

You Cannot Negotiate With God

Not too long ago, the Nigerian President, Goodluck Jonathan, as part of his efforts to stem the tide of violence being unleashed on the country by the Boko Haram, invited the leaders and members of the group to come forward and identify themselves so that the Nigerian government would know not only who they are but, more importantly, what they want. On the face of it, it is difficult to quibble with the reasonability of the President's request. And this is a request that has been made by many opinion leaders in the Nigerian polity.

The request is based on several assumptions. First, all, including the President, who are asking that the group come forward and negotiate are convinced or, at least, persuaded that Boko Haram members are not bloodthirsty, wanton killers who just love to kill. Second, they probably have grievances that are severe enough to have driven them to turn on their fellow citizens and unleash mayhem on the polity. Third, since negotia-

tion always requires that all participants commit to give and take and seek to moderate their demands such that no one leaves the negotiation table unsatisfied or feeling humiliated. Finally, everyone assumes that Boko Haram members are no less committed to the rules, regulation, institutions and processes that structure the lives of Nigerians within the boundaries of a common citizenship and an interest in furthering the attainment of the goals that furnish guidance for public life in the country.

No one should be in doubt that the assumptions are plausible. For one thing, peace is gradually returning to the Niger Delta after years of armed activism by Nigerian citizens who originate from the area. Their beef was the criminal neglect by successive governments in Nigeria of the areas from where the bulk of Nigeria's oil wealth is sourced. After the government put in place an amnesty programme followed by rehabilitation of many of the armed militants and renewed commitment to improve the lives of the peoples of the Niger Delta through increased transfer of resources for development, the combatants are being gradually reintegrated into the fabric of life in the country. There is no way all this would have happened had the aggrieved activists not come forward and identified themselves. Not only that, they entered into negotiations that involved the kind of give and take that I alluded to above.

Unfortunately, this is where the analogy with Boko Haram breaks down. Indeed, it can be shown that all the four assumptions above are false where Boko Haram and its members are concerned. As a clandestine organisation, it would be foolhardy for anyone outside its ranks to claim to know with certainty what the sect is all about. Despite this caveat, we do have some suggestions regarding what the sect would like to see happen.

First, they are convinced that Western education is forbidden, inappropriate, a phenomenon that no true believer should or could embrace. Secondly, they would like to see an Islamic state in Nigeria or, minimally, their sections of it, dominated by Sharia as the legal system, the relationship between the individual and the state as well as the relations among individuals guided by Islamic principles as articulated in the founding articles of that faith's tradition. Needless to say, the Nigerian state, as it is at present constituted, and the



OLUFEMI TAIWO

citizenship that flows from it are not merely illegitimate, as non-Islamic contraptions, they run against the dictates of the law of God and, therefore, stand condemned.

If what I have just said is plausible, it follows that Boko Haram members are unlikely to regard themselves as being participants in a common project with their putative fellow Nigerian citizens. To the extent that this is the case, when their bombs kill and maim, they are not killing and maiming their fellow citizens, only infidels and their weak-willed, nominally Muslim associates. Whatever grievances they may seem to have pertaining to poverty, youth employment, or even injustice done to them and their former leader by the Nigerian state and its operators, can only be secondary to the ultimate defect of the Nigerian state and its citizens: their refusal to accept the supremacy of Islam and to yield to it as the only correct way of living in the world.

Pray, one may ask, what is the enabling ground of the sect's demands? God's say-so!

Of course, we may not query the epistemic competence of those who claim to have direct line to God or the veracity of their claim to know what God wants. Insofar as this certitude regarding God's will and their earthly role as God's enforcers is not vacated, it should be abundantly clear that any talk of negotiation, including the kind of give and take that the Niger Delta militants embraced a few years back, is sure to qualify as blasphemy in the eyes of God's enforcers.

When you are the owners of God's infallible truth or, at least, its instruments, you do not negotiate. When you are the Nigerian state and its operators, citizens of the Nigerian polity that remain recalcitrant to the call to the right path to eternity, it is not your place to negotiate with God or God's enforcers, the deliverers of God's truth and executors of his judgment. You have but one clear option: Surrender. You cannot negotiate with God! I hope that I am wrong.

I conclude. Mr. President and other leaders of opinion in Nigeria who are asking that the Boko Haram members come forward, identify themselves, state their demands, and negotiate may be overly optimistic. How do you expect to persuade God's enforcers that Western education is halal; that the separation between religion and state is incompatible with the intimate connection that God's enforcers insist must characterise the life of the true Muslim in a genuine community that satisfies the demands of God's law and his injunctions; that a state is legitimate in which the freedom of religion also includes the freedom of irreligion and non-religion; where it is not acceptable for the state or any other individual

Insofar as this certitude regarding God's will and their earthly role as God's enforcers is not vacated, it should be abundantly clear that any talk of negotiation, including the kind of give and take that the Niger Delta militants embraced a few years back, is sure to qualify as blasphemy in the eyes of God's enforcers

to tell an individual how to lead her life unless she accepts to go along with the programme; and that a Muslim cannot be deemed to be prima facie superior to a non-Muslim on account of the latter's non-Muslim identity?

If I am not mistaken in believing that the demand for an Islamic polity is crucial to Boko Haram's identity and mission, those who are hoping for a negotiated way out of the present situation in Nigeria may be in quest of the proverbial fool's gold. With God, you can only surrender; You cannot negotiate with God!

—Professor Taiwo is of the Philosophy and Global African Studies Department, Seattle University, Seattle, USA