African Traditional Religion, Secularism and the Nigerian Nation

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Abstract
African Traditional Religion is the indigenous religion of the Africans. The religion that has existed before the advent of other foreign religions and western civilization which came with secularism as an umbrella that shades politics, religions, education, urbanization, colonization and others. These features of western civilization were imposed upon Africans and their Traditional Religion. Secularism is the transformation of a society from close religious value identification towards non-religious values and secular organizations. Hence, the presence of the known old cultures and practices in contemporary African Traditional Religion and practices are seriously fading away as well as the presence of elements of traditionalism in contemporary African society. This first reduces the authority of the traditional priest who happened to be the custodians of revealed knowledge, as the responsibility for education has moved from the family and community to the state. Two consequences have arisen, collective conscience is diminished and fragmentation of communal activities which leads to traditional religion becoming more of a choice thing rather than observed social obligations. Nigeria is a heterogeneous state with different groups practicing diverse religion. Religion has been a dominant factor in Nigerian politics especially in this post-independence era. In whichever way one sees religion, the fact cannot be denied of its interaction with politics in Nigeria. The work attempt to examine the concept of secularism, secularism in Africa, secularism and the Nigerian nation, the place of religion in Nigerian nation and the biasness of Nigerian nation against African Traditional Religion.

Keywords: Religion, Africa Traditional Religion, Secularism, Nigerian Nation and Biasness

Introduction

Africa as a continent is undergoing a serious case of secularism. The secularism thesis is understood to mean that as society's progress, particularly through modernization and rationalization, religion loses its authority in all aspects of social life and governance. The ways of the religious are fast being abandoned or in sharp decline while most elites are beginning to

clamour for a cultural change or better put, for the return to the African cultures which have long been overlooked for the more grand - seeming European ones. The change in cultural taste has seen a more serious route to secularism as both the old and new culture do not seem to satisfy the insatiable want of the contemporary society and is finally turning to the most concrete or satisfying explanation for their social dilemmas, the secular sciences route. For the African, religion is particularly important as it is essentially central to their culture. It is not just a part of culture. Almost every aspect of the lives of the Africans is controlled by religion. That is what gave birth to their religion called African Traditional Religion.

In Nigeria today, the phenomenon of religion and politics is an obvious one. In political aspects such as style of governance, policy formulations and the electoral process in Nigeria, religion has been a strong determining factor. However, the influence of religion on politics in Nigeria could be both positive and negative. The ideals of secularism are so endearing, hence Wing and Varol (2007) exhaustively as follows: First, in secular regimes, sovereignty belongs to the nation and not a divine body. Second, religion is separate from state in a secular government. Religion does not affect the government's affairs, meaning that laws and regulations are not based on religion. Third, a secular government is neutral towards all religions. As such, the regime cannot have an official religion and does not protect one religion over another. Likewise, all individuals, irrespective of their religion, are equal before the law. Fourth, a secular regime requires the education and the legal systems to be secular. The legal system does not contain laws based on religion, and the education system is based on logic and science, not religion or dogmas. Fifth, a secular government requires freedom of religion and conscience. Thus, secularism does not mean the absence of religion from society. Individuals are free to exercise their religions and manifest their religious beliefs in both the private and the public sphere. Finally, a secular regime is based on pluralism, which requires the government's respect for all religions and religious beliefs.

On the basis of these characteristics, therefore, the following queries are appropriate: where does sovereignty reside in Nigeria – in the state or in a divine body? To what extent are Nigerian laws insulated from religious dogmas? Is the Nigerian state neutral and fair in its dealings with all religions? Are Nigerian legal and educational systems independent? Does the Nigeria constitution guarantee freedom of religion and conscience? Does the Nigerian state adhere to the principle of religious pluralism (respect for all religions)?

In the preamble of the Nigerian constitution, the state is secular and it enthused: the people of the Federal Republic of Nigeria have solemnly resolved to live in unity and harmony as one indivisible, indissoluble, democratic, and sovereign nation under God, to provide for our self a constitution for the purpose of promoting the good government and welfare of all persons in our country on the principle of freedom, equality, and justice. And in section 14(1) (a), the constitution enthused: Sovereignty belongs to the people of Nigeria from whom

government through this constitution derives all its powers and authority (1999 Nigerian Constitution).

Concept of Secularism

Secularism draws its intellectual roots from Greek and Roman philosophers such as Marcus Aurelius and Epicurus, Medieval Muslim polymaths such as Ibn Rushd, enlightenment thinkers like Denis Diderot, Voltaire Benedict Spinoza, John Locke, James Madison, Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine, and modern freethinkers, agnostic and atheists such as Bertrand Russell and Robert Ingersoll. Moreover, in Nigeria, secularism drew its root and strength from chapter one and article 10 of the 1999 constitution which states that, "the Government of the Federation or of a state shall not adopt any religion as state religion" (Ogoloma 2006). The word "secular" is the coinage of the Latin word "*saeculum*" which denote an age of time, non-involvement in religious or spiritual affair and exclusion of religious from public affairs. It is the process by which religious element and dimension are being removed from a thing. A secular state on the other hand is a state in which the constitution transcends all persons and groups. It is a kind of state at which the state surpasses and also has power over all other institutions (Cinjel & Chujor, 2017). It is usually practice among pluralist and heterogeneous society and the essence is to give group her sense of self-expression, freedom, and unity.

