

# RELIGIOUS INFLUENCE ON POLITICS: A CATCH OF THE NIGERIAN STATE TOWARDS NATIONHOOD

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## Abstract

*The constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria makes it explicit that Nigeria is a secular state, where all religious dimensions or elements are supposedly not to have any influence on its political or civic affairs. This exempts religion from the running of the public organisations and schemes, and also excludes it from the philosophical and moral system of the nation. Although, the secular nature of the Nigerian state does not imply the absence of religions in the state, but the prohibition of a state sponsored religion, where the choice of the religious tenets of the compatriots is managed in such a way that it does not exert significant impacts on the nation's politics. However, the political landscape of Nigeria is saturated with religious influences, such that it becomes difficult to separate them. Perhaps, this posed a great challenge to the aspiration of the Nigerian state towards nationhood. The article seeks to evaluate the problems of religious dabbling in politics, with the aim of suggesting prospects for meaningful governance and development in the country.*

**Keywords:** Politics, Religious Influence, Nationhood, Secularism, Constitution

## Introduction

The independent Nigerian state joined the growing queue of a constitutional arrangement that is typical of a modern liberal political society. Although, this arrangement has its history traceable to the colonial regimes, the country however runs a republicanised constitutionalism since its independence in the mid-twentieth century. This was aimed at bringing together the heterogeneous Nigerian society, which is characterised by divergent values and interests, into a commonly held belief and sentiments they agreed to form. To achieve this, certain liberal pronouncement of secularity was enshrined in the constitution; this was done to avoid the meddling of the various religions in politics.

The struggle of the Nigerian state towards becoming a nation is traceable to the emergence of the Southern and Northern protectorates by the colonialists at the down of the twentieth

century. Sadly, more than a century after the amalgamation of the protectorates Nigeria is yet to take a concrete and definitive step towards nationhood. While other nations have explored their diversities and advanced towards self-determination, such diversities serve as obstacle to Nigeria's progress. Perhaps, certain factors are responsible for the inability of the various component units in all the six geopolitical zones to put aside their different interests to embrace communality for collective interests. The seeming obstacle towards the progress of the Nigerian polity is chiefly religion. Rather than uniting the cultures or ethnic groups and fatherlands religions, the country succeeds in deemphasizing collective aspirations of the diverse groups, and promotes ethno-religious loyalty, which makes the Nigerian project to be mere geographical expression in the minds of the compatriots since the amalgamation. Hence, over a century of its historical evolution, Nigeria has not taken the advantage of its diversities to advance to a united and prosperous nation. It is against this backdrop that the paper sets out to examine the pitfall created by religion in the pursuit of the goal of nationhood.

### **The Complex Composition of Nigeria**

Nigeria is majorly divided into two equal halves (North and South), with dynamism of historical evolution, social norms, disproportionate population sizes. The diversity in religion, socio-political and economic formation, educational attainments and personality types, talents and opportunities etc, make Nigeria a more complex society that requires other steering mechanisms for easy running of its affairs (Kabuk, 2014:135). Nigeria consists of a tripod ethno-linguistic structure that deeply segments it within ethnic divides based on the influential linguistic trivet, namely, Hausa in the North, Igbo in the East, and Yoruba in the West. The deeply ethnic segmented Nigerian society emphasizes political rivalry, unjust distribution of common good and opportunities, parochial sentiments, strife and ethnic competition. Nonetheless, there is high tendency of people identifying with their tribal distinctiveness and preference rather than professing one concrete or indivisible nation, whose goals should aim at transforming the possibilities for a more solid national identity. There is a growing concern that the ethnic groups pay allegiance and prefer the good of their respective nations instead of the collective national interests. Indeed, the Nigerian state is deeply segmented within the lines of ethno-religious consciousness that are detrimental to the growth and development of a modern state (Kabuk, 2014:138).

The Nigerian society is polarized into two seeming irreconcilable halves; where the Northern half is predominantly Muslims, the Southern half on the other hand is inhibited mainly by Christians. Indicatively, the perceived differences amongst these regions have been a source of political disagreement and suspicion between them since the colonial era. The emergence of the protectorates and the subsequent preference for a Federal structure were meant to serve as direction-finding mechanisms for a collective identity and distributive politics, and also to ease the act of governance in the polity (Kabuk, 2015:162). Other steering mechanisms such as the Federal Character/Zoning System and the secularism of the Nigerian nation for an inclusive participation of all compatriots, irrespective of their ethnic nationalities or creeds, are entrenched in the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. This is done to deemphasise or check the exclusive dominance of one section or religion of the country over others. For it is through it that the citizens can feel the sense of belonging and be committed to the continued existence of the union (Usoh, 2006:96-7).

