

Religious extremism: The case of Sudan's Mariam Yahya Ibrahim Ishag

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The recent case of the arrest, prosecution and imprisonment of Mariam Yahya Ibrahim Ishag of Sudan has drawn attention to the place of Islamic sharia law in contemporary, diverse and multireligious communities and nation states. Islamic sharia law was used to charge Mariam of *apostasy*; she was subsequently sentenced to 100 lashes followed by hanging. Religious extremism and one of its resultant effects, namely persecution, particularly of women and other minorities, is a persistent hindrance to ongoing efforts against poverty responses. Religious extremism goes against the spirit of Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Article 18 of the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights, of which many nation states are signatories. The Catholic vows of consecration – poverty, chastity and obedience – are very helpful perspectives that can assist in pursuing responses to religious extremism and the resultant intolerance, persecution and dispossession.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: Drawing from the Roman Catholic Church's vows of consecration, the article argues for a stance that communities can take in situations that call for solidarity with people in vulnerable situations.

Introduction

Globally many vulnerable people continue to be victims of unending circles of alienation, deprivation and untold suffering. The poor, children, dark-skinned people, women, sexual minorities, the sick, mentally handicapped and those who are physically disabled continue to experience alienation and the pain of living at the peripheries of their own communities.

In various situations, the vulnerable tend to find their pitiful situations recurring almost endlessly. On account of their vulnerable status, the weak tend to be victims of various forms of injustice. Religious persecution is one of those injustices. Various expressions of religious intolerance tend to result in religious persecution, particularly towards the vulnerable.

In this article, the case of one such individual, Mariam Yahya Ibrahim Ishag, a woman from Sudan, is highlighted in order to draw attention to the cruelty of religious intolerance and persecution meted out to the vulnerable in Sudan, as well as globally. Just before 2011, Sudan was the largest country in Africa, in terms of landmass, with a population of just over 40 million people. Sudan bordered Egypt and Libya in the north; the Red Sea, Eritrea and Ethiopia in the east; Kenya, Uganda, the Republic of Congo and Central African Republic in the south; and Chad in the west. After 2011, South Sudan seceded from the north to become an independent nation. In this article, 'Sudan' refers to South Sudan's northern neighbour, the Republic of Sudan.

Before examining Mariam's case, a brief legal and constitutional background of Sudan is provided in order to reveal the context in which Mariam found herself. Mariam's background is offered, followed by her court case, sentencing and eventual eventful release. A discussion on the Islamic sharia law that was used to prosecute and imprison her is followed by an inquiry into the place of Islamic sharia law in the contemporary world. Before drawing on the lessons of the Catholic vows of consecration – poverty, chastity, and obedience – an attempt is made to draw some implications of Mariam's situation in particular, and religious persecution in general, to poverty responses.

Sudan: A legal and constitutional background

The case of the attempted execution of Mariam Yahya Ibrahim Ishag has implications for universal human rights and civil liberties. The case indeed raises questions about the place of sharia and religious (in)tolerance in the modern world. Sharia is the set of Islamic laws that regulate personal and moral conduct, including both civil and criminal justice. Sharia law is based on the Quran in

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addition to other various Islamic religious texts. Islamic states are theocracies that hold Islamic religious texts as law and apply them as sharia or sharia law (Sharia n.d.: 2 of 31).

The Sudanese-born human rights scholar Abdullahi Ahmed An-na'im gives an exceptional insight into the background of sharia and the consequences of renunciation of Islam (apostasy), especially in Sudan. Writing about a case of the execution of one *Ustadh* Mahmoud Muhammad for apostasy, he observed that the case raised questions about the place of sharia in the modern world. An-na'im (1986) observed that:

In the Shari'a principle of apostasy, the tension between faith and legalism is not obvious. The candid admission of this element of religious intolerance in Shari'a is an essential prerequisite for the success of any attempt at securing complete respect for freedom of religion. (p. 197)