In the words of Igware (2007), secularism is a way of promoting a social order separate from religion, without actively dismissing or criticizing religious belief. Secularism is the religion of humanity, it embraces the affairs of this world, it is interested in everything that touches the welfare of a sentient being, it advocates attention to the particular planet on which we happen to live; it mean that each individual counts for something; it is a declaration of intellectual independence, it means the pew is superior to the pulpit, that those who bear the burdens shall have the profits and that they who fill the purse shall hold the strings (Ingersoll 1996 cited in Ademowo, 2014). Ingersoll further claims that secularism is a protest against ecclesiastical tyranny, against being a serf, subject or slave of any phantom, or of the priest of any phantom. It is a protest against wasting this life for the sake of one we know not of. It proposes to let the gods take care of themselves. it means living for ourselves and each other for the present instead of the past, for this world instead of another. In political terms, secularism is a movement towards the separation of religion and government. This refers to reducing ties between a government and a state religion, replacing laws based on scripture (such as the Ten Commandments in Christianity and Sharia law in Islam) with civil laws, and eliminating discrimination on the basis of religion. This is said to add to democracy by protecting the rights of religious minorities (Suleiman 2008).

According to Gbadegesin (2016) the contemporary usage of the word "secularism" can be of two forms, namely, hard secularism and soft secularism, he considers religious propositions to be epistemologically illegitimate, warranted by neither reason nor experience. While in the view of soft secularism, the attainment of absolute truth was impossible and

therefore skepticism and tolerance should be the guiding principle and overriding values soft secularism is therefore more receptive as it appreciates certain 'truism' or truth in all religious and/or even unbelief (Gbadegesin, 2016). In the context of this study, secularism is defined as the political principle or philosophy that there must exist some sphere of knowledge, values, institutions, and action that is independent of religious authority. If there is no such secular sphere, then everything is under ecclesiastical control and this undermines the possibility for liberty and autonomy.

Secularism in Africa

Africans are notoriously religious (Mbiti 1982). These classic words are quite as well-known, even after four decades, as just the religiosity of the African people. In spite of all the religiosity of Africans as Mbiti observed, religious leaders, as far back as the early 1990s, were beginning to grow discomfort in the happenings on the religious front in this "notoriously religious continent". John Paul in his post-Synod exhortations after the African Synod pointed to the growing threat of secularism in Africa. He said: Although the subject scarcely received a mention in the speeches, messages and propositions of the synod, the rapid evolution of the society has given rise to new challenges linked to the phenomenon, notably of family uprooting, urbanization, unemployment, materialistic seductions of all kinds, a certain secularization and an intellectual upheaval caused by the avalanche of insufficiently critical ideas spread by the media. The pope spoke of the media intrusion and about the temptation of individualism, Secularism may stem from explicit unbelief, the denial of the existence of God or of any religious dimensions to human life.

Such unbelief is rarely the product of a formal atheistic rational philosophy. It stems more from the allegiance to the popular myth of science as the ultimate theory of everything; a conviction that the only truths are those which are accessible and proven by scientific observations and experiments. It is a faith on the unlimited human progress, apparently confirmed by the spectacular achievements of western technology.

Consumer materialism is nowadays the most common causes of secularism. Rather than formal unbelief, it is religious indifference induced by the preoccupation with material things. Douglas (2013) pointed this thus "It is the world of impersonal things, a world which personal relationship is at a minimum and in which symbolism and ritual are discounted as forms of expressions in the interpretation of reality". However, the reality of secularism is very obvious in Africa. One may not see it vividly as it is in the western world, but that does not mean that secularism is not or cannot be traced in Africa.

For example, Identity crisis has been identified as one of the factor pushing Africa into secularism. Africa is a Continent with numerous cultural ethnic groups and belief identity. This has brought about the issue of identity crisis among Africans. Africans being very religious people have always sought for a cause to believe in. The search and thirst for knowledge have driven many Africans in search of a common ground to belief against the general influence of

middle - Eastern and Western belief systems. Due to the great influx of these foreign beliefs into Africa which has led to the obliteration of most African norms, beliefs and customs, this leaves the searching Africans empty and devoid of a central belief system at the core. With the Eastern and Western cultures at battle for the domination of Africa and Africans at a loss for an indigenous common ground for a central belief, it leaves Africans at a loss, an identity crisis.

The modern sociologist provides the Africans with an escape route from the religious battlefield, an answer to its problem in the practical sense, a world devoid of mystery but rich in details and reason. The sociologist provides the Africans with the secular view of things based strictly on physical science, reason, logic and thought, and not religion and mystery. This of course promotes the course of secularism. The need to unite the world with science, the trend of progress, was ushered in, these were imbued in the psyche of Africans, they, therefore, started pursuing these new trend. There is no better way to buy a confused man's trust more than to show him the light for the solution to his problems.

