

## RELIGION, POLITICS AND NIGERIA'S GOVERNANCE CONUNDRUM

**Joseph Okwesili Nkwede**

Department of Political Science,  
Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki

&

**Alegu, Patrick Austin**

Department of History,  
Ebonyi State College of Education, Ikwo

### **Abstract**

*Religion and politics have been recognized as inseparable in both theory and practice given the level of influence they exert on each other, especially in the developing democracies across the globe. This relationship is made particularly complex by the intricacies inherent in the politicization of religion. An investigation of the extent of the interconnectedness and the attendant consequences for the society indeed formed the basis of this study. Data for the study were collected from documentary sources; media commentaries and scholarly inputs on religion, politics and governance, while analysis was conducted using the content analytic approach. The study further adopted functionalism as its framework of analysis. It found that religion is a very emotive issue in the Nigerian polity with far-reaching implications for the corporate existence and survivability of the Nigerian State, and that it is crucial for encouraging political participation, promoting democratic values, norms and aggregating distinctive political interests in Nigeria. The paper, among other things, recommends the upholding of Nigeria's secular status, commitment to the tenets of true democracy and de-emphasizing of political appointments along religious or ethnic lines with a view to enthroning good governance in the country. The paper concludes that religion has not promoted good governance but has instead motivated violence, electoral fraud, lopsided political appointments and cries of marginalization.*

**Keywords:** Religion, Politics, Governance, Democracy and Nigeria.

### **Introduction**

Religion has been seen and defined differently by scholars and practitioners. According to Obe cited in Adawale (2010), religion connotes a belief in Supreme Being and His worship through a specified ritual. It is always based on moralistic outlook or a way of life. In the words of Kuka (2003) in Nkwede (2015) religion is derived from a Latin word religere (to bind) which reflect the efforts by fallen man to re-establish contact with his creator. To Durkheim in Danoye (2008) religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices which unite into one moral community called a church all those who adhere to them. However, Ike (2010) sees religion as Man's

relation to divinity, to reverence, worship, obedience and submission to mandates and precepts of Supernatural or Superior Beings. Nwanaju (2015) opined that Religion, ordinarily understood, should provide some sense of the Divine, Awe, Respect, Justice and Peace in the society.

The above definitions when analyzed and understood would provide a sharp contrast to what politics stands for. Politics, according to Lasswell (1936), is the game/business of who gets what, when and how. Aristotle, the great sage and philosopher, describing man as political animal, says that Politics is nothing but a plausible response to the problem of governing or maintaining order in a complex society. Easton says that politics is the Authoritative Allocation of values for a society within the system (Mukherjee and Ramaswamy 2007, NOUN 2013, Lasswell 1936, and Laski, 1982).

However, in spite of the above noted differences between the two concepts of Religion and Politics, there seems to be an intricate relationship between them, such that one can hardly exist without the other in the developing society like Nigeria. This is why Falana (2010, p.14) in Afolabi (2015, p.23) opined that “there is an incontrovertible connection between religion and politics. While the actual role that religion plays in politics has remained debatable, the nexus between the two concepts has been long established”. This supports the argument that man is both a religious being and a political animal, and that religion is the opium of the masses. In a sense therefore, religion is what drives man’s quest and character even as he plays politics. Man, therefore, is arguably the only animal with a religion. If man is therefore a political animal and a religious being it is therefore established that man is a two-sided being.

This submission of an intricate relationship between religion and politics in man’s society and life therefore raises the fundamental questions which this study tends to investigate. What is the nature of relationship between Religion and Politics? (Is their relationship complementary or conflict-prone, as it relates to Nigeria as a state). What role has each of them played in the struggle and hold onto power by each ethnic grouping in Nigeria? What problem does this intricate relationship between the two create in Nigeria? And finally what is the place of good governance in the interplay between religion and politics in Nigeria?

To achieve the above stated objectives, the paper is subdivided into eight sections. The first section covers the introductory aspect of the paper, section two establishes the theoretical framework upon which the study is anchored, and the third section addresses the methodology. The fourth section focuses on the historical overview of Religion and Politics in Nigeria, the Politics of Religion in Nigeria, the role of Religion in electioneering, resource allocation political appointment and National cohesion. Finally, the debate as to whether religion has engendered good governance in Nigeria form, the conclusion and recommendations.

