

**POLITICS AND GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA: THE IMPACT OF RELIGION IN A
PLURALISTIC SOCIETY**

BY

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ABSTRACT

Politics is the mechanism for selecting leaders who will engage in the governance of any democratically orientated society. Therefore, its significance cannot be diminished. This article, titled “Politics and Governance in Nigeria: The Impact of Religion in a Pluralistic Society,” studied the role of religion in achieving equilibrium in politics aimed at fostering effective governance within a diverse community. The study revealed that the Nigerian state is fraught with complexities in its political orientations that have impeded human capital development. It has also deteriorated relationships, particularly those of an ethno-religious kind. The paper recommends, among other measures, that Christian and Muslim clerics endeavour to instill appropriate religious and ethical values in their followers; that Christianity and Islam seek mutual understanding through consensus, facilitated by religious dialogue and trust-building; and that Nigeria's political elites and impoverished populations, transcending religious, regional, ethnic, and political divisions, should resist the inclination to conflate religion with politics or exploit religion as an instrument of partisan politics due to the complexities involved.

Key words: Politics, Governance, Religion and Pluralistic Society

Introduction

Political persuasion in human interactions is as ancient as humanity. Consequently, the interactions among individuals in any community have been obscured by political complexities. Politics is a contest in which individuals engage to determine the trajectory of their society and the governing leadership style. Therefore, humanity is inherently political by

nature. Aristotle characterises humans as inherently political beings (Mukherjee and Ramaswamy 2007). This involves the conception of humanity as perpetually involved in influencing others, thereby directly or indirectly participating in politics. Man is a political being, as he inevitably engages in power dynamics, regardless of his preferences (Akinbade, 2004). Conversely, Jawondo (2005) perceives humanity as a dual entity, embodying both religious and political characteristics. Humans are arguably the sole species with a religion. If humanity is inherently religious, it follows that religion is a universal phenomenon, present in all communities, exhibiting significant diversity in expression, and regarded with utmost seriousness by its adherents (McGee, 1980). Religion is as significant to human civilisation as politics. It is essential, using Nigerian society as a case study, to evaluate the effects of religion on politics in a pluralistic context.

Nexus between Religion and Politics

Religion and politics are great subjects in contemporary academic discourse. A lot of opinions have been given by scholars to portray what religion and politics stand for. None of these however, captures in one sentence what each of the subject matter of religion and politics entails. Imo (1986) however, advises that any meaningful postulation on religion must take into account the concepts of the profane and the supernatural. More so, it should be emphasized that some scholars approach the subject of religion with prejudice. In fact, some scholars of religion claim not to even practice any form of religion hence, they lack what could be regarded as firsthand experience. Thus, a good description of religion, Imo further emphasizes, should feature specificity and inclusiveness. He avers that religion is the varied, symbolic expression of, and appropriate response to that, which people deliberately affirm as being of unrestricted value for them. McGee (1980:362-365) posits that the religious communities of human beings are often distinguished by reference to their central object of worship. Around this sacred object, person or concept, patterns, ritual practices, ethical system and social organization take form. He sees religion as “a set of activities organized around the sacred, non-empirical source of power, transcendence, mystery and awe”.

The basic dimensions of religion include the belief patterns that accommodate the sacred reality, which people experience through revelation, reflection or divine illumination. Religion includes ritual practices which are prescribed for believers as appropriate human responses in the relationship to the ultimate source of being or value. Religion also includes

ethical codes and behaviour that are directed towards other persons and religion could also develop through the formation of cultic organizations.

On the other hand, Abearian and Masannat (1970:9) sees politics as “a phenomenon which has its origin in the class of individual preferences, its process in public demands for accommodation of competing goals and its output in the form of binding public policies”. Easton (1956) as cited in Olaniyi, (2001:2) avers politics as being concerned with the process of “authoritative allocation of values in any social system”. Values here include all things sought after in the society such as wealth, respect, prestige, position, security and power among others.

Looking at the different positions of scholars on the concepts of religion and politics, both seem to have a set of well stated objectives. These structured objectives are directed or targeted at the people who could be adherents or citizens as the case may be. No wonder, Hank (2003:18) sees religion as a tool of politics however, in the real sense of it, religion and politics can be manipulated to make strange bedfellows. In his words; “just as soccer is singularly the sole and most unifying factor in Nigeria, nothing is as divisive as religion, especially when it is used as a tool of politics”. It should therefore, be noted that in sharply divided societies, like Nigeria where Islam and Christianity are in competition, ethnic sentiments are wielded, this invariably threatens the stability of the system.

