

# RELIGIOUS ISSUES IN ACHIEVING SUSTAINABLE DEMOCRACY AND POLITICAL STABILITY

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## ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the importance of religion in achieving sustainable democracy and political stability in Nigeria. It has a cursory look into the historical perspective of religio-political issues in Nigeria and also its present situation with the aim of predicting and improving in the future.

The paper goes further to examine the relationship between religion and politics. This paper argues that if Pastors, Imams and other religious leaders do not participate righteously in politics, there is therefore little hope for religions to fulfil their roles in sustaining democracy and political stability.

The paper concluded by giving some suggestions for the enhancement of sustainable democracy and political stability in the next millennium.

## INTRODUCTION

It has been argued in some quarters vehemently that religion cannot mix with politics and that neither the church nor the mosque should be involved in politics. The argument is that a prominent and active politician cannot be a good Christian or Muslim at the same time for the following three reasons out of many:

- (1) The quality of a politician includes an ability to convince people to his side to win their roles. In the course of doing this, a politician will tell lies to convince the people.
- (2) Politicians are not consistent; they can change from one party to the other. But a godly person should not do this.
- (3) Politicians make promises which in the end will not be fulfilled. Politics is the science of the art of the management of public affairs. It is the purpose of adjustment and interplay of power and a national and multi-national level. To participate there in any manner is to take some part in politics.

Generally, people have felt that Christians should have nothing to do with party politics. One very good reason for people feeling this way is that, it is capable of bringing dissensions into the Church in any locality, because, the members in exercising both their civic rights and the freedom of their will must necessarily believe in different political ideologies and consequently belong to rival political parties. This is a very honest plea, because it is true. In principle, there is nothing bad about this. But in practice, have had in this country distressing experiences from the bitterness that existed between rival political parties. Not only did this unhealthy rivalry create bad blood; it hindered progress and effective development. What we have witnessed here has not been the doctrine of "live and let live, but that of "live and let die".

Recorded history contains gruesome accounts of horrors arising from atrocities committed against mankind in God's name whenever there is an inter-religious or even an intra-faith competition for political supremacy in any national system.

In the first of such recorded upheavals in Judeo - Christian tradition, the Bible records, that in the return of Moses from Mount Sinai about three thousand people were massacred on the spot by the Levites on instruction because the people turned to idol worship while Moses was still communicating with the true God on their behalf. Similarly, in the name of the then new and ascendant Christian religion in Rome, untold bloodshed and misery was wrought on the people within the empire after Emperor Constantine (324-336 AD) became a Christian and made Rome to adopt it over and above others as a state religion.

Accounts of such horrors are even more gruesome in the history of the origin, spread and consolidation of the Islamic religion within its first eighty provinces - Mecca, Medina, Syria,

Jazira (Mesopotamia), Basra (Persia or Iran), Kufa (Iraq), Egypt and Palestine - (Majid Ali Khan 1978).

Even within the same faith, cases of intra-religious disputes have been recorded in which

suffering and bloodshed were the results of factional rivalries for power or for doctrinal supremacy and hegemony. (Winkworth 1974; 25).

The foregoing introductory expose underscores at least four major factors that must be borne in mind while discussing the issues of religion, for political stability to maintain peace in Nigeria, namely

- (a) Religions are parochial and emotional socialists. They specialize in building one faith exclusive brotherhood communities;
- (b) Religion, at some point, is politics and is most potent and long lasting political association. Moreover, religious creeds excite and extract with deepest possible emotional and physical loyalties from their adherents when in political competition with people of other faiths;
- (c) The two received religions predominant in Nigeria, both originating from Asia, are long-standing rival ideologies with a history of ethno-political antagonism. Nigerians must not be drawn blind-folded by ignorance;
- (d) It makes no sense to discuss the modalities of bringing about religious tolerance for peaceful co-existence and co-operation in a multi-religious Nigeria without first understanding the world outlooks of the two received religious faiths to appreciate the motivating forces that inform and impel them to political action.

### **THE ADVENT OF RELIGIOUS POLITICS**

Every religion is characterized by sharp subdivisions of the world into clear-cut dichotomies; the "good" and the "bad"; the "we" versus "they"; the "saved" and the "lost"; or the "brethren" versus "the rest of the world" who are not expected to share in the life hereafter. Thus as much as religions traced other primordial barriers like tribal, regional and racial considerations; they also erect strong fences against non-believers.

