

RELIGIONS IN NIGERIA

NGBEA TERWASE GABRIEL, PhD

Department of Christian Religious Studies

Federal University of Lafia

gabbypush@gmail.com

Abstract

Discussions on religion in Nigeria always begin with references to the history of Christian-Muslim relations. In recent decades, religion has become an important factor, both in public debate and as a means of political mobilization. As a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country, Nigeria is a pluralistic society with African Traditional Religion, Christianity and Islam as its three main religions. She is among the most religious countries in the world. Officially, Nigeria is a secular state with freedom of religion guaranteed in the 1999 Constitution. Nigeria seeks to maintain some forms of neutrality on religious matters, but religion continues to cast an ominous shadow on the governance of the country. This paper examines the undue romance between the Nigerian state and Religion which has caused more harm than good. Among others, the paper recommends that there is urgent need for the Nigerian government to maintain a neutral posture with regard to all religions in Nigeria. The methodology adapted in this paper is historical and phenomenological, with data collected from secondary sources and analysed qualitatively.

Keywords: ATR, Christianity, Islam, Religion, The Nigerian State

Introduction

The most important factor that would engender the stability of any country is the type of government it operates. Nigeria consists of three predominant religions: Islam, Christianity and African Traditional Religions. In Nigeria, religious organizations are supposed to be completely separate from the political organization, whether the term secular is mentioned in the constitution or not. The Nigerian government is to support religion in general but not to give preference in her dealings with any particular religion. On the contrary, the Nigerian governments, both past and present, have at different fora selected Islam and Christianity as state religions and treated them exceptionally. Religion continues to cast an ominous shadow on the governance of the country. In Nigeria, religion has become a tool for politics. The aim of this paper is to discuss the level of involvement of the Nigerian state in religious affairs that has made the country to

lose neutrality on the issue of religion by patronizing Islam and Christianity at the expense of other faiths.

Religion and the Nigerian State

What we have today as modern Nigeria began effectively on 1st January, 1914 when the northern and southern protectorates were amalgamated under the British colonial administration¹. A unitary system of government was evolved and presided over by a Governor-General, Frederick Lugard. Nigeria was later divided by Lugard into four administrative areas for the purpose of administrative convenience; namely, the Colony of Lagos, the Northern, Western and Eastern provinces; and these were granted self-government, while the Northern region was granted its functional powers in 1959.² On the 1st of October, 1960, Nigeria gained her independence from the British. Before and after independence, according to Bauna, the notion of Nigeria as a nation remained in question among political analysts and ethnologists as a result of its geographical and ethnic composition³. The post-independence history of Nigeria has been an attempt at trying to grapple with the problems of its lack of unity and how best to accommodate the competing socio-political, religious and ethno-cultural differences of the Nigerian people.

Late Obafemi Awolowo (1947) famously said that “Nigeria is not a nation. It is a mere geographical expression”⁴. Ahmadu Bello (1962), the late Sardauna of Sokoto, referred to the amalgamation of Nigeria as “The mistake of 1914”⁵. A more pessimistic view of Nigeria as a nation, according to Bauna (1991), is the one presented by Hugh (1953) who was the Governor of Nigeria from 1919-1925:

Assuming that the impossible were feasible... that this collection of self-contained and mutually independent native states separated from one another as many of them are by great distances, by differences of history and traditions, and by ethnological, racial, tribal, political, social and religious barriers, were indeed capable of being welded into a single homogeneous nation in a deadly blow would thereby be struck at the very root of national self-government in Nigeria,

¹Peter T. Bauna, *The Christian Association of Nigeria and the Challenge of the Ecumenical Imperative*. Rome: Domenici Pechenx; Dlakwa, H. 1997. “Ethnicity in Nigerian politics: Formation of Political Organizations and Parties” in Okafor, F. U. (Ed) *New Strategies for Curbing Ethnic and Religious Conflicts in Nigeria*. Enugu: Forth Dimension publishers.

²Ekpu, R. “Opium of the People.” In *Newswatch Magazine* of October 1985. Lagos: Newswatch communications Ltd.

