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## **RELIGION AND POLITICS IN A PLURALISTIC SOCIETY: THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE**

### ***Introduction***

The need for political stability in Nigeria cannot be overemphasized. Indeed, all segments of the Nigerian society are interested in the political future of the nation. However, this interest is approached from various dimensions. A major interest in the Nigerian polity is the relationship between religion and politics. The Nigerian society is religiously pluralized and this significantly influences political decisions and policies of the nation. On the other hand, there are people who hold the strong opinion that this relationship should not be stressed and that religion and politics should be allowed to operate separately without one interfering with the other. Those who hold this view argued essentially from the position that religion mixed politics is mostly like to imbibe various vices associated with politics. Also that politics may not be properly and dispassionately played if mixed with religion. The objective of this paper is to re-examine the age-old controversy on the relationship that should obtain between religion and politics in particular. It seeks to bring into focus, the Nigerian situation. This has to do with how religious plurality has affected positively or negatively the Nigerian polity; particularly the often vexed questions, politicization of religion in Nigeria. The paper will therefore attempt to suggest workable formula for a complementary relationship between religion and politics for a stable, united and progressively Nigeria.

### **1. *Definition of Terms***

For a better appreciation of the objectives of this paper, it is perhaps good for us to attempt definitions of some key terms. These terms includes religion, politics and pluralism.

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### **1.1 What is Religion?**

The task of giving a definition to religion has been very herculean. However, for operational reasons, it is imperative that we attempt a definition here. For the purpose of this paper, we shall adopt Emile Durkheim's definition of religion, which is sociologically based. He defines it as:

A unified system of beliefs and practices which unite into one moral community called a church all those who adhere to them (Aderibigbe and Aiyegboyin, 1997:7).

This definition gives a sociological interpretation to religion and its practice. It is from this premise that Durkheim draws his popular dictum of relationship between the sacred and the profane. To him, even though, there should be communication between the sacred and the profane, in the psyche of man, the difference between them is clear. But as Aderibigbe points out, the definition has the potential of admitting into the religious phenomenon all matters that constitute an obsession to a society... to adorn the garb of religiosity<sup>2</sup>. Further, the definition is a clear reference to organized religion to the exclusion of the primal or oriental religious ideologies. It also suggests a religious origin to socio-political associations with their set of rules and regulations. However, it tends to indicate that religion cannot relate with other institutions in the society since it is a mere "*moral community*" which might restrict its adherents to its tenets thereby limit their socio-political interaction.

### **1.2 What is Politics?**

Politics is about the acquisition of power and the use of such power. The *Oxford Dictionary of Words* defines politics as "matters concerned with acquiring or exercising power, within a group or an organisation". Nkem Onyekpe defines the term politics as:

The struggle for power which itself is the authority to determine or formulate and execute decisions and policies, which must be accepted by the society... it is the struggle for power of governance, especially executive authority (Onyekpe 1998:16).

Onyekpe however gives a caveat to the first part of his definition. According to him, the struggle for or the acquisition of power and the reaction of the society to it, depend greatly on the level of political development of the country. In an undemocratic society, it does not really matter whether the decisions and policies are accepted by the society. Thus the value of political power or politics leaves little or no room for the people to have input, except where democracy has already been entrenched. In a plutocratic system of government, like we have in Nigeria in recent past, political actions entrenched in, policies and social values attached to them, are function

of the value system and the political orientation of the ruling stratum. Presently, the Nigeria society is in the process of demilitarization and it is not surprising that elements of plutocracy is still visible.

From the above, we observe that politics is all about struggle for power as it relates to use and control of such power in governance. Thus politics involve stage governance and how the political leaders acquire their mandate. It should be stated however, that we are here interested in the relationship between religion and politics in a pluralistic society, like Nigeria. Even though we might go into state governance in an attempt to articulate the objectives of this paper, our discussion will be limited to the relationship between religion and politics.

### **1.3 What is Pluralism?**

Pluralism suggests divergent views. The *Oxford Dictionary* defines it as: the existence in one society of a number of groups that belong to different race or have different political or religious beliefs... the principle that these different groups can live together in peace in one society.

