



Politics and religion in Nigeria: The relationship

Okpala Mathias Onyinye¹, Onodugo Ifeanyi Chris²

Professor, Department of Religion, Charisma University, Turks and Caicos Islands

Professor, Department of Business Education, Enugu State College of Education Technical, Enugu, Nigeria

Abstract

Because there is always a point of convergence, politics and religion have a close relationship. The relationship is complicated in part because of the complexities brought on by the politicization of religion. With particular attention to Nigeria, Islam and Christianity are the two most prevalent religions in the country today. Islam and Christianity are not acknowledged in this work to minimize the role of traditional animism; it is done on purpose because of the influence both have on Nigerian politics and administration. The influence makes stability more challenging and significantly increases regional and ethnic inequalities. This essay, which examines the relationship between the two, how they relate to power, and the issues that have resulted, was prompted by the realization of the issue caused by the politicization of religion.

Keywords: politics and religion, politicization of religion, Islam and Christianity

Introduction

Aristotle, the ancient philosopher and intellectual giant, says that man is a political animal (Mukherjee, & Ramaswamy 2019: 105) ^[14]. This has to do with the idea that man is continually trying to influence, intimidate, or use threat against others, which means that he is either directly or indirectly involved in politics. That is to say, man is political, and whether or not he likes it, observes the facts, is indifferent to them, or is active or not, he is inevitably entangled in power plays (Akinbade, 2014: 148) ^[2]. In his own contribution, Jawondo (2015: 180) ^[9] compares the political and religious aspects of man to those of an animal. Perhaps the only other animal having a religion is man. If man is a religious entity as well, this suggests that religion is a universal activity that is done in all human communities, comes in a wide variety of forms, and is taken very seriously by those who practice it (McGee, 2015:360) ^[13]. Although this contribution tackles the fundamental issue of whether or not everyone is religious, that is not the main focus of the paper.

The paper is organized into seven sections in order to accomplish these goals. The introduction is covered in the first half, while the notions of politics and religion are covered in the second. The third and fourth portions are devoted to talking about how religion has been politicized both before and after independence as well as how it plays a role in politics. Section five deals with the Nigerian state, politics, and secular discourse, while Section six concentrates on some realities arising from the Nigerian experience. The recommendation and closing remarks are in the seventh section.

Religion and politics theory

Because religion combines the secular and the supernatural, religious scholars like Imo (2016: 1-5) ^[8] cannot agree on a single definition of the term "religion." A decent definition must therefore take both into account. Some people approach the notion of religion with bias, while others lack the necessary experience since they do not practice a particular faith.

Imo emphasizes that a good definition should be inclusive and specific. He makes the argument that religion is the diverse, symbolic manifestation of—and the proper reaction to—that which people consciously affirm to be of limitless importance for them.

According to McGee (2015:362-365) ^[13], the primary object of worship is frequently used to identify across religious communities of people. Belief patterns, ritual behaviors, an ethical code, and a social structure develop around this sacred thing, person, or idea. He characterizes religion as "a collection of practices centered on the sacred—that non-empirical source of strength, transcendence, mystery, and wonder."

The fundamental components of religion include belief systems that account for the sacred reality that individuals encounter through revelation, introspection, or divine illumination; ritual practices that are prescribed for adherents as appropriate human responses in relation to the ultimate source of being or value; ethical standards, which are actions that are directed toward other people; and cultic organizations.

Politics are "a phenomena with its genesis in the class of individual preferences, its process in public demands for accommodation of opposing interests, and its output in the shape of binding public policies," according to Abearian & Masannat (2017:9) ^[1].

In a similar line, David Easton famously stated that politics is the process of "authoritative distribution of values in any social organization" (Cited in Olaniyi, 2011:2) ^[15]. All of the societally desired ideals, including riches, respect, status, position, security, and power, are included here as values.

Both religion and politics seem to have a clear set of goals when comparing the various scholarly viewpoints on these issues. These specific goals are aimed at those who may be "adherents" or "citizens," depending on the situation. Are their bounds contiguous at this point? Or do their declared goals coincide at a certain point, making both of their intrusions eventually necessary? Hank Eso views religion as a political instrument, and in the real world, politics and religion are unusual bedfellows. Nothing is more dividing

than religion, especially when it is utilized as a political instrument, in his words: "Just as soccer is singularly the only and most unifying factor in Nigeria." John Eso (2013) ^[16].

It should be highlighted that ethnic sentiments are used in starkly split nations, such as Nigeria, where Islam and Christianity are in conflict, and that this inevitably endangers the stability of the system.