While all fellow believers are seen as co-heirs to the heavenly kingdom and the peace of paradise, non-believers are seen as condemned people automatically destined for hell-fire and eternal damnation unless they repent and follow one's type of faith, the only "true way". The scriptures of the received religions particularly keep these feelings irreconcilable and unmitigatingly clear, as in Jesus' reply to the doubting Thomas: Jesus answered him,

"I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one goes to the Father except by me" (John 14:6)

This is an exclusive and, to non-Christians, mentally disconcerting statement when seen in terms of religious co-existence, mutual respect and co-operation. So is the Qur'anic verse which orders:

Say to the unbelievers: 'You shall be discomfited and driven into hell - an everlasting place' (Al Imran 3:12). Given these strong and authoritative statements, some kinds of "holier than thou" attitudes are inevitable on both sides and an attendant emotional irritability is implied when such religions are in perpetual competition for the souls of men within the same political system. Moreover, religions are potent brotherhoods; displaying rather efficacious acquired family relationships on earth. Like exclusive clubs, cliques or cults, members offer each other unmerited help, favors and considerations. This is what makes the politicization of religion most

objectionable in a multi-faith society like Nigeria because the objectivity of "brothers" in public offices is likely to be blurred by religious consideration serving a heterogeneous community. More importantly still, it is the very basis for the needed separation of state and religion.

Politicization of religion is a natural outcome of a multi-religious society. This can **not** merely be wished away. It can only be avoided by preventing the conditions, which give rise to it. Religions don't co-exist easily because they are exclusive ideological world outlooks. Once politicized, they become exclusive political parties whose members may never adhere to nor

respect the outcomes of normal democratic processes. The result is permanent instability and bloody rivalries characteristic of Lebanon, Northern Ireland and the Punjab Province of India.

One or a combination of several conditions gives rise to politicization of religion, namely:

(i) when there are two or more major religious groups with numerical strengths that can significantly affect the outcome and direction of a democratic political process;

(ii) when religion is a legitimizing tool of hegemony and existing leadership feel the status quo is under threat; (iii) when there is an ascendant radical thinking within a politically significant religious group capable of upstaging hegemony; (iv) when the society is characterized by political, social or economic hardships that can trigger off the messianic/mahdist tendencies of the major religions. In Nigeria today the two received religions, Islam and Christianity are in keen competition for the conversion of unbelievers and the proselytisation of one another's adherents. What needs to be borne in mind, therefore, is that where such a competition takes on a political configuration, the end result can create deep hatred, anguish and even civil strife that might lead to painful disintegration of the nation.

### **The Seeds of Religious Politics in Nigeria**

Given the foregoing analysis, it would be idle exercise and wishful thinking to merely explore and suggest methods of ensuring religious peace and co-operation in a multi-faith Nigeria without first of all, appreciating the historical antecedents regarding the capacity for:

- 1 (a) Peaceful co-existence and /or
- (b) Political conflicts among the religious groups concerned and the underlying factors which enhance or prevent such co-existence or conflicts;
- 2 the political traditions and world outlooks of the religious faiths concerned, and
- 3 The socio-political and economic milieu in which the religions operate; any threat to the status quo?

### **HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS**

Factional religious disturbances and inter-faith conflicts are a recent phenomenon in Nigeria. It is more or less the result of a vacuum in partisan political activities occasioned by long-staying military dictatorships. As contended by Alhaji Gidado (1985), a former Permanent Secretary in Kaduna State, serious factional disturbances resulting in bloodshed started only after the emergence of the Isalatual Bidi'a wa Ikamatul sunna, an Islamic Fundamentalist Movement founded by Sheikh Abubakar Mahmud Gumi, in 1977.

