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Christian Moral Framework For Promoting Freedom Of Belief In The Face Of Persecution In Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Freedom of belief is a crucial element of human dignity and religious liberty, allowing individuals to practice their convictions without fear of intimidation or coercion. In Nigeria, however, many people and religious communities face persecution, including discrimination, violence, and restrictions on their practices. This situation presents an ethical challenge for Christians, who must balance upholding truth with respecting the freedom and dignity of others. The paper is descriptive in nature, and the author employs a qualitative research approach that involves a combination of literature review, biblical analysis, and freedom of belief as stated in the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and the United Nations Human Rights Commission. The paper identifies dynamics of freedom of belief in the face of persecution. The rationales for promoting freedom of belief include protection of human dignity, prevention of religious persecution and coercion, promotion of peaceful coexistence, and promotion of justice and equality. The factors hindering freedom of belief include religious intolerance, misinformation and false teachings, persecution and violence, inadequate protection by security and justice institutions, and discrimination against other religious groups. Hindering freedom of belief has devastating effects on people, society, and the nation's image. The paper proposes a Christian moral framework for promoting freedom of belief in the face of persecution which includes respects for human dignity and conscience, truthful Christian witness, forgiveness and reconciliation, and upholds Christian solidarity with the persecuted.

Keywords: Christian Moral Framework, Freedom of Belief, Persecution, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Freedom of belief is a fundamental aspect of human dignity and an essential expression of religious liberty. It refers to the right of individuals to hold, change, express, and practice their religious convictions without intimidation, discrimination, or coercion. Christianity holds the sanctity of life and the dignity of every human being as created in the image of God. It also recognises the imperative to allow individuals to respond to matters of faith freely, without any form of coercion. However, in Nigerian society, individuals and religious communities continue to experience persecution because of their beliefs. Such persecution takes the form of discrimination, social exclusion, threats, violence, destruction of religious property, and restrictions of religious practices, among others. These realities pose an important ethical challenge for Christians, who are called to uphold truth while respecting the freedom and dignity of others.

The Christian faith provides moral principles that guide believers in responding to persecution and promoting freedom of belief. Jesus Christ demonstrated love, compassion, forgiveness, and respect for human persons. He also encourages believers to pursue peace, justice, and faithful witness even in the face of opposition. Christian moral responsibility, therefore, goes beyond defending one's religious freedom; it also involves respecting the conscience and religious liberty of others. Christians are called to

reject coercion, hatred, retaliation, and discrimination while demonstrating their convictions through peaceful witness, love, service, dialogue, and righteous conduct. In this way, Christian morality provides a framework through which believers can respond constructively to religious persecution without compromising their faith. The paper is limited to freedom of belief in the face of persecution against the church in Nigeria. The paper is descriptive in nature, and the author employs a qualitative research approach that involves a combination of literature review, biblical analysis, and freedom of belief as stated in the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and the United Nations Human Rights Commission. The paper examines the dynamics of freedom of belief in the face of persecution, rationales for promoting freedom of belief, factors hindering freedom of belief, effects of hindering freedom of belief and Christian moral framework for promoting freedom of belief in the face of persecution.

Dynamics of Freedom of Belief in the Face of Persecution

Freedom of belief refers to the liberty of every individual to hold, adopt, change, retain, or reject a religion or belief without coercion, discrimination, intimidation, or persecution. It includes both the internal freedom to form one's convictions and the external freedom to express or practice those convictions individually or collectively. The dynamics of freedom of belief become particularly significant when individuals or religious communities experience persecution. The dynamics of freedom of belief in the face of persecution are discussed below:

Freedom of Belief and Coercion: One of the central dynamics of religious freedom under persecution is the struggle between personal conviction and coercion. Genuine freedom of belief requires that individuals be allowed to determine their religious or philosophical convictions without being forced to accept, reject, or change a particular belief. United Human Rights Commission (1993:5) explains that coercion may include physical force, penal sanctions, or policies that pressure individuals to adhere to, abandon, or convert from a particular religion or belief. Consequently, persecution attacks the very foundation of freedom because it seeks to replace personal conviction with fear or compulsion.