History provides numerous examples of how religion and politics have frequently been very closely linked, despite efforts to keep them apart. A religion may occasionally endorsing or supporting a certain leader or ideology. One such is the idea of the Divine Right of Kings, which holds that the authority of the monarch comes straight from God and must therefore be respected. Niccolo Machiavelli also argued for the use of church authority by rulers to establish and uphold their suzerainty, reasoning that doing so would keep society stable. In a similar vein, religion has frequently been employed to establish or uphold social class hierarchies.

On the other hand, various social classes have occasionally overwhelmingly embraced various religions. On the other hand, several governments have wholly or partially supported a particular religion, sometimes to the point where citizens are severely discouraged from practicing any other. One of the most well-known instances of this in the West is the Church of England, which continues to be the recognized Christian denomination in England with the Monarch acting as its supreme leader. Other instances include the official status of Islam in numerous nations around the world and the Roman Catholic Church in a number of European and Latin American nations. This also applies to current initiatives to impose Sharia law outside of the Islamic governments that already exist in various parts of the world. (2019; Reeves and Taylor) ^[17]

The part religion plays in politics

The discussion of how religion has a role in politics is the focus of this section. Indeed, religion and religious organizations play a number of democratic roles, although it is debatable to what extent these roles have been played.

Because religion is a complicated phenomena, it serves a wide range of social purposes. Some religious activities are latent, or not immediately apparent, while others are visible, or immediately detectable. It should be understood that an activity is considered functional if it improves the integrative performance of an organization. Through ministerial and lay practice, roles like encouragement of toleration, peaceful coexistence, and loves are encouraged.

One of the democratic uses of religion, according to Schaefer & Lamn (2017:273-275) ^[19], is the blending of human communities made up of people and social groupings with various interests and goals. They believe that religious ties transcend these individualized and dividing forces. The potential of religion to validate the current social order is another crucial role noted by the two authors.

I heavily cite Rotimi, Mala, and Aiyegboyin's (2019:33-41) essay when I say that religion serves six interrelated functions: it restrains or critiques government behavior, promotes political participation, upholds democratic norms and values, articulates and aggregates distinct societal interests, creates cross-cutting identities, and offers opportunities for the development of leadership skills.

Regarding the first function of restraint and containment of government behavior, religious associations in Nigeria have consistently and vehemently denounced bad government policies or actions that interfere with the welfare of the citizenry in general or the interests of the religious community in particular. Religious organizations are now criticizing the government's handling of the religious unrest that has rocked several Northern states as well as the dubious and convoluted character of the military's democratization project. Nigeria's religious organizations have contributed significantly to the stimulation of political engagement and civic identity by inspiring and mobilizing their followers toward active engagement in, and identification with, public events and politics. This is accomplished by encouraging their members to "pray and fast" for peace, stability, justice, and the advancement of the country in order to increase their feeling of civic identification and engagement (Ayorinde, 2019) ^[3].

Third, religion encourages democratic standards and principles. To achieve this, democratic norms and principles like tolerance, moderation, willingness to reach a compromise, and respect for the truth, justice, and freedom are promoted and propagated. Religious leaders in Nigeria have at various times shown their dedication to democracy by asking people to embrace democratic institutions without wavering (Tukur, 2019) ^[21]. More so, religion offers channels for the representation of interests. Organizations with a religious focus express, group, and represent various societal concerns. Only one of many occasions in which the Christian community has represented its interests since 2016 was the representation and mobilization against Nigeria's membership in the OIC.

Religion also sparks attention across disciplines. Cross-cutting interests imply that competing affiliations could act to secure social peace and democratic stability and prevent destructive or protracted social conflict by leading people and groups to divide their emotions along a single explosive line of affiliation. This would prevent cross-cutting interests from being the sole source of cross-cutting interests. Finally, religious organizations offer a suitable setting for the development of leadership qualities, just like many other organized types of associational activity or social interaction. By speaking up bravely and repeatedly against the excessive answers to the challenges facing the country, they demonstrate an exceptional aptitude to manage people and resources in their particular organizations. Religious leaders have improved their credibility and reputation as strong, capable national leaders as a result.

However, it would be false to claim that religious institutions have continuously or uniformly backed democratic principles and practices in Nigeria. Instead, they have occasionally displayed unsettling anti-democratic tendencies that have manifested themselves in religious intolerance and violence, as well as in the corruption and subversion of religious figures. From the aforementioned, it can be concluded that some religious practices are dysfunctional because the results contradict the groups' claimed objectives. Generally speaking, religion is either effective or dysfunctional, depending on how much it advances society objectives.

