

## **Religion and Political Culture in Nigeria**

By

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### **Abstract**

The political environment of Nigeria, including the manner of government, the creation of public policies, and the electoral process, have all been significantly influenced by religion. It cannot be overstated that religion has always played a significant role in Nigerian politics, particularly since the country won its independence. No matter how one feels about religion, it is a well-known fact that in Nigeria, politics and religion are closely related, despite the circularity of the Nigerian state in line with the constitution. This paper, therefore, examines the impact of religion on Nigerian politics, focusing on how it has influenced the political culture of the people positively and negatively since the advent of the fourth republic in 1999. This study suggests that people of all religions should get involved in politics, starting with local elections in our small towns and moving on to presidential campaigns and elections. To achieve national cohesion and development, politics in Nigeria needs to be practised, religious morals followed, and freedom of religion protected by the Nigerian constitution. The paper concludes that religion should shape our personality to reflect the characteristics of whoever our creator is and use those characteristics to improve our society's political space. Each of us should strive to become a member of the Nigerian dream team that will advance the nation and rethink the concept of modern governance to better serve the needs of as many people as possible.

*Keywords:* culture, governmental policy, religion, political culture, politics, Nigeria

### **Introduction**

Nigeria is one of the world's most religiously and ethnically divided countries, with extensive socioeconomic cleavages. These have grown increasingly significant because of the following: The three major ethnic groups have nothing in common politically, socially, or historically. Most Nigerians speak a "home language" and learn English, but not the other main local languages. Religion is not as significant in the South. Muslims in Yoruba, for example, behave politically as Yorubas rather than

Muslims. In contrast, in the north, it is difficult to separate religion from ethnicity. Religion has been in existence since the creation story, from the biblical perspective; it has no generally accepted definition, but salient points from available definitions expressly emphasize religion as a channel or means through which mankind reaches or interacts with whoever he/she believes or accepts as his/her creator. So whichever religion one finds himself or herself in, there is the realization and consciousness of salvation, which makes the adherent to desire to do always what is acceptable to one's creator in order not to be sanctioned. According to Durkheim (1912), cited in Taves (2009), "a religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative 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."

Max Lynn Stackhouse, according to Nelson (2010), said religion is "A comprehensive worldview or 'metaphysical moral vision' that is accepted as binding because it is held to be in itself true and just even if all dimensions of it cannot be either fully confirmed or refuted." In 1871, Edward Burnett Taylor coined the term "religion" to describe "the belief in spiritual beings." He argued that limiting the definition to include "belief in a supreme deity," "judgment after death," "idolatry," and other similar concepts would exclude a large number of individuals from the category of religious people and "has the fault of identifying religion rather with particular developments than with the deeper motive which underlies them. "Additionally, he argued that all known societies hold spiritual beliefs. The truth about religion is that certainly religion is a beaming light and an unassailable tower for the protection and welfare of the peoples of the world, for the fear of God encourages those who truly believe in Him to hold fast to that which is good and turn away from all evil acts. Once the lamp of religion is hidden, confusion and misunderstanding will follow, and the lights of fairness and justice, tranquillity and peace will cease to shine. Unto this every one of true understanding will bear witness (Baha'u'llah, 2018).

"Political" is referring to politics, which is an act or process of governance or, put differently, a settled pattern of administration. The Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines political as "referring or relating to government, a government, or the conduct of government, relating to, or concerned with the making as distinguished from the administration of governmental policy and relating to, involving, or involved in politics and especially party politics." In his book, *The Sociology of Religion*, Thomas F. O'Dea (1970) said, "Religion, like culture, is a symbolic transformation of experience."

Culture rules virtually every aspect of an individual's life, which is why it is commonly referred to as a way of life of the people. Culture is dynamic because it allows its members to function through relating with each other without the need to discuss the implications of being together at every moment. Culture is learned and unwittingly expressed, so regardless of its importance we are generally unconscious of its effect on how we perceive the world and interact within it (Global Affairs Canada, 2014). Anthropologist E.B. Taylor referred to culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by a man as a member of society," a definition which Griswold notes is the "anthropological definition of culture" (Griswold, 2012).

