

POLITICIZATION OF RELIGION: A REFLECTION ON FULANI HERDSMEN ATTACK IN NIGERIA

RICHARD EMMANUEL GOKUM

Introduction

Religions have emerged in the course of history as standards of relating to society, with the moral aspect of most religions being viewed from the humanistic context from which they originated. The clerical rituals and the communitarian roles have become the dominant social view of religion. In the pre-industrial society, kings use the guise of religion for their expansion quest, aligning with the clergy. The expansion quest assumed the form of Crusades for Christian kings, while for the Muslims, it took on the form of jihad, the Hindu kings not to be left behind, sought expansion under the guise of the *Dharmayuddh*. The common denominator is that the violence associated with the expansion were all carried out in the name of religion.¹ Thus, what commonly appears to be religious conflict is in fact politics not religion. There are claims also that the so-called religious wars are but economic and not religious or ethnic wars. The assumption stems from the belief that religion by itself is not a major factor in human events, but an epiphenomenon (something that can be caused but cannot cause something else).

The intrigues surrounding the Fulani herdsmen attacks in Nigeria can be described within this category as the political manipulation of religion. The basic presumption among non-Muslims in Nigeria that the Fulani herdsmen attack has an expansionist agenda feeds the narratives that it is a religious question; because most of the communities under attack are incidentally majority Christian communities. The attacks may also be acts of terrorism shrouded in the garbs of “Fulani herdsmen”; brigandage, reaction to an ailing economy, poverty, retaliation, or other local historical issues (land, boundaries, rights) and climate change (ecological factors).

This study nevertheless will examine the contested construction and linkage between religion and the herdsmen attack in Nigeria and its implication for harmonious co-existence in order to establish the kingdom of God in Nigeria.

¹ Cf. R. PUNIYANI, “Religion, Politics and Society, A Bird Eye view” in *Academia edu*, accessed Friday 31, May 2019.

Political Manipulation of Religion in Nigeria

It is difficult to reconstruct the factors that have led Nigeria to the place she now finds herself with regard to the Fulani herdsmen attacks. The root of the current situation is however, strongly tied to the country's colonial legacy. The European scramble for land in Africa during the late 19th century resulted in redefining traditional borders as Europeans claimed territories. They ended up creating a more complex African Society by merging peoples of different cultural background together. A good number of these states have continued to cascade into violence due to unresolved competing claims and narratives.

These struggles are perceived and presented in religious terms. In the last seven years, the biggest threat to Nigeria's security has been *Boko Haram*, but it has been overtaken by an uptick in violent activities of AK-47 wielding nomadic Fulani herdsmen. At present, Fulani herdsmen attacks is accounting for more deaths in Nigeria.²

The Fulani herdsmen or Fulani pastoralists are nomadic or semi-nomadic people whose chief occupation is raising livestock. They are largely located in the Sahel and semi-arid parts of West Africa., but due to relatively recent changes in climate patterns, many of them have moved further to the south into the savannah and tropical forested areas in search of grazing grounds. This movement down south is not without consequences. Nigeria's middle belt region, which is the theatre of the slaughter of the Fulani herdsmen, straddles the divide between the largely Muslim north and the majority Christian south. It is an ethnically and religiously diverse zone and a sort of mini-Nigeria. In the past such clashes arose from minor disputes ranging from cattle grazing on crops to contamination of water sources; these types of disputes were invariably settled between community leaders and *Ardos*³. But these past years have been different. What we have now are reoccurring cases of armed young pastoralists from neighbouring countries trooping into Nigeria, invading farmlands with thousands of cows. There are situations in which villagers are attacked and slaughtered in their homes in the dead of the night. The attacks are seen in many quarters within this region as quest for dominance by either of the religions. The connection with the attacks on Christians assumes a historical bias in which Christianity is associated with the British colonialists, and thus, considered as a western innovation to attack and corrupt Islam.

² Cf. YOMI KAZEEM, *Nigeria now has a bigger internal security threat*.

³ *Ardo* is the name of the local chief of the herdsmen.

The Implications of the Fulani Herdsmen Attacks on Christians and the Way Forward

The Catholic Church owes her survival of almost three centuries of uninterrupted persecution during her seminal age to the heroism of the Christian martyrs. This was a tradition she had inherited from Judaism to witness to their faith not only at the cost of, but actually by means of suffering and death. For Christians, martyrdom is rooted in the death of Jesus. Martyrdom is the supreme and most effective mode of evangelization. The Fulani herdsmen attack are targeted on Christians. While we celebrate the heroism of the Christians who have perished as a result of the Fulani herdsmen attack, we must also realise that the pillaging of Christian communities amounts to the cessation of Christian presence in the affected areas, if the *modus operandi* of the Fulani herdsmen is anything to be believed as painted by the gruesome story below:

Goska is just five minutes up the road from Dongoma in Nigeria's Middle-belt region. 'Bullet holes and abandoned burned-out buildings in Goska are evidence something sudden and terrible happened there. Moses Barde, the village head explains that more than 40 people were killed and over 100 homes destroyed in back-to-back attacks on the 24th and 25th of December 2016. They accuse their Fulani neighbors in Dongoma village of hiring armed Fulani pastoralists from outside the area to do their dirty work. "The interlopers now graze their cattle on Goska's rich farm lands, driving off anyone bold enough to venture near."⁴

Succumbing to the threat of the Fulani herdsmen also mean that Christians will perpetually live as second-class citizens in their fatherland, something that is alien to the concept of equality and unity as enshrined in the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. To ensure that these ugly incidences are checked, the following measures are necessary:

- The porous natures of Nigeria's frontiers (borders) are the first areas that should be addressed. The ECOWAS treaty on the free movement of people within the West African sub-region, nevertheless, joint border patrols with neighbors is crucial in this fight.

⁴ A. OBI, *The Deadly Conflict Tearing Nigeria Apart*, IRIN Publishers, www.irinnews.org, accessed Sunday 9, June 2019.

- Reviews of the fire arms Act and provide stiffer penalties for illegal possession of firearms. The government must ensure that all those coming into the country are properly screened and certified that they are not carrying arms.
- Increase public awareness through newly launched community policing initiatives.
- Providing the police with modern hi-tech devices that will enable the police effectively track down and arrest criminals.
- Re-orientating the minds of the herdsmen or gunmen to embrace ranching as a new and modern way to herd cattle.
- Creating a clear distinction within the constitutional framework, for the role and limit of religion in the national polity.
- Government must jettison parochial sentiment and cultivate the ‘will power’ to take difficult decisions.
- Government should bring the perpetrators of these attacks to book. This should serve as a deterrent to other uprising groups.
- Finally, peace and fraternal initiatives should be encouraged and integrated into the consciousness of the members of these groups. However, this should be achieved through dialogue for a peaceful co-habitation.

Conclusion

Justice and peace is a permanent and constitutive dimension of coexistence. The primary responsibility of any government is to safeguard the lives and properties of the citizens. Where this is not the case for whatever reason, that government has failed in its responsibility. Granted that friction are a part of the experience of coexistence, but when friction threatens to tear the very fabric that holds the nation together, a solution must be sort to it. No matter how bitter the truths that lead to this solution (s), the bitter pill of truth has to be swallowed in the interest of mutual coexistence. The wounds of the injustice that has led to these fracasos should not just be soothed but the root causes ought to be confronted. Life is sacred and needs to be protected. Human being are the noblest creatures of God, endowed with conscience and freedom of choice. All hands must be on deck to oppose all who exploit, oppress, discriminate and deal unjustly with others. If Christians and Muslims can consciously put into practice, without deviation, these teachings on justice, peace will flourish in Nigeria.