Religion's politicization before and after independence

The following is mentioned by Mazrui in his submission:

The two creeds become contentious rather than unifying, destabilizing rather than legitimizing, especially those African nations where Islam and Christianity are in direct conflict and both are politicized. Where religion exacerbates racial disparities and geographical variance, governments deteriorate rather than improve. Overall, the two Semitic religions in Nigeria—Islam and Christianity—reinforce regional and racial divisions and make stability more challenging. 198 (Mazrui, 2016)^[12].

In 1914, the then-Southern and Northern protectorates of the British Empire imperialist power were combined to form what is now known as Nigeria. Before the British invasion, Islam had established a stronghold from the former Sokoto Caliphate, the Borno empire, to the Yoruba territory, and all the way down to Lagos on the Atlantic coast. On the other hand, colonialists, who were imperialist agents, brought Christianity with them. Independent missionaries invaded Southern Nigeria and entered through Northern minority, bringing about the slow destruction of traditional African religion. As Nigerians adopted them, Christianity and Islam overtook each other. Before this time, the then-dominant African traditional faiths dominated all political activity. Chief priests were well-known chiefs with tremendous influence. This suggests that religion has always influenced politics from the beginning. Following the end of colonialism, Christianity expanded quickly and was heavily supported by the government.

The election of Chief Obafemi Awolowo, Dr. Nnamdi Azikwe, and Sir Ahmadu Bello as premiers of the Western, Eastern, and Northern regions respectively upheld the status quo in Nigerian politics' use of religion. While Islam was in charge of the North, Christianity was still more powerful there. The North, where the majority of people came from royal families and where politics were completely under their control and heavily influenced by Islam, was where this problem of the politicization of religion was most obvious. The rising liberal democracy endangered the hegemonic position of the Northern ruling class since they lacked the necessary tools, which was essentially political bankruptcy. Therefore, in order to safeguard and defend their interests, they turned to the defense of Islam. In the second republic, this took on a new twist as political intrigue turned into the defense of "Northern interests," which were perceived as a ruse to earn the support of both Muslim and non-Muslim minority in the area. The "Northern interest" drew together the Northern political actors who had previously been at odds over politics. This political decision-making is referred to as "conscriptio politics" by Kukah (2013:5)^[10].

Without a doubt, the situation in Nigeria now is not different from what it was in the past. More Nigerians have shown a strong bond or affiliation with their religious organization than with the governmental entity. This may explain why Nigerians are regarded as the world's most pious people. The reality is that this propensity fosters differences and ethnic diversity rather than stabilizing the state. The Nigerian state has been undermined by the ferocious gyration of Nigerians over religious issues, which will not be repeated when it comes to national interest. According to a study of the ethnoreligious crises in Nigeria, this zeal, fervor, emotional and emotive emotions, moral certainty, and religion are to blame for the bloodshed of innocent

Nigerians and the destruction of their property. (Ojo, 2013:368-378)^[16]. Unfortunately, unjustified property and life devastation has always taken place in Northern Nigeria.

The Nigerian state, politics and the secular debate

The political climate of the society in which they live can occasionally have a specific impact on religious institutions and believers. For instance, governments may enact legislation that affects or poses a danger to the manner in which a specific faith's traditions may offend its adherents. In Nigeria, this is the situation. There have been spirited discussions about the constitution's acceptance of state secularism. Kukah has covered the debate's topic in detail. He said this:

"One of the most heated and contentious debates still takes place on the state of religion in Nigeria. The discussion has frequently been tainted by nationalism, zealotry, hubris, and prejudice. There has always been more heat than light in the end. (Kukah, 2019:102)^[11].

Another group includes mostly Marxist-leaning secularists. These individuals regard the entire argument as a battle for control of the Nigerian state that cuts over religious and ethnic lines, as well as a brazen distortion of the Nigerian state's secular position. Their arguments are based on the idea that, other from serving their own interests, this self-serving elite has no real affection for the Nigerian state. They don't have anywhere else to call home, nor do the majority of poor Nigerians.