The Izak movement is dedicated to returning Islam to its pristine practices of all forms of modernization and innovations. Its first proselytisation drive is directed against the Islamic community itself, aimed at reconverting all Muslims to adopt the fundamentalist and "true Islamic ways and practices". As such it couldn't but provoke the existing traditional Islamic

leadership, the darika (or establishment Islam), to anger. More so, when the initial strategy of the Izala was to hijack and control existing Juma'at Mosque, wherever they gained an appreciable number of adherents sufficient to cause trouble and stampede. As a result, a series of local upheavals, breaches of peace and bloodshed have been recorded in various urban areas of the North since 1977. It is even suspected that the Maintatsine Islamic crises that hit Kano (Yan Awaki Ward 1980), Kaduna (Rigass Ward, 1982), Maiduguri (Bulumkutu Ward 1982), Yola (Dobeli Ward, 1984) and Gombe (Pantami Ward, 1985) were seen as premature eruptions of a more elaborate and long term political design in the mould and fashion of Izala plot.

Incidentally, 1977 was the year when the transition to the Second Republic civil rule began. That was also the period when religion began to be politicized in Nigeria. The Izala group thus greatly contributed to the acute sensitivity and emotional outbursts displayed by both the pro-Shagari and anti-Sharia groups during 1979-80 constitutional debates, especially given their extremist "Islam Kawal" slogan, calling for an Islamic state system for Nigeria. Of course since then, religions politicization in Nigeria only grew deeper, such that both Christian and

Muslim leaders tend to weigh every government decision in terms of their respective religions; calculating, therefrom their possible gains and losses.

Set against these Islamic socio-political outlooks is the equally ambiguous Christian political theology and attitudes to politics. The nearest biblical reference, which appears to confer worldly power on Christians, is found in Luke 4:8: 18-21 when Term Christ Himself appeared to have acted on the fulfillment of the prophecy found in the book of Isaiah.

The spirit of the Sovereign Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the captives and release for the prisoners, and provide for those who grieve in Zion - to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of His splendour (Isaiah 61:1 -3).

He went further into the synagogue in Nazareth and stood up to perform the ceremony of reading the scriptures. The scroll of prophet Isaiah, containing the above quoted passage, was by divine guidance handed to Him to read out what He did.

And He said to them, today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing (Luke 4:21)

These passage indeed formed the basis of "Liberation Theology" for Nigeria's Nationalist leaders (Boer, 1979) and to their liberation movement today. But Christians are generally divided on matters of involvement in politics. European and American missionaries in colonial Nigeria found it prudent to convince their converts to steer clear of the politics of the day justifying this by reference to Jesus' classic response to the Pharisees:

Give unto Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's (Mt. 22:21, Mk 12:17) when the latter planned to trap Him into making pronouncements, pronouncements that the Roman imperial powers might consider sedition and subversive.

The Christian missionaries were right at least in temporal perspectives, if not doctrinally. To encourage their converts to organize for political emancipation, self-determination and equality within a colonial political outfit was to raise the flag of anti-colonial movement too early. Moreover, in the Northern Nigeria setting, British colonialism had come into a firm, political alliance with the Muslim traditional leadership. As a result, the pagan tribes of the Nigerian Middle Belt Region were brought under the Fulani hegemony. As such, combining the spread of the gospel with mobilization for political awareness would have amounted to pitching an opposition against the British - Fulani alliance. The mission of spreading the gospel would have suffered. Hence the mission's depoliticization of Christianity.

## **POLITICAL TYRANNY**

We have witnessed the situation whereby a political party once in power, had tried by all means to remain in it for ever and to silence all voices raised in protest against any of its policies. There had also been positive efforts - usually by oppressive, tyrannical and coercive means - to force everybody into the ruling party. Consequently, members of the opposition party had had to suffer persecution and victimization.

In a number of African countries we have seen the banning of all opposition parties and the introduction of a one-party system of Government, have also seen elections being openly rigged to ensure victory for the party in power. It is this attempt to gag the voices of opposition that led to many a coup d'etat in Africa and also in our own country, Nigeria.

What is disturbing in all this, is the fact that our traditional system of government before the colonial era held no parallel for these party struggles.

One might say with some justification that the political parties that we have seen in this country have been all out for the development of society. Crash programmes, large-scale industrialization, community development have not been attended to with all sincerity. On the contrary, what we have seen have been a struggle to share the national cake among the good boys of the ruling parties, the diversion of the money belonging to the nation or state into the private

enterprises of the members of parties in power. We have not seen much of a sense of responsibility to society on the part of the government parties. We have seen the institution of a number of commissions of enquiry into how governments or government Corporations used public funds (unfortunately, the outcome of such probes was never made public). We are only hoping for the better during this Obasanjo - regime with this new wind of change.