³Peter T. Bauna, *The Christian Association of Nigeria and the Challenge of the Ecumenical Imperative*. Rome: Domenici Pechenx. Dlakwa, H. 1997.

⁴Obafemi Awolowo, *Path to Nigerian Freedom*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1947),47

⁵Obafemi Awolowo, *Path to Nigerian Freedom*, 133

which secures to each separate people the right to maintain its identity, its own chosen form of government and its peculiar political and social institutions⁶.

Since after independence, ethnicity and religion remain the two issues that have played dominant roles in the governance of Nigeria. Kalu argues that “Religion dominates the root of the culture areas of Nigeria . . . little or no distinction existed between the profane and the sacred dimensions of life”⁷. Enwerem points out that over and above the factors of environment, political organization and outlook of traditional Nigeria, the religious factor remains the major source of inspiration and the catalyst for the people’s activities and world-view⁸. Dlakwa (1997) also argues that the political behaviour of some Nigerians is still influenced heavily by the hyperbolic assumption that one’s destiny is intrinsically and exclusively linked with one’s ethnic, linguistic and religious identity⁹.

The ethnic and religious composition of Nigeria and its manipulation by the political elite, according to Salisu, has posed a lot of challenges to governance and security in Nigeria. As the Nigerian experience illustrates, religion can hardly be separated from the Nigerian state and its politics, so far as people give serious considerations to religion when they are confronted with political issues and decisions. Religion in Nigeria has remained a strong influencing factor on the country’s political process¹⁰.

Religion always shows itself in the socio-political activities of the Nigerian people. Even with the advent of the two dominant foreign religions, most educated Nigerians still fall back to traditional religion as their sources of inspiration for political agreements¹¹. Chukwuma cited a good example of Nnamdi Azikiwe who, in 1957, asked for a traditional religious swearing-in ceremony to be arranged between him and his political friend, Mbadiwe. The swearing in ceremony was to be some sort of a trust-pact between both of them to be arranged for them by their

⁶Obafemi Awolowo, *Path to Nigerian Freedom*, 194

⁷Kalu, O. A. “Religions in Nigeria: An Overview in Atanda.” J. A. et’al. (Eds.) *Nigeria Since Independence: The First Twenty-Five Years*. Vol. XI. (Ibadan: Heinemann publishes), 1989, 11.

⁸Enwerem, I. M. *A dangerous Awakening: the politicization of religion in Nigeria*. (Ibadan: French institute for Research in Africa), 1995.

⁹Dlakwa, H. “Ethnicity in Nigerian politics: Formation of Political Organizations and Parties” in Okafor, F. U. (Ed) *New strategies for curbing Ethnic and Religious Conflicts in Nigeria*. (Enugu: Forth Dimension publishers), 1997.

¹⁰Salisu, A. M, *Constitutional Reform in Nigeria: Issues, Perspectives, Challenges and Opportunities*. (Nigeria: publications NG), 2013, 183

¹¹Chukwuma, M. *Nigerian Politics and Religion*. Doctoral Thesis, Faculty of Philosophy, Rheinischen Friedrich Wilhems Universitatzu Born, 1985, 37

village relatives. The refusal of this traditional religious ceremony on the part of Mbadiwe made Azikiwe to become suspicious of Mbadiwe, and he thus declared Mbadiwe as a political suspect for life, saying, "I shall forever be suspicious of him". Though Azikiwe and Mbadiwe were both baptized Christians, their trust in the traditional political order, formed on the traditional religion, still lingered in their minds, in spite of their exposure and status in the society, which shows the power of religion in Nigerian politics. The above situation clearly shows that religion and politics in Nigeria have been bedfellows cemented by the traditional allegiance to the political-religious leaders of the various ethnic groups.

After independence, Nigeria sought a political arrangement that would give all the ethnic groups a say on how they would be governed. The most conspicuous and major political problem the nation faced shortly after independence was how to accommodate the minority interests. Consequently, most of the politicking centred on wooing people into the fold of the major ethnic groups. To take care of the problem, the existing regions had to be broken into states¹². Another factor which accelerated the creation of more states was the fact that each of the regions found out that it could not control the central government on its own. They therefore needed the support of one another, and the need for political-religious alignment became inevitable. The kind of alignment that suddenly emerged was such that Christians grouped up to vote for a Christian contesting for a political post, while Muslims did the same for a Muslim candidate. With this trend, states came to be seen through the prisms of "Christian" or "Muslim" states.

