

## Religion as a Tool of Political Manipulation in Nigeria

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### **Abstract**

The Nigerian political system exemplifies manipulation of all sorts and in various forms with religion serving as one of the structures through which this manipulation takes place. This paper intends to address the role of religion in serving as a means through which members of the political class manipulates the country's polity and undermine the nation's political framework. While some have argued that since religion is an integral part of the society, it has a role to play to deterring the political destiny of a nation, others on the hand vehemently oppose this claim assertion claiming that religion has been hijacked by political elites and has become an instrument to further their political plans, perpetuate political ills, manipulate political decisions of Nigerians and ultimately enslave the people. This paper argues that there is an urgent need for de-politization of religion and separation of politics from religion if Nigerians are to achieve freedom from political manipulation and enslavement by the Nigerian politicians.

**Keywords:** Religion, Politics, Nigeria, Political Power, Clergy

### **Introduction**

That Nigerians are very religious is an indisputable claim that is evident in the activities of and manner in which Nigerians present themselves. Religion has come to be one of the most visible institutions that is associated with Nigerians and more importantly, it is not only the rank and file of the Nigerian populace that shows religiousness but also the leaders in various capacities. An important class of Nigerians that has adopted religion as a viable instrument to achieve its objectives is the political class. Religion has come to be a structural platform for both positive and negative trends in the Nigerian state. Nigerians are indeed deeply religious and religion permeates every fabric of their personal and communal lives to such an extent that it is not uncommon to find places of worship in some offices, government secretariats and government buildings in general, schools, filling stations and even in some private residences. In schools and certain business institutions, fellowship meetings of Christians on Fridays has become a norm with religions processions in the name of evangelism, prayer walk etc. common practices in this

part of the world. Though this religious frenzy and sensitivity can be partly alluded to the belief that Africans are naturally conscious of “the supreme divinity”, it can also be rightly assumed to a reasonable extent that religion is one of the social institutions that has a wide range of influence among gregarious species such as man.

The influence of religion cuts across economics, social interactions, culture, medicine, politics and several other aspects of the Nigerian society. According to Weber, religion is a belief in a supernatural power that is above nature and cannot be explained scientifically (Pals, 2014: 43). Thus, Nigerians believe that there is a divine entity beyond their objective thought who holds sway over the affairs of the world and determines their fate in the universe. Nonetheless, religion has become a veritable platform for positive and negative use in Nigeria and an important class of Nigerians that has adopted religion as a means to achieve its objectives is the political clans. Today, it is not uncommon for politicians to win the electorate using religious sentiments and religious sympathy to attract attention. Political and public office seekers often make use of their religious affiliation to canvass for votes hence, Christian politicians appeal to Christians for votes while a Muslim candidate appeals to Muslim voters. To this end, Oguntola suggests that political office holders often drew on religious ideas, practices and symbols as a tool of negotiation with the electorate during political campaigns. (Oguntola-Laguda, 2015: 2)

A debate that has pervaded the political landscape in the country is the Muslim/Muslim ticket or Christian /Muslim ticket and a vice versa controversies. Moreover, religious leaders have continually played prominent roles in the political process. It has become common for religious leaders to make pronouncements in the name of prophecies before, during and after elections with the aim of predicting winners of elections. Thus, in the build-up to the 2011 presidential election, Pastor Chris Okotie prophesied that he would win the election while in the 2015 elections some pastors predicted the win of President Buhari while others predicted a win for incumbent President, Goodluck Jonathan. Thus, religion has become a machinery of great importance in the Nation’s political dynasty. But what is alarming in this interpolation of religion with politics in Nigeria is the use of religion by nefarious politicians who present themselves to unsuspecting Nigerians who vote for them. Examples of this are littered in the political annals of the nation with the 2011 and 2015 general elections as examples. The 2011 post-election violence and 2015 church tourism by some politicians notably former president, Dr. Goodluck Jonathan are platforms that will set the tone for this discourse.

