



Interrogating the Relevance of Rawls' Private-Public Dichotomy Paradigm against the Phenomenon of Politicization of Religion and Religionization of Politics in Nigeria

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Abstract

Politics and religion are two mutually exclusive domains of human endeavours that are required to maintain the equilibrium of plural societies. However, in contexts where their deployments are not properly defined but allowed to intermingle, the outcome can be counterproductive, resulting into violence, disunity and destruction of lives and property. The situation may even become worst in societies where two major religions like Christianity and Islam co-exist, with each competing for supremacy. This has been the case in Nigeria, where the intermingling of politics and religion has resulted into post-election violence involving members of the two major religions. Thus, this paper examined the relevance of Rawls' private-public dichotomy paradigm in addressing the phenomenon of politicization of religion in Nigeria. The paper used the discursive and analytical approach in discussing data gathered through critical review of extant literature and personal observation. It identified the usual government patronages of religion, political formula of Muslim-Christian candidacy, endorsement of political aspirants by Pastors and Imams, use of religious statements and songs during political electioneering campaigns, and the littering of political billboards with religious images of a particular religion as clear manifestations of the phenomenon of politicization of religion in Nigeria that are inimical to peace, stability and national cohesion. Therefore, it recommends the practice of responsible religious pluralism and adoption of civil religion as alternative. The paper concludes that unless this is done, violent inter-religious conflicts orchestrated by the politicization of religion will continue to erupt in Nigeria.

Key Words: *Politics, Religion, Politicization, Religionization, Rawls' Paradigm and Nigeria.*

Introduction

Religion and politics are arguably two indispensable fields of human endeavour because human beings are both religious and political animals. In fact, it could be argued that peace, stability and development of any nation depend largely on the management of its religious diversity and the kind of politicking that is characteristic of such a nation. This is true because religion is a fragile phenomenon that should ordinarily be treated with absolute caution, especially when it concerns issues of politics, otherwise such a nation may continue to witness inter-religious violence and destruction of lives and property orchestrated by mismanagement of it. The situation



may even grow worst in contexts where religion is deployed by politicians as an instrument for political positions as the case in Nigeria has shown. This misuse contrasts with indigenous cultural performances that ordinarily promote cohesion, shared identity and communal responsibility (Akpan, Edem, & Iseyen, 2025). Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to examine the dynamics of politicization of religion or the religionization of politics and its attendant negative consequences on a religiously pluralistic and heavily divided country like Nigeria using Rawls' private-public dichotomy paradigm as a model for assessment. The paper used the discursive and analytical approach in discussing data gathered through review of extant literature. It is the thesis of this paper that the phenomenon of politicization of religion with its diverse manifestations in Nigeria contravenes the ideals of a true democratic and religiously pluralistic society. It is also important to note that in this paper the term politicization of religion or religionization of politics are two sides of the same coin and such would be used interchangeably to mean the same.

Conceptual Clarification of Key Terms

Koko (2020:33) has argued that concepts can easily be misconstrued if their contexts are not clearly defined. Thus, it is appropriate to begin the paper by providing conceptual clarifications of the main variables of the paper namely religion, politics, politicization and religionization.

