

The Crisis of the Mind: A Christian Perspective

Dr. Katrina A. Korb

This article appeared in *Leadership* on 3 February 2010.

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Romans 12:2

We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought and make it obedient to Christ. 2 Corinthians 10:5

Two violent crises have horrified Plateau State within the past 14 months. We all know of the obvious crises being fought by looting, burning, and killing. However, there is a less obvious crisis that is being fought in our minds. Until we conquer the crisis of our minds, the violent crises will rage on in our communities.

Our mind has a powerful tool to help us understand the world called a schema. A schema is defined as an organized system of thought that allows us to mentally represent, or think about, the objects and events in the world (Woolfolk, 2007). Imagine a dog. Something has now come to your mind. There is not a physical dog in your mind, but your *schema* of a dog. Based on your previous experience with dogs, your mind has created a representation of a dog. Because I was bitten by a dog when I was in secondary school and I am frequently awakened at night by the neighborhood dogs loudly barking, my schema for a dog is a stupid animal with big teeth that barks all night for the sole purpose of destroying my sleep. On the other hand, I have a good friend who has a small, sweet dog as a pet so she imagines a dog as a comforting, furry companion.

A schema is a powerful tool for helping us understand the world because it helps us process information quickly and efficiently (Woolfolk, 2007). However, there are negative side-effects of schemas that cause harmful stereotypes. Many Christians in Plateau State believe that Christians are fundamentally good, innocent people. Because of this belief and the evidence of fighting throughout the state, this schema leads to the stereotype that Muslims are wicked and therefore the source of all of the problems in Plateau State. Four properties of schemas cause many Christians to unconsciously misrepresent information about the crises.

One property of a schema is that it helps us to remember information (Woolfolk, 2007). However, we selectively remember information based on our schemas: we remember information that agrees with our schema but forget information that contradicts our schema (Macrae, Milne, & Bodenhausen, 1994). After the 2010 crisis, I heard a Christian rage about how some Muslim soldiers looked the other way while Muslim gangs were burning and killing. However, he forgot the rumor that Christian soldiers told the Christian gangs that they had one hour to do what they wanted in the 2008 crisis. Because the rumor that Muslim soldiers permitted violence fit the schema that Christians are good and Muslims are bad, he remembered that rumor. However, the rumor about the Christian soldiers doing the same thing in 2008 did not fit his schema so it was forgotten. Instead of remembering only the atrocities committed by the “other side,” we need to understand that both sides have engaged in violence.

A second property of schemas is that they help us make inferences about unobserved events (Driscoll, 2005). When there is information that we do not know, our schema makes an inference, or a guess, about that information. If I said, “The university student took her exam,” you would likely assume that the student was a young woman in her 20s who took the exam in a lecture hall at the university. I did not say all of that information, but your schema for *university student* and *took exam* helps you make those guesses. Our schemas also help us make guesses about events we do not know in the crises. I overheard two Christians, let’s call them John and Paul, discussing the rumor that the 2010 conflict was started by a dispute between church members and a Muslim man rebuilding his house. John said the Muslim construction workers blocked the entrance to the church, so a Christian woman asked them to move so she could enter the church. Paul said that perhaps the Christian woman spoke harsh words to the Muslim construction workers. John replied, “Oh, no. She did not speak harsh words.” John was not at the scene, he simply heard this rumor repeated from another individual. However, John’s schema that Christians are right and Muslims are wrong made him assume that the Christian woman was completely innocent. Even though John really had no idea what the Christian woman said, he assumed that she must not have spoken harsh words. Since our schemas help us make guesses about events that we did not experience, we will make unsupported assumptions that make “our side” innocent while blaming the “other side.” We must avoid the temptation to make assumptions about events that we have not personally witnessed.