Islam came to Sudan through Muslim migrant ethnic groups, including through the Muslim mystics (*sufi*) and other religious leaders. Over time, popular forms of Islam, including various principles of Islamic law, were incorporated into the customary laws of various Sudanese ethnic groups. An-na'im (1986:198–201) traces the Islamisation of Sudan to President Numeiri's declaration of Sudan as an Islamic republic in 1983. All Sudanese laws were brought into conformity with sharia. Legislation was deemed invalid if it was incompatible or inconsistent with sharia. From 1898 to 1956, Sudan was administered under three concurrent systems of law, namely, the general territorial law, the customary laws of the various ethnic communities, and Islamic sharia law. The Sudanese law, at least by the time of independence in 1956, was based on the principles of English common law, which governed civil and criminal matters in towns and the more accessible countryside of north and central Sudan. Customary law prevailed in the rest of the country. In contrast, sharia law was confined to the areas of family law and inheritance. That is, such aspects as marriage, divorce, child custody and succession remained under the sharia law courts. The three aforementioned legal systems, however, were implemented within the context of a secular constitutional framework.

Akolda M. Tier, in his 1982 article in the *Journal of African Law* titled 'Freedom of Religion under the Sudan Constitution and Laws' acknowledges that a 1973 Sudanese constitution contained two articles on religion, namely, Article 47 Part 3 on 'Freedom, Rights, and Duties'. This article, Tier (1982:136) asserts, proclaimed the right to freedom of religion. Tier further observes that the 1973 constitution allowed for non-discrimination on such grounds as birth, religion, race and sex (Tier 1982:137). Tier notes that the protection of the right to freedom of religion in the 1973 Sudanese constitution was further entrenched in the 1974 Sudanese Penal Code, which first appeared in 1899 (Tier 1982:138). Ironically, all the cases of prosecution for religious acts, up to 1982, had only Christians as the accused persons. Tier notes that '[r]estrictions on religious acts have in practice been applied to Christians only' (Tier 1982:140). According to An-na'im (1986:200), the

1956 and 1973 constitutions of Sudan established a secular state. The judiciary retained a secular and common law orientation until 1983. However, the issue of Islamisation had been a major concern in Sudanese political and constitutional debates since independence.

In 1977 President Numeiri ordered for a revision of Sudanese laws in order to bring them into conformity with sharia. A bill dubbed 'the Source of Judicial Decisions' effected sharia law and made it applicable in all matters that were not provided for in 'specific and explicit' legislation. All existing and future legislations had to be interpreted and enforced in conformity with sharia. Upon completion of the ordered revision, President Numeiri declared Sudan an Islamic Republic in 1983 (An-na'im 1986:200–201). The 1977 Law Revision Committee, as Tier (1982:148) recorded, had her terms of reference significantly indicated in its rather lengthy title, namely, 'The Committee to Revise the Laws of the Sudan so as to Conform to the Sharia Rules and Principles'. The Committee's agenda was clearly to shift the direction of Sudan away from a modern nation state with limitations based on sex, religion or race. Sharia law, as Tier (1982:148–149) observed, '... discriminates too much in favour of Muslims and males'.

Even with a military coup d'état against President Numeiri in April 1985, including its replacement with a 'civilian–military coalition', the constitution that had enabled Numeiri to declare Sudan an Islamic Republic remained unchanged, despite an apparent commitment by the new leadership to repeal laws that were inconsistent with the 1973 constitution. What the new regime did change were the alterations made to Article 111 of the Constitution, which, as An-na'im (1986) further observes:

... enabled the president to 'take the necessary measures ... which may include the suspension of all or any of the freedoms and rights guaranteed by this Constitution' except the right to resort to the courts. All measures taken by the President ... were to have the force of law. (p. 202)

The civilian–military coalition became notorious for effecting extraordinary measures, including public floggings and amputations for alleged violations of the Islamic code. The regime also took advantage of the existing *Judiciary Act* of 1984 which had increased the powers of the president to enable the president to appoint and deploy judges, including setting up special courts to enforce the 'prompt' justice of the 'Islamic code' (An-na'im 1986:203).