This definition, suggests that pluralism points to the existence of many groups of people, whether tribal, ethnic, political or religious. Therefore, a religious pluralistic society will refer to an environment where there are many religious beliefs, concepts or ideologies. This perhaps is comparable to a society with multiplicity of religious thoughts and ideologies. This sets the tone of the main preoccupation of this work, which is the appraisal of relationship between religion and politics in an environment that is pluralistic. That is, if we agree that there is a relationship between religion and politics, then what kind of relationship should exist in a heterogeneous society like Nigeria, or should we say in view of these divergent religious views, in Nigeria, there should not be any interaction between religion and politics?

## **2. Religion and Politics: What is Relationship?**

S.O. Abogunrin, in his paper titled "Towards a Unifying Political Ideology and Peaceful Coexistence in Nigeria: A Christian View"<sup>4</sup>, opines that religion and politics are two inseparable institutions in the human social psyche and structure. He equally asserts that earthly governments are mere agents of God's theocratic governance of the physical and the spiritual world (Abogunrin, 1984:118). R.D. Abubakre, writing from an Islamic perspective, suggests that Islam is a way of life, which dictates, the political ideology and practice in any Islamic society. He, however, points out that the ideals of Islam is a good guide to political conducts, but the practices of such ideals are usually influenced by the socio-cultural institutions in the society, including politics (Abubakre 1984:129).

On the contrary, arguments abound that there should not be a direct relationship between politics and religion especially, since, according to proponents of this positions, both phenomena belong to different realms of existence – sacred and profane. Those in this group are mostly Christians. In the opinion of J.K Balogun Islam does not discriminate between religious and secular matters. On the contrary, Christians always base their argument on the statement of Jesus Christ that “Give unto Caesar what is Caesar and unto God the things that are God’s” (Matt. 22:17-22). This phrase has often been used to exclude clergymen, who want to venture into politics. Matthew Hassan Kukah however, disagrees with this school of thought, with an exegesis on this passage. He writes:

What Jesus really meant was not that religion and politics do not mix, nor did He mean that Christians should not participate in politics... the coin was representation of the power of Caesar and that was why the coin had Caesar’s sign... In the case of God, His authority is over and above the realm of Caesar’s empire. In that sense both Caesar and his coin are under the aegis of God and the issue of separation is an aberration (Kukah 1998:16)

It should be noted that the argument of these opposing schools are hinged on their belief, perhaps based on experience, that politics often corrupt religion. Also that political leaders use religion as a platform to deceive the people. The fact should be stated that since the relationship between the sacred and the profane is symbiotic, there is no reason why religion should not influence political ideologies and vice-versa. Where this interaction is possible and allowed, the nature of the society and the strata therein have a lot to do in dictating the mode of such a relationship.

Although not a universal condition, in a religiously homogenous society, religion and politics could interact absolutely and peace and economic posterity will always be the fruit of such relation. This perhaps goes to support the view of the Aristotelian school that religious homogeneity is a condition for political stability. In a heterogeneous as well as pluralistic society, divergent opinions in relation to religious beliefs and ideologies, might not allow for a cordial relationship between religion and politics. This may be the reason why political parties, in heterogeneous societies are not founded on religious grounds.

Consequently, politics and state governance are secularized and this will have its attendant’s effect on state policies. The struggle for supremacy among religions in the society will not allow for a compromise especially in state policies as it affects affiliations to socioeconomic institutions in the globe. A case in point in Nigeria is Christian’s rejection of the state’s membership of an Organisation of Islamic Conference (O.I.C) in spite of economic gains that could be derived from this association. This position might not be the same in western societies. According to Leicester Webb, these soci-

eties are united by certain political values, closely associated with Christian doctrines and ethics as it relates to justice, morality, freedom, equity, etc (Alfold 1981:164).

However, B. Alford suggests that there is a possibility of effective interaction between religion and politics in a pluralized society. This relationship will depend largely on some essential conditions in the society. These include secularization of politics, weakness in religious beliefs (where adherents of different faiths are not fanatical or are not particularistic) and separation of religion from other areas of life. In the same vein, in homogenous societies, it is possible to have pluralized religious ideologies, but where there is a consensus on teachings and practices of such religions, there is bound to be unity of political purpose (Alfold 1981:164). In countries, where political policies are formulated on religious doctrines, they perhaps must have achieved religious and political freedom at the same time. This could be the basis for such relationship.

