

The Integrity of Religion in Nigerian Politics, 1999 - 2019

Dr. Moses Adebolu Adetunmbi J.P.

Senior Lecturer in Ecclesiastical Mission,
Church History and Ecumenism, Department of Religious Studies,
Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo, Oyo State
mosesadetunmbi@gmail.com; ma.adetunmbi@acu.edu.ng
+234 803 471 7327

Abstract

That religion plays a major role in the governance of Nigeria is not an understatement but a fact that is unequivocal; it might appear a bit difficult to separate religion from the state because religionists are key players in the governance of the country. That religion has entered into politics and governance is not new; both are as old as the history of the nation itself. It has been discovered that religion has dominated national life of recent. If religion is thus important in the act of governance, it should therefore ensure its integrity is not dented. However, Nigeria has not had it so good since 1999 that the third democracy started because of greed, avarice and corruption. One may then wonder if religion has got any influence on the key players/actors of the art of governance in Nigeria because the scale and forms in which religious leaders are brazenly intruding into politics of recent is alarming. They are supposed to be detached from partisan politics but to encourage politicians to deliver good governance and sustainable development for citizens. The scope of this work covers a twenty year period from 1999 to 2009 which falls within the third republic. This article therefore seeks to situate that integrity of religion is sacrosanct to Nigerian politics before she can graduate from the underdeveloped stage to developing and developed using interdisciplinary approach which was drawn from historical perspectives. It is therefore recommended that in order to protect the integrity of religion in politics, leaders of religion should live and preach uprightiness, probity, accountability and prowess in their daily preaching.

Keywords: Integrity, Politics in Nigeria, Religious leaders, Political leaders, Governance

Introduction

Nigeria as a nation became an independent country on October 1, 1960. The Civilian rule was interrupted by recurring military coups until 1999 when a new constitution was adopted and a civilian government was subsequently enthroned. A former Head of State under the military era, General (Rtd) Chief Olusegun Obasanjo was elected as President and Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces. He was thereafter sworn in on the 29th of May, 1999. He re-contested for the second term in office in 2003 having completed his first tenure and he was declared the winner to run another term of four years with his running mate, Atiku Abubakar.

Having completed his mandatory eight year tenure, he had to give way for another president. He conducted another election in 2007 and Alhaji Musa Yar'Adua was duly elected to be assisted by Goodluck Ebele Jonathan as Vice President. However, following the incapacitation of Musa Yar'Adua due to ill health, Goodluck Jonathan was sworn in as acting President until the death of Yar'Adua on May 5, 2010, when he was now sworn in on the 6th May as substantive President with Architect Nnamadi Sambo as Vice President. Another General Election took place in 2011 between Goodluck Jonathan and Muhammadu Buhari in which Goodluck Jonathan was declared winner. Luck however, was not on the side of Goodluck Jonathan in 2015 when another election was conducted as Muhammadu Buhari had to unseat him as a sitting President which brought an end to the 16 year rule of the Peoples Democratic Party. Another Presidential Election took place in February 2019 between Muhammad Buhari/Yemi Osinbajo of APC and Atiku Abubakar/Peter Obi of PDP which APC won as a party.

All the key players/actors of Nigeria's political system belonged to either Christianity or Islamic religions whose dogmas centred on governance with integrity. From past researches/works, politicians tend to forget their religious faith immediately they cling the political powers and behave as if they are not religious people anymore.

An erstwhile Civil Service Commissioner in Ondo State, Prof. M.O. Olofinboba stated:

“Christians in particular are Christians only by name in politics. It is not the politicians alone that are corrupt but career officers are equally guilty as they are equally involved in taking gratis. They easily forget their callings as Christians once money is involved especially in the areas of inflation in award of contracts.

Equally, Prof. Israel Okoye says:

“Some Christians perceive politics as a ‘worldly’ affair. It is imperative for the church to participate in politics without being partisan. Politics is indispensable in society, the church cannot alienate herself from it because of some of its perverse characteristics”¹

This paper therefore aims at digging deep into how major players of religion have brought dexterity into Nigerian politics with lack of integrity. Christians and Muslims alike have detached themselves from their dogmatic roots.