A diagnosis of these three concepts, namely, religion, politics and culture, reveals that, in the context of this study's topic, they are bound in a strong, interwoven relationship in the sense that religion can bond and inspire individuals in the direction of a mutual goal or common belief system; this set of common beliefs can influence their worldview, attitudes and social behavior (culture), which in turn, might become a prism through which they assess social options and make leadership decisions as to how their society is governed (politics). In generating this string of relationships, religion appears to exert a force greater than what no political factor could generally accomplish. Culture, as a concept, is all-embracing, in the sense that it is a way of life of a people in terms of their collectivist orientation that manifests in their individual or group social expressions. When we talk of religion and political culture in Nigeria, therefore, we are referring to the manner in which religion influences the political viewpoints, attitudes and choices of Nigerians as seen in their involvement in politics, especially party politics, and in their political affiliations and choices. This is a very broad issue we cannot exhaustively discuss within the scope of this paper, and so we will narrow our attention, in this study, to the question, "In what ways does religion affect political culture in Nigeria?"

### **Theoretical Framework**

The three concepts, religion, politics and culture, are discussed in this paper under the conceptual framework of structural functionalism theory. Structural functionalism sees society as an interrelated part. The functionalist's approach was first obvious in the thought of August Comte who stressed the need for cohesion after the social malaise of the French Revolution. It was later presented in the work of Emile Durkheim, in his study of how societies can maintain social unity. In 1963, in their book titled, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitude and Democracy in Five Nations* (Almond & Verba, 1963), two political scientists, Gabriel Almond

and Sydney Verba, who were strongly influenced by sociological structural functionalism, published a study of the political cultures associated with five democratic countries – Germany, Italy, Mexico, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

According to Almond and Verba, there are three basic types of political culture which can be used to explain why people do or do not participate in political processes; they are: Parochial political culture, Subject political culture, and Participant political culture. Parochial political culture exists where citizens are mostly uninformed and unaware of their government and take little interest in the political process. Subject political culture refers to where citizens are somewhat informed and aware of their government and occasionally participate in the political process, while Participant political culture is what we see in a polity where citizens are informed and actively participate in the political process. It is based on these three types of political culture identified by Almond and Verba that the direction of the political culture that religion has helped to shape is determined. Talcott Parsons (1902–1979), who was heavily influenced by Émile Durkheim and Max Weber, and who developed the idea of roles into collective roles (Parsons, 1966), says that for society to enjoy some acceptable level of solidarity and stability, institutions saddled with the responsibility of social functioning in the society (economics, education, legal and even gender-based) should complement each other in fulfilling societal functional needs for it to run smoothly. He believes that once this is allowed in every society the social contract between the ruler and the ruled will be beneficial to the ruled; this can encourage those persons on parochial and subjective side to navigate toward the direction of participant political culture. Although numerous critics have pointed out Parsons' emphasis on political and monetary struggle, his position has continued to gain popularity as it concerns stability and order in society.

### **Methodology**

Data for this study were collected from secondary sources like books, articles, newspapers, libraries, resource centres and online sources. All of them helped in the explanation of the concepts and in understanding how religion affects political culture. Collected data were analyzed using monolog descriptive mechanism to extract points made by different authors that argue for or against the ways religion affects political culture.

### **What is Political Culture?**

Having discussed above the word “political” (as used in this study’s title), we need to also explain the term “political culture.” According to the

*International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, political culture is the combination of attitudes, beliefs and sentiments that give order and meaning to a political process and which make available the fundamental expectations and rules that govern behaviour in the political system. The aforementioned encompasses both the political ideals and operating norms of a polity. People behave in ways that are consistent with their fundamental views in terms of politics, the economy, and society, according to Robert Swierenga, cited in Wald & Calhoun-Brown (2018). The god or gods they place at the centre of their being determine their values, morals, and behaviours in the workplace, at home, and in the voting booth (Wald & Calhoun-Brown, 2018).