In the First Republic, the major political parties in Nigeria were formed along ethnic lines and had religious connotations. The Northern Peoples' Congress (NPC) emerged from a northern-based cultural group, *Arewa*, with the support of the Hausa-Fulani. The Yoruba Cultural Organization (*Egbe Omo Oduduwa*) metamorphosed into Action Group (AG), the National Convention of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) had its base within the core of Igbo in Eastern Nigeria. Minority groups such as the Tiv, Ijaw/Kalabari, and others, formed smaller parties like the United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC) and Niger Delta Congress.¹³ Abubakar (1997) argues that the ethnic orientation of the political parties was one of the main reasons for the collapse of the First Republic.

¹²Peter T. Bauna, *The Christian Association of Nigeria and the Challenge of the Ecumenical Imperative*. Rome: Domenici Pechenx. Dlakwa, H. 1997.

¹³Salisu, A. M, *Constitutional Reform in Nigeria: Issues, Perspectives, Challenges and Opportunities*. (Nigeria: publications NG), 2013, 190

Secular Status of Nigeria

In order to address this pitfall, the 1979 Constitution of the Second Republic prohibited the formation of political parties with ethnic or religious connotation. Section 202 of the 1979 Constitution provides that no association, by whatever name called, shall function as a political party unless:

- i. The names and addresses of its national officers are registered with the Federal Electoral Commission;
- ii. The membership of the association is open to every citizen of Nigeria, irrespective of his place of origin, sex, religious or ethnic grouping;
- iii. A copy of its constitution is registered in the principal office of the Commission in such form as may be prescribed by the Commission;
- iv. Any alteration in its registered constitution is also recognized in the principal office of the Commission within 30 days of the made alteration;
- v. The name of the association, its emblem or motto does not contain any ethnic or religious connotation or give the appearance that the activities of the association are confined to a part only of the geographical area of Nigeria; and
- vi. The headquarters of the association is situated in the capital of the Federation¹⁴.

This provision is repeated in section 220 of the 1989 Constitution and section 221 of the 1999 Constitution. Also, realizing the volatility of religion in a multi-religious and multi-ethnic country like Nigeria, it was entrenched in the 1999 Constitution that, the Nigerian government shall not adopt any religion as a state religion. The fundamental human rights of every person in Nigeria to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, are also guaranteed by the Nigerian Constitution. Despite this, in utter contravention of the clear constitutional provisions on religion, the Nigerian political class has adopted Christianity and Islam as official religions as against the constitutional requirements. The Nigerian government has deliberately refused to separate religion from the state; the government has rather encouraged the manipulation of religion by public office-holders and other interest groups.

¹⁴Olanmi, & Co, *The Nigerian Constitutions* 1963, 1979, 1999. (Abuja: Lawlords publications, 2008), 211

Discourses on secularism and the constitutional provisions in Nigeria¹⁵ have been reduced to engagements or confrontations between Muslims and Christians, allowing adherents of African Traditional Religion (ATR) little or no space to engage the state. Despite the constitutional provisions, the religious question remains problematic in the Nigerian state. The expanding landscape of religious fundamentalism in Nigeria owes largely to the fact that religion is no longer merely about the control of the theological space, but also an arena of accumulation, according to Ibrahim (1991) who underscores the increasing influence of religion on the political economy of the state.

Onaiyekan asserts that Nigerians take their religions seriously. This is because, African indigenous religions have been part of them from birth. This is self-evident in the way Nigerian Muslims, Christians and devotees of African Traditional Religions go about their religiosity in Nigeria¹⁶. Religious activities are on the rise on daily basis. Religion is a major source of joy, since it is playing a transformative and integrative function in Nigeria today. At the same time, religion has also generated a lot of tensions, fears and upheavals among Nigerians.

