**ORIGINAL ARTICLE**

# The Interaction of Religion with the Political Culture of Nigeria: Exploring the Challenges and Opportunities

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*Abstract*

*This article was intended to examine the interaction of religion with the political culture of Nigeria. The positive influence of Nigeria's socioeconomic and political development shouldn't be understated since its economy is one of the giant economies of Africa, and its contribution to the continent is very significant. However, the politicization of religion has obstructed Nigeria's progress. This study employed functionalist and conflict theories to explore the challenges and opportunities posed by religion in Nigerian politics. Similarly, a qualitative research design was adopted. My study subjects were adult Nigerians, purposefully selected. Secondary data and literature from various sources were collected to provide a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. This study reveals that religion can be functional or dysfunctional depending on how it is utilized by religious practitioners. In its functional state, religion can facilitate peacebuilding, and socioeconomic development. In contrast, the dysfunctional state of religion triggers unintended consequences that impede socioeconomic development. By examining the interaction of religion and politics in Nigeria, this study illuminated the subtleties and complexity of the interplay between religion and the political culture of Nigeria. It was, therefore, recommended among other things that regulatory frameworks should be implemented to promote interfaith cooperation, and an ideal political culture that is conducive to the socio-economic development of Nigeria.*

**Keywords:** Religion, Nigeria, Political culture, Socioeconomic development, and Functionalism

## Introduction

Nigeria is religiously plural society with a blend of African Traditional Religion, Christianity and Islam as the predominant religions. The proportion of Christians to Muslims in Nigeria is a contentious issue. However, Sampson (2014) asserts that the country's north-eastern and northwest regions are dominated by the Islamic faith whereas the southwest, south-eastern and southern regions are predominantly Christians. The status of Nigeria as a secular state is hinged on the constitution. Both the current and previous constitutions of Nigeria vehemently declare the country's secularism which is the separation of church and state, and the ability to practice one's religion without fear (Oshewolo and Maren, 2015). Section 10 of the Constitution emphatically states that 'the Government of the federation or of any state shall not adopt any religion as state religion'.

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Notwithstanding, political leaders who are from both Christian and Muslim backgrounds have referred to God in public, and they attempted to use religion to influence laws, economic and political policies and ultimately, governance freely (Oshewolo and Maren, 2015). On the other hand, the adoption of Sharia laws in some northern states has made it impossible for Nigeria to uphold the fundamental ideals of a secular state. The inextricability of religion from politics, and its effect on Nigeria's socioeconomic development is alarming. For example, there is a tendency from both Christianity and Islam's sides to politicize religion in Nigeria. Therefore, this article focuses on both religions without including the African Traditional Religion.

The interaction of religion with the political culture of Nigeria presents ample opportunities for socioeconomic development. However, owing to the prevalence of religious manipulation, the interaction of religion with Nigerian political culture can also be said to be dysfunctional. The aim of this article is to examine the subtleties and complexities inherent in the interplay between religion and the political culture of Nigeria, and to proffer approaches that can be adopted to enhance Nigeria's political culture and socioeconomic development. The study used a qualitative research design to make content and thematic analyses on secondary data which were collected from: literature, books, journals and online repositories to provide a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter.

## Conceptual Review

### Religion

Throughout history, different academicians have endeavoured to define religion based on their own subject matter perspectives. However, owing to the ambiguity of religion, there is no widely acknowledged definition. Etymologically, the term 'religion' derives from the Latin word 'religare', which means to bind. According to Okwueze (2003), religion can be understood as a regulated pattern of life of a people in which experience, beliefs and knowledge are reflected in man's conception of himself in relation to others, his social world, the physical as well as the metaphysical world.

From both functional and substantive angles, the term 'religion' can be extensively construed. According to the former, religion plays in the sociocultural evolution of humans while the latter clarifies the enigma surrounding religion (Oguntola-Laguda, 2015). Yinger defines religion as, "A system of beliefs and practices through which a group of people struggles with problems of human existence," (Van der Leew, 1963). Similarly, Durkheim defined religion as, "A unified system of beliefs and practices which are related to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church all those who adhere to them," (Durkheim, 1915). Given that religion is ingrained in human nature, religion and human affairs particularly politics are inextricable. From the functionalist definition of religion, it can be deduced that religion can promote socioeconomic development or vice versa depending on how it is used. It has significant social aspects and effects which may be perceived favourably or unfavourably based on how people respond to and embraces the laws, doctrines, precepts and principles that are the foundation of religion (Oguntola-Laguda, 2015).