Political culture is a concept used in political science to describe a population's shared opinions and normative judgments about its political system. This concept does not refer to attitudes toward particular political figures, such as presidents or prime ministers, but rather to how people perceive the political system as a whole and their confidence in its legitimacy. Political culture was defined by American political scientist Lucian Pye as the collection of fundamental beliefs, sentiments, and knowledge that form the basis of the political system. Therefore, the attitudes that people have toward their system of governance serve as the foundation of political culture (Morlino, 2017; Winkler, 2022). Gabriel Almond defines it as "the particular pattern of orientations toward political actions in which every political system is embedded". According to López González (2017), María Eugenia Vázquez Semadeni defines political culture as "the set of discourses and symbolic practices through which both individuals and groups articulate their power relationship, elaborate their political demands and put them at stake."

Political culture, simply put, talks about what people believe and feel about government, and how they think people should act in the direction of government. Comprehending the relationship of a government to its people, and how those people are going to act towards that government and others, is at the core of political culture which, according to Swedlow (2013), is the shared values and beliefs of a group or society regarding political relationships and public policy and in answering the question of how human beings are going to live together. That is, political culture answers the question of who gets to do what, with whom and under what conditions. Political culture also answers the question of who decides, who has authority, and who has power in a group, organization, institution, or other social unit in society.

## **How Religion Affects Political Culture**

Religion is a collection of ideas, practices, values, and stories that are all entrenched in culture. Just as religion cannot be understood in isolation from its cultural and political contexts, it is practically impossible to understand a culture without considering its religious dimensions. Just as race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and socio-economic class are always factors in cultural interpretation and understanding, so too is religion (Harvard Divinity School, 2018).

According to Cuba (2015), religion, like other closely-held opinions/beliefs/thoughts, affects political culture in the following ways; Firstly it creates voting blocks, it does not however guarantee that everyone who identifies with religion X or denomination Y or group Z will vote the same way but in practice we see this happening. Secondly, political cultures have an emotional impact on how laws/executive orders are made, by having individuals in positions of power and by having legislators who have no direct affiliation with a religious group and who can, at least, stop and consider their response to any specific legislation or position. And thirdly, political culture causes issues to be discussed. There might not always be agreement on those issues but at least they are discussed. Didonato (2018) maintains that as much as secular governments strive for a clean break between religion and politics, the two do in actuality mix in multifaceted ways. On the political end, religion can powerfully influence which party a person votes for, and even campaigns for, and on the religious end, political views can play a major role in religious conversion – in other words, people do not commonly change religions or denominations to find a fit for their political beliefs.

## **The Nature of Religious States**

Religion is more than just a way of life in some countries; it is the basic constitutional law of some countries. States like Saudi Arabia, Iran, Afghanistan, and the Vatican are religious, not secular, states. Religious concepts and codes dictate the affairs of such countries. Theocracy, not full-scale democracy, is practised in such countries where the supreme leaders are invariable religious leaders. According to Boyer (2017), ‘If religion is the opiate of the masses, these countries know how to get high.’ Emphasizing further, she said; According to data from the 2017 Best Countries rankings, a representation of 80 countries centered on a survey of more than 21,000 global citizens, Saudi Arabia is observed to be the most religious country in the world. With theocratic monarchy and a legal system based on Islamic Sharia law, her citizens can receive harsh punishments, including death, for apostasy and blasphemy.

The Vatican City, also called the Holy See, is the only place in the world where we have a full theocratic monarchy based on Christian religion. Although within a geographic state (Italy), the Vatican functions as an independent State, with the Pope functioning as its King and head of government. Under international law, the Holy See is allowed to enter into certain international agreements; however, it does not operate under civil laws since it is not a civil state but an absolute monarchy in control of the Roman Catholic Church, ruling according to the Apostolic Constitution of 1967 (Encyclopedia of Nations, 2018).

