

**THE MYTH OF RELIGIOUS WAR: THE VATICAN
INVOLVEMENT AND NIGERIA'S DEFENSIVE
DIPLOMACY DURING THE
BIAFRAN WAR, 1967-1970**

Babajimi O. Faseke

Abstract

The Nigerian civil war was caused by a number of factors ranging from politics to colonial legacies, as well as the fragile trust existing among the major regional and ethnic groups. All of these reached a crescendo after the coup and counter coup in 1966. The fact that the secessionist region was made up of predominantly Igbo Catholic Christians as opposed to the Muslim Hausa dominated Nigerian State also exacerbated the conflict. Indeed, the Biafrans made the most of this factor in selling the propaganda that the war was religious and that the Catholic Igbos were being persecuted by reason of their faith; a claim that won the sympathy of some foreign actors, including the Vatican. While the allegation of a religious war was unfounded, it calls into question how a non-material factor like religion could be so potent as to be a major determinant in influencing international actors. It was not until the religious element was decisively squashed that the Vatican involvement in the war waned, thus reinforcing the strength of faith in diplomacy. It is against this backdrop that the essay investigates the extent to which the Vatican bought Biafra's religious war propaganda, how this influenced its participation, and the extent to which the Nigerian Military Government (FMG), as a diplomatic tactic, discredited the Pope and Vatican's interpretation of the war as religious.

Babajimi O. Faseke
Department of History and International Studies, Ajayi Crowther
University, Oyo, Oyo State.
bfaseke@gmail.com

The essay is qualitative and adopts the historical research methodology using secondary and primary sources derived from national and private archives, government documents from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as well as interviews from veteran diplomats. The essay concludes that the Vatican, through the Pope, had been influenced by the religious war propaganda of Biafra and the FMG's diplomacy, which included the penetration of the church, was effective in tempering the involvement of the Vatican during the war.

Introduction

The Nigerian Civil war (also Biafran) broke out on 6 July 1967. The outbreak was as a result of the combination of an uneasy peace and instability that had plagued the nation from independence in 1960 (Forsyth, 1969). The immediate cause of the war could be traced to the coup and counter coup of January and July 1966, respectively. The Eastern Region of the country perceived itself to have been the target (and victim) of the July coup, which was also exacerbated by the 1966 pogrom that took place at about the same period. As a consequence, the predominantly Igbo and Christian region, under its military governor—Chukwuemeka O. Ojukwu—decided to breakaway and form the Republic of Biafra. The Nigerian government's refusal to honour secession was the catalyst for conflagration. Owing to the ethno-religious composition of the secessionist and that of the ruling Hausa elite of Nigeria, the war was perceived as religious in some quarters. Such a perception was cultivated by the very effective Biafran propaganda.

Extant literature has suggested that one of the greatest strengths of Biafra was the effective use of propaganda. This, at the very least, explains why the war lasted for the duration that it did. Davies (1995), for example, argues that it was the successful use of propaganda, particularly that of genocide, that got many countries like Portugal, the Vatican, Russia, Tanzania, Gabon, Zambia and Ivory Coast partisan in favour of Biafra in one form or the other. Also, Doron (2014) emphasizes the adaptive nature of the Biafran

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propaganda to the changing circumstances of the war such that sympathies could be drawn to their plight. It was therefore not a surprise that 'genocide' became a central theme of the secessionist region when they experienced severe malnutrition and were bomarded with bombs and other weapons of mass destruction. Heerten & Moses (2014) have, for instance, identified how the question of genocide against a people convinced many Germans of the need for a government intervention in the war. The success of a genocidal claim, however, hinged on a religious bent to it. Omenka (2010) adequately caputres this dimension when he avows that Biafran propaganda was anchored on the twin tickets of genocide and religious war, and that this represented the greatest boon for the secessionists in their bid for international recognition. In other words, it was not just a question of a people being the subject of genocide, it was about their attack as a consequence of their Christian faith.