However, despite all efforts to keep religion and politics separate, history offers many occasions when the two have often been very closely intertwined. Sometimes, religion endorses or supports a particular leader or system. One example is the Divine Right of Kings in which royal power is believed to be derived directly from God and therefore must be obeyed. Little wonder, Machiavelli (1532) cited in Mazrui (1996) advocates that rulers should use the power of the church to establish and maintain their reigns, believing that this would bring stability in the society. In a related way, religion has often been used as a means of defining or maintaining social class structures.

Different classes have at times overwhelmingly adopted different faiths. On the other side of the coin, some governments have either endorsed or fully administered specific religions, sometimes to the degree that citizens have strongly been discouraged from following any other. One of the best-known examples of this in the Western world is the Church of England

which remains today, the official Christian church in England, with the Monarch empowered as its supreme head. Other examples include the Roman Catholic Church's status as the official religion of several countries in Europe and Latin America. And, the official status of Islam in many countries around the world. Contemporary efforts to impose Sharia law in various places around the world, outside the pre-existing Islamic states also fit this description (Reeves and Taylor, 1999)

Nigerian State, Politics and the Secular Debate

At times, religious organizations and people of faith may be affected in specific ways by the political climate of the society that surrounds them. For instance, governments may pass laws that affect or threaten to affect the ways in which the traditions of a given faith may be offensive to the adherents of a particular belief system. Such is the case in Nigeria. The recognition of state secularism by the constitution has generated heated debates. For instance, Kukah(1999:102) submits that:

The debate over the religious status of the Nigeria state remains one of the most passionate and acrimonious. The debate has often been beclouded by bellicosity, zealotry, arrogance and prejudices. In the end, there has always been more heat than light.

There is another group made up of largely Marxist-oriented secularists. These people see the entire debate not only as a flagrant distortion of the secular status of the Nigerian state, but also part of the game in the struggle for the control of the Nigerian state across the religious and ethnic boundaries. Their arguments are anchored on the fact that while these selfish elites have really no love for the Nigerian state beyond their personal interests, they and majority of poor Nigerians have no other place to call home.

With so much religious turmoil in Nigeria, the government has always taken the blame. Both Muslims and Christians argue that it is usually the government's sin of omission and commission. This accusation notwithstanding, the only instrument we can rely on is the constitution and what it says about religion. According to Ilesanmi (2001) the provision on state secularism in the constitution is the rock behind which government and people stake their claims for neutrality. However, secular state is needed to redress the imbalance caused by what is considered to be the manipulation of religion for political purposes. Manipulation is therefore the process of essentially controlling the action of a person or group without that

person or group knowing the goals, methods and purpose of that control and without even being aware that a form of control is being exercised upon them at all. This campaign of systematic manipulation of religious sentiments is being conducted for the sinister and reactionary purpose for diverting attention (Usman, 1987).

This paper believes that the political class cannot exonerate itself from the present predicament of Nigerians Muslim-Muslim ticket which has sets the country into religious mess. Moreover, as politicians, instead of mobilizing Nigerians for the task of nation building, the new political elites are busy mobilizing their religious constituencies for a war against one another. Muslims on the one hand believe that if they do not stand their grounds, Christians and other non-Muslims would continue to subjugate them. On the other hand, Christians and other non-Muslims argue that the debate is not about Islam as a religion, it is largely a debate about the articulation and legal defense of the liberty of Nigerians to live under a secular, democratic Nigerian state. Besides, while Christians argue that they need to be voted into power so as to defend Christian territories from Islamic control, Muslims on the other hand sort the support of their constituencies to arrest the threats to Islam posed by non-Muslims. With religion generating so much passion, the polarization of the nation has found full expression as the country is finally pitched as a battleground between Christians and Muslims. The involvement of the political class therefore makes the situation even more worrisome (Shagaya, 2003).

Politics of Religion in Nigeria

The politics of religion in the Nigeria political space and across the African state has been a subject that has gain prominence over time. Mazrui (1996:198) notes that:

In African countries, where Islam is in serious competition with Christianity and both are politicized, the two creeds become divisive rather than unifying, destabilizing rather than legitimizing. Where religion reinforces ethnic differences on regional variation, governments become less stable rather than more... On the whole, the two Semitic religions in Nigeria Christianity and Islam reinforce regional and ethnic differences, and make stability more difficult.