Integrity and Challenges in Nigeria

Since 2015, concerns around security, economic hardship, recession, increasing unemployment and anti-corruption have been identified by Nigerian populace as major challenges facing the country at large and this has formed major discourse in both print and electronic media not only in Nigeria but worldwide and these centre on integrity. They are:

Security

In addition to the long-standing conflict with Boko Haram in the North-East, there were growing clashes between Fulani Herdsmen and Farmers throughout the Northern Nigeria and the Middle Belt. While these clashes were primarily over access to grazing land, the conflict had been politicized, particularly along religious and ethnic lines. Many lives were lost to these unwarranted clashes. Also, there were growing numbers of kidnappings, armed robberies, thuggery and banditry which contributed to an environment of fear and insecurity in some parts of the country

Economy

Nigeria is an acclaimed Africa's largest economy by Gross Domestic Product (GDP), however, according to the world Poverty Clock, 87 million Nigerians live in extreme poverty, representing 46.7% of the population. The economy entered a deep recession in 2016 with high unemployment particularly among the youth 36.5%. The economy and unemployment were key concerns across the country². With this in view, money played a key role in voting at the polls as there were widespread allegations and counter-allegations of vote buying against the two major political parties of APC and PDP to serve as inducements to influence the elections.

Other Electoral Issues

Some political parties raised concerns over the neutrality of INEC, in particular, relating to one of the commissioners and her potential role in the collation process. The National Assemblies made four attempts since 2015 to amend the Electoral Act to enhance the integrity of the electoral process including the use of the Smart Card Reader a legal requirement. These amendments did not receive Presidential assent most especially in December 2018, because of its proximity to the elections.

The Nexus between Religion, Politics and Integrity

Religion features at the very beginning of our nation's constitution. In the preamble to the 1999 Nigerian Constitution, it is affirmed that we intend to live together as one united country under God. Indeed the overwhelming majority of Nigerians are religious people. We believe in the supremacy of God. We believe that God is the very basis of our individual lives and our corporate existence. We believe in and relate with supernatural realities through prayers and supplications and through the offering of sacrifices. We find churches, mosques, shrines and sundry prayer houses everywhere in the land. We take part in crusades, worship sessions and vigils; we offer sacrifices and observe fasting days and religious holidays; and we go in large numbers on religious pilgrimages to Jerusalem and Mecca, taking pride in being called Jerusalem Pilgrim (JP) or Alhaji for the rest of our lives.

While there is a noticeable decline in religious fervour³ in many parts of the world, the religious enterprise appears to be thriving very much in Nigeria, as more and more company warehouses and private buildings are being converted to prayer houses, and our sports stadia all over the country are being used more for religious crusades than for sporting events. Streets within our towns and villages, as well as inter-state highways are often blocked these days by enthusiastic worshippers who flock to churches and camp meetings⁴. In many of our urban areas, there are as many churches and mosques as there are streets! Within this religious firmament, bishops, pastors, evangelists, faith healers, prophets and visionaries, as well as sheikhs, imams and gurus of all sorts are swelling in number and having a field day. With so many seminaries, monasteries and Bible colleges, churning out thousands of Christian preachers, evangelists and prophets, we have even begun sending missionaries to various countries in Europe and America where they seem to have lost the faith to the agents of secularism.

In the last few years, a new dimension has also been added to the thriving religious enterprise. It is the increased patronage of high ranking public officials who not only openly call for and sponsor regular prayer sessions in different prayer houses, but have themselves become born again Christians and prayer merchants, often appearing at church crusades and prayer vigils with all the paraphernalia of public office, and sometimes grabbing the microphone to deliver sanctimonious homilies and earthshaking prayers. These days, prayer and preaching sessions are no longer limited to churches, mosques and homes. They are held at corporate boardrooms, in government offices, in commercial buses and in open markets. Nigerians going about their daily business can be seen brandishing the Bible or the Koran, the Rosary or Islamic prayer beads. The largest billboards in our towns and cities are those advertising upcoming religious crusades and faith healing carnivals. Religious exclamations such as “to God be the glory,” “praise the Lord,” and “Alaahu wa ku bar,” are often on the lips of Nigerians, at work or at play - from the exalted members of the National Executive Council or Council of State, to the young ones who are about to sit for Common Entrance Examinations. Thus, from all outward indications, Nigerians are a chronically religious

people. There is perhaps no other nation in the modern world with as much religiosity as contemporary Nigeria⁵.

With all this show of religiosity or outward display of piety, one would have expected to see a very high degree of social morality in Nigeria, since all world religions generally promote truth, justice, honesty and probity. But this is not to be the case with Nigeria. There is an embarrassing contradiction between the high ethical demands of the two religions which the majority of Nigerians profess, and the phenomenon of corruption, greed and graft that has earned our country the unenviable status of the “second most corrupt country in the world!” according to Transparency International’s year 2002 Corruption Perception Index⁶.