### **Theoretical foundation of Secularism**

Secularism is a philosophic thinking that religion and religious bodies should have no part in the civic affairs of a people or nation. This seeks to interpret life squarely on the basic principle sourced from the material world, with no recourse to all religious inclinations. In the words of Chaturvedi (2006:280), “secularism is the giving up of religious thought and feeling in the normal day to day interaction in the society.” Secularism has its theoretical foundation traceable to the classical theorists of the ancient thinking (such as those of the Epicurean movement and Marcus Aurelius), which gained credence amongst the enlightenment thinkers (e.g. Diderot, Voltaire, Spinoza, Locke, T. Jefferson and Paine). Other social theorists (like Marx) and the modern-day freethinkers and agnostics found the disposition of the classics and the enlightenment thinkers more congenial for their arguments. This forms the basis for the various social orientations and several other liberal movements today.

The trend perhaps sought to conduct human affairs based on some naturalistic aura of human inclinations that sought to separate religion from civic affairs and the state. Although, certain factors played out during the wave of secularism all through the era of Western enlightenment, but certain considerations of anti-naturalism and atheism fanned the ember of religious resistance in the public affairs, where the struggle was glaringly anticlericalism. This led to the removal of all religious symbols from the public sphere and institutions, which aimed at total removal or minimalizing the role of religion in civic matters (Nader: 2009). Although, certain quarters, especially the Anglo-American cultures, reject the blanket notion of “separation” or “rejection” and emphasised on the equality before the law and state neutrality on religious affairs as the true meaning of secularism.

Etymologically, the word secularism is derived from the classical Latin word *Saeculum* – that literally means *worldly, an age, or a generation* – which implies the state of being neutral with regards to civic matters with those of religion. It was used as a pejorative term by the church's fathers in the wake of the middle age to refer to the world of time (a perceived inclination on temporal world, as against the theology of eternal kingdom) that was the existential condition of the church. This crept into the twelfth century when the papal party consistently spoke about the temporal rule of the emperors and kings by means of temporal rules that were sourced from the secular laws (Berman, 1983:109). Indicatively, the modern usage of the concept of secularism that seeks to separate religion from politics was aimed at rejecting all inclinations towards justifying the state's existences by theology (McClean; 1995:426).

Secularization as a modern era movement began as result of the tension between religion and science and the schisms between forms of Christianity on the hand, which was amplified by the wave of renaissance and the reformation. Hence, the contemporary usage is aimed at emphasizing the state's sovereignty, free from religious interferences. The term secularism is an ideology that promotes the idea of secular or secularity. The doctrine emphasises the subjective character of religion, which must not to be seen to have connectivity or interfere with all philosophical or moral systems. Secularism sometimes resonates as a movement that evinces the right to be free from religious teachings or rules, and the right to be free of religious imposition or adoption in running the state affairs. This however emphasis the neutrality of the

state affairs from matters of belief or faith.

Indicatively, most Western civilizations have long embraced secularism as a philosophical or moral system that guides their collective dispositions towards their public or political wellbeing. In such societies, citizens are neither given undue advantage nor discriminated on the basis of their religion; rather, the individuals are seen as citizens, and not as members of religious groups. Conversely, the religious dispositions of the individuals remain highly subjective in which their rights and duties do not count on the basis of their beliefs. Although, the general concept of secularism does not imply strictly a form of antagonism or rejection of any religion or god, but an indication of a dichotomy between religion and the secular or temporal involvements (Juergensmeyer, 2017:74).

However, different individuals and societies hold sways various notions of secularity and secularism. While certain cultures of the West accept the term to be a form of separation of religion and the state (e.g. the United States and France), others conceived it to be an anti-religious movement (e.g. the Soviet Union and Japan). Perhaps, there are several non-Western cultures whose historical antecedents are deeply rooted in the practice of rituals and beliefs as their value systems, but must have been influenced either by the secularised Westernization processes, colonisation or even by local modernization; there is often little dichotomy between the conceptions of both “secular” and “religious” in such societies. The colonised cultures are mostly fraught with tensions between the actual meanings of secularity and non-secularities due to the attendant colonialism, which are often viewed as parallels. Although, secularism is a free-standing term to them, but their collective attitudes towards their civic affairs is deeply religious; hence, there is no detachment between the two.

### **The Question of the Nigerian Secularism**

Secularism is generally conceived as a philosophical thinking that interprets life basically on the principle sourced from the material world instead of religion. In the words of Okeke (2013:65) secularism is construed to be an ideology which holds that religious issues should not be the basis of politics, or, in the extreme, that religion has no place in public life. Hence, secularism seeks to preserve the religious neutrality of government and cultures. Nonetheless, there seems to be increasingly distinct traditions of secularism among non-Western cultures (particularly the post-colonized Africa society), whose secular credentials are continually put to test in so many ways and circumstances.