### **Religion and Politics in the Society**

The interpolation of religion and politics predates the contemporary to the ancient times where mythology and religious superstitions held sway and rationalized man’s thinking. But things took a drastic turn in medieval times where theology dominated the temper of the society and influenced the medical, cultural and political landscape amongst other institutions. Most of what occurred as intellectual discourse in the realm of politics during the medieval age was within the framework of religion. It can thus be argued as Irele explicated that the political ideas of this age were Christian-oriented. (Irele, 1998: 27) In a nut shell, the influence of religion on political thought and politics itself note that they are three ways in which religion can influence

politics namely (i) by the direct involvement of religious men in politics (ii) by fusing the two together as one and (iii) by subjecting politics to the doctrines or laws of religion, thereby carrying out politics or governance along the lines of religious doctrines or laws. (Omoregbe, 2007: 120)

Two prominent political thinkers in the medieval period who argued in different tones that politics should be subjected to religious laws are Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. While Augustine held that the Church should not be involved in politics, Aquinas upheld that the church is an indigent organization which is superior to the state. This claim of Aquinas was premised on his belief that church caters for the material needs of man. The political structure of the medieval was characterized by the involvement of religious men in politics as well as the fusion of religion and politics. During this period, emperors interfered in the affairs of the church and the popes also interfered in the administration of state. In the 12th century, clergy and the church came to be under the control of secular authorities (Omoregbe, 2007:33). As a result of the interference of politics in religion, the practice of lay investiture began operation, Bishops and Popes were appointed by Emperors until the 11th century when this practice was reversed and Popes began appointing Emperors (Pope Gregory VII held that the Pope had authority from Christ over emperors).

As a result of the interference of the Pope (and religion men in politics), there was constant friction between the clergy and the rulers, for example when the Holy Roman Emperor, Henry IV refused to support Pope Gregory VII in his church reforms, he excommunicated him, compelling the emperor to fall down on his knees and ask for forgiveness (Schvech, 1997: 49). Similarly, Emperor Frederick, attacked Pope Alexander III who was forced to run away. In England, the conflict between the king, Henry II and the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Beckett led to the murder of the Archbishop on the altar inside his cathedral by some of the king's soldier (Schvech, 1997: 49). These are some of the instances that portray the political atmosphere of the middle age where religions men became involved in governance and politics.

In contemporary times, religion's involvement in political affairs of some societies is well documented where in some societies, both were fused into a single office while in other societies, religion actually dictated the governing of the society. According to Omoregbe, there was a fusion of religious and secular powers in China and Japan (Omoregbe, 1999:32). Between 206 BC and 220 AD, Confucianism was the official religion of China and it dominated every sphere of China civilization to such an extent that success in Confucian classics became a prerequisite for holding public office in China (Anderson, 1950: 2).

More so, it was similar in Japan where myths held that the imperial dynasty (the political class) was believed to be of divine origin and Japanese emperors were believed to be descendants of the sun goddess, Amaterasu, whose grandson, TimmaTenuu descended from heaven, became a man and established political authority. As a result of this claim. Japanese emperors were both supreme religious and political heads, thus exercising both religious and political functions. Hence, the imperial throne was a scared throne and the emperor wielded both religious and political pou'ers. Thus relationship between religious and the state is stated in the Nation's Proclamation which state thus.

“We solemnly announce the heavenly Deities and the Great Ancestries established the throne and made the succession sure. The line of Emperors in unbroken succession entered into passion thereof and handed it on. Religious ceremonies and government were one and the same, and the innumerable subjects were united” (Omoregbe, 199:103).

From the foregoing, it can be arguably explicated that there has been a form of interaction between religion and politics in man’s history. While in some societies both were just posed in others, religious leaders were involved in ruling and dictating the affairs of the state. Nigeria is by no means an exception as some prominent religious leaders notably pastors have either contested elections or have been elected into public offices such as Pastor Chris Okotie who contested the 2007 and 2011 presidential elections on the platform of Justice Party of Nigeria and Fresh Party respectively, Rev. Jolly Nyame, the erstwhile governor of Taraba State, Pastor Ize-Iyamu of the PDP and the present vice-president of the country, Prof. Yemi Osibajo among others.

### **Religion and the Quest for Political Power in Nigeria**

Religion is a crucial aspect of the average Nigerian’s life and it is not uncommon to see morning devotion in private and public institution. The influence of this institution can be felt in every strata of the country including the political landscape of the nation. The term religion can be explained in terms of its functionality and necessity in human socio-cultural existence. As a result, Millon Yinger explains religion as a system of beliefs and practices through which a group of people struggle with problems of human existence (Van der Lew, 1963:102). Emile Durkheim claims that religion is a phenomenon that unites people into a no moral community which must adhere to its ethics (Aderibigbe, 1997: 4). The definitions above suggest that religion is a social tool with the ability to bring about socio-political and economic development in a society. It can also be observed that religion has serious social dimensions and implicit put. With regards to the political terrain of the country, religion is seen as platform to acquire power by many power by Nigerian politician have become spurious and intense over the past two decade and they stop at nothing to get it, it no wonder that politics Nigeria has become a do or die affairs.