Apart from competitiveness in terms of expansion among the two major religions in Nigeria, there is another important issue of syncretic behaviours of Nigerian Muslims and Christians. According to Rimansikwe and Achunike (2014), Islam and Christianity seem to have incorporated some traditional religious practices into their belief systems. Many Muslims and Christians are openly seen performing certain rites of traditional religion. There have been several attempts by the independent African churches to indigenize Christianity in Nigeria. The Cherubim and Seraphim in Nigeria, for instance, initiated this move by importing into the church, several cultural elements such as polygamy, healing, drumming, dancing, seeing visions and prophetic utterances, among others. Both Muslims and Christians in Nigeria now seem to mix African practices with those of Islam and Christianity. Muslims have adopted traditional practice of rituals, magic and medicine. Both Muslims and Christians in Nigeria now freely accommodate traditional practices with their new-found religious practices.¹⁷

¹⁵Omotola, J.S, *Secularism and the Politics of Religious Balancing in Nigeria*. Retrieved from <http://www.irmgard.coninx-stiftung.de/fileadmin/userupload/pdf/culturalpluralism/religion/essay-omotola.pdf>.on 27/02/18.

¹⁶Onaiyekan, J. *Religion in Nigeria: A test opening plenary session of the 10th Anniversary of Rhodes forum on October 4, 2012*. Retrieved from wpfd.org/society/1998-religion-in-Nigeria on 12-06-2019.

¹⁷J. S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*. (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd), 1978.

Religion and its Influence on Nigerian Citizens

Another dangerous dimension to religion in Nigeria is the new gospel of prosperity that is spreading like a wildfire among some Christian denominations. The prosperity gospel and the African traditional world-view are some of the major influences of syncretism among Christians in Nigeria. The prosperity gospel has become so popular that it has replaced the orthodox message of the cross on many pulpits. It is interesting to note that, while the Nigerian economy is dwindling, the Christian religious sectors are apparently benefiting. The promises of material prosperity, comfort and easy life have made many Nigerians to flood churches run by prosperity preachers. In Nigeria today, running this kind of church is a big business, largely considered a multi-million-naira industry. The Nigerian prosperity preachers are stupendously rich and live in opulence. Oyedepo expresses this idea, thus: "I have not found any reason why anybody in the church I pastor should be richer than me because, it was Jesus who rode on the colt, the disciples were following Him on foot"¹⁸

The prosperity churches in Nigeria have assumed a corporate identity. Now, they have their different logos, satellite networks, educational institutions, banks, hotels, petrol stations, and directors; with their founders or leaders as executive directors. Nigerian prosperity preachers are ranked among the richest pastors in the world, with their rat race to accumulate wealth. To buy a private jet is now the ambition of virtually every prosperity preacher in Nigeria, and this is a country where the vast majority of the people are ravaged by poverty.

Religious festivals and pilgrimages are relevant features of religion in contemporary Nigeria. There are so many religious festivals observed in Nigeria as public holidays which have negative impacts on the Nigerian economy. Added to this is the fact that pilgrimage to the Holy Lands of Israel and Mecca by only Christians and Muslims was until the 1900 self-sponsored, but now enjoys government sponsorship with taxpayers' money, with each group having its separate Pilgrims Welfare Board, without any for the adherents of African Traditional Religion.

In Nigeria, religious crimes emerged as the most potentially explosive human catastrophe. There have been several outbreaks of religious violence, resulting in thousands of deaths, injuries and loss of properties. Another form of religious crime in Nigeria is the activities of many of the so-called men of God. The conduct of the leaders of the new religious movements (men of God) throws up moral, ethical, and even religious questions. Those so-called men of God are hiding under religion to perpetrate a lot of crimes on helpless, innocent Nigerians. For Nkoima, many of the helpless and desperate worshippers hold their religious

¹⁸Oyedepo, D. O., *Releasing the Supernatural*. (Ikeja: Dominion Publishing House, 2003), 83.

leaders in very high esteem as those that will bring them spiritual redemption. Many believe that by obeying these religious leaders, they will automatically merit heaven. For this reason, many of the worshippers, especially the womenfolk, are ready to part with anything and everything, including their bodies; the religious leaders only need to ask. Apart from their acquisitive tendencies; lust for money, flashy cars, aeroplanes and helicopters, cruise ships and luxury yachts, most of the Nigerian “men of God” have added sexual immorality and even bestiality to their ways of life and the preaching of the Bible.

