

**an appraisal of nigeria catholic bishops' ethics of forgiveness TO THE *BOKO HARAM*  
INSURGENCE**

**By**

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**Abstract**

This paper recognises forgiveness as one of the core values in Christianity and therefore agrees with the Catholic Bishop of Nigeria to forgive the *boko haram* insurgents. The paper, however argues that adopting such attitude could be problematic. Thus, using a heuristic research approach, the paper engages the theme from various Christian sources to situate the problem in context. It concludes that the Bishops' position is right, but it lacks sufficient impetus for a far-reaching moral application. It therefore suggests a more theologically and ethically based arguments to impress the option on the victims and the aggressors.

**Keyword:** Boko Haram, Nigeria Catholic Bishops, Forgiveness, Christian ethics.

## **Introduction**

This paper adopts a heuristic research method which is justified by the theme and content of the problem it addresses, namely, forgiving one's aggressive enemy in an unjustifiable aggression on non-combatant individuals and groups. It investigates the theme of forgiveness within the context of basic human tendency to revenge ills as against creedal and doctrinal demands that the Catholic bishops proposed with regards to the *Boko Haram* offensive.

At the height of the Islamic insurgency popularly known as the 'Boko Haram insurgency' in the Northern part of Nigeria, the then President of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria declared:

"There is nothing we can do to our enemies but to forgive them... We must show love and forgive one another for peace to reign in our society. We should remember that over 2,000 years ago [Jesus] faced a similar persecution, humiliation and death in the hands of those that were supposed to love Him, but even at that He forgave them."

This response is typical of the Nigerian Catholic Bishops' stance on the insurgency that has hitherto recorded a heavy toll on the lives and properties of Christians in that part of the Country. Individually and collectively as an episcopal body, the Bishops have always avoided the use of any expression that will suggest the possible use of armed defense, armed resistance, or violent reprisal in their pronouncements. At best, their position often places the bulk of responsibility in addressing the problem at the door of the Nigeria government that have been accused by well-meaning Christians, Muslims and civil society groups as being incapable of adequately handling the problem singlehandedly. Christians have continually remained vulnerable to the insurgents' attacks and subsequent traumatic experiences that follow after each attack. Feelers from most mass media reports indicate that the Bishops' call only repressed anger and tentatively soothes a profound inhibited desire for revenge. This is evident in expressed pockets of armed reprisals and instances of Christians' attitudinal resentment of Muslims and Islam. It is from this background that this paper argues that while the Bishops' approach may be good in itself, it lacks sufficient impetus for far-reaching moral application. A good basis and convincing justification for such an option need be impressed on the victims of this aggression. Hence, this paper attempts a constructive basis and orientation on which the idea of forgiveness may thrive better to the benefit of both the aggressors and the victims in a meaningful ethic of forgiveness. Secondly, it argues for a need

to augment the call to forgiveness with an equal compelling action that will make the government take effective practical steps to curtail the insurgents' excesses.

### **Background to the Problem**

Religious and political upheavals resulting in riots that take heavy tolls on the lives and properties of Christians in Northern Nigeria is not uncommon.<sup>1</sup> In recent past, Christians survivors have had to relocate their families on ground of apparent helplessness in facing the killing and maiming of Christians by some Muslims in the North under various pretexts. Continually, many of these aggressive Islamists carry out atrocious attacks on Christians who often run for their lives rather than attack back. The killing of women, children and other unarmed worshippers by the *Boko Haram* became usual sights on Sundays, especially in churches during Christian worships. Other nefarious and heinous crimes were committed by the sect. Often the Christians refrain from appraisals either because they are disadvantaged by their population or inability to match the aggressors force to force. The aggressors nevertheless boast of their deeds and show no remorse on what they do. This situation necessarily raises questions regarding what should be the Christians response. Should they fight back? What form should their fighting back take, if that is an option? Should Christians talk of forgiveness in such situation? Is it morally right? If forgiveness is adopted, what is the intent and aim of ethic? Will such attitude not be a smokescreen for apparent inability to do otherwise? The Catholic Bishop Conference of Nigeria<sup>2</sup> finds reason in adopting forgiveness in response to these crimes. At face value, the sense in asking Christians to forgive the *Boko Haram* attacks on Christians' lives and properties apparently betrays a loser's resort. However, the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria thinks differently and offer 'forgiveness' as an option to reprisals.

The call by the bishops on Christians to forgive the *Boko Haram* insurgents has fell on deaf ears in some instances and while not really making a convincing sense to some, it does check the tendency to respond violently. Does such appeal make any ethical sense in the Christian tradition? What goal/s does such call aimed at? Is this approach justified? Are there means by which the bishops could make their option convincingly more effective? This paper addresses these issues and is guided by the conviction that the Bishops position is right but lacks sufficient impetus for far reaching moral application. It moves for a more theologically and ethically based arguments to impress the option on the victims and the aggressors.

## The idea of Christian Forgiveness

The conventional meaning of the word forgiveness as letting go of certain feelings for which resentment is felt is often implied when used in popular parlance. It connotes amnesty, mercy or even letting a criminal off the hook of justice on ground of attaining peace. The meaning of the word is often taken for granted in religious discussions, but since this paper has forgiveness as a key concept, there is a need to have a deeper examination of the concept. Attempts shall also be made to find out if the Bishop's use of the word has corresponding meaning to its scriptural sense.

