

Religio-Political Situation in Northern Nigeria: The Limits of the Law and the Fault Lines in Christian Response to Islam

Richard Emmanuel Gokum, Pilani Michael Paul, Anthony Azuwiki

Abstract

This paper explores the complex religio-political underpinnings of the systematic attacks on Christian communities in Northern Nigeria's Middle Belt region, which have resulted in the displacement of thousands, loss of lives, and destruction of numerous churches. It analyses historical patterns of persecution and ideological motives behind the subjugation of Christians in Northern Nigeria, revealing the sophisticated and systematic nature of the attacks, which bear characteristics of ethno-religious cleansing. The paper challenges the oversimplification of the conflict as solely driven by environmental degradation, migration, or land disputes, highlighting targeted violence against ethnic and religious minorities, particularly indigenous Christian farmers. It also critiques the distortion of facts and lack of mainstream media coverage, and the limitations of legal frameworks and fault lines in the Christian response to the escalating violence and persecution.

Key words: Religio-political, Limit of the Law, Fault Lines, and Response

Introduction

A study carried out by the Nigeria Conflict and Security Analysis Network (NCSAN) in April 2015 entitled *Migration and Violent-Conflict in Divided Societies: Non-Boko Haram Violence against Christians in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria*, indicated a sophisticated and systematic attack on Christians around the Middle Belt region of Northern Nigeria, with patterns that show ethnic cleansing. These attacks have displaced thousands of civilians, mainly indigenous Christian farmers leading to the death of thousands, and hundreds of churches have been targeted or destroyed. The perpetrators of these heinous acts leave in their wake raped victims, disembowelled pregnant women, and victims of machete cuts including suckling babies. Media and public commentators directly link this violent conflict to the issues of contestation over land, grazing fields, and environmental resources in the context of environmental degradation and migration (Gokum, 2022). The ongoing conflict is a complex phenomenon where thousands of Christians and some Muslims

are being killed and displaced. In most cases, however, most of these conflicts in Northern Nigeria's Middle Belt region has been oversimplified and understudied, often portrayed as a mere land dispute or reprisal attacks and all these are rarely litigated (Azuwike, 2023).

This study seeks to explore the complex religio-political underpinnings of the systematic attacks on Christian communities, which have led to the displacement of thousands, the loss of countless lives, and the destruction of numerous churches. Through a comprehensive analysis spanning colonial, post-colonial, and post-military democratic periods, this paper unveils the historical patterns of persecution and the ideological motives behind the subjugation of Christians in Northern Nigeria.

The paper also provides a critical examination of the distortion of facts and the lack of mainstream media coverage, which has contributed to the neglect and misrepresentation of the crisis. It also explores the limitations of legal frameworks and the fault lines in the Christian response to the escalating violence and persecution, including the permissibility of self-defense as a safe and acceptable response to the aggression of Islamic violence and fundamentalist attacks. Through the analysis of the religio-political situation in Northern Nigeria and the complexities surrounding the attacks on Christian communities, this study aims to foster a deeper understanding of the conflict's root, causes and the urgent need for effective interventions and inclusive dialogue to promote religious tolerance and protect vulnerable populations (Azuwike, 2020).

Divided Societies and Violent Conflicts

According to Yiftachel (1994), deeply divided societies are those which are composed of non-assimilating ethnic groups, preoccupied with their historical memory and cultural affiliation to their homeland. Such societies tend to promote goals of cultural and regional autonomy which results in more conflicts.

For Oyenyi (2011), conflicts usually occur because of a clash between parties whose interests are incompatible. They express hostile attitudes or seek their interests through actions that damage the other parties' interest. These interests could be resources, power-sharing, community identity, sense of exclusion or threat to religious affiliation. Conflicts generally occur when these parties seek to achieve their interests by means which are violent and try to dominate or annihilate the other contesting party(s). The factors contingent upon opposed interests are the imposition of religious supremacy, competition over territories, traditional institutions, natural resources, and the levers of power. Other factors may include opposing parties such as religious, ethnic, or regional communities, state and political factions, and border.

