Politicization of Religion in Nigeria: the Ills of the Politics of god Seekers

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Abstract

A major problem in Nigeria is the issue of whether or not there is a need to delineate politics from religion since the religious plurality of the country seems to significantly influence political decisions.The country is presently experiencing its worst conflict since the fierce civil war that almost threw her into extinction. The Boko Haram menace on the one hand and the activities of the Fulani herdsmen on the other hand has ravaged the Northern part of the country and has destabilized the relative peace of the nation. Though the country is not at war, its citizens are fighting to stay at peace. Despite the fact that Nigeria is a highly religious country, its history is clouded in conflicts thus raising the question; how many of these are motivated by religion. Using the process tracing technique as a methodology for this study, the research highlighted the role of religion in the many conflicts that have ravaged Nigeria as part of the ills of the politics of god seekers (the exploitation of religious differences in the quest to acquire political powers) who have politicize the country's religious landscape through the stirring up of religious sentiments as a tool to achieving selfish political goals. To this end, the paper made suggestions on possible ways for a better relationship between politics and religion for a peaceful/united Nigeria.Using the Religious and Liberal Theories of Engagement, the paper calls for religious neutrality in political decisions.Thus, the paper strongly opposes the exploitation of religioussentiments by politicians and religious leaders in their quest for political powerwhich constitutes 'the ills of the politics of god seekers'.

Keywords: Religion, Conflict, Politics, Pluralism and Ethnicity.

Introduction

Arguably, man's communication skill is the most advanced among all animals. This advanced/sophisticated communication skill is what has allowed man to be a social animal and by extension a political/religious one. Little wonder that the great political philosopher Aristotle referred to man as a 'political animal'. Arguably, among all social animal's, man is the only one that is not only political, but also religious. The yearning to believe in an all superior being (god) is a reflection of man's ability to think (the one ability that clearly distinguishes man from other animals). However, over the years the failure of man to delineate politics from religion has proven to be the downside for man quest for god, as this have left a bloody history to reflect on. The highly

emotional/sentimental attachment between men and their gods have been most often times than not exploited by those who seek political power to create chaos or subject men to consensual bondage throughout history. This religious weakness in man was what prompted Karl Marx to refer to religion as the ''opium of the masses''.

Nigeria a country made up of over 250 ethnic groups is not only highly divided along ethnic lines, but also, along religious lines. While the Southern part of the country is highly dominated by the Christian Igbo/Yoruba ethnic groups, the Northern part is dominated by the Muslim Hausa/Fulani ethic group. This religious/ethnic diversity has ensured that the country has always maintained a tensed relation throughout her history. The above position is echoed by Mazrui (1996) who noted that:in those African countries, where Islam is in serious competition with Christianity and both are politicized, the two creeds become divisive rather than unifying, destabilizing rather than legitimizing. Where religion reinforces ethnic differences on regional variation, governments become less stable rather than more… On the whole, the two Semitic religions in Nigeria Christianity and Islam reinforce regional and ethnic differences, and make stability more difficult. (Mazrui, 1996:198).

In Nigeria, the government and her citizens are yet to accept fully both in theory and practise the stark realities of pluralism of religious beliefs and practises. The waves of religious crises and violence in recent years seem to confirm this observation (Ekwunife, 1992).With religion generating so much passion, the polarization of the nation has found full expression as the country is finally pitched as a battleground between Christians and Muslims (Roseline and Borok, 2015: 9). The decision of politicians to exploit religious differences in their quest to acquire political powers especially in the fourth republic coupledwith the so much religious turmoil ravagingthe country,the need to delineate religion from politics has become expedient.

Nigeria's population of over 140million is divided nearly equally between Christians andMuslims. The importance of this division is well illustratedby the fact that religion, not nationality, is the way inwhich most Nigerians choose to identify themselves;though not in all cases. Thus, the domains of religion,secularism and politics are becoming increasinglyintermingled in both overt and covert ways. Invariably,sectarian politics is inherently problematic (Tar andShettima, 2010). Ever since the assumption of this administration (Buhari/Osibanjo) into power, the Christian/Muslim divide has become more pronounce in the country's political space. The activities of the Fulani herdsmen seem to have created more room for politicians and religious leaders alike to exploit the dangerous connection between politics and religion in the country as religion continues to take center stage in shaping the power tussle in the country.