Similar to ethnicity, religion is the cornerstone of African culture since it defines its adherents' universe, gives them purpose, and access to the abilities which help them to understand and interpret both the material and spiritual worlds. In addition, it gives its members a feeling of safety and well beingness. Furthermore, it empowers them to protect their bodily and spiritual integrity from outside threats (Egobueze and Ojirika, 2017).

## Political Culture

The 1963 book "The Civic Culture" by Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba is credited with popularizing the term 'political culture', and the study was a traditional comparative examination of political beliefs and democratic practices across five nations (Odoemelam and Aisien, 2013). Marshall (1996) defines political culture as, "The norms, values and symbols that help to legitimize the political power system of a society." Ofoeze (2001) citing Rosenbaun noted that there are two ways to describe political culture: at the levels of individual citizens and political system as a whole. With reference to the individual level, political culture refers to "All the important ways in which a person is subjectively oriented towards the essential element in the political system" while the collective orientation of a person towards the basic elements in their political system is its definition in relation to the political system as a whole (Ofoeze, 2001).

Political culture is described as, "The attitudes, beliefs and values which underpin the operation of a particular political system." These were seen as including knowledge and skill about the operation of the political system, positive and negative feelings towards it, and evaluative judgments about the system' (McLean and McMillan, 2009). Political culture refers to formal customs, traditions, and political behaviours which are passed down from generations to generation, and it incorporates well-established political traits that characterize a society (Udim, 2014). Political culture is also the culmination of the subjective and psychological aspects of politics (Jatula, 2019). It probes the political relationship between actors, actions and outcomes. It is also deemed as the collection of attitudes, convictions and feelings that provide a political process structure and purpose as well as the fundamental presumptions and guidelines that direct behaviour inside the political system (Yusuf, 2022).Since political culture can be intrinsically based on positive orientations that produce norms, values, beliefs and attitudes that uphold the political power structure, constructive political socialization is needed (Odoemelam and Aisien, 2013).This underscores the pertinence of acclimatization of citizens on the fundamental components of politic culture.

In their research, Almond and Verba distinguished three categories of political cultures namely: participant, subject and parochial political cultures. In participant political culture, people comprehend politics and engage in them. However, in subject political culture, people generally follow the law, but they don't get involved much because they regard themselves as subjects of the state rather than as participants in politics. Lastly, in parochial political culture, people vaguely understand that there is a central government, but they have no knowledge or interest in politics. Political cultures are important because they influence not just the political attitudes and behaviours of a populace but also the course of regimes. They offer a framework for comprehending legitimacy, power, authority, and policy. They also have a significant impact on the election processes and democratic growth of a state (Jatula, 2019).

## Theoretical Frameworks: Functionalism

This study is premised on Emile Durkheim's functionalist theory of religion. Durkheim counted on institutional structures like religion to maintain society. The functionalist theory appraises religion in terms of society's needs and the contributions religion makes to meet these needs (Vij, 2018). Religion can be found in all known human societies, and it has continued to be a significant part of societies and human experiences shaping how individuals react to the environments in which they live (Achebe, 1983).

 In giving a functionalist definition of religion, Durkheim accentuated the functions of religion in the society irrespective of how it is practised or the religious beliefs it favours. The functions of religion in societies include: giving meaning and purpose to life, reinforcing social unity and stability, serving as an agent of social control of behaviour, promoting physical and psychological well-being, and motivating people to work for positive social change (University of Minnesota, 2016).

The role of religion in the development of societies in which it is situated cannot be overemphasised especially in Nigeria where there is an apparent struggle for sustainable socio-economic development. Religion has played and is still playing a major role in social institutions such as economics and politics as it is an interactive force in society because of its ability to shape collective beliefs, and it provides cohesion in the social order by promoting a sense of belonging in collective enterprises (Adetunmbi, 2019).The relevance of this theory to the study lies in the observation that Christianity, as practised in Nigeria, exhibits a remarkable proclivity towards meeting both the spiritual and secular needs of the adherents, a characteristic that can be contextualised within the prism of development which is an indispensable aspect of religious expression. Functionalism is criticised for overlooking power dynamics, existing inequalities and religion's role in conflict in Nigeria, as religious differences fuel separatist movements, violence and control over Nigeria's political system.

## Conflict Perspective Theory

Karl Marx's conflict theory is a sociological theory that holds the idea that struggle for scarce resources keeps society in a condition of constant conflict. Conflict theory maintains that dominance and power, not agreement and compliance, preserve social order, and that the wealthy and powerful maintain their position primarily by oppressing the weak and helpless. Marx contends that maintaining the status quo requires religion that promises rewards in the afterlife rather than in the present earthly world. As a means of social control, it is used by the bourgeoise to keep the proletariat content with existing inequality through ideological coercion which created consensus and acceptance of the values and expectations determined by the bourgeoisie.