Gokum (2022) provides a helpful list of some of the reasons, though not exhaustive of ethnic and sectional consciousness. These he says includes,

decline of economic growth, political changes, spatial mobility among ethnic groups and real or perceived injustice. Ethnic conflicts can also be traced to either the case of colonial rule, land dispute, resource control or tribal and cultural superiority. So far, religious, and ethnic conflicts in Nigeria have political, economic, and religious undertones, but in our opinion, the religious, tribal, and cultural superiority issues account by far for the various skirmishes and conflicts so far experienced. They include: the 1987 and 1992 Zangon-Kataf clashes (Suberu, 2020), the Hausa-Fulani and Berom clashes between 2001 and 2010, the skirmishes that followed the announcement of the 2011 General Elections results, and recently the Fulani herdsmen attacks in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria.

The situation has become rather precarious as the failure of statecraft and the inability of leaders to institutionalize fundamental changes has given rise to more serious problems of ethnicity and religious bigotry (Pilani, 2023). The absence of a firm state machinery as regulatory institution has meant that new kingpins have emerged on the scene, leading to a rise in clandestine activities across the country (Gokum, 2022). These clandestine activities are masked in religious and emancipation garbs, like the Boko Haram, the Shia movement, the Niger-Delta movement, the Indigenous People of Biafra movement (IPOB) and the agitation of the Movement for Oduduwa Republic. The failure of state to deliver on essential services means that citizens marooned by poverty now find themselves falling prey to the tendency to see their failure as being caused by others, what Kukah refers to as the 'theory of Relative deprivation' (Kukah, 2006).

In Africa, the introduction of liberal democracy (Pilani, 2023) and multi-party democracy have fermented divisions within African societies and created new layers of religious, ethno-regional and political loyalties (Norris, 2005). Nigeria's return to multi-party democracy in 1999 reignited the Northern Nigerian Muslims' intention to dominate the polity. The result is what Kukah (2014) describes as "keg of frustration which often explodes at the slightest provocation based on anything from argument over the results of elections by politicians, students, ethnic groups or any other social formation on the landscape."

The conflicts happening in Nigeria while it has some connections to international features of global events is better understood from its local context (Gokum 2022). These contexts are analysed here according to the theoretical framework of Eric Nordlinger's (1972) concept of deeply 'divided societies.' Although his definition of the phrase 'divided society' can be interchangeably used as 'divided societies', 'vertically segmented', and 'communally divided' society, scholars like to distinguish between pluralistic societies and deeply divided societies. Guelke's (2012) submission however better captures or explains the reason for the action of the two main religiously inspired armed groups wrecking havocs in Northern and Middle Belt Nigeria – Boko Haram and Fulani herdsmen (Kanu et al., 2024). For example, he says, the most

frequently occurring features of deeply divided societies are divisions arising from 'class, caste, religion, language, race, ethnicity, and clan' which tend to weave competing binaries. These differences span both social and political realms and could be said to be responsible for creating binaries such as 'settlers versus indigenous,' 'us versus them', 'believers versus unbelievers' and other contrasting social-cum political categorizations.

The Religio-Political Situation in Nigeria

Gokum (2022) gives an insightful exposition of how the Northern hegemony in Nigeria came to be and remains, thanks to the instrumentality of religion. Religion, the basis upon which the Sokoto caliphate came into being was heavily employed by the ruling class to give political opposition a religious implication and interpretation. By 1966, it became clear that the purported claim of the ruling class to be custodians of the interest of the North was but a ploy to retain the allegiance of the minority tribes and non-Muslims. But the events of Kafanchan in Kaduna in 1987 narrowed identities among the Northerners. Religion became clearer as the basis of identity and to a large extent appointment into public offices, such that when in 1986 the issue of Nigeria' membership of the OIC (Organization of Islamic Countries) came up, Christians raised eyebrows, and a great debate was sparked off across the country about how the status of the country as secular state should be. Although the crisis started as a minor misunderstanding among the Muslim and Christian students of College of Education, Kafanchan, Kaduna State, it expresses the underlying deep-seated resentment, prejudice, and all forms of frustration between Muslims and Christians on one hand, and the indigenes of the area against government on the other hand (Kukah, 1993).