Gassiss (2001:908–909) observes that, since independence, Sudan has been governed by different dictatorships and it was not until June 1989 that 'an Islamic Fundamentalist military junta seized power in the Sudan ...'. The regime that came to power in 1989 opened '... a new and savage chapter in Sudan's long struggle to find and realise its identity as a multi-racial, multi-religious, and multi-ethnic society'. The 1989 Islamic fundamentalist regime, which remains in power to the present, was intolerant of diversity, and has endeavoured to 'assimilate' the different 'cultures, traditions,

and languages' by the obligatory use of the Arabic language and also the imposition of Islamic law and religion. Gassis (2001:911–912) demonstrates how successive regimes in Sudan, from her independence in 1956, sought to create a Sudan that, in spite of its ethnic and religious diversity, would be Arab and Muslim, and non-Muslims would become a tolerated religious minority. Presently, Islamic sharia law has been promulgated as the law of the land without the people's popular vote, but by imposition with no regard to diversity. Further, relief foods and other humanitarian aid are (mis)used to Islamise non-Muslims and those communities that are non-Arabic. The Quran has become the source of all legislation. The present fundamentalist regime does not tolerate those who oppose the transformation of Sudan into an Islamic theocracy.

In its efforts to Islamise Sudan, the leadership has not only discriminated against those opposed to them, but has gone further to use atrocious forms of persecution, such as jihad and enslavement. The kind of force used by the leadership has resulted in genocide and massive human-caused famines. Gassis (2011:912–914) demonstrates how Christian missionaries have been expelled from Sudan and their properties confiscated by the regime. Christian church leaders face arbitrary arrests at gunpoint, while some 'are tortured and subjected to cruel and inhumane treatment in order to force a confession ... [of] guilt of terrorist attacks against the regime'. Torture appears to occupy an integral place within the policies of the Sudanese Islamic fundamentalist regime. Indeed, tens of thousands of Christians, including opposition personalities, have died, while many have become 'permanently disabled under torture'. Still others have been abducted, never to be seen again. There is also a clear admission, by international organisations, that there is slavery in Sudan. Girls in particular are usually raped, circumcised (genitally mutilated) and sold to soldiers or militia, as instruments of sexual pleasure or as concubines (Hodge 2006:433).

The background and the scenario so far sketched is the context in which Mariam Yahya Ibrahim Ishag found herself.

The person of Mariam Yahya Ibrahim Ishag

Mariam's case serves to demonstrate how some continue to use religion as an instrument to dispossess, impoverish and dehumanise. This case also shows how religious extremism and intolerance can result in the persecution (and even execution) of the vulnerable. The case points to how religious intolerance breeds various forms of untold pain and deprivation.

The 27-year-old Mariam was born to a Muslim father and a Christian mother in Western Sudan. Mariam's mother was originally an Ethiopian and a member of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Mariam's father left the family when Mariam was only 6 years old. Her mother subsequently raised her alone, and Mariam grew up as a Christian and a member of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (Alexander 2014c; BBC 2014).

Mariam later married a Christian man, Daniel Bicansio Wani, who holds dual citizenship (Sudanese and American), on 19 December 2011, at St. Mathew's Cathedral in Khartoum. Daniel is physically disabled, uses a wheelchair, and is largely dependent on his wife for his general upkeep. They have two children, Martin (22 months old) and Maya, born on 27 May 2014, in prison (Alexander 2014d).

Though an ordinary woman, Mariam worked hard and obtained successful businesses including a flourishing hair salon. She also owned a general convenience store in a shopping mall, together with a thriving agricultural property. Members of her own family orchestrated her tribulations. Her own brother, Al Samani Al Hadi Mohamed Abdulla, instigated charges against her, including maintaining that she should be executed. During the trial, Mariam and her lawyers alleged that Mariam's brother, Al Samani, had instigated charges against Mariam because he wanted to take over her businesses. Aware of the religious and legal situation in Sudan, Al Samani knew that he would have the upper hand in the case (Alexander 2014b; Jones & Derrick 2014; Weber 2014).

Mariam was later released after intense pressure was mounted on the Sudanese government. Several Christian lobby groups called for her immediate release, while some Islamic extremist groups opposed her release. There was also pressure from several countries that condemned Mariam's imprisonment and called for her release (Al Jazeera 2014a; Marie 2014; Timberlake 2014).

