

Nigeria today, who is to blame: Religion, Nigerians or Both?



“Religion has a place in the lives of every nation, Nigeria included. Irrespective of the faith or denomination, religion when truly practiced in its truest form and spirit, has been and remains sacred. It plays a vital role in purposeful leadership, community building, social justice, law and order, peace-making, reconciliation, for-giveness and the healing of wounds, be they political, family or personal!.

Hank Eso (2003)

“It is the responsibilities of intellectuals to speak the truth and to expose lies”.

Noam Chomsky.

Introduction

Religion is such a sensitive issue in Nigeria that one has to tread carefully in discussions to avoid flaring emotions, accusations of taking sides or risk being misinterpreted. However, in search of peace, security, and prosperity for our country, we must not shy away, or get discouraged from exploring truth, for “it is the responsibilities of intellectuals to speak the truth and to expose lies” (Noam Chomsky). The purpose of this write up is to present the reader with enough information to draw a conclusion as to whether religion is to blame for the social, economic and political state of Nigeria today. The goal of Openmind Foundation is to inform and educate Nigerians for a greater tomorrow.

Religion and Politics in Nigeria

Religion is an important part of our lives, from birth to death, and commands immense influence in our national politics. Of course there are voices that argue against mixing politics and religion and others who share the view that politics and religion are inextricable. Chuba Okadigbo was once quoted as saying:

“Religion being a matter of individual choice and faith, must be left where it is, such that our clerics can take care of our souls and religious persuasions, while elected civilians take care of the businesses of governance.”

Though Chuba's position leans more to the school of thought that views a mix of religion and politics as toxic, his recognition of the importance of caring for the souls and businesses of governance in a society, indirectly, reinforces the importance of a partnership between clerics and politicians. "In many ways religion is safer at home and politics in the public domain. But it can be very difficult to separate morality from practicality and politics, particularly at a time when politicians seem to be taking a moral stance on truth. So it becomes almost necessary for the religious institutions to intervene because no-one can claim to have a completely clean conscience in politics" (Professor Haleh Afshar, University of York Politics department, BBC). Although Individuals do interpret religion in different ways, leading to people of the same religious persuasion maintaining opposing political views and parties, "religion and politics are essentially inseparable because religion leads to beliefs about the structure of society and beliefs about the structure of society lead to political action." (Alice Prince, BBC).

Well, in Nigeria, religion and politics do mix and the country provides examples of the challenges of mixing religion and politics. Elizabeth Dickinson of RD Magazine explains why. "The country's troubles are visible and pronounced—poverty lurks on every street corner; beggars crawl through the streets in Kano, where a lingering polio epidemic has left them crippled; natural resources line some people's pockets and other people's soil with the thick sheen of oil. So sometimes out of faith, sometimes out of desperation, and sometimes merely for survival, Nigerians have taken political problems to the mosques and churches. In the predominantly Muslim North, shari'a law has been in place for a decade, implemented by a region so tired of lawlessness that Qur'anic law seemed an enlightened answer. In the poor slums of Lagos, churches provide the services that the state would not—could not—ever provide".

The 1999 Nigerian Constitution (Section 1) emphasised the supremacy of the Constitution and the binding force of its provisions on all authorities and persons throughout the Federation. The section 10 of the Constitution unequivocally declares, "The Government of the Federation or of any State shall not adopt any religion as State Religion." In Subsection 2, the Constitution emphasised that "the Federal Republic of Nigeria shall not be governed, nor shall any person or group of persons take control of the Government of Nigeria or any part thereof, except in accordance with the provisions of this Constitution." Put it bluntly, Nigerian Constitutions, past and present, decree the secularity of the Nigerian state, the separation of church and state and the freedom to practice religion of one's choice without fear of persecution and prosecution. Developments in Nigeria in recent years makes one wonder whether the constitution means different things to different politicians, states, regions and peoples of the country. The tension generated by failure to observe the sanctity of the Constitution is vividly clear to all and a factor driving the current debate on Sharia Banking. For example, Mr Joe Garba, in his speech of February 15, 2002 to a Nigerian leadership forum, argued:

"The inability to maintain the principles of a secular nation and separate the state from religion has added another dimension to existing national tension. Consequently, with the introduction of Sharia laws by several state governments, national politics has all of a sudden become suffused with the deep-seated fear of Islam as a political force. This was never the case in the early years of our independence."

