

RELIGION AND POLITICS IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between politics and religion is intimate because there is always a point of convergence. More so, the relationship is complex because of the intricacies inherent in the politicization of religion. Focusing on Nigeria, today, there are two dominant religious groups in Nigeria, Islam and Christianity. Islam and Christianity are not recognized here to the trivialization of the position of traditional animism; that they take the centre stage in this work is deliberate because of the impact of both on the Nigerian government and politics. The impact profoundly reinforces regional and ethnic differences and makes stability more difficult. The recognition of the problem brought about by the politicization of religion has inspired the writing of this paper which is aimed at exploring the relationship between the two; how they both relate to power; and the problems that have arisen there from.

INTRODUCTION

The great philosopher and intellectual colossus, Aristotle describes man as a political animal (Mukherjee, & Ramaswany 2007: 105). This has to do with the conceptualization of man as being constantly engaged in the process of influencing, threatening or using threat on others and therefore directly or indirectly being engaged in politics. That is, man is political and he is inevitably involved in power play whether or not he likes it or notices the facts or is indifferent or active (Akinbade, 2004: 148). In his own contribution, Jawondo (2005: 180) depicts man as both a religious and political animal. Man is arguably the only animal with a religion. If man is also a religious being, it therefore implies that religion is a universal activity; practiced in all

human societies, extremely varied in form and is regarded with great seriousness by those who adhere to it (McGee, 1980:360). This submission raises the fundamental question as to whether or not all people are religious which is however not the thrust of this paper.

In achieving these objectives, the paper is divided into seven sections. The first section is the introductory aspect while the second section discusses the concepts of religions and politics. The third and fourth sections are devoted to discussing the roles of religion in politics and the politicization of religion before and after independence. The Nigerian state, politics and the secular debate forms section five and the sixth section focuses on some facts emanating from the Nigerian experience. The seventh section is the recommendation and concluding remarks.

THEORIZING RELIGION AND POLITICS

Scholars of religion like Imo (1986: 1-5) do not agree on a single definition of the word 'religion' because religion is a combination of two things: the profane and the supernatural. Therefore, a good definition has to take the two into consideration. Some approach its definition with prejudice while some scholars of religion do not practice one so they lack the experience.

A good definition, Imo emphasizes should feature specificity and inclusiveness. He advances 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, belief patterns, ritual practices, ethical system and social organization take form. He defines religion as "a set of activities organized around the sacred- that non-empirical source of power, transcendence, mystery and awe'.

The basic dimensions of religion include the belief patterns which accommodate the sacred reality people experience through revelation, reflection or divine illumination; ritual practices which are prescribed for believers as appropriate human responses in the relationship to the ultimate source of being or value; ethical codes which are behaviour directed towards other person; and cultic organization.

Abearian & Masannat (1970:9) define 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 polices’.

In a similar vein David Easton (Cited in Olaniyi, 2001:2) famously defined 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, 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. The question now is: are their boundaries coterminous? Or do their stated objectives converge at a point which ultimately necessitates infiltration by both? Hank Eso sees religion as a tool of politics and that in the real sense of it both 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”. Hank Eso (2003).

It should therefore be noted that in sharply divided societies, like Nigeria where Islam and Christianity are in competition, ethnic sentiments are wielded and this invariably threatens the stability of the system.

Despite efforts to keep religion and politics separate, history offers many occasions when the two have often been very closely intertwined. Sometimes, a 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. Also Niccolo Machiavelli advocated that rulers use the power of the church to establish and maintain their reigns, believing that this would maintain stability in the society. In a related way, religion has often been used as a means of defining or maintaining social class structures.

Conversely, 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 as the official Christian church in England with the Monarch empowered as its supreme Governor. Other examples include the Roman Catholic Church 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)

THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN POLITICS

This section is devoted to the consideration of the roles of religion in politics. Indeed, religion and religious associations perform a number of democratic roles but the extent to which these roles have been performed is another issue.

Because religion is a complex phenomenon, the social functions it performs are quite diverse. Some religious functions are manifest-immediately observable- and some are latent – not immediately discernible. It should be recognized that if an activity helps the integrative performance of an organisation, then we call it functional. Roles like support for tolerance, peaceful cooperation and loves are promoted through ministerial and lay practise.

Schaefer & Lamn (1997:273-275) 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 legitimise the existing social order.

Borrowing heavily from the essay of Rotimi, Mala & Aiyegboyin (1999:33-41) religion performs six interrelated functions, namely, restraining or criticising 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/or the welfare of the citizenry in general. Thus, religious associations have joined independence groups in civil society in criticising 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 organisations have played an important role in encouraging and mobilising 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).

Thirdly, religion 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 organisations articulate, aggregate and represent distinctive societal interests. The Christian representation and mobilisation against Nigeria's membership of the country in the OIC represented only one of the many instances of interest representation by the Christian community since 1986.