As noted by Oluwaseun (2015) "since May 1992, over 10,000 people have died fromcommunal-religious conflicts. Plateau, Benue, Tarabaand Borno States constituted the highest figure ofcausalities on the period under review". According to some accounts, more than10,000 people have been killed in sectarian conflicts,primarily in Kaduna and Plateau States in the last sevenyears. Subsequently from 2001, incidents of Christian-Muslim violence have become more frequent andbloodier. Violence between Muslims and Christians inNigeria has claimed thousands of lives in the pastdecade. It flared again in February 2006 when Muslimwere outraged at the caricatures of the prophetMuhammad which led to a massacre of dozens ofChristians in the north, followed

by reprisal killings ofMuslims by Christians in the south. More than 150 peoplewere killed and numerous churches and mosquesdestroyed (Oluwaseun, 2015: 46).

At present, the killing spree of the Fulani herdsmen all over the country has once again brought the 'politicization of religion' debate to the fore front. The federal government's solution to the problem through the setting up of cattle colonies across the country has met with strong resistance by the Christian leaders who see it as a dubious attempt to Islamize the country. The religious coloration of a sensitive security issue like this only goes to show the ills of the politics of god seekers in the country. To this end, this research work has employed the ***process tracing technique as a methodology*** to highlight the ills of the politics of god seekers who have over the years stir religious sentiments to achieve political goals.

The essence for the adoption of the process tracing technique as a methodology for this study is because it is a method of data analysis that involves identifying trends in case studies often through a historical analytical process. It is a relevant tool of analysis in security studies. Thus, as rightly noted by David (2011) "process tracing inherently analyzes trajectories of change and causation, but the analysis fails if the phenomena observed at each step in this trajectory are not adequately described. Hence, what in a sense is "static" description is a crucial building block in analyzing the processes being studied". Unfolding an event over time by taking a snapshot of key issues is the main focus of process tracing. To this end, process tracing can make decisive contributions to diverse research objectives such as: gaining insight into causal mechanisms which is very relevant to our study (David, 2011; 824). Thus, in an attempt to highlight the ills of the politics of god seekers in the country through the politicization of religion, the research has attempted to give answers to the questions below:

    I.   How has meddling religion with politics contributed to the various religious/political crises ravaging the country? and

   II.   What is the cost of the conflict so far?

Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of this research work is to investigate the extent to which religion influences political decisions in the country. This study is also driven by the following objectives:

    1.   To investigate the role of religion in the various political crises/conflicts in the country, and.

    2.   To ascertain the cost of the conflict so far.

Literature Review: Conceptualizing Religion and Politics

The concept of politics and religion are devoid of an all encompassing definition; this does not however imply that they are short of academic touch. As a matter of fact, the lack of an all encompassing definition is only a reflection of the fact that they have been defined endlessly by scholars based on their own view point/understanding. To this end, an attempt would be made to operationalize bothconcepts in order to have a working definition.

Lasswell (1936) defined politics as "…the process of who gets what, when, and how." This definition implies that politics is the process of allocating scarce values (resources). The point Lasswell is trying to make here is that; human resources are limited which

makes them valuable, and as a consequence of this scarcity of resources, humans are in constant competition to survive. Thus, politics is the ability to control the power to allocate these scarce resources. It is important to note that to Lasswell, politics only occur where there are two or more people involved in a relationship. This pointhas been explained extensively by Hanley (2010) who noted that

> In a hypothetical state of nature where I am all alone, my choice to climb a tree to pick apples is not a political decision. But if you are also present, and the options that exist are to work together to pick the apples, then figure out how to divide them, or to try to pick the apples surreptitiously, or to try to exert sole despotic dominion over the apples and keep the other away–then we have politics. To take a literary example, when Robinson Crusoe was alone on the island there was no politics, but as soon as "Friday" appeared, *everything* became political.

Similarly, David Easton defined politics as "those interactions through which values are authoritatively allocated for a society".Robert Dahl opined that politics consist of any persistent pattern of human relationships that involves ... power, rule, or authority. To this end, Dahl's argument is that every human relationship is a power relationship (control for power). Thus, politics is the process of exerting power in a relationship. In a shift from the broad definitions of politics given above, Awolowo (1987) defines politics as the science and art of the management of public affairs. In trying to avoid vagueness, Awolowo fell into the temptation of being too narrow as to exclude some activities that could be regarded as political as not political by the implication of his definition of politics as the 'management of public affairs'. This is because, his definition of politics as the 'management of public affairs' fails to take cognizance of the fact that politics goes beyond the public life into private affairs that involves a power relationship between two or more people.

