

## RELIGION AND ELECTION IN NIGERIA

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### **Abstract**

*This paper examines Religion and Election in Nigeria and noted that Nigeria is a predominant religious nation. For this conspicuous reason, religion seems to be mixed with politics and statecraft. The paper argued that the problem is not that Religion cannot play advisory and non-partisan role. It can critique political events and insist on moral efficiency (political moralism) than expediency. Unfortunately, our findings revealed that Religion is being manipulated for political gains. Over the years, during elections, religious and ethnic sentiments are used to whip up sentiments and to overheat the polity. In many cases, it erupts violence and other eye for eye kind of reactions. Religious leaders are also culpable alongside politicians in desecrating the sacredness of Religion and thus, making it non-sacrosanct at times. As the 2019 elections draws close, it is being projected as a very decisive election that will determine the fate of Nigeria. This paper therefore concludes among many recommendations that what Nigeria truly needs now are religious and political reforms with the suggestion of the Religious Electoral Act which can be passed as a bill in forestalling religious excesses in relation to politics and elections.*

**Key words:** Religion, Election, Nigeria

### **Introduction:**

There is actually a direct link between religion and election in Nigeria. This is owing to the fact (borrowing from J. S. Mbiti), the average Nigerian is notoriously religious. Religion and ethnicity are two most prominent features of the Nigerian political narrative. Where one is from or one's faith or creed determines what one gets politically in the Nigerian state.

Politics as a social phenomena that is about governance and being governed and also the utilization of power, coercion and control is an important element in a people's destiny and this is no different for the Nigerian peoples. The average Nigerian on the street understands something about politics as it concerns Nigeria. You witness these political arguments in commuting buses, marketplaces, in social gatherings and public relaxation spots (beer parlour, for

instance). These arguments soon graduate into ethnical considerations and religious leanings.

In 2015, for instance, President Jonathan was seen as a Christian by the Muslims and to that end, was voted out. Muhammadu Buhari was seen as a Muslim and for that, the predominant Christian geopolitical zones of South and East never voted for him. Jonathan was voted in the foregoing areas because he was a Christian. Thus, from these examples, we can see that religion and election in Nigeria are two sides of a coin.

Again, another vital cog in the wheels of this narrative is the involvement of religious institutions especially in the areas of prophecy and endorsement. Religious institutions often show partisan outlook when prophesying which candidate will win an election or who is endorsed and encouraged by members of the religious institutions to vote for.

In 2015, President Goodluck Jonathan was seen as an infidel and a custodian of corruption by some Muslim in the Northern part of the country. Former Military President, Muhammadu Buhari was seen as an anti-corruption Messiah and was for this reason endorsed by all who wanted to see the then President Jonathan out of the seat. A popular Catholic priest (in Enugu Diocese), Fr. Ejike Camillus Mbaka's prophecies under that period in 2015 almost divided Christianity. His controversial sermon of "From good luck to bad luck" was viewed by pundits as a partisan ploy of endorsement of Muhammadu Buhari and join in the growing "Change Jonathan" voices at the time. Some saw him as friend of the north, a Judas who betrayed a Christian Jonathan or someone bought over with money. This incidence pitched him up against the ecclesiastical authorities like the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) who ordered his local Bishop to call him to order. Consequent upon that, immediately after the election, Mbaka was transferred from his former parish of Christ the King, Ekulu, Enugu to another parish in Enugu Diocese. This fuelled rumour of prosecution against Fr. Mbaka, which the Church authorities quickly quashed as baseless.

As witnessed again, against the run of play to 2019 general elections, some Christian clerics and an Imam was heard openly endorsing former Vice President Alhaji Atiku Abubakar for a shot at the presidency after picking Peter Obi as a running mate. These instances have shown clearly in practical terms that Religion and Election in Nigeria almost inseparable. In this paper we will look at the notion of religion and the concept of election. We will also look at why religion and politics seems intertwined in Nigeria. We will analyze the effects of

religion on election in Nigeria and then chart the way forward, especially as we enter into an election year in 2019 and thus, making this paper timely.

### **What is Religion?**

According to Atheism (2018) Religion is the set of beliefs, feelings, dogmas and practices that define the relations between human being and sacred or divinity. A given religion is defined by specific elements of a community of believers: dogmas, sacred books, rites, worship, sacrament, moral prescription, interdicts, organization. The majority of religions have developed starting from a revelation based on the exemplary history of a nation, of a prophet who taught something about life.

Religion therefore, may be defined with its three great characteristics:

- Believes and religious practices
- The religious feeling, that is, faith
- Unity in a community of those who share the same faith: the Church. It is what differentiates religion from magic (Atheism (2018)).

