

RELIGION, CONFLICT, VIOLENCE, AND TOLERANCE IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES: THE ISA/RC22 ABUJA 2012 CONFERENCE AND ITS CONTRIBUTION TO THE POLITOLOGY OF RELIGION

Introduction

In collaboration with PANAFSTRAG (Pan-African Strategic and Policy Research Group), the Sociology of Religion Research Committee (RC22) of the International Sociological Association, held their Mid-Term International Conference from 27–30 January 2012 in Abuja, Nigeria.¹ The theme of the Conference was, “Religion, Conflict, Violence, and Tolerance in Global Perspectives.” Roughly 50 scholars and observers assembled in this modern African city from a diverse cross-section of the globe, including France, Malaysia, Netherlands, Nigeria, Pakistan, Serbia, Turkey, United Kingdom, United States, and Zimbabwe. Their range of vantage points and fields of study proved to be just as diverse, with participants bringing expertise in sociology, phenomenology, politology, historiography, jurisprudence, and public policy.

The function of the Conference was to provide a cross-disciplinary platform of discourse, focused upon the intersections of conflict, violence, and tolerance within various religious traditions and historical epochs. As conventional explanations have been largely insufficient in both grasping local-global complexities and providing a comprehensive framework to approach and analyze the empirical social world, the Conference was organized in order to foster attention and further analysis into a popular, yet often misunderstood field of study.

The Setting of the Conference

The decision and determination to host the Conference in Abuja was bold and timely. It required scholars who were willing to get beyond the sensational and frequently violent headlines to engage in serious discussion in the midst of a nation in flux. Nigeria is situated geographically in West Africa, just below the fringe of the Sahara Desert, and occupies an informal boundary marker between the largely Muslim population of northern Africa and the largely

1 <http://www.isa-rc22.org/>, accessed 14.02.2012.

Christian population of sub-Saharan Africa. While forms of African Traditional Religion are still ritually active, both formally and informally, and over 250 different ethno-linguistic groups inhabit Nigeria, most of the country's 160 million people are evenly split between those claiming to be Muslim or Christian. Thus, Nigeria provides one of only a few examples, and certainly the largest example, of a nation with a relatively even proportion of Muslims and Christians. Given this segmentation, and considering the size of the population, Nigeria is a major bastion for both Muslim and Christian dominion; causing many to see it as "the greatest Islamo-Christian nation in the world," and offering the potential to serve as a microcosmic litmus test for better understanding interreligious encounter and the role that religion plays in Africa and beyond.²

Contributions to the Politology of Religion

The papers presented at the Conference were fascinating. While some focused upon specific and detailed cases of conflict or tolerance, others delivered a bold and comprehensive analysis of broader historical and theoretical approaches. The unintentional, yet timely focus on Nigeria constructed a web of conversation linking together seemingly unrelated events and people. Pragmatic and theoretical methods emerged during many of the presentations that crossed boundaries of culture, geography, and field of study. While my purpose here is to reflect upon how the Conference contributed particularly to discourse in the politology of religion, these reflections can aptly be applied across all disciplines of social science.

Reflection #1: The Group Without A Face

Given recent events in Nigeria, the quasi religio-political group popularly known as Boko Haram, was a frequent topic of discussion.³ Yet, despite being commonplace in our academic sessions and forming the centerpiece of the daily news headlines during the Conference, a realization was made: there has been relatively no serious social scientific study and analysis of the group. It is not that this group or others like it do not have a face; it is rather that hardly anyone has taken the time and effort to catch a glimpse.

As an imperative, the use of the social scientific approach, from whatever

2 This commonly referred to phrase was originally coined by Archbishop Teissier of Algiers and is quoted in: J. Onaiyekan, "Being the Church in an Islamo-Christian Society: A Nigerian Perspective," in *Towards an African Synod*, eds. G. Albergo and A. Mushete (London: SCM Press, 1992), 48.

3 The name Boko Haram is of Hausa origin and roughly translated means: western education is forbidden or sinful. This is the name given to them by local residents in Maiduguri, Nigeria, the spiritual center and headquarters of the group. The official name, however, is Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad, an Arabic slogan meaning "People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad."

angle or field of study, implies the direct observation of and analysis of the empirical social world. Regardless, what is more common than not, especially in relation to the study of groups like Boko Haram, is an approach rooted in a speculative arrangement of secondary journalist material and images spliced out of context from social and mass media. This narrow restriction often leads to a gross misinterpretation of the complexities found on the ground (i.e. in the lived world).

Of course, researching social violence is indeed difficult and sometimes even dangerous, but being in the field comes with the territory and is necessary to be qualified as social science. This issue calls for what anthropologist Lynn Hirschkind once termed the return of the field to fieldwork; a return in which the scholar is not only literally present in the field, but able to express sensitivity to the nuances and distinctiveness of the local.⁴ As Clifford Geertz stressed in his classic work, *Islam Observed*, "... there is no route to general knowledge save through a dense thicket of particulars."⁵ To date these particulars have yet to be explored.

The academic approach to groups such as Boko Haram needs to be reimagined and cleansed of its convenient association with introductory journalism. While it is tempting in the midst of a seemingly chaotic situation to make quick public policy decisions, scholars need to take a measured approach based upon what is actually known.