Most African societies exhibit some forms of beliefs on spiritual things or the supernatural, which are essential to their cultural values; this involves mostly some core cultural practices of rituals that characterised virtually every African society. Secularism is undeniably a resultant import of the imperial influence – as some scholars described it. Hence, the notion of the “secular” may not have an exact meaning for the non-Western cultures (such as Africa), since it sometimes appears parallel, and of course, permits some interferences of religion in the political or public matters.

Conversely, the secular credentials of the post-independent Nigerian society cannot be different from those of other African cultures. Indeed, Nigeria practices a secular democratic

scheme which does not have the semblance of a theocratic system. The attribute of the Nigerian secularity drew its roots and strength from the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria; in its chapter one, article ten, it states that: “The Government of the Federation or of a state shall not adopt any religion as state religion” (1999:24). This is done perhaps with the full recognition that sovereignty belongs to the state and not to a divine power of a theocratic setting. So, the laws here are not based on divine rules, and hence, are separated from religion. The neutrality of religion extends beyond political affairs to include a secular regime that requires its education and legal system to be absolute religiously nonaligned. The preference for the secularity of the Nigerian state is presumably to have a free-standing political system based on pluralism, which requires the government to respect the people of different religious creed and ethnic nationality (Adegbola, 1977); by so doing, the law does not have to protect or recognize one religion over another. Therefore, the education and the legal systems are presumably held based on logic and science and not on some religious dogmatism. All these are the full elaboration of the sovereignty which the Nigerian state should possess and its neutrality on every religious predisposition.

However, the Nigerian political scene appears not to be the way it was articulated in chapter 1, article 10 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Many happenings have deadened the intended spirit of its secularity. Therefore, the purported official neutrality in matters of religion stated by the constitution is trivialised by certain contradictory sections of the same constitution. (2) Section 38 re-echoes the rights of Nigerians to freedom of thought, conscience and religion in its 4 sub-sections. In the words of Pam (2017), Sections 275 and 280 make a volt-face and contradict the two earlier quoted sections. While section 275 provides for the creation of states Sharia courts of appeal, section 280 provides for the creation of states customary courts of appeal.

Pam (2017) gives further tripartite justifications on the contradictory claims of the constitution, where he explained that:

First, the provisions found in sections 10 and 38 are completely negated and rendered void by the provisions found in sections of 275 and 280. Second, the adherents of other religions apart from Islam have been relegated to an inferior status and discriminated against by the provisions in section 275 because their religions have not been given equal recognition by the same constitution. Third, while these provisions recognise the important place of religion in our national life, they pretend that we can operate some modicum of secularism and not pluralism.

By and large, the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria is construed to be fanning the problems Nigeria is facing today, because it has failed to address the complex composition of the Nigerian state. It is evident that the Nigerian state operates dual laws which the non-Muslims predominantly living in the South legitimately recognised the secular constitutional provisions; conversely, the larger Muslim-North mostly operates a theocratic system, deeply rooted in the same constitutional provisions. The adherents of Islamic principles use such a constitutional leverage (the choice of either secular or sharia principles)

for their convenience. Pam (2017) however re-echoed Pastor Bosun Emmanuel's view by stating that “the major flaw in our 1999 constitution is its “dual ideology” because it is ambivalent in its religious provisions”. In Pam's view, a constitution cannot obviously guarantee freedom of choice of religion to all citizens, but seen to violet it by promoting one religion over others. To ensure equitable justice among the citizenry, the constitutional provisions and the running of the state's affairs should be consistent with the true meaning of the principles and be genuine in asserting the non-adoption of a state religion.

### **The Religious Influences in the Nigerian Politics**

The Southern and Northern halves of Nigeria were officially merged in 1914 by the then colonial administrator, Lord Fredrick Lugard. This was done to bring together the diverse cultures and ethnic nationalities that are heterogeneous in many respects, to unite them politically as one people for an effective colonial administration (Kabuk, 2014). The social formation, the pluralism of languages and religions etc that pluralised the Nigerian state is such that characterised other nations like the United State, who took advantage of their diversities and built a vibrant and economic viable nation. Conversely, Nigeria is yet to be seen exploring its divergence for any meaningful development, instead, such a complex composition introduced rivalry and mutual suspicion among the various ethnic nationalities, which often has its roots hinged on religion.