### **Relationship between Religion and Politics**

Religion is one of the most overlooked topics in the study of world politics. This is because of a long-standing bias against the study of religion, the impact of classical liberal principles that emphasize the separation of church and state on social scientists, and the difficulty of quantifying religion, among other reasons. The Westphalia Treaty, which was signed in 1648, established political and religious separation. However, religion has always had an impact on how government decisions are made and how policies are developed. According to Fox (2001), religion has three impacts on global politics: (1) it affects the context in which decision-makers act as well as the worldviews of many of them and the people who elect them. (2) Religious beliefs and practices serve as justification for political decisions and actions. (3) Religious conflicts frequently span national boundaries and have global implications. Equally important are international religious movements like political Islam and fundamentalist groups, as well as the foreign policy of theocratic nations and other governments that are affected by religion. The global campaign to protect religious freedom is the centre of attention in the light of the world's growing interdependence. This illustrates how important religion is to comprehending world politics. The interaction between religion and politics today is complex and constantly shifting. The religious beliefs of a population have an impact on the leaders and lawmakers of a nation, and this influence cannot be isolated from the governance of a state (Fox, 2001; Mandaville, & Hamid, 2018).

The relationship between religion and politics continues in the direction of being an important theme in political philosophy, despite the developing consensus among political theorists and the cordial management of both in practical political contexts, such as the United Nations. There is a need for some kind of separation between church and state and also the right to freedom of conscience. A unique reason for the importance of this topic is

that religion over and over again makes strong claims on people's allegiance, and universal religion makes these claims on all people, rather than just a particular community. For instance, Islam has traditionally held that all people owe obedience to Allah's will. Consequently, it is probably inevitable that religious commitments will sometimes come into conflict with the demands of politics. Nonetheless, religious beliefs and practices also hypothetically support politics in many ways (IEP, 2018; Lane, 1992).

The influence of religion on world politics is complex. It is abundantly obvious that the leaders and foreign policies of theocratic countries like Iran and Afghanistan are influenced by their religious doctrines. They routinely spring up international challenges and conditions that cannot be detached from their domestic and foreign policies. The role of religion as a source of public legitimacy is highlighted by the importance of moral pleas made by religious figures like the Dalai Lama and the Pope (Fox, 2001; Golan, & Martini, 2020). Politics and religion both function as "living" systems, which means they may evolve and adapt to their surroundings just like people do. When combined, the two have a profound impact on people, neighbourhoods, nations, and even the entire world. Politics and religion coexist in a symbiotic connection with the capacity to both help and hurt the other. Every group in human society has a set of beliefs that it has developed with the aid of religious principles (Ivy Panda, 2022). These beliefs frequently influence how people behave politically within a given political system. The media will always assess a politician's life in light of specific religious ideas. These values are based on religious morality and convictions. Here in Nigeria, a candidate for office is classified as either a Christian or a Muslim. The number of votes a political figure might garner in an election depends on their religion. Politicians in the United States identify with Christianity since the majority of voters are Christians. A political figure in the Arab world must identify with Islam because it is the predominant religion in the area. Before a political leader is chosen, the religious factions must also be made apparent. In some nations, religion plays a significant role in every election year. Certain religious affiliations are seen to be connected to cultural values that influence how well leaders operate in any political system. When it was reported that Obama was a Muslim, the question of religion became more prominent in the United States. Obama almost lost the election due to concerns that he might promote Muslim interests, if elected. The president allayed concerns, though, by affirming that he was a Christian (Fox, 2001; Golan & Martini, 2020; Ivy Panda, 2022).