### **Theoretical framework**

This study adopted a *mélange* of Emile Durkheim’s Sociological Theory and Functionalism. This theory studies the structure of society and how the society

functions. Durkheim's theories were founded on the concept of social facts, defined as the norms, values, and structures of a society. According to Durkheim, collective consciousness, values, and rules are critical to a functional society. This theory emphasizes a societal equilibrium. If something happens to disrupt the order and the flow of the system, society must adjust to achieve a stable state. According to Durkheim, society should be analyzed and described in terms of functions. Society is a system of interrelated parts where no one part can function without the other. These parts make up the whole of society. If one part changes, it has an impact on society as a whole. How does this theory apply to the work? You need to demonstrate that by using its key elements to link your X and Y variables. That is, religion and politics on the one hand, and Nigeria's development conundrum on the other. It is only then that you have a framework; otherwise, you have merely stated a theory.

### **Methodology**

Content Analytical technique was employed for the analysis of data. The data collected in this study were presented through non-statistical method, and analyzed through interpretative analysis.

### **Religion and Politics in Nigeria: The Historical Overview**

Prior to the British incursion into the area and territory that later became Nigeria, in their colonial quest, traditionally, the different ethnic groupings and nationalities in these territories had their well established and organized political structure, organization and religious belief. Even before the colonizers', some of these ethnic nationalities or groups had witnessed the intrusion of foreign interests with the presence of European missionaries in the South and the Arab missionaries/invaders in the North. Many of these ethnic groupings had social organizations that separated religion from politics, while to some, especially in the North, religion and politics went on hand in hand; a situation in which the religious leaders doubled as political leaders. This practice was further reinforced when the Northern territory made up of mostly Hausas and Fulani's accepted Islamic religion.

But in the Southern region, especially among the Yorubas, at the first instance, religion and politics were autonomous. This could partly be accounted for by the fact that as, Ani and Alegu (2015:134) argued, "available record has it that among the earliest converts of the Christian Missionaries (in Southern Nigeria, especially the Igbos) were the "Never-Do-Wells" in the society, the socially rejected and extremely needy". Essentially, these classes of converts could not be entrusted with the political leadership of the society, and such attempt was what led to the popular Aba women riot in 1929, as the colonizers tried to build on the structures that had been laid on group by the Christian Missionaries. And so, as the Islamic religion was gradually gaining ground among the Hausa- Fulani in the North, it increasingly became state religion simply because, among their first converts were the rulers. From that moment till now, religion became inseparable from politics. However, the case was partly different in the Southern region, as religion was clearly separated from politics. So, the inseparable relationship between religion and politics started

prior to Nigeria's independence and both have continued to influence each other till date. Corroborating the above fact, Isaac (2014) opined that an analysis of the influence of religion on communal politics or governance in these pre-colonial societies as well as the transformation of state-religion relations among them would show that their respective historical developments influenced contemporary relations between the state and religion.

Historically, Islamic religion became a state religion in Hausa land following Uthman Dan Fodio's 1810 Jihad. Fodio soon after the success of the Jihad established a caliphate of 15 states known as emirates. Each of these emirates were headed by an Islamic Umar, who are themselves kit and kin of Dan Fodio, who headed the main caliphate. Implicitly, the political leaders were also the religious leaders, as Islam was their religion, though available records has it that before the 1810 Jihad, both Islam and African Traditional Religion flourished together in the Hausa society (Isaac 2014, Okafor 2015, Obodo-Egbulem 2015 and Agwu 2015).

However, in the South, the Yoruba's had a similar religion and political practices like the Hausa-Fulani's. The Oba's, derive their political source and legitimacy from religion, as seen in the powers of Ooni of Ife and Alaafin of Oyo, which are the main Obas in Yorubaland. This was because the Yoruba's believed that political authority is divinely ordained, as the Oba's themselves were seen as direct sons of Oduduwa, who was believed to have come down to the earth from heaven through a string. Apparently, Oduduwa was believed to have come from heaven as a spiritual being and was their political leader. Since then, religion and politics were seen in a complementary relationship.

However, in the pre-colonial Igbo societies, a contrast to what was obtained in the pre-colonial Hausa-Fulani and Yoruba societies existed. The Igbos, who themselves had no central kingdom or king, had more of a republican and democratic society. It was the elders in the whole society that wielded political authority. Traditionally, the pre-colonial Igbo people, were highly religious (practicing African Traditional Religion (ATR) and later Christianity), but politics was separated from religion. The Igbos believed in the Supreme Being - Chukwu. Chukwu was represented by subordinate gods: Ala, Igwe, Agwa, Ifejioku etc. But the worship of these gods was separated from the communal politics.