In an article published in 2003, Hank Eso argued, "It is clear to me that the dangers posed by mixing religion and politics in Nigeria are manifest, except that our leaders are ambivalent about addressing them. To them, the wielding of political power is the most lucrative occupation in Nigeria, and its attainment by any means far outweighs the risks posed to the national interest by that means". Our political leaders, on both sides, Muslims and Christians, have invoked the name of God in politics, and sought to use religion freely in influencing the polity, decisions and swaying national political and economic policies and to that end governance.

Income inequality, poverty among all but the very top few, lawlessness / selectively lawed, unemployment, poor education system, bastardised healthcare system, and medieval infrastructure have culminated in unleashing a level of hardship and human suffering that have forced many to seek divine intervention through churches and mosques. Elizabeth Dickinson observed that:

“For years, this has bred the sort of suffering that makes people not just uncomfortable, but desperate. Grasping at anything that brings order to an otherwise uncertain life, there has been no more logical receptor than religion, literally the saving grace of many in the country’s arid North. Churches and mosques will provide more services and support than the government could ever hope to do. Schools, particularly Qur’anic ones, which meet everywhere from elaborate mosques to dirt backyards with rough canvas roofs, are leaps and bounds above their state peers, though this still is not saying much. People have retreated into the churches and mosques, seeking order, comfort, and support in a world without any of the three”.

Politicians have been quick to embrace religion too, turning up at churches and mosques, raising constituencies among their religious peers and allying themselves with specific Pastors and Imams. Unfortunately, nothing positive has emerged from the mix of politics and religion, either by way of economic growth, improved standard of living, reduction in unemployment, reduced corruption, improved infrastructure, or improved security of lives and assets. Consequently, it is not out of place finding Nigerians pointing accusing figure on religion as the root cause of the state of affairs in the country. The question this paper seeks to address is this – Is religion to blame for the woes of Nigeria?

Attempt to define Religion

To answer this question, it is right that we attempt to understand what religion is and about. It is thought the root of the word “religion” can be traced to the Latin words “Le; ligare”, meaning “being bound” or “to tie fast”. Not surprising, a religious person can be said to be one “bound by choice or by commitment to the tenets of a particular faith system” (Gerald A. Larne). Others argue that religion may have been derived from the Latin word “religo”, meaning “good faith”, “ritual”, etc. So, what is religion? If we are to form opinion about or accuse religion of responsibility for Nigeria’s problems, then we must attempt to understand its meaning and what it stands for.

Scholars seem to agree that there are serious issues with defining religion. The reason is that most people tend to define it narrowly by focusing on aspects of religion that match theirs. Others define religion so broadly that it covers even areas that most people may not consider as religious. So rather than attempt to craft a definition of religion, let me present a number of definitions and then extract some common and important attributes for review. Religion is:

1. *“Human recognition of superhuman controlling power and especially of a personal God entitled to obedience” (The Concise Oxford Dictionary). In this definition the words personal God and obedience are worth noting.*
2. *“The beliefs, attitudes, emotions, behaviour, etc., constituting man’s relationship with the powers and principles of the universe, especially with a deity or deities; also, any particular system of such beliefs, attitudes, etc.” (Qumran Bet). In this definition, the following contents are worth noting: beliefs, behaviour, attitudes and man’s relationship with the powers and principles of the universe (deity).*
3. *“An organized system of belief that generally seeks to understand purpose, meaning, goals, and methods of spiritual things. These spiritual things can be God, people in relation to God, salvation, after life, purpose of life, order of the cosmos, etc. (CARM)”. Here, the words, organised system of belief, understanding purpose, meaning, goals are important.*

4. "... a system of social coherence based on a common group of beliefs or attitudes concerning an object, person, unseen being, or system of thought considered to be supernatural, sacred, divine or highest truth, and the moral codes, practices, values, institutions, traditions, and rituals associated with such belief or system of thought" (Wikipedia). In this description the following additional words/phrases are worth underlining – social coherence, system of thought considered to be supernatural, sacred, divine or highest truth; moral codes, practices, values.