The Concept of Religion

The term "religion" has no single definition that is universally accepted as Chineke (2016) has observed. Fraser and Moore (2019) have argued that this lack of consensus among scholars in the definition of religion is due to the fact that religion functions in dynamic ways. Accordingly, two strands of definitions have emerged namely: substantive and functional definitions. Generally, those who hold to the substantive dimension of religion conceive religion simply as a system of beliefs, symbols and practices that tend to provide understanding of the world in which we live. For example, Sibani and Oko (2020:141), Barkan (2012) and Okujaku (2006:12) conceived religion simply as a transcending system of various beliefs and practices which help a society, group or individuals to understand the meaning and purpose of life. Moreover, Iyer (2016:398) has observed that the substantive definitions of religion attempt to investigate it as a system of beliefs or as a philosophy with a view to understanding the world. This conception is also common with Durkheim (1912) who conceived religion as a unified system of beliefs and practices pertaining to sacred things, where "sacred things" are taken to mean things set aside and considered forbidden such as: beliefs and moral practices which unite into one single moral community. Similarly, Radhakrishnan (1928:25) have noted that "religion is an expression of the spiritual experience of a race, a record of its social evolution, and an integral element of the society in which it is found". Hence, religion from its substantive conception, is connected to beliefs and practices that are accepted by religious individuals and religious communities, as a guide to human life and purpose on the one hand and society on the other hand. The functional definitions of religion focus attention on what religion does for people in terms of its role in their lives or supporting them either socially or psychologically, as Iyer (2016:398) observed. For example, Glock and Stark (1965:4) have argued that religion has to do with an institutionalized system of symbols, beliefs, values, and practices which relate to questions of ultimate meaning. Also, Durkheim cited by Barkan (2012) has outlined some roles of religion namely: "that religion gives meaning and purpose to life;



reinforces unity and stability; is an agent of social control and thus strengthens social order; provides greater psychological and physical well-being; and motivate people to work for positive social change”. But some scholars think that religion should be seen as playing a double-edged sword” role in the sense that it could inspire violence in some cases and promote social harmony in other cases (Ekanem and Ekefre, 2013 and Chineke 2016:204). A similar view of religion is given by Yihua (2013:15-16) who bluntly described it as both a “spoiler” and a “builder”. The implication of the above definitions is that religion plays a major role in the lives of individuals and society. This agrees with the view that religion possesses the capacity both to shape ethical behaviour and to influence social transformation when properly applied. Given the above therefore, Koko (2020:132) has conceived religion as an integral human experience which plays both substantive and functional roles not only in the lives of the individuals but also in all that happen in human society. This includes the role of providing citizens with the motivation to carry out their civic duties without being manipulated by politicians.

The Concept of Politics

Unlike religion that is notoriously difficult to define, the term “politics” appears to have a more precise definition, although scholars also differ in their approaches on how it should be defined. For example, in defining the term, the New International Webster’s Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language (2010:978) describes politics as the science of civil government that involves the activities or intrigues of a political party. In essence, the concept of politics by this dictionary definition has something to do with the activities of a political party and government. The Greek concept of politics according to Akubor (2018:108) refers to a process by which people debate matters concerning the political community and take actions in an attempt to realize the public interest or the common good. Hence, he notes that politics concerns the management and allocation of resources for the benefit of the greatest number of people in any given society using political parties as vehicles in seeking the mandate of the people (Akubor, 2018:111). In politics, there is usually a social contract between the government and the citizens of any given society as Gough (1936:2-3) has noted. In this light, Hornby (2000:899) conceived politics simply as the activities involved in getting and using power in public life, and being able to influence decisions that affect a country or a society. The implication of Hornby definition is that politics concerns the process of taking power and using this power to influence public life either negatively or positively. But Nmah (2007:119-127) adds that politics does not only have to do with the process of adjustment and interplay of power but also of interest as well within the public life and affairs of a society on national and multi-national levels. By and large, it is safe to define politics as the process which involves the acquisition of power from citizens through the use of political parties and political campaigns for purpose of providing governance to such citizens within a given state or society.

Politicization of Religion and Religionization of Politics

It should be established from the onset that the terms politicization of religion and religionization of politics are two sides of the same coin. The New International Webster’s Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language (2010:978) defines the term “politicization” as the process of making something politically active or to make it a political issue. This means



that politicization of religion could refer simply to the condition of making religion a political issue rather than an exclusive religious issue. However, a more appropriate definition is given by Koko (2016:833) who defined it as a trend in which Christians and Muslims especially the political class use religion as an instrument for political bargain and negotiation or as a means of buying votes and winning the support of the people. Therefore, politicization of religion is the phenomenon whereby politicians and religious leaders use religion as an instrument for political gains. Such manipulation often weakens religion's moral authority and its responsibility to promote justice, compassion and responsible citizenship. Hence, this instrumentalization weakens the communal role of religion, unlike cultural traditions that preserve shared values across generations (Ekpo & Edem, 2026). It is a condition in which public office holders and religious leaders use religion as a bargaining power to win votes and achieve their selfish ambitions.