Religion and Politics in Nigeria: An Overview

Many Nigerians, including seemingly pious Christians and Muslims, who would go to war in defense of their religions, have no qualms of conscience when they pay to obtain yellow cards without the necessary inoculation for which the card is supposed to be evidence. Many of our countrymen and women who flock our churches on Sunday and fill the mosques on Friday are at one time or the other involved in such fraudulent activities as evading tax, issuing and obtaining of fake receipts, over-invoicing and under-invoicing, importation of fake drugs, petty and large-scale bribery, fake audit reports, “creative book-keeping,” “round-tripping,” advance fee fraud⁷, etc. All these practices are so commonplace and so widespread that many young Nigerians are today unable to distinguish between good and evil or between right and wrong and this tells much on the integrity of religion.

The brand of religion that is experiencing the fastest growth in Nigeria today does not seem to have a place for the notion of the cross, suffering and sacrifice which constitute the centre of traditional Christian doctrine and life; the kind of five pillars of Islam which Prophet Mohammad preaches⁸. That is why at a time when Nigeria needs religious leaders and groups to spearhead a moral revolution and an ethical re-orientation for a nation and its people that have been brought low by a life of debauchery, we hear little more than prosperity extravaganza and healing bonanza! At

a time when Christian/Muslim leaders and groups should use the message of the cross/pillars of Islam and a modest austere lifestyle to contradict the crass materialism and extreme economic liberalism of our age that are daily crushing the poor, we are confronted with scandalously expensive churches/mosques, harbouring stinking rich priests/Alfas and nauseatingly flashy Pastors/Muslim clerics, whose marks of success include palatial mansions, state of the art cars and custom designed suits and shoes.

Religion has been thoroughly exploited and manipulated in Nigeria by smart men and women for political or economic gains. Much of the Christian-Muslim related violence and tension in this country, has not been caused by those who genuinely practice the two religions, but by those who use religion as a platform for political ascendancy. Christianity in Nigeria today has been turned into a business with few ethical norms, where populism and charlatanism is the order of the day in the founding and running of churches, and where pride and arrogance, and greed and avarice rather than doctrinal differentiation are responsible for the daily emergence of new churches. It has been noted by many observers that in this era of economic distress, “the quickest and easiest way to make money in Nigeria is to carry a Bible on Sunday and start preaching.”

Both leading candidates at the 2019 Presidential Election – General Muhammadu Buhari and Alhaji Atiku Abubakar chose Christians as their running mates. Accused serially of being a hard-line Muslim Jihadist, Buhari picked Professor Yemi Osinbajo who is an ordained pastor of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, one of the largest denominations in Nigeria, as his Vice Presidential candidate. He hails from the South-West of Nigeria. On his part, Atiku picked Dr. Peter Obi, erstwhile governor of Anambra State, a Christian from the South-East of Nigeria as his Vice Presidential candidate. Though the country’s constitution is silent on the need for those who run for political offices to choose their running mates from the two dominant religions in Nigeria, politicians have considered choosing a running mate from another faith as a strategy that could swing votes at the polls⁹.

In spite of these measures, in the run-up to the elections, the Muslim-Christian divide became a theme in the social media campaign. The

leader of an extremist Islamic Sect called Izala, Sheikh Sani Yahaya Jingir, spoke in a video in Hausa Language to his followers against voting for the PDP candidate, though Atiku is a Muslim. The fundamentalist Izala movement has millions of adherents in North-Central Nigeria as he claimed that Atiku's running mate is from the Igbo stock, who are mainly Christians, but who were accused of killing the Sardauna of Sokoto, the late Prime Minister of Northern Nigeria, in a 1966 coup d'état. Sheikh Jingir is very prominent in Plateau State, such that in 2015, the government appointed him as the leader of the state's delegation to the annual pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia¹⁰. His video, in Hausa Language, went viral. Though it came under serious condemnation and was made to retract the message on a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) Hausa Radio program, watchers of the political events in Nigeria knew it stuck among Muslim faithful.

In Kaduna State, where there is the majority Muslim and minority Christians, the governor, Malam Nasir el-Rufai, a Muslim who is a confidant of Buhari, snubbed Christians in the southern part of the state, by appointing a Muslim as his deputy for the March 9 governorship election. He argued that even if the Pope were his running mate in the elections, Christian-dominated Southern Kaduna would not vote for him.

