POLITICS OF RELIGION AND ETHNICITY: A PHILOSOPHICAL ENQUIRY INTO NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT
This paper is a philosophical inquiry into politics of religion and ethnicity and its implications for national development. The study assesses the extent to which religion, politics and ethnicity have dealt a devastating blow on Nigeria’s sustainable development, and suggests a way forward towards harnessing Nigeria’s multiple indices as a nation for national development. The following factors motivated this study: politics of religion and ethnicity which has become a concern across the globe. Nigeria is a heterogeneous nation with diversity in terms of multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, religious and political spheres which have been kept below the level of development expected of her by the indices of a multiple state as a result of politics of ethnicity and religion. The work was guided by logical deductions and model statements. The findings of this paper are that British introduction of indirect rule system of government has rubberstamping effect on the political state of the ethnic nationalities of Nigeria, and this was one evil that outlived British administration. Politically, Nigeria did not have a strong institution that could enable the political system to face the challenge of governance in a systematic way, because Nigeria has political parties built along ethnicity and religion. Consequently, the paper recommends the need for more effort to be made on appealing to religious leaders, most especially Islamic teachers and Christians, to embark upon dialogue and embrace peace which should be the traditional role of every religion. The paper concludes that the salient suggestions proffered in this work would be a formidable panacea to underdevelopment resulting from the challenges of religion, politics and ethnicity in Nigeria.

KEYWORDS: Religion, Politics, Ethnicity, National development

INTRODUCTION
Nigeria as a nation came into existence in the year 1914 when Sir Frederick Lugard brought together what was then the Northern and Southern Protectorates of Nigeria under a single administrative system. Ademoyega (1981) stated that prior to this date, the political entity called Nigeria today was administered in separate smaller units: Northern Nigeria, the
colony of Lagos, and Southern Nigeria. Nigeria covers an area of about 924sq Km with three major ethnic groups, the Hausa/Fulani, the Ibos and the Yorubas and more than three hundred other smaller groups. The British brought these groups together for administrative convenience not minding their differences in culture, religion and politics.

Jibrin (2017) stated that Nigeria’s political problems “sprang from the carefree manner in which the British took over, administered and abandoned the government and people of Nigeria”. When the British came to Nigeria as an imperial power to take over rulership of the country, they met the people of the South only observing and regulating their own monarchs and institutions. In the North, they met the Fulani in the process of establishing their rulership over other ethnic minorities. In order to administer Nigeria to their own advantage, the British introduced the indirect rule system of government, thereby rubberstamping the political state of the ethnic nationalities of Nigeria and this according to Bamgbose (2004) was one evil that outlived the British administration.

Abogusin (1986) added that the three major ethnic nationalities in Nigeria prior to colonial rule had distinct forms of government: the feudalistic oligarchy in the North, the centralized monarchical democracy in the West among the Yorubas and the decentralized democracy in the East among the Igbo states. From a religious perspective, the Hausas were pagans before they were conquered by the Fulanis who subsequently imposed Islam on them. The Emir doubles as both the political and religious head of his people. The Yorubas and the Igbo states practiced traditional religion before Christianity was introduced to them. The wake of the early 20th century saw the birth and rise of Pan-African movement, a universal Negro Association with the aim of liberating Africa from alien rule. Nationalist leaders emerged from different nations of Africa including Nigeria.

Bamgbose (2004) wrote that prior to independence, three power blocs were established which are Kaduna in the North where Sir Ahamdu Bello, the Sardauna of Sokoto emerged as leader; Ibadan in the West where Obafemi Awolowo, a renowned lawyer, was the leader, Enugu in the East where Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, an accomplished journalist was the leader. This was the pattern that preluded the independence of Nigeria. With the calling forth of regional representatives to the constitutional conferences that brought independence, the political leadership of the country was born and nurtured along ethnic lines. That today we still talk about under developed Nigeria is as a result of the challenges posed by the indices of pluralism.

**CONCEPT OF RELIGION**

The term religion has many meanings and interpretations. Religion has multiple definitions based on how an individual views it. It is the oldest discipline in human society that
is one of the most difficult to define. This is based on the fact that many people have different perspectives according to their disciplines.

Vernon (1962) sees religion as that part of culture composed of shared beliefs and practices which not only identify or define the supernatural, the sacred and man’s relationship thereto, but which also relate them to the known world in such a way that the group is provided with moral definitions as to what is good (in harmony with or approved by the supernatural) and what is bad (contrary to and out of harmony with the supernatural). This is to say that Vernon viewed religion based on the operational and interactive element of the society. He also considered group emotional response to the supernatural and the sacred which involves individual participation in a group. In addition to this, Ekwunife (1992) sees religion as a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggle with the ultimate problems of human life. It expresses their refusal to capitulate to death, to give up in the face of frustration and to allow hostility to tear apart their human association.