Thus, it can safely be argued that the incontrovertible connection between religion and politics in Nigeria dates back to the pre-colonial times. The Hausa-Fulani and Yoruba societies never separated religion from politics, though the situation differed in the pre-colonial Igbo society. Even though the two concepts were inseparable in the pre-colonial times, it was seen that they complement each other and religion helped politics in instituting good governance.

### **Politics of Religion in Nigeria since Independence**

As a corollary of the above established nexus, that the inseparable relationship between religion and politics in Nigeria dates back to the pre-colonial times, it has now become a norm in Nigeria that politics is being played along religious lines. The Nigerian society is religiously polarized and this has significantly

influenced political decisions and policies of the nation. Obodo-Egbulem (2015, pp.161-164) puts it this way, “any discourse on Nigeria’s unity, disunity or politics draws inferences from the teething problems of political manipulation, religious exclusivism and ethnic rivalry which are prevalent”. This is because, many Nigerians pledge half loyalty to the Nigerian project and other half to their political, religious or ethnic group. There is deep sense of commitment of Nigerians to live by the tenets of their various religious beliefs. Though, true religion has to do with the relationship between human beings and God that guides and nourishes correct relationship among people. Religion in Nigeria has been hijacked by politicians who exploit it to further their ambitions and interests. The fact that religion deals with man’s inner conviction, makes it most complex of all human activities. This perhaps explains why men go to any length to project or preserve their religions and in the event of a perceived infringement, a religious devotee is ever willing to lay down his life in defense of his religion. Religion in the hands of men is a double-edged sword, as it has been responsible for most of the wars and feuds in the Nigerian polity.

It is increasingly clear that parties are now formed along ethnic and religious lines. Who becomes one’s political friend or enemy is partly determined by religion and ethnicity. From 1999, when democracy was ushered in Nigeria, it was only People’s Democratic Party (PDP) that had a bit of national outlook, while other political parties – (Alliance for Democracy) AD, (Action Congress) AC, (All Nigerian People Party) ANPP, (Congress for Progressive Change) CPC and recently formed mega Party, the All Progressive Congress (APC), all had ethnic and religious coloration. And as parties are formed along religious lines, so the entire game of politics is being played along religious lines. Most recently, it has been witnessed that federal political appointments are influenced by religion. It is on record that under President Muhammadu Buhari, 70% of the federal appointments are influenced by religion, as 70% of his appointees are Muslims and generally from the North. This has made many to claim that President Buhari’s administration has an agenda of Islamizing Nigeria. Also the politics of war and killings since Nigeria’s independence, and most recently the Boko Haram insurgency and killings by the Fulani herdsmen, is influenced by religion. This informed Odey’s 2014 assertion that religion had made fool of too many of us... it has made many of us do what we ought not to have done as full rational beings.

Unarguably, religion has played key role in appointments and placements in Nigeria, election and electioneering process (especially voting behaviour), resource control and even job placement (employment). The politicians and Political office holders have succeeded in manipulating various religious bodies/leaders into instigating religious sentiments, just to grab power on religious ground. Nigeria has now become a country where religion can make the most educated individual act like the worst illiterate. And predominantly, it has been a battle between Islam and Christianity. Evidently, the provisions of section 10 of 1999 constitution (as amended) that Nigeria is a secular state, meaning that no Religion shall be adopted as a state religion is observed more in the breach as what obtains now looks as if religion is the primary factor in resource control. This is what makes valid the

argument of Alhaji Sa'ad Abubakar III (Sultan of Sokoto and Leader of the Islamic community in Nigeria), as quoted in Isaac (2014), that anyone saying Nigeria is a secular nation does not understand the meaning of the word secular. There is nothing, according to him, secular about the Nigerian nation since whatever we do, we will always put Islam and Christianity in the forefront. To this extent, the style of politics in Nigeria is the type in which religion –Islam and Christianity, is the factor that determines who gets what, when and how.