The Phenomenon of Politicization of Religion or Religionization of Politics in Nigeria

How has religion been politicized or politics be religionized in Nigeria? Onapajo (2012:42) has noted that the subject of politicization of religion or religionization of politics in Nigeria is not new and has been the concern of many scholars in Nigeria. For example, Kukah (1999), Best (2001), Obadare (2006), Imo (2008), Adebani (2010), etc. have written on it. In particular, Koko (2016:830-840) has provided a detailed understanding of the diverse manifestations of this phenomenon in Nigeria. The point of departure of this present work from the former however, is that it seeks to interrogate this phenomenon against the backdrop of Rawls's private-public dichotomy paradigm with a view to providing an alternative. This is necessary because religion as some scholars have argued, is a "double-edged sword" in the sense that it can inspire violence in some cases and promote social harmony in others, depending on the context and mode of its deployment (Ekanem and Ekefre, 2013 and Chineke 2016:204). Consequently, Yihua (2013:15-16) bluntly describes it as both a "spoiler" and a "builder". Regrettably, in Nigeria, politicization of religion or religionization of politics has been one of the major factors that have inspired violent political and religious crises in the country. There are various ways in which the situation has played out in Nigeria, which Koko (2016) has identified. However, for lack of space, only a few shall be discussed.

The first obvious manifestation of the phenomenon of politicization of religion or religionization of politics in Nigeria, is government's patronage of religion through sponsorship of various religious activities of Islam and Christianity. This government's patronage ranges from donating huge sums of money to Churches and Mosques, sponsoring of Muslims and Christians for pilgrimages to Mecca and Jerusalem, respectively, receiving Muslims and Christians' prayers publicly from Imams and Pastors, donating huge sums of money for building of Churches and Mosques, etc. Sadly, this is usually done with a view to win the favour of religious adherents. For example, it is reported by Eme (2012:191-192) that Kebbi State's Pilgrims Welfare Agency alone expended 2.1 billion naira in 2010 for sponsorship of Muslims to Mecca. Also, Bauchi State Government is reported to have committed over 50 million naira for sponsorship of the Annual Convention of the Women's Wing of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN). Similarly, in 2008, Gombe State Government is reported to have donated 100 million naira for the building of a mosque and another 50 million naira for the building of a Church respectively. In the same year,



2008, the late President Umaru Musa Yar'adua said to have donated 90 million naira for Quranic education in the north which provoked some responses from Christians, under the umbrella of Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) who threatened and demanded that a similar gesture be extended to theological colleges in Nigeria. Arguably, this happened because government's sponsorship of religious activities as Eme(2012:191-192) rightly observes, contradicts section 10 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, which prohibits the Government of the Federation or of a State from adopting any religion as State Religion. Most worrisome is the fact that such government's patronage of religion could serve as obvious grounds for political conflicts and ultimately interreligious crises.

Aside the above, the phenomenon of politicization of religion or religionization of politics in Nigeria has also played out prominently in the form of public-endorsements of political aspirants or presidential candidates of political parties by highly placed Imams, Pastors and even so-called Prophets" in the country. This has become a routine in Nigerian political landscape today. For example, during President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan's tenure, the CAN President, Pastor Ayo Oitsejafor was known to have politicized religion by publicly laying hands on the President and praying for him on several occasions. It is also on record that President Jonathan in the company of nineteen governors, some serving ministers and key government functionaries including the CAN President, Pastor Ayo Oritsejafor embarked on a religious tourism to Jerusalem, where the said pastor again publicly laid hands and prayed for the President.