Upon her release, Mariam and her family (husband and children) were reported to have taken refuge at the US embassy in Khartoum. While taking refuge at the US embassy, the Italian government offered to negotiate with the Sudanese regime to obtain travel documents for Mariam. Later, on 03 July 2014, Mariam and her family travelled to Italy and Vatican City, where they met with the Catholic pope, Francis. The pope praised Mariam for her courage and constant witness of faith. Mariam and her family plan to permanently settle in New Hampshire, USA (Lodge 2014; McKenna & Sherwell 2014; Messia, Elbagir & Smith-Spark 2014; Starkey, 2014).

The trial of Mariam Yahya Ibrahim Ishag

Mariam was arrested on 11 May 2014 and sentenced to death by a Sudanese court on 15 May 2014. Her own brother had handed her in, alleging that Mariam had committed adultery by marrying a Christian man. The Sudanese courts sentenced her to death on account of not only marrying a Christian man, but also because of apostasy. The courts claimed that she was guilty of changing religions, from Islam to Christianity. The courts claimed that she had failed to follow the religion of her (absent) father. She was ordered by the courts to, within 3 days, abandon Christianity and turn back to Islam. Mariam responded that she had been a Christian all her life and would not abandon her Christian faith (Alexander 2014a; Amnesty International UK 2014; Horswill 2014; Sudan News 2014).

When Mariam refused to abandon her Christian faith, the Sudanese courts sentenced her to hang, after receiving 100 lashes. The courts used Islamic sharia law, which had been in force since 1983, to convict her. Additionally, Article 146 of the Sudanese Criminal Code was used to declare her marriage an act of adultery. Mariam was allowed to give birth and nurse her baby in prison for 2 years before the lashes and hanging would be enforced. The Sudanese courts nullified Mariam's marriage to Daniel using Islamic sharia law, which does not allow for the possibility of marriage between a Muslim woman (Mariam) and a non-Muslim man (Daniel). Even though Mariam was not a Muslim as she declared, the Sudanese courts held that Mariam should not have been raised as a Christian and should also not have chosen Christianity. The courts treated her as a Muslim, despite her being a lifelong Christian. Her marriage to Daniel was invalidated. The courts further imprisoned Mariam's then-20-month-old child and never allowed Daniel access or contact with the child (Al Jazeera 2014b; Horswill 2014; Saleh 2014; Tasch 2014).

After sentencing Mariam, the Sudanese courts kept her at Omdurman Federal Women's Prison, with her then-20-month-old son, Martin Wani. Mariam was not allowed any visitation. When Daniel, her husband, finally got permission to visit her, he found out that she had been kept under very inhumane conditions, including being shackled on her swollen feet. She had also been denied medical attention and a transfer to a hospital, in addition to her traumatic and difficult pregnancy, 8 months along at that point. By the time of the birth of her second baby, she was still in prison, shackled to the prison floors. Curiously, she was unshackled after she gave birth. To date, there are concerns that her second child may be permanently disabled due to mistreatment during pregnancy (Alexander 2014d, 2014e; Christian Solidarity Worldwide 2014; Sky News 2014; Timberlake 2014; Thornhill 2014; Tran & Davies 2014). Although Mariam has decided to relocate to the USA, there is no information about whether the Sudanese government will protect her property and businesses or whether the brother will now repossess her wealth.

Islamic sharia law of apostasy in Sudan

An apostate, as An-na'im (1986) puts it, is:

one who is held to have turned away from Islam (*murtadd*), is a Muslim by birth or conversion who has renounced Islam, regardless of whether or not he subsequently embraced another faith. He is held to have done so if he expressed unbelief by word or deeds, whether explicitly or by necessary implication. (p. 211)

The Islamic sharia law of apostasy violates freedom of religion. Sharia law penalises a Muslim who renounces his or her Islamic faith. Apostasy is punishable by death. Even though some arguments against the death penalty for apostasy have been advanced, including attempts to restrict the death penalty to apostasy when combined with active rebellion, maintaining the Islamic sharia law of apostasy is still inconsistent with

religious freedom. An-na'im's (1986:210–213) analysis of the Islamic law of apostasy, though concise, is quite thorough. He states that the Islamic law of apostasy is not only liable to be abused, but that it is also inherently in contradiction with more universally accepted standards of constitutional civil liberties and international human rights.