### **The Role of Religion in Electioneering, Resource Allocation/Control, Political Appointment and National Cohesion**

Because religion is a complex phenomenon, the function it performs is quite diverse. Oshewolo and Borok (2015) opined that, since religion has an integrative function in an organization, it is performing both uniting function and disintegrating functions. Arguing that religion has some democratic utilities like integration of human societies, encouraging political participation, retraining the conduct of government, promoting democratic values and norms, articulating and aggregating distinctive social interest, generating cross-cutting identifies and providing avenues for the development of leadership skills. However, the picture in the present-day Nigeria is rather different, as religion, instead of performing the above functions, has been used to achieve selfish political ambitions. There has always been this strong link or alliance, demonstrated among Nigerians, to their religious organizations. The fact remains that religion rather than being used as a factor for national cohesion has rather been used to reinforce differences and ethnic variations. Though both Islam and Christianity have monotheistic view of reality, their political orientation differs completely and has tended to influence politics in Nigeria and equally aggravated the agitation by the different ethnic groups for power and resource control. And Power when held, such group would continue to use such means to hold on to power and resource. Whereas, Islam identified politics with religion, Christianity on the other hand, with its Western orientation promoted the idea of politics as distinct from religion. This has made it possible for the North, which is predominantly Muslim to dominate and continue to rule, and get fixated on the notion of being "Born to Rule". For instance, whereas Christians generally see politics as a dirty game and as such distance themselves from it, the Muslims do everything within their power to grab power using their religion. And when power is in their hands, they deploy every means to dominate the political structure of the nation. This made it possible during electioneering for each ethnic group with their peculiar religion to would use their religion as a means of galvanizing support. Conversely, in Nigeria, electioneering campaigns are characterized by inciting of ethno-religious sentiments.

Without doubt, leadership or political appointment based on ethno-religious lines are used as compensation and this has acquired added significance under the President Mohammadu Buhari's administration, and this has in turn heightened ethno-religious agitation and violence in the country. As political offices are allocated along ethno-religious line, one group under one religion dominates the resource of the nation (common wealth) and religion, instead of bringing national integration and

cohesion, is now a factor in reinforcing hatred and disintegration.

### **Religion, Politics and the Place of Good Governance**

Unequivocally, religion is so crucial to the corporate existence and survival of Nigeria. Being a very powerful tool of social mobilization and cohesion, religion, irrespective of which creed, should be made to impact positively in the country's democracy and help in the change process, thereby bringing or engendering good governance. Nwanaju (2015) argues that for one to understand the proper role of religion in good governance in any modern society, one has to know what democracy really means. For him, democracy is a system of rule based on the majority opinion of the people who freely elect their leaders by themselves. Democracy is based on fundamental principles of justice, equality, freedom, respect for human persons and their dignity. It is a system free from coercion of all sorts. *Ipsa facto*, to govern properly is to organize a particular society on the basis of justice, freedom, equality, and respect for human life, rights and dignity. The idea of good governance in any political setting can only be understood within the context of democracy, where the right of free choice is respected, not super-imposing of candidates based on religion or any other inclination nor use of violence and intimidation to win elections. Democracy promotes, or rather is built on liberty and freedom of worship and its cardinal principles are equality and justice. This means that good governance can only be found under the tenets of democratic set up. In a sense, good governance is a natural correlate of peace and harmony. It does not accommodate fanaticism, exclusivism, extremism, bigotry and so on. Good governance and democracy are rooted in rule of rule and respect for the rights of others. And so, since we still experience armed banditry, violence, kidnapping, wars etc in the Nigeria polity, one could argue that true democracy has not gotten a good root in Nigeria and to that extent, there is no good governance yet because of bad leadership. Good governance must be a government or politics that promote common good, promote peace and national cohesion, promote love and respect for human life and dignity, promote unity and equality of all persons among others.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Every human society desires order and good governance. From our discussion in this study, we have discovered these essential ingredients of the good life are in deficit in Nigeria. We also made the point that religion and politics are important in every human society and that both are interrelated and serve complimentary purposes to one another. A thorough examination of the two in the Nigerian context shows they have been part of the Nigerian history. Religion, being a powerful tool of social mobilization was used to direct politics and political decisions in the pre-colonial Nigeria. However, that complimentary relationship between religion and politics in Nigeria was damaged immediately after independence with the effect that what we witness today are religious motivated violence, electoral fraud, lop-sided political appointments, and chant of marginalization. This has made it difficult for good governance to find its place in the Nigerian polity. For good

governance to be achieved in Nigeria, therefore, religion (which is much important in the psyche of every Nigerian) and politics should be made to promote democracy, where justice, peace, freedom, respect for human lives and dignity, equality of all persons and groups, liberty etc, will be made to have its due place.