Much of these can be blamed on the ignorance of majority of the voters. Once elected, the new Member of Parliament finds he is owing large sums of money. His salary may be fat, but it is by no means sufficient to pay off the debts he has incurred during electioneering campaigns. Those who voted him into parliament also have to be remembered. He discovers to his pleasure that his colleagues in parliament have similar problems. So then, in principle there is a compromise. Consequently, we have corruption, parochialism, nepotism, and misuse of public funds, to mention a few. These are the evils, which those who protest against the participation of Christians in particular in party politics see.

But are the problems solved by the refusal of Christians to play party politics? Does society gain anything from such aloofness or indifference by Christians? Perhaps a closer look at our present society will help us to have a better appraisal of the issues involved.

Having established the basis of the Church's concern for and involvement in society, we must take a look at the state of the society in which the church is expected to operate.

The Nigerian society, is a very fortunate one. It is a nation that promises to be great, for it possesses all that make a great (in natural resources, economic stability, manpower and cultural heritage etc). Just as we rejoice about our wealth and potential greatness on the one hand, we must lament at the internal rottenness of our society on the other.

In Nigeria today, we make material possession the goal of life. Bribery and corruption are rife and they are indicative of a materialistic philosophy of life. To use our resources wastefully: like spraying at parties, buying luxurious cars for thousands and even millions of Naira, turning the side of an unknown grandfather for the third time, whenever we have some surplus to declare; indulging in lavish -entertainment at weddings, funerals etc, the craze for gambling - on football pools (Saturday nights are always unhappy nights for millions of Nigerians - the pool stakers); prosecuting armed robbery in which high ranking and affluent members of society have been found to be involved, misappropriation of official funds, embezzlement of large sums of money; smuggling even when we go out on religious pilgrimages; etc are all sins against God. To use what we have to widen the opportunities before us and for doing God's will is to please God.

Our society today is rotten morally. The youths are crazy not only do they have no philosophy of life, their dressing reveals the confused state of minds. What with a respectable young lady walking along the street in complete men's outfit, or half-nude; or in dresses that look more like right dress! What with young men walking around like lunatics who have just escaped from the asylum! Where in our society are you received with courtesy! In what office can you receive normal service! It is in this society sick people are treated like criminals; It is here you have to bribe in order to patronize an establishment. Despite of strict Government measures and vigilance smuggling has continued. Subsistence has become almost impossible because of the wicked inflation of prices of commodities. Everybody's only ambition is the accumulation of material wealth.

What of the incidence of unemployment! Is anyone doing anything about this! What about the fear of famine in an agricultural society! If desert lands like Israel could produce more than enough food for home consumption, is it not criminal that we are faced here with the threat of famine? These are just a few of the problems of our society.

We are hopeful that the Anti Corruption bill proposed by the President, Olusegun Obasanjo be passed by the House and Senate to deal effectively with the question of corruption especially in high places; that the anti-inflation measures will see to it that the common man can at least preserve his life; that the Public Complaints' Commission will be allowed to operate freely and fairly.

Active participation by Christians of conviction will go a long way in helping to inject into our body politic some sanity.

Christians are also citizens of any community, they have a right to vote and be voted for. While we do not plead for the creation of a Christian Party, we believe that the Christian should not only be a politician, but in so doing, he should carry his Christian concerns and insights, especially those of love and the demand for social justice, into his political party, into his government, into the floor of parliament, into the labour union, into the various corporations and societies of which he is a member.

His personal life is his biggest weapon. He must be known to follow a high standard of honesty, devotion to and assiduity at work; concern for the welfare of the common man.