The case of Mariam Yahya Ibrahim Ishag can never be dismissed as a 'stand-alone' example of repressive and draconian cruelty. Her case stands out as an example of religious intolerance. It demonstrates how persecution, legitimised by religion, can be meted out to the defenceless members of communities. The case reveals how religion can be (mis)used to dispossess and further impoverish the vulnerable.

Islamic law, as An-na'im (1986:211) highlights, emanates from two basic sources, namely, the Quran and the Sunna (the traditions of the prophets). Two other subsidiary sources are used to settle disputes on the interpretation of the Quran and the Sunna, providing for situations not covered by the Quran and the Sunna, namely, *qiyas* (legal principles by analogy) and *ijma* (the agreements of the learned).

The Quran deals with apostasy in Sura 4 verse 90, Sura 5 verse 59, and Sura 16 verse 108, by condemning apostasy in very tough and unambiguous language. However, none of these verses provide a penalty for apostasy in this life. The punishment of apostasy provided for in sharia is based on the Sunna. It is on the account of the Sunna, including the standard commentaries on the Quran, that the Islamic schools of jurisprudence are unanimous in holding that apostasy is punishable by death. There is disagreement, however, on the question of the execution of the death penalty, namely, whether the death penalty should be executed immediately or whether the apostate should be granted reprieve 'for a few days' in order to allow reflection and possible re-embracing of Islam. There is also no unanimity on whether a female apostate is to be killed, or merely imprisoned until she returns to Islam. The test applied to determine apostasy is whether one has repudiated what is 'necessarily' known to be part of the Islamic religion, presumably determined by a judge or court (An-na'im 1986:211–212). Such a task, particularly in Sudan, is a dead-end and clearly open to manipulation. The Sudanese judiciary is not independent. Regime leaders have the power to choose judges, who then serve the interests of those in power.

Even though there is disagreement on the determination of what constitutes apostasy, as An-na'im (1986:211) posits, there are examples that are claimed to be clearly 'beyond any dispute'. He writes that a:

person who is known to have been a Muslim and then converted to Christianity or any other religion, or simply declared himself to have become atheist, is the most obvious example. (p. 211)

Mariam Yahya Ibrahim Ishag was not an apostate in any of these forms. She did not fit into the aforementioned category, and there was no evidence that she was ever a Muslim.

However, one of her parents, her father, was a Muslim. Even with such a clear history, the Sudanese courts opted to apply a law that had no relevance to her situation.

When one is found guilty of apostasy, various consequences accrue, including the loss of all rights to own property or dispose of one's property, pending either death or return to Islam. All property rights are restored upon return to Islam. However, if one dies while apostate, all property is transferred to the public treasury. In addition, a marriage contract is immediately dissolved upon apostasy of either spouse (An-na'im 1986:213). In Mariam's case, her brother Al Samani would inherit all her possessions and businesses. The state has an equal right to also claim all of Mariam's possessions. Stated differently, Mariam's case demonstrates how religious extremism can midwife abuse, intolerance, persecution and subsequent dispossession and impoverishment, particularly of the weak and vulnerable.

Apostasy and religious persecution today

Religious freedom is a basic human right, which is accepted internationally. Religious freedom is a fundamental civil liberty, which is jealously protected by most constitutions worldwide. It is however regrettable that the extremists discussed above continue to support and propagate the implementation of sharia. Arguments advanced in support of the propagation and implementation of Islamic sharia law can never be convincing, rational or justifiable (An-na'im 1986:213–215).

Islamic sharia law is unconvincing because it illegitimately attempts to limit the scope of religious freedom by deliberately excluding the freedom to change one's religion or belief. Article 18 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and Article 18 of the 1966 International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) provide for the freedom of thought, conscience and religion (Nesvag *et al.* 2001). Article 18 of the UDHR (United Nations 1948) states that:

... everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance. (p. 18)

This declaration provides for a multifaceted right, namely, the right to believe, worship and witness; the right to change one's belief or religion; and the right to join together and express one's beliefs. The freedom of thought, conscience and religion, equally and by implication, allows for the possibility of having no faith or being a non-believer. All Muslim countries are party to the UDHR, while several are party to the ICCPR. Sudan ratified the ICCPR in 1986. Article 18 of the 1966 ICCPR holds that:

1. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either

individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.

