

RELIGION AS A TOOL OF POLITICS: THE ANAMBRA STATE EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

Anambra state is comprised of so many religious groups with dominant ones being Christianity and African Traditional Religion. African Traditional Religion is the traditional religion of the people before the emergence of Christianity. Following the dominance of Christianity in the State, with its attendant rivalry and unhealthy competitions amongst its various groups and denominations; it appears the Christian religion has straddled across and has taken the architectural design and construction of Anambra State polity in matters of religious and political competition. Despite the claims of democratic procedures as spelt out in the Nigerian legal and political documents, the issue of religion in the Anambra politics has become a case of grave concern. This issue of religious politics in Anambra State is more pronounced amongst the Roman Catholics, Anglicans and other Orthodox Churches as well as the Pentecostal(New generation Churches). It is the above observations that warranted this investigation of Anambra State's political administrations and its involvement with religion. The research will enable the researcher find a lasting resolution to the problem of religious politics in Anambra State. However, for a constructive and analytical study, this research work employed the use of primary and secondary sources of data collection to elicit correct and proper information. While the primary sources involved personal observations, the secondary sources employed library materials. Documentary and textual analysis was also employed for an in dept and analytical study. The principal findings of this study revealed that the Roman Catholic, Anglican and Pentecostal denominations in Anambra State are always at logger heads with each other especially in the political governance of the State. There is a problem of character assassinations and inter-denominational proselytism following the inter-mix of religion and politics in Anambra State. To address these problems, this study recommends a need for political education so that the citizens of the State regardless of their political, social, religious, economic and cultural backgrounds would regard each other as one. There should be a partnership between the church and the political leaders in the State in widening of people's knowledge on the meaning of the religion and the religious attitudinal orientations of the people. In effect, no religion or church denomination in the State should be more recognized than the other. In order words, religion should not be used for political campaigning. Both the religious and political leaders in the State should be conscientized on the need for unity, peace, and tolerance. It should be the top priority of the government to provide the dividends of democracy to all the citizens of the State irrespective of religious and political affiliations. Above all, there should be an enhanced spirit of ecumenism amongst the various Christian denominations in Anambra State. All these when put in real practice will go a long way in reducing the rate of religious politics in Anambra State.

Introduction

Religion can be both an integrative and divisive factor in any society. When the divisive elements of religion are not properly handled and brought under strict control, they create tensions and unrest in a society. Often, these manifest themselves in form of religious riots and intolerance. Whereas in almost all the civilized worlds of Europe and America, the

government and her citizens have been able to contain the divisive elements of religion to a reasonable extent while the third world Africa and some parts of Asia are yet to contain and manage the crises associated with religion. In Nigeria, the government and her citizens have started realizing the realities of pluralism of religious beliefs and practices. The waves of religious crises and violence in recent years seem to confirm this observation.

However, the missionary scramble for Igbo land encountered a great variety of denominational and colonial filters and rivalries: the C.M.S, R.C.M and the Primitive Methodists. The denominational rivalries and colonial influence gave rise to some unlikely alliances especially amongst the protestant C.M.S, Primitive Methodists and Presbyterian Missions. This is based on the fact that Igbo land favoured the Roman Catholic Mission more than the protestant churches. To contain the spread of Roman Catholic spread in Igboland, the protestant missions in Igbo land entered into a gentleman's agreement of sharing the various parts of Igbo land amongst themselves. As the C.M.S Mission concentrated in Anambra and Enugu States, the Primitive Methodists centered in Imo and Abia States while the Presbyterian Mission exercised influence amongst Ebonyi and some parts of Delta and Rivers States. Though, this arrangement later brought divisions amongst these protestant groups, its original intention was to religiously and politically dominate the various locations of Igboland. This understanding agrees with Kuka(1993) on his postulation on the machination and manipulation of the Nigerian political class thus:

When colonialism was no longer a credible weapon for canvassing support, Regionalism took its place and with the demise of regionalism came ethnicity and with the apparently unpromising role of ethnicity in the new dispensation, some sentimental alternative has to be found and as candidate must have to divide loyalty in favour of one factor of the political class against the other, there is no such ready-made candidate as religion (p.18).