Freedom of Belief and Religious Manifestation: Freedom of belief is not meaningful if individuals are permitted to hold convictions privately but are prevented from expressing them publicly. Religious manifestation may include worship, prayer, preaching, teaching, wearing religious symbols, observing religious festivals, and gathering with other believers. The international legal framework, therefore, recognises both the internal and external dimensions of religious freedom (United Nations Human Rights Commission, 1993:8).

State Power and Persecution: The Governments possess significant authority to protect or restrict religious communities. Where government authority privileges one religious identity and discriminates against others, state power may become an instrument of religious repression (Grim and Roger 2010:25-26). The government are to stand clean in matters of freedom of belief without favouring one faith over another.

Social Pressure and Community Persecution: Individuals may experience pressure from families, communities, religious bodies, or social groups. Such pressure can include threats, discrimination, harassment, economic exclusion, and violence. Protecting freedom of belief requires more than constitutional guarantees. It also requires social conditions in which people can exercise their convictions without fear. Ghanea and Wiener (2016:361) note that freedom of religion or belief intersects with a broad range of other rights and becomes particularly vulnerable in situations involving minorities, refugees, detainees, women, children, and migrants.

Persecution and the Resilience of Believers: The resilience that believers demonstrate in the face of religious persecution is indispensable. Because when individuals perceive their faith as part of their identity and conscience, attempts to suppress that faith may strengthen communal solidarity. Religious communities may respond to persecution through prayer, mutual support, peaceful advocacy, legal action, interfaith cooperation, and humanitarian assistance to victims (Bielefeldt, Ghanea, and Wiener, 2016:401).

Freedom of Belief, Pluralism, and Peace: Freedom of belief also contributes to religious pluralism by creating space for different religious and non-religious convictions to coexist. When individuals and communities are allowed to hold different convictions without persecution, social relationships can develop around mutual respect rather than forced religious uniformity. Conversely, systematic religious repression can intensify social divisions and contribute to broader conflict (Grim and Roger, 2010:202).
Legal Protection and the Limits of Freedom: Protecting freedom of belief requires effective legal institutions. Constitutions, human rights legislation, courts, law enforcement agencies, and international human rights mechanisms can provide avenues through which victims of persecution seek protection and remedy (551). The dynamics of freedom of belief involve a continuing balance between individual conscience, religious manifestation, public authority, and the rights of others.