2. No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.
3. Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others. (n.p.)

Religious freedom, as enshrined in the two international treaties, benefits Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Muslims themselves should demand and protect the right of religious freedom for those wishing to convert to Islam, and by implication allow for those wishing to repudiate their faith in Islam. In Sudan, as in other Islamic states, attempts to challenge the implementation of Islamic sharia law in general, and its treatment of apostasy in particular, comes with its own severe consequences, including death.

Mariam Yahya Ibrahim Ishag's abuse and dispossession may be linked to her religious affiliation and her place in her community as a vulnerable person, namely, a female. Religious persecution, as Hodge (2006:432) posits, is a 'severe discrimination that stems from an individual's faith' and manifests in the denial of any of the rights of religious freedom. Hodge acknowledges that religious persecution is a very complex phenomenon 'in which multiple identities related to religion, race, gender, class and other factors are intertwined'. As such:

[o]ne way of demarcating religious persecution is to ask, if the person suffering held a different faith or no faith, would the degree of suffering differ? The extent to which the discrimination abates is the extent to which religious discrimination occurs. (p. 432)

Religious persecution is not a phenomenon found only in Sudan. Religious persecution is a global problem. According to some estimates, 33% of the world's people live under regimes that fundamentally restrict religious freedom (Davis 2002; Hertzke 2004). There is no doubt, nonetheless, that religious minorities who have no access to cultural or political power are often victims of persecution. Among the most persecuted groups in the world, however, are in Sudan, namely, various local traditional tribes, the liberal Muslims, and Christians (Hamilton & Sharma 1997; Marshall 2000; Wambach & Van Soest 1997). It is claimed that Christians are the most widely persecuted groups in the world (Hertzke & Philpott 2000; Hodge 2006:433; Marshall 2000). Over the last 50 years, there has been a remarkable demographic shift in the Christian population in the world. The centre of Christianity is no longer in the Western world but in Africa, Latin America and Asia. This demographic shift will keep its momentum within the foreseeable future. The majority of Christians in the world now come from the so-called two-thirds world or the 'global South'. Over 70% of the evangelical Christians who live in Africa, Asia and Latin America are perpetual targets of persecution (Hodge 2006: 433–434; McGrath 2000; Jenkins 2002; Hertzke 2003). As

such, there is a need for urgent inquiry and response to mitigate ongoing and possible future persecutions, which continue to impoverish and dehumanise many, especially the vulnerable in communities.

Poverty, among other impoverishing dynamics, plays a significant role in shrinking and depressing the social status of the many vulnerable people and groups in Sudan. Hodge (2006:437), among others (Marshall 1998; Shea 1997), observes that poverty in the developing world, such as in Africa, which is increasingly becoming the epicentre of the Christian faith, is an inhibiting factor in the protection of religious freedom(s) by many African states.

Although religious persecution and poverty are both phenomena that call for very urgent and concerted counter-response, poverty responses are less effective within contexts of religious persecution. Responses to poverty have better chances of success when conditions of tolerance exist. Various regions on the African continent continue to grapple with the challenges of religious extremism, intolerance and persecution. The existence of such groups as Al-Shabaab and the Lord's Resistance Army in East Africa, Boko Haram in West Africa and the Muslim Brotherhood (with possible links to ISIS) in North Africa continue to impoverish communities. Various poor nations, such as Sudan, have not successfully developed a culture that respects basic human rights, because it is virtually impossible to do so when those who perpetuate intolerance and persecution are the wealthier and stronger ones. Communities and individuals cannot thrive when situations of religious persecution transpire relentlessly.