Interrogating the Marriage of Strange Bed Fellows

According to Kukah (2016), "like in many African countries, colonial rule in Nigeria came to an end in the early 1960s with independence, but after independence, a good number of the states that emerged remained largely inchoate, weak and combustible, often sliding to violence at the slightest provocation or triggered by the internal competing forces often based on unresolved competing claims and narratives." The battle for control of power in the new entities forged together by the colonialists bred new kinds of wars and struggles. Kukah further captures it succinctly in the following words: "In almost all these states, renewed hostilities, wars, and battles for control of territories and resources have been fought in almost the same manner and intensity as with the colonial state. These hostilities have often been wrapped, perceived, and presented in religious [or theological] terms."

The forced marriage or the Amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorate, in 1914, each with a conglomeration of tribes, distinct traditions and religions and other sectarian differences (such as ethnicity, sectionalism) by Lord Lugard, have been converted into tools and means to achieve and sustain power. Politicians openly espouse religious and sectarian sentiments in campaigning for public support. "No one can aspire to or hold political office in

Nigeria without pretending to be religious” says Matthew Kukah (1993). Elsewhere he says:

Many people are oblivious of the fact that northern Nigeria emerged from the throes of a theocratic state. Those who forget this fact assume that the empire of Othman dan Fodio passed away with the British conquest of 1903. It should be remembered that in that theocracy, being Muslim was a basic requirement for upward mobility within the society. To the extent that dan Fodio's scions are still very much alive (thanks to the British who encouraged this attitude for their gains), living that legacy and holding to those ideals remains a key component in every area of the life of the northern oligarchy. The values that have followed from there are values that are related to a stratified society in which the ruler and the ruled, the believer and the unbeliever, live in separate worlds (Kukah, 2007).

Interpreting these indices holds the key to understanding the frustrations of the minority tribes and the other religions, which often spiral into conflicts. It is this imposition of Islamic norms across the northern polity and the attempt to impose it on the entire country, that is making it difficult for non-Muslims to rise to the highest level of political life in northern Nigeria, and probably one of the roots of the feeling of alienation and frustration among non-Muslims (Gokum, 2022).

Resonances of Contested Identities

According to most analysts, the 1804 jihad of Uthman dan Fodio is the single historical factor that has continued to dog post-colonial inter-communal interaction in Nigeria (Nmah and Amanambu, 2017). The jihad became the catalyst that resulted in the transformation of large chunk of Nigeria's geography and politics. It created a fusion of atomistic and independent Hausa states under a united Fulani-controlled caliphate (Ishaku, 2012). The success of the jihad in the Middle Belt was limited due to several factors. In the mountainous areas of the Plateau for example, the natives took refuge in the mountains and caves that their natural habitat provided as the jihadists approached. However, the incursion of the jihadists into the areas of the natives set the tone of future interactions between the natives and the Fulani feudal warlords. Then came the British colonialists, and everything changed. In 1906 when the British colonialists had conquered Sokoto caliphate, for reason of expediency and cost, they adopted what has come to be known as the 'indirect system' of administration – a rule of the British through the Fulani feudal rulers.

Thus, the non-Muslim natives of central Nigeria and the Middle Belt came under the rule of the caliphate after the gerrymandering of the non-Hausa-Fulani tribes into the realms and control of the Hausa-Fulani. This exposed the natives to two layers of colonialism: that of the British and that of feudal lords of the Sokoto caliphate. The areas of the natives in question includes, north-western Zuru land to the Plateau and Bauchi plateaux in central Nigeria to

southern Borno and Adamawa-Taraba axis in the northeast of Nigeria (Gokum, 2022). The minority tribes had raised their concerns and fears about their relationship with the Hausa-Fulani feudal lord/Native Authority and demanded that the influence of the Hausa-Fulani be rolled back. The British responded by setting up the Willinks Commission of Inquiry to investigate the concern of the Northern Nigeria minorities, but jettisoned its findings, stating that the fear expressed by the minorities was untenable (The Willinks Minority Commission and Minority Rights in Nigeria, 1957). The British colonialists can therefore not be absolved of complicity in the current precarious situation of the non-Muslim natives of Northern Nigeria, because they failed to address the fears and concern raised by the natives (Gokum, 2022).