Conflict theory assumes that power inequalities exist in human relationships and social structures with those who benefit from a particular structure working to maintain and enhance their power. Powerful individuals within a religion are able to enforce beliefs and practices through their interpretations of sacred texts or claims of direct revelations from God. Based on the Nigerian experience, religion consolidates power and control of resources as well as audience and followership (Obiefuna, 2011). Governors and politicians have turned the yearly pilgrimage that the government sponsors into a vehicle for political patronage rewarding party members in the hopes of bolstering their support bases (Omilusi, 2015). Marx viewed religion as the opiate of the people that pacifies

members by providing a worldview that deflects attention that would otherwise be directed at the inequalities of this world. Considering Nigeria, Marx's argument can be faulted for oversimplifying religion, disregarding its potential for social services and cooperation,

necessitating more sophisticated approaches to tackling inequality.

## Historical Background of Religion in Nigeria's Political Space

Nigeria's political landscape has been shaped by external forces of colonialism, globalisation and foreign policies. The pre-colonial era was characterised by tolerance with politicians frequently entwined with religious authority. However, the introduction of Christianity and Islam by colonial powers significantly influenced Nigeria's religious composition. Islam established a stronghold throughout the nation prior to the British invasion extending from the Sokoto Caliphate, the Borno empire, to the Yoruba land and all the way down to Lagos' Atlantic coast (Oshewolo and Maren, 2015). The exposure of northern communities to Islam was mainly took place through the trans-Saharan trade route (Nolte, Danjibo and Oladeji, 2014:10). The early contacts between Islam and Northern Nigeria led to the supremacy of Islam in Hausa-Fulani cities before colonization. Usman Dan Fodio (1754–1817) led a jihad in the 19th century that revitalized Islam, and he united a sizable portion of northern Nigeria under a new caliphate. Through voluntarily converted Yoruba people and connections to Malian commercial groups, Islam also reached the Yoruba people in southwest Nigeria (Omilusi, 2015).

Conversely, Christianity arrived alongside colonialists who served as imperialist agents. Coastal cities like Lagos and the ethnic communities in southeast Nigeria saw a greater concentration and intensity of European Christian missionaries' activities as well as those of freed and returned slaves. As a result, as Christian evangelism and education proliferated, Christianity emerged as the predominant religion in southeast Nigeria (Emelonye, 2011). The gradual destruction of African traditional religion appeared imminent as independent missionary workers occupied Southern Nigeria, and as they made their way through the Northern minorities. Prior to these times, traditional African religions dominated all political activities and Chief priests were well-known chiefs with great authority. The arrival of Christianity and Islam during colonialism resulted in a regional religious division like the Northern People's Congress.

Post-independence politicians continued to use religious rhetoric and identity politics to garner support demonstrating the continued influence of religion in politics. Nigerian politics continued to manipulate religion as evidenced by the rise to prominence of Chief Obafemi Awolowo, Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe and Sir Ahmadu Bello as leaders of the country's western, eastern and northern regions. Islam controlled the North while Christianity continued to have more sway in the South. Since the majority of people in the North were from royal families who controlled all aspects of Northern politics and were heavily influenced by Islam, the problem of the politicization of religion was more evident there than in other parts of the country (Oshewolo and Maren, 2015).

The burgeoning liberal democracy posed a danger to the Northern ruling class's hegemonic status. As a result, they lacked the necessary resources. Thus, becoming politically bankrupt. In order to safeguard and defend their interests, they consequently turned to the defence of Islam. Under the second republic, this took on a new turn as the political intrigue turned into the defence of 'Northern interest', which was perceived as merely a ruse to win over the region's minority, both Muslim and non-Muslim (Oshewolo and

Maren, 2015). 'Northern interest' served to unite the Northern political actors who had previously been divided by politics. Kukah (1993:5) refers to this political manoeuvre as 'conscription politics.' Presently, global factors like terrorism by Boko-Haram have led to security issues and political instability while conditionalities for foreign aid, and for governance frameworks of the United Nations and African Union has influenced Nigeria's perspective on human rights and democracy.