So far, we have observed that in spite of the opinion of the antagonist of interaction between religion and politics, there is the possibility of effective relationship between these two phenomena, no matter the nature of the society. In other words, religion and politics could relate in a pluralistic, homogenous as well as heterogeneous societies. However, for such relationship to be effective (positive) the society and its citizenry have a lot to contribute to its success, especially based on the practice of their religious beliefs and ideals.

### **3. *The Relationship Between Religion and Politics in Nigeria***

In Nigeria the relationship between religion and politics has been given various interpretations. In fact, D.F Asaju suggests a politicization of religion in the body polity of the state. He relied heavily on the opinion of Theophilus Danjuma, which suggests that “religious fanaticism and favouritism have also been politically employed to polarize the people and sustain unhealthy tension of Nigeria” (Asaju 1990:172). This situation points directly to the fact that religion has negatively affected politics. However, it should be noted that politics has equally affected religious thoughts, practices and beliefs in the country. It is not impossible these days to see the clergy and the laity engage in politics even within the church<sup>5</sup>. In some case, politics has been reported to have influenced the appointment of key officers in the Anglican church in Nigeria. In spite of these negative trend, religion and politics interact effectively in the country. Worthy of note, however, is the fact that the state itself is “secularized” and its policies are supposed to be so formulated. This trend could be traced to Nigeria’s colonial master’s protestant political culture, wherein separation between the church and the state is encouraged. Further, the agitation of Nigerian nationalists for political independence was secularized. This does not suggest the secularization of the whole social institutions and virtues.

In fact, in some cases the conclusion of Karl Marx that “religion is the opium of the masses holds true. It has been used as a tool of political jogging and manipulation of the oppressed. This was the case in the reoccurring Maitatsine riot in Kano State and the recent religious clash in Sagamu between the traditional worshippers and the Hausa Muslims in the area. Therefore, the opinion of Yusuf Bala Usman is apposite in this regard. He opines that the elite have used religion as a tool of exploitation to achieve selfish socio-economic ends. However, in spite of the negative uses to which politics and religion have been subjected to in Nigeria. It is possible for these two phenomena to interact positively to the benefit of the state and her citizens.

The three dominant religions in Nigeria are traditional religion, Islam and Christianity. All these religious ideologies allow for interaction between religion and politics. Traditional religion of the people is a systematic reflection of their socio-cultural orientation, history and legacies on elemental forces, which in turn produces a belief in supreme cosmic power who created heaven and earth. To this power belong, all things in their social psyche. Thus traditional politics of the people has a strong linkage to the belief in theocracy. To Yorubas, *Oba* (king), the political leader of the people, is only holding office in trust for *Olodumare* (The Supreme Being). Moreso, before an *Oba* is selected or appointed, as the case may be, the Ifa oracle must be adequately consulted for spiritual approval. Therefore, politics and religion in traditional society are intertwined and have direct influence on each other. This is still the situation even at the close of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Islam as a way of life dictates and governs the totality of life of Muslims from cradle to grave. Consequently, his political interest, economic considerations, social values and interaction are often given Islamic interpretations based on the Holy Quran, prophetic practices and other sources of law recognized in Islam. These virtues are expected to permeate the sociopolitical structure of any Islamic state. In fact, Prophet Muhammed was the spiritual as well as the political leader of his people during his lifetime. After his death, the caliphs emerged and still held on to the same principles. Regardless of the nature of the society, Islam encourages Muslims to hold on to its principles by allowing the Holy Quran and the Sunnah to be his/her guide. We can conclude here that Islam allows for a spiritual relationship between religion and politics (Akintola 1997:138-155).