Whether real or perceived, the religious dimension to the war cannot be ignored. McCauley (2017) describes how colonial legacies and balkanization of Africa was responsible for some of the ethno-religious conflicts in Africa, including that of Biafra. He argues that even when these conflicts are not religious per se, the ethnic composition of African states make it easy for leaders to evoke religious sentiments as was the case with Ojukwu's Biafra. In fact, some scholars see the religious angle to the war as more than just sentiments or propaganda. For instance, despite acknowledging that Ojukwu deliberately whipped up religious sentiments during the war, Enwerem (1995) maintains that 'not even the Biafran leadership was able to discern the religious background of the civil war'. That is to say, to Enwerem, there was merit in the religious war narrative of the Biafran leaders. For Streamlau (1977), however, while the war was not particularly religious, the religious dimension added to the complexity of the international politics of the period in the sense that opinions and positions of foreign actors were swayed by it, with some Christian entities supporting Biafra for reason of their faith.

In fact, for Wiseberg (1975), the Christian world's participation in the civil war was a little overbearing since the Christian Church (both Catholic and Protestant) was partisan in its support for the secessionists. Yet, a number of other scholars have described the role of Christian entities during the war as purely humanitarian. Byrne (1997), for example, gives a firsthand account of the humanitarian efforts of Christian bodies, particularly the Catholic Church, which included airlifts that defied Nigerian authorities. His accounts reflect the conflict of the Church with politicians, which prompted the former to work with strange characters like gunrunners to deliver relief at all cost to the Biafrans, who were desperately in need of it. Booth (1970) also adds credence to this humanitarian dimension, detailing how churches in Africa, through the All Africa Conference of Churches, got involved in humanitarian activities, including bringing churchmen on both sides of the quarrel to seek peaceful solutions as well as issuing aids at the height of the war. But, religion can sometimes form a barrier to conflict resolution and humanitarian efforts. This point was made by Nwaka (2015), who captured the contrasting reactions of the two conflicting parties to the Church's involvement in the war. She goes further to detail the Federal Military Government (FMG's) displeasure with the Catholic Church and how such disapproval hindered the church from achieving much in terms of conflict resolution and provision of relief.

However, despite the well documented fact that the Church was sympathetic towards the secessionists and the FMG's disapproval, there is yet to be a comprehensive study that captures not only how the Catholic Church and the Vatican were influenced by the religious war propaganda, but how potent such influence proved to be, to the extent that the FMG had to come up with a comprehensive 'defensive diplomacy' that sufficiently diffused the religious stench. It was only then that the Vatican's influence began to wane. The remainder of this article argues that this religious war propaganda had a bearing on the Pope and this had an influence on vatican's involvement in the conflict. In addition, the

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involvement of the Vatican affected the participation of other nations to the extent that the Nigerian government had to discredit the Pope and the Catholic Church in order to assert its defensive diplomacy.

Biafra's Religious War Propaganda

It has become common knowledge that one of the greatest strengths of Biafra during the civil war was their effective use of propaganda. Shortly after the war commenced a Directorate of Propaganda was created and headed by Uche Chukwumerije. Its aim was to convince both the Igbo nation and the outside world that Biafra was under siege and only a secession would suffice. The content of the directorate's propaganda was determined by the Psychological Warfare Committee, which normally met every Tuesday to review and plan the major items of propaganda to be introduced each month (Stremlau, 1977, 115). The foreign distribution of the directorate's daily and weekly output of propaganda was handled by the Overseas Press Service, which was headed by Cyprian Ekwensi. It was Ekwensi's responsibility to censor all nonofficial news stories transmitted from Biafra and to forward the Directorate of Propaganda's daily news bulletin and other materials to a Geneva public relations firm, Markpress News Feature Services (Stremlau, 1977, 115). This was one of the major channels through which Biafra was able to spread its religious and allegation of genocide propaganda.