Thirdly, schemas make us overestimate the differences between people in our group and underestimate the differences between people in other groups (Quattrone & Jones, 1980). An *in-group* involves those we are similar to and the *out-group* involves those who do not fit in the in-group. Christians typically identify other Christians as their in-group and Muslims as the out-group. Because most Christians tend to spend most of their time with other Christians, they have considerable understanding of other Christians but little understanding of Muslims. Because of this, Christians know that there are many differences between Christians. Some Christians are tall, others are short. Some Christians are kind while other Christians can be harsh. Some Christians are smart, other Christians are dull. Some Christians are peaceful, other Christians can be violent. But because Christians spend little time interacting with Muslims, they do not understand that there are just as many differences between Muslim individuals as there are between Christian individuals. Some Muslims are tall, others are short. Some Muslims are kind while other Muslims can be harsh. Some Muslims are smart, other Muslims are dull. Some Muslims are peaceful, other Muslims can be violent. This is called the *out-group homogeneity bias*, the tendency to assume that members of the out-group are all alike (Brown, 1995). Since we believe that all members of the out-group are the same, whenever we see violence by one member of the out-group, our out-group homogeneity bias leads us to believe that all members of the out-group must be violent. On the other hand, since we know that there are differences between members of our in-group, we understand that violence by one member of the Christian community does not mean that all Christians are violent. Let us overcome the out-group homogeneity bias and understand that just because some Muslims have engaged in violence does not mean that all Muslims are violent.

There is another more damaging side-effect of the out-group homogeneity bias, called the *ultimate attribution error*. This means that people typically assume that the negative behaviors by out-group members are internally caused whereas the same behavior from the in-group is justified because of an external cause (Brown, 1995). In other words, Muslim violence is caused by internal factors; “they are just like that.” On the other hand, Christian violence is caused by external factors; “we are just defending ourselves.” The fact is that both

Christians and Muslims have engaged in violence. Both Christians and Muslims have burned homes. Both Christians and Muslims have burned places of worship. Both Christians and Muslims have killed. To be fair, we cannot believe that Muslims have done these atrocities because “they are like that,” but Christians have engaged in the same behaviors because “we are defending ourselves.”

There is an intellectual movement in Europe and America called *relativism*, the philosophy that truth is relative to an individual, or that no absolute truth exists in the world (Slick, 2010). Most Nigerians I talk to are appalled by this philosophy. They believe that absolute truth does exist based on God’s mandates. However, it appears that these crises have made relativists of many people in Plateau State. Jesus said, “*You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, ‘Do not resist an evil person’* (Matthew 5:38). Only a relativist would say that this mandate does not apply to Plateau State because they are trying to take the land of our ancestors. Jesus said, “*But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also*” (Luke 6:27-28). Only a relativist would say that this mandate does not apply to Plateau State because we have already turned our cheeks enough. The holy scriptures tell us, “*Do not take revenge, my friends... On the contrary, if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good*” (Romans 12:19-21). Only a relativist would say that this mandate does not apply to Plateau State because we need to get revenge on the people who have burned our houses, burned our churches, and killed our people.

There is a crisis being fought physically between groups in Plateau State, but there is also a crisis being fought within the mind of every individual in Plateau State. Let us not be conformed to the pattern of violence and stereotypes in the world, but let us be transformed into Christ-like people by understanding how our minds can misrepresent the situation in Plateau State. We need to fight the stereotypes in our minds that are set up against the knowledge of God. The knowledge that *all* people, Christian and Muslim, are created in God’s image (Genesis 1:27). The knowledge that killing innocent people is absolutely, fundamentally wrong in every circumstance (Exodus 20:13). The knowledge that Christians are not to take revenge (Romans 12:19). The knowledge that Christians are to confess our sins (James 5:16) and make restitution (Exodus 22:1-15). The knowledge that we are to be peacemakers (Matthew 5:9) by loving our enemies (Luke 6:27). Let us as Christians take captive every thought and make it obedient to Christ.

References

- Brown, R. (1995). *Prejudice: Its social psychology*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Driscoll, M. P. (2005). *Psychology of learning for instruction* (3rd ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Macrae, C. N., Milne, A. B., & Bodenhausen, G. V. (1994). Stereotypes as energy-saving devices: A peek inside the cognitive toolbox. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 66, 37-47.
- Quattrone, G. A. & Jones, E. E. (1980). The perception of variability within in-groups and out-groups: Implications for the law of small numbers. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 38, 141-152.
- Slick, M. (2010). *What is relativism?* Retrieved January 27, 2010 from <http://www.carm.org/what-relativism>
- Woolfolk, A. (2007). *Educational Psychology* (10th ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.