Ogbu (2014) reiterates the Nigerian constitutional position concerning secularism. He avers that “it prohibits both states and the Federal Government from adopting any religion as state religion, and guarantees to every person the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion as well as the right to freedom from discrimination on grounds, inter alia, of religion.” Hence, in principle the Nigerian state is separated from religious affairs, and has not adopted or approved any state religion; but in practical terms, owing to certain historical and sociological facts, various religious organizations obviously play burly roles in public affairs to assert seeming traditional laws that are virtually based on religious doctrines. The ideal of secularism which the constitution professes is glaringly not adhered to.

Certain ideals which the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria seeks to address appear to raise more questions than providing answers to the problem created by the pluralistic composition of the country. The general opinion of scholars is that some of the ethno distinctiveness and political strives within religious lines emanate from the constitution, because some of its provisions flawed the general ideals that aim at unifying the complex spread of the nation. Ogbu (2014) x-rayed the glaring constitutional flaws by stating that:

...it prohibits both states and the Federal Government from adopting any religion as state religion, and guarantees to every person the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion as well as the right to freedom from discrimination on grounds, inter alia, of religion. On the other hand, the Constitution in chapter II under the fundamental objectives and directive principles of state policy, enjoins the state to provide facilities for, among other things, religious life. In addition, it makes provision for the establishment of Sharia Courts of Appeal though

with jurisdiction restricted to questions of Islamic personal law. The Constitution also provides for the taking of oath of office by certain public officers. Although the Constitution is silent on the sources of Nigeria law Islamic law has been recognized as one of the sources of Nigerian law.

The provisions found in sections 275 and 280 in the Nigerian constitution confirm this; perhaps, it renders void the provisions of sections 10 and 38, and appears to have negated the adherents of other religions other than Islam to an inferior status by the same constitution. Hence, Pam (2017) further buttressed Bosun Emmanuel's analysis that: "... Bosun Emmanuel submitted that the 1999 Constitution mentions 'Shariah' 73 times, 'Grand Khadi' 54 times, 'Islam' 28 times and 'Muslims' 10 times but does not mention the words 'Christ', 'Christian', 'Christianity' or 'church' even once." Of course, Pam asserts that, Bosun concluded however that other mischievous elements take advantage of these constitutional lapses to make some ungodly statement that the Nigerian state is an Islamic nation regardless the its multi ethno-religious composition.

Indicatively, Nigeria is believed to be largely segmented within the ethnic spreads based on the influential tripod tribes, which are mainly Hausa in the North, Igbo in the East, and Yoruba in the West. However, the tripod ethnic structure of the Nigerian nation emphasises ethnic suspicion and political rivalry, strife and competition. By so doing, the various ethnic divides pay allegiance and consider their respective nations, which arouse tribal distinctiveness and sectional preferences rather than seeking for concrete transformative possibilities for a more solid national identity. The ethnic consciousness or the ethnicity experiencing in Nigeria is such that is often linked to religious consciousness, as against the framework of the modern state that involves elements of rational goal-oriented behaviour and effective attitude (Kabuk, 2015:219).

The distribution of rights, opportunities and other economic goods are canvassed and considered using religion as a gauge to consider who gets what. The political arrangement of Nigerian is such that the yardsticks for appointing political office holders is not based on merit, but by certain parochial considerations of the ethnic nationalities of the candidates and the faith each professes. Ethnic and religious champions seem to have more supports and are preferred in public space or governance than the candidates that appear to be competent. Religion has indeed created a gulf between the adherents of the different faith in Nigeria, such that the collective interest of the citizenry is no longer meritocracy, but a system that promotes ethno-religious loyalty or sentiment – hence, the larger chunk of the Southern half would prefer a Christian leader, while the North often insists on Northern Muslim candidates for leaderships and appointments.

The divisive tendency of the Nigerian state within ethno-religious lines deadens the collective aspiration towards nationhood and enthrones sectional distrust and religious bigotry among citizenry. This always creates some unhealthy strives that often leads to ethnic and religious conflicts that result in the killing of lives and destruction of properties. The Nigeria developmental roadmap has been plagued by incessant conflict brought about by religious interests, and no nation in the history of the world has ever achieved any significant structural,

economic or educational developments in times of war or conflict.

### **The Problem of Politico-Religious influences in Nigeria**

Religious influences have permeated every sphere of Nigeria's socio-political affairs since independence, despite the fact that the constitutional provisions affirmed its secularity. However, conjoining political matters with those of religion makes a complex society to be conflict prone, especially in a society like Nigeria that is characteristically pluralistic in many respects. Nigeria has indeed provided a catalogue of ethno-religious violence that resulted in an unquantifiable loss of lives and properties through the decades of its history (Owutu, 2013). There is no doubt the nation is deeply divided vigorously within the ethno-religious lines. Perhaps, most of the major political issues are intricately contested along the lines of complex ethnic, religious or regional divides. The situation in Nigeria is such that boycotted the due course of legitimization and posits serious consequences for the nation's stability; which deters it from meaningful developments (Kabuk, 2015:161).