Etymologically, the *International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* identifies the Hebrew כָּפַר, *kāphar*, נָסָא, *nāsā'*, סָלַח, *śālah*; and the Greek ἀπολύειν, *apolúein* χαρίζεσθαι, *charízesthai*, ἄφεσις, *áphesis* πάρεσις, *páresis* as the words used to express the idea of forgiveness in the Bible. It identifies “*Apoluein*” used in Luke\_6:37<sup>3</sup> as being used “because of the analogy of sin to debt” and further “denotes the release from it.”<sup>4</sup> But more relatedly to this paper is the two words πάρεσις, *páresis* and φεσις, *áphesis*, Both convey the idea of forgiveness, but while forgiveness as *Paresis* connotes “putting aside,” “disregarding,” “pretermission”, *aphesis* conveys “‘putting away’ completely and unreservedly.”<sup>5</sup> The latter sense seems to translate what is demanded of a Christians.<sup>6</sup> That is, not a temporary *putting aside* but an unreserved *putting away*. This understanding also reflects Paul Hughes perception of the concept as “derives from ‘give’ or to ‘grant’, as in ‘to give up,’ or ‘cease to harbor (resentment, wrath)’.”<sup>7</sup> In more specific term, Paul went further to say that it specifically “refers to the act of giving up a feeling, such as resentment, or a claim to requital or compensation.” Consequently, to him the term forgiveness would be defined as “the action of forgiving, pardoning of a fault, remission of a debt, and similar responses to injury, wrongdoing, or obligation.”<sup>8</sup> Even when used in sacramental context, Ryan observes that it refers to “the removal of obstacles that lie in the way of intimate union with God and others.”<sup>9</sup> Thus we have the functioning of the concept laden with a taking away of something negative to facilitate something positive. It constitutes “a broader process of reconciliation with God, others, the world, and oneself”<sup>10</sup> What is significant in this consideration of the concept of forgiveness is what Hughes referred to as “dyadic relation” that take seriously the concerns of “the wrongdoer and a wronged party, and is thought to be a way in which victims of wrong alter their and a wrongdoer's status by, for instance, acknowledging yet moving past a transgression.” Dyadic relation does not necessarily limit the interplay of forgiveness “between two persons only” but may extend to forgiveness “between groups of

people, as evidenced by intra-national restorative justice efforts and government commissions established to effect truth and reconciliation between perpetrators and victims of historical wrongs.” The slant recognizing what ‘putting away’ of resentment does to a Christian in relation to God, others and to oneself is very important to this paper.

To Villa-Vicencio, “[t]o reach out to your former enemies is not merely altruistic. It is central to self-interest and sustainable peace building.”<sup>11</sup> To him, “[f]orgiveness in the fullness sense involves a change of heart and mind, which takes a special effort from all concerned and more mutual understanding... the option for forgiveness is an ideal that the world cannot afford to give up on. It is a lure that draws us increasingly forward to deeper levels of integration and healing.”<sup>12</sup>

### **The Boko Haram Insurgents**

The expression, *Boko Haram*, is the colloquial name given to the group which formally calls itself *Jama’atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda’awati wal Jihad* (“People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet’s Teachings and Jihad,” in Arabic).

The Boko Haram group is an Islamic Fundamentalist group based in the Northern part of Nigeria. The phrase ‘boko haram’ in the local Hausa Language is a phrase that literally translates into “Western education is forbidden”. From the two words, *boko* and *haram*, where the former originally means ‘fake’ but has come to be associated in significance with Western education, and the latter *haram* which means forbidden, the idea of “Western education is forbidden” is formed. But in line with the Jenifer Cooke’s report that the group draw “its adherents largely from disaffected university students”,<sup>13</sup> the name by which they are known does not truly describe their composition nor demonstrate their intent and operational modalities. Simply stated, according to Jenifer Cooke, *Boko Haram* is the colloquial name given to the group which formally calls itself *Jama’atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda’awati wal Jihad* (“People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet’s Teachings and Jihad,” in Arabic). At its inception, the group was also locally known as the Nigerian Taliban.<sup>14</sup> They are influenced by the Qur’anic phrase that: “Anyone who is not governed by what Allah has revealed is among the transgressors”.<sup>15</sup>

The body was originally formed by a Muslim cleric Mohammed Yusuf in Maiduguri in 2002. He had stated a school in Maiduguri where he enrolled many youths from mainly poor background. While they were taught the rudiments of Islam and Arabic language, he was also interested in creating an Islamic state; hence the school became a ‘recruiting ground for jihadis to fight the state’.<sup>16</sup> According to Cooke,

The group's demands range from the improbable—including full implementation of Shari'a in northern Nigeria (with some adherents advocating Shari'a for all of Nigeria—to the more plausible—including full accountability for police and security forces involved in the extra-judicial killing of Yusuf and the associated violence that left 700 dead; public access to a former national security adviser's investigation and report on the 2009 crackdown; the release of imprisoned Boko Haram members; and the rebuilding of mosques and other buildings destroyed by security forces.<sup>17</sup>

It has gone about these demands in an “array of targets and gradual adoption of modern terror tactics”<sup>18</sup> that has touched on the lives and properties of innocent Nigerians.

