



18 (b). RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN NIGERIA

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Introduction

Nigeria is a country known for its religious diversity, with Christianity and Islam being the two dominant faiths. However, the issue of religious freedom has been a source of concern, particularly for the Christian community. This paper explores the challenges faced by Christians in Nigeria and examines the potential role of the Nigerian Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) in addressing these concerns.

The State of Religious Freedom in Nigeria

**The 1999 Constitution of the
Federal Republic of Nigeria,
guarantees the right to freedom of
religion in 38, which states:**

38. Freedom of thought, conscience and religion

(1) Every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom (either alone or in community with others, and in public or in private) to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance.

38. Freedom of thought, conscience and religion

(2) No person attending any place of education shall be required to receive religious instruction or to take part in or attend any religious ceremony or observance if such instruction, ceremony or observance relates to a religion other than his own, or a religion not approved by his parent or guardian.

38. Freedom of thought, conscience and religion

(3) No religious community or denomination shall be prevented from providing religious instruction for pupils of that community or denomination in any place of education maintained wholly by that community or denomination.

(4) Nothing in this section shall entitle any person to form, take part in the activity or be a member of a secret society.

38. Freedom of thought, conscience and religion

This section of the Nigerian Constitution clearly establishes the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including the freedom to change one's religion and to manifest and propagate one's religion. It also provides protections for students against being forced to participate in religious activities that are not aligned with their own faith or that of their parents/guardians.

38. Freedom of thought, conscience and religion

But in practice, this right has often been violated, especially for Christian minorities in some states or regions. Christians in certain regions of the country, particularly in the predominantly Muslim northern states, have faced various forms of persecution, including discrimination, violence, and restrictions on their religious activities.

38. Freedom of thought, conscience and religion

One of the primary challenges faced by Nigerian Christians is the imposition of Sharia law in some northern states. This has led to the curtailment of certain rights and freedoms, such as the ability to build churches, engage in evangelism, or access public services. Additionally, Christian communities have been targeted by Boko Haram and other extremist groups, resulting in the destruction of churches, the displacement of believers, and the loss of lives.

The Impact of religious freedom on the Christian Community

The infringement on religious freedom has had a significant impact on the Christian community in Nigeria. Many Christians have been forced to live in fear, limiting their ability to practice their faith openly and freely. This has led to the displacement of large numbers of believers, the closure and destruction of churches, and the disruption of Christian education and social services.

The Impact of religious freedom on the Christian Community

The economic and social consequences of these challenges are also profound. Christians have faced barriers in accessing employment, education, and other opportunities, further exacerbating the marginalization of the community. This has, in turn, led to increased poverty and social instability within Christian communities.

The Role of NIREC

The Nigerian Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) is a body established in 1999 to promote interfaith dialogue and cooperation. NIREC has the potential to play a crucial role in addressing the issues of religious freedom in Nigeria, particularly as it relates to the Christian community.

As a platform for dialogue and collaboration between Christian and Muslim leaders, NIREC can serve as a bridge-builder, fostering mutual understanding and respect.

The Role of NIREC

Through its advocacy efforts, NIREC can work to influence policymakers and government officials to uphold the constitutional guarantees of religious freedom and ensure the protection of minority communities. Moreover, NIREC can facilitate the development of conflict-resolution mechanisms and promote peaceful coexistence between diverse religious groups.

By addressing the underlying causes of religious tensions and fostering interfaith cooperation, NIREC can contribute to the creation of an environment where Christians can freely practice their faith without fear of persecution or discrimination.

Conclusion

The issue of religious freedom in Nigeria is a complex and pressing concern, particularly for the Christian community. The infringement on their rights has had far-reaching consequences, both for the individuals and the broader social fabric of the country. NIREC, with its unique position as an interfaith platform, has the potential to play a pivotal role in addressing these challenges. By promoting dialogue, advocating for policy changes, and fostering interfaith cooperation, NIREC can work towards ensuring that the constitutional guarantees of religious freedom are upheld and that all Nigerians, regardless of their faith, can freely practice their beliefs without fear or discrimination.