Apart from the Governor of Kaduna State, an allegation that Buhari has an agenda to Islamize Nigeria became prominent during the campaign. All the country's service chiefs are Muslims from the North, the Finance Minister, Zainab Ahmed, is a Muslim from the North; the Minister of Justice and Attorney-General, Abubakar Malami, is a Muslim from the North, and recently a Christian Chief Justice of Nigeria, Justice Walter Onnoghne, was removed and replaced with a Shariah Law judge, Justice Ibrahim Tanko Muhammad.

Over the last four years, Muslim-Fulani Jihadists had destroyed Christian communities in Adamawa State, killing hundreds of persons and destroying churches and properties owned by Christians. The Christian leaders led by CAN Chairman and Catholic Bishop of Yola, Most Rev. Stephen Dami Mamza, claimed that Buhari did not visit them during those dark days; neither did government send relief materials to those

displaced in the violence. Also, Leah Sharibu, a Christian girl has been languishing in Boko Haram enclave since Feb. 21, 2018. Though she was abducted along with over 100 Muslim girls from Government Science and Technical School in Dapchi, Yobe State, government negotiated the release of the Muslim girls but has failed to secure the release of Leah Sharibu. For these reasons, the Christian leaders declined any commitment to vote for Buhari in the elections.

Politicians, in their attempt to win the votes of Christians, patronized Christian groups and sought the endorsement of frontline pastors¹¹. Prominent among the preachers they patronized is a Catholic priest, Father Ejike Mbaka, whose ministry attracts a huge crowd in the South-East of Nigeria. Agents of both President Buhari and the main challenger, Atiku Abubakar, visited the Adoration Ground in Enugu, ostensibly to seek the Reverend Father's blessing. An endorsement by Mbaka, a populist preacher who is followed by millions of poor and downtrodden in Enugu State, could sway the votes of the congregation in favor of the endorsed politician. In December 2018, Father Mbaka's romance with politicians turned scandalous, with his prediction of victory for Buhari in the Presidential election. As a result of the partisan outlook of his activities, the Secretary General of the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria (CSN), Reverend Father Ralph Madu, had to issue a statement reprimanding Father Mbaka.

Reverend Father Madu said in his statement,

“- As has always been our stand, the Catholic Church in Nigeria as clearly stated in their August 7, 2018 directives, remains apolitical and does not support or subscribe to any political party. Our concern is for a peaceful election process seen to be free, fair, credible and just, and a democratic governance that guarantees peace, justice, equity, among others¹² -”

While religion has always been an important factor in Nigerian politics, the scale and forms in which religious leaders are brazenly intruding into

politics recently is alarming. Ideally, Nigerian religious leaders, like traditional rulers, are supposed to be detached from partisan politics by virtue of their positions as members of an honourable and pious class whose political responsibility, if anything, is to advocate for peaceful elections and encourage politicians to deliver good governance and sustainable development for citizens. Clerics are also expected to promote justice and social rights while avoiding partisan politics as partisanship could, potentially, lead to conflicts of interest. When clerics choose politics over preaching, or choose something in-between, they should shun using religion to support their political interests.

In what is a bizarre foray into politics, prominent Muslim and Christian clerics publicly announced their chosen candidates for the 2019 elections. When justifying their public support for a politician, they often quote religious texts or claim prophecy from God; For instance, the Presiding Bishop of Divine Seed of God Chapel Ministries, Ibadan, Pastor Wale Olaganju, reported a prophecy in October 2018 in which he said God told him that Buhari would lose to Atiku. This could be interpreted as a sacred message from God, except that Pastor Olaganju also proceeded to condemn President Buhari, who was seeking re-election under the All Progressive Congress (APC), in favour of the opposing People's Democratic Party's (PDP) Alhaji Atiku Abubakar. Olaganju claimed that "the Yoruba will not vote for Buhari, but for Atiku... [and] only a mature son of the devil will support Buhari". It is obvious that the Pastor has diluted his prophecy with political maneuverings.

Equally, the national chairman of *Jama'atu Izatul Bid'ah Wa Iqamatus Sunnah* (Society for the Removal of Innovation and Re-establishment of Sunnah, aka JIBWIS), Sheikh Abdullahi Bala Lau, endorsed President Buhari as the preferred candidate of the Islamic sect and directed all followers of the sect to vote him in the 2019 elections.