## The Role of Religion in shaping Nigeria's Political Culture

Many people have misconstrued religion's purposes by limiting it only to responses to cosmic forces and god manifestations as well as communicating with supernatural and cosmic forces (Familusi, 2012). However, throughout history, religion and politics have been closely linked. This can be seen in the histories of the Mesopotamian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek and Roman empires as well as ancient Egypt and Greece. Following the collapse of the Roman Empire, this practice persisted in the feudal nations (Oyetunbi and Akinrinde, 2021). In a similar manner, in Nigeria, religion plays a significant role in people's lives. As evidenced by our constitution, the influence of religious leaders as well as our political and electoral processes is very crucial in the course of the nation's administrative history (Adamo, 2018). As an agent of socialization institution, religion has been harnessed to inform the political culture. Additionally, it has been applied to constructive orientations that provide standards, ideals, convictions and dispositions that uphold Nigerian democracy.

Furthermore, religion has always some influence on Nigerian elections either explicitly or covertly as it plays a significant role in each and every stage of the process (Familusi, 2012). Recognizing that religious rhetoric and affiliations are used to pick candidates, political office aspirants use religious sentiments to court the support of the electorate. This heightened the discourse on Muslim/Muslim or Christian/Muslim tickets that ensued before the presidential election of February, 2023.Electioneering activities are common among religious leaders usually backed by prophecies. In 2011, Pastor Chris Okotie who was a presidential aspirant and general overseer of Household of God Church, unsuccessfully foretold that he would emerge as winner of the election.

Six interconnected functions of religion include: limiting or criticizing the actions of the government, fostering political engagement, advancing democratic norms and values, articulating and bringing together of different societal interests, creating transversal identities and offering opportunities for the growth of leadership abilities (Rotimi, Mala and Aiyegboyin, 1999). When conflicting affiliations exist, it suggests that social peace and democratic stability may be maintained by dividing people's emotions along a single, explosive line of affiliation thereby averting long-term or destructive social conflicts. Ultimately, religious institutions, akin to numerous other structured forms of social interaction or association, offer a suitable setting for the cultivation of leadership abilities. This is accomplished by demonstrating an amazing ability to manage personnel and resources within their respective organizations and by vocally and resolutely opposing the extreme solutions to the country's problems (Oshewolo and Maren, 2015).

However, concluding that religious organizations have only consistently or uniformly supported democratic processes and values in Nigeria would be misleading. Sometimes, conversely, they have on some occasions displayed anti-democratic tendencies that have been manifested in acts of religious intolerance and violence as well as in the corruption and manipulation of religious authorities. As a result, it could be deduced that some

religious practices are dysfunctional since they have negative consequences that contradict with Nigeria's objectives. Prior to, and during elections, political figures promise different religious claims and allegiances to use it as a major tool for achieving their political goals, and they use it to gain political power. However, after they win the election, they forget what they promise, and even sometimes they disturb its teachings and moral standards.

Religious leaders have previously adopted stances by openly endorsing religious politicians. There are mutual expectations from both sides. As a result, churches and mosques have become fertile political stages where politicians swarm to obtain 'blessings,' and clerics openly order the faithful to vote for particular candidates (Emeaku, 2019). In order to divide the populace and maintain tension in the nation, political elites employ religious fanaticism and favouritism as their means of getting win over their rivals. The result of this tension creating has been witnessed in a widespread politically motivated and ethnoreligious killings and kidnappings. As it has been mentioned by Emeaku (2019), aver that destructive disputes, politicians, policy makers and religious leaders frequently use religion as a deciding factor in deciding who gets what, when and how in public and private offices. Not only this, but it also has a significant impact on the course of government policy. Omilusi (2015) assert that following elections, political gladiators and religious stakeholders undermine public interests as a result of the intrigue and complexities that go into the process. In the same vein, voters choose their candidates solely based on their religious affiliation.

Since religion has reportedly become the crux of cultures, it upholds social standards, and it makes it impracticable to question the gravity of faith or the dedication of the majority of Nigerians to their religious convictions (Emeaku, 2019). Eschatological teachings inherent in religion as well as the antecedents of past politicians, have led to the demonization of politics, and its portrayal as a dirty game. Thus, rather than actively mobilizing the people to engage in religion, religion sometimes alienates its adherents from politics, exacerbating political apathy.

# Opportunities Posed by the Interaction of Religion with Politics

## Mobilization and Civic Participation

Religious associations in Nigeria have loudly and consistently condemned bad government policies or actions that violate the rights of the religious community in particular and/or the welfare of the citizenry in general; they have also joined civil societies in denouncing the government's handling of the religious unrest that have erupted among many Northern states (Oshewolo and Maren, 2015). Regarding the promotion of civic engagement and political engagement, religious organizations have been instrumental in motivating their adherents to actively engage in and identify with politics through fasting and prayers for the country's advancement, peace, stability and justice (Ayorinde, 2007).

