

## Turning the Bible into a weapon against the 'other'



By Savi Hensman

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Anglican Archbishop Nicholas Okoh and his allies claim to speak for "Bible-believing" Christians or those seeking to defend the cultures of Africa, Asia and Latin America from malign western influences, says Savi Hensman. Yet neither claim holds water.

Nigeria is at risk from an "invading army of homosexuality, lesbianism and bisexual lifestyle", proclaimed the country's most senior Anglican cleric, Archbishop Nicholas Okoh.

Speaking earlier in July 2010 at "our maiden press conference since our assumption to the primacy of the church", he declared "Same sex marriage, paedophilia and all sexual pervasions [sic] should be roundly condemned by all who accept the authority of scripture over human life." His views affect the lives of large numbers of Nigerians and, increasingly, Anglicans elsewhere. So it is worth trying to understand the basis of his beliefs.

He and his allies sometimes claim to speak for "Bible-believing" Christians or those seeking to defend the cultures of Africa, Asia and Latin America from malign western influences. Yet neither claim holds water.

The point has often been made that scripture should be read in context, and interpretation may not be literal. Yet, even taken literally, the Bible does not support Okoh's pronouncements.

"The sin of homosexuality, it must be re-emphasised, destroyed the communities of Sodom and Gomorrah", he declared. Yet the sin of Sodom in Genesis 19 is rape and inhospitality – contrasted with the hospitality and compassion of Abraham

in Genesis 18 – and Jesus refers to this in the Gospels.

Editing Bible passages so that the meaning is lost is another Okoh speciality. In a sermon he stated that "As son of man (son of God) Jesus is lord of the Sabbath. He has control over the holy day of God's people (Mark 2. 28f)." But in Mark 2, "the son of man is lord even of the Sabbath" is a rebuke to those who care more about religiosity than human need: "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath".

One Old Testament commandment repeatedly endorsed in the New Testament – not bearing false witness against one's neighbour – does not seem to appear in Okoh's version of the Bible. At the press conference he alleged that "The church in the west had vowed to use their money to spread the homosexual lifestyle in African societies and churches; after all Africa is poor. They are pursuing this agenda vigorously and what is more, they now have the support of the United Nations." While the UN opposes jailing gay people, as do many churches, that is rather different!

Okoh is by no means the first to distort the meaning of the story of Sodom to encourage, rather than warn against, victimising the vulnerable and rejecting the unfamiliar. Admittedly, many Christians occasionally misinterpret our faith because of our preconceptions and prejudices. However he is unusual in his self-belief and fierce hostility to those who disagree with him.

For instance James Jones, Bishop of Liverpool, an evangelical who once strongly opposed inclusiveness towards partnered gays and lesbians, softened his stance partly because of careful reading of scripture, and suggested that Christians with different views could stay in fellowship. Okoh denounced Jones for establishing "two authorities in the church, the scriptures and 'the canon' of deviant sub-culture. It is intended to destroy the Judeo-Christian understanding of morality as revealed in the Bible".

Likewise, Okoh's supposed defence of African culture is more about clinging to Victorian mores. Interestingly, colonial rule did not fully stamp out local customs such as woman-to-woman marriage, documented by Nigerian social scientists such as Victor Uchendu and Ifi Amadiume. Marriage may involve an economic rather than sexual bond. Nevertheless Okoh's simplistic approach to gender and sexuality is at odds with that of many in the south, while appealing to his allies in the US and beyond.

In a turbulent world, absolute certainty, and 'religious' movements linked with worldly power-seeking, have considerable appeal. But Christians who care about love and justice should vigorously challenge the distorted spirituality peddled by Nicholas Okoh.

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This article is adapted, with acknowledgments, from Savi's regular Guardian CIF columns (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/profile/savitrihensman> [2]).


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