“Redline Crossing”

For example, in Yauri, north of Borguland, the Sardauna's conversion pressure became almost unbearable with waves of *mallamai* (Islamic teachers) presumably sponsored with government funds went from village to village to see conversion (Pilani, 2022). To the World Muslim League, Ahmadu Bello, the Sardauna boasted that he had converted 60,000 people to Islam. Even if this number was correct, it was an orchestrated effort with the active collaboration of mobilized hangers-on, coerced community leaders, civil servants, provincial commissioners, and harnessed political party machine etc., to achieve such a feat. This method was also employed among the non-Muslim Hausa communities in Katsina, Kano and Kaduna state and in the Middle Belt. Many of the conversions were spurious because they were because of sustained pressure, with some renouncing Islam immediately after his assassination in 1966 (Olayinka, 2007).

A little digression here will profit us: It may be instructive here to refer to a section in Sir Ahmadu Bello, the Sardauna of Sokoto' autobiography which probably occurred two years before the attainment of Independence. He stated as follows:

I think that it is fitting to bring my narrative to an end with the grant to us of our long-sought self-government. It might be called the restoration of the pre-1900 era, modernized, polished, democratized, refined, but not out of recognition; reconstructed, but still within the same framework and on the same foundations; comprehensible by all and appreciated by all. The train, the car, the lorry, the aeroplane, the telephone, the hospitals, the dispensary, the school, the college, the fertilizer, the hypodermic syringe have transformed [Usman] dan Fodio's world, but the basis is still there. The old loyalties, the decencies, the old beliefs still hold the people of this varied Region together ((Olayinka, 2007).

According to O. Oluniyi, the statement above summarizes the Sardauna's thought about his colonial benefactors and predecessors. It paints a belief that the colonial experience only painted a semblance of government. It was an era

characterized by cosmetic governance, while leaving untouched the essence of what the colonialists met on ground.

Fault Lines in Christian Response to Islam and the Permissibility of Self-Defence

Despite the relentless attacks and persecution faced by Christian communities in Northern Nigeria at the hands of Islamic extremist groups, the response from Christians has been remarkably muted and passive. Rather than taking decisive action to defend themselves and their families (Pilani, 2023), Christians have largely turned the other cheek, adhering to non-violent principles even in the face of extreme provocation. However, this posture of submission and lack of preparedness is becoming increasingly untenable. Both civil laws and the teachings of Islam and Christianity permit self-defence as a last resort when faced with violence and aggression. It is time for Christians to explore avenues for reasonable, proportional self-protection that align with legal and moral codes. Merely hoping the attacks will cease through persevering pacifism is a failing strategy that has allowed the atrocities to continue unabated. Adopting carefully considered defence modalities could help preserve innocent lives while still upholding ethical values. The following discourse validates the claim that proportional self-protection aligns with legal and moral codes in civil law, Islam, and Christianity.

The Law and the Imperative of Self-Defence for Embattled Communities

It is clear to the historian and observer alike that the situation of non-Muslim indigenes of northern Nigeria is not only one of great concern but one that calls for urgent steps in self-defence, to avert their steady and eventual extermination. Both local and internal laws provide for self-defence, more so, in the face of such pogroms as are currently unfolding in the concerned areas of Northern Nigeria. Thus, it is important to understand what legal provisions are available to the victims and what limits the law places on them in their recourse to the natural rights of self-defence.

Early Theories of Self-Defence

Building on the Roman law of dominium, early theories of self-defence made no distinction between defence of the person and defence of property (Frier & McGinn, 2004). In the 6th century Digest of Justinian (530–533 AD) The right to self-defence is couched as the principle of *vim vi repellere licet* “it is permitted to repel force by force” (Roman Digest, note 3). Hobbes in proposing the foundational political theory on the state of nature, used the English term self-defence for the first time while arguing that “although some may be stronger or more intelligent than others in their natural state, none are so strong as to be beyond a fear of violent death, which justifies self-defence as the highest necessity” (Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan 1651) For John Locke, natural rights are self-evident and grant man the freedom “to pursue life, health, liberty and possessions,” as well as the right to self-defence (Halbrook, 1989). The United States Founders adopted this idea which Thomas Jefferson articulated in detail in the Declaration of Independence. Reviewing David Kopel's book *The morality*

of self-defence and military action: The Judeo-Christian Tradition (2017), Miguel Faria concludes:

...Liberty and the right to preserve life through self-defence are natural rights of the people – namely, gifts from God or Nature to man – and governments that attempt to circumvent those rights are no longer legitimate governments but usurpations. Bad governments and usurpations are already in rebellion against God and man, so the people have a legitimate right to self-defence in the form of insurrection to overthrow those governments (2017).