In addition, religion also upholds democratic principles and standards by advancing tolerance, moderation, veracity, justice and freedom. Nigerian religious leaders have shown their dedication to democracy by imploring people to remain steadfast in embracing democratic institutions (Tukur, 1999). Furthermore, religion offers channels for representation of interests as it expresses, brings together and stands for specific

societal interests. One of the numerous ways through which the Christian community has represented its interests since 1986 is through its mobilization and representation in Nigeria's admission to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) (Oshewolo and Maren, 2015).

Since Nigeria's democratic government came into power in 1999, faith-based organizations like the Muslim League for Accountability (MULAC), Federation of Muslim Women's Associations of Nigeria (FOMWAN), Justice, Development and Peace Commission (JDPC) among others have kept an eye on the outcome of the elections. Given that they frequently collaborate with other civil society organizations, this may not be unrelated to the goal of giving the electoral process some legitimacy. More frequently than not, both academics and politicians are interested in their reports, and the latter rely on them in part for electoral litigation (Omilusi, 2015). To put an end to the recent wave of violence and killings in Nigeria, Pastor E.A. Adeboye rallied millions of his church members to go on a prayer walk. In the same way, an analogous fasting and prayer was announced by the Christian Association of Nigeria in February 2020 in an effort to bolster the armed forces' efforts to combat terrorism and insurgency activity within the nation (Punch Newspaper,

2020).

## Community Development and Welfare

The clergy in Nigeria are listed as they are among the wealthiest and most powerful in the world (Onapajo, 2016). Interestingly, this is translated to developmental projects in the society. In Christianity tithe giving and charity are highly regarded and the funds collected are used to address the plights of the poor with widows and women being given much preference as they are the most vulnerable groups in terms of securing their livelihoods. In Nigeria, the activities of Faith Based Organizations have been both proactive and supplementary in the provision of social amenities for the populace especially in areas where the government is lacking. Religious institutions and organisations make huge contributions to disaster relief, and they support and participate in development activities (Tomalin, 2013). During the COVID-19 pandemic, popular general overseers like Pastor W.F. Kumuyi, Pastor E.A. Adeboye and Bishop Oyedepo donated money, medical equipment and relief materials to alleviate the suffering of the masses. Provision of social services to internally displaced people and rural communities are also developmental projects embarked on religious organizations.

Besides formalizing education in Nigeria, religious organizations have continued to establish educational institutions across the country. Notably, the Roman Catholic Church of Nigeria initiated the creation of private universities like Madonna university and other denominations like the Nigerian Baptist Convention took the initiative to establish Bowen University. Similarly, faith-based health care services are also common sight in Nigeria. These hospitals and health centres support government initiatives for the delivery of healthcare by providing effective services to Nigerians at reasonable costs. In Nigeria, there are about 4,400 registered hospitals under the Christian Health Association of Nigeria (CHAN) that help sustain Nigeria's healthcare sector (Omegoh, 2015). Likewise, religious organizations also embark on skill acquisition trainings for their members to complement formal education. The contributions of the Omega Power Ministry to the development of Port Harcourt metropolis cannot be underemphasized. Ngbea and Achunike (2014) averred that some of the economic roles which religion plays in Nigeria includes: employer of labour, provider of services especially in health and education, investor in real estate and manager of properties. More importantly, religious values such

as integrity, frugality and charity have impact on economic behaviour while the practice of zakat among Muslims has also facilitated neighbourliness.

## Compass for Morality and Value Formulation

Morality is essentially about behaviour and obligation, and it is one of the fundamental tenets of religion. It assumes mutual respect in our relationship with one another in addition to establishing rules of conduct. Religion provides the fundamental moral precepts upon which our culture and society are based (Adamolekun, 2012). Oboh (2016) opines that religious institutions still remain the most dependable keepers of moral norms in society, and any country that rejects the doctrine and practices of recognized religious institutions may find it challenging to furnish its inhabitants with a moral foundation necessary for social conduct of its citizens.

According to Kant (1960), religious community is the only social force that can offer a framework for morality or the moral code which is necessary to achieve the highest good. Nigeria's Same-Sex Marriage prohibition bill signed in January 2014 and her legislation on the inclusion of religious education in Basic Education Curriculum are prime examples of the place of religion in instituting morality. Similarly, Hisbah a religious police force in northern Nigeria promotes morality by monitoring and regulating activities like alcohol consumption and gambling.