Moreover, the term religion is a complex and elusive concept to define. This is because the subject matter of religion which is God is invincible and not subject to empirical observation. It is also complex in itself because the subject "religion" is conceived by different people in different ways. Examples are the sociologists, theologians, psychologists and so on. Even though religion can be defined in different ways, the key factor in all is that it is a relationship between man and God. The relationship can be through reflection or through symbolic ritual actions. It is pertinent here to define religion from its sociological context. This is because the

topic of the research borders on religious politics as it concerns the socio-religious lives of the people of Anambra State.

Religion which is believing strongly in the existence of God or gods, is not peculiar to any religion like Islam, Christianity and other world religions. Moreover, Okwueze(2003) defined religion as a system of social coherence based on a common group of beliefs or attitudes concerning an object, person, unseen being, or system of thought considered to be supernatural, sacred and divine or rituals associated with such beliefs or system of thought. Madu (1996), is of the view that one striking thing in the different definitions of religion is that none is flawless on critical analysis. Each scholar tries to articulate the features of religion in his or her definition.

Politics on the other hand can as well be defined as the science and art of governance. It is derived from the Greek root “polis” which means city-state and thus refers also to the act of governance. Politics which involves the structuring of power for achieving articulated goal is in line with Ugwueye (2004) which stated that politics is the activities involved in getting and using power in public life, and being able to influence decisions that affect a country or a society. These activities are done in order to plan, organize and run a business, an institution or a state.

Since religion has been the major factor in determining the staying in power, it has also become imperative for Christians to now use religion for achieving their socio-political goals. In the Nigerian polity, this state of affairs has created a lot of problems, for instance, the attempt to enroll Nigeria into the organization of Islamic Conference (O.I.C) has some political underpinnings even though it is covered with religion. Even the Christian Association of Nigeria (C.A.N) is a Christian religious body with some political ambitions. This body of Christians was formed so that Christians would have a collective say in the matters of governing and allocation of the national cake. Even though it is clearly stipulated in the Nigerian constitution that she is a secular state which means that the government should not involve itself in any particular religion or give preferential treatment to any, yet, the activities of the government are still seen today to revolve around one religion or the other.

Based on the above observations, the following questions have continued to agitate the mind of the researcher:

- (i) Why would every religious orientation see itself as the best and would not freely co-exist with one another
- (ii) Why is it that, each cannot see anything good out of each other. Even among the adherent of the same religion like Christianity, there exists rivalry, hatred, suspicion and unhealthy competition
- (iii) Why is it that even though Nigeria is a secular state, as her constitution stipulated, religion is still seen to play a great role in its government and politics.

To tackle these questions, the researcher seeks to address the following:

- (xxxii) The relationship between religion and politics in Anambra State
- (xxxiii) The constitutional view of religion and politics in Nigeria with particular regards to Anambra State.
- (xxxiv) To seek ways of addressing the problems of religious intolerance, marginalization, and socio-religious influence of the successive administrations in Anambra State.
- (xxxv) The study will also seek to explore some practical ways of addressing the machination of a particular church denomination to retain power or to achieve their selfish ends at the expense of other church denominations.

The scope of this work is restricted to religion and politics as it concerns the Anambra State government. It also tended to investigate on the challenges encountered by the mixture of religion and politics in Anambra State polity. The methodology adopted in this study is historical cum text analysis. Since the title of the work is based on religious politics, the study traced the history of religion in Anambra State polity. The past and present administrations was be investigated so as to determine how religion has influenced its activities. Personal observations of religious influence on the political matters of the State would also be analyzed in the course of the study.