While it is difficult to pick the loopholes of the definitions of politics given above, it is quite difficult to give a definition that will embrace all facet of the political life. Thus, for the purpose of this study, politics is defined as the process of capturing state power in order to distribute scarce resources.

Just like politics, the concept of religion is rich in terms of scholarly definitions. To this end, Omoregbe (1993) defined religion as human activities manifesting through beliefs and ritual practises in response to the Supersensible Being, believed to exist.Ejizu (1986), noted that religion consist of man's value system and attitudinal orientations. To this end, Imo (1986) positedreligion to be the varied, symbolic expression of, and appropriate response to that, which people deliberately affirm as being of unrestricted value for them. Roseline and Borok opined that

> The basic dimensions of religion include the belief patterns which accommodate the sacred reality people experience through revelation, reflection or divine illumination; ritual practises which are prescribed for believers as appropriate human responses in the relationship to the ultimate source of being or value; ethical codes which are behaviour directed towards other person; and cultic organization.

To this end, Omoregbe (1993) argued that religion is "a fixed relationship between the human self and some non-human entity, the sacred, the supernatural, the self-existent, the absolute or simply, God". While there is a paucity of agreement by scholars as to an all

definitive definition of the concept of religion, this work defines religion as the various processes adopted by humans which forms their believe in creating a relationship with a super natural being.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework adopted for this study is the Religious and Liberal Theories of Engagement. The theory contends that religion and state relationship canbe practised in two different ways. To this end, the theory holds that modern liberalism hasfour salient features: individualism, rationalization, neutrality and the privatization ofreligion.

The main thrust of the theory is that decision making should only occur on rational grounds, where arguments containsecular, not religious overtones. To this end, Rorty (2003) argues that competinginterests between secular governments and ecclesiastical organizations are reconciledunder this model as religion remains a private matter.Researchers such as Crowe (2004)reinforce the benefits of secular discourse by stating that secular arguments, unlikereligious arguments, are readily accepted by all citizens. In this way individualism,rationalization and privatization are said to produce religious neutrality.

To this end and as noted byBrennan (2006), the theory advocates for a greatersystem of fairness, where Christians and Muslims are treated in an equal way.It is in line with this thought that Costello (2007) argued that politiciansshould have a moral compass, and should practise religion in an ideologically free andnonpartisan mannerso as to maintain peace and order in the society.

The essence of using the Religious and Liberal Theories of Engagementfor this research endeavor is not to question the social function of religion, but to show the important role it plays in shaping a man's attitude towards his society. Thus, the Religious and Liberal Theories of Engagement on religion calls for religious neutrality as it relates to political decision because of the dangers religion can pose when used to steer political sentiments.

Religion and Politics in Nigeria: a Review of a Turbulent History

The issue of religion and politics in Nigeria dates back to the colonial period. Colonial policies deliberately promoted religious pluralism in Nigeria. While missionaries were actively encouraged to join the colonial powers in the "civilization" mission in southern Nigeria to establish churches and mission schools, their activities were severely restricted in Muslim northern Nigeria (Izzah, 2013). Religion and religious conflict have long been part of Nigerian politics and public life. In the 1950s, while Nigeria remained under the British rule, Islamic law (Sharia) was incorporated into the country's legal systemin the late 1960s, religion was one factor in the internal conflict that eventually erupted into the Biafran war (1967 to 1970) (Oluwaseun, 2015: 44).

Abdulrafiu, (2009) cited in Ntamu, Abia, Ndinyang, and Eneji, (2014)observed that after the 1914 amalgamation of Nigeria and emergence of indigenous national politics, Islam has effectively represented a source of ethnic identity, group unity, political mobilization, de-mobilization, regime legitimization and de-legitimization in the country. As a result of this, the northern Hausa-Fulani see themselves as the offspring's of the Sheikh Uthman Dan Fodio, representing the epitome of the Islamic holy Jihad and a product of an enviable Islamic socio-cultural history. Similarly, Izzah showing the existence of religion in Nigerian political landscape in the first republic noted that:

> The introduction of party politics and Western type of democracy…in essentially peasant societies with limited class differentiation meant that religious and ethnic differences formed the bases of 'we' and 'they' as the political parties mobilized support. So the NPC was predominantly Hausa/Fulani cum Muslim while AG Yoruba and NCNC predominantly Ibo. Ideally politics ought to serve as a vehicle for the reconciliation of conflicting claims among contending parties, but this process was rudely terminated in January 1963 through a military coup. The process of learning the political art of compromise was terminated (Izzah, 2013).