Reflection #2: The Contemporary is rooted in Vertical Interaction

In order to understand the particulars of any religio-political group, scholars must recognize the role of historical precedence. All contemporary interactions are rooted in and arise out of vertical interaction. How a group defines itself and takes action in the present is connected to the past and cannot be understood apart from this context of previous action. As the sociologist Herbert Blumer makes clear, "One is on treacherous and empirically invalid grounds if he thinks that any given form of action can be sliced off from its historical linkage, as if its makeup and character arose out of the air through spontaneous generation instead of growing out of what went before."⁶

Once again, using the example of Boko Haram, while this group seems to have emerged around 2001, there is undoubtedly a backstory yet to be fully discovered. As a note, this is not to say that individuals or groups cannot and do not take actions that are markedly different from previous actions. However, even in such cases, there is always the bond of continuity and historical linkage with previous action.

4 Lynn Hirschkind, "Redefining the 'Field' in Fieldwork," *Ethnology* 30, no. 3 (1991): 237–249.

5 Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 22.

6 Herbert Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1986), 20.

Reflection #3: The Role of Phenomenology

While Politologists of Religion are not strictly guided by the philosophical assumptions of phenomenology, in order to understand the actions and motivations of any individual or group, one has to see objects as they see them and get inside their defining process of meaning and experience. In approaching this process, there is an assumption that the reality perceived is the most important reality. While this access and understanding is inherently limited, Bronislaw Malinowski's words are still relevant here: "The final goal ... is, briefly, to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realize *his* vision of *his* world."⁷ While Malinowski's positivist approach has been thoroughly critiqued, with doubts of whether it is possible to "grasp the native's point of view," the goal remains, at least as an attempt, as an intended purpose, to get as close as possible.

Using a phenomenological approach is perhaps indispensable when researching delicate topics such as religio-political violence and terrorism. Performing *epochè* allows the scholar to suspend one's own judgments and analysis as far as possible, in order to first understand, describe, and explain the social phenomena from the perspective of the actors involved.⁸ As James L. Cox rightly asserts of this process: "What is important for the phenomenologist of religion is not what is true, but the attainment of understanding and an accurate description of what the adherent believes to be true."⁹ This dispassionate, analytical focus on the perceived reality and an interest in the experiences and motivations of those involved will undoubtedly lead to better access and provide a clearer glimpse into the lived world.¹⁰

7 Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Limited, 1922), 25. While Malinowski's terminology is perhaps outdated, his phenomenological approach remains grounded in contemporary ethnography.

8 For an extended discussion of the stages of the phenomenological method, see: James L. Cox, *An Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion* (London: Continuum Publishing, 2006), 48–72. As Cox states: "A central problem for the study of religion is how the subjective observer gains knowledge of an objective entity when that objective entity (religious life and practice) is embodied in subjective experience ... even though the observer endeavors to suspend all previous judgements, this is impossible in the literal sense ... *epochè* cannot be practised perfectly and is best understood as a self-reflexive attitude ..." (50–52).

9 Cox 56.

10 James P. Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979), 34. In this critical work, Spradley offers a brief description of the disposition required for this type of approach: "I want to understand the world from your point of view. I want to know what you know in the way you know it. I want to understand the meaning of your experience, to walk in your shoes, to feel things as you feel them, to explain things as you explain them. Will you become my teacher and help me understand?" See also: Jonathan A. Smith, Paul Flowers and Michael Larkin, *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research* (London: Sage Publications, 2010), 36. Their perspective points to the adoption of an insider's perspective, while at the same time looking at the phenomena from other angles.

Reflection #4: The Nature of Culture

Cultures exist only in bricolaged form. Thus, the Politologist of Religion, while a specialist in the interplay between politics and religion, must be aware of the broader social web in which these objects exist. This is where what Clifford Geertz termed the knowledge of the local becomes incredibly important, as objects can and do relate to other objects in different ways depending on the localization of these objects. In the lived world, people do not exist in segmented realities, with actions compartmentalized inside the bounds of proper social categories. People are everything they are. There are no imbibed, ideal, or true forms. There is only what is—what exists in the empirical social world.

This existence is porous and under constant revision. Hierarchies of identity, whether consciously or unconsciously, are adapted within horizontal and vertical interaction. In other words, interaction with others and the progress of time affect the construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of an individual or group. No one and no group are able to remain static. With this admission in mind, the scholar is better able to understand the fullness of social life and change. Long established ideologies can be challenged, romanticized visions of a group can be demystified, and sensationalized reports can be viewed more comprehensively.

Final Thoughts

Religio-Political symbols are visibly manifested across the landscapes and mindsets of societies around the globe. Yet, despite these observable qualities, the meanings and motivations behind these symbols are intricately woven into the enigmatic fabric of a society's chaotic and heterogeneous cultural milieu. Every case holds a nuanced relationship with both local and global influences, constantly alternating between pattern and redesign. This is the type of field that exists for the Politologist of Religion. These reflections, while not offering full resolve, contribute to an ongoing discourse in how to best approach the empirical social world.

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