'Politics is a dirty game' is a saying that has more or less been accepted as the Gospel Truth. This is not true. The Christian in politics must prove by his own faithfulness and transparent honesty the falsity of this conception. The misfortune of the past is the failure of Christian politicians to take Christianity into politics. On the contrary, they succeeded in bringing politics into Christianity, while they themselves became assimilated into the make-belief paradise of corrupt politicians. If only Christians regard their opportunity to serve in political positions as a calling, they will realize that the spirit of God is there to guide them. We however recognize, all the same, the dilemma of the Christian politician when he is left with a choice between his own Christian principles and party loyalty, especially when these two conflict. When situation like this arises, God's wisdom should be applied at all costs. Should Pastors be politicians? It has been observed that in certain countries where the laity had probably failed to show effective Christian leadership, Pastors have been forced to become politicians. But this has its complications especially in developing countries where the intricacies of politics have not been desirable to encourage pastors or Imams to become politicians directly. But the

Pastors have a tremendous role to play in the political life of community. First and foremost. . . *t* is a watchman whose responsibility is described in Ezekiel 33:1-9. Note especially verses 7-9.

The old prophets were alive to this responsibility and they pursued it very vigorously: :: was not a pleasant job; but it was inescapable: Two examples will suffice.

1. Amos did not appreciate his unenviable position, but he had been compelled :: speak and so despite the fact that he was not a prophet, he abandoned his trade and prophesied to the people of Israel. Amos 7:19-16.
2. Jeremiah was a very miserable prophet. The people among whom he prophesied were very hostile to him and in fact made several attempts to kill him: Jer. 18:18. Jer. 26:2-20.

If the Pastor must be a faithful follower of Christ, he cannot compromise with the world. He must not be afraid of being hated by the world: Our Lord's assurance was enough strength for him. Luke 12:35—40; John 15:18-27, Matt 5:10-16.

The Pastor also has to provide for his flock the spiritual food and the inspiration that will guide them in their political activities.

## CONCLUSION

We have stated that the church/mosque is an organized body of human beings. As an organized body of human beings therefore, the church can not avoid the relationship with fellow human beings. The church/mosque is a social unit and must exist and operate in a social context and fabrics of human relationship communication, actions and interactions. The church/mosque can not avoid living within the structure of human relationship, which involves the adjustment of power and interest. Since politics is also concerned with the adjustment of positions or relationship of power, interest and rights, politics can neither be foreign to the church nor mosque. A living, dynamic and sensitive church can not opt out of politics, she must realize that political power is from God and that all power is divine. Saint Paul in Romans 13:1 stated that 'There is no authority except from God, and those that exist had been instituted by God'. It is

therefore clear from the Christian revelation viewpoint that power, social and political, is from God and hence divine.

The God of the church/mosque is one, and the same God of politics. To regard politics as a demonic zone, free from God's influence is a distorted vision of divine providence. And as Howardy Crosby aptly puts it "To let politics become a cesspool, and then avoid it, is a cesspool double crime". (Cesspool is a pit where you dump refuse). It is therefore natural that the Church as an organized body of the people of God must be in politics, but a Church in politics should not lose her sense of Mission and Ministry. She must understand and practically acknowledge what the concept of Christian Ministry as opposed to dominion and domination and selfish exploitation for power. The objective of the Church in politics is and should be an entirely humanitarian one. The church should try to harmonize prayer and politics. To many, politics and justice work for the achievement of true peace and social harmony. The Church must show deep concern for the people of God where they are and whenever they can be found.

The church must be in politics so as to show its sensitivity to the problems of man. To the adverse of a contrary view would be to divorce prayer from politics. To separate prayer from political concern for the people where they can be found. If Religion should adopt the policy of political withdrawal, abstention and isolationism, she would be to all intent and purposes condemning and committing herself to a curse of political sterilization. To advocate withdrawal from politics for Church is to make the Church conservative. It is to further ultimate and fetter the dimension of the Mission of the Church to the people of the society.

Religion has a role to play in politics. She must recognize, acknowledge and respect power in politics, she must seek to divert political responsibility into the political affairs of the country, she must see that political power does not, violate human rights and values. The Church in politics should seek justice and peace, progress and stability.

Religion must always seek a sustainable democracy and political stability in order to promote public peace, morality, social justice and equality under the law. The interest of common good renders the presence of the Religion politics necessary. Religion in politics should act as the conscience and moral watchdog of the nation for the restoration of human dignity and for the promotion of liberty. Both church and Mosque can serve God and the people of God in the Church/Mosque and politics without any detriment to religion. This will usher in a brighter future politically in the next Millennium in our society.

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