The two major religions in Nigeria, that is, Christianity and Islam, according to Udobata, have not done much in combating corruption, disunity, political riots, electoral frauds, ethnic rivalry and discrimination. One’s state of origin in Nigeria determines the type of job he/she gets, admission into universities, and enlistment into the Army, Police, Air Force and Navy¹⁹. Nigerians swear false affidavits with the Bible and Koran but not with the Dane gun, local deities and other traditional weapons of social control, because of the immediate punishment. It is indeed the Traditional Religion that seems to curb the excesses of fraud in Nigeria, because people are afraid of instant justice by the local deities than the God of Christianity and Allah of Islam.

Onaiyekan disagrees with the near-unanimous notion that there are three main religions in Nigeria; namely, Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion. The reality on ground is very different²⁰. There is no justification for placing the three religions side-by-side as three independent and equally important religious options. Rather, he sees the two main religions in Nigeria, Islam and Christianity, sprouting from building upon and gradually replacing the common substratum of African Traditional Religion. Statistically, the number of Nigerians who stand up to be counted as adherents of the African Traditional Religion is small. Indeed, much of what is left to observe in the traditional religion is in the hands of men and women who also claim to be either Christians or Muslims. Every attempt so far made by self-proclaimed leaders of African Traditional Religion to obtain public recognition alongside the accredited leaders of Islam and Christianity has failed for lack of a convincing followership. With the present situation in the country as regards religion, there is no doubt that the future of religion in Nigeria is squarely between Islam and (not or) Christianity. Whatever contribution religion

¹⁹Udobata, O. *Religion and Society: Issues and Trends in National Development in 21st Century*. Unpublished text of the Lead Paper presented at Nsukka on 6th Nov. 2012 on the occasion of Homecoming of the Alumni and Alumnae of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

²⁰Onaiyekan, J. *Religion in Nigeria: A test opening plenary session of the 10th Anniversary of Rhodes forum on October 4, 2012*. Retrieved from wpfd.org/society/1998-religion-in-Nigeria on 12.06.2019.

has for the Nigerian state either good or bad will depend on how the adherents of these two religions behave among themselves and with each other.

In terms of national unity, there is need to re-evaluate the place of religion in Nigeria. Religion has divided the country more than bringing the unity that is expected. Nigerian Christians and Muslims are bold enough to condemn gay practices and same sex marriages in the Western world, but they cannot come out to condemn corruption being perpetrated by Christians and Muslims in public offices in the country. People use religion in Nigeria to evade tax, customs duties on imported goods, etc; yet, religion in any country is supposed to serve as the primary moral architecture for nation building and development. In terms of human rights, Udobata further asserts that Islam in Nigeria is still oppressing women and killing the poor who stole N2000 or a goat, or a young girl caught having sex or being pregnant out of wedlock, but sparing rich politicians who print counterfeit dollar and naira or smuggle huge amounts of money out of the country, or known to be fully involved in regular sexual immorality with under-aged girls²¹.

In Nigeria, the kind of dress you wear, the language you speak, and the kind of religious article you hang inside your car and wear on your body determine the kind of reception you will receive in a public office, and from the security men/women that mount roadblocks on the worst parts of our federal roads. In Nigeria, the decision to get a plot for building a church/mosque; the decision as to how many missionaries can enter the country; the decision as to whether your village will get pipe-borne water, electricity, or road; and how many Christians/Muslims can go on pilgrimage, etc. are all political decisions influenced by religion.

