News

Bishop Matthew Kukah of Nigeria

Bishop Matthew Kukah of Sokoto, Nigeria, urged the Black church in the United States to "step up the game" and join Nigerians in addressing corruption, violence and instability in his country. (Courtesy of Notre Dame Law School Religious Liberty Initiative/Evan Cobb)



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Black churches should get more involved in fights for religious liberty, lest they lose influence on many of the social and political issues facing their community today, according to speakers at a University of Notre Dame Conference Sept. 26-27.

The Black church — both Protestant and Catholic — has historically been aligned with progressive politics, especially during the Civil Rights Movement.

By contrast, "The Black Church and Religious Freedom" conference was sponsored by more conservative groups: the Religious Liberty Initiative at Notre Dame's Law School and the Seymour Institute for Black Church and Policy Studies. It was also funded by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the 1st Amendment

Partnership and the American Unity Fund — all known for their advocacy for religious freedom and traditional views of marriage and sexuality.

It made for lively — and sometimes heated — discussions among panelists with often very different perspectives on issues that included racial justice, LGBTQ+ rights, vulnerable Black populations, violence and Black Lives Matter, and education and school boards.

"I think we feel insulated from the threat," said Jacqueline Rivers, a co-founder and executive director of the Seymour Institute, whose mission is to educate and train Black leaders about "a proper Christian philosophic and theological understanding" of complex issues.

"We have a lot of favor with the left because of the oppression we've experienced, and we think that what is happening with religious freedom doesn't touch the Black church," she said. "But we have to stand up for our brothers and sisters in the faith. When the left is through with them, they'll come for us. We need to protect the rights of people of all faiths, and of no faith, to follow their conscience."



Former U.S. Rep. Bobby Rush of Illinois, center, was honored with an award Sept. 28 during a conference on "The Black Church and Religious Freedom. On his left is G. Marcus Cole, dean of Notre Dame Law School and founder of Notre Dame Law School Religious Liberty Initiative. At right is Rev. Eugene F. Rivers III, founder and director of Seymour Institute for Black Church and Policy Studies. (Courtesy of Notre Dame Law School Religious Liberty Initiative/Evan Cobb)

Some panelists argued that the Black church has already lost credibility on social issues and has conceded its moral authority to secular movements.

"I think Black Lives Matter has commandeered the civil rights agenda and they have silenced many of our African American preachers," said Pastor Jesse Turner of the Arkansas-based Pine Bluff Interested Citizens for Voter Registration, on a panel on "Violence in the Black Community, BLM and Religious Freedom."

Turner also said the Black Lives Matter movement has "brought a sense of violence to our communities, and this violence hurts us," he said.

Fellow panelist Pastor Michael McBride of the anti-violence organization Live Free USA said he was "deeply troubled" by such assumptions about young Black activists, which he said were untrue.

"It is important for us not to internalize the talking points of white supremacists and anti-Black people in this country," he said. "That is, I believe, more criminal than the burning down of buildings."

On the panel about "Education, School Boards and Religious Freedom," Ian Rowe of the American Enterprise Institute, who also has led charter schools in the Bronx, said that school choice and educational freedom are essential for helping students of color succeed.

Accusing public school boards of "adopting the woke religion of DEI and anti-racism" (diversity, equity and inclusion), Rowe said that in creating new rights, such as those for transgender people, schools are "simultaneously eroding the rights and longstanding practices that safeguard children" and are "destroying parental rights."

> 'Why are we fighting about the bathrooms? … We should be fighting about the fact that our Black kids are still remaining underserved, no matter what their sexual orientation.'
> —Jonathan Collins

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During the question-and-answer session, an attendee noted that the term "woke" initially was used by the African American community to describe empathy for racial justice. The questioner said he was "disheartened" to hear it used as a pejorative term.

Another questioner noted that, while she approved of school board activists who oppose transgender accommodations, she did not appreciate those same activists trying to stop teaching about the history of racism.

Panelist Jonathan Collins, assistant professor of political science, public policy and education at Brown University, warned against too much emphasis on such "hyper-politicized ideas."

"Why are we fighting about the bathrooms? Why are we fighting about the sports teams?" Collins said. "We should be fighting about the fact that you have kids that are vulnerable to heightened levels of violence at extremely early ages. We should be fighting about the fact that our Black kids are still remaining underserved, no matter what their sexual orientation."

On the panel called "The Black Church's Response to LGBTQ+ Issues," panelists also disagreed about whether the struggle for LGBTQ+ rights could be seen as an expansion of the Civil Rights Movement or a hijacking of it.

The Rev. Willie Dwayne Francois of Mount Zion Baptist Church in Pleasantville, New Jersey, cautioned against the dangers of comparing struggles for liberation and instead urged coalition building among movements. "As Black people and people of faith, we ought to be invested in the idea that all people have the imago dei," or "image of God," he said.

At least one panelist thought the Black church's reputation made it even more essential to religious liberty debates.

"The Black church has more credibility on these justice issues than probably any other stream of Christianity," said Tim Schultz, who is president of the 1st Amendment Partnership and is also affiliated with the Federalist Society.

"It's really important that the Black church be involved in these conversations," Schultz said. "People do listen to you. Moderate lawmakers listen to you in a way that they would not listen to somebody who has the positions you do, but has a white face and whose faith tradition got it wrong on Jim Crow."

The keynote speaker at the two-day conference did not address these domestic social and culture war issues. Bishop Matthew Kukah of Nigeria instead spoke about the violence that Catholics and Christians in his country face, often at the hands of Muslim terrorist groups.



Bishop Matthew Kukah of Sokoto, Nigeria, offered reflections during morning prayer at the conference on "The Black Church and Religious Freedom" Sept. 28-29 at the

University of Notre Dame. (Courtesy of Notre Dame Law School Religious Liberty Initiative/Evan Cobb)

Kukah, who is well respected as a tireless advocate for justice and democracy in Nigeria, has founded the Kukah Centre to promote interreligious dialogue with the goal of promoting peace and reconciliation. Yet, for priests and parishioners in the Sokoto Diocese in the country's northwest, church burnings, kidnappings and other violence are a part of life.

Although religion plays a role in such violence, Kukah noted that religion is often manipulated by those in power in Nigeria, where ethnic conflict, poverty and corruption, combined with a history of military rule, contribute to the current problems.

Still, he called for Americans — specifically Black Christians—to "step up the game" and join Nigerians in addressing corruption, violence and instability in Nigeria and the rest of Africa.

"Nigeria must be fixed," he said. "I believe the Christian faith has the capacity and the means of restoring the brokenness of our continent."

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Kukah's inclusion in the conference aimed to connect global and domestic religious freedom issues. The Rev. Eugene Rivers, founder and director of the Seymour Institute, noted in his opening remarks the "global nature of the Black church."

Yet speaker Suzan Johnson Cook, former U.S. ambassador at large for international religious freedom during the Obama administration, observed that definitions of religious freedom vary geographically and noted that in the U.S., what has been "mainly a white conservative movement" must also address other oppressions, including sexism and racism.

G. Marcus Cole, dean of Notre Dame's Law School, acknowledged that the "matters of life and death" faced by Christians in Nigeria are not identical to the religious liberty issues in the West.

"But we are confronting challenges here in the United States in regards to religious freedom," he added. "It's our responsibility as Catholics and as Christians to fight for religious freedom, not just for Catholics and Christians but for all people."

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