### **Religious Politics in Nigeria**

In Nigeria, religious politics is a well-known phenomenon. Religion has



been a significant factor in political expression in Nigeria; it influences the style of governance, policy formulation, and the electoral process. Religion's influence on politics in Nigeria may be both beneficial and detrimental. According to Umeanolue (2019), just as religion boosts national development, it also has the potential to hinder it. In the Nigerian society, there is a clear connection between politics and religion. The connection between religion and politics has been established for a long time, even though the actual role religion plays in politics is still up for debate. In Nigeria, people are not seen as being good or bad because of their religion; rather, religion is exploited by politicians to deceive, divide, and oppress the people. The majority of Nigerians are aware of this oppression but appear to have accepted it as their fate, an attitude exacerbated by poverty, illiteracy, and lack of political education (Falana, 2010).

Religion has always played a big role in politics in Nigeria, especially since the country gained independence. No matter how religion is viewed, its connection to politics in Nigeria cannot be denied. There are numerous competing religions for relevance and recognition in addition to the three major religions—Christianity, Islam, and Traditional Religion. Despite this fact, Nigeria remains, theoretically, a secular state. Since independence, this has been stated in the constitution. The Latin word "Secularism," which means temporal, is the root of the word "secular". It is understood to refer to "worldly, as opposed to sacred things or having no particular religious affinities". As a philosophy, secularism rejects religion. It asserts that civil rules should not be influenced by religion and that religion should not have any place in civil affairs. In this manner, a common state is a state where strict religious networks play no perceived part in legislative issues and no conventional connection to the state. This is not the case in a religious or theocratic state, where religion dictates policy. "The government of the federation shall not adopt any religion as State Religion," reads section 10 of the 1999 Federal Republic of Nigeria Constitution (Bibinu, et al., 2020; Golan & Martini, 2020). The section further states that: Any religion cannot be officially adopted as the state or the Federation's religion. Alternatively, Section 38(1) states that: Every person shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including the freedom to change his (sic) religion or belief, and (either alone or in community with others, and in public or in private) to manifest and propagate his (sic) religion or belief through worship, teaching, practice, and observance. Additionally, Section 275(1) of the Nigerian Constitution recognized Nigerians' right to Shari'a law, stating: "There must be for any state that requires it a Shari'a Court of Appeal for that state." Additionally, Section 260(1) states that Abuja would house the

Federal Capital Territory's Shari'a Court of Appeal.

The Nigerian constitution has always been influenced by religion directly or indirectly. Political parties since 1999, at the advent of the fourth republic, has tried to play the religious game in politics by projecting candidates who represent the two major religions, Islam and Christianity, for election at the national and, in most cases, sub-national levels. Regarding presidential elections, in 1999 all the presidential candidates of the political parties either has a Christian presidential candidate and a Muslim vice presidential candidate or vice versa. This trend has been consistent, as witnessed in 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019 presidential elections in Nigeria. However, that of 2023 was different as a political party, the All Progressive Party (APC), projected a Muslim-Muslim joint presidential ticket. That action generated a series of reactions; some saw it as a threat to the peaceful coexistence of both religions while others saw it as a way of discouraging Nigerians from judging candidates by their religious orientations. These reactions and counter-reactions are similar to those of 1993 in the aborted third republic, where the then Social Democratic Party (SDP) also had a Muslim-Muslim ticket; the controversy ended with the annulment of that election. According to Akinwunmi (2022), Bola Tinubu and Kashim Shettima, who were the APC presidential and vice-presidential candidates in the 2023 election, have consistently defended themselves thus:

We are not coming into government to represent the Muslim or Christian faith. The Sultan of Sokoto and the CAN President are competent to represent their faiths. We are the Nigerian dream team that will catapult the country to a higher pedestal and we will redefine the concept of modern governance. The Christians have nothing to fear and there is no cause for alarm because we are one people with a common destiny.

Since political culture is expressed in how the electorates perceive the political parties and their candidates, the outcome of the 2023 presidential election and the performance of the Tinubu-Shettima administration would, in a significant way, affect the way Nigerians view the religious coloration of joint presidential candidates in the future, thus opening a new vista of the interwoven relationship between religion and politics in Nigeria.