Analysts of the Biafran propaganda agree that of all the major themes that the secessionist enclave adopted as propaganda, the most successful was that of genocide, with the May 1966 Pogrom being a centerpiece of this claim (Akinyemi, 1979). For example, Davies (1995, 182) argues that, 'famine - and the pictures of Kwashiorkor children, women and men achieved what religion... did not'. This claim slightly misses the point in the sense that it was the religious factor in the Biafra propaganda that made claims of genocide and pictures of malnourished children and general sufferings very effective. To confirm the religious ambition of the northern Muslims, stories of atrocities were developed that accused

federal troops of systematically desecrating holy places, raping Catholic sisters, bombing churches and gunning down worshippers as they prayed (Stremlau, 1977, 114). While some of these claims were exaggerated, they gained attention both locally and internationally. One important dynamic was the presence of Catholic missionaries in the East. The fact that many Eastern missionaries felt the impact of the 1966 pogrom by experiencing mutilated bodies returning home—and the fact that they feared the war might take on the character of a genocidal conflagration, made these missionaries become the first to report to the world of the killings and said atrocities (Wiseberg, 1975, 307). The missionaries also wrote to foreign church leaders about the plight of the Biafrans, and by so doing they aided the cause of the directorate’s ‘religious war’ propaganda. The first-hand accounts of these missionaries were a catalyst for world opinion, and as the war deteriorated in 1968, the number of religious journalists, religious leaders, and parliamentarians who were flown into the enclave increased dramatically.

Understanding the potency of religion in their struggles, the directorate leveraged on the awareness created by these missionaries to further appeal to various Christian leaders around the world. For example, in a confidential report prepared by the Propaganda Analysis Committee in March 1968 the directorate was encouraged to make the most of the Pope’s influence. According to the report,

We should remember that the pope wields important moral force in the world... if through the many contacts that the Papacy has in influential world capitals our case is brought to the notice of those who could help to end the conflict with the recognition of our independence, that would be good (Stremlau, 1977, 127).

In addition to lobbying the Pope directly, the directorate also ensured that billions of posters were pasted around Catholic churches throughout the Western world. One *Morning Post* article in particular was quoted to have read: ‘Help your Brothers in Christ

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who are suffering for the sake of their Freedom Fight. Help the “biafrans”, donate generously’ (as cited in Omenka, 2010, 377). The religious war propaganda turned out to be the greatest boon for the secessionist cause. For one thing, it led to the Christian church’s willingness to provide humanitarian assistance through Caritas and other private church organizations. It also influenced the Holy Sees’ involvement during the war. Recognizing the poignant effect of religious propaganda on the war, Ojukwu admitted in a private interview with Enwerem,

Let us see it this way: Within Biafra, it (religion) was used to inculcate a feeling of identity as a people, separate and distinct from the Nigerian side. But outside, in making others hear of and understand our case, the religious aspect played a major part in restoring the survival of our people. This was because it was easy for the various Christian Churches to rally round with the people with whom they have the same belief. That I used religion, yes... I needed to use it to make every Biafran clearly understand the dangers and reasons why he is fighting and I also went out to seek solidarity of like thinkers all over the world (Enwerem, 1995, 62).

The Vatican gets Involved

Naturally enough, one of the most supportive nations to Biafra’s cause was the Vatican. At the outbreak of the war there were personal appeals to Pope Paul VI from the several Catholic missionaries that were serving in the East, particularly those of the Holy Ghost Fathers (HGF), on the need to intervene in the war. The pope therefore had in July 1967 privately appealed to both Ojukwu and and Nigeria’s head of state, Yakubu Gowon to sheath their swords (Wiseberg, 1975, 308). His Holiness further sent two papal envoys, Monsignor George Rochau and Monsignor Dominic Conway, First to Lagos and later to Biafra. On arriving Lagos in December 15, 1967, the delegates promised Gowon that they had

come to arrange for distribution of relief and that their mission was not political, nor religious, nor diplomatic, but purely humanitarian (Wiseberg, 1975, 308). The delegates further requested that Gowon guaranteed them a temporary ceasefire while they flew into the East. Gowon declined this request on the grounds of military strategy and affirmed that he could not guarantee the safety of the envoys. Apart from the fear of losing grounds militarily, it has been suggested that a more significant factor for Gowon's refusal was because he was unwilling to assist the Biafrans open a channel of communication through the primates, recognizing how potent this might prove for the 'rebels' (Wiseberg, 1975). When the delegates decided to fly to the East 'at their own risk', the Federal Military Government (FMG) further issued a prohibition on the use of all airlines to Port Harcourt, the main airport within the secessionist enclave. In effect this was a blockade that prevented official air-travel to the East.