There were several other Presidential visits to Dunamis Church, The Redeemed Christian Church of God, the Living Faith Church and the Apostolic Church where the then President Jonathan was publicly prayed for by the General Overseers of these Christian denominations as Koko (2016) has noted. Similarly, the present dispensation of President Muhammadu Buhari has also witnessed public endorsements of Pastors and Imams. Prominent among them is Rev. Fr. Ejike Mbaka of Adoration Ministry, Enugu who is known to have publicly prayed for the emergence of President Buhari. It should be stated outrightly that the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria guarantees such right of freedom of movement and freedom of association to all citizens. The problem however, is that these activities violate section 10 of the 1999 Constitution which prohibits the government from adopting any particular religion as State Religion. This is so because in an ideal state, the President should not be seen or appear to be seen as representing a particular religion, otherwise the situation could steer up religious sentiments which will further polarize the state along religious lines. Odeh (2007:47) is therefore perfectly in order to have opined that religious violence in Nigeria is a volatile mix of high politics and religion.

There is another model of politicization of religion in Nigeria which finds expression in Muslim-Christian or Christian Muslim candidacy but which has continued to define the dynamics of Nigeria's political landscape. For example, political parties, while jostling for elective positions, in Nigeria usually resort to this model of Christian-Muslim candidacy and vice versa in order to win the support of the masses which they believe are mostly religious citizens and forms a larger percentage of voters. This model as Koko (2016:836) noted has gained prominence since 1999 and has become a norm for all political parties in the country. For example, in 1999 and 2003 respectively, there was the Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo/Alhaji Atiku Abubaker's candidacy of the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) in which Obasanjo represented the Christians south and Atiku represented the Muslims north. In that same year, 2003, Gen. Muhammadu Buhari/Dr. Chuba



Wilberforce Okadigbo's candidacy was endorsed by the All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP). Buhari represented the Muslims north while Okadigbo represented the Christians south. Similarly, in 2007, the same trend continued and Alhaji Umaru Musa Yar'Adua /Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan's candidacy was adopted by the PDP. Yar'Adua represented the Muslims north, while Jonathan represented the Christians south. The same was applicable for the ANPP, where Gen. Muhammadu Buhari/Chief Ume-Ezeoke's candidacy was adopted. Buhari was the Presidential candidate from the Muslims north while Ezeoke was his vice from the Christians south. A similar scenario played out in 2011 and Dr. Goodluck E. Jonathan/Namadi Sambo's candidacy was adopted by the PDP. Interestingly, the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC) also adopted the Gen. Muhammadu Buhari/Pastor Tunde Bakare's candidacy. In the presidential election of 2015, the All Progressive Congress (APC) adopted the Gen. Muhammadu Buhari/Prof. Yemi Osinbajo's candidacy while the PDP retained the Goodluck E. Jonathan/Namadi Sambo's candidacy. This Buhari/Osinbajo's candidacy was retained by APC in 2019 and the trend is likely to continue ad infinitum. However, these point to the fact that religion plays an active role in Nigerian politics.

Moreover, politicians are also known for using religion as instrument to win the favour of voters during political campaigns. This has manifested prominently in many ways in Nigeria's democratic landscape from 1999 till date. For example, Koko (2016:834) has observed that politicians usually employ the schemes of singing religious songs and making religious speeches and prayers rather than talking about real issues such as infrastructure, economy, welfare, education, healthcare, security, etc. during political campaigns. They do this in order to win the favour of religious voters who constitute a greater percentage of the population. For example, the election results of 2011 showed a voting pattern that was significantly defined by religion and ethnicity. The 2011 presidential results released by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) indicated that Jonathan had a landslide victory in the Christian dominated region of the country but lost in Muslim dominated areas. His closest contestant, Muhammadu Buhari who lost the 2011 election won in core Muslim regions of the country but lost in all Christian dominated states, pointing out to the fact that Nigerians voted along religious lines. This explains the 2011 post-election violence that followed the announcement of the election results and which claimed the lives of over 500 persons. A similar scenario occurred in the 2015 presidential election in which, Muhammadu Buhari had a landslide victory in all Muslim dominated areas but Goodluck Jonathan only won in Christian dominated areas. Again, all this simply allude to the fact that religion has been heavily politicized in Nigeria. But as Onapajo (2012) has observed, politicization of religion is inimical to democratic ideals and values and has adverse effects on the political, socio-cultural as well as economic policies of the state.