The word religion is derived from Latin root and while there are few different translations, the most prevalent roots take you back to the Latin word "Re-Ligare". "Ligare" means "to bind" or to "connect". Adding the "re" before "ligare" causes the word to mean "Re-Bind" or "Re-Connect" (Trimble 2014, para.2).

Religion has been defined in various ways by Scholars of different ages. Below arena compiled definitions of religion by various scholars. They include:

1. "[Religion is] the belief in Spiritual Beings" (Edward B Tylor, *Primitive Culture*)
2. "By religion, then, I understand a propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to man which are believed to direct and control the course of nature and of human life" (James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough*).
3. "[Religion is] the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine." (William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*)
4. "A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them."

(b) [Religion is] "the self-validation of a society by means of myth and ritual." (Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*).

5. "[Religion is] "the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary, and a concern that in itself provides the answer to the question of the meaning of our existence." (Paul Tillich)

6. "[Religion is] a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, persuasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations...by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic." (Clifford Geertz, *Religion as a Cultural System*).

7. "Religion, like culture, is a symbolic transformation of experience." (Thomas F. O'Dea, *The Sociology of Religion*).

8. "[Religion is] a system of symbols (creed, code, cultus) by means of which people (a community) orient themselves in the world with reference to both ordinary and extraordinary powers, meanings, and values." (Catherine Albanese, *America: Religions and Religion*).

9. "Religion is a means to ultimate transformation." (Frederick Streng, *Understanding Religious Life*).

10. [Religion is] a means of ultimate transformation and/or orientation." (Joseph Adler, "Varieties of Spiritual Experience: Shen in Neo-Confucian Discourse").(See Kenyon.edu 2018, for the compilations).

From the foregoing, the major things to note are that Religion is a system, a belief, a cultural pattern, that ultimately leads to a horizontal-vertical ends.

Having briefly looked at the concept of Religion, let us discuss the concept of election.

### **The Concept of Election**

Election is a formal group decision-making process by which a population chooses an individual to hold public office. Elections have been the usual mechanism by which modern representative democracy has operated since the 17th century (Encyclopedia Britannica). Elections may fill offices in the legislature, sometimes in the executive and judiciary, and

for regional and local government. This process is also used in many other private and business organizations, from clubs to voluntary associations and corporations (Robert *et al*, 2011, pp.438-446).

According to Headlam (1891 as cited in Wikipedia 2018), the universal use of elections as a tool for selecting representatives in modern representative democracies is in contrast with the practice in the democratic archetype, ancient Athens, where the Elections were considered an oligarchic institution and most political offices were filled using sortition, also known as allotment, by which officeholders were chosen by lot (para.2).

Electoral reform describes the process of introducing fair electoral systems where they are not in place, or improving the fairness or effectiveness of existing systems. Psephology is the study of results and other statistics relating to elections (especially with a view to predicting future results). To *elect* means "to choose or make a decision", and so sometimes other forms of ballot such as referendums are referred to as elections, especially in the United States.

### **Religion and Election in Nigeria**

In appraising Religion and Election in Nigeria which is the focus of this paper, there are those who believe that Religion has a role on politics and by extension, election. They opined that it plays the role of an Observer and also checkmates.

This much was emphasized by Oshewolo and Karen (2015) religion is a complex phenomenon, the social functions it performs are quite diverse. Some religious functions are manifest-immediately observable- and some are latent - not immediately discernible. It should be recognized that if an activity helps the integrative performance of an organization, then we call it functional. Roles like support for tolerance, peaceful cooperation and loves are promoted through ministerial and lay practice.

Schaefer & Lamn (1997, as cited in Oshewolo and Karen 2015) identify some democratic utilities of religion which include the integration of human societies composed of individuals and social groups with diverse interests and aspirations. In their view, religious bond transcend these personal and divisive force. Another important function identified by the two authors is the ability of religion to legitimize the existing social order (p.4).

Borrowing heavily from the essay of Rotimi, Mala & Aiyegboyin (1999 as cited in Oshewolo and Karen 2015) religion performs six interrelated functions, namely,

restraining or criticizing the conduct of government, encouraging political participation, promoting democratic values and norm, articulating and aggregating distinctive societal interests, generating cross-cutting identities and providing and providing avenues for the development of leadership skills. (para. 4).