Significantly, by the time the Vatican delegates flew to Biafra in February 1968 they had blatantly violated the blockade imposed by the FMG. To make matters worse, they had used the private airplane provided by Frank Wharton, the American arms dealer supplying the Biafrans, to fly from Lisbon to the enclave. The trip marked the first official international delegation to visit Biafra (Wiseberg, 1975, 310). Horgan notes that the presence of the delegates 'was the first indication to the Biafrans that something of their problems had percolated through what had seemed up to now an indifferent if not actually a hostile world' (Horgan, 1968). Despite the claim that the Vatican's involvement was purely for humanitarian concerns, that the pope went to such an extent as to defy a sovereign nation's blockade was perceived by the FMG as partisanship, which was believed to have been influenced by the strong Catholic presence in the East (Omenka, 2010, 378).

Apart from the Catholic appeal in Biafra one can also understand the pontiff's action in light of the fact that his Holiness was familiar with Nigeria. Before he became Pope—that is, while he was Giovanni Batista (or Cardinal Montini), he visited Nigeria in the summer of 1962. On his stay, Cardinal Montini met with

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Ahmadu Bello and the meeting left the Cardinal with the belief that the Sardauna of Sokoto was bent on completing Usman dan Fodio's jihad and driving Christianity out of the country (Wiseberg, 1975, 312). There was, therefore, the sentiment that this was a holy war. Also, the fact that Pope Paul, who often acted as his own Secretary of State, played a direct role in Vatican's foreign policy made Vatican's aid of Biafra straightforward. Indeed, while the Vatican did not grant Biafra diplomatic recognition it recognized it as an equal party in the conflict, which greatly annoyed the FMG (Stremlau, 1977, 345). But this was not the greatest significance the Papacy had on the conflict, neither was it the thousands of dollars of relief aid sent through Caritas or the channel of communication that his Holiness' involvement created. Instead, the greatest significance is the fact that being the first sovereign head to sponsor an official diplomatic delegation to Biafra greatly influenced some other heads of state, including France and the four African countries in supporting Biafra.

Effect of Vatican's Involvement on other Nations

The Pope and Vatican's participation had an effect on international actors, particularly in Africa. African countries, through the umbrella of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) were generally sympathetic to the Nigerian cause. The notable exceptions were Ivory Coast, Gabon Tanzania and Zambia. All four countries granted Biafra diplomatic recognition (but not full diplomatic relations). It is not a coincidence, however, that these four states were governed by Catholic heads of state: Felix Houphouet-Boigny of Ivory Coast, Albert (Omar) Bongo of Gabon, Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia and Julius Nyerere of Tanzania were staunch Catholics. Apart from granting diplomatic recognition to Biafra, these four nations voted in favour of the secessionist state in all OAU summits concerning the war. Such pro-Biafra stance had been attributed to French influence on its former colonies, whose leaders in turn lured Anglophone countries like Zambia and Tanzania (Chinade, 2018). This, however, does not explain the strong pro-Nigerian posture of other former French colonies like Guinea and Mali, among others, which could have been easily

influenced by de Gaulle. In fact, Biafran support from these four states preceded that of France. And, significantly, such support had come within a month of the Papal delegation's visit to the secessionist enclave (Stremlau, 1977, 127).

