

INTEGRATING MORALITY INTO NIGERIAN POLITICS: A PERSPECTIVE FROM JAMES-MICHAEL OKPALAONWUKA

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Abstract

This work search for a means of integrating morality into Nigerian politics through the lenses of Dr. James-Michael Okpalaonwuka (JMO) who attributes Nigeria's political turmoil to the alienation of morality from Nigerian politics. The absolute divorce of morality from Nigerian party politics has resulted in Nigeria's human and infrastructural underdevelopment, further leading to the dehumanization of Nigerian citizens, widespread hunger, poverty, disease, political apathy etc., which have become the order of the day. This existential challenge pricks the following questions in the mind of the researcher: What factors contribute to the erosion of morality in Nigerian politics? How can ethical frameworks be integrated into Nigerian political institutions and practices? What role can religious values play in promoting morality in Nigerian politics? What are the challenges of integrating morality into Nigerian politics? How can these be resolved in the light of JMO's moral theology? In an attempt to proffer solutions to these problems, the researcher employs the method of analysis. This work reveals that while the political problems of Nigeria have an age-long history and the political elites' zeal to fight any institutional change that would affect the status quo, conscientious enlightenment and active political participation of all Nigerians is needed to integrate morality into Nigerian politics.

Key words: James-Michael Okpalaonwuka, Politics, Nigerian Politics, Morality, Corruption.

Introduction

Recent political dispensations in Nigeria has compelled the people to rationalized politics as a dirty game (Ajayi, 2024), played by only those who have no moral sense or with little or no moral worth left in them (Ejizu, 1989) and shouldn't be participated in by true Christians (Christian Association of Nigeria, undated, cited by Orji, 2024). Sadly, politics in Nigeria has glaringly drifted away from the independence of creating "a just, peaceful and prosperous society where no one shall be oppressed" (Ejizu, 1989). Several scholars attribute Nigeria's political turmoil to the alienation of morality from Nigerian politics (Okpalaonwuka, 1997). Nigerian political history is one that is replete with gross negligence to ethical principles and values that knit human society together. Immorality and corruption among today's political leaders is a testament of corrupt practices that dates back to the pre-colonial era (Igboin, 2016). The absolute divorce of morality from Nigerian party politics has remained a societal deficiency that has eaten deep into the fabrics of Nigeria's human and infrastructural development. Politics without morality that is practiced in Nigeria accounts for the dehumanization of Nigerian citizens. This is elaborately made manifest by the widespread hunger, poverty, disease, banditry, political apathy etc., which have become the order of the day - all of these further resulting in political instability and excruciating economic downturn.

Nigeria's political challenges have been argued to have resulted from little values which political leaders and Nigerians at large place on "all-important issues of good conduct, discipline, loyalty, patriotism, accountability, transparency, social justice, covenant-keeping and other positive values in their daily dealings" (Atoi, et al, 2020, p. 115). However, no one is

born corrupt. Corruption is acquired by individuals from the society. A society without adequate welfare system and support for its citizens oftentimes engenders greed, individualism, materialism and the search for private gains. Thus, Okpalaonwuka (1997) situates corruption in Nigeria in the weak sociopolitical and economic system that fails to guarantee the social security of Nigerians while in or out of office.

Needless to say, this has, as a matter of urgent necessity, led to philosophical and academic inquiry towards finding a lasting solution to this threatening, precarious situation. In tandem with the above, the writer asks: What is the current state of morality in Nigerian politics? What factors contribute to the erosion of morality in Nigerian politics? How can ethical frameworks be integrated into Nigerian political institutions and practices? What role can religious values play in promoting morality in Nigerian politics? How can these be resolved in the light of Dr. James-Michael Okpalaonwuka's moral theology? In an attempt to proffer solutions to these problems, the researcher employs the method of analysis and also relying on qualitative research design made vast use of secondary sources like textbooks, journal articles and internet sources. This work reveals that while the political problems of Nigeria has an age-long history, a conscientious effort from the agents of political socialization like the Church, in a catch-them-young approach, and active involvement in politics by Christians would be instrumental in salvaging Nigerian polity.