Religion equally generates cross-cutting interest. The existence of cross-cutting interests 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 organisations, like many other ordered shares of associational activity or social intercourse, provide an appropriate environment of the development of leadership skills. This is done by displaying an impressive capacity to manage people and resources in their respective organisations by speaking out courageously and consistently against the excesses solutions to nation's problems. Through this,

religious leaders have gained some reputation and legitimacy as effective national leaders of thorough and potential statement.

It would however be misleading to conclude that religious organisations have been uniformly or consistently supportive of democratic processes and values in Nigeria. On the contrary, they have periodically exhibited disturbing anti-democratic 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.

THE POLITICIZATION OF RELIGION BEFORE AND AFTER INDEPENDENCE

In his submission, Mazrui notes the following:

In those African countries, where Islam is in serious competition with Christianity and both are politicised, the two creeds become divisive rather than unifying, destabilising rather than legitimising. 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. (Mazrui, 1996:198)

An entity now known as Nigeria came into being in 1914 through the amalgamation of the then Southern and Northern protectorates of the British Empire imperialist 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. The period which followed the era of colonialism – witnessed rapid growth of Christianity and enjoyed tremendous government patronage,

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, majority of who were from royal families, was in full control of Northern politics and those were highly influenced by Islam. The hegemonic position of the Northern ruling class was threatened with the emerging liberal democracy because they lacked the instrumentalities needed which was more or less political bankruptcy. They therefore resorted to the defence 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 ‘conscriptioin’.

Unequivocally put, 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 organisation than the political body. This perhaps, accounts for why Nigerians have been adjudged the most religious people on earth. The fact remains that this tendency, rather than stabilising 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. A survey of ethno-religious crisis in Nigeria reveals that blood of innocent Nigerians are shed and properties destroyed on account of this passion, fervour, emotional and emotive reactions, moral certitude and religiosity. (Ojo, 2006:368-378). Unfortunately, the Northern Nigeria has always been the spot for unwarranted destruction of lives and properties.

THE NIGERIAN STATE, POLITICS AND THE SECULAR DEBATE

At times, religious organisations 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. The nature of the debate has been covered by Kukah. According to him:

“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.” (Kukah, 1999:102)

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 this selfish elite has 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 they are both 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. 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 politics. 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, 1987:12-13).

It is my candid opinion that the political class cannot exonerate itself from the present predicament of Nigeria. Rather than politicians seeing themselves as being divided only by contending ideological presentations of their party manifestos, a lot of useful energy is diverted to building religious sentiment. Rather than mobilize Nigerians to their cause as politicians, the new political elites are busy mobilising their religious constituencies for a war against one another. Muslims believe that if they do not stand their grounds, non-Muslims would continue to subjugate them while non-Muslims on the other hand argue that the debate is not about Islam as a religion, it is largely a debate about the articulation and legal defence of the liberty of Nigerians to live under a secular, democratic Nigerian state. While non-Muslims argue that they need to be voted in so as to defend Christian territories from Islamic control, Muslims on the other hand see the support of their constituencies to arrest the threats to Islam posed by non-Muslims. The heat, acrimony and bitterness generated in 1986 by the debate over Nigeria's (OIC) later spilled over and led to a series of religiously motivated eruptions of violence of cataclysmic proportions across many states in the North.

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).

FACTS EMANATING FROM THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE

From the research on the intricacies of Nigerian politics, it is necessary to highlight some hard and incontrovertible facts pertinent to our religion-in-politics dilemma. They are worth considering in our national and common interest.

Fact One: History is replete with religious zealots. The Christians have their crusaders and the Muslims their Jihadists. Vestiges of both and recidivists can be found in very modern nation states where the religions co-exist and are practiced. Therefore, Nigeria is not an exception.

Fact two: Religion has a place in the life of every nation, Nigeria included. Irrespective of the faith or denomination, religion when truly practised 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, by the political, family and personal.

Fact Three: Nigerian constitutions past and present proclaims 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 Nigerian Constitution (section 1) stipulates 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 categorical in proclaiming, '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." All said, the constitution bars a state religion by adoption, and any attempt by anyone to foist a religion on the nation. The secular debate is therefore a frivolous one.

Fact Four: 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 the polity decisions and swaying national political and economic policies and to that end governance.

Fact Five: 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.

In considering these incontrovertible facts, the knowledge that they are realities and their possible implication for Nigeria, is more prescient and troubling. Our leaders have been mostly ambivalent. Unfortunately, some still don't see religion-in-politics as a problem so long as it serves their petty personal or sectional interests. Those who are genuinely concerned about this problem have spoken out. I suspect many more would like to, but fear about how their reactions might be publicly perceived and interpreted. I believe the greater danger for Nigeria lies in not speaking up and challenging the erosion of our secularity, especially by those elected to protect it.

CONCLUDING REMARKS AND RECOMMENDATION

Any nation where people lack religion is bound to lack conscience, compassion and progress. We need and must support unreservedly the free practice of religion by Nigerian Christians, Muslims and Traditional animists. No religion in Nigeria should be deemed superior or subordinate to the other, and none should be state sanctioned or enforced. Finally, we must be willing to overcome the temptation to mix religion and politics or make religion a tool of our national partisan politics because of the intricacies involved.

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