With the previous administration in Nigeria, The US CSIS, Jennifer Cooke, reported that “there is considerable concern that the [Nigeria] government may lack the capacity and political will to mount an effective, comprehensive response” to the insurgency but encourage the “Nigerian government to formulate and articulate a national security strategy that commits the government to comprehensive, balanced approach and can help guide a more coordinate and effective national and international response.”<sup>19</sup>

The impact of the boko haram crimes does not only rest on the living victims. Many were killed and many others were left orphaned or maimed. Forgiveness of the boko haram rest not only on those directed affected by the physical impact of these attacks. The memory of the dead and the living images of the havoc they wreck on people are instances that remain and constitute objects that may constitute hindrances to letting go.

### **Basis for Ethics of forgiveness in Christianity and Islam**

#### *In Christianity*

At the conclusion of chapter two of her book, *perspectives on New Testament Discipleship, eschatology, and Social Responsibility*, Lisa Cahill wrote:

the follower of Jesus ought to live first and foremost by the virtue by the virtues of forgiveness and compassion; ... the idea of forgiving love ought not easily be set aside on ground of impossibility of achieving the kingdom in history; ... the acts this love sponsors should extend across social and religious boundaries....<sup>20</sup>

Beginning with the Old Testament through the New Testament and the early Christian writings one can sieve in great measure the ideal that Cahill presents above. It could be said to be *de iure* traditional Christian teaching on forgiveness. It is a Christian spiritual duty to forgive as the forgiveness of a Christian by God seems to be a function of his/her ability to forgive others.<sup>21</sup> The ideal of not taking vengeance, not bearing grudges and of loving ones neighbor as laid out in Leviticus 19:18 was evidently demonstrated in Jesus asking Peter to shield his sword and healing the wound inflicted on the ear of the aggressor.

The forgiveness of an enemy as a Christian function does not seem to have limitation or scope as Matthew 18:21-35 apparently suggests. In like manner, the example of Stephen in the Acts of the Apostle 7:59-60 ruled out a break from Jesus' teaching on forgiveness and retaliations. That also goes for Paul: "It seems to me that God has put us on display at the end of the procession, like those condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe. To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. Yet when we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly."<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, much of the writings among the early Christian writers ruled out retaliations on enemies or aggressors for Christians. This is found among works as Tertullian's, Hippolytus and many others. Of particular interest is that of Justin Martyr, writing on Christian witnessing, he wrote: "we who formerly used to murder one another ... now refrain from making war upon our enemies."<sup>23</sup> "Above all" says Clement of Alexandria, "Christians are not allowed to correct with violence."<sup>24</sup> More so, in his *Apology*, Aristides highlight the Christian virtue of forgiveness of aggressors when he stated that Christians comfort their oppressors and "make them their friends; they do good to their enemies."<sup>25</sup> These and other references that one may glean from the works of these early Christians points to the fact that forgiveness of enemies and a non-violent to dealing with aggressors mark the *modus operandi* of early Christians in conflict situations.

The Roman Catholic Church apparently imbibed this tradition of non-violence and heritage of forgiveness of enemies. Traditional ritual of mediated forgiveness of sin by the church through an ordained priest was crafted into the church's practice.<sup>26</sup> It is therefore, generally not out of place to present forgiveness as an alternative to other options in dealing with insurgencies as Christians and particularly, as Catholics.

One must be quick to note the difference in the ongoing kind of forgiveness elicited by remorsefulness and an unsolicited forgiveness as in the case of the insurgents that see no wrong in one they do. The former is evident in many religious traditions where restitution and a promise not to repeat the action is a precondition to the offer of forgiveness. The latter is often experienced in a political struggle where the aggressor sometime feels that his/her actions are justified in spite of the pains he/she inflicts on the victims – and he/she has no qualms inflicting such.<sup>27</sup>

### *In Islam*

To sources that are paramount to Islamic tradition are the Qur'an and the Hadith. Both project forgiveness as a relational principle that is encouraged in human relation. Islam, like Christianity has two components to the sphere of forgiveness, namely God's forgiveness and human forgiveness. It recognizes the existential fact of erring towards God, oneself and towards others, *ipso facto*, the teaching on forgiveness in those areas. From the ninety-nine names of 'allah, either conceived as "Al-Ghafoor,<sup>28</sup> Al-'Afuw,<sup>29</sup> or Al-Rahman,<sup>30</sup> Allah is understood by Muslims as an embodiment of forgiveness. The human agent is expected to forgive in fairness to others as he/she expects God to forgive him/her.<sup>31</sup> Reminiscent of Paul's experience and his forgiveness of those who stoned him to the point of death at , Mohammad was said to have had a similar experience in which he was persecuted and stoned at Ta'if for what he preached. He forgave them. In another instance in Makkah, when he had an 'upper hand' against his staunchest enemies he recalled the forgiveness by Joseph on his brothers, and said to the enemies: 'No blame on you today. Go, you are all free.'<sup>32</sup>

One common thing that could be inferred from all that have been said from this background is that neither Christianity nor Islam takes forgiveness out of the purview of its Creed. Hence when adherent are not abided by their creeds it is because of a "disconnect between the preaching of both religions and the actions of their practitioners."<sup>33</sup> Obviously, that attitude "demeans both religions."<sup>34</sup> Essentially then, what the Catholic Bishops are doing in Nigeria is to re-establish such disconnect between what is preached and what is done.

