


Religion as a Vital Instrument for Repositioning Nigerian Politics for Nation Building

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Abstract

Religion and politics are intertwined and prominent in human society. Religion interacts with politics and government consciously or unconsciously. The paper evaluates the problem of corrupt political leadership as the factor that impedes nation building in Nigeria. The study aims at demonstrating how religion could serve as a vital instrument towards restructuring Nigerian politics for nation building. Religion could act as a double-edged sword through its influence on politics, which could either enhance or impede nation building depending on its application. Using analytical and historical methods, the paper discovered that nation building could only be actualised through functional application of religion in Nigerian politics. Religion has the ability to unite and foster harmony, peaceful co-existence and effective governance that can engender nation building. The study recommends that political leaders should desist from politics of calumny, which portrays religion in bad light. In practicing politics in Nigeria, the political actors should focus on the positive aspects of religion and shun the negative features that portray it as agent of disunity. The paper concludes that God initiated politics; and it is His intention that committed religious adherents be involved in politics for good governance and nation building.

Key Words: Religion, Repositioning, Nigeria, Politics, and Nation Building

Introduction

Religion is a prominent and indispensable feature in human society. It is as old as mankind; hence it equates with human nature and will possibly linger throughout man’s existence. As a social being, man is both a religious and political animal. Man is perhaps the only animal with a religion, which makes him a religious being. Implicitly, religion is a pervasive phenomenon; practiced in all human societies (Okafor, 2004). Equally, politics is an integral aspect of human existence. Every individual plays politics consciously or unconsciously, from the home front through school, workplace to other spheres of the society. This orchestrates the assertion of the illustrious philosopher and intellectual colossus, Aristotle that man is a political animal (Oshewolo and Maren 2015). This relates to man’s continuous influence on situations around him; and depicts the fact that man is political and inescapably involved in power play directly or indirectly. Interestingly, politics and religion are interrelated concepts that interact continuously. Both originated from God and are part of the society.

Nevertheless, the relationship is composite due to the intricacies innate in both of them. Obviously, in Nigerian social arena, religion and politics have strong affinity that politicians often utilize for their own advantage. A school of thought regards both as incompatible from their own perspective. Little wonder therefore, some people who are deeply religious consciously dissociate themselves from politics, which they brand a ‘dirty game’. Although, Nigeria is regarded as a secular nation due to multiplicity of religions practiced in the country, yet, Nigerians are highly religious (Gbadamosi, 2013). It is against this backdrop that some unscrupulous political gladiators maneuver religion for their selfish purposes. The three dominant religions in the country are Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion. They all allude to the existence of a Supernatural Being who entrenched politics and oversees human affairs, with emphasis on established ethical codes of conduct which guides man to live and act morally.

Presently, the political tempo in Nigeria is very high; there is tension everywhere due to the upcoming election slated for 25th of February and 11th March, 2023 respectively. It is aimed at producing political leaders across the nation, namely: the President, State Governors and Members of the National Assemblies. Religion has been a sturdy decisive feature in Nigerian politics ranging from mode of governance, formulation of policies and the electoral process. Religion is capable of reshaping Nigerian politics due to its unique functions, and the fact that most humans engage in politics, whether partisan politics, electioneering, membership of one religious body or the other. Umeanolue (2019) posits that every religion has its ethical code of conduct with emphasis on morality and integrity. Nevertheless, religion has ambivalent nature which could enhance or mar nation building depending on its application.

Undoubtedly, Nigeria is experiencing severe socio-economic and political crises regardless of her reversion to democratic governance. The nation is in a state of abject poverty, famine, undernourishment, diseases, illiteracy and other forms of hardship. The underlying cause of this suffering is corrupt political leadership. Some of the political leaders do not have the fear of God, hence their inability to manage the nation. Rather than design a blueprint on how to develop the nation, most of them vying for political positions engage in vote buying by distributing money and food items to the populace to vote them into power. Conversely, most of the electorates are ignorantly nonchalant to voting, oblivious of the fact that their franchise is an occasion to entrench good leadership. Despite the sorry situations and suffering of the masses presently, most Nigerians, especially the youth, tend to be indifferent with regard to elections.

Majority did not register for the permanent voters card (PVC). Some that managed to register are not interested in casting their votes on the scheduled date for the election, while a host of others have not been able to collect their PVC from the Independent National Electoral Commission offices (INEC). In spite of the fact that the proposed 2023 general election is less than three weeks away at the time of writing this work, there are piles of PVCs waiting to be claimed by their owners. The detection of the problem of corrupt political leadership as a factor that impedes nation building in Nigeria has therefore motivated this write up.