Various interpretations have been given to the concept of religion, but Huntington succinctly explicates its roles to humanity in the following words; “in the modern world religion is central, perhaps the central force that motivates and mobilizes people...” (Huntington, 1996:27). Perhaps, this is further buttressed by Nze (2006:2), where he re-echoed Haynes' view that, “as a large substratum, religion harbours different people with verifying levels of understanding of the sophisticated construct in which they inhere or that holds them...”. The two ideas conceptuate in general terms the global perception of what the concept of religion means to its adherents, and the African perspective is not found to be different from that. Those of the African cultures, particularly the Nigerian cultures, clearly demonstrate this even way beyond these descriptions; this probably made Pam (2017) to make the general assumption that

Nigeria's religion is 'political religion' in the main. That is, the huge obsession by religion by Nigerians is basically for political reasons. Nigerians foist religion to the fore in governance, politics, economics, social debate and in virtually every other facet of national life just so that adherents of their own religions gets whatever there is to gain – seats/participation in government, land, money, higher offices, first position, etc, and not for spiritual growth, economic development or justice. Political religion is all about one religion cheating other religions.

It is perhaps with this brand of political climate that many people conceive the Nigerian politics as a dirty game. Despite the general assumption of Nigeria being a 'secular state' successive regimes show inclinations toward the two dominant religions – Christianity and Islam. Besides ethnic consideration, religion has always been manipulated for political ends (Magbadelo: 2003:64). Since independence the developmental pace of the Nigerian polity has been greatly slow compared to the numerous potentialities found in it. This is due to the glaring adversarial agenda that every ethnic-religious community deeply emphasizes; which often heightens mistrust or mutual suspicions that bring about premonitory causes for virtually all religious tensions in the country. Hence, Nigeria undoubtedly manifests an image of a deeply religiously divided country. The elites nonetheless explore the religious

distinctiveness of the divergent beliefs to gain or bargain undue political positions or economic advantages.

The preponderance of the electorates is often manipulated to condition their minds toward choosing their elective representatives within ethno-religious lines. This is often violence prone caused by those who feel short-changed. In other words, the circles of electoral 'regime change' have never been witnessed without any form of violence that is either ethnic or religiously inclined; such has characterised virtually all the political dispensations since the history of Nigerian nation.

Conversely, the general strives that characterized the multi-ethnic cultures enthroned by religion has made it (religion) a veritable tool that emphasized ethnic consciousness as the preeminent landmark of exclusionary identity politics that wrecked the nation's progress and places it on a retrogressive path.

### **Conclusion**

Religious influence on politics that enthroned ethnic consciousness in Nigeria has its history traceable to colonialism. The colonial incursion established the basis for using politics of identity or ethnic consciousness as a means of gaining loyalty from the various conglomerates. Ochonu blamed it on the imperialists as the cause for the primordial condition of identities that generated tensions and conflicts between the major faiths – Christians and Muslims – in Nigeria (Kabuk, 2015). The distinct governing styles of the imperialists, which were mainly indirect rule policy for the North and direct policy for the South, were somehow perceived as “divide-and-rule” tactics, which in some way permit or enthroned zealotry and ethnicity in the Nigerian polity. In the words of Ojakaminor (2012:66), “in Nigeria we are so religious that we bring God into everything.” It appears religion is one of the big problems of the nation, which its handlers have abused and misused; indeed, the political arrangement is excessively skewed through religious manipulations for sectional, social or economic interests, and political ambition or ethnic considerations. The divisive tendency of the nation's polity within ethnic and perhaps religious lines has inevitable implications and threatens our corporate existence as a united country. This perhaps results in the developmental setbacks as witnessed in the Nigerian political and economic arenas today.

It is as a result of this simple fact that building a healthy national and an economic dependable state in Nigeria appears to be a mirage. To achieve this, there must be a collective consciousness toward going back to the drawing board for a new political and economic arrangement (particularly the 1999 constitution), to deemphasize ethnic and religious consciousness by acknowledging the ideals of true secularism and federalism for healthy relations between the various creeds and fatherlands; by stripping from it (constitution) every strand of religious doctrine and also devolving powers to the respective regions for effective administration. This would dispel regional strives, suspicions and political exclusionary consciousness for a meaningful development of the nation.

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