Religion is a very broad concept that needs clarity but it is not possible to successfully label people religious, unless the criteria used to judge them is clarified. Furthermore, in analysing the definition of religion, we are likely to think that not all people are religious. Suffice it to say that religion is composed of shared beliefs and practices of what is sacred and man’s relationship to the supernatural and should be an instrument for building trust and national development. However, this definition of religion seems to have failed to capture the purpose and real meaning as it is used in Nigeria to perpetuate evil against one another. In the same vein, Ekwunife (1992) sees religion as a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggle with the ultimate problems of human life. What are these problems of ultimate life? It could be a problem of trying to overcome evil with good, or the problem of service to humanity. And if adherents of different faiths can try as much as possible to live by their religious teachings, then Nigeria will be a nation that the whole world will reckon with. Furthermore, men need some absolute values to enable them live harmoniously. So far, science has been unable to solve many human problems and only religion seems to be able to supply meaning in moments of serious crises and uncertainties.

**Politics**

Politics is one of the oldest social sciences, in fact, second to religion. The term ‘politics’ is derived from the Greek word ‘polis’ which means the city state. According to Markle (1967), Aristotle who saw man as a political animal coined this word. He stated the three guiding principles to politics thus: involves a state; requires entering into relationship
with other people as a way of satisfying man’s unlimited wants and it involves rival groups as to make it competitive and healthy.

The above definition implies that politics helps a nation live in unity as one indivisible, indissoluble, democratic and sovereign nation which is founded on the principles of freedom, equality and justice as captured by the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2014). In Nigeria however, the reverse is the case as politics is a tool of conquest and domination by the political class. To this end, Ejizu (1993) defined politics as a sphere of purposeful behaviour through which we seek to live better than we do now. Markle (1967) defined politics from two perspectives. Positively he said, “Politics is a noble quest for good order and justice” while negatively he said, “Politics is a selfish grab for power, glory and riches”. As a science or art of governing through legitimized government, it means an indispensable social organization established in every society for the purpose of formally enacting, codifying and enforcing the laws and values of a particular society. Vernon (1962) asserts that government is unique among social institutions in that it typically has society’s compliance with its laws.

CONCEPT OF ETHNICITY

Henry in Baily (2016) stated that the term ethnic is derived from the Greek word ἔθνος ethnos (more precisely, from the adjective ἐθνικός ethnikos which was loaned into Latin as ethnicus). The inherited English language term for this concept is folk, used alongside the latinate people since the late middle English period. In early modern English and until the mid-19th century, ethnic was used to mean heathen or pagan (in the sense of disparate “nations” which did not yet participate in the Christian oikumene). The term ecumene (US) or oecumene (UK; Greek: οἰκουμένη, oikouménē, lit. “Inhabited”) was an ancient Greek term for the known, the inhabited, or the habitable world. Under the Roman Empire, it came to refer to civilization as well as the secular and religious imperial administration.

In present usage in Nigeria, it is most often used in the context of “ecumenical” and describes the Christian Church as a unified whole, or the unified modern world civilization as the septuagint used ta ethne (“the nations”) to translate the Hebrew goyim “the nations, non-Hebrews, non-Jews”. The Greek term in early antiquity (Homeric Greek) could refer to any large group, a host of men, a band of comrades as well as a swarm or flock of animals. In classical Greek, the term took on a meaning comparable to the concept now expressed by “ethnic group”, mostly translated as “nation, people”. Only in Hellenistic Greek did the term tend to become further narrowed to refer to “foreign” or “barbarous” nations in particular (whence came the later meaning “heathen, pagan”) according to Tonkin and Chapman (2018).
An ethnic group or an ethnicity, is a category of people who identify with each other based on similarities such as common ancestry, language, history, society, culture or nation. Ethnicity is usually an inherited status based on the society in which one lives. Membership of an ethnic group tends to be defined by a shared cultural heritage, ancestry, origin myth, history, homeland, language or dialect, symbolic systems such as religion, mythology and ritual, cuisine, dressing style, art or physical appearance.

Ethnic groups, derived from the same historical founder population, often continue to speak related languages and share a similar gene pool. By way of language shift, acculturation, adoption and religious conversion, it is sometimes possible for individuals or groups to leave one ethnic group and become part of another (except for ethnic groups emphasizing homogeneity or racial purity as a key membership criterion).