Like the Vatican, these states did not necessarily justify their support in religious terms, but on the strength of humanitarian concerns. For example, at the fifth OAU summit in Algiers where the Nigerian crisis was debated, the Zambian delegate stressed that his government's 'recognition of Biafra was for humanitarian reasons, and should be recognized as non-political' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1968). Similar sentiments were expressed by the Tanzanian president (Nyerere, 1968). But, as earlier argued, the question of humanitarian concerns cannot be completely divested from the fact that those that were 'suffering' (Eastern Nigerians) were largely Christians, and this had attracted sympathies as it did with the Pope. More than the other three, however, the religious factor played a more prominent role in Houphouet-Boigny's involvement. Stremlau reminds us, for example, that 'the Biafrans appealed to Houphouet-Boigny's deep belief in Catholicism... and his traditional fear among coastal West African leaders of greater Moslem domination from the northern hinterlands' (Stremlau, 1977, 135). It is, therefore, not surprising that the Ivorian head of state was the most instrumental of the African leaders in supporting the secessionists. He was integral in canvassing de Gaulle's aid of Biafra as well as lobbying the involvement of Israel, stating that in his view Israeli humanitarian aid was insufficient in helping Biafra, and offering the Jewish state an opportunity to transport arms from Abidjan to Biafra (Levy, 2014, 267).

Public sentiments among Catholic nations also favoured Biafra. In France, French papers like *France-Inter*, for example, insisted on the religious character of the war; one edition, for instance, reported that 'in Biafra, war goes on with its death toll: yesterday, a bomb landed near Umuahia cathedral at the time that mass was being celebrated, and killed four' (Ugochukwu, 2010). For De Gaulle, therefore, it was not just his interest in destabilizing Britain's former colony, nor the oil concession he was promised by

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Biafra, that made him give the secessionist region some measure of support. It was a combination of these factors and De Gaulle's Catholicism that accounts for France support (Davies, 1995, 187). We should not forget also that Portuguese dictator, Antonio de Oliveira Salazar, who provided one of the most tangible material support to Biafra, was a 'fundamentalist Catholic' (Lochery, 2012). In fact, Catholic nations that resisted supporting Biafra had to withstand heavy public pressure. This was particularly the case with Italy and Ireland (Staunton, 1999, 516). Apart from the fact that Ireland was a Catholic nation, the Eastern Region of Nigeria had the greatest concentration of Irish missionaries in the world before the outbreak of war (N.A.I, DFA/F1/20, 1968).

FMG's Reaction

In view of the foregoing, the FMG adopted what can be described as a 'defensive diplomacy' wherein they had to use diplomatic means to discredit the claim that there was genocide perpetrated against the Christian Igbos, which, in their view, the Catholic Church had helped promote. The first thing the FMG did was to discredit the religious war propaganda that was sold by the Biafrans. There wasn't a better person to spearhead this charge than the head of state himself, Gen. Yakubu Gowon. In an interview with the *Herald Tribune* Gowon affirmed that 'there is no question of religious warfare and as a Christian and the son of a Methodist minister, if there were, I should be fighting on the Christian side' (As cited in Omenka, 2010, 368). The head of state went on to visit different countries where public opinion supported the religious war notion in order to dispel such claims. In his correspondence with *Msgr. George Huessler*, the General Secretary of the German Caritas, he also repeated the same sentiments refuting the claim that the war was religious in character, pointing to the Christian composition of a majority of the federal forces with two-thirds of his cabinet members being Christian as well (N.A.I/DFP13/A, 1969). Also, on September 6 1968, after extensive deliberations, the FMG invited the UN Secretary General, the OAU, and the governments of the United Kingdom, Canada, Poland, and Sweden to send observers (Smith, 2014). The observers were offered a two-

month mandate to visit all war affected areas and to see that ‘there is no intentional or planned systematic and wanton destruction of civilian lives or their property in the war zone’ (Anthony, 2018). Unsurprisingly, by December the team of international observers had absolved the FMG on every charge of genocide thus giving the Nigerian government better credibility in the international arena. The use of international observers was a masterstroke on the part of the FMG because, as earlier argued, the charge against the FMG was not just that of genocide but genocide against Christians, especially Catholic Christians.