Based on these variants of definition, one can appreciate the difficulty of coming up with a universally accepted characterisation. Rather than side with any of the definitions above, I will pull together the attributes common to all the definitions. Based on the definitions above, we can safely say that religion is about, strongly held organised system of belief about a superior, sacred, divine and unseen being (God); and obedience to the superior, sacred, divine and unseen God through abiding by uncompromising moral codes, practices, values, traditions and rituals associated with the belief system. In Islamic and Christian faiths, which are the dominant religions in Nigeria, morality is the basic value they embrace and respect in their respective belief systems. Meaning that in a country dominated by two powerful belief systems that duel strongly on morality, politicians and citizens in general, should be of high moral order, if indeed they abide by uncompromising moral codes, practices, values, traditions and rituals associated with their respective belief systems (Christianity and Islam). The immediate benefit will be among others, patriotic citizenry, security of life and assets, improving quality of life at all levels of the society, and less corruption in both lower and higher places. Where these benefits are absent, in a country that embraces two prominent religions/ belief systems, then who is to blame – religion or the people or both? The decision is yours, but before then, let me take you through a case study of the people, government and country of origin of the two faiths in Nigerian (Israel and Saudi Arabia). As a Christian with the name Israel, and since everything about Nigeria can easily be politicised, to avoid accusation of favouritism and bias, I would preview Saudi Arabia first. In the normal order of things, my choice would have been to showcase the countries alphabetically.

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

"One of the most devout and insular countries in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia has emerged from being an underdeveloped desert kingdom to become one of the wealthiest nations in the region thanks to vast oil resources".

BBC 26 March 2011

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was named after the ruling Al Saud family, "which came into power in the 18th Century.. and includes the Hijaz region - the birthplace of the Prophet Muhammad and the cradle of Islam" (BBC). With a strict interpretation of Sunni Islam known as "Wahhabism", Saudi Arabia has developed a strongly religious self-identity. The country was established in 1932 by King Abd-al-Aziz. As at 2010 the population was 26.2 million, and with a gross nation income per capital of \$17,700 (World Bank). The country has the largest oil reserve in the world and its main exports are oil, gas and cereal.

Contrary to some ignorant views, Islam is not anti-progress or anti-Western education and science. Take a trip to Dubai, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states and see a level of progress that marvels even the citizens and governments of the EU/US. For those of us driven by hate, memory of acts of terrorism, words of ignorance, and unsubstantiated claims pouring from evangelical pulpits, I say listen to the words of President Obama on Islam and adjust your views accordingly in the interest of our country and future generations of Nigeria:

"As a student of history, I also know civilization's debt to Islam. It was Islam, at places like Al-Azhar that carried the light of learning through so many centuries, paving the way for Europe's Renaissance and Enlightenment. It was innovation in Muslim communities that

developed the order of algebra; our magnetic compass and tools of navigation; our mastery of pens and printing; our understanding of how disease spreads and how it can be healed. Islamic culture has given us majestic arches and soaring spires; timeless poetry and cherished music; elegant calligraphy and places of peaceful contemplation. And throughout history, Islam has demonstrated through words and deeds the possibilities of religious tolerance and racial equality”.

President Barack Obama
Cairo University, Cairo, Egypt, June 4, 2009

Saudi Arabia is home to Islam and one of only a few fast-growing countries in the world with a relatively high per capita income. Though sitting on oil wealth, it has launched six economic cities for completion by 2020 to diversify the economy. Each city is projected to contribute \$150 billion to the GDP annually. Urban areas of Riyadh and Jeddah are projected to contribute \$267 billion by the year 2020. Income per capita is forecast to rise from \$15,000 in 2006 to \$33,500 in 2020.

In 2007, Saudi Arabia began a major overhaul of its education system. The country invested “SR11.8 billion (\$3.1 billion) into the project, to ensure overall development of its students by increasing their knowledge as well as their physical, professional, psychological and intellectual capabilities” (Arab News). The Education Minister Abdullah Al-Obaid unveiled the Saudi Government’s long-term goal for education. He said:

“We’ll continue our efforts for the development of education, making use of the successful experiments of countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea, Japan, China, New Zealand, Finland, France, Ireland, Britain, Canada and the US,”

“The atmosphere in classrooms will be improved by providing modern technological facilities such as interactive boards, displaying devices, communication network and Internet services,”

The University of Petroleum and Minerals (King Fahd University) in Dhahran offers undergraduate and graduate degree programs in engineering and science, with most programs of study offered in English. King Faisal University, offer degree programs covering agricultural sciences and foods, architecture, education, medicine, and veterinary medicine.