### **Forgiveness and amnesty: responsive models to armed insurgency in Nigeria**

The history of armed Islamists insurgency in Nigeria neither begins with the *Boko Haram* insurgency nor does the response from the Nigeria Catholic Bishops conference begin with it.<sup>35</sup> What is however different is the Bishop's call for forgiveness in the face of the current and most fierce of the various insurgencies, especially in the context of an existing non-conventional connotation of 'forgiveness' in Nigeria.

One needs to understand the contextual hermeneutical undertone in which forgiveness is understood in the recent Nigeria history. The concept of 'forgiveness' in relation to large scale attacks on people and properties in Nigeria has acquired an image that connotes a political horse trading. It is a means by which the government negotiates peace at the detriment of the victims of the crimes meted. The amnesty granted the Niger-Delta militant by the government is a reference point. The group had attacked public structures,

kidnapped factory workers [mostly foreigners], sabotaged various sectors of the country's economy and constitute themselves a terror group to villagers and residents in their territories. They were *forgiven*, that is, granted amnesty and is being trained in various skills in and outside the country to become better citizens.

The connotation of forgiveness as implied in the context of Niger Delta militancy makes the Bishops' call for forgiveness in the *Boko Haram* insurgents' case worrisome. The recent call for amnesty for the *Boko Haram* members by the Sultan of Sokoto with whom Cardinal John Onaiyekan is a co-chairman of the Nigeria Christian-Muslim peace group makes many people even more apprehensive of what 'forgiveness' now entails.

From the ongoing background, caution must be exercised in delineating the concept of forgiveness as a political bargaining means and as a Christian virtue. As stated earlier, the latter goes beyond the former in the sense of not necessarily being based on any horse trading as precondition for its exercise. For Jacques Derrida such form of forgiveness as issuing from a Christian virtue "is not normal, normative, normalizing. It should remain exceptional and extraordinary, in the face of the impossible: as if it interrupted the ordinary course of historical temporality."<sup>36</sup> It falls within what John de Gruchy refers to as belonging to a 'primary level of expression' in statements concerning reconciliation in conflict situation.

### **The Nigeria Catholic Bishops' Conference: *forgiveness* response insurgencies in Nigeria**

The Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria has often towed the path of forgiveness in response to insurgences in Nigeria.<sup>37</sup> In 1998, having "watched with deep concern the progressively worsening political and social situation in the country,"<sup>38</sup> the Bishops issued a *Statement on the State of the Nation: Let us be Reconciled lest we Perish*. In the statement, the Bishops said that "reconciliation entails having the courage to forgive one another."<sup>39</sup> They do not see forgiving the insurgents as an act of weakness or cowardice on the Christian part but do realize that "it demand courage and sometimes even heroism,... a victory over self rather than over others... it is the patient wise art of peace."<sup>40</sup> Subsequent contents of their collective communiqué as well as private and joint statements reflect a basic principle that "our Christian faith enjoins us to live in peace with everyone. It is difficult to justify violence on the basis of our Christian faith."<sup>41</sup>

At a colloquium organized by the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, the Catholic Bishop of Kano, John Niyiring points out that "[o]f all the contemporary crises we have witnessed in Nigeria, the Boko Haram religious sect forms the most comprehensive and extensive challenge to our national life and religious freedom posing an insurmountable obstacle to the

Christian work of mission and dialogue.”<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, the colloquium makes a recourse to the “rich history of the Church” which “demonstrates that the difficulties and challenges from within and without of Christianity can serve as spring bunch for an authentic living out of the gospel values.”<sup>43</sup> The “spring bunch for an authentic living out of the gospel values” which the Bishop refers could be identified in the Archbishop of Kaduna Archdiocese’s statement to the Catholics on one of the Boko Haram bombing of a church in his diocese; “over 2,000 years, during Jesus time on earth. He faced a similar persecution, humiliation and death in the hands of those that were supposed to love Him, but even at that He forgave them. ... [s]o violence, being it religious, political, economic and social, has been there long time ago in the history of humanity.”<sup>44</sup>

The Bishops has put the bulk of the problem at the doorsteps of the government. At their 2011 second plenary session in Abakaliki, Nigeria, the then President of the Bishops Conference, Archbishop Felix Alaba Job said, “We have spoken at length on the issue of Boko Haram, the blame as I know it, is with the government.”<sup>45</sup> However, in recent times, the Bishops have acknowledged what they referred to as “remarkable efforts at controlling the situation,”<sup>46</sup> but asked the government for a “change of gear in the approach ... at curtailing the situation noting: ‘Much more needs to be done in the area of intelligence gathering, analyzing, interpreting and security equipment procurement.’<sup>47</sup> It is impressive that clear mapping of areas and means by which the government may improve were outlined but that precision is apparently lacking in how their call on Christians to forgive may be internalised and demonstrated. According to the Bishops, Christians have often been asked to forgive and live by their creedal demands “following the injunction of Christ”<sup>48</sup> nevertheless, they realise that “if there is no clear and concrete sign of improvement, the patience of many Christians will wear out, our sermons of restraint will fall on many deaf ears, and those who see violent reprisals as justified deterrence will fall beyond our control.”<sup>49</sup> To the Bishops, they understand that “people are tired” but reiterates that being tired “does not justify our hitting out against one another in violence. Two wrongs do not make a right. Our country is one; hence, we must together find the solution to our woes.”<sup>50</sup> What sense may one make of this call to forgiveness and restraint to violence given the current context of the on-going killing and maiming of Christians in the northern part of the country? How is that to be done?