Furthermore, that people have a natural right to self-defence, which gives them the ability to protect themselves (Azuwiki, 2023); how people also have a moral obligation to defend their families and neighbours (Onukwuba et al., 2023); and how the community as a whole has a collective right to armed self-defence as a means of preventing or containing tyrannical government (Faria, 2017). Given the constant threats in a world full of weapons, contemporary thinkers view the issue of self-defence as one of moral authority within the nation to define the boundaries of compliance to the state and its laws. Thus, there is a growing trend of states assigning or privatising their coercive powers to private security service providers, either to reinforce or replace existing power hierarchy components. The notion that people have the right or privilege to use violence in self-defence is strengthened by the reality that states are no longer claiming exclusive control over law enforcement within their borders, often necessitated by the prevalence of vast ungoverned spaces within countries, including Nigeria.

In keeping with Article 12 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), we argue that the right to self-defence against coercion (including the use of violence) is a fundamental human right and that this right always and without exception justifies the use of violence to protect oneself or one's property. Article 12 of UDHR states: "No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home, or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honour and reputation. Everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks" (UN universal-declaration-of-human-rights, 2012).

Common Law Norms of Self-Defence

In general, the principle of self-defence as enunciated by the common law "Castle Doctrine" which has been codified and expanded by legislatures of common law countries and some state legislatures, acknowledges a person's right to the use of reasonable force, including deadly force in defence of a person's home in the event of a forceful break in. This coincides with the general notion of self-defence that allows a non-aggressor to use force on an aggressor if the non-aggressor reasonably believes such force to be necessary to protect himself or another from an imminent use of unlawful force. Deadly force is justified if the aggressor is using deadly force. However, the non-aggressor

must prove that he or she acted reasonably and used an appropriate level of force. This is because the theory of self-defence is protection and not aggression. To balance the two however, the force to repel should approximate the violence threatened. Even a person who starts an affray is entitled to use self-defence when the opposing party escalates the level of the conflict (*United States v. Stanley*, 71 M.J. 60, 2011).

The Nigerian criminal Code Act makes similar legal provisions consistent with the castle doctrine. It states in Section 282:

It is lawful for any person who is in peaceable possession of a dwelling-house, and for any person lawfully assisting him or acting by his authority, to use such force as he believes, on reasonable grounds, to be necessary in order to prevent the forcible breaking and entering of the dwelling-house, either by night or day, by any person whom he believes on reasonable grounds, to be attempting to break and enter the dwelling-house with intent to commit a felony or misdemeanour therein.

Similarly, Section 286 of the Criminal Code Act in Nigeria provides for Self-defence against unprovoked assault when it says:

When a person is unlawfully assaulted, and has not provoked the assault, it is lawful for him to use such force to the assailant as is reasonably necessary to make effectual defence against the assault: Provided that the force used is not intended, and is not such as is likely, to cause death or grievous harm. If the nature of the assault is such as to cause reasonable apprehension of death or grievous harm, and the person using force by way of defence believes, on reasonable ground, that he cannot otherwise preserve the person defended from death or grievous harm, it is lawful for him to use any such force to the assailant as is necessary for defence, even though such force may cause death or grievous harm.