The first major religious riot aided by ethnic politics was the one in March 1987that pitched Muslims and Christians against each other in Kafanchan, old Kaduna State. It was also noted that, the usually peaceful Ilorin, Kwara State, once witnessed a religious skirmish when some exuberant Christian youths held an Easter procession in a thickly Muslim neighborhood, pointing at houses and singing: "Jesus dey here? "E dey...!" (Asemota, 2013 in Babatola, 2015: 6). Ever since independence, religion has continued to play a key role in Nigerian politics even up to the fourth republic. This is revealed by Ebhomienlen and Ukpebor (2013:168) when they noted that

> In 1999, shortly after the transition to democratic rule in Nigeria, the Zamfara state governor, Ahmed Yerima of the All Nigerian people's Party, introduced the Shar'iah as the official legal system for the state owning to the provision of the 1999 constitution which stipulates in section 4 subsection 7 that: "the house of assembly of a state shall have the power to make laws for peace, order and good government of the state". This gesture…was to transform the ANPP to posses the image of the old ruling political party of the North that were synonymous with the conservative Islamic ideology of NPC and NPN in previous republics. Consequently, the ANPP became the most popular in the north and represented the major opposition to the ruling party, the People' Democratic Party (PDP)(Onapajo, 2012: 51).

It is sad to note that this worrisome trend of our political class steering religious sentiments to gain political support has continued to the present day even up to the time of writing this paper. The last presidential election is a pointer to the fact that Nigerians do not vote on party ideology, but on ethnic/religious affiliation as the election result made the once invincible lines dividing the country to be visible.

The ills of the Politics of god seekers: the intolerance
The lack of an ideological base has meant that Nigerian politicians rely heavily on steering ethnic/religious sentiments for local support. The result of this wrong approach to politics is decades of religious conflict with the emergence of the Boko Haram group being its nadir. The sect has claimed thousands of lives in the North East fighting for an Islamic state with the government seeming lost in its effort in clamping it down. As a matter of fact, since May 1992, over 10,000 people have died from communal-religious conflicts. Plateau, Benue, Taraba and Borno States constituted the highest figure of causalities. According to some accounts, more than 10,000 people have been killed in sectarian conflicts, primarily in Kaduna and Plateau States in the last seven years.

Subsequently from 2001, incidents of Christian/Muslim violence have become more frequent and bloodier. Violence between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria has claimed thousands of lives in the past decade (Oluwaseun, 2015: 44). …the political class cannot exonerate itself from the present predicament of Nigeria. Rather than politicians seeing themselves as being divided only by contending ideological presentations of their party manifestos, a lot of useful energy is diverted to building religious sentiment (Roseline and Borok, 2015: 9).

Due to the important role played by religion in the country's politics especially in the first republic as a basis for identity, mobilization and legitimization,the need to further strengthen the unity of faith and to protect the interest of members of these religions so as to continue advancing the philosophies on which each of the religions is based became expedient. Consequently, groups and associations started springing up from Islam and Christianity in the country. As noted by Ebhomienlen, and Ukpebor (2013:168) the emergence of theChristian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and theNigeria Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA)had a significant influence on the shape of politics in Nigeria. Between 1970s and 1980s Muslims intellectuals began to seek for new identity for Islam in order to give it a better and beneficial status in the Muslim world. They started advancing for Shar'iah the Islamic Law to be incorporated in the constitution.

The insistence of the Muslim political class to insert the Shar'iah law (Islamic law) into the Nigerian constitution despite the fact that the country is heavily divided along religious lines, succeeded in awakening the political consciousness of the various religious groups in the country. The above is particularly true when one puts into consideration the arguments of some scholars thatalthough the Sharia debate in 1977-78 has been identified…as providing the spark to the rise in the tone of debates around religion in Nigeria, subsequent developments have shown that these debates were more about the control of power than the practise of religion (Source: http://run.edu.ng/media/19693240223271.pdf).

Politically, Christians' consciousness has sparked some interest in the country's political terrain as orchestrated by Islam' challenge. These situations have become most pronounced as a result of the recurring religious crises fermented by the adherents of Islam especially against the northern Christian minorities (Ntamu, Ndinyang. And Eneji, 2014: 305). This single act of foolishness by the Nigerian political class to mix religion with politics and thinker with the constitution created the foundation for religious intolerance in the country.