Definition of Terms

Politics

As every other social science term or concept, politics has no universal definition. Etymologically, the term politics came from the Greek word polis, meaning relating or belonging to the polis or city-state. In modern times, politics is seen as the study of the state, its aims and objectives, institutions through which these aims and objectives are realized, its relation with the individuals in the state and its relation with other states (Ogbenika, 2022). Politics is concerned with "who gets what, when and how" (Laswell, 1958, cited by Orji, 2024, p. 56). Obasekore (2018, p. 189) defines politics as "the process through which political power is attained for the betterment of the people through the rule of law in achieving the common good and satisfies the needs and aspirations of the peoples in the society. It is the process of making decisions that is applicable to the citizens irrespective of their political or ethnic considerations."

Politics is a human activity that is concerned with power acquisition for the welfare of the people. Aristotle saw politics as a conduct that aims at the welfare of the people, the attainment of the common good, the highest good which is happiness. Thus, traditional philosophy has defined politics as a venture that seeks to create an enabling environment for social cooperation, social order, justice, progress and development. It is meant to create balance in the society and bring about the betterment of the people. It is supposed to be an ethical activity that would ensure the good of the social system (Iordaah, 2023, 189). Politics is an art of governance that is aimed at regulating social order by managing, directing, enforcing and mobilizing both human and resources (Ejizu, 1989). Politics is a means of maximizing scarce resources and talent for the common good. This underscores the fact that politics involves the integration of people of diverse talents and orientations in the pursuit of a common interest which is more or less, the welfare of the individual and the general public.

Unfortunately, the practice of politics in Nigeria has been bastardized to the extent that good people are scared of getting involved for fear of getting to compromise their morals, engaging in immoral acts, ritual killing or getting killed themselves. Politics in Nigeria has crystallized to the definition given to it by the Portuguese dictator, Antonio Salazar according to whom

politics refers to: "All those noisy and incoherent promises, the impossible demands, the hotchpotch of unfounded ideas and impractical plans, opportunism that cares neither for truth nor justice, the inglorious chase after unmerited fame, the unleashing distortion of facts and all that feverish and sterile fuss" (Gbagir, 2022, p. 744).

Morality

The etymology of the word moral traces back to the Latin word *mores* and the Greek word *ethos* both concerning habits, customs, ways of life..."(Lacey, 1996, p. 221). Morality has to do with the assessment of human conduct as good or bad, right or wrong. An action is adjudged good or bad, right or wrong to the extent it aligns or deviates from the nature of man (Ejizu, 1989). Morality or ethics is aimed at regulating or controlling human action as social and political being.

Man, understood as a social, inter-subjective and political being, lives and interacts with others. His actions and conducts impacts others significantly hence, moral rules, ideas, virtues and guides are necessary for ensuring a harmonious co-existence. Moral choices build on the interplay of rationality and intention making man a moral agent who is responsible for his actions. He is blameworthy or praiseworthy for his actions depending on the effect such actions produce. Actions that foster the common good, harmonious relationship and advances human nature are considered good while those that contradict these ideals are considered bad.

Morality is often viewed as a derivative from God's revelation to mankind. Morality is often associated with religious beliefs. Dr. James-Michael Okpalaonwuka sees Christian ethics a derivative of the Holy Scripture built on the person of Jesus Christ. Obedience to the laws of the Scripture is seen as an obligation and allegiance which the Christian faithful owe to God. Corroborating the religious foundation of morality, Waziri (2014, cited by Obasekore, 2018, p. 188) defines morality as:

A comprehensive term that includes righteousness, good character, and the body of moral qualities and virtues prescribed in Islamic religious texts. The idea (of morality) is that mankind will acquire and follow the body of moral qualities in order to seek God's pleasure and to treat fellow human beings in the best possible manner in our dealings with one another in the society.