In the same way, Enweremadu (1991), studied how the church contributed to the moral revolution in modern-day Nigeria. He made a case for the church's vital missionary activities in advancing justice, fair play and the moral uplift of modern-day Nigerian society. Religious convictions compel us to live transparent lives in order to promote stability and growth (Ngbea and Achunike, 2014). Religious sanctions punish people who transgress religious precepts, hence regulating the formation of individual and collective identities in all human cultures (Benaiah, 2023). 'In the extreme, groups who deviate from religious proscriptions may be tortured, executed, or excommunicated; in more subtle ways, religious deviants may be ridiculed, shunned or ostracized' (Andersen, 1997). On the other hand, solicited and unsolicited payers are often said for leaders and the country (Familusi, 2010). As the cornerstone of morality, religion can oppose the materialism of our culture and the unequal distribution of the wealth and resources of the country which are dominated by the corrupt members of society (Gbadegesin and Adeyemi-Adejolu, 2016).

## Conflict Resolution, Peacebuilding and Social Cohesion

The democratic utilities of religion include the integration of human societies which is composed of individuals and social groups with diverse interests and aspirations. Additionally, religious bond transcends personal and divisive force, and it legitimizes existing social order (Oshewolo and Karen, 2015). Abu-Nimer (2001) concurs that religion can be a powerful tool in conflict resolution and peacebuilding. When practiced in its purest form and spirit, religion is essential for social justice, law and order, community development, intentional leadership, peace-making, and reconciliation (Oshewolo and Maren, 2015).

Both christianity and Islam both teach forgiveness, reconciliation, and peaceful coexistence which can help resolve conflicts between individuals and communities. In support of this, Benaiah (2023) noted that peace process can be facilitated by religion because of the infrastructure that institutional religion provides and the religious leaders' desire to offer direction. She also stated that although the role that religion can play in promoting peace has long been recognized, it is not as frequently highlighted as the one it plays in inciting violence. Communal belief is shaped into a communal identity through religion's role as an integrative social force. Religious rites such as birthday celebrations, child dedication, marriages and funerals foster unity and solidarity within the community. Voters get a sense of belonging when they identify with a specific religious community. Establishing social cohesiveness and a shared identity leads to the achievement of social control.

The Sultan Foundation for Peace and Development, Interfaith Mediation Centre, Nigerian Inter-Religious Council, Christian Association of Nigeria and Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs have all been involved in peace building, and in conflict resolution in states like Plateau, and Kaduna among others. They have achieved these through peace conferences, peace education, interfaith dialogue sessions and collaborative activities like interfaith prayers, peace marches and football competitions between Christians and Muslims. Victims of farmer-herder crisis, gun-men and Boko-Haram attacks are offered humanitarian aid to ease their suffering, and to facilitate their reintegration into the society. Comment

# Challenges Inherent in the Inextricability of Religion from Nigerian Politics

## Ethno-religious Polarization

According to a survey which was conducted on the ethno-religious crises in Nigeria, emotive reactions and religiosity of Nigerians are responsible for the loss of life and wanton destruction of properties (Ojo, 2006). Mazrui (1996) observes that Christianity and Islam have become polarizing rather than bringing people together, and they are destabilizing rather than establishing legitimacy in African nations where they are fiercely competitive and both are politicized. Generally speaking, the two Semitic religions in Nigeria, Islam and Christianity, exacerbate regional and ethnic divisions, and they make stability more challenging. Governments become less stable when religion serves to legitimize ethnic differences. While politically using religious fanaticism and favouritism to polarize the populace and maintain unhealthful conflict in the nation, political elites use religion as a tool of exploitation to attain self-serving socioeconomic purposes (Omilusi, 2015).

In north-eastern Nigeria, the political culture revolves around ethnicity and religion which in turn influences political activities like voting and contesting for elections notably between 2011 and 2019 (Yusuf, 2022). Consequently, Christians do not win elections in areas with a majority of Muslims, and vice versa. A candidate's developmental ideas and aspirations are of little concern to voters; voting behaviours are usually patterned along religious or ethnic identity (Yusuf, 2022). In contrast to the political body and religion, Nigerians have shown a stronger bond or alliance with their religious organization which is rather than stabilizing the political system, deepens ethnic divides.

## Extremism and Violence

Extremism in religion is causing for many human and material resource destructions across the world. This is also true in Nigeria where many human lives and economic devastations happened in different times and places. For instance, in 1979/1980 Maitatsine violence in the North claimed 4,177 people; Kafanchan, Kaduna and Zaria crisis of March 1987caused by a clash between Christians and Muslim at Kafanchan over the misinterpretation of Quran by a Christian preacher claimed lives and property; 1982 crisis in Kano which stemmed from the decision of the Anglican Hausa Church to build a bigger church within its walled premises at Fegge quarters which the majority of Muslims around the area felt it was too close to their Central Mosque; the 1988 U.I. Chapel episode where some Muslim fundamentalists attempted to burn down the wooden status of the risen Christ at the University Chapel after the construction of new Mosque on the Campus and subsequent claims by Muslims that the effigy of risen Christ was facing the Mosque and the 1990 Katsina Shiite movement protest against the unity in Nigeria are lucid examples of religious extremism and violence (Emeaku, 2019).

