with other religious communities.

The Iraq statement aims at promoting accountability and reconciliation. There is a delicate interrelationship between these two aims. It is similar to that between justice and forgiveness, both of which are necessary for true peace. Promoting forgiveness as a necessary condition for peace and reconciliation should be the special role and duty of religious leaders.

Religion in the world of today

On a more general note, I would like to share some brief but important personal reflections about what is happening to religion in the world of our days.

- a) The many cases of clear abuse and misuse of religion for violence and crime have given religion itself a bad name. Those who genuinely believe in the nobility of religion must continue to work towards liberating religion from those who have held it hostage, under whatever pretence. We must insist that religious conviction and the desire to share it with others is a noble right. But this right is limited by the rights of others, especially the right to life and the right to just and dignified human living conditions. This is about the all-important matter of freedom of religion.
- b) In this matter, we cannot deny the burden of past history which we all bear, a past history marked both by many heroic pages of value and valour, but also many other ugly pages soiled by bloody violence and massive killings, jihads and crusades justified by bad theology “in God’s name”.
- c) We have to face a “new world order” emerging before our eyes, characterised by globalization and growing religious pluralism all over the world. This demands a radical change in what religion means and demands of people all across board. We have to acknowledge, take responsibility, repent and apologize for past errors perpetrated in the name of our various religious communities, ask for forgiveness, and where necessary make appropriate restitution. It means readiness to review our theology to accommodate the right of other faiths to exist, with a proper understanding of the relationship between God and religion. There is one God and many religions. Everyone must be deemed sincere in his or her religious conviction and deserves to be respected in this by all, with full reciprocity of mutual respect. Above all, the sacredness of human life must be scrupulously respected. The strong statement of the late Pope Saint John Paul II is very striking in this regard: “It is blasphemy to kill a human being in the name of God”. Unfortunately, this is still happening even today. What a tragic irony that we still hear of cases where governments sentence their citizens to death for alleged crime of “blasphemy”!

- d) In our days, it is necessary to work out in a peaceful and practical way the relationship between religion and politics. I will make only a few points in this regard, without any expatiation. Religion and politics are both connected but distinct. Religion should give moral direction to politics. This is challenging but necessary in our religiously pluralistic world. There should be an inter-religious effort to arrive at a common ground that cuts across religious differences. The political power that the state rightly wields, is to be used for the common good of citizens without any discrimination.
- e) Religious leaders and politicians are members of the same nation and family. At times, indeed quite often, the same person is both a religious leader and a politician. Whatever the situation, the aim must be good governance for the common good, in peace, justice and freedom. We are all to some extent both religious and political.
- f) Our present globalised world has all that it takes to achieve a peaceful and prosperous world, on the condition that there is genuine solidarity at all levels.

Conclusion

I wish to close these reflections with reference to the rampaging and ravaging virus that has turned the lives of everybody upside down. From the religious point of view, I see COVID-19 as a loud message from God, affirming his almighty power and the limits of our human ingenuity. Military prowess, economic power and high level scientific attainments have all been rendered irrelevant. But at the same time, the unity of the human family has been clearly shown for all to see. Global solidarity has become an imperative, if we are to survive the pandemic. We hope we will learn the lesson, not only for the pandemic period, but in the world after COVID.