This succinctly explains that moral rules flow from religious principles which inspire adherents to do good and avoid evil, especially since evil attracts punishment. All laws, taboos and behavioural codes meant for controlling human conduct all derive their compulsion from religion (Saiyou and Oladipo, 2022).

An Overview of Nigerian Politics

It is important to note at the beginning that the Nigeria we know today never existed but became a British experiment after the partitioning of Africa, after which the British inherited Nigeria as their own piece of the national cake - Africa, by powerful European countries in what was termed the West African Conference held in Berlin in 1884 with no African representative. It was in this conference that the Europeans created the problems that have continued to haunt Africa and Nigeria in particular. Prior to the partitioning, Africans lived in small communities (made up of people of the same or similar cultural, religious and political orientation) that governed themselves as they deemed befitting for them. This explains why the Oyo Empire and the old Sokoto Sultanate a centralized system while the Igbo were more acephalous and

republican (Fashagba, 2021). The partitioning of Africa was in the Europeans scramble for colonies and resources.

Prior to the 1914 Amalgamation, Nigeria was governed as the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria and the Colony and the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria. But for administrative convenience the Northern and Southern Protectorates were amalgamated on January 1, 1914 without any consideration or consent of the people of different ethnicities involved. This sheer negligence would later continue to traumatize Nigeria as evidenced in inter-ethnic struggles, competition and acrimonious political tension and instability, military interventions in politics, sectionalism, ethno-religious violence, economic crisis, increasing poverty, terrorism and banditry kidnapping, etc. While the 1960 independence ushered in some glimpse of hope for a Nigeria where there would be peaceful coexistence, freedom and fair treatment (Ejizu, 1989), the fundamental problems that lay buried at the foundation of Nigeria keep resurfacing.

Less than a decade after the independence, Nigeria witness the first of her many military interventions in her polity. The military involvement in Nigerian politics was attributed to some political, economic and social reason (Okpalaonwuka, 1997). Intermittent return to democratic government equally failed as well as further divided Nigeria along the lines of ethno-religious stratification. For instance, the attempt to return to democracy and subsequent sanction of political parties saw the formation of parties along ethnic lines.

Since the return to democracy in 1999, Nigeria has for the first time in its history enjoyed the longest period of civilian rule even though it is difficult to properly situate what Nigeria practice as democracy. More unfortunate is the fact that, as if cursed, the polity is incredibly bereft of morality, lacks nationalistic and patriotic leaders but rather, the leadership is filled by people who brazenly project sectional interest as national interest. Fashagba (2021) observes that:

...loyalty to the Nigerian state is a rarity in Nigeria, not even among the rulers of Nigeria is loyalty to the state considered salient. This is evidenced by the actions of those who rule the state from one time to the other. Most often, sectional interest is equated with national interest, and the appointments made by some of the rulers are clear indicators of where their loyalty lies. This is most obvious in recent years under President Muhammadu Buhari. Indeed, his approach to governance is such that apart from exhibiting outright disdain for the rule of law and the court, his sectional and ethnic loyalty is an open secret. Although the government had at various times adopted policies aimed at uniting the various groups, the actions of most administrations have deepened and exacerbated the differences among groups rather than uniting them. Often, national integrative policies have been observed in breach than in observance by those in the government. Therefore, the ordinary citizens have no examples to emulate in terms of determining where their loyalty should lie (p. 3).

Fashagba aptly captures the political situation under Mohammad Buhari as the President of Nigeria. However, as Buhari's Minister of Information allegedly said, Nigerians are currently missing Buhari. This is as a result of the excruciating pain and heightened suffering that Nigerians face in this current dispensation of President Bola A. Tinubu. In fact, if Buhari was frying pan, Tinubu is a fire burning with sulphur. This is coupled with his questionable background and means of acquiring the power he wield. It is indeed in Tinubu that Machiavellianism was made flesh. This gives credence to political "brutality, political assassinations, thuggery, intimidation, blackmail, kidnapping, disregard for the rule of law and constitution, disruption of due process, witch-hunting, and sabotage among other vices"

(Iordaaah, 2023, p. 192) that are bedeviling the country today. However, these problems did not particularly originate with Tinubu, rather with him the rot in the system got amplified. We shall in the next section look at the root causes of Nigeria's political woes.