Finally, politicians in their quest to religionize politics have also adopted the strategy of erecting billboards with bold religious inscriptions and images that either directly support their political ambitions or provide a basis for their political interests. These billboards as Koko (2016:834-835) has argued are usually placed in strategic places with inscriptions such as "divine mandate, God's sent, divine leadership, divine restoration, God's elects, the ordained ones, and so on". In some cases, such billboards are usually designed with purported images of angels and Jesus to further validate their claim of divine support. This trend has become a norm in Nigeria's political landscape and is prevalent among Christian politicians. Ironically, it is these same politicians who claim to have divine mandate that also mismanage our resources and become extremely corrupt



while in offices as Koko (2016:835) has observed. The phenomenon of politicization of religion therefore, as it is in the Nigerian context is inconsistent with the tenets of democracy because as scholars have noted, it can promote mutual distrust and suspicion and make national issues difficult to address (Adogame, 2005:125; Alanamu, 2006:605-609; Ehianu, 2012:219).

Most worrisome is the fact that these dynamics of politicization of religion in Nigeria has the tendency to make religion an instrument for inter-religious violence, especially between Christians and Muslims. For instance, such billboards with purported images of Jesus Christ lending full support to Christian politicians, as Koko (2016:835) has intelligently argued, can stir up religious sentiments among Muslims who may interpret it purely to mean religious exclusion and domination. A similar observation has also been made by Osivwi (2011:67) and Alanamu (2004) who believe that all religion-related violence in Nigeria are caused by politicization of religion. Most importantly, the use of such religious speeches, inscriptions and images of a particular religion for political campaigns also directly violates section 95, subsections 1, 2, & 3 of the 2010 Electoral Act, which prohibits the use of languages capable of injuring others. Therefore, it is appropriate to argue that politicization of religion or religionization of politics is inconsistent with the ideals of a true democratic society. How then should this problem be addressed? The next section will examine the relevance of Rawls' private-public dichotomy paradigm as an alternative to the phenomenon of politicization of religion or vice versa in Nigeria.

Relevance of Rawls' Public-Private Dichotomy Paradigm

There are extant theoretical paradigms that have sought to conceptualize the nexus between politics and religion with a view to promoting peace, national cohesion and security. However, for purpose of this discussion, it is safe to restrict the focus of this to Rawls' paradigm of public-private dichotomy. As a starting point, Rawls (1993; 1997; 1999) has argued that citizens in a society of conflicting religious, moral and philosophical ideologies must treat their fellow citizens simply as citizens without recourse to religion, bearing in mind that individuals are free to hold on to what they consider as valuable and important. But while this is so, they must conduct their daily affairs within the purview of what he terms "public reason" (Rawls, 1997:765-768). Such reason is considered public for three main reasons: one, because all free and equal citizens hold in common; two, because it is primarily concerned about political justice; third, because it meets the principle of mutuality, i.e. the belief that the reasons we would offer for our political actions are sufficient and reasonable not only to us but also to others (Rawls, 1999:574-578). Also, public reason neither attacks nor imposes religious doctrines on others. Public reason applies to discourse of judges especially of a supreme court; discourse of government officials, especially chief executives and legislators; and discourse of public officers and their campaign managers, especially in their public oratory, party platforms, and political statements. Citizens are also required to heed to public reason when exercising their civic responsibility especially during voting (Rawls, 1997:767-768). However, they are not bound by it if they are involved in other private activities such as religious worship, carrying out research, performing on stage and so on (Rawls, 1993:13-14).

The implication of Rawls' paradigm is that there should be a clear demarcation between the sphere of politics and that of religion such that the one does not interfere on the other. This means that religious ideologies should not be introduced into purely political matters, nor should



politics be introduced into purely religious matters; instead citizens should simply treat themselves as citizens without recourse to religious affiliations when relating with each other at the public domain. However, they are free to hold to their religious ideologies at the private sphere. The most important goal of Rawls' theory as it were, is to promote a religiously pluralistic society in which citizens are undifferentiated when it concerns issues of the public space. Consequently, Rawls addressed the phenomenon of politicization of religion or religionization of politics by creating two mutually exclusive spheres namely: political and religious. With this, the private-public dichotomy paradigm is then brought to the fore in which religious ideologies belong to the private sphere while political issues are seen as public issues. This theory has had strong influence in the policies of nations like the U.S, UK, France, Netherlands, among others.