Having cleared the charge of genocide, one institution that needed to be addressed was the Catholic Church and its aid institutions. There was no doubt that the FMG was hostile to the Caritas on account of its blatant violation of the government’s blockade and the suspicion-cum-conviction that they were aiding the ‘rebels’ in transporting arms (Staunton, 1999, 520). The Pope in particular—and the influence he wielded—had to be discredited. After all, as we have seen, the pontiff’s sympathies for the secessionist had a direct influence on some international actors. Thus, as soon as the Pope made his relief efforts in the Biafran enclave public, Nigeria’s Ambassador to the United Nations, Amb. Edwin Ogbu, gave a press conference that expressed the FMG’s displeasure stating,

We have protested to the Pope through the Papal delegate in Lagos that he is taking the attitude that this is a religious war, which it is not (*Daily Times*, 31 July 1968).

Soon after Ogbu’s there was a flurry of media comments where the Pope was vilified. *The Nigerian Tribune*, for example, began by saying that the Pope’s public admission ‘implicitly confirmed the suspicions of many that the Vatican had succumbed to the rebel propaganda that the Nigerian civil war is a religious war between Hausa Muslims and Ibo Christians’ (*Nigerian Tribune*, 1 Aug. 1968). The *Sketch*’s virulent attack on the papacy is also telling. According to the Ibadan-based paper,

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The Catholic Church is subscribing to the untruth that the war in Nigeria is mainly religious. To work in this fashion at a time when even the Church is fighting strenuously for world-wide unity is to plead guilty to a charge of hypocrisy (*Daily Sketch*, 23 July 1968).

The negative media attention the Pope was getting also influenced the actions of Nigerian students abroad. The Catholics among them were particularly worried about the involvement of the Pope and *Caritas Internationalis*. Some of these sentiments were expressed in a letter to the Pope by the Nigerian Union of Students in Germany. In it they announced their intention to send a delegation to Rome with the purpose of asking the pontiff to explain 'the Papal policy in Nigeria'. They described the Church's support for Biafra as 'a policy of indirect colonialism' (Omenka, 2010, 385). Furthermore, Gowon's regime had a full understanding that the perception that there was a religious character to the war would not go away easily through the actions of the FMG alone. There was, therefore the need to percolate the church through the use of clergymen. Consequently, it became a matter of deliberate policy to charge Catholic Bishops with the responsibility of quashing the religious war propaganda and making sure that their messages resonated abroad to their co-religionists. Thus, the various levels of government deplored the perceived passivity of the Nigerian Christian churches in the face of the successful but destructive religious propaganda of their Biafran counterparts. In a goodwill message to the Nigerian Catholic bishops' conference in September 1969, for instance, General Gowon, expressed his 'dismay and disappointment' over the 'anti-Nigeria acts' of some members of the Catholic Church overseas, who had, among other things, 'dubbed our present crisis a religious war'. He charged the bishops as spiritual leaders to give unflinching support to the struggle for a united Nigeria. According to the head of state, 'all we want of you is for you to tell the wide world the truth of our situation' (Omenka, 2010, 382).

With such prodding, by the middle of 1968, Christian leaders in Nigeria had come to the realization that their silence was dangerous and all efforts were subsequently made to discredit sources that laid claim to the religious character of the war. In December of 1968 *International Fides Service*, a news agency sponsored by the Pontifical Mission Society for the Propagation of the Faith, captured the mood when it published that,

A crisis over involvement of Catholics in the Nigerian civil war that has been smouldering for some time has suddenly blown up to serious proportions. Sharp criticism of Caritas and of certain missionary priests has mounted in Press, on Radio and on TV. Some commentators have sought to bring the whole Catholic Church under censure and have even called for the expulsion of missionaries, citing the example of Guinea. A picture of Pope Paul VI has appeared in the daily newspaper, *The Morning Post*, captioned 'He is aiding the rebels'.... Such criticisms have brought acute and dangerous embarrassment to Catholics in the Federal area of Nigeria, and there are many fears as to the possible consequences. Members of the Legion of Mary report that in the course of their visitation duty they are being turned away from houses as 'the people who love war (*International Fides Service*, no. 2150, 11 Dec. 1968).