Section 288 of the Criminal Code Act further expands the law by providing for aid in self-defence: "In any case in which it is lawful for any person to use force in any degree for the purpose of defending himself against an assault, it is lawful for any other person acting in good faith in his aid to use a like degree of force for the purpose of defending such first-mentioned person." With specific reference to the non-Muslim indigenes of northern Nigeria who are daily killed, maimed, displaced, and dispossessed of their ancestral home and farmlands, there is a legal imperative for self-defence supported by extant local and internal law. The law (for e.g., Section 288 of the Criminal Code Act) even invites neighbours to come to the aid of assaulted victims using necessary force. Who could be more neighbour than government whose primary sworn duty is the protection of life and property, and why are the besieged communities in Nigeria not being safeguarded by the Nigerian security agencies? These are existential questions to be reflected upon in the search for answers.

It has been argued, even in this paper, that the attacks on ancestral communities of the North and Middle Belt of Nigeria by Boko Haram and the Fulani herdsmen are religiously motivated. What then is the role of the law in granting affected communities the legal impetus for self-defence? Section 292 of the Criminal Code Act copiously provides for the defence of premises against trespassers (and the removal of disorderly persons). It states:

It is lawful for a person who is in peaceable possession of any land, structure, vessel or place, or who is entitled to the control or management of any land, structure, vessel, or place, and for any person acting by his authority, to use such force as is reasonably necessary in order to prevent any person from wrongfully entering upon such land, structure, vessel, or place, or in order to remove therefrom a person who wrongfully remains therein, provided that he does not do harm to such person.

With regards to the provisions that stipulate the non-inflicting of harm to the intruder, Sections 282 and 286 are engaged as soon as there is deadly force used by the intruder-aggressor. Unfortunately, this is mostly the case in the North and Middle Belt states of Nigeria where indigenous Christian communities and their ancestral homelands have been laid waste by unprovoked deadly force. These communities have the legal standing to defend themselves against such unprovoked attacks as provided by Section 286 of the Criminal Code Act which says:

When a person is unlawfully assaulted, and has not provoked the assault, it is lawful for him to use such force to the assailant as is reasonably necessary to make effectual defence against the assault: Provided that the force used is not intended, and is not such as is likely, to cause death or grievous harm. If the nature of the assault is such as to cause reasonable apprehension of death or grievous harm, and the person using force by way of defence believes, on reasonable ground, that he cannot otherwise preserve the person defended from death or grievous harm, it is lawful for him to use any such force to the assailant as is necessary for defence, even though such force may cause death or grievous harm.

The Demand of Reasonableness

The law of self-defence is usually predicated on the three key elements: (a) Imminent Threat - the threat of danger must be immediately present. (b) Reasonable Fear of Harm - the defendant must have a reasonable fear of harm or death from the aggressor. (c) Proportionate Response - the defence response must be proportionate to that of the aggression (Dave Douglass, *Midflorida Newspapers*, 2002). In 2005, Florida passed a law related to castle doctrine, expanding on that premise with “stand your ground” language related to self-defence and duty to retreat (nctl.org/civil-and-criminal-justice/self-defence-and-stand-your-ground). Florida's law states that “a person who is not engaged

in an unlawful activity and who is attacked in any other place where he or she has a right to be has no duty to retreat and has the right to stand his or her ground and meet force with force, including deadly force, if he reasonably believes it is necessary to do so to prevent death or great bodily harm to himself or another or to prevent the commission of a forcible felony (Florida Statutes Sections 776.012 and 776.013)".

The right of free men to own and bear arms for self-defence turns on the responsibility to safeguard those in their care and their household. This explains why majority of religions, particularly those of the Judeo-Christian origin affirm the right to bear guns for the defence of self and the home. Thus, following the teaching of Thomas Aquinas, the Catechism of the Catholic Church states: "Legitimate defence can be not only a right but a grave duty for someone responsible for another's life. Preserving the common good requires rendering the unjust aggressor unable to inflict harm. To this end, those holding legitimate authority have the right to repel by armed force aggressors against the civil community entrusted to their charge" (Aquinas, 64, 7; Catechism of the Catholic Church no. 2265).

The permissibility of unprovoked aggression in Islam or Christianity

It is worth noting that the Quran does not explicitly encourage attacks on non-believers as a general principle under normal circumstance, it nevertheless gives principles of attack that could easily be overstretched (Ziemke, 2006). For example, Surah At-Tawbah, 9:5 and 9:29 both appear to teach unprovoked attack on non-believers. They read respectively as follows:

But when the forbidden months are past, then fight and slay the Pagans wherever ye find them, and seize them, beleaguer them, and lie in wait for them in every stratagem (of war); but if they repent, and establish regular prayers and practise regular charity, then open the way for them: for Allah is Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful.