According to Usman (1999) the entity now known as Nigeria came into being in 1914 through the amalgamation of the then Southern and Northern protectorates of the British colonial power. Before the British incursion into the country, Islam had taken a firm presence from

the then Sokoto Caliphate, the Borno Empire, to the Yoruba land and down to the Atlantic coast of Lagos. Christianity on the other hand came with the colonialists who were imperialist agents. Independent missionary workers took over the Southern Nigeria and penetrated through the Northern minorities and thus, gradual overthrowing of the African traditional religion became imminent. Both Islam and Christianity took over as Nigerians embraced them. Before this period, all political activities were surrounded by the then African traditional religions. Chief priests were prominent chiefs and they wielded enormous power. This implies that right from time immemorial politics has always been influenced by religion (Ilesanmi, 2001). The period which followed the era of colonialism witnessed rapid growth of Christianity and enjoyed tremendous government patronage,

More so, Halsell (1986) posits that the emergence of Chief Obafemi Awolowo, Dr. Nnamdi Azikwe and Sir Ahmadu Bello as premiers of the Western, the Eastern and the Northern regions, maintained the status quo in the manipulation of religion in Nigerian politics. Christianity continued to wield greater influence in the South while Islam was in control of the North. This issue of politicization of religion was more glaring in the North, because majority of those who were from royal families were in full control of Northern politics which again was highly influenced by Islam. According to Usman (1999) the hegemonic position of the Northern ruling class was threatened with the emerging liberal democracy because they lacked the instrumentalities needed. They therefore resorted to the defense of Islam for the purpose of protecting and defending their interest. This took a new twist in the second republic when the political intrigue became the protection of northern interest which was seen as mere ploy to win the support of both Muslims and non-Muslim minorities in the region. The Northern political actors who were hitherto separated by politics were brought together by northern interest. Kukah (1993:5) describes this political calculation as politics of “conscriptio”.

Unequivocally however, the picture in the present day Nigeria is however not different from what it used to be. Nigerians have demonstrated stronger link or alliance to their religious organization than the country. This perhaps, accounts for why Nigerians have been adjudged the most religious people on earth. The fact remains that this tendency, rather than stabilizing the polity reinforces differences and ethnic variations. The ferocious gyration of Nigerians about religious matters which will not be replicated when it comes to national interest has

weakened the Nigerian state (Ilesanmi, 2001). A survey of ethno-religious crisis in Nigeria reveals that blood of innocent Nigerians is shed and properties destroyed on account of this passion, fervor, emotional reactions, moral certitude and religiosity (Ojo, 2006). Unfortunately, northern Nigeria has always been the spot for unwarranted destruction of lives and properties.

Facts Emanating from the Nigerian Experience

From the foregone analysis on the intricacies of Nigerian politics, it is necessary to highlight some hard and incontrovertible facts pertinent to the dilemma on religion in politics. This is because they are worth considering for our national and common interest. These facts are;

- i. History is replicated with more than a full dose of religious extremists. The Christians have their crusaders and the Muslims their Jihadists. Vestiges of this can be found in every modern nation state where the religions co-exist and are practiced. Therefore, Nigeria is not an exception.
- ii. Religion has a place in the life of every nation, Nigeria included. Irrespective of the faith or denomination, religion when truly practiced in its truest form and spirit, has been and remains sacred. It plays a vital role in purposeful leadership, community building, social justice, law and order, peace-making, reconciliation, forgiveness and the healing of wounds, at the political, family and personal levels.
- iii. Nigerian constitutions past and present proclaim loudly the secularity of the Nigerian state, the separation of religion from politics and the freedom to practice one's religion without fear of persecution and prosecution. Provisions of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria as stipulated in Section One states that the constitution is supreme and that its provisions have binding force on all authorities and persons throughout the federation. Section 10 of the constitution is categorically clear in proclaiming that, "the Government of the federation or of any state shall not adopt any religion as state religion". Additionally, in subsection 2, the constitution stipulates that "the federal republic of Nigeria shall not be governed, nor shall any person or group of persons take control of the government of Nigeria or any part thereof except in accordance with the provisions of this constitution." The constitution

bars a state religion by adoption, and any attempt by anyone to foist a religion on the nation.

- iv. Our political leaders, on both sides, Muslims and Christians have invoked the name of God in politics and sought to use religion freely in influencing policy decisions on important national, political and economic matters.
- v. In Nigeria, religion has become a tool of politics. We are evidently, no longer able to maintain the fundamental principles of a secular state. The sanction and endorsement of Sharia laws in and by some state governments have also compounded our problems.

Therefore, the incontrovertible facts of these realities and their possible implication for Nigeria make it more prescient and troubling. Unfortunately, some still don't see the manipulation of religion for political gains as a problem so long as it serves their petty personal or sectional interests. It is viewed that many people are not still comfortable with the kind of religious politics ongoing in Nigerian's society today and that is why there are mixed feelings and expressions on social media and in the country's mainstream media houses (Mazrui, 1996). Those who are genuinely concerned about this problem have spoken out. The researcher suspects that many more would like to, but they might be however skeptical on how their reactions might be publicly perceived and interpreted by their various religious counterparts. It is therefore believed that the greater danger for Nigeria lies in not speaking up and challenging the erosion of our secularity, especially by those elected to protect it.