Politicization of religion is one of the blind eyes of the Nigerian nation. There is intolerance when any group in a society deliberately and violently sets out to stamp out what the members subjectively consider to be error in religious thought and practiseof other groups (PaulIkechukwu & Clara, 2015: 196). The level of religious fanatism in Nigeria is encapsulated in the views of Sheikh Abubakar Mohammed Gumi, a Muslim leader and teacher who proclaimed to his students that:

> The two-party system of government will not be south against North
> but Islam against Christianity. Once you are a Moslem, you cannot
> accept to choose a non-Muslim to be your leader. If Christians do not
> accept Muslims as their leader, then we have to divide the country.
> Nigerian unity is to try to convert Christians and non-Muslims (to

Islam) until other realign become minority and they will not affect our society (PaulIkechukwu & Clara, 2015:196).

Olojo (2014) have noted that violence involving religious groups in Nigeria is not always caused by religious issues.Philip (2009), further buttress this point when he noted that although religious difference adds fuel to the firewhen things go wrong, it remains a secondary factor. To this Olojo (2014) highlighting how the meddling of religion and politics can be disastrous noted that

> In Jos North, voters were polarised (along religious line) as the PDP was made up of mostly Christian supporters and the ANPP largely comprised of the Jasawa who are mainly Muslims of Hausa/Fulani ethnicmake-up. Only to this extent did this combination create an entry point for religion in the local government election crisis because the crisis which led to reportedly 350 to 500 deaths (some estimates are higher) in just two days was essentially political in nature (Olojo, 2014).

Islam, being theocentric in its doctrine, opposes secularity which is constitutionally allowed in religiously pluralistic societies like Nigeria. Ayantayo have noted that it's continuous opposition to secularity has threatened the stability and development of the nation (Ayantayo 2012:101). Some decisions like the elevation of the sharia into the Nigerian legal and political system, and the issue of Nigeria becoming the member of organization of Islamic countries (OIC) among others have become a source of grudges in the country's religious circle especially among the Christian folks. Little wonder that Babatola (2015: 6) asserted that religion has contributed adversely to the disintegration of Nigeria.

The Cost of the Conflict
Nigeria the most populous black nation on earth has experienced its own fair share of religious/political upheaval, but it must however be stated that of all religious crisis that have ravaged the country, "the Boko Haram menace is undoubtedly…the most destructive both in terms of its demonic brutality, mindless savagery and increasingly in scope of operation" (Obioma, 2009). The group: Jama'atulAlhulSunnahLidda'Wat, Wal Jihad popularly known as Boko Haram, is one of the greatest security challenges facing present day Nigeria. The group has created widespread tension across Northern Nigeria and between various ethnic communities, interrupted commercial activities, frightens investors and generated concerns among Nigerians northern neighbors through its ferocious fight for an Islamic state. This unprecedented state of terrorism by the Boko Haram sect in Nigeria has ruined the tranquility of the northern atmosphere and the high rate of insecurity pervading northern region in particular and the nation/Nigeria in general is alarming and is a cause for serious concern to well meaning Nigerians.
Ever since the brutal death of her leader Mohammed Yusuf (founder of the Boko Haram Group) in the hands of the Nigeria police force, the radicalreligious sect has metamorphosed into the most dreaded terrorist organization in sub Saharan Africa, with the group gaining global attention in 2014 when it kidnapped over 270 female students from the government secondary school in the town of Chibok Borno state. Ever since it came into existence, the group has claimed the lives of over 100,000 Nigerians (Kashim

Shettima, 2016).The government has responded to the Boko Haram menace by deploying troops to combat the sect. while there has been monumental loses from both ends, the Boko Haram menace is far from finish with the group becoming more daring and vicious with each new attack by the day.

The Boko Haram sect is a classic example of the dangers of mixing religion and politics. The insertion of the Islamic law in the Nigerian constitution which led to its adoption by 12 Northern states no doubt raised the political consciousness of members of the sect and thus formed the basis for religious fanaticism. Though the above could be argued as there are several factors that come into play to form a terrorist, the role of religion and politics as it pertains to the Boko Haram menace cannot be undermined. And thus, stressing the need for politicians to delineate religion from politics.

Conclusion

The romance between religion and politics in Nigeria is no doubt as a result of the lack of a political ideological base by her ruling class. This unhealthy romance has meant that religion has taken a front role in Nigeria's political landscape as a basis for identity, mobilization and legitimization. The Boko Haram menace only strengthens the argument for the need for apolitics/religion dichotomy. The various religious crises ravaging the countryprove that the incursion of religion into politics reinforces ethnic differences rather than unifying the country. Thus, if the country aims to create a conducive environment suitable for political stability and economic growth, then there is a need to delineatereligion from politics.

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