### **An appraisal of the Nigeria Catholic Bishops Ethic of Forgiveness**

The rationale for forgiveness in terror context varied from religious through therapeutic to social reasons. Patrick Miller put the gains of forgiveness beautifully when he

noted that “real forgiveness is the key not only to healing victimization, but to actually preventing attacks while reducing anxiety, increasing intelligence, and maximizing creativity.”<sup>51</sup> Among the gains of forgiveness outside its ability to remotely stop terrorism and contribute to peace building are the facts that an unforgiving attitude hurts oneself, it hurts others, it denies healing to others, it affects personal relationship with God and in fact, it does not allow one to have an experience of God's forgiveness. For these reasons and for the imperativeness of forgiveness as a Christian virtue, the Bishops’ call for forgiveness as an alternative to reprisals and violent reactions is a very welcome option.

It was pointed out earlier that the understanding of forgiveness in the present context of placating militants in Nigeria, the term now falls within the maze of government’s understanding and use of it as a political amnesty and the Bishop’s usage of the same word as a Christian virtue and duty. However, it is the same country with the same people perceiving the concept in varied understanding. The burden of explanation thus falls on the Bishops to properly situate their context of usage and the import that it carries. Doing this will make the meaning more sensible and have a more profound impact on Catholics most especially and Nigerian Christian in general.

In making the Bishop’s idea of forgiveness as relevant to curbing terror and reaching out for peace in the country, it is theologically significant “to speak about reconciliation as a God-given reality that can be appropriated.”<sup>52</sup> Awkward as it may seem that at the point in which people are clamoring for ‘an eye for an eye’ theology, the bishops’ find it appropriate to ask Christians to forgive. Obviously, it is because such attitude finds expressions in the various traditions from Jesus through the different ages and down to us. However, it is a faith language that can be “highly inappropriate and counter-productive when such faith language is uncritically or directly attached to political discourse.”<sup>53</sup>

Part of the reason for this is that the church’s witness to reconciliation relates to a promise that has yet to be fulfilled in social and political terms. Hence there is a need to distinguish between what Dietrich Ritschl refers to as the ‘levels of primary and secondary statements.

De Gruch went further to make this distinction: “At the primary level of expression the content of reconciliation is invisible and undemonstrable; but it can also be stated in the linguistic form of the hopes and reconciliation of the early church.... On the level of secondary statement we have the signs set up by believers and the words that comment on them.”

There is the problem of transcending the individual slant to considering forgiveness and moving towards the communal import of the act. To Ryan when individualistic consideration forms the basis for forgiveness, it is “often denied or avoided.”<sup>54</sup> But a wider scope that considers forgiveness from a broad base communal interest impacts more towards reconciliation and faster healing. This paper subscribes to de Gruchy’s argument that primary expressions about reconciliation to which ‘forgiveness’ belongs “cannot be directly equated with reconciliation as a political policy and objective without creating conceptual confusion.”

*Let the one who has not sinned cast the first stone. Forgive us our sins as we forgive others. All have sinned.*

In various ways, individually and/or collectively there are moments when our life story is punctuated by occasion of crimes against the other person. The Catholic Church’s Act of Contrition which acknowledges chances of sin in thoughts, words, wrong deed and omission of right interventions makes this culpability even more palpable. While the level or gravity of indulgence may be considered insignificant by the violator’s standard, it is the victim who can tell the extent of such impact on his/her personality. Infringement on the personality of an individual is a violation of his/her essence as a person. To claim otherwise may either be a deliberate exercise in self-deceit or ignorance perpetuated on self-glorification. Derrida’s injunction makes much meaning in this connection when he wrote, “...of all the crimes of the past against humanity, there would no longer be an innocent person on earth – and therefore no one in the position to judge or arbitrate. We are all heir, at least, to persons and events marked, in an essential, interior, ineffaceable fashion, by crimes against humanity.”<sup>55</sup> One way therefore to consider the rationale of the Bishop’s standpoint is from the point of view that all have sinned, and if everyone is thus a perpetrator of one violence against some other person, let who have not sinned cast the first stone.

I do not by the ongoing mean that violators of others’ right should go unpunished, but that the attitude of non-forgiveness borne out of a desire for revenge and retaliation of violence done to one can boomerang on the victim in conscience. After all, some victims of the attacks do not live to see that such justice is meted on their persecutors. later<sup>56</sup>

### **Suggestions towards effective internalization of the forgiveness option**

At a symposium in which the Nigeria Shari’a conflict was discussed and various Christian responses to religious conflict were examined, the Catholic Cardinal John Onaiyekan of Abuja Arch-diocese observed that “violence does not resolve anything. On the

contrary, it leads to unnecessary sufferings and destruction of life and property. Therefore whatever response we may want to give, we have to do our best to remain non-violent... Our Christian faith enjoins us to live in peace with everyone. It is difficult to justify violence on the basis of our Christian faith, even though at times legitimate self-defense can justify a proportionate violent reaction.<sup>57</sup> Once again the call to what the Christian faith calls the christian to do is presented here as a check on his/her actions in the face of violent attacks. There is no doubt that forgiveness as projected is one of such faith-call but how may we practically apply this? Issuing of communiqué is good and important but it is not adequate. Unfortunately, that has always been the traditional means through which the Bishops have often reach out to the teeming Catholic populace in Nigeria.