Assessing Religion in Politics and Governance in a Pluralistic Society

Indeed, religion and religious associations perform a number of democratic roles but the extent to which these roles have been performed is another issue. Religion is a complex phenomenon and the social functions it performs are quite diverse. Some religious functions are immediately observable and some are not immediately discernible. It should be recognized that if an activity helps the integrative performance of an organization, then we call it functional. Roles like support for tolerance, peaceful cooperation and loves are promoted through ministerial and lay practice.

Schaefer and Lamn (1997) identify some democratic utilities of religion which include the integration of human societies composed of individuals and social groups with diverse interests and aspirations. In their view, religious bond transcend these personal and divisive force. Another important function identified by the two authors is the ability of religion to legitimize the existing social order. On the other hand, borrowing heavily from the essay of Rotimi, Mala and Aiyegboyin (1999), religion performs six interrelated functions, namely, restraining or criticizing the conduct of government, encouraging political participation, promoting democratic values and norm, articulating and aggregating distinctive societal interests, generating cross-cutting identities and providing avenues for the development of leadership skills.

With reference to the first function of restraining and containing government conduct, religious associations in Nigeria have repeatedly and stridently denounced bad governmental policies or actions that infringe on the interests of the religious community in particular, and the welfare of the citizenry in general. For instance, Usman (1999) avers that religious associations have joined independence groups in civil society in criticizing the dubious and circuitous nature of the military's democratization project and government's management of the religious disturbances that have convulsed several Northern states. On the stimulation of political participation and civic identification, Nigeria's religious organizations have played an important role in encouraging and mobilizing their members towards active participation in, and identification with public affairs and politics. This is done by stimulating a sense of civic identification and participation in their members by urging such members to pray and fast for peace, stability, justice and progress of the nation (Ayorinde, 2007).

Furthermore, religion also promotes democratic values and norms. This is done through the promotion and propagation of such democratic norms and values as tolerance, moderation, willingness to compromise, and respect for truth, justice and freedom. Religious leaders in Nigeria have at different times demonstrated this commitment to democracy by urging Nigerians not to waver in their support for democratic institutions (Tukur, 1999). More so, religion provides avenues for interest representation. Religious organizations articulate, aggregate and represent distinctive societal interests. The Christian representation and mobilization against Nigeria's membership of the country in the Organizations of Islamic Countries (OICs) represented only one of the many instances of interest representation by the

Christian community since 1986. Religion equally generates cross-cutting interest (Ilesanmi, 2001). The existence of cross-cutting interest implies that competing affiliations could operate to secure social peace and democratic stability, and prevent destructive or protracted social conflict, by inducing individuals and groups to divide their emotions in a single explosive line of affiliation.

Finally, religious organizations provide an appropriate environment for the development of leadership skills. This is done by displaying an impressive capacity to manage people and resources in their respective organizations by speaking out courageously and consistently against the excesses to the nation's problems. Through this, religious leaders have gained some reputation and legitimacy as effective national leaders of thorough and potential value.

Way Forward

The following recommendations can serve as way forward in achieving a society that can allow religion where necessary to shape political behaviour rather than being a tool that divides the people;

- i. Both Christian and Muslim clerics should strive to inculcate the right religious and ethical values into their adherents, this is because any nation where people lack religious ethical principles, that nation is bound to lack conscience, compassion and progress.
- ii. Christianity and Islam should reach an understanding through consensus, achieved by religious dialogue and trust building. This is so they could liaise and lobby government at both federal and states levels, especially in northern Nigeria, to make strong policies that would unreservedly ensure the free practice of religion by all and sundry. Additionally, they must insist that no religion in Nigeria should be deemed superior or subordinate to the other, and none should be adopted as a state religion.
- iii. Finally, both the Nigeria political elites and the poor masses across religious, regional, ethnic and political divides should be willing to overcome the temptation to mix religion and politics or manipulate religion or make religion a tool of national partisan politics because of the intricacies involved.

Conclusion

It would however be misleading to conclude that religious organizations have been uniformly or consistently supportive of democratic processes and values in Nigeria. On the contrary, they have periodically exhibited disturbing antidemocratic proclivities that have found expression in religious violence and intolerance, in the corruption and manipulation of religious leaders. From the foregoing, some religious activities can be described as dysfunctional because their consequences frustrate the stated goals of the groups. In general religion is functional or dysfunctional, depending on the extent to which it contributes to the achievement of societal goals. Thus, this study examined the role of religion in politics and puts forward some recommendations and hope that if they are properly implemented, they will go a long way in giving the Nigerian society a fair political atmosphere influenced by the ethical principles of religion.

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