Nigerian Political Problems: The Root Causes

While the barrage of problems facing Nigeria polity can be traced as far back as the pre-colonial era and domiciled in the transition from village administration as in Umuofia village in late Prof. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, to a new social order that substituted traditional honesty, duty consciousness and honesty with rationalism, pragmatism and egoism, Dr. Okpalaonwuka sees the root of the decline in political ethics in the post-war declaration of 1970 that took away from the Church the management of schools (Okpalaonwuka, 1997). As argued by some scholars and stated above, the foundation of morality is religious beliefs. In Nigeria, both Islamic and Christian religion has morality at the core of their teachings. However, the Edict of December 31, 1970 that took away schools from the Church and reduced the teaching of religious instructions to one period of 45 minutes per week, watered down discipline and morality that the church had instilled in the younger generation. The government take-over of school has in the long run incubated citizens that are excessively materialistic while being repulsive to moderation, a virtue extolled by the ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle.

In the same vein, owing to the prevalent weak sociopolitical and economic system in Nigeria that promotes corruption; young children of primary school age are exposed bribery and corruption (Okpalaonwuka, 1997). This further confirms the earlier assertion that no one is born corrupt but acquires it from the society. The corrupt education system is the recipe for the moral comatose that Nigeria finds itself today. As the writing at the gate of university in South Africa says:

Destroying any nation does not require the use of atomic bombs or the use of long range missiles. It only requires lowering the quality of education and allowing cheating in the examinations by the students.

Patients die at the hands of such doctors.

Buildings collapse at the hands of such engineers.

Money is lost at the hands of such economists & accountants.

Humanity dies at the hands of such religious scholars.

Justice is lost at the hands of such judges...

The collapse of education is the collapse of the nation (Gaji, 2018).

There is no doubt that Nigerian education system is deeply corrupt and compromised. It therefore suffices to say that Nigeria sowed the wind and currently reaping the whirlwind. Besides government take-over of schools and corruption, other political problems facing Nigeria include tribalism, selfishness, materialism and importantly, the scuttling of the traditional political institutions by the colonizers.

Integrating Morality into Nigerian Politics: JMO's Perspective

Dr. Okpalaonwuka (1997, p. 91) categorically asserts that man without religion is worse than an animal, and given that by taking over the schools, the government inadvertently threw God away from the teaming youth creating a religious vacuum, there is need to search for a means

of reinstating morality in Nigerian politics *per Deum*. Inevitably, our search and quest for politics that embraces morality (goodness) can be found only in a:

...transcendent being who is the beginning and end of all morality, and who alone can command unconditional obedience the Moslems call "Allah", and the Christians refer to as "God". More than 90% of Nigerians believe in this Allah or God. He is goodness itself. It stands to commonsense that only a perfect being who is goodness in itself can set the standard of goodness. Since human beings are imperfect creatures, neither the individual nor the society (which is but a collection of imperfect individuals) can set the ultimate standard of right and wrong. The moral law has its origin in this Allah or God (Okpalaonwuka, 1997, p. 143).

Dr. Okpalaonwuka is here reaffirming the teaching of St. Augustine who taught that in us exists a void that only God can fill. St. Augustine further avers that the goodness or morality we seen can only found in God who is goodness Himself. While moral principles are inscribed in man's heart and illuminated by the Divine, his frailty stands as an impediment to living out these principles.

