

Appendix 55:

Southern States Embrace Muslims

Jan H. Boer

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What happens when a governor of a sharia state goes out of his way to include Christians? Unfortunately, I do not know of a single example. But what happens when a Christian governor of a non-sharia state embraces Muslims? Does that do anything to bring peace and reconciliation? I will give you some examples of successes here.

In Volume 5, I told you the story of how the Christian Governor of the Southern Ogun State, Gbenga Daniel, organized a special *iftar* or breaking-of-the-fast for Muslims in Government House, Abeokuta. Muslims, I wrote, jumped all over him and each other with praise. The Muslim Oba Sikiru Adetona of Ijebuland congratulated him and urged everyone to emulate him. He also encouraged Muslims in the state “to support Daniel’s administration.” The occasion also happened to give Daniel the opportunity to list the achievements of his administration towards Islam, including a mosque renovation at Government House, improvement of comfort of pilgrims in Saudi Arabia and increased government sponsorship of pilgrims. Whether that is legitimate government business is a large question between Muslims and Christians, but the former were happy with it.¹ To them it signaled genuine dialogue. Well, I did say that government and politics are hard to separate!

Now Ogun State has a considerable Muslim population, so that it was politically wise for the Governor to embrace them. But what of states with only a small Muslim minority? The story of Ebonyi State, a Southern “Christian” state, proves that equal treatment can go a long way to settle things down., at least when Muslims constitute a minority and are the beneficiaries. The Chairman of Ebonyi’s Pilgrims Welfare Board, the Muslim Bello Amadi, described Governor Sam Egwu as “the best and most magnanimous governor in the country. He praised him for his non-discriminative education setup that, in distinction from some states [including Zamfara, the leading sharia state], Ebonyi “allows every citizen in the state to benefit from its free education

¹*TD*, 11 Nov/2004. J. Boer, 2006, vol. 5, pp. 101-102.

and other welfare packages.” The Governor also sponsored 122 Muslims for the annual pilgrimage. “The state,” declared Amadi, “is regarded by Muslims in Nigeria as one of the best states in terms of peaceful co-existence of Muslims and Christian.” There has never been any problem between Muslims and Christians in this state, we are told. “Relationships with the people and the government are very cordial.” Then he added the information that the Muslim community grades all states and their governors according to their treatment of the pilgrimage. Ebonyi came out on top “at 100 per cent,” even above Muslim states like Sokoto.

With such a glowing record, it is no wonder that Amadi promised “that he and other members of the Board would continue to ensure that the peace is maintained and assured them that they would continue to support Egwu’s aspirations.”² Who said that justice does not pay? Kudos to Governor Egwu for his splendid example. I do not know, of course, whether he consulted the large majority of his Christian population whether that is how they would like the Government to spend their tax nairas. This is one of the burning issues between the two religions that needs to be solved in principle and throughout the country, not just on an ad hoc basis. Of course, Christians have accepted the notion of government spending on *their* pilgrimage—a venture they copied from Muslims.

Governor Orji Kalu of Abia, an Ibo state with very few indigenous Muslims, appointed six Muslims as special advisers to his cabinet. One of the appointees, Salisu Idris, declared this to be an unparalleled overture in the South. He praised the Governor for carrying everyone along in spite of detractors. He further explained that “the creation of the offices aimed at integration of Muslims in the state, noting that in the past there was a communication gap between the Muslims and the Government.” This move was “to give us the sense of belonging. Those so appointed are acting as liaison officers between the Government and the Muslims in the state.” He intended this “enabling and peace environment created by Governor Kalu” to lead to dialogue with the local people to help them “understand the peaceful and accommodating nature of Islam.”³

²C. Eze, 20 Nov/2004.

³M. Ajah, 4 Jan/2006.

Another South-Eastern state to move into a similar direction is Akwa Ibom, again, a state with few indigenous Muslims. The need for a central mosque for Uyo, the capital, was recognized by both religions. Hence, CAN and “other religious organizations” participated in fund raising. This cooperation did not go unnoticed and created a warm atmosphere in the State, when the Sultan from Sokoto, Muhammad Saad Abubakar III, President-General of JNII, arrived to lay the foundation stone. In this situation of appreciation and fuzzy feelings, the Sultan “expressed willingness and determination to work with CAN and other religious groups to end incessant religious crisis.” He “stressed the need for the full and unconditional restoration of the ethos of religious tolerance and understanding upon which the nation was built.” By its cooperation in this project, the Sultan recognized that CAN hereby constituted “a great testimony to the new spirit of understanding.” This ceremony of laying the mosque foundation, he declared, is symbolic of “the foundation stone of greater religious harmony and tolerance in Nigeria, where everyone feels he is his brother’s keeper and the religious welfare of one becomes the spiritual welfare of all.”

The local Muslim community also chimed in. They affirmed that “they have been fully integrated into the state and have lived, prospered and enjoyed peace, saying the State Governor had sponsored more than 200 Muslims to the pilgrimage since he came to office.”

Of course, Governor Obong Attah was not to be left behind. He “appealed to the Sultan to use his good offices to promote harmony and peaceful co-existence between Christians and Muslims. “We will continue to ensure that our brothers from other parts of the country will continue to live and carry on their businesses happily in the state,” he declared.⁴ The message between the lines was clear. He wanted the Sultan to work for similar positive relations in the core North, where Christian Easterners are having a very difficult time of it under those Muslim regimes. What could the Sultan say? It is a mere rhetorical question—but an important one.

It is only fair to acknowledge that some movement along this line has also started in Kano State. In 2007, Governor Shekarau appointed the Ibo Chief Chris Azuka as the Special Adviser Special

⁴O. Bassey, 15 May/2007. Appendix xx. (App under Christian proposals)

Adviser on Inter-Community Relations. The Ibo community gushed all over the Governor for his wisdom and inclusiveness.⁵

⁵*DI*, 17 Sep/2007.