Christians in Nigeria would rather not get involved in politics but the fact remains that Jesus Christ did not discourage political participation for the faithfuls. In Judaism, which provided background to Christianity, the God of Israel, Yahweh is the God of war (Josh. 6:20ff), economy (Ex. 16) and God of obedience and moral virtues (Num. 21:4-8). Yahweh is all in all in Judaic traditional thought, religion and politics. In the Apostolic age, the church witnessed effectively interplay between religion and politics. And where such interaction tends towards negative ends, the Apostles often adopted

Christian principles to solve the problem as the church spiritual motivators. Perhaps, the most significant interaction between religion and politics in church history was witnessed during the Constantine and the post Constantine era where the emperor often used machinery of the state to promote Christianity; thus the religion became politicized and it was politics that marred the progress of the church during this period. Jesus' teachings and Pauline theology encourage political process and respect for those in political offices, since they are representatives of God (Matt. 22:17-20).

From the above, we observed that religions in Nigeria, are not particularly against the relationship between religion and politics. Therefore, religious pluralism in the country may not retard sociopolitical development and economic growth. The divergent religious beliefs could be a pivot for effective policies provided adherents of these religions lives according to the ethics and disciplines of these groups.

It is not surprising that the nation did not adopt any religion as state religion, but allow freedom of religious affiliation in the face of religious pluralism. The adoption of one religion at the expense of the others could lead to resentment, which in turn could lead to civil unrest that could culminate into a religious war. The direct effect of this situation is the secularization of political policies, parties and values. Although, some of these policies have religious undertones, they are not pronounced. For example, every year, the federal government declares minimum of eleven days as religious holidays. Political parties, while jostling for power, often picked their governorship and presidential candidates vis-à-vis their running mates, for elections, with religious undertone. Where a Christian is the candidate, the running mate will be a Muslim and vice-versa. We can safely conclude that the distinction often proclaimed between religion and politics in a mirage as the two institutions in Nigeria seems inseparable. These intertwined factors have affected political, sociocultural as well as economic policies of the state. The same could be said of implementation of such policies.

However, successive governments in the country have only based their policies on the doctrines, precepts and ethics of Islam and Christianity, to the detriment of traditional religion. This situation is a clear pointer to the fact that traditional religion is not popular among the citizens of this country. In spite of the attempts by government in Nigeria to give religious meaning and interpretation to politics and policies, the country has witnessed political instability, corruption, economic downturn, moral laxity which have plunged her into economic doldrums. This is fundamental because the rulers have often neglected the ethics of their religions while in office, thereby adopting a secular ethics, which has no respect of the divine and supernatural forces. If the question is asked that could Nigeria's search for political stability, economic posterity, increase in moral values, and a corrupt free society, be achieved through religion? Or could religion in Nigeria influence politics? That politics should influence religious beliefs and practices. The answer, to us, could be in the affirmative. This is

more because inspite of the fear expressed by the antagonists of the relationship between religion and politics, the two institutions could relate effectively; even with her pluralistic religious nature. If politicians, in the quest for political power and the use of such power, are guided by ethics and doctrines of their religions, then the fear of God and service to humanity will be uppermost in their hearts. Selfishness will give room to good neighbourliness and our political structure, policies, and values could be the better for it. In fact, the recent fraud and perjury committed by the former speaker of the House of Representative could not suffice if he had allowed Islamic principles to be the pivot for his zeal to serve the nation (Alhaji Salisu Buhari... p. 217).

It is not impossible that politics could hinder the practice of religious beliefs. But if it is true that man is a political animal, politics cannot be part and parcel of religious process, especially as it concerns its administration. It is possible for political reasons that a man could be appointed a Bishop or Imam, or politicking could permeate the election of religious leaders. It should be understood that the process where an individual lobbies or seeks appointment in religious associations is politics or the process within it; then if it is normal for such a lobby to take place, then politics could have a role to play in religious administration. This is the case in African Church Incorporation, during the bishop and laity elections in Nigeria.

