

# CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE OF NIGERIA

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## POSITION OF THE CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE OF NIGERIA ON THE BILL FOR AN ACT TO ESTABLISH THE NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR CHRISTIAN EDUCATION FOR THE PURPOSE OF REGULATING AND SETTING STANDARDS AND FOR RELATED MATTERS, 2023.

In response to the above-referenced Bill (no. HB. 2177), dated 21 March 2023, proceeding from the Senate of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria (CBCN), in the following paragraphs, strongly expresses its reservations and articulates its position.

### I. Essential Elements of the Bill

1. *The Bill for an Act to Establish a National Council for Christian Education* is being sponsored by the following Lawmakers:
  - Hon. Rimamde Shawulu Kwewum
  - Hon. Beni Lar
  - Hon. Yusuf Ayo Tajudeen
  - Hon. John Dyegh
  - Hon. Solomon Bob
  - Hon. Benjamin Mzondu
2. The Bill is for the purpose, among others, of
  - Developing, regulating, and approving syllabuses/contents at all levels of Christian education;
  - Certifying Christian Religion Education Instructors at basic and secondary levels;
  - Approving the content of all Christian Religion Education in all schools;
  - Accrediting programmes of Christian Theological Institutions.
3. The Chairman of the Governing Board of the Council shall be appointed by the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria from the five Blocs of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) in rotational and alphabetical order. The President will also be responsible for appointing nine other members of the Governing Board.

### II. Origin and Motivation of the Bill

4. The idea of pursuing a Bill to regulate religious studies in secular schools came up during the Education summit organized in 2019 by the Association of Christian Schools in Nigeria (ACSN), a body of mostly Pentecostal private school owners and some protestant denominations. The Bill, as originally intended, was neither intended to regulate theological concerns nor to have anything to do with theological institutions. Having discussed the idea, CAN decided to pursue it by asking the lawmakers named above to sponsor the Bill. But at some point, certain elements were added to the Bill, which certainly are not in the interest of the Church.

5. The chief motivation was that the Muslims had an Education Board being funded by the Federal Government. It was reckoned that if the Muslims had such a Board, Christians, too, should have theirs.

### **III. Some areas of concern**

6. The Bill (Section 7 vi) calls for the accreditation of the programmes of Christian institutes of theological learning. No exemption was made for seminaries and other religious institutes owned by the various Christian denominations. This Bill will, therefore, infringe on the rights of these various Christian denominations to provide instructions and formation according to their respective doctrines. Section 42 (3) of the constitution states, "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."
7. The Bill is incompatible with the secular character of the Nigerian State as enshrined in Section 10 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. In as much as the Government, at the Federal or State level, has not and cannot adopt any religion as its official religion, it must respect the three juridical principles that govern the relationship between the State and the Church; that is:
  - i. The principle of juridical autonomy of both entities;
  - ii. The principle of reciprocal incompetence in regulating the affairs of each other; and
  - iii. The principle of collaboration between both entities.

The first principle makes it legally possible for the Church to provide education for its adherents. The second principle makes the State incompetent to regulate the education provided in Church institutions. And the third principle means the State can support (not regulate or control) the mission of the Church to provide education for its adherents.

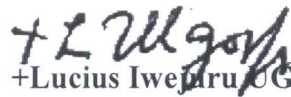
8. The Bill proposes the establishment of a government Board whose members are to be appointed by the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The fear cannot be dismissed of having People appointed who may not necessarily serve Christian interests.
9. The Bill seeks the power to determine the contents of Christian curricula, certify our teachers, and control the teaching of "Christian" doctrines. As such, the Bill ignores the fundamental differences between Nigeria's over one thousand Christian denominations. CAN itself has five Blocs. How can we have one "Christian Education" regulated by the proposed Board?

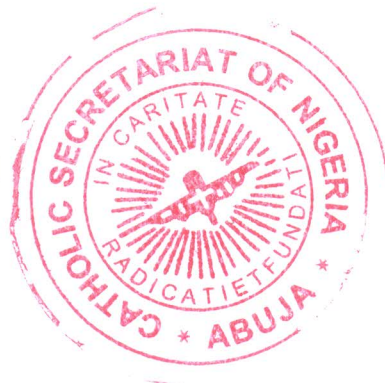
#### **The Way Forward:**


10. The Bill is unnecessary and impracticable because of our doctrinal differences. Furthermore, our juridical autonomy in matters of education is being surrendered to the Government.
11. CAN should undertake a proper needs assessment to determine the needs of Christians in Nigeria that would require the support of the Government. Asking the Government to establish a Council for Christian Education simply because Muslims

have one is counterproductive. It is imperative to revisit and properly examine CAN's original purpose as opposed to what is expressed in the Bill presented at the National Assembly.

12. CAN should explore the possibility of going for a Bill that addresses our concerns as Christians. For example,
  - In most parts of the North, there have been unprovoked attacks on Christians.
  - For over forty years, well before Boko Haram's destructions, thousands of our churches have been destroyed across northern Nigeria. No one has been charged, nor has compensation been paid.
  - Christians face serious challenges and obstacles in gaining access to land to build their places of worship in northern Nigeria.
  - Christian children are hardly given admission to schools because they bear Christian names. Where they could enter higher institutions, they are denied high-profile courses like Medicine, Architecture, Engineering, etc.
  - Christian Religious Education is prohibited in some parts of the North.
  
13. Should CAN determine that there is a need for a National Christian Council for Education, such a Council, which must recognise the doctrinal differences of the various Christian denominations, should be under the full control of CAN and not of the government. Where there is genuine collaboration in Nigeria between the State and the Church, Government funding can be available to such Council without it being a government "parastatal."
  
14. Therefore, the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria, due to the injurious nature of this Bill, as reflected in the foregoing paragraphs, strongly expresses its absolute objection to this Bill.

  
+Lucius Iwejuru OGORJI  
The Archbishop of OWERRI  
President, CBCN



  
+Donatus OGUN (OSA)  
The Bishop of UROMI  
Secretary, CBCN