Rationales for Promoting Freedom of Belief

Freedom of belief is an important aspect of human dignity because it protects the individual's conscience and allows people to hold, adopt, change, or retain religious and non-religious convictions without coercion. The United Nations Human Rights Committee (1993:1) explains that freedom of thought, conscience, religion, and belief is a fundamental right and includes both the freedom to hold beliefs and the freedom to manifest them individually or collectively.
Protection of Human Dignity: Promoting freedom of belief is necessary because every human person possesses inherent dignity and should be allowed to make fundamental decisions concerning conscience and belief. Religious or ideological coercion undermines this dignity by forcing individuals to accept beliefs against their conscience. United Nation Human Rights Commission (1993:1) maintains that individuals must be free to have or adopt a religion or belief of their choice, including the right to retain or change their beliefs.
Prevention of Religious Persecution and Coercion: Promoting freedom of belief is essential to preventing persecution, intimidation, forced conversion, and other forms of coercion. Such coercion can include threats of physical force or punishment designed to compel people to accept, abandon, or change their beliefs (United Nations Human Rights Commission, 1993:2).
Promotion of Peaceful Coexistence: Freedom of belief can contribute to peaceful coexistence in religiously diverse societies. When people are permitted to practice their convictions without unjust discrimination, different religious and non-religious communities have a greater opportunity to interact peacefully (African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights 1981:4). Respect for this freedom can therefore provide a framework within which people of different convictions live together while maintaining their distinct identities.
Protection of Religious Minorities: Promoting freedom of belief is particularly important for protecting religious minorities and persons whose beliefs differ from those of the majority. Without adequate protection, minority groups may experience discrimination, restrictions on worship, social exclusion, or pressure to conform to dominant religious practices (United Nations Human Rights Committee, 1993:1).
Protection of the Freedom to Practice and Manifest Belief: Freedom of belief is not limited to what a person privately thinks. It also includes the legitimate manifestation of religion or belief through worship, observance, practice, and teaching. Promoting freedom of belief, therefore, requires creating conditions in which individuals and communities can express their convictions while respecting lawful protections for public safety and the rights of others (United Nations Human Rights Commission 1993:3).
Promotion of Justice and Equality: Freedom of belief is also necessary for justice because people should not lose access to education, employment, health care, political participation, or other fundamental rights merely because of their religious or non-religious convictions. The United Nations Human Rights Commission (1993:2) specifically identifies discriminatory practices that restrict access to education, medical care, employment, or political rights because of belief as inconsistent with freedom of religion or belief.

Factors Hindering Freedom of Belief

Factors hindering freedom of belief include the following:

Religious Intolerance: This occurs when individuals or groups refuse to accept the legitimacy of beliefs different from their own and attempt to discriminate against, silence, or exclude adherents of other religions or belief systems. Intolerance can occur between different religious communities as well as within the same religious tradition. (The United Nations Human Rights Committee 1993:2).

Persecution and Violence: Persecution hinders freedom of belief, and it may involve killing, kidnapping, destruction of religious buildings, forced displacement, threats, physical assault or other forms of intimidation directed at people because of their religious identity or beliefs. Violence creates fear and can force individuals to abandon public religious activities or relocate to safer areas. In Nigeria, continuing attacks against religious communities are detrimental to the freedom of religion or belief (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2026:7).

Discriminatory Laws and Government Policies: The government has a responsibility to maintain public order, and laws and policies can impede freedom of belief when they discriminate against particular religions or belief systems (The United Nations Human Rights Commission 1993:2).

Social Pressure and Community Expectations: Social pressure can also prevent individuals from freely choosing or changing their beliefs. In some families and communities, religious identity is closely connected with culture, family relationships and social belonging. Individuals who adopt another religion, leave a religion, or identify with no religion may experience rejection, discrimination, threats or loss of social support. (The United Nations Human Rights Commission, 1993:2). Social or family pressure that effectively coerces a person into maintaining a particular belief conflicts with the principle of freedom of conscience.

Discrimination against Religious Minorities: Religious minorities may face unequal treatment in education, employment, political participation, access to public services and community life. Such discrimination may cause minority groups to conceal their religious identity or restrict their religious practices. The principle of freedom of belief requires equal protection for people regardless of whether their religion is held by a majority or minority (The United Nations Human Rights Commission 1993:3).

Inadequate Protection by Security and Justice Institutions: Freedom of belief will be hindered when individuals are not adequately protected from violence and when perpetrators of religious attacks are not brought to justice. Recently, inadequate protection by security officers in the Middle Belt of Nigeria has resulted in the loss of many lives and property. Similarly, the government's programme on the rehabilitation of bandits who were in the custody of security personnel and their reintegration into society without due process generated a lot of arguments in society. This kind of programme may give false hope to some bandits who are disrupting freedom of religion.

Misinformation and False Teachings: This can lead to the bitterness of heart, hate speech, hostility and discrimination among people of other faiths. This is capable of creating tension, resulting in persecution, and ultimately undermining freedom of belief in society.