Incorporating Integrity into Religion and Politics in Nigeria

The word *integrity* comes from the same Latin root as *integer* and implies a wholeness of person. Just as we would talk about a whole number, so also we can talk about a whole person who is undivided. A person of integrity is living rightly, not divided, nor being a different person in different circumstances. A person of integrity is the same person in private that he or she is in public.

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word translated “integrity” means “the condition of being without blemish, completeness, perfection, sincerity, soundness, uprightness, wholeness.” Integrity in the New Testament means “honesty and adherence to a pattern of good works.” Jesus is the perfect example of a man of integrity. After He was baptized, He went into the wilderness to fast for forty days and nights, during which time Satan came to Him at His weakest to try to break His integrity and corrupt Him. Jesus was wholly man and wholly God at the same time, and He was tempted in every way as we are, yet He never sinned – Hebrews 4:15. Jesus is the only one who was ever without blemish, perfect, completely truthful, and always showing a pattern of good works.

Christians are called to be like Jesus. In Christ, Christians are new creations and can be considered without blemish before God – 2 Corinthians 5:17, 21; Ephesians 1:4-8. “Integrity” in the world today implies moral incorruptibility. Christians should be those who cannot be bribed or compromised because they serve God rather than men – Colossians 3:17, 23; Acts 5: 29. Integrity, therefore, not only implies undividedness, but moral purity as well. In 1 Kings 9:4, God instructs Solomon to walk with “integrity of heart and uprightness” as his father did. David says in 1 Chronicles 29:17, “I know, my God, that you test the heart and are pleased with integrity.” And in Psalm 78:70-72 we read that “David shepherded them with integrity of heart, with skillful hands.”

There are two concepts in Islam that, among others, define our understanding of integrity; its meaning and method of attainment. These are purity and wholeness. We find that the Islamic definition of integrity resembles the scientific and natural interpretations of the word more than the philosophical or theoretical understanding; insofar that it refers less

to the consistency with which human behavior is aligned to a given moral or ethical dogma, and more to the extent to which human behavior is brought into agreement with intrinsic human nature.

Integrity in Islam refers to the restoration and maintenance of that natural and primal state of purity. Allah says: "Set your face to the religion of Islam in sincerity which is Allah's fitrah upon which He created humankind. There is no changing in the creation of Allah. That is the right deen but most people know not." [Quran 30:30]. When we talk of integrity, we generally refer (at least in part) to the realization of that nature which is literally integral to our being; of being true to our intrinsic qualities and character.

Recommendations

There should be an arm's length relationship between religious leaders and politicians. In other words, the former should strive to promote peaceful elections by enabling freedom of choice among their followers. In addition, religious leaders should encourage politicians to deliver good governance and avoid corruption, while avoiding partisan politics. This would not only help in consolidating secularism in the country's governance structure but would also allow citizens to exercise their democratic rights in a free and fair atmosphere. Clerics should remember that their duty is to ensure there is order in politics, while being aware that words of God will be better preached when not manipulated to serve the interests of politicians.

Conclusion

Using religion to support politicians has the potential to worsen religious intolerance and erode social capital among citizens at a time when Nigerians need to be more tolerant and united. While the fear of nationwide post-election violence is low given that the major presidential candidates are Muslims from northern Nigeria, there is still the pertinent risk of deteriorating social cohesion and religious tolerance at lower levels of the society. Differences in political choices of religious leaders could worsen inter and intra-religious tensions, endangering peaceful

coexistence and mutual understanding in the country. For example, Shiite Muslims could interpret JIBWIS's public endorsement of President Buhari as a direct support for his hostile approach towards them, which could further deepen animosity between followers of the two Islamic sects. It would, therefore, be in the interest of national security if clerics do not get caught up in partisan politics.

ENDNOTES

¹ M.O. Olofinboba, *Involvement of Christians in Politics in Nigeria*, An Address delivered at the Ekiti Diocese Clergy School, July 2015

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³ Anjov, Terfa Kahaga, *Religion and the Nigerian Nation*, Makurdi, Lanrad Prints, 2010, 77

⁴ Erwin Fahlbusch, *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2005, 307 Retrieved 18 June 2012

⁵ A. Adenugba, & A. Omolawal., "Religious Values and Corruption in Nigeria – A Dislocated Relationship." *Journal of Educational and Social Research*, MCSEER Publishing, Rome, Italy, 4 no. 3 (May, 2014), 45

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⁹ Punch Newspaper of February 12, 2019

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