On the whole, we make bold, to say that religion and politics need to interact in Nigeria to promote good governance, the effect of this will be political stability, steady economic development, a corruption free society and increase in moral values. To achieve these lofty objectives, the three arms of government – the Executive, the Legislature, and the Judiciary – seek to play their traditional roles as dictated by the Constitution guided by the principles and ethics of their respective religions. This will lead to sincerity of purpose, and accountability in national polity. Further, a good understanding of religion and its purpose for man, here and in the hereafter, will be better appreciated if it is allowed to interact with politics.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The importance of religion and politics in the psyche of a Nigerian cannot be overemphasized. A thorough examination of these two phenomena have revealed that they are interrelated and are both necessary for man as a social being. However, in Nigeria, the role religion could play in politics and vice-versa is limited by the individual's orientation and the nature of the society. But in spite of these limitations, religion continues to influence political decisions of successive governments of this country. This suggests that politics and religion could relate effectively in Nigeria, but the benefits that could be derived from such relationship depend solely on the sincerity of those who are engaged in the practice of these phenomena. However, in Nigeria, this inter-



action has often generated negative impacts, but politicians and adherents of religious faiths need to recognize the right of individual to freedom of religion. Nobody should be forced to practice a religion that is not his choice. Further, no religion should be adopted as state religion. Politicians, in their quest to acquire power, should refrain from using religion as a tool of oppression, disunity and war. Religious leaders should make moves to get involved in politics as they have potential that could make them leaders who have the fear of God and service to humanity as their motto. Even more, political leaders should seek to secularize their policies and show neutrality at all times in religious affairs. Religious particularism should be shelved. This is possible since Christianity and Islam have a lot of similarities than dissimilarities. If all these are adhered to and taken into consideration then religion and politics in Nigeria could interact positively inspite of the pluralistic nature of the country.

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**Abstract**

**Danoye Oguntola-Laguda**

**RELIGION AND POLITICS IN A PLURALISTIC SOCIETY: THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE**

The interaction between religion and politics has been a subject of debate among scholars of religion, political scientists and sociologists. The arguments have generally been that of total or partial dis-interaction between the two phenomena. To the protagonists, religion should not be corrupted with the tricks, intrigues and challenges of politics. On the other side of the divide, the opinion is that the two institutions should relate to each other for the benefits of humanity. Our observation has shown that the nature of the society is a determinant factor if the relationship should ever be allowed to exist. It has been argued that in homogenous societies, politics and religion can relate to each other as suggested by the protagonists. However, in pluralistic societies like Nigeria, secularism has been suggested as an alternative. In Nigeria, our case study, it is noted that religions have always played significant roles in the political process, policy formulations and their implementation.

**Key words:** Secularism, Pluralism, Policy, Formulation, Humanity, Interaction.

## **Резиме**

**Даноје Огунтола-Лагуда**

### **РЕЛИГИЈА И ПОЛИТИКА У ПЛУРАЛИСТИЧКИМ ДРУШТВИМА: ИСКУСТВО НИГЕРИЈЕ**

Однос и интеракција између религије и политике представљају предмет дебате која се води између научника који се баве проучавањем религије, политиколога и социолога. Спор се води око тога да ли је непостојање интеракције између ова два друштвена феномена потпуно или делимично. За њене протагонисте, религија не сме да буде искварена триковима, интригама и изазовима политике. На другој страни ове поделе, имамо мишљење да ове две институције, због добробити човечанства, не треба да буду у било каквом односу. Наша разматрања показују да је природа друштва одлучујући фактор у овом односу, ако икада и треба да буде дозвољено да тај однос уопште постоји. Раније се тврдило да религија и политика у хетерогеним и хомогеним друштвима могу имати међусобне односе на поменути начин. Међутим, у плуралистичким друштвима као што је нигеријско, сматра се да секуларизам представља алтернативу за те односе и интеракције. Наша студија показује да је у Нигерији религија увек имала значајну улогу у политичким процесима, као и у формулисању и спровођењу политике.

У овој студији, највећа пажња је посвећена разматрању интеракције између религије и политике у плуралистичким земљама као што је Нигерија. Имали смо, такође, и намеру да се укључимо у дебату о питању да ли је поменута интеракција између религије и политике уопште пожељна. Размотрићемо и утицај религије на формулисање и спровођење политике у Нигерији. Усредсредимо се, при томе, на религијске контроверзе у вези са новим погребним прописима у једном федералној држави, Југозападној Нигерији.

**Кључне речи:** секуларизам, плурализам, формулисање политике, људско друштво, интеракција.