Effects of Hindering Freedom of Belief

The effects of hindering freedom of belief in Nigeria are stated below:

Violation of Human Dignity: The violation of human dignity is a profound concern that intersects with the issues of freedom of belief and religious persecution, particularly in contexts where individuals face oppression for their convictions. Human dignity, which is inherent to all people, demands respect for one's autonomy, beliefs, and personhood. This involves physical and social attacks against individuals or communities based on their religious beliefs. Such acts can lead to trauma, loss of life, and hatred. Some individuals may be marginalised because of their religious beliefs. This attitude undermines their identity and diminishes their sense of belonging and worth.

Violation of Fundamental Rights: Freedom of belief is a fundamental human right of every citizen. When people are prevented from holding or expressing their convictions, they may experience a loss of personal autonomy and dignity. Restrictions may include forced religious conformity, prohibition of worship,

punishment for religious conversion, or discrimination against people because of their beliefs. Such practices undermine the principle that every person should be treated with equal respect regardless of religious or non-religious conviction (United Nations Human Rights Committee, 1993:1).

Discrimination and Social Exclusion: Hindering freedom of belief can produce discrimination against religious minorities and people who hold unpopular or non-religious convictions. Discrimination may occur in employment, education, access to public services, housing, political participation, or community life. When a particular religion or belief is treated as superior, and others are marginalised, social divisions deepen (Pew Research Centre, 2009:1).

Violence and Insecurity: Severe restrictions on belief can develop into persecution and physical violence. Individuals or groups may be threatened, assaulted, detained, displaced, or have their places of worship damaged because of their religious identity or convictions (Majumdar and Jacobs, 2026:1). When freedom of belief is hindered, religion-related harassment, threats and violence will ensue, which will claim the lives of people and destroy a lot of property. The practical experience is what is happening in the northern part of the country.

Suppression of Religious Practice and Worship: The restriction of people's ability to practise their faith arises when freedom of belief is hindered. Hindering freedom of belief may prevent individuals from attending worship services, observing religious festivals, following dietary practices, wearing religious clothing, educating their children according to their convictions, or performing religious rituals (Majumdar and Jacobs, 2026:1). Such restrictions can weaken religious communities and instil fear among believers.

Growth of Religious Hostility and Conflict: Restrictions on freedom of belief can contribute to increased religious hostility. When individuals or groups are denied equal opportunities because of their beliefs, resentment and mistrust may develop. Pew's research (2009:3) indicates that government restrictions and social hostilities frequently exist alongside one another, demonstrating the connection between institutional restrictions and social tensions. In 2023, fifty-five countries had high or very high levels of social hostilities involving religion. This does not mean that restrictions automatically cause conflict in every situation, but it shows that religious restrictions and religion-related hostilities are significant features of many societies (Majumdar and Jacobs, 2026:3).

Disruption of Peaceful Coexistence: Freedom of belief provides an important foundation for peaceful coexistence in religiously diverse societies. When people are permitted to hold different convictions while respecting others' rights, cooperation becomes possible. Persecution and discrimination increase suspicion between communities. Therefore, hindering freedom of belief weakens social trust and makes reconciliation more difficult where religious tensions already exist.

Undermining the Rule of Law and Equality: When laws or public institutions discriminate against people because of their religion or belief, the principles of equality before the law and impartial governance are weakened. The international human rights framework recognises freedom of thought, conscience, and religion as a fundamental right (United Nations Human Rights Commission, 1993:1).