The study aims at demonstrating how religion could serve as a vital instrument towards restructuring Nigerian politics for nation building. To achieve this objective, the paper adopts analytical and historical methods. The work is split into six segments. The first segment is the introduction, followed by conceptualisation of the key concepts of religion, politics and nation building. The third section concentrates on the relationship between religion and politics. The fourth section discusses religion as a strategy for good political leadership in Nigeria. While the fifth and sixth sections cover the concluding remarks and recommendations respectively.

Conceptualising Religion, Politics and Nation Building Religion

Scholars have divergent views on the definition of religion. As a concept, religion is a mixture of two realities: the profane and the supernatural. Both should therefore reflect in a good definition of religion. According to Imo (1986) religion relates with diverse, figurative expressions, and suitable reactions to that which humans consciously avow as being of unlimited significance to them. The essential proportions of religion comprise the belief system which contain the sacred reality of people's experience through revelation, divine illumination; ritual exercise which are prescribed for believers as proper individual response with respect to relationship to transcendental being or moral principles which direct people's conduct towards others; together with cultic organisation (Oshewolo and Maren, 2015).

Obiefuna (2018) defines religion as an experience in human society; a component of man's existence which shapes societal behaviour and institutions such as marriage, health, politics,

law, education (formal and informal), and economy. Obiefuna's view of religion adequately corresponds with the present study's understanding of religion. As such, it will be adopted in the work.

Politics

The word politics originates from the Greek term *polis* generally interpreted as a city state. It refers to logical attempt, executed within the society, to stimulate other people in pursuit of some proposed plans initiated and nurtured by the player. It entails assembling and sustaining support for human venture. Politics encompasses all spheres of human endeavour, namely: religion, business, and sports, among others (Dickerson & Flanagan, 1988). Politics can also be viewed as a procedure by which collection of people agree together on salient issues. It involves individuals who resolve on how to govern a state (Ituma, 2009).

Politics deals with groups' attitude and issues that concern choice of government such as institution and management of political parties, voting or exercise of power. It also involves government resolutions and enforcement of law and order at all levels of the society (Gbadamosi, 2013). Through politics, governance becomes achievable and efficient for the development of a nation. Those in government are chosen to govern or oversee the affairs a people, state or nation.

Nation Building

Nation building has been defined by Kanu (2004) as a dialectical trend in which the individual and society cooperate with their corporeal, natural and inter-human surroundings with the aim of converting them for the benefit of humans. According to Ojo and Akolo (2021), nation building refers to the process of erecting or configuring a society by means of the power of the state. It could also be regarded as the unification of individuals within the state in order to keep it politically secure and feasible. Nation building is a crucial aspect of every human society. It is a process of modification from one shape to another whose features differ and are better than that of the initial.

The forms of nation building in focus are humans' religious, moral, political, social, cultural and economic life, which are of great importance. The essence of nation building is to bring positive development to the society that is not exclusively in material wealth. But include a plethora of those possessions essential for meaningful and upright life in line with human dignity and God's purpose. It is possible for a nation to abound in substantial wealth, yet the populace experience abject poverty and moral debauchery that hinders development as found currently in Nigeria.

Relationship between Religion and Politics in Nigeria

Religion has been a strong decisive factor in political leadership and policy formulation in Nigeria from the colonial era until date. This is because religion and politics are interrelated. Most individuals that engage in politics are adherents of different religious groups. This explains the reason for religious politics in the country. Incidentally, religion could act as a double-edged sword through its influence on politics in Nigeria. Thus, it could either enhance

or impede nation building depending on its application (Umeanolue, 2019). It is the manipulation of religion by political actors, as found in Nigeria, that makes it dysfunctional. In Gbadamosi's (2013) view, religion and politics are two inseparable institutions in human perception and structure. He further remarks that political leaders are God's earthly representatives, while citing Mbiti's thesis which portrays Africans as "notoriously religious". The United States of America, which is generally regarded as a secular state, reflects the tie between religion and politics through the unique inscription in their dollar "In God we trust". The expression clearly explains that God is directly or indirectly involved in the political leadership of every nation.