In the developing world, such as in many African countries, Christians are often the ostracised people, with little or no access to cultural or political power (Hodge 2006:434). In the developing world, women, darker-skinned people and the poor form the majority of those who attend church services. A typical Christian in the developing world is not a Western European male, but an African or Asian woman, like Mariam Yahya Ibrahim Ishag, living under precarious socio-economic conditions, including unimaginable poverty. In India, for example, the intersection of gender, ethnicity, class and race, compounded by Christian minority status, does make Christians particularly vulnerable targets of persecution. The Indian Dalits (the untouchable) have rejected the traditional Hindu belief systems in favour of Christianity, which affirms the equal dignity and worth of all human beings. On account of their social status (as the untouchables, poor and vulnerable), these Christians are easily targeted by those attempting to maintain a social structure that grants them privilege (Hamilton & Sharma 1977; Hodge 2006:434; Jenkins 2002; Wambach & Van Soet 1977; Young *et al.* 2004). Owing to their social status, they are perpetual victims of persecution. Although Christianity is claimed as thriving globally and mainly in the global South, the persecution that Christians continue to suffer has visited on them untold human suffering. It has been argued that more Christians have died for their faith in the last century than in the previous 19 centuries combined (Hodge 2006:434; McGrath 2002; Shea

1997). In Sudan, the government has committed genocide against Christians and those who do not support the implementation of sharia law (Hodge 2006:434; Marshall 2000; Young *et al.* 2004). No one should turn a blind eye to religious persecution of any kind, anywhere.

The vows of poverty, chastity and obedience

What do people look like who are sensitive to, and actively engage in ways to oppose, dehumanising situations such as religious persecution, meted out particularly to the weak and vulnerable?

Albert Nolan argues for the embodiment of the message of Jesus as an act of what he calls 'prophetic witness', to the 'values of the future', through the Roman Catholic Church's vows of consecration. He goes on to call on his readers to consider the values of a 'consecrated life'. A consecrated life is a life 'that contradicts the values of the world' but gives 'witness to the reality of God, the relevance of Jesus Christ, and the work of the Spirit'. It is the kind of life that 'finds expression' in 'three vows ... of consecration: Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience' (Nolan 2009:117). It must be acknowledged, however, that at no time did Jesus oppose the possession or acquisition of wealth, whether individually or communally. Additionally, Jesus was never opposed to the enjoyment of sexual intercourse, even though he remained chaste during the entirety of his earthly life. Wealthy and sexually active people are capable of pursuing the values of the kingdom of God. The Roman Catholic Church's vows are representative of an attitude and a perspective, rather than an actual downright rejection of wealth, sex and self.

It is our view that the Roman Catholic Church's three vows of consecration, understood and applied widely, can assist us to engage in appropriate responses to the kinds of realities that emerge for us in our contexts, including and especially the challenge of religious intolerance and its attendant persecution that impoverish and dehumanise individuals, especially the weak and the vulnerable.

The Roman Catholic Church's notion of a consecrated life as a prophetic witness, which finds expression in the three vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, are worth giving attention. The situations of many in similar conditions as Mariam Yahya Ibrahim Ishag could be appropriately mitigated and responded to, if the Roman Catholic Church's framework of a 'consecrated life' was a way of life for humanity at large.

There is adequate, if not excessive, wealth, including an oversupply of food and resources globally. However, a great deal of poverty, hunger and destitution manifest nonetheless (Nolan 2009:112–114). Poverty, hunger and destitution are arguably the greatest sources of indignity in the world today. The foundations of great injustice, whose faces are greed, gluttony, exploitation and theft, find justification in

misrepresentations of religions and faiths. This is the world of Mariam Yahya Ibrahim Ishag.

The Roman Catholic Church's notion of a consecrated life, firstly, finds expression in the vow of poverty. The vow of poverty is the idea of voluntary giving up one's right to private ownership. It is a commitment to sharing rather than to poverty itself. Within conditions where resources are shared fairly and equitably, nobody will be in need; nobody will be destitute (Nolan 2009:114). This vow is about sharing, so that no one would be needy. This vow stands in contrast to global greed, selfishness and injustice. This kind of life was alien to Al Samani, Mariam's brother, who instigated false charges against his own younger sister, knowing well that he stood a good chance of dispossessing her of her hard-earned wealth and property. It is an example of disproportionate selfishness and greed.