Conclusion

Religion, being a very powerful tool for social mobilization and cohesion, irrespective of its creed, must be used in Nigeria to impact positively on the country's development. Many people have argued that the religious problem in Nigeria is principally not a problem between Christians and Muslims, but a problem between the government and government officials who are abusing and manipulating religion in their favour to build political constituencies. The continuous manipulation and transformation of religious identities for political ends are detrimental to the peace and development of the country. The role of the Nigerian government in religious matters is not healthy for peace and development. There is urgent need for the Nigerian government to maintain a neutral posture

²¹Udobata, O. *Religion and Society: Issues and Trends in National Development in 21st Century*. Unpublished text of the Lead Paper presented at Nsukka on 6th Nov. 2012 on the occasion of Homecoming of the Alumni and Alumnae of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

towards the religious groups in the country, instead of the present role of taking side with Christianity and Islam and making them state religions against the interest of Nigerian citizens, since the two religions are causing more harm than good. The Nigerian state for some time now has become an active participant in religious affairs and incapacitated itself in maintaining fairness and equity in its relation with religions, thereby causing secular marginalization and exclusion. Religion in Nigeria has become an enemy of nationhood, since Nigerians has turned religion to become a lethal weapon in the hands of bad men and women who hide under religion to achieve their selfish ends. For Nigeria to forge ahead, it must have to relegate religion to the background and make it a private and personal relationship of an individual with his/her God or gods.

Bibliography

- Awolowo, O., *Path to Nigerian Freedom*. London: Faber and Faber, 1947.
- Bauna, P. T. *The Christian Association of Nigeria and the Challenge of the Ecumenical Imperative*. Rome: Domenici pechenx, 1991.
- Chukwuma, M., *Nigerian Politics and Religion*. Doctoral Thesis, Faculty of Philosophy, Rheinischen Friedrich Wilhems Universitatzu Born, 1985.
- Dlakwa, H., "Ethnicity in Nigerian Politics: Formation of Political Organizations and Parties" in Okafor, F. U. (Ed) *New Strategies for Curbing Ethnic and Religious Conflicts in Nigeria*. Enugu: Forth Dimension publishers, 1997.
- Enwerem, I. M., *A Dangerous Awakening: the Politicization of Religion in Nigeria*. Ibadan: French Institute for Research in Africa, 1995.
- Ekpu, R., "Opium of the People" in *Newswatch Magazine* of October 1985. Lagos: Newswatch Communications Ltd, 1985.
- Falana, F., "Religion and Security: A legal Perspective" in *The Nation Newspaper*. 2013.
- Hugh, C. "Nigeria: Background to Nationalism" in *Coleman*. Los Angeles: University of California press, 1953.
- Ibrahim, J. (1991). "Religion and political Turbulence in Nigeria". *Journal of modern African studies* 29, no.1, pp. 115-136, 32-37.
- Kalu, O. A., Religions in Nigeria: An overview in Atanda, J. A. et'al. (Eds.) *Nigeria Since Independence: The First Twenty-Five Years*. Vol. XI. Ibadan: Heinemann publishes, 1989.
- Mbiti, J. S., *Introduction to African Religion*. London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 1978.
- Olakanmi, & Co., *The Nigerian Constitutions 1963, 1979, 1999*. Abuja: Lawlords Publications 2008.
- Omotola, J. S., *Secularism and the Politics of Religious Balancing in Nigeria*. Retrieved from <http://www.irmgard.coninx-stiftung.de/fileadmin/userupload/pdf/culturalpluralism/religion/essayomotola.pdf>. On 27/02/18.
- Onaiyekan, J., *Religion in Nigeria: A Test Opening Plenary Session of the 10th Anniversary of Rhodes Forum on October 4, 2012*. Retrieved from wpfd.org/society/1998-religion-in-Nigeria
- Onaiyekan, J., *Seeking Common Grounds, Inter-religious Dialogue in Africa*. Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2013.
- Oyedepo, D. O., *Releasing the Supernatural*. Ikeja: Dominion Publishing House, 2003.
- Rimamsikwe, H.K. & Achunike, H.C. "Religion in Nigeria from 1900-2013" in *Journals of Research on Humanities and Social Sciences Vol. 3 No. 18*. 2013.

Retrieved from www.iiste.org/journals/index.php/Ritss/issue/ view on 04.08.2014

Salisu, A. M., *Constitutional Reform in Nigeria: Issues, Perspectives, Challenges and Opportunities*. Nigeria: publications NG, 2013.

Udobata, O., *Religion and Society: Issues and Trends in National Development in 21st Century*. Unpublished text of the Lead Paper presented at Nsukka on 6th Nov. 2012 on the occasion of Home-coming of the Alumni and Alumnae of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, 2012