With reference to the first function of restraining and containing government conduct, religious associations in Nigeria have repeatedly and stridently denounced bad governmental policies or actions that infringe on the interests of the religious community in particular, and/or the welfare of the citizenry in general. Thus, religious associations have joined independence groups in civil society in criticizing the dubious and circuitous nature of the military's democratization project and government's management of the religious disturbances that have convulsed several Northern states. On the stimulation of political participation and civic identification, Nigeria's religious organizations have played an important role in encouraging and mobilizing their members towards active participation in, and identification with public affairs and politics. This is done by stimulating a sense of civic identification and participation in their members by urging such members to 'pray and fast' for peace, stability, justice and progress of the nation (Ayorinde, 2007).

Thirdly, religion promotes democratic values and norms. This is done through the promotion and propagation of such democratic norms and values as tolerance, moderation, willingness to compromise, and respect for truth, justice and freedom. Religious leaders in Nigeria have at different times demonstrated this commitment to democracy by urging Nigerians not to waver in their support for democratic institutions (Tukur, 1999). More so, religion provides avenues for interest representation. Religious organizations articulate, aggregate and represent distinctive societal interests. The Christian representation and mobilization against Nigeria's membership of the country in the OIC represented only one of the many instances of interest representation by the Christian community since 1986. Religion equally generates cross-cutting interest. The existence of cross-cutting interests implies that competing affiliations could operate to secure social peace and democratic stability, and prevent destructive or protracted social conflict, by inducing individuals and groups to divide their emotions in a single explosive line of affiliation. Finally, religious organizations, like many other ordered shares of associational activity or social intercourse, provide an appropriate environment of the development of leadership skills. This is done by displaying an impressive capacity to manage people and

resources in their respective organizations by speaking out courageously and consistently against the excesses solutions to nation's problems. Through this, religious leaders have gained some reputation and legitimacy as effective national leaders of thorough and potential statement (Oshewolo and Karen 2015, paras.4-6).

However, there are those who believe that religion has brought about anti-democratic processes in ways that are questioning and demeaning. In relation to election, religion seems to have sometimes played a negative role that does not resonate with religious tenets. The political class are accused of arousing religious sentiments to amass votes while the electorates vote along religious and ethnic lines.

According to Adiola Aderonmu (2006 as cited in Ayuba 2012); one of the most disturbing issues in the unification of Nigeria is religion. Ake, C., Jega, A. and Jinaid (1995,2002,2001) argues, the close interaction between Nigeria state, and religious and faith based organization reflects the widespread perception that Nigeria is not a secular state.

Also, Ozegwu, Kukah, and Jibril; the existence of several religious in Nigeria was viewed to accentuate regional and ethnic distinctions (paras.2-3).

On the other hand, the political engagement of religious groups and their provision of services in areas where the state has failed to deliver present an ideological and practical challenge to the state. (Corten and Marshal Frutani, 2001:Soares and Otayek, 2007 as cited in Ayuba 2012).

Religious politics do not affect the state in a coherent or uniform way, instead having a complex and even contradictory impact on the state and institutions( Love 2006; Philpott, 2007 as cited in Ayuba 2012, para. 2).

Harvard Divinity school (2015) used a correspondence by Will Ross of BBC to appraise the 2011 elections in Nigeria as a case study of religious influence on political outcomes. It noted that:

Jonathan was a Pentecostal Christian of the southern Ijaw tribe, and Buhari a Sunni Muslim and northern Fulani. Violence broke out after the 2011 race, leading to 800 deaths and 65,000 displacements in the north, where many felt that Jonathan had betrayed an unspoken rule that the presidency should alternate between a Christian and a Muslim. Although, voters in Jos worry about ongoing violence, Will Ross writes of a growing

awareness of the ways that religion is used to mask conversations about real issues challenging Nigeria, and that religious issues allow politicians to "divide and conquer" by pitting groups against one another. These tactics only encourage more violence, commentators argue (para.2).

Archbishop Benjamin Kwashi, who has played a key role diffusing religious tension in Jos said that "Religion by its very nature and content appeals not so much to reason. It's a heart matter and carries with it huge emotions. When religions like Christianity and Islam have a huge following of hungry not very educated people on both sides then politicians will explore the areas of religion to get them on their sides. That's a very dangerous and bad thing to do. It's not fair and it's not right" (Harvard Divinity School, para.2).

Harvard Divinity School Professor Jacob Olupona comments in The Huffington Post as follows:

Religion has entered into politics and governance is not new; it is as old as the history of the nation itself. What is new in the current dispensation is the extent to which religion dominates national life. The myth of the secular Nigerian state that purports to separate the institutions of religion from those of the government has failed to translate into reality. Indeed, there is evidence to show that Nigeria's troublesome religious conflict, especially in the northeastern and Middle Belt states, will negatively affect the election (Harvard Divinity School, para.3).