Augustine insisted, however, that man is morally weak. Man's will has been weakened by original sin, and as a result man is unable to do any good without the help of God, that is, without God's grace. Left to himself, man can see and know what is good, but he will be unable to do it, nor can he avoid doing what he knows to be evil except God gives him the grace to do so. Just as the human intellect needs the illumination of the divine light to be able to perceive and grasp truths, so does the will need the divine grace to enable it to observe the moral law, that is, to do good and avoid evil (Omoregbe, p. 102).

It therefore behooves on the religious leaders to draw men to the conviction of God the ultimate goodness. It the enormous task of the Church to impact and teach these moral principles to the lay faithful. However, as Dr. Okpalaonwuka accurately observed, "moral pronouncements alone on the part of the Church without action by her lay members are abstract, sterile and sheer verbalism hence, the need for lay members of the Church to take active part in politics (Okpalaonwuka, 1997, p. 207).

While the Vatican Council prohibits the Church from indulging in partisan politics, the lay faithful being a member of two communities - the Christian community and the political community, should understand their obligation to the respective communities which they are members bearing in mind his Christian political responsibility (Okpalaonwuka, 1997). Notwithstanding the factors militating against the participation of Christians in politics, the Church has the responsibility of teaching them the necessity of their active participation. It is by actively participating in political processes without compromising their Christian faith (although politics involves compromise) that they, the Christian faithful, can influence the ethos and make the Church and her teachings present in the polity. The laity has a principal role in bringing morality to politics in Nigeria. It does not suffice to steer clear of politics because it can be a dirty business. If good people fail to actively participate in politics, they abandon it for the less conscientious; they weaken the social fabric of their faith and allow secular humanists to increase their power (Okpalaonwuka, 1997, p. 211).

Corroborating Okpalaonwuka, Orji (2024, p. 56) advocates for Christians' active involvement in, particularly, electoral process so as to ensure credible representatives and people with good reputation are elected. The political participation of Christians should be seen as an imperative in the light of Kantian duties. It is a *prima facie* duty that can guarantee the common good of

Christians and non-Christians alike. Christians should seek political positions for "When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice: But when the wicked beareth rule, the people mourn (Prov 29:2). Christians should see their participation in politics as a spiritual obligation to God, as a social obligation to others and as moral obligation to truth (Orji, 2024, pp. 62-63). It is only good people, when in power, can suppress evil, stand against abortion, homosexuality, lesbianism, gay-marriage, money laundry, killing, kidnapping, thuggery, and praise the wonderful works of upright citizens and other works (Orji, 2024, p. 62).

Conclusion

Nigeria's political woes dates back to the pre-colonial era although they are exacerbated by the balkanization of Africa and later amalgamation of Nigeria in 1914 without the consent of the constituent Protectorates. These acts would precipitate the present political conundrum involving high level of moral depravity manifesting in unbridled corruption, killing, kidnapping etc. In an attempt to proffer solutions to the decadent political situation of Nigeria, the work has provided useful insights into the meaning of the concepts of politics and morality, underscoring the fact that both are mutually inclusive as they are concerned with the common good. It is not dubitable that man, in his socio-political interactions with others, influences or affects them. Hence their actions should be directed towards the societal good. But the lived reality of Nigeria runs incongruent to goodness among political leaders and the citizenry in general.

Albeit these, Dr. James-Michael Okpalaonwuka's *Morality and Politics in Nigeria* gave us a hindsight towards the infusion of morality into our body politic. It is imperative to know, as deducible from him, that without deep personal conviction in the authority of God and total obedience to his laws and ordinances which the Christian faith teaches, morality would remain utopian in our society. Consequently, the church leaders as well as the Christian faithful have enormous role to play in the enthronement of morality in our politics. The Church has the duty of influencing the ethos of politics and teaching the church members the import of active political participation. It is in their political involvement while adhering to their Christian calling that they can change the political *status quo*. Because, "in the final analysis, while avoiding formal cooperation in anything immoral," it is the Christians who "should bring Jesus' truth and love to bear in the healing of the body politic" (Okpalaonwuka, 1997, p. 211).

Endnotes

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