Religious Politics in Anambra State

Since the creation of Anambra State on the 27th of August 1991 by the Babangida led administration, it has been observed that religion and politics are closely associated with each other in the State's administrations. The reason is obvious, man by virtue of his nature is political being and by his character, a religious being. Anambra as one of Nigerian 36 States is comprised of so many religious groups with the dominant ones being Christianity and African Traditional Religion. Each of these religious groups has different historical, political

and religious backgrounds. Christianity for instance, has different denominations and faith organizations which claims superiority over one another. The traditional dogmas of different religious groups have always conflicted with one another.

However, the issue of religious politics in Anambra State is primarily an intra-religious crisis between the Roman Catholics, Anglicans and the New Religious Movements. Each of the religious groups or denominations in the State have always scrambles to attract the attention of the government at the expense of others; each at loggerheads with one another over political affairs. That is why Muozoba (2003) pointed out that religious rivalries in Anambra State is the cause of the political imbalances and instability in the State's polity. No wonder, the 2006-2014 administration of Mr. Peter Obi were characterized by series of religious irregularities, fanaticism, and religious dictatorship. In fact, Mr. Peter Obi's administration would be best described as a condition where religion was used as a political tool. In other words, the influence of religion on political matters was more pronounced in Peter Obi's administration than other previous administrations. During the military era, when Joseph Abulu was appointed the first administrator of new Anambra State in 1992, and when Dr. Chukwuemeka Ezeife of Salvation Army assumed the Governor of the State, religion was never an issue. From the time of Dabo Aliyu, Mike Atta, Erufai Garba, and Emmanuel Ukaegbu were in Awka as military administrators, up till when Dr. Chinweoke Mbadinuju, a Pentecostal was elected Governor in 1999, at the return of civil rule, religious calculations was minimal, rather people channeled their energies to celebrating the return of democracy and almost relegated religion to the background. Even with Ngige's administration in the State, religion was not a major consideration for political appointments. It was rather with the coming of Mr. Peter Obi that things took a new turn as regards to religious politics. Caution was thrown to the wind and everything was blown open. Indeed, from the researcher's personal observation of Peter Obi's administration, his political antecedents expanded the frontiers of religious politics in the State. This is mostly evident in the sharing of democracy dividends and political appointments during his administration. In fact throughout his administration of the state, Obi's preference for the Catholic church was never made hidden (Nwankwo, 2016). One of the areas he placed the Catholic faithful above other Christians in the State was in the cabinet which he had more Catholics than the rest of other churches. Even the political appointments were based on denominational considerations (Nwokedi, 2019).

Moreover, on the Obiano's regime, reports have also indicated that his political antecedents have sustained the trend. In 2017(Guardian, April 12,2017) reported that the relationship between the Anglicans and the Roman Catholics had turned sour over the demolition of Ebenezer Anglican church in Oyulu-Ezeh, NkwelleEzunaka,Anambra State.The demolition, which was carried out by people allegedly fulfilling the agenda of some prominent individuals in the state, created a serious strain in the relationship between the two orthodox churches, so much so that even the State Governor Chief Willie Obiano was implicated. Following this deplorable religious condition in the state, some of the Anglican and Protestant denominations who are somewhat denied of their political rights have resorted to always antagonize and criticize the government.

Anambra People's Contribution to the Religious Intolerance in the State

Anambra People having experienced several shortcomings over the issue of religious politics in the State during the past and present administrations are expected to voice out publicly against the political anomaly. The people who are the electorates are supposed to dismantle all religious inclinations when dealing with political matters. The beauty of democracy is its legitimacy derived from the electorates and once these electorates fails to uphold the good democratic process; they disrupt and disorganize the principle of leadership and followership. Instead of voicing out publicly the menace of religious politics in Anambra State, some people have rather maintained a peace of the grave yard; keeping quite as if all is well. Still others have worsened the matter by their negative utterances against each other. This according to Madu(2003), reports thus:

Most Roman Catholics regard Catholic belief and practices as the authentic ones. To be accepted and therefore may regard any concessions or compromises as abominations. Thus, for such Catholics, only the Protestants must abandon their beliefs and practices for all the churches are not the same according to this group of Catholics.(p.36).