The FMG's strategy of discrediting the Pope was not limited to the media. When in August 1969 it was suggested that the pontiff would be willing to play a mediatory role in the Nigerian crisis by flying into the troubled area, the FMG moved quickly to discourage such intervention (Stremlau, 1977, 343). When arrangements for a papal visit to Kampala, Uganda were confirmed in late July both Ojukwu and Gowon were invited to join the pontiff for discussions about ending the conflict, but Gowon

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immediately declined, citing prior commitments. These actions were taken for the obvious reason that Gowon's regime regarded the Catholic Church as closely identified with the Biafran cause. Gowon asked Enahoro to represent him at the Kampala meeting with the Pope and at the meeting the Commissioner of Information went on to criticize the Pope's interpretation of military developments in Nigeria and warned that a victory for the FMG was the most likely outcome (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1969).

With the foregoing, the pope had to be more cautious in the wake of constant accusation of partisanship from Nigeria. Though the pope had never openly claimed the conflict was a religious war, some of his actions had suggested it and this had led to a backlash, with the FMG and the press sufficiently discrediting him. With the negative attention the pope was getting from Nigeria and some members of his Catholic constituency, the Vatican secretary of state, Cardinal Cicognani arranged a meeting that had representatives of Catholic bishops on both sides of the conflict and was held on 3rd February 1969. One of the aims of the meeting was to address the supposed partisanship of the pope. This was well-expressed in the opening address from Msgr. Gallina, the secretary of civil affairs in charge of West Africa, who emphasized the non-political stance and neutrality of the Pope in the Nigeria-Biafra conflict. 'The Holy See', he said, 'supports neither the Independence of Biafra nor the Unity of Nigeria' (Archives of the CDE, 1969). The Pope himself reiterated this dispassionate political stance in his address to the bishops at the end of their deliberations, when he expressed that he had always approached the tragic events with 'disinterested impartiality' (Archives of the CDE, 1969). Such public disclaimers began to have a ripple effect on other international organizations and global statesmen.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, the example of the Nigerian civil war is a pointer to the potency of religion, not just as it affects conflicts, but international politics in general. Biafran leadership used faith as rally support to the international community that their people were experiencing starvation and genocide because of their Christianity

(and Catholicism). This gained the attention of the Vatican and in turn encouraged the sympathy of other countries, whose leaders or peoples were of Catholic persuasions that also revered both the Pope and the Vatican. It was, therefore, not until the FMG belatedly realised that dismissing the genocide charge alone was not sufficient in swaying international opinion, the religious propaganda also needed to be squashed. Steps were therefore taken to vigorously engage in travels and diplomatic campaigns to such countries where there was Catholic interest, to dispel the notion of a religious war. Such efforts incorporated not just members of Gowon's cabinet members, but respected Nigerian clergymen, who had a bearing on influencing opinions within the church, both at home and abroad. This proved potent in quenching the religious stench the war bore and also encouraged both the pope and the Vatican to re-align accordingly.

However, it is important to point out here that it is not the intention of this researcher to discredit Pope Paul VI's claim of non-partisanship in the war. Instead, it is to suggest that certain actions gave impetus to the claim of partisanship, and the concern shown towards the secessionist—no matter how benign—influenced the decision of other actors. The humanitarian efforts were of course necessary, but, perhaps, the breach of FMG blockades and its involvement with questionable characters like gunrunners bordered on partisanship, which had been borne out of religious considerations. In the end, the potency of religion should never be considered trivial in any local or international conflict, whether real or perceived. Had the FMG paid sufficient attention to this dimension early enough, Vatican's commitment and those of some other Catholic countries (or Catholic leaders) might not have been as politically involved as they were. Aluko (1981) has in fact opined that the slow and ineffective Nigerian propaganda (compared to that of the Biafrans) was part of the reasons the war lingered on for that long.

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