Forgiveness must be taken radically as defined at the beginning of this paper, that is 'putting away' of resentment. If putting 'aside' must be distinguished effectively from 'putting away' it must be made an attitude and not something that is instantaneously taken, expected to bloom instantly and exercised momentarily. As Miller wrote, it is a kind of disciplines that is learnt. It is "a daily discipline of learning to see things differently, which enables you to respond to challenges with clarity, compassion, and ingenuity."<sup>58</sup>

From Miller's point of view, which I think is rightly so, imbibing the Christian attitude of forgiveness requires a discipline that is not instantaneously acquired. By this I mean that the slim line between theory and practice in the translation of the Christian ethical principles to everyday live situation must be made. The work of Don Browning on interpretation of present situation joining hermeneutical process<sup>59</sup> could be handy in doing this. Similarly, according to Ted and Winnie Brock in their review of Lewis S Mudge and James N. Poling book, *Formation and Reflection: The Promise of Practical Theology* , it is observed that,

the failure to anchor Christian religious education in the more fundamental discipline of practical theology and its key subdiscipline of theological ethics explains much of the confusion that has beset the educational task of the church. It has led us to fail to see Christian education within its proper disciplinary context, and it has blinded us to the truth that a central goal of Christian education is to help create people who are themselves practical theological thinkers and actors.<sup>60</sup>

If the Bishop's option of forgiveness and non-violence approach should work, the right place to begin is to integrate *what is prayed* (believe) with *what is done* in practical terms. Established as a firm teaching in Christianity that forgiveness is a Christian duty, such that the Christian does not seem to have an option of turning down a plea for forgiveness

(Luke 17:4); that fact must be impressively marked on the consciousness of the catechumen.<sup>61</sup> In other words, there must be the understanding that one is learning. The Christian who is following in the path of Christ cannot presume to have mastered an act that has not been tested. The Boko Haram insurgence provides the test ground. Forgiveness as a Christian virtue and as a Christian duty is not attained spontaneously. Hence, it must be be consciously highlighted as such in catechism classes and at every opportunity for such teaching – formally or informally. This has the strength of making it foundational as an attitude to be put into practice at the public arena. That is actualizing at ‘the secondary level of expression’ the gains at the ‘primary level.’<sup>62</sup>

Another way to do this is by collaborating with the Imams [the Muslim teachers of Islamic catechism]. The Catholic Bishops have often spot the Muslim leaders in a good light, hence the above idea as suggested could also be recommended to them as part of their curricular activities. This suggestion is appropriate because recently, in a jointly signed communiqué by the CBCN President and Secretary, the Catholic Bishops called on the Muslim community in Nigeria to “do all in its powers to reach out to those who foment, plan, encourage and carry out these acts of violence in the name of Islam.” It has being said earlier that Islam itself does not necessarily foment trouble and hence it is not a surprise that the Bishop’s acknowledged that “many of the recognized Muslim leaders have clearly condemned these violent and criminal actions.”<sup>63</sup> They however feel that their effort is not enough as it only issue verbal condemnation of terrorist activities. They ask for “for concrete and pro-active action to call to order those responsible and to make and to make them desist from causing any further havoc on our nation in the name of religion.” Again, this is where the concrete steps in the direction of how this could be done become very important. The above suggestions on how Islamic catechesis could be used may be helpful. Such efforts when made could elicit forgiveness from victims of the Islamists’ aggression even though they are not the ones directly attempting the restoration.

## **Conclusion**

Hastings Rashdall would argue against retributive theory of punishment seeing it as “irrational, immoral, and [and even] wholly unchristian”<sup>64</sup> His contention is further buttressed by his observation that retributive theory does not provide for nor is it consistent with the “duty of forgiveness.”<sup>65</sup>

To his, “Both the ‘deterrent theory’ and the ‘reformatory theory’ are no doubt inadequate to express the whole truth about punishment. There is a side of punishment which

might perhaps be best expressed by the term ‘educational theory ‘; or, perhaps, all the aspects of punishment might be recognized at once by saying that the end of punishment is partly deterrent or utilitarian, and partly ethical”<sup>66</sup>

Hastings links forgiveness to societal common good. Which Schreier will make an emphasis on the individual and personal benefit of forgiveness on the individual, Hastings draws a connection that links the “duty of resentment and the duty of forgiveness.”<sup>67</sup> He finds that link in “social well-being”; to him “It is our duty to make our own personal resentment subordinate to the general good of society, just as it is a duty to subordinate good-will towards individuals to the interests of other individuals. In determining whether we should resent or punish an injury (to ourselves or to others) or whether we should forgive, we should simply consider what is best for the interests alike of the individual himself and of society at large, the offender's good and the injured person's interest alike being assigned its due, and no more than its due, importance.”<sup>68</sup>

The duty of forgiveness is the general manifestation of the duty of love.<sup>69</sup> Naturally the punishment of an aggressor is often expected as a pre-condition to forgiveness. Many Christians expect punishment on the insurgents as a precondition to dialogue, but the position of the Bishops disparate such attitude. The position of Hastings will apparently subscribe to this stance, because he argued that we cannot say “that the duty of forgiveness begins when the due punishment has been exacted. For what will forgiveness mean in [that] case?”<sup>70</sup> However, this is not to deny the place of punishment but where that must come, it should be meted on the note of good-will.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The Arch Bishop of Abuja, Nigeria Capital state, Cardinal John Onaiyekan also confirmed this recently in Toronto. Cf: Massacres of Christians by Islamic Extremists the “Norm” in Nigeria. <http://www.persecution.org/2013/02/07/massacres-of-christians-by-islamic-extremists-the-norm-in-nigeria/> Retrieved, 3/11/2013.