In affirmation to the fact above, Diobu (2015) has this to say, "As far as the Anglicans are concerned, the sworn enemy is Roman Catholicism. How to fight the Roman Catholics, compete with them, stop their aggressive proselytism as the target"(p.34). The insights obtained from the above expressions shows how the people have contributed to the influence of religion in the political affairs of the State. The reports shows that the people of the State have no common ground on morals, social issues like unemployment, bribery, corruption, oppression of the poor, management of schools and hospitals and to crown it all, no sincere

dialogue and mutual trust amongst the people and such are contributory to the continued suspicion and rancor among the various religious groups in the State.

Ethical and Moral Implications of Religious Politics in the Governance of the State

Ethics are moral principles that control or influence a person's behavior while morality is concerned with the principles of right and wrong behaviour. Ethics and morality are closely related. According to Omoregbe(2013), "morality is the basis of ethics for it is through the sense of morality that ethics is studied and that is why man is able to make moral judgment even without reflecting on the principle underlying such moral judgment"(p.24). Obviously, the nature of religious intolerant, religious discriminations, and fanaticism in Anambra State calls for an ethical evaluations. Considering the rate at which religion interferes in the political matters of the State, Odey(2013) remarked that "if religious politics should cease from Anambra State, the State would be one of the best in Nigeria"(p.5). Odey(2013) further maintained that if religious politics continues to be tolerated in the State, the dreams of many would be shattered. He wondered why the Anglicans and Roman Catholics should continue to struggle for the control of the political system of Anambra State and when any of the churches clinches to power, the interests of other churches would never be catered for. It then becomes the survival of the fittest, a situation whereby no one would allow another to triumph. This destroys church unity and political governance. Almost all the governors that ruled in the State struggled with this politico-religious dilemma in their quest for public support. A governor is meant to be a leader to all religious groups including the adherents of African Traditional Religion. Rather, they bowed to the pressure of their churches to deliver dividends of democracy, employment and political appointments based on religious reasons. This however, has resulted to unhealthy competitions and aggressive proselytism in the State.

The moral and ethical implications of this is condemnable. With this type or religious war in the State, it will be difficult to have a meaningful dialogue between the Catholics, Protestants, and other religious groups in the State. It will also be difficult to achieve a meaningful and adequate progress in the State. The most annoying consequences of this politico-religious malady is that the tyrant leaders would be promoted in the State and the people that are governed by those corrupt leaders would be denied of their rights as the citizens of the State. The people will also look down on religion as the guardian of morality due to the way its leaders abuse the privilege of their positions as the leaders of religions. At the same time, their religious leaders would keep protecting their interests by presenting their good pictures

to the public. Instead of openly condemning their evil deeds would rather assist them to succeed politically because of their selfish interests.

When the church leaders who are meant to be the mouthpiece of the people are abusing their honour and privilege by taking side in political matters either overtly or covertly, this would always have an adverse effect on the church. Anetoh(2004) observed this fact as he reported that: “Ngige disappointed a bishop who came with five names for political appointments, the governor nearly asked the bishop out of his office”(p.8). Against this backdrop, one wonders the motive behind the action of the bishop. This shows that level of moral decadency amongst the supposed church leaders today.

Since religion serves as the conscience of the people, preachers of these religions ought not engage in political fraud for it will stain their image and personality and also bring insult to these religions that the people might cease to see and appreciate the importance of religion. What concerns the people should equally be the concern of the church. Odey(2013)reiterated that a religion which is only concerned with the salvation of souls but not interested with what affects the people in their day to day endeavours is a useless religion. The life of the people will not be balanced if only their spiritual lives were attended to. It could be in this light that Okwueze(2018) stated that the church must be in politics but not of politics. If that is the case, the irregularities that characterize the Anambra State polity will be drastically reduced.