Christian Moral Framework for Promoting Freedom of Belief in the Face of Persecution

Christianity teaches that human beings are created in the image of God and therefore possess dignity, conscience, and respect. The biblical principle that God desires willing obedience rather than forced religious conformity provides a foundation for respecting freedom of belief. The paper provides a Christian moral framework for promoting freedom of belief in the face of persecution, and they are spelt below:

Respect for Human Dignity and Conscience: A central component of the Christian moral framework is respect for the dignity of every human being. Genesis 1:27 teaches that humanity is created in the image of God. Hence, every person should be treated with respect regardless of religious identity or conviction. Christian morality rejects religious persecution, discrimination, forced conversion, and violence against people because of their beliefs. The World Council of Churches (2013:54) connects religious freedom with the God-given dignity, reason, and free will of human beings, emphasising that freedom of religion

should apply to all persons rather than being a privilege reserved for Christians. A person's faith involves an inward response to God, and genuine conviction cannot be created through intimidation. Romans 14:5 states that individuals should be fully convinced in their own minds, while 1 Peter 3:15 encourages Christians to give an account of their hope with gentleness and respect. Thus, Christian witness should seek to persuade through truth, love, and moral example rather than through coercion.

Love as the Foundation of Religious Engagement: Christian moral teaching places love at the centre of relationships with both believers and those who hold different beliefs. Jesus commands his followers to love their neighbours (Matt. 22:39) and even to love their enemies (Matt. 5:44). Hence, persecution cannot be adequately answered with hatred, revenge, or retaliation. The Christian response should demonstrate love even when Christians themselves experience discrimination or persecution. This principle does not mean that Christians should remain silent about injustice. Rather, Christian love requires they defend the dignity and freedom of persecuted persons while avoiding hatred toward their persecutors. has emphasised Christian solidarity with communities experiencing religious violence and persecution, drawing upon biblical teachings about sharing the suffering and burdens of others.

Non-Coercion and Voluntary Faith: Rejection of religious coercion is a responsibility of every Christian. Christian faith is meaningful when it arises from genuine conviction and voluntary commitment. Jesus invited people to follow him, but he did not establish faith through physical compulsion. His encounter with individuals such as Zacchaeus, the rich ruler, and the Samaritan woman demonstrates the importance of personal response to divine truth. Ahdar and Leigh (2013:11) identify voluntariness, conscience, the example of Christ to opposition and persecution, and limitations on governmental authority over religious belief among the Christian principles supporting religious freedom. Wilken (2019:19) similarly traces the development of the Christian conviction that external force cannot create authentic faith.

Courageous Resistance to Persecution: Promoting freedom of belief also requires moral courage in the face of persecution. The New Testament does not present persecution as a justification for abandoning Christian convictions. Jesus tells his disciples that those who are persecuted for righteousness are blessed (Matt. 5:10–12), while Acts 5:29 records the apostles declaring that obedience to God takes priority when human commands directly contradict their religious obligation. Christian resistance to persecution, however, should be distinguished from violent retaliation. The examples of Jesus and the early Christians demonstrate a willingness to suffer rather than to inflict suffering on others. The Christian moral framework, therefore, encourages steadfastness, peaceful resistance, prayer, truthful testimony, and appropriate appeal to lawful authorities.

Justice and Equality for All Believers: Christian promotion of freedom of belief should not be limited to protecting Christians alone. A consistent Christian moral position recognises the freedom of people of different religious convictions. The principle of loving one's neighbour requires Christians to oppose persecution even when the victims belong to another faith or worldview. Christians are to seek equality for all believers without bias or prejudice.

Christian Solidarity with the Persecuted: Christian morality requires solidarity with those whose freedom of belief is threatened. Hebrews 13:3 calls believers to remember those who are imprisoned and those who suffer as though they themselves were suffering with them. Such solidarity can take different forms: prayer, pastoral support, humanitarian assistance, public advocacy, legal assistance, education, and peaceful engagement with institutions responsible for protecting religious liberty. Sauer (2015:452) identifies Christian solidarity as an important response to discrimination and persecution and discusses it at theological, practical, and structural levels. The implication is that the church should not treat persecution merely as an individual problem. Churches and Christian organisations can cooperate in defending religious freedom and supporting vulnerable communities.