And

Fight those who believe not in Allah nor the Last Day, nor hold that forbidden which hath been forbidden by Allah and His Messenger, nor acknowledge the religion of Truth, (even if they are) of the People of the Book, until they pay the Jizya with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued.

Additionally, Surah Al-Baqarah, 2:191 as translated by Yusuf Ali, says:

And kill them wherever you find them and drive them out from where they drove you out; persecution is worse than slaughter. But do not fight them in the Sacred Mosque unless they fight you there. If they fight you, then kill them. Such is the recompense of the disbelievers.

In this verse, it is being stated that believers are permitted to defend themselves against persecution and aggression. However, fighting is not allowed within

the Sacred Mosque unless attacked there Abdel Haleem, 2010, 153. But there is a confrontation, then they are permitted to defend themselves, as this is seen as the appropriate response to those who oppose the faith (Shah, 2013; Abdel Haleem, 2010). If this is true, then it would be a case of reading too much into the text, to interpret as teaching and promoting unprovoked aggression against non-believers.

However, the Quran also emphasizes the importance of peaceful coexistence, justice, and forgiveness. Surah Al-Mumtahanah, 60:8 (Yusuf Ali) says "Allah forbids you not, with regard to those who fight you not for (your) Faith nor drive you out of your homes, from dealing kindly and justly with them: for Allah loveth those who are just." In the same vein Surah Al-Baqarah, 2:256 (Yusuf Ali) states: "Let there be no compulsion in religion: Truth stands out clear from Error: whoever rejects evil and believes in Allah hath grasped the most trustworthy handhold, that never breaks. And Allah heareth and knoweth all things."

These verses underline the principles of justice, fairness, and the rejection of coercion in matters of faith (Shibly, 2020). It is crucial to study the Quran in its entirety, with the guidance of scholars and understanding of its historical context, to grasp its teachings comprehensively. However, as Shibly (2020) would say, "Sometimes the historical prescriptions of Muslim scholars are interpreted in ways that appear to violate the principle of non-aggression. For example, some jurists developed a concept of 'offensive jihad' (*jihad al-talab*) which involves attacking the enemy in their own lands. It is analogous to the Western concept of pre-emptive war, taking initiative against a credible threat." The conclusion one can draw from the above seemingly conflicting Qur'anic verses is that like many religious texts, the Qur'an requires interpretation and context to understand its teachings fully.

In the Christian context, self-defence is a theme addressed in the Bible, with some specific verses shedding light on appropriate responses to personal threats or perilous situations. As an ancient text, the Bible acknowledges the principle of personal protection, indicating that individuals should not remain passive when confronted with immediate physical danger from another person. The background to this is that the Bible emphasizes the sanctity of life as a divine gift, thus acknowledging that self-defense may become necessary in specific situations to protect one's own life or the lives of others. These teachings do not condone violence, but rather recognize the reality of a fallen world where physical defence may be required.

Several figures in the Bible faced circumstances that required them to engage in self-defense. David, for instance, found himself in a situation where he had to defend himself against King Saul, who sought to take his life. One text in Old Testament that is clear on self-defence is Exodus 22:2-3 which states that: "If a thief is caught breaking in at night and is struck a fatal blow, the defender is not guilty of bloodshed; but if it happens after sunrise, the defender is guilty of bloodshed." Scholars also think that from the New Testament perspective, "He

said to them, 'But now if you have a purse, take it, and also a bag; and if you don't have a sword, sell your cloak, and buy one.'" Jesus in Luke 22:36 appears to endorse self-defence. These biblical narratives provide ideas into the nuanced nature of self-defense, showing the importance of approaching it with caution and prudence, rather than recklessness.

In conclusion, while the Bible primarily promotes peace, love, and forgiveness, it also acknowledges the right to self-defense in situations where one's life is at risk.