The State of Israel

Following World War II, the British withdrew from their mandate of Palestine, and the United Nations partitioned the area into Arab and Jewish states. The State of Israel was created in 1948. Although it is the birth place of Christianity, the dominant religion is Judaism and Islam (BBC, March 2011). It is considered one of the most advanced countries in the world in economic and industrial development terms. It has the 2nd largest number of start-up companies in the world after the US and the largest number of NASDAQ-listed companies outside the North America. In 2009, Israel had the 49th-highest gross domestic product and 29th-highest gross domestic product per capita (at purchasing power parity) at \$206.4 billion and \$28,393, respectively.

Israel has a population of 7.3 million, with income per capital, in 2009, of \$25,740 (World Bank). In 2009/10, the Israeli economy was ranked first as the world's most durable economy in the face of crises, and was also ranked first in the rate of research and development centre investments. Despite limited natural resources and land space, the country’s leading export include fruits, vegetables, pharmaceuticals, software, chemicals, military technology, and diamonds (see Wikipedia).

The educational system in Israel “aims to prepare children to become responsible members of a democratic, pluralistic society in which people from different ethnic, religious, cultural and political backgrounds coexist. It is based on Jewish values, love of the land, and the principles of liberty and tolerance. It seeks to impart a high level of knowledge, with an emphasis on scientific and technological skills essential for the country’s continued development” (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs). The standard of University Education is comparable to US/EU.

From the analysis above, it is obvious that the custodians of the two main religions in Nigeria are progressive, enjoying heaven on earth and with real hope extending their reward into the high heavens. To get to the root of the relationship, if any, between religion and the state of affairs in Nigerian, we must attempt to link, justifiably, religion and the state of affairs (political/economic stability, prosperity and progress) in Saudi Arabia and Israel. As you will recall, after a list of definitions on religion, we extracted attributes common to those definitions, thus:

“...strongly held organised system of belief about a superior, sacred, divine and unseen being (God); and obedience to the superior, sacred, divine and unseen God through abiding by uncompromising moral codes, practices, values, traditions and rituals associated with the belief system”.

From these attributes, we can all agree that religion can have a positive impact on human behaviour through moral codes. In fulfilling the moral codes, religious people display acts of obedience to the superior, sacred, divine and unseen being (God). Since religious acts of obedience to a superior God, in all its form, are geared towards peace, security, equity, justice, good health, good governance, hard work, honesty, and prosperity for all, a united, prosperous people and nation get established. On the strength of this, we can argue then that, as the custodians of religious faiths, the religious people and governments of Saudi Arabia and Israel observe religious codes of conduct in obedience to the superior, sacred, divine and unseen being (God). This assumption triggers a very curious and important question. Considering that Nigeria has two progressive (see country profile section on Saudi Arabia and Israel above) faiths, Christianity and Islam, and these faiths have strict moral codes, do the religious people and government of Nigeria observe religious codes of conduct in obedience to the superior, sacred, divine and unseen being (God) as the faiths demand? I leave that with you to grapple with.

We have been able to establish that Islam and Christianity are both progressive. The social, economic, political, and technological progress in Saudi Arabia and Israel presents irrefutable testimony. In these two religious states, there are two forces acting in tandem – people and religion. The power of choice is given to man both by God and the constitution of a country. Religion deals with moral codes aimed at pleasing a superior, sacred, divine and unseen God. In strictly observing those codes the society and country benefit as well. However, the practice of strict moral codes is a matter of choice. Nigerians, just like humans of every other race, have that power of choice. Therefore a question arises - what is holding Nigeria’s progress in the face of numerous religious visits to the Holy Lands, exploding numbers of Mosques, Churches and Cathedrals all over the country? That’s a food for thought for all.

I am satisfied that on my part, I have made available sufficient evidence, for you to judge whether Nigeria’s social, political, technological and economic situations are the products of mixing religion with politics or the handwork of the theory of Blackman – his own worst enemy. Openmind Foundation blog section awaits your verdict and comments.

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