In a public lecture by +Adewale Martins (The Catholic Bishop of Abeokuta) to mark his 51<sup>st</sup> Birthday, he noted that:

...there are different ways in which religion impacts on the governance system and administration of state in each context. In the United States where even though a sizable number of people adhere to certain religious beliefs the impact of religion on the development and democracy is rather minimal. The same is not the case in Nigeria where religion has remained a strong influencing factor on the country's political process (Sahara Reporters 2016, para.1).

He noted still that:

While religion has contributed in some ways to the process of nation building, the positive impact of religion on Nigeria's democracy has remained negligible. The manipulation of religion by some powerful

individuals who hide under the guise of religion to pursue selfish interests remains one of the negative effects of religion on the polity. In addition, greed has crept into the religious terrain to the extent that some religious leaders now patronize corrupt rulers to meet their lust for money and other material gains (Sahara Reporters 2016, para.2).

Although, Nigeria is considered constitutionally a secular state, the impact of religion in the country's polity has remained incontestable. It is of course appreciated that religion and politics interact. The truth that is preached in religion is beneficial to the process of governance. Religion could also serve as an effective tool for propelling social mobilization and societal transformation. But this is only possible where religion has not deviated from its original role. Religion could be volatile and vicious where it is expressed with so much passion and allowed to dominate the thinking of the populace. It is in that context that Karl Marx referred to it as the opium of the people. . This is not to say that one should not hold a particular religion view. Perhaps, there have been Constitutional provisions in most nations that provide for the people to hold their accepted religion view (Sahara Reporters 2016, paras. 4-5).

However, in the area of day go day politics that include power retention and even election, we have used religion to propagate lies and fake prophecies. Corroborating this, Martins (2016) noted:

Just recently, some highly placed religious leaders visited the Late President Umaru Y'ardua at Aso Rock, Abuja. They were reported to have prayed for the speedy recovery of the President. Surprisingly, the eminent priests were manipulated to deceive Nigerians with respect to the actual state of health of the President. One of them predicted, with mathematical precision, that the President was going to resume his presidential duties in a matter of days. A few weeks later, the President passed on. Such fake prophecies from highly respected religious leaders have continued to expose religion to ridicule. History is replete with religious zealots. The Christians have their Crusaders and the Muslims their Jihadists. Vestiges of both and recidivists can be found in every modern nation state where these religions co-exist and are practiced. Nigeria, therefore, is not an exception (See Sahara Reporters 2016, para. 10).

In a peculiarly volatile nation as Nigeria, the mixing of religion with politics has done the country more harm than good. For instance, the record of violence in the country and the linkage of religion and politics to many of the riots shows

how dangerous a mix of politics and religion could be. While religion may not necessarily impact negatively on politics if properly observed, the manipulation of religion as a political weapon could set a nation on fire. Nigeria has experienced its fair share of the terrible implications of religion and politics. From the era of Maitatsine riots of 1980 which started in Kano, the bloody upheavals in Bauchi in 1991, and the Jos riots which have remained potent since 2001, among other series of violent conflicts, religion and political undertones have been read into their emergence (Sahara Reporters 2016, paras. 11-13).

The indictment of political leaders in cases of violence in the country demonstrates a particular dangerous feature of the connection between religion and politics in the Nigerian contextual environment. For instance, in its report regarding the Maitatsine, riots "the Justice Anigolu Tribunal found that "there are various levels of involvement, ranging from Maitatsine himself and his followers, to the state government and its agencies, individuals, organizations, the police and the National Security Organisation" (Sahara Reporters 2016, paras. 14-16).

Despite universalistic teaching of all religions and elevation of their true followers to the highest spiritual level, man has suffered because of the dysfunctionality of religion, arising from its archaic institutionalization, corporate character and indoctrination of fanatic and obsolete beliefs and practices. The religious leaders in Nigeria and their political allies seem to have abandoned their responsibilities in the process of nation building. While religious leaders and the political rulers should be more occupied with the question of how to ensure the common good, there is unification between religious practitioners and political leaders that is detrimental to the process of social change. At both the religious and political arenas in Nigeria in recent times, the pursuance of group interest has given way to self-serving enterprise where common goal is no longer valuable and unity unnecessary (Sahara Reporters 2016, paras.17-18).

Religion has become so much the opiate of our politicians that we now tend to ignore warnings about the inherent dangers of mixing religion and politics. In examining the global implications of such a disposition, Anthony Lewis warned that, "religion and extreme nationalism have formed deadly combinations in these decades, impervious to reason" (Sahara Reporters 2016, para. 19).