An insight into the teachings of the three major religions show that that hold the belief that power belongs to God and he gives it to whosoever he wishes. They teach that leadership position is bestowed on people according to the will of God but it is instructive to note that many politicians due to their inordinate scheming for power often neglect the ethics of power set out by their various religions. They claim to be ardent followers of the precepts and doctrines of their various religious but will readily forgo those principles when it comes to their designs to obtain political power.

In Christianity, God is presented as the owner and over of power, thus Matthew 28:17 says “All power is given unto me in heaven and on earth. Moreover, the apostles of the early church chose leaders based on directives from God (Acts 1:23-24, 14:23). Similarly, Islam teaches that nobody can achieve power unless given to him by Allah. The Quran says:

“O Allah, Lord of Power and rule, thou givest power to whom thou pleased. Thou endues with honor that thou pleases and thou bringest low who thou pleases, to thy hand is all good”. Verily, over all things, thou has power (Quran 3:26).

In African traditional religion, Olodumare is regarded as the supreme owner of all power (Fadipe, 1970:202). He has full prerogative and exercise it over all. His will is absolute. Hence, appointments of the political leader are based on the directives of Olodomare through the Ifa Oracle (Idowu, 1996:37).

Thus, the dominant religions in Nigeria teach that Power is of God and He bestows political power on whom he wishes and at His behest. But despite this and the religious dispositions of many political aspirants, quest for power in Nigeria is often fatal and violent. Politically motivated kidnappings, assassinations, assault and other deadly acts have become a prominent feature in the country's political history.

Another dimension to this discourse is the use of religion to appeal to the electorates by Nigerian politicians. In the bid to acquire power, many politicians often resort to religious campaigns wherein they take their campaign trains to churches and mosques. In the build up to the 2011 election, many politicians visited many places of worship under the guise of prayers and appeal for calm, orderliness during the elections (but with the motive of canvassing for votes). The then incumbent president, Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan participated in the worship services of the RCCG, The Lord's Chosen Church and the Covenant Church and that of some mosques while the candidate of the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC), Gen. Muhuminadu Buhari (rtd.) had meetings with some pastors and Islamic clerics. The use of worship centers as a subtle campaign ground was also employed by several other political aspirants. In similar fashion, the 2015 general elections witnessed a renewed church tourism by President Jonathan who subtly used the pulpit to launch his presidential bid. On January 26, 2014, President Jonathan worshipped at the living faith church, keffi, Nasarrawa and was accompanied by his son, the minister of state for the FCT, Oloye Jurnoke Akinjide and the deputy governor of Nassarawa state, Dameshi Luka and on February 16, 2014, he attended the Sunday service of the redeemed Christian church of God, Olive Tree parish, Ikoyi, Lagos state. The Dunamis Gospel centre was the President's next port of call on February 23, 2014 while he also attended the February edition of the truly Ghost service organized by the RCCG at the Redemption camp on February 5, 2016. He also visited The Lord's Chosen Charismatic Revival Movement's service on February 6, 2016. The APC's candidate, General Muhammadu Buhari and his running mate. Prof. Yemi Osibajo who incidentally is a pastor had a meeting with Catholic Bishops in Abuja on February 10, 2016. It will be recalled that during Dr. Jonathan speeches at the worship centers he visited, he emphasized on the need for Nigerians to pray for the nation while also subtly stressing some of his achievements in office and at the same time making electoral promises. In his words during his visit to RCCG, he said “safety in Nigeria is the priority of our government; just pray for us that God should give us wisdom. We will still work hard against robbery, we are committed to tackling corruption and mismanagement of public fund and we are also committed to educational development (Adeyemi, 2015).

These are clear indications of the use of religion as a mean to an end in the ploy to acquire political power. Furthermore, many religious leaders have become complicit in this matter and religion has now become a platform used by politicians in the obsessive quest for political power across the country.

### **A Tool for Political Manipulation in Nigeria**

It is no doubt that religion is a social instrument with the ability to engender cooperation and integration among followers yet the negative use to which it can be put can also undermine a people's development. A clear example of the negative implication of religious manipulation is the various ethno-religious crisis the country has to witness. Eminent economist and political philosopher, Karl Marx is famously known for his tirade against religion and his claims that religion foster oppression in the society. Moreover, he regarded it as a means to oppress the masses. In his words, he said

Religion is the sign of the oppressed creatures, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of the soulless condition. It is the opium of the people (Bums, 1978:140).

For Marx, religion is often used to suppress the thinking of the masses and is a tool used by the elite to oppress the people. Thence, Marx's arguments suggest that religion is only a means to an end which is often retrogressive as it reduces or eliminates the development of individuals and society. It thus becomes clear that religion is a tool in the hands of elites to manipulate people: it is used to enslave the people while at the same time creating a consciousness of a false hope.