The Roman Catholic Church's notion of a consecrated life, secondly, finds expression in the vow of chastity (Nolan 2009:114–116). This vow has as its pillar an endeavour to, 'love everyone, to pursue a kind of love that includes all human beings ... a special kind of commitment to universal, unconditional, and inclusive love' (Nolan 2009:114). There is no implication here that one has to denounce one's sexuality in order to demonstrate love for the rest of the world. The problem with humanity is, 'the exploitation of women and men and children when they are treated as sex objects instead of persons. The problem is rape and child abuse and pornography' (Nolan 2009:115). These human problems, such as rape and child abuse, flourish in Sudan. In such a world, the vow of chastity provides for the possibility of another life, a life where there is unconditional love, universal love and inclusive love. Mariam Yahya Ibrahim Ishag, including all the other victims of Al-Shabaab, the Lord's Resistance Army, Boko Haram and the Muslim Brotherhood, deserve unconditional, universal and inclusive love. Mariam Yahya Ibrahim Ishag experienced nothing but exclusion. She was treated as other females in Sudan (and other places on Earth) unfortunately are treated. Her so-called crime of apostasy brought upon her nothing but condemnation, not unconditional love and not inclusive love. She was unloved, lonely, rejected and marginalised.

The Roman Catholic Church's notion of a consecrated life, thirdly, finds expression in the vow of obedience. Contemporary cultures are secular cultures that value, above everything else, money and sex. These are cultures where there is worship of money and idolisation of sex. These cultures are conducive to the breeding of selfishness and individualism. The third vow of obedience stands in contrast to individualism and calls for the pursuit of a 'commitment to the common good, what is best for everyone' (Nolan 2009:116). Nolan (2009:116) argues that, '[w]e sacrifice our own will, and our own interests, our own careers for the sake of the common good. We commit ourselves to the needs of others'. This vow challenges humanity to consider pursuing what is for the good of all. This commitment is not about a slavish submission to the will of others, nor is it about 'acting

like a robot or a dog that has been trained to just obey'. It is also not about childishness and immaturity. This vow challenges us to envision a better Sudan and a better world, where the needs of Mariam Yahya Ibrahim Ishag would be seen from a just perspective. It is a call for a Sudan and a world where there is no place for the selfishness of her accusers, but a nurturing of an environment where the good of one is the good of all.

Conclusion

Adequate resources and wealth exist for every human being in the world. It is in sharing that we can meet the needs of fellow human beings. Mariam Yahya Ibrahim Ishag's nightmares emanated from the heart of a brother who did not care for the humanity and dignity of his own sister. He never saw the success of his own sister as mutually benefiting him. His selfishness and greed, together with a conducive religious and legal context that could be manipulated to suit the selfish cravings of the stronger ones, particularly males, brought about the dispossession of Mariam.

Religious extremism is humanity's undoing. What manifests in Sudan could be replicated not only in other Islamic states but could also cross into other faiths. Christian fundamentalism and extremism is equally as dangerous. Religious intolerance and persecution is a breeding ground for untold human pain and impoverishment. Many in Sudan, including Mariam, and others in other parts of the world continue to suffer dispossession, dehumanisation and subsequently deprivation of meaningful livelihoods on account of their religion.

Religions ought to advance the 'common good'. People should have the right to belong to a religion of their choice without fear. A community or a nation state that nurtures religious tolerance is better placed to deliberate on their challenges and mutual progress.

The place of Islamic sharia law in the contemporary world should be critically evaluated. Communities and nation states have the task of critically engaging on how to incorporate the values of their religions into their contemporary lives within a context of diversity and dynamism. Such an engagement should be guided by tolerance and mutual restraint.

The weaker in society, such as the poor, physically disabled, children, women, dark-skinned persons, those thought to be illiterate and any other peoples in the margins of society, have to be part of any meaningful endeavour for social, community and state transformation – together with the elite, the strong, the wealthy and light-skinned persons. Any (religious) laws that seek to exclude and alienate must be rejected. Such laws breed dehumanisation and impoverishment.

The case of Mariam Yahya Ibrahim Ishag is not an isolated one. However, it is an example of how religion can be used to dehumanise and deprive many vulnerable people in many communities.

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