Truthful Christian Witness: Freedom of belief also requires Christians to maintain an ethical approach to evangelism and public witness. Christianity has a missionary character, but Christian mission should be carried out through proclamation, persuasion, service, and personal example rather than threats or manipulation. First Peter 3:15–16 instructs Christians to give reasons for their hope with gentleness and respect. This principle is particularly important in environments characterised by religious tension. A

Christian witness that respects the conscience of others can contribute to peaceful coexistence, whereas coercive or contemptuous religious behaviour can intensify hostility. Contemporary Christian scholarship on freedom of belief and mission, therefore, treats religious freedom as relevant not only to the protection of Christians but also to authentic Christian witness (Hans, 2015:494).

Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Forgiveness is another moral resource for responding to persecution. Christianity does not encourage victims of persecution to cultivate hatred or seek personal revenge. Jesus' teaching to forgive and pray for one's enemies provides an ethical framework for breaking cycles of religious violence (Matt. 5:44; Luke 23:34). Forgiveness, however, should not be confused with ignoring injustice. Christian reconciliation can include truth-telling, accountability, restoration, and efforts to prevent further persecution. Therefore, Christian forgiveness should work alongside justice. Churches can condemn persecution while still seeking reconciliation between hostile religious communities. Such an approach reflects the Christian calling to be peacemakers (Matt. 5:9) and to overcome evil with good (Rom. 12:21).

Advocacy for Religious Freedom and Justice: The Christian moral framework also includes responsible advocacy. Churches have a role in speaking against laws, social practices, and institutional behaviours that unjustly restrict freedom of belief. This is because the Constitution of Nigeria (1999 rev. 2023), article 38, section 1, under freedom of opinion, thoughts and conscience, states that every person is entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. Such advocacy should be based on truth, justice, and the equal dignity of persons rather than political domination. Christian moral responsibility extends beyond protecting church members; it involves contributing to a social environment in which people can live according to conscience without persecution or discrimination.

CONCLUSION

The Christian faith calls believers to remain steadfast in their convictions while refusing to respond to persecution with hatred, revenge, or further violence. Freedom of belief entails the right to hold, change, express, and practice religious convictions without fear of intimidation, discrimination, or coercion. In Nigeria, however, individuals and religious communities face persecution manifested through discrimination, social exclusion, threats, and violence, challenging Christians to uphold truth while respecting the freedom and dignity of others. The paper identifies dynamics of freedom of belief in the face of persecution, which include freedom of belief and coercion, freedom of belief and religious manifestation, persecution and the resilience of believers and freedom of belief, pluralism, and peace.

The rationales for promoting freedom of belief include protection of human dignity, prevention of religious persecution and coercion, promotion of peaceful coexistence, protection of religious minorities, protection of the freedom to practice and manifest belief, promotion of justice and equality. The factors hindering freedom of belief include religious intolerance, persecution and violence, discriminatory laws and government policies, social pressure and community expectations, discrimination against other religious groups, inadequate protection by security and justice institutions and misinformation and false teachings. The paper identifies effects of hindering freedom of belief, including violation of human dignity, violation of fundamental rights, discrimination and social exclusion, violence and insecurity, suppression of religious practice and worship, growth of religious hostility and conflict, disrupting peaceful coexistence, and undermining the rule of law and equality.

The paper proposes a Christian moral framework for promoting freedom of belief in the face of persecution, which respects human dignity and conscience, love as the foundation of religious engagement, non-coercion and voluntary faith, courageous resistance to persecution, justice and equality for all believers, Christian solidarity with the persecuted, truthful Christian witness, forgiveness and reconciliation and advocacy for religious freedom and Justice. Churches and Christian leaders should therefore defend the rights of persecuted persons, promote dialogue among religious communities, educate believers on religious freedom, and demonstrate Christ-like compassion toward people of different beliefs. By combining courageous Christian witness with forgiveness, reconciliation, advocacy,

and practical solidarity, the Church in Nigeria can contribute meaningfully to protecting freedom of belief and to developing peaceful and just societies.

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