In the same way, responses to political election results are also influenced by religious beliefs as evident in the post-election violence of 2011 that took 800 lives in Northern Nigeria, and it displaced 65,000 people in three days (USIP, 2011). Yusuf (2011) stated that an interview of a security personnel revealed that after the declaration of the 2011 presidential election result, rioters in Bauchi state chanted:

'allahuakbar, allahuakbar, allahuakbar' where are the arnals (infidel) here, come out we will slaughter you like cows, you have manipulated a faithful servant of Allah, Muhammadu Buhari, come out we will kill you'.

Due to, the rioters' belief that Christians supported a Christian candidate from the South as a result of which churches were destroyed, and the majority of those killed were Christians. Clerics advise their followers to play partisan politics since they view politics as an integral element of their faith. Political candidates often garner support from fellow practitioners of their religion; in instances of loss, their supporters may turn to violence or apathy. It is believed that President Goodluck Jonathan alienated a large portion of the Muslim population in the north as a result of his appeal to the Christian voters in the north prior to the 2011 election which was aptly symbolized by a picture of him kneeling before a well-known Pentecostal Christian preacher (Omilusi, 2015).

## Religious Influence on Policymaking

Oyetunbi and Akinrinde (2021) opine that the clergy and religious institutions are often involved in politics at least at the level of lobbying governments to influence political decisions. It is acclaimed that the adoption of sharia in some northern states goes against the articulation of Nigerians' freedom to live under a secular democratic state. Non-Muslims now conceive politics as a way to protect themselves from Islamic rule while perceived Muslim solidarity is an attempt to halt the threats that non-Muslims pose to Islam. Ayantayo (2005) pointed out that Alhaji Yerima, the governor of Zamfara state had promised to Muslims in the north during his election campaign in 2003 that Sharia rules would be implemented in the state provided that if they supported him. As a result, he was elected on the basis of this promise he proposed during his campaign, and after assuming office, he implemented Sharia law and turned the state into an Islamic state. The

implementation has caused conflict between the state's Muslim and Christian populations with the latter complaining that their religious rights were being denied (Ayantayo, 2005).

Hisbah, Jigawa's Sharia law enforcement organisation which was reported in February 2021 that it had destroyed no fewer than 3,000 alcohol bottles that had been seized in the state's Kazaure Local Government Area (Sahara Reporters, 20210. Similarly, according to Channels Television which was voiced in February 2022, the Kano Hisbah Board destroyed about four million beer bottles citing the state's Shariah laws that forbade the sale or consumption of alcohol (Channels Television, 2022). Ironically, ICIR (2021) noted that since 2015, the state of Kano has received approximately N525.74 billion in federal allocations from Value Added Tax (VAT) a portion of which is derived from alcohol tax. This is despite the government's policy of seizing and destroying alcohol bottles in accordance with Sharia Law. On the other hand, many people in the south do not see the reason why taxes which were collected from businesses which were prohibited by the Sharia law, should be used to develop states that operate it (Umeanolue, 2020). During his tenure as the governor of Rivers State, Nyesom Wike emphatically stated that "Naturally, states with ethically restrictive social policies with economic implications may be adversely affected for now," implying that states destroying alcoholic drinks can no longer benefit from Rivers state Value Added Tax (Peoples Gazette, 2021)

## Underdevelopment

The presence of religion in Nigerian politics can be likened to a two-edged sword depending on who is wielding it. It can lead to development or underdevelopment depending on how it is harnessed. Despite the religious ties of her leaders at all levels of administration, the country has remained characterized by institutional dysfunction and deteriorating infrastructure owing to political patronage. President Bola Tinubu's decision to subsidize the 2024 Hajj journey to Mecca is a political and religious pandering as it contradicts his Inauguration Day mantra of "subsidy is gone," which has caused immense economic misery for Nigerians (Punch Newspaper, 2024). The removal of subsidies on fuel and electricity while approving N90 billion in subsidies for the Muslim pilgrimage in 2024 is a huge price considering the economic realities of Nigeria. Despite the fact that the national debt has reached around N100 trillion, and 140 million people live in multidimensional poverty, Nigerians battle with erratic electricity and infrastructure deficit of $3 trillion, or $100 billion per year over the next 30 years (Punch Newspaper, 2024). President Tinubu alongside governors of states like Kano, Kogi, Ogun and Kebbi have been criticized for subsidizing 2024 hajj fares.