<sup>2</sup> The CBCN, Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Nigeria, “is the organ of unity, communion and solidarity for the millions of Catholics spread across the thirty-six states of Nigeria and the Federal Capital Territory. It is the forum wherein the collegiality of the Nigeria Catholic bishops, as successors of the Apostles in union with the Pope, is expressed and where the idea of the Church as family is signified.” Cf. CBCN at the official site of the Bishop’s Conference. <http://www.cbcn-ng.org/> accessed 3/2/2013.

<sup>3</sup> Judge not: and you shall not be judged. Condemn not: and you shall not be condemned. Forgive: and you shall be forgiven.

<sup>4</sup> ISBE

<sup>5</sup> International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia. This source further discussed in some details the theme of forgiveness in various ramifications.

<sup>6</sup> The lesson of Luke 17:4 takes for granted the putting away of an initial offense to keep no record at the turn of another plea for forgiveness. Forgiveness in this order is granted without reserve.

<sup>7</sup> Paul, Hughes, M, "Forgiveness", The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy (Winter 2011 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2011/entries/forgiveness/>>

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- <sup>8</sup> Paul, Hughes, M., "Forgiveness." *ibid*
- <sup>9</sup> Thomas Ryan. A Catholic Understanding of Forgiveness and Reconciliation. September 11-15, 2006. <http://www.nccusa.org/pdfs/IFRtomryan.pdf>. Retrieved 3/9/2013. This excerpt is from a part of a panel presentation that he gave at the World's Religions After 9/11 Global Congress in Montreal, September 11-15, 2006.
- <sup>10</sup> Thomas Ryan. A Catholic Understanding of Forgiveness and Reconciliation.
- <sup>11</sup> Villa-Vicencio, *Walk with us and Listen*. p.ix
- <sup>12</sup> Villa-Vicencio, *ibid*.
- <sup>13</sup> Jennifer Cooke. Statement before the House Committee on Homeland Security Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence: "Boko Haram-Emerging threat to the U.S. Homeland". Cannon House Office Building. November 30, 2011. [www.csis.org](http://www.csis.org).
- <sup>14</sup> Jennifer Cooke. *Statement before the House*, 1
- <sup>15</sup> Farouk Chothia. "Who are Nigeria's Boko Haram Islamists?". BBC African Service, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-13809501>. 11 January 2012 Last updated at 11:30 ET
- <sup>16</sup> BBC Report, "Who are Nigeria's Boko Haram Islamists?"
- <sup>17</sup> Jennifer Cooke. *Statement before the House*, 4
- <sup>18</sup> *ibid*
- <sup>19</sup> Jennifer Cooke. *Statement before the House*. *ibid*
- <sup>20</sup> Lisa Cahill. *Love your enemies*. p.38
- <sup>21</sup> Matthew 6:9-13
- <sup>22</sup> 1 Corinthians 4:9-13 NIV
- <sup>23</sup> The First Apology of Justin Martyr 39
- <sup>24</sup> "Maximus", Sermon 55, p. 661. Translated by William Wilson. From Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 2. Edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885.) Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0211.htm>>.
- <sup>25</sup> "The Apology of Aristides" 15. Translated by D.M. Kay. From Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 9. Edited by Allan Menzies. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1896.) Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1012.htm>>.
- <sup>26</sup> Protestant Christians also believe that God forgives sins but do not necessarily subscribe to this form of mediated forgiveness through a human agent.
- <sup>27</sup> New World Encyclopedia contributors, "Forgiveness," New World Encyclopedia, <http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/p/index.php?title=Forgiveness&oldid=957246> (accessed March 21, 2013).
- <sup>28</sup> The one who excuses, pardon, remits or forgive
- <sup>29</sup> Releases, restores
- <sup>30</sup> Most merciful/ Compassionate
- <sup>31</sup> al-Nahl 16:126-127; al-Shura 42:37 and al-Shura 42:40
- <sup>32</sup> The Holy Qur'an, Yusuf 12:92
- <sup>33</sup> Forgiveness in Christianity and Islam (2007, May 02) Retrieved March 29, 2013, from <http://www.academon.com/comparison-essay/forgiveness-in-christianity-and-islam-94590/>
- <sup>34</sup> Forgiveness in Christianity and Islam (2007, May 02) Retrieved March 26, 2013, from <http://www.academon.com/comparison-essay/forgiveness-in-christianity-and-islam-94590/>
- <sup>35</sup> There is a detail study of the history of violent religious riots in Nigeria especially between 1980 and 1985 in Toyin Falola's *Violence in Nigeria: The Crisis of Religious Politics and Secular Ideologies*. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press. 1998. See especially pp.137-225.
- <sup>36</sup> Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*. New York: Routledge. 2001. p.32
- <sup>37</sup> The Publication *Voice of the voiceless* contains most of these documents. Those particularly carrying message of forgiveness in the face of insurgencies include: Statement on the State of the Nation: Let us be Reconciled lest we Perish (May 5, 1998); "A Ray of Hope" September 12, 1998; "The Jubilee and National Reconciliation," March 18, 2000; "Let us Live and Work together in Peace and Harmony."
- <sup>38</sup> Voice of the voiceless
- <sup>39</sup> Peter Schineller [Ed]. *Statement on the State of the Nation: Let us be Reconciled lest we Perish*. Voice of the Voiceless: Pastoral Letters and Communiqués of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria. 1960-2002. Ibadan, Nigeria: Daily Graphic Nigeria Limited. 2002. p.377.
- <sup>40</sup> Voice of the Voiceless. p. 378.
- <sup>41</sup> John Onaiyekan. Catholic Archbishop of Abuja. "The Sharia in Nigeria: Challenge to Christians (SIST SYMPOSIUM:23 March 2001 —Attakwu-Enugu).