Synthesis of Findings from the Foregoing Study

The systematic attacks on Christian communities in Northern Nigeria's Middle Belt region have resulted in widespread displacement, loss of life, and destruction of churches. These attacks are rooted in a complex web of religio-political underpinnings and historical patterns of persecution, driven by an ideology of subjugating Christians in the region. The violence against Christian communities is sophisticated and systematic, bearing the hallmarks of ethno-religious cleansing. It is an oversimplification to attribute the conflict solely to environmental degradation, migration, or land disputes. Instead, the targeted nature of the violence against ethnic and religious minorities, particularly indigenous Christian farmers, points to a deeper, more sinister agenda.

Despite the gravity of the situation, the mainstream media has largely distorted the facts and failed to provide adequate coverage of the escalating persecution faced by Christians in Northern Nigeria. This lack of attention has allowed the violence to continue unabated, exacerbated by the limitations of legal frameworks and fault lines in the Christian response. While self-defense is permissible under civil law, Islamic jurisprudence, and Christian teachings, the Christian communities in Northern Nigeria have failed to respond decisively to the attacks. This failure to mount an effective defence has emboldened the perpetrators, who have operated with impunity, unlitigated and unchecked. The religio-political conflict in Northern Nigeria demands urgent intervention and inclusive dialogue to promote religious tolerance and protect vulnerable Christian populations. If necessary, self-defensive mechanisms must be employed to safeguard the lives and rights of these communities. A deeper understanding of the root causes of the conflict is crucial to fostering sustainable solutions and preventing further escalation of violence and persecution.

Recommendations

Based on the foregoing discourse, the study recommends the following:

- i. To ensure peaceful coexistence, there should be inclusive dialogue and interfaith initiatives because where there is open and respectful dialogue among religious leaders, communities, and policymakers, the root causes of the conflict are addressed, and religious tolerance and understanding are fostered.
- ii. In order to strengthen legal frameworks and accountability measures, existing legal frameworks should be reviewed and strengthened to ensure

effective prosecution of perpetrators and protection of vulnerable communities. In this regard, accountability measures should be established to hold responsible parties accountable for acts of violence and persecution.

- iii. There should be an enhanced media coverage and fact-based reporting. In this connection, efforts should be made to counter the distortion of facts and lack of mainstream media coverage. Accurate and impartial reporting is essential to raise awareness, challenge oversimplifications, and garner support for appropriate interventions.
- iv. Targeted measures should be implemented to empower and protect indigenous Christian farmers, who have been disproportionately affected by the violence. This could include providing legal aid, ensuring land rights, and promoting sustainable agricultural practices.
- v. While promoting peaceful resolutions, the paper acknowledges the permissibility of self-defense as a legitimate response to aggression and violence. Capacity-building initiatives could be explored to equip Christian communities with the necessary skills and resources. The aim of these recommendations is to address the complex challenges outlined in the study to promote a comprehensive approach to promote religious tolerance, protect vulnerable populations, and ultimately resolve the religio-political conflict in Northern Nigeria.

Conclusion

The systematic attacks on Christian communities in Northern Nigeria's Middle Belt region are a complex and troubling phenomenon rooted in historical persecution and ideological motives to subjugate religious minorities. The study reveals the sophisticated and systematic nature of these attacks, which bear the hallmarks of ethno-religious cleansing. The distortion of facts and lack of mainstream media coverage have contributed to the neglect and misrepresentation of this crisis, allowing the violence to escalate unabated. The limitations of existing legal frameworks and the fault lines in the Christian response have emboldened the perpetrators to operate with impunity.

Urgent interventions are needed to address the religio-political situation in Northern Nigeria. Promoting inclusive dialogue, strengthening legal accountability measures, and enhancing media coverage are crucial steps towards addressing the root causes of the conflicts and fostering religious tolerance. Ensuring humanitarian aid and empowering indigenous Christian farmers is also essential. Self-defense mechanisms is encouraged as one necessary step, but efforts should focus on capacity-building initiatives to equip communities with the means to protect themselves within legal and ethical boundaries. The findings serve as a call to action for policymakers, human rights organizations, and the international community to recognize the gravity of the situation and take decisive steps to address the escalating violence and persecution against Christian communities in Northern Nigeria.

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