In Nigerian politics, political actors are known for their brazen appeal to the religious sentiments of people during campaigns and political outreaches. It is not unusual for funny politicians to attend services of religious denominators as witnessed by some during the 2011 and the 2015 general elections and under the guise of seeking prayers present themselves as humble to the unsuspecting electorate. During ex-president Jonathan's visit to the redemption ground prior to the 2011 presidential election, he knelt before the man of God and won the sympathy of many Christians who claimed he was humble because he knelt before Pastor Adeboye. The consensus then among many was that it is rare for a highly placed individual to stoop so low and kneel before a citizen for prayer. As a result, his humility won him support and favour among Christians and many people voted for Dr. Jonathan during the election. In another way, political parties appeal to religion in their bid to court people's vote by opting for a mixed religion ticket: Muslim-Christian or Christian-Muslim ticket in gubernatorial and presidential races. An examination of past presidents and their vices as well as state governors and their deputies will reveal that if one is a Christian, the other will be Muslim or vice-versa.

Using the 2011 presidential election as a case study, it will be seen that religion voting plays a prominent role in pattern, as adherents of specific religions vote for their "brother(s)". In 2011, the predominantly Christian South voted for Dr. Goodluck Jonathan while the Muslim North voted for Gen. Buhari, a Muslim. In the 2015 election as well, a Northern Muslim candidate of

the APC won overwhelmingly in the Muslim dominated North while the Christian candidate of the PDP polled majority of his 12 million votes in the South. This shows that religious affiliations had a say in these elections as many Christians voted for Christian candidates while many Muslims voted for Muslim candidates. It should be noted also that many pastors urged their congregation to vote for Christian candidates while Islamic religious leaders canvassed support for Muslim candidates. In fact many Christian leaders claimed that Gen. Buhari is a religious bigot who has an agenda to Islamize the country and therefore urged Christian candidate. This same sentiment has been raised by some unscrupulous politicians in the south-west who claim that the four of the APC controlled states in the region have Muslim as their chief executive officers.

Though, it is nearly possible to diffuse religion from politics in Nigeria because it is of the social institutions that have influence in every strata of the people's lives yet the use to which it is put in the political landscape suggests that it has become a veritable tool to brainwash the people, manipulate them and play "divide and rule politics". Religion by its very nature and content appeals not so much to reason and now often used content appeals not so much to reason and now often used but politicians to play divide and rule politics (Oguntola-Laguda, 2008:124). It has become a means of fostering candidates on religious adherents because of brotherly love and other funny dictions. Rather than an examination of candidates' credibility, demeanor, profile and other performance indicators, leaders are voted for on religious affiliation, sentiments and directives by religious leaders. This amounts to exploitation of the people's will, more so, many political leaders often rely on religion to acquire power but do not follow the dictates of their religions in dealing with their followers. This is evidenced by poor infrastructure, non-existent social amenities, poor standard living etc. that has become a norm in the country. This is no more than a manipulation of the people. Also, many politicians appear religious and Godly when canvassing for votes but exhibit their hidden but true nature when they get to office.

## **Conclusion**

The influence of religion in the Nigerian polity today is overwhelming and it is today used to compromise and corrupt the electoral process. In Nigeria, people who aspire for public offices seem to be religious only at the point of canvassing for votes from unsuspecting Nigerians. More so, one can say that people appropriate religion as a tool for political power.

Notwithstanding, religion has a role in enlightening the people and setting parameters which should serve as guidelines in choosing political leaders. Just as the three main religions in the country teach that leaders must be Godly and possess people-oriented skills, adherents should make these and other relevant principles the basis of their choice and not religious affiliations. Moreover, religious leaders must urgently stem the tide of romance between the church and politics. The pulpit should not serve as a platform for political campaigns but rather as a platform to preach the undiluted truth to the country's leaders and educate them on virtues leaders must possess. To this end, religious leaders must stop acts that are tantamount to robbing religion of its values and purpose.

More so, Nigerians should avoid being blindfolded, brain washed or manipulated by any religious leader in choosing political leaders rather they should appeal to reason and substantial facts as addendum to prayers in establishing any government of their choice. They urgently need to come to terms with the capabilities and abilities of various political candidates and make rational political decisions. Thus, it suffice to say that there must be a diffusion of religion from manipulative politics, though it plays positive role in governance including the inculcation of morality, honesty, accountability, sense of duty, love for citizens, selfish services, justice and fairness, empathy and other worthwhile values.

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