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- <sup>42</sup> John Niyiring. “Boko haram insurgence a great challenge to national life and religious freedom.” A paper presented at the Colloquium on peace and reconciliation, organized by the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria (CSN), in Abuja. <http://www.cbcn-ng.org/newsdetail.php?tab=166>. Accessed 3/29/2013.
- <sup>43</sup> John Niyiring. “Boko haram insurgence a great challenge to national life and religious freedom.” Ibid.
- <sup>44</sup> Mathew Ndagoso, Catholic Archbishop of Kaduna. “We forgive Boko Haram for attacking us.” <http://www.informationng.com/2012/12/we-forgive-boko-haram-for-attacking-us-catholic-bishop.html>. Accessed 3/10/13.
- <sup>45</sup> “Boko Haram: Catholic Bishops Accuse FG of Negligence.” <http://www.thisdaylive.com/articles/boko-haram-catholic-bishops-accuse-fg-of-negligence/98266/>. Accessed 8/2/2013.
- <sup>46</sup> “Boko Haram: Catholic Bishops Warn Of Imminent Danger.” Communiqué issued at the End of the Second Plenary Meeting of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) at the Bishop Anthony Nwedo Pastoral Centre, Umuahia, Abia State, 8th – 14th September, 2012. <http://www.cbcn-ng.org/newsdetail.php?tab=166>. Accessed 3/29/2013
- <sup>47</sup> “Boko Haram: Catholic Bishops Warn Of Imminent Danger.” Ibid.
- <sup>48</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>49</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>51</sup> Patrick Miller. “Seven Steps of Forgiveness” in A Little Book Of Forgiveness: Challenges and Meditations for Anyone with Something to Forgive (10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition). <http://www.ofspirit.com/dpatrickmiller1.htm>
- <sup>52</sup> John de Gruchy. p.18
- <sup>53</sup> De Gruch, ibid.
- <sup>54</sup> Thomas Ryan. A Catholic Understanding of Forgiveness and Reconciliation. September 11-15, 2006. <http://www.nccusa.org/pdfs/IFRtomryan.pdf>. Retrieved 3/9/2013. This excerpt is from a panel presentation that he gave at the World’s Religions After 9/11 Global Congress in Montreal, September 11-15, 2006.
- <sup>55</sup> Jacques Derrida, On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness.p.29.
- <sup>56</sup> Glen Pettigrove. Forgiveness and Interpretation.The Journal of Religious Ethics. Vol. 35, No. 3 (Sep., 2007). Wiley Stable. , pp. 429-452.
- <sup>57</sup> John Onayekan. “The Sharia in Nigeria: Challenge to Christians.” SIST SYMPOSIUM: 23 March 2001 — Attakwu-Enugu.
- <sup>58</sup> Patrick Miller, “Seven Steps of Forgiveness”
- <sup>59</sup> Don S. Browning. Fundamental Practical Theology.p.55-59.
- <sup>60</sup> Ted and Winnie Brock’s review of Lewis S Mudge and James N. Polig’s Chapter 2 of Formation and Reflection: The Promise of Practical Theology. religion-online.org. Accessed 3/16/2013
- <sup>61</sup> I use the word Catechumen in the spirit of Galatian 6:6 [RSV] as refers to the one is taught the word and who is asked to share the good things he learnt.
- <sup>62</sup> The idea of ‘levels of primary and secondary statements’ is a theological categorization used by Dietrich Ritschl and presented by John de Gruchy in his book. Discussions and details of such usage in Theological context is given vent from p.18 of John de Gruchy’s book. Reconciliation: Restoring Justice. Minneapolis: Fortress. 2002.
- <sup>63</sup> Call For Proactive Actions By Moslem Leaders On Boko Haram
- <sup>64</sup> Hastings Rashdall.*The Ethics of Forgiveness*.International Journal of Ethics, Vol. 10, No. 2 (Jan., 1900), p. 195
- <sup>65</sup> Hastings, p199
- <sup>66</sup> Hastings Rashdall, The Ethics of forgiveness. p.196
- <sup>67</sup> Hastings, p200
- <sup>68</sup> Hastings ibd
- <sup>69</sup> Hastings 201
- <sup>70</sup> Pg. 202