For the above to be achieved therefore, this study recommends the following;

- ❖ That the secular status of Nigeria be upheld: the Federal Government of Nigeria should continue to promote the constitutional provision of the secular status of the nation, and should desist from adopting any religion as state religion in keeping with Section 10 of the 1999 Constitution (as amended). Our leaders and politicians should be guided by this principle and promote same as to engender equity.
- ❖ That the tenets of true democracy, where its true fundamentals of freedom, peace, equality, justice, liberty, respect for human persons should be made to work, for it is the only way to achieve good governance.
- ❖ Every religion in Nigeria must promote peace. Peace is the fruit of justice and love and is dependent on right order among humans in a society. Nigerian politicians should give peace a chance.
- ❖ Respect for human person/life and dignity. All religious creeds in Nigeria must be made to respect human lives and dignity.
- ❖ Politics and religion should be made to promote common good of Nigerians.
- ❖ Finally, Nigerian politicians must learn to be true stewards, not self-serving or ethnic and religion bigots.

### **References**

- Adewale, M.A. (2010). *Religion and Political Reforms in Nigeria*: Lagos: Sahara Report.
- Afolabi, O.O. (2015). *The Role of Religion in Nigerian Politics and its Sustainability for Political Development: Net Journal of Social Science*, Vol 3.
- Agwu, E.E. (2015). The Role of Religion in Politics – The Nigeria’s Scenario. *Punch Newspaper*, March 2015.
- Akwara, A.F. and Ojomah, B.O. (2015). *Religion, Politics and Democracy in Nigeria*: Canadian Academy of Oriental and Occidental Culture. Ontario: Canadian Social Science Publishers.
- Ani, K.J. and Alegu, P. A. (2015). Religion and politics in Nigeria. In I.U. Nwanaju (ed), *Religious Conflicts and Dialogue Initiatives in Nigeria*. Abakaliki: Citizens Advocate.
- CBCN (2016a). *Restoring Confidence in Nigeria*. A Statement of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria on the State of the Nation. Abuja: Catholic Bishops Secretariat.
- CBCN(2016b). *Religion as Instrument for Peace and Integral Human Development*. A Communiqué at the End of the Second Plenary Meeting of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) at Domuc Pacis Pastoral Centre Igoba Akure Ondo.



- Danoye, O.L. (2008). Religion and Politics in a Pluralistic Society: The Nigerian Experience. *International Journal on Politics*, 2: 28-42.
- Ike, O. (2010). Religion and Politics-Perspectives of the Social Teaching of the Church: The Case of Nigeria. *International Journals of Politic and Good Governance*, 2: 201-216.
- Isaac, T.S. (2014). Religion and the Nigerian State: Situating the de facto and de-Jure Frontiers of State – Religion Relations and its Implication for National Security. *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion*, 3: 53-65.
- Ituma, E. A. (2009). Religion and Partisan Politics in Nigeria: A Challenge to the Committed Christian. *Bassey Andah Journal*, 12: 106-121.
- Laski, H. (1982). *Grammar of Politics*. London: George Allen and Unwin Books.
- Lasswell, H.D. (1936). *Politics: Who Gets What, When and How*. New York: Menden Books,.
- Mukherjee, S. & Ramaswamy, S. (2007). *A History of Political Thought: Plato to Marx*: New Delhi: Prentice Hall of India Publication
- NOUN (2013). *Elements of Political Science: A Course Work for POL 111*. Lagos: National Open University of Nigeria.
- Nwanaju, I.U. (2015). Religious Bigotry and Good Governance in Nigerian. *International Journal of African and Asian Studies*, 15: 83-97.
- Okafor, E. K. (2015). Religion and politics in Nigeria. In I.U. Nwanaju (ed), *Religious Conflicts and Dialogue Initiatives in Nigeria*. Abakaliki: Citizens Advocate.
- Onaiyekan, J. (2009). *The Role of Traditional and Religious Institutions in the Advancement of Good Governance and Sustainable Development*. A Lecture delivered at Senior, Executive Course of National Institute of Strategic Studies, Kuru, March.
- Oshewolo, R.M. and Borok, A.M. (2015). Religion and Politics in Nigeria. *International Journal of Politics and Good Governance*, 4: 154-173.
- Uthman, I.O. and Lateef, O.A. (2014). Muslim and Christianity Politics of Religion in Nigeria: The Sharia Application and the Religious Foundations of Global Muslim Engagement with Modernity: *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*, 6: 135-144.