### **Discussion**

Political socialisation is value-laden in the quest for an equal society. Nigerians form political opinions and attitudes through socialisation agents such as the family, schools, interest organisations, the media, and

government-sponsored events. Political socialisation in affluent nations takes place through relatively stable institutions. Nigerians, on the other hand, grow up in a political environment that is continuously changing.

The upheaval of urbanisation, along with the impact of recurring economic downturns, complicates political socialisation even more. Nigeria's political and economic leaders constitute a bourgeois class whose income is directly or indirectly derived from the state. The elites frequently utilise their positions for personal benefit, preserving their fortune during both civilian and military rules. Because of its bigger population and leadership positions within the armed forces, the north produced the bulk of Nigeria's chief executives, both civilian and military. Goodluck Jonathan was an exception, serving as the first president from a minority ethnic group, the Ijaw. Whether obvious or implied, religion or religious influence on political culture can be discerned from most social or historical experiences. That was why Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) argued that religion was vital for politics as “religion drives people to obedience, makes them familiar with laws and how to live in a peaceful society. Alluding to Hobbes position, Montesquieu (1689-1755) also had a firm belief that religion should be part of politics as “religion provides unity, harmony and social stability for society”. Therefore, it can be categorically said that religion affects political culture. This view is supported by available literature that indicates that over many centuries religion has proved to be a very powerful concept that commands total devotion and partly or totally influences the political choices of its adherents. Religion fills such an important vacuum in the life of an individual that, sometimes, someone who had stopped believing in one particular religion may be pulled, like the people of Athens that Apostle Paul referred to who were “worshipping the unknown god” (Acts17:23), towards relying on another form of faith. This could be why Machiavelli believed that “religion was the foundation of state and society”. This may also, remotely, explain why, in Nigeria, religion and political culture appear inseparable.

### **Conclusion**

From the foregoing, it is clear that in spite of efforts to separate religion from politics, both spheres of activities usually meet, formally or informally. As to whether religion or religious influence on political culture is positive or negative, available information indicates that it could be either or both, depending on how a given society manages the relationship. Many so-called secular ideas have roots in religious beliefs. For example, political theorists have recently emphasized the ways that different explanations of secularism have been overwhelmingly formed by diverse normative assumptions about Christianity. This single illustration

of a fundamental shift in political theory is challenging the legitimacy of the long-lasting contention that religion can be and should be restricted to a private sphere and separated from political influence. Those who insist that religion, Christianity or Islam, should be completely separated from political culture were advised by John Gladwin in his book, *God's People in God's World*, that they should have a rethink because from creation the plan of God for mankind is to be in the world and become the light and salt of their various societies so that social phenomena, such as politics and governance, will be in perfect order.

According to Harvard School of Divinity, the ongoing global influences of religions in the political life of a people during the course of time and period became pronounced in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and the 9/11 attack of September 11, 2001; since these events, political theorists in the West began to recognize the highly challenging ways that religions and religious influences have been disregarded.

This study concludes by providing an illustrative response to the question posed in the introductory section, namely, "In what ways does religion affect political culture in Nigeria?" In Nigeria, the southern part dominated by Christians appears to see politics as a dirty game that good Christians should not be part of, a view which engenders political apathy, while the Northern part dominated by Muslims sees politics as a normal game – in fact, to them, Islam encourages it; and so enthusiasm about politics and political calculations is higher in that part of the country. The type of political leadership this kind of system throws up is difficult to separate from religious influence.

### **Recommendation**

This study recommends that since religion cannot be totally separated from politics and one's religious beliefs cannot immune them from the adverse effects of negative political choices and decisions, everyone, irrespective of their religion, should play active part in politics. They should deploy the virtues taught in their religious doctrines to play ethical politics and help in sanitizing Nigerian politics and stabilizing the polity. Irrespective of any one's religion, age or sex, they should be involved in politics, even if their involvement only goes as far as simply educating themselves on who is who or why this person, and not that person, should be elected.

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#### APA

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