However, Rawls' view has also faced strong criticism from scholars who hold to a "public-private non-dichotomy paradigm". For example, Neuhaus (1984) has argued that the attempt to expunge religion from the public space may rather create public persons that are anonymous and irrational and who only define justice behind a "veil of ignorance". This position gains strength in Newbigin (1986) who argued that the dichotomy between public and private spheres with respect to religious practices is inimical to public morality. In this light, the hypothesis for an empty shrine is conceived as an ideological stance that is completely misleading. This is so because it is believed that religion plays a significant role in promoting order and peace in any given society and as such should not be expunged from public life. A stronger position is even projected by Tocqueville (2004), who unapologetically argued that social and democratic order is impossible in a religiously pluralistic society without reference to religious faith. Therefore, introduction of religious ideologies whether at the private or public domain should be encouraged because religion is the basis of morality. This view also gains support in Habermas (2003:1-25; 2006:2-12), who reverberated that religion plays a vital role at the public space and as such secularism is not a sufficient condition to guaranteeing equal religious freedom for everybody. But the question is how should the problems resulting from religious hegemony be addressed if religion is allowed to play such a role in politics? It should be stated that while these later scholars may have a point in their criticism of Rawls' paradigm, their position is nonetheless insufficient to dispel Rawls' position as the most legitimate alternative to dealing with the phenomenon of politicization of religion in Nigeria. Therefore, it is worthwhile to endorse *prima facie* Rawls' private-public dichotomy paradigm as a model in addressing the ugly phenomenon of politicization of religion by politicians and religious leaders in Nigeria.

Strategic Recommendations for Nigeria

Given the above, there are two strategic steps that should be taken, in addition to the suggested paradigm. The first is what Koko (2020:41) fittingly termed 'responsible religious pluralism.' Responsible religious pluralism is a phenomenon in which religious practices within a multi-religious state are not allowed to override public order, collective interest and individuals' human rights and freedom. Instead, religious people, business men and women, academics, politicians and public officials, in the exercise of their religious freedom adhere strictly to the principles of neutrality, equal recognition of all religions and respect for public order, collective interest and individuals' human rights and freedom.



Secondly, there is need for an urgent amendment of Section 38, subsection 1-4 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, which provides for freedom of thought, conscience and religion to include adoption of civil religion and restriction of politicians from the use of religion during political campaigns. This civil religion can be the national anthem and pledge and citizens should be made to compulsorily recite it during political, academic and civil society gatherings. One of the benefits that could accrue from this is that it can spur national consensus, cohesion, consciousness, peace and stability.

Conclusion

In this paper, effort has been made to examine the dynamics of politicization of religion and its attendant negative consequences on a religiously pluralistic and heavily divided country like Nigeria. The paper argued that religion is a very fragile phenomenon that should not be allowed to mix with politics if peace and stability must be achieved in any society, especially religiously pluralistic ones. The paper particularly identified some predominant manifestations of the phenomenon of politicization of religion by politicians, top government officials and religious leaders in Nigeria and therefore endorsed Rawls' private-public paradigm as a plausible alternative based on its merits. These merits include a strict demarcation between the spheres of politics and religion, promotion of the principle of religious neutrality in carrying out official duties, and encouraging undifferentiated citizenship in which citizens treat fellow citizens based on their humanity and not on their religious affiliation. Unfortunately, the Nigerian experience has shown that these basic principles have been violated wholesale by some religious leaders, public office holders and politicians. Therefore, the paper concludes that unless the phenomenon of politicization of religion is replaced with Rawls' private-public dichotomy paradigm through the practice of responsible religious pluralism and adoption of civil religion, peace, unity and stability would still be difficult to achieve in Nigeria.

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