Ethnicity is often used synonymously with terms such as nation or people. In English, it can also have the connotation of something exotic, generally related to cultures of more recent immigrants, who arrived after the dominant population of an area was established. To this end, Achebe (1983) sees ethnicity “as discrimination against a citizen because of his place of birth”. In Nigeria, the word ethnicity and tribalism are used interchangeably.

PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY INTO POLITICS OF ETHNICITY AND RELIGION FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Politically, Nigeria did not have a strong institution that could enable the political system to face the challenge of governance in a systematic way. Nigeria had political parties built along ethnic and religious lines, which according to Achebe (1964) is the bane of national development. In the 1964 elections, the two main alliances for the election were Nigerian National Alliance (NNA) comprising the Northern People’s Congress (NPC) and its client parties NNDP, NDC, MWDF. The other alliance was the United Progress Grand Alliance (UPGA) formed by the National Council for Nigeria and Cameroon (NCNC) and Action Group (AG), NEPU and UMBC. In spite of the national cross regional appearances of the alliances, the two camps presented a North and South constellation of forces. The mainstay of the NNA was NPC whose motive was the consolidation of Northern hegemony. The UPGA on the other hand was a Southern coalition whose primary objective was to halt hegemony.

Osaghae (2016) affirmed that these forces have produced Awoists, Zikists and Sardaunas and the trend continues until today. The other feature that the party politics exhibited and which affected the smooth functioning of democracy was the increasing use of violence. The parties employed violent tactics which sometimes involved the physical elimination of opposition candidates. In the same vein, Osaghae (2016) observed that this was well seen
during the 1964 elections when opposition candidates were harassed, prevented from campaigning and even the filling of nomination papers was made impossible.

**THE PRESENT DAY NIGERIA**

In the 2019 general elections in Nigeria, the two major political parties were the All Progressive Congress (APC) and the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) and others. Under the watch of President Muhammadu Buhari, there was a repeat of what happened in 1964 where opposition parties suffered all forms of harassment and intimidation and the election was marred by violence and where opposition was seen to be leading, the election was declared inconclusive as in the case of Bauchi, Kano, Adamawa, Benue, Sokoto, Plateau, and so on. There is also an absence of a free and fair electoral body. In support of this view, Johannes (2008) maintained that the entire electoral umpire set up by the leadership of this nation since 1964 up till now had not been able to conduct a free and fair election. Two factors could be said to be responsible for this ineptitude: firstly, the appointment of Electoral commission chairman had been the prerogative of the President and can be said to be based on religious affiliation. This therefore lends credence to the charade Nigeria has had all these years, as he (the president) who pays the piper dictates the tune. Secondly, ethnicity factor is another clog in the wheel of progress in terms of the nation achieving a free and fair election where the electorates exercise their constitutional rights through the ballot.

Eke, Dele, Cole and Olasanya (2015) believe that during the First Republic, it was brought out that the members of the Electoral Commission regarded themselves as representatives of their regions whose duties were primarily to defend and protect regional interests. This was the earliest foundation to Nigerian ethnic oriented politics.

According to Ngele (2008), socially, one finds heterogeneity prevailing for there are more than 250 ethnic groups that exist in Nigeria. Out of these, the predominant ones are the Hausa-Fulani, Ibos and the Yorubas. Each of these dominates a specific region of the country. The Hausa-Fulani dominate the northern parts, the Ibos dominate the Eastern parts and the Yorubas dominate the Western parts. Among these three predominant groups as well as the minorities, hostilities have been rife as skirmishes of war are very much obvious. The roots of this problem according to Matthew (2014) can be traced back to independence in 1960 when Nigeria struggled unsuccessfully to clearly articulate the relationship between religion, ethnicity and the state. Whereas the British colonialists seemingly bequeathed to the new nation-state a secular regime at independence, the internal contradictions, which, paradoxically were propagated by the colonial authority, incubated to pose a challenge to the new state soon thereafter. On the one hand, there was the Muslim north, groomed under the English indirect
rule, which accommodated the Sharia legal order; on the other hand, there was the Christian/Animist south, mentored under the British-secular regime. Thus the post-independence secular state, which seemed acceptable to the Christian/animist south, was abhorred by the Muslim north. This paradox has remained the Achilles’ heel of Nigeria’s corporate existence, as northern Islamists have consistently sought the establishment of an Islamic state to replace the extant secular regime.