The argument of this study is not that the church should shy away from the political matters of the State. It is their duty to prayerfully direct and correct the erring ones as regards to political affairs. According to Echma(2016), God’s intention for delivering His people was both socio-political and religio-political. In Lk. 4:18, Jesus declared that His mission is to set the captives free, recover sight to the blind and set a liberty those that were oppressed. If Christ could carry out such a mission, the church should equally do same. The arguments of the study however, is to address the areas the church is digressing in achieving the singular purpose of serving as the mouthpiece of the human society. When church leaders indulge in sorts of political corruptions, oppressions becomes the other of the day. When the church leaders are rightly representing the masses in politics, they can correct some of the anomalies found among the political leaders.

The Way forward to the Challenges of Religious Politics in Anambra State

In view of the magnitude of the problems posed by the influence of religious politics in Anambra State. This study hereby suggests the following as a way forward out of the problems:

- (vi) That Anambra State government should adopt an open and uncompromising neutral attitude towards the various religious organizations in the State. Neutrality here does not mean indifference in the sense of not caring about aberrations in religion which threaten peace and mutual relationships among the various faith groups and religious denominations in the State. Rather, it means that anyone in the position of power in the State should not allow his own religious inclinations to over-ride the common interest of the people.
- (vii) The common good of all Anambrarians demands an altruistic, open-minded, self-effacing and large hearted leader in religious matters, a leader who would recognize in practice not in writing the value of religious pluralism in a heterogeneous society like Anambra State. A leader who will always encourage and promote the positive elements in all religion and discourage the negative ones.
- (viii) The government of Anambra State should, if possible, build, finance and control ecumenical school to be run by experts drawn from various religious bodies in the State. This school should be run in short term basis for present and future politicians, civil and religious leaders. The curriculum in such an institution should be enough and should differ in scope from the normal curriculum of religious studies in our tertiary institution. The accent in this ecumenical school should be placed on dialogue with different religions.
- (ix) The leaders of various religious groups in the State should conscientize their numerous followers on the great value of religious tolerance in a pluralistic religious society like Anambra State. They should match words with examples. They should denounce religious intolerance in any form by upholding the positive values and functions of religion, which is love, peace, harmony, tolerance and forgiveness. These great values should be interpreted in the context of religious unity and progress. Lasting peace is the fruit of patience, dialogue with various religious groups, tolerance of opposing religious views, a willingness to cooperate with others in those areas that promote general welfare and aspirations of all and sundry. All these when put in real practice will go a long way in imbibing

the spirit of tolerance in both the leaders and the lead and will equally bring about a virile, egalitarian and indivisible State.

Conclusion

In conclusion from the observations made above, the researcher observed that the activities of the church, church leaders and the political leaders in Anambra State are not encouraging as regards religious influence in the political matters of the State. They fought one another politically and supported tyrant leaders because of religious reasons. Some of the church leaders in the State have offered themselves to partisan politics instead of correcting the anomalies found in the State's political system. Indeed, religious politics in Anambra State is a problem that needed due consideration. The researcher maintained that it can be controlled if necessary measures are put in place. It is obvious that religion cannot be completely separated from politics, because of the various roles they play in the society. What this work advocates is to have checks and balances between the spirit of religion and the spirit of politics in Anambra State. It advocates for equal rights for the entire citizenry, dividends of democracy should be equally distributed without considering ones religious affiliations. The people should be sensitized that politics is not a do or die affair. It is neither a business venture nor a dirty game. It is however, dirty people in politics that makes it dirty. Therefore, the said dirty people in the politics of Anambra State should find their way out so that the sanity in politics would be restored in Anambra State polity.

However, moral upbringing teachings are highly recommended because all the perpetrators of evil in politics are members of one family or the other. Parents has greater responsibility to imbibe moral virtue in their children. This is because of the position of the family as the unit of every society. When a child is corrupt from home, there is tendency that the corruption may affect his entire life. Therefore, discipline and moral virtue should be a watchword of every parent. Finally, the religious leaders in the State should desist from engaging themselves with some corrupt leaders. They should maintain their position as God's representatives on earth.

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