For this reason, Familusi (2010) asserts that "any government that is more concerned with rewarding citizens for travelling to Mecca or Jerusalem than with urgent issues that can advance development, is an insincere government." In addition to pilgrimages, the public funds being used on places of prayer in government buildings and other public areas may have benefited the struggling economy. Furthermore, public funds which contributed to religious organisations by political leaders as a covert means of stifling criticism of the government's actions as well as the numerous public holidays set aside each year for religious celebrations can be used for other constructive endeavours (Umeanolue, 2020). Considering Nigeria's secularity, such acts can be deemed as political patronage. Rival religions become enraged and resentful when government exploit public funding as a means of political patronage (Sampson, 2014).

The antipathy that exists between Islam and Christianity has often resulted in an unhealthy rivalry, and the deliberate destruction of lives and properties. Ajaegbu (2012) corroborates the notion that religious terrorism in Nigeria poses a serious threat to the country's development because it is evident in Northern Nigeria where social and economic activities in some of the most volatile states like Yobe and Borno have all stopped owing to constant destruction of people's source of livelihood, and the termination of both local and foreign investments.

# Conclusion

In a heterogeneous nation like Nigeria where the people openly and fiercely identify with either Islam or Christianity, the intricate relationship between religion and politics is most evident (Omilusi, 2015). Employing both the functionalist and conflict theories of religion, this article argues that as societies develop, the fusion of functionalist and conflict perspectives of religion can construct a more holistic understanding of social institutions like religion. The growing hostility between Christians and Muslims throughout the nation has been worsened by the heavy politicization of religion in modern-day Nigeria, and it has given the separatist movement more clout and legitimacy. Political elites have not turned their religious beliefs into good governance for the common good despite the fact that a Muslim-Muslim or Christian-Christian ticket is frequently met with harsh criticism. In order to gain or hold onto power, their conception of government is typically seen through the limited lens of ethno-religious beliefs.

Acknowledging and addressing the dysfunctionalities of religion by stakeholders of religion and politics would reduce conflicts and bring about desired social changes. Politicians should be advised by religious leaders to uphold the moral standards of their respective faiths. If Nigerian political leaders were truly led by the precepts of their religion, they would be thoughtful and regard religious ethics as a foundation from which to build their leadership (Oguntola-Laguda, 2015). Patronage, clientelism and favouritism that exacerbate inequalities and dissension should be addressed.

# Recommendations

The following recommendations are made to ensure that religion is leveraged on to enhance Nigeria's political culture and socioeconomic development.

### Regulatory Frameworks

Government should create legislations that promote religious freedom and inter-faith dialogue between leaders and members of different religious groups to promote understanding and tolerance. Similarly, legislation should proscribe the use of inciting words across media.

### Emphasis on Meritocracy over Religious Identities

In societies, where religious sentiment is a determining factor in voting, the emergence of mediocre leaders is likely to occur which in turn will impede progress and development. Election into political offices should be based on solely merit and competence base as poor

governance affects everyone regardless of their religion.

## Civic Reorientation and Education

Mandatory civic reorientation would spur political participation, and it can enlighten people about the importance of exercising their right to vote in a way that is impartial and appropriate for their role as citizens. They must be taught to refrain from adopting the shady practice of endorsing political candidates and forcing them upon others. The promotion of civic education at both secular and religious areas, can enhance the principles of democracy, responsible governance, and also it matures citizens who are self-reliant, perceptive and analytical in their thinking. Also, the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council curriculum should introduce religious studies that cover the basic practices of Nigeria's major faiths to promote tolerance and peaceful coexistence.

## Electoral Act Reform and Constitutional Amendment

To enable development and to bring the desired political culture, the government must have the political will to redefine the boundaries between politics and religion. It is imperative that religious fanaticism which is exhibited by Nigerians particularly by the political elites, be minimized. Therefore, religions should be addressed that neither the Popes nor the Sheiks should be more than Nigerians. The primary reason why laws ensuring accountability of public authorities are either preventive or correlative is because religion and state are not separated in practice instead it guarantees the delivery of questionable exploitations that rely on the ruling class's religious identity. Nigeria's secularism is necessary to correct the imbalance which brought about by what is thought to be 'political manipulation.' Deterrent measures must be put in place by the constitution to prohibit systematic religious sentiment manipulation, and government activities which are done with nefarious and reactive intentions to deflect attention.

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