Since 1999 when Nigeria began another democratic journey, while religious leaders have contributed in some ways to the democratic process, the record has

remained unimpressive in terms of overall usefulness of religion to the current democratic attempt. A number of elections have been held in Nigeria since the advent of this current dispensation, the first being in 1999. The second and the third elections were held in 2003 and 2007 respectively. This is not to talk of the re-run elections that have accompanied some of these cases of fraudulent elections which were later overturned in Election Tribunals or Appeal Courts. While the holding of elections marks a good feature of democracy, the quality of such elections determines whether they conform to acceptable standard in terms of meeting the democratic aspirations and the needs of the people. Unfortunately, most of the elections that have been held in Nigeria since 1999 have received knocks locally and internationally for the level of fraud that was perpetrated.

Just as the political leaders in the country have failed to imbibe democratic principles which preach fairness and equity, they have found allies among the country's religious leaders who assist politicians that have stolen the people's mandates to conduct thanksgiving service in their worship places as a way of 'thanking' God for making it possible for them to rig elections. Why should respected men of God join in celebrating, and even lead, a ceremony to mark the robbery that has been perpetrated in the polling stations and other places connected with the process of electioneering? Under normal circumstances, religious leaders should only adhere to the truth and follow the path of honour and righteousness, but, with due respect, there is a common deviation from this virtue among most of our religious leaders. Quite a large section of the populace have lost confidence in leaders who represent various faiths in the country for the failure of the religious leaders to support what is right at crucial times rather than lining behind corrupt politicians who deny the people the benefits that are associated with democratic governance (See Adewale Martins 2016 as cited in Sahara Reporters 2016).

In all these, we can see that religion and politics in Nigeria for which election is part (of politics) have not gone down well with Reason. Religion has followed an irrational pattern in matters of politics and governance as the arguments by +Adewale Martins showed.

## **Concluding**

All through this paper, we have been able to look at the concepts of Religion and Election (Politics in larger analysis) in Nigeria. Religion is a means by which

people find meaning in ultimate and spiritual sense. It carries a horizontal/vertical disposition.

However, in a country like Nigeria, our findings have shown that Religion which is supposed to take an apolitical or if at all, play a good non-partisan role leading to the development of the human person and society, have become bastardized and politicized. As the general elections of 2019 come closer, there are growing fears among disillusioned patriots and intellectuals that Religion might again be politicized and used to advance the selfish interests of power brokers both in political and religious ambiances.

Will the election be about credibility of political candidates or about voting along religious and ethnic lines? Will various religious ministers come up with various prophecies that overheat the polity and in the court of Reason found out to be mere swerving opinion? Will religious ministers allow religious ceremony to become political campaign sermons? History is replete with all these.

However, here is our recommendations to the issue of Religion and Election in Nigeria.

1. There is need for political/religious reforms. There are many rots in the political and religious space, that one often tends to affect the other. These rots are the reasons why Nigeria as a nation is not working. While Religion can play an advisory and non-partisan role in politics, it must not be politicized or manipulated. It must not be used as a tool in the pursuit, pursuance/execution of power. Nigeria's peoples strong religious disposition must not be used as a tool to render them gullible. The essence of Religion is to lead Man to divine encounter and not to create further problems in the world through it. We therefore recommend the **Religious Electoral Act** to be passed as a bill which can help checkmate both religious/political excesses in electoral years.
2. The need for investment in Education is still important. It is lack of a strong literary culture in Nigeria that breeds religious fanaticism which are on display in political matters on in elections, where violence breaks out especially in the North, when a preferred candidate loses an election. It has become word on the marble that it was in this Nigeria, that a political figure was attributed as saying that the Baboons and the Dogs will be soaked in blood if he loses an election. Proper investment in Education will create an ambience, where we do not see things as do or die.

3. Political campaigns should be issues-based and people-focused. They should not have jots of religious undertone to sway voters. Like we have said, it should be based on credibility and competence than sentiments and other frivolous factors.
4. Religious Leaders should on their part sensitize their congregants on the need to exercise their franchise in a nonpartisan way befitting of citizenship and civic duty. They must not engage in the unsavoury attitude of endorsement of political candidates and also imposing such candidates on their congregants to vote.
5. There is a general need to separate politics from religious but not in a way that leads to expediency or the subversion of morality but rather in a way that leads to sanity and the avoidance of excesses.

Conclusively, we can say that Religion and Election in Nigeria is one that leads to Nigeria's development if Religion is properly used in Nigeria.

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