In the Bible, God is also projected as the author of politics or government in the administration of justice, in political parlance (Genesis 9:6). In a nutshell, God is presented as the originator of politics and the architect of creation, who in his infinite knowledge made provision for politics and governance at creation (Genesis 1:26-28). If politics was instituted by God, his representatives have to perform a unifying responsibility of overseeing the entire nation. This, therefore, indicates that the author of politics would be fully involved in the polity. Certainly, religion is an integral part of the state because religious practitioners engage in politics. By virtue of this fact, religious adherents are definitely involved and affected directly or indirectly in policy formulation that could be favourable or unfavourable.

In Nigeria's post-independence period, it could be inferred that religion has become a more formidable factor in her political arena. Despite the fact that Nigeria is acclaimed a secular state, religion manifests in various forms in the nation's affairs, especially in politics. Oshewolo and Maren (2015) aver that prior to the advent of Christianity and Islam, all political activities were within the ambit of the African Traditional Religion(s). Chief priests were famous and exercised tremendous power. Ofili (2021) echoes this assertion as she asserts that paradoxically, the three main religious groups in Nigeria: African Traditional Religion, Christianity and Islam have the tendency to interfere with the political dealings of the country by reason of their influential disposition. Inadvertently, for a very long time now, religion has always wielded a unique influence on politics in the Nigerian nation.

In various political dispensations, religion has been a determinant force in the choice of principal officers at different levels of government, especially the presidential and national assembly elections. For example, in the just concluded elections in Nigeria, most Nigerians, particularly the Christians, frowned at the All Progressive Congress' (APC) Muslim/ Muslim presidential ticket. Some argued that in a multi-religious nation like Nigeria, political candidates from the main religions should be adequately represented at the federal level. Besides, campaign and voting are often based on religious sentiments, either for or against candidates. This explains the reason some Muslims will not support Christian

candidates and vice-versa. These instances are evidences that political parties and administrations are cognizance of the invaluable role of religion in an electoral process and governance. According to Umeanolue (2019), in 2003, Major General Buhari the then presidential aspirant of the All Nigerian Peoples Party was criticised with respect to his position on religious matters. It was alleged that he canvassed against Christian candidates not to be voted for by Muslims. He was therefore tagged an advocate of the Sharia law and fundamentalist, which might have contributed to his loss in 2011 presidential election in Nigeria.

Religious organisations do not shy away from issues that pertain to politics; hence, they offer prayers for political leaders and the country as an entity. At public gatherings such as political rallies and national gatherings, political leaders consciously ensure that the two prominent religions are involved in the opening and closing prayers. In a situation where a Christian says the opening prayer, the closing prayer is said by a Muslim or vice versa. The essence is to guard against conflict, which might escalate into violence.

Moreover, public holidays are observed for both Christian and Islamic festivals, usually declared as work free days. Ironically, no public holiday has ever been declared for traditional festivals by the federal government of Nigeria. This could be attributed to the tolerant nature of the traditional religion, or the fact that its festivals are segmented. Festivals that could last for a week or more are celebrated locally and at different periods by various communities unlike Christianity and Islam which have specific periods of celebration (Umeanolue, 2019).

Presently, the Nigerian government sponsors people of different religious faiths, especially Christians and Muslims, on pilgrimage to the Holy Land on yearly basis; they also erect Chapels and Mosques in government houses and other public places. Some religious crises in Nigeria are also suspected to be sponsored by politicians. Thus, Gbadamosi (2013) observes that politics influences religious thoughts, practices and beliefs in Nigeria. Religious leaders, pastors, imams or African traditionalists often times engage in politics with their members because it is inherent in humans. From the foregoing, it can be deduced that religion and politics are intertwined and positive religious influence on politics results in nation building.

Religion as a Strategy for Good Political Leadership in Nigeria

One of the ways out of bad leadership in Nigeria is for religion to positively influence politics. This could be made possible when religious practitioners with credible characters and the fear of God participate in politics and assume political leadership. Both religion and politics are integral parts of the society. They are therefore considered inseparable. The common relationship between them portends that bad governance that has contributed largely to stagnation of nation building in Nigeria can be curbed through a positive application of religion by both the government and the

governed. Attansay, (2006) enumerates some possible steps by which religion can enhance good governance to include: Identity building, personal discipline, accountability, spiritual advancement, trust and community spirit. Religion is a viable institution that can entrench purposeful and sincere leadership devoid of corruption, ethnicity, and political showmanship which entails positive and effective transformation of the society.