Commenting on this, Kalu (1996) says Nigeria was called a mere geographical expression not only by the British who had an interest in keeping it so, but even by her nationalists when it suited them to retreat into tribe to check their more successful rivals from other parts of the country. Nothing in Nigeria’s political history captures her problem of national integration more than the chequered fortune of tribe in her vocabulary. At Nigeria’s independence in 1960, the national anthem which was her hymn of deliverance from British colonial bondage had these lines: “Though tribe and tongue may differ, in brotherhood we stand”. This was in the opinion of Achebe (1983), “a most ominous beginning” and not surprisingly, this brotherhood lasted only six years. And ever since then, a Nigerian child seeking admission into a federal school; a student wishing to enter a university; a graduate seeking employment in the public service; a businessman tendering for contract will fill a form which requires him to confess his tribe. In Nigeria there are places you cannot seek political office because you are not an indigene or of the same faith. To add to this scenario, in the 2019 general elections, PDP was seen as a Christian party while APC was considered an Islamic party and the trend continued all through the period of the election.

The issue of religion in Nigeria is so bad that if not taken care of, Nigeria as a nation may not survive the looming danger coming. When the nation Nigeria was born, there existed different regions dominated by ethnic groups following a different religion. In its simplest form, while Northern Nigerians are predominately Hausa/Fulani and Muslims, Southern Nigerians are largely Yoruba/Igbos and Christians. To this, Toyin (2017) avers that Nigerian colonial masters sowed seeds of discord between Christianity and Islam, the two major religious bodies that hold sway in the socio-political scene of her national life. The authors had earlier in this writeup, painted a true picture of the scenario created by British imperialism which laid the foundation of suspicion and rivalry among the ethnic nationalities and religious groups in Nigeria when they posited that:

A contrary wind blew in the north as the root of Islamic fundamentalism was sowed. This veritable religious and political challenge to Christianity was nursed in the early days of independence. The conflict between Christianity and Islam was at first an aspect of regional rivalry and development.
Anugwom and Oji (2018) maintained that ethno-religious plurality has not been in the best interest of Nigeria as it has been the basis for many conflicts, Nigeria as a nation-state has “witnessed the most perturbing and unprecedented upsurge of religious disturbance”. Religious riots have remained a constant threat to peace in Nigeria and have continued to threaten the continued coexistence and habitation of the different ethnic nationalities that make up the country.

Okwueze (2013) wrote that one of the major religious crises ever witnessed in Nigeria on a large disturbing scale is the Maitasine religious riot which took place in Kano in 1980, Jimeta, Yola in 1984, and Gombe, former Bauchi State in 1985. These were followed by religious disturbances in Illorin, 1986, in Bauchi town in 1991, Kano in 1991, Zango-Kataf in 1992 and recently prior to the 2015 general elections, northern Islamists have consistently sought the establishment of an Islamic state to replace the extant secular regime. The Fulani attacked places like Taraba, Benue, Plateau, Kaduna, Nasarawa, Anambra, just to mention but a few and then there were the reprisal attacks. The authors submitted that religion in Nigeria functions as a means for the perpetration of violence, fuelling ethnic consciousness and solidarity, acquisition of political power and socio-economic gains, massive killings, wanton destruction of lives and vandalising of property of those considered infidels or who pay allegiance to other religions. This is traced to the acrimony between the two dominant religions – Islam and Christianity which has often resulted in the struggle for power and supremacy, bitter feud and wanton destruction of life and property. This religious situation had like a cataclysmic vortex devastated the ground for sustainable national development.

**THE WAY FORWARD**

- Every religion and tribe preaches peace – peace with others, and peace with God. As religion is often regarded as “a living thing”, any living thing is always very much interested in what is happening in the environment. Any living religion must therefore not only make pronouncement on current human and social problems but must provide solutions as well.

- One of the ways through which Christianity and other world religions could help in securing world peace even the peace of Nigeria is by appealing to the conscience of the people through their ethical teachings found in the Holy Scriptures. Conscience is seen as a practical judgment concerning the morality of a concluded action.

- There is the need for more effort to be made on appealing to religious leaders, most especially Islamic teachers and Christians clerics, to embark upon dialogue and embrace peace which has been the traditional role of every religion.
• Appointment into various political offices should be done on the bases of competence and credibility.

• Also, more effort should be made to ban all sorts of teachings that are not aimed at preaching tolerance by various religious teachers.

CONCLUSION

Nigeria as a nation faces serious challenges as a result of politics of religion and ethnicity which have weakened and hampered the development of institutions (religion and ethnicity) necessary for building a nation. Even in situations where the leadership as well as institutions responded by initiating some proactive measures, such measures have always been aimed at promoting the ethnic, religious and political interests of favoured regions or cliques and not the general or national interest of Nigerians. This is sequel to the hormone of religious bigotry, ethnic sentiment and political disorientation that flows through our veins. The suggestion proffered in this work would be a formidable panacea to the underdevelopment situation resulting from the challenges of religion, politics and ethnicity ravaging the nation.

REFERENCES