Nigeria has a lot of religious strife, and the government has always been held accountable. Muslims and Christians contend that they are both guilty of the sins of omission and commission committed by the government. Regardless of this charge, the only tool we have is the constitution and what it says regarding religion. The constitutional clause on state secularism serves as the foundation for the neutrality assertions made by both the government and the populace. However, a secular state is required to correct the imbalance brought about by what is thought to be political manipulation. Therefore, manipulation is the process of fundamentally managing the behavior of an individual or group without that individual or group being aware of the objectives, strategies, or purpose of that control, or even that a kind of control is even being used against them. This campaign of systematic religious feeling manipulation is being carried out for the nefarious and reactionary intent of deflecting attention (Usman, 2014:12-13)^[23].

In my honest opinion, the political class cannot absolve itself of responsibility for Nigeria's current situation. A lot of productive work is dedicated to fostering religious sentiment rather than politicians perceiving themselves as being split merely by opposing ideological presentations of their party manifestos. The new political elites are occupied mobilizing their religious constituencies for a fight against one another rather than mobilizing Nigerians to their cause as politicians. Muslims contend that if they do not defend their rights, non-Muslims would continue to oppress them, while non-Muslims contend that the discussion is primarily about the legal justification and defense of Nigerians' freedom to live under a secular, democratic state rather than Islam as a religion. Muslims, on the other hand, believe that their constituencies will back them in stopping the threats that non-Muslims bring to Islam. Non-Muslims contend that they must be elected in order to protect Christian lands from Islamic domination. The argument over Nigeria's (OIC) in

2016 generated a lot of heat, animosity, and hatred, which subsequently spilled over and caused a series of violent religious eruptions of calamitous proportions in various states in the North.

Due to the fervor that religion inspires, the country has become increasingly divided, with Christians and Muslims being pitted against one another on its soil. Therefore, the political elite's involvement makes the situation much more serious (Shagaya, 2013)^[20].

Information derived from the Nigerian experience

In light of the research on the complexities of Nigerian politics, it is vital to draw attention to a few certain, factual facts that are relevant to the problem of religion in politics. They merit thought in the interest of our country and the general public.

Fact 1: Religious fanatics have a long history. Both Muslims and Christians have their share of jihadists. In relatively contemporary nation states where the religions co-exist and are practiced, remnants of both and recidivists can be found. Nigeria is therefore not an exception.

Fact 2: Religion plays a role in daily life in every country, including Nigeria. Religion has always been and remains sacred when it is truly practiced in its purest form and spirit, regardless of the faith or denomination. It is essential for effective leadership, community development, social justice, law and order, making peace, bringing people together, forgiving them, and healing personal, familial, and societal traumas.

Fact 3: The separation of religion and politics, as well as the freedom to practice one's faith without fear of retribution or punishment, are publicly proclaimed in both the past and present constitutions of Nigeria. The 2019 Nigerian Constitution (section 1) states that the constitution is paramount and that all authorities and individuals within the federation are bound by its provisions. The government of the federation or of any state shall not adopt any religion as the state religion, states Section 10 of the constitution categorically. The federal republic of Nigeria "must not be ruled, nor shall any individual or group of persons take control of the government of Nigeria or any part thereof except in accordance with the terms of this constitution," according to subsection 2 of the constitution. All in all, the constitution forbids any attempt to impose a religion on the country by adoption of a state religion. Therefore, the secular debate is pointless.

Fact 4: Our political leaders, on both sides of the political spectrum-Muslims and Christians-have referred to God in public and have actively sought to use religion as a free tool for shaping public opinion, national policymaking, and economic development.

Fact number five is that politics now use religion in Nigeria. Evidently, we are unable to uphold the essential tenants of a secular state. Our issues have been made worse by the sanction and support given to Sharia legislation by some state governments.

When taking into account these undeniable facts, it becomes more alarming and prescient to realize that they are realities and that they may have implications for Nigeria. Most of our leaders have exhibited ambivalence. Sadly, some people

continue to not see religion's influence on politics to be a concern as long as it advances their narrow personal or sectarian interests. People who are genuinely worried about this issue have come forward. I believe that many more would like to but are concerned about how their activities would be seen and understood by the general public. The larger risk for Nigeria, in my opinion, lies in our silence while our secularity is eroded, especially by those who are supposed to be defending it.

Recommendations and conclusions

Any society devoid of religion is inevitably devoid of conscience, compassion, and advancement.

We must unconditionally support Nigerian Christians' right to freedom of religion.

Traditional animists and Muslims. In Nigeria, no religion should be seen as superior or none should be sanctioned or enforced by the state, each being subject to the others. Lastly, we need to be willing to resist the temptation to use religion as a political instrument or to muddle the two national partisan politics due of the complexity present.

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