Religion has valid ethical codes of conduct that serve as a compass for political office holders. It propagates reconciliation among differing political groups for the purpose of nation building. The reason is because peace brings cooperation, which engenders development. According to Apenda (2006), religion provides an invaluable service to humanity. It is a factor within the system that gives direction to politics, education, economy, and cultural expressions of a nation. This was evidenced in United States of America in the 19th century where religion functioned as a channel for positive reform to salvage the nation from moral decadence and a voice for the subjugated and exploited class in the society. Certainly, it impels political leaders to integrate norms into rules of regulations which advances welfare and defends the rights of citizens within and outside the nation.

In addition, religion re-orientates people's mindset from insensitive and inhuman leadership to humane and patriotic governance. Obviously, religion has a place in ensuring good governance in Nigerian political leadership. Religious leaders have the responsibility of creating awareness of political process to their members as well as encouraging them to participate in partisan politics. Such understanding would propel the committed religious adherents to contest for leadership positions and also seek political appointments. The leadership of this nation should not be left for selfish and unscrupulous politicians who have nothing to offer. Rather, genuine Christians and Muslims with integrity should be fully involved in partisan politics in order to offer leadership that will honour God through transformation of individuals and the nation at large.

As an agent of social control, religion enables the leaders and the populace to abide by the norms of the society, which is the foundation of politics. This can be achieved through credible electoral process that will produce legitimate leaders who will govern with the fear of God and exhibit good characters to be emulated by obedient followers. Umeanolue, (2019) affirms that such move would ultimately erode the challenges of political instability, insecurity, violence, maladministration, disunity, international stigmatization and lack of interest in politics, which are possible consequences of electoral misconduct.

Furthermore, religion inculcates the discipline and determination to adhere to oath of office. At the inception of every political dispensation, political office holders are made to invoke divine assistance and pledge to rule with the fear of God through the oath administered to them. Since those involved claim to be religious, such oath should not be taken

for granted but the content should be internalized and imbibed, because it is a guarantee for good governance. On this note, Danjibo and Oladeji (2009) lament that since Nigerian independence, religious moral values have not produced the desired change in governance; hence these positive features appear to be hypothetical. Obviously, the slogan of the current President of Nigeria, Muhamadu Buhari which states that "change begins with me" is very paramount for a positive impact. These religious values, if properly applied would definitely instill a sense of moral consciousness and selfless service in the minds of political leaders; and spur them to be proactive and affect lives positively in the course of their political assignments.

Recommendations

In line with the discussion in the work, the following recommendations are hereby given:

- i. It is imperative for religious practitioners with credible characters to actively participate in politics and assume political leadership to enable them impute religious virtues into political affairs for nation building.
- ii. In practicing politics in Nigeria, the political actors should focus on the positive aspects of religion and shun the negative features that portray it as agent of disunity.
- iii. Religious leaders and practitioners should make it a point of duty to pray for political leaders and political process, rather than complaints and unconstructive criticisms.
- iv. Government officials or politicians who are genuine religious practitioners should be conscious of their position as God's representatives; operate in accordance with religious norms and be patriotic in order to make the desired impact.
- v. Religious leaders, particularly Christian and Muslim Leaders should always organize rallies to address socio - political issues and sensitize people on voters' registration; the need to vote as well as monitoring of elections to ensure that credible individuals who have the fear of God and are morally sound are elected into political office to avoid misuse of political power.

Conclusion

It has been deciphered that religion, in the work, has enormous roles to play in order to reposition Nigerian politics spiritually and physically for nation building. Politics and religion are indispensable aspects of human society and are interrelated having originated from God. Bad leadership in Nigeria stems from the endemic corruption of the people in the society. Indeed, Nigerian political leadership has been branded 'corrupt' because the entire society is corrupt. Ituma (2009) rightly posits that the caliber of people that emerge as leaders in a state is based on the category of people in that state.

Corrupt citizens of a state will ultimately produce corrupt leaders. While a state with upright individuals will produce

good and patriotic leadership. Politics is not necessarily a dirty game when it is played according to rules. Committed religious adherents with integrity should be involved in politics to reform the polity through religious virtues which include love, selfless service among others. Adherents of various religions in Nigeria, whether politicians, religious leaders or the governed should guard against hypocrisy, have good mindset and practice true religion as exemplified by their founders like Jesus Christ and Muhammad. Every religion has its ethical code of conduct with emphasis on morality and integrity which will serve as a guide for government officials and enable them to willingly transform this country. This could be made possible when religious practitioners with credible characters and the fear of God assume political leadership.

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