Speaking on a radio interview sometimes ago, former South African President, Thabo Mbeki lamented the issue of victimization of the African youth thus: The young African, having gone through studies and experiences where he is being viewed as a victim always, will at some point get uncomfortable with the victim tag and thus in a haste to belong to the victory side, refutes the religious ways of his father for the more acceptable, logical and secular facts and reasons. There is a big dichotomy between the contemporary African and the primordial African. The mind of the African in the contemporary world seems to be distorted. This, we can see vividly in the African attitude towards African indigenous languages, morals and values.

Africans seem to have adopted this science oriented facts which on the surface tend to help solve the numerous challenges facing people in their various walks of life. However, the present researcher is of the view that had Africans had a more central and concrete culture and identity, capable of supporting their origin and satisfying their societal challenges, there would have been no need for acculturation. Secularism would have been seen as a religious threat rather that a course to follow.

Secularism and the Nigerian Nation

The Nigerian constitution pre-supposes that an individual has freedom to practice religion of his or her choice without government interference. This is where secularism comes into play. Secularism is a legal position in the supreme law of Nigeria, stating that religious belief should not influence any public and/or government decisions. In order words, secularism is a documented position in a constitution relating to political belief in the separation of religion and state. While people are allowed to practice whatever they believe in as their religion, the government must not allow that to influence public policy. Religion is the service and worship of God or gods. The word "religion", which was first used in the 13th century, is Latin in its origin. From a sociologist perspective, the society creates religion as an instrument in

moulding, controlling, and directing societal thinking and behaviour (Durkheim 1985). Therefore, in a secular state, citizenry is allowed to practice whatever kind of religion of their kind but the law of the state which is enforceable through the constitution exceeds and transcends all other laws (Ghali 2008).

The only emblem that gave the nation power over the diverse groups is the secular outlook which empowered the constitution over every institution. It also created a sense of balance and harmony among the diverse groups (Gofwen 2010). However, the place and position of religion has continued to compete with the state in Nigeria and the aftermath of their clash is violent conflict (Igware 2007). Reasoning along similar line, Sampson posits that anyone saying Nigeria is a secular nation does not understand the meaning of the word "secular". There is nothing secular about Nigerian nation since whatever we do will always put Islam and Christianity in the fore front. A statement by Archbishop Olubunmi Okogie, the Catholic Bishop of Lagos Diocese, represents the Christian community's perception on the relationship between the state and religion: 'when you are in a position of trust, forget about your religion because it is a private affair between you and your God. If you want to bring religion in, let it be after office hours'.

On the other hand, Northern Muslims have consistently maintained a hostile view of secularism since independence in 1960, describing the concept as atheism or irreligion, a perception consistently expressed whenever reference is made to Nigeria as a secular state. The *Jamma' atu Nasril Islam (JNI)* the society for the victory of Islam for example, argued that 'secularism is a system of social teachings or organisation which allows no part of religion', while Sheik Abubakar Gummi, the late pillar of Islamic activism in Nigeria, said 'a secular state is an atheistic state'. Another Muslim intellectual, Ibrahim Suleiman, argued that 'secularism is hostile to Islam. It seeks to undermine Islamic values, supplant the Islamic laws with those of its own and deface the sanctity of the Muslim society'. With this divergent view of secularism by the two dominant religious groups, it was only a matter of time before the contradictions inherent in the seemingly secular Nigerian state bequeathed by the British colonialists would manifest themselves (Sampson 2014).

Regardless of the popular misconceptions that surround it, secularism is not a principle of anarchy (even though there are many religious people who would give it this interpretation to condemn it). Secularism is a principle of tolerance. A secular society that is established on the principle of secularism does not force beliefs (or unbelief) on its citizens; neither does it limit the expression of people's beliefs, and even unbelief (Ademowo 2014). A secular state is therefore any state or country purports to be officially neutral in matters of religion, supporting neither religion nor irreligion; a state that treats all its citizens equally regardless of religion or non-religiosity; and claims not to or ceases to give preferential treatment(s) to a citizen (or citizens) of a particular religion over another with different religions or non-religious affiliation(s).

The Place of Religion in Nigerian Nation

Nigeria as a nation is religiously pluralistic. Apart from the three major religions, Christianity, Islam and Traditional Religion, there are several others competing for relevance and recognition. In spite of this reality, in theory, Nigeria is a secular state. This has been indicated in the constitution since independence. For the purpose of emphasis, the word, secular, is derived from the Latin word '*Secularis*', which means temporal. It is taken to mean 'of or relating to worldly, as opposed to sacred things or having no particular religious affinities'.

Secularism, as a doctrine, rejects religion. It maintains that religion should have no place in civil affairs and civil rules should have no interest in religion. Thus, a secular state is a state where religious communities have no recognized role in politics and no formal relation to the state. This is different from a theocratic or a religious state where religion determines what happen in the state. As stated in section 10 of the 1999 Constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria, "the government of the federation shall not adopt any religion as State Religion". Therefore, in policy formulation, governance, and other governmental activities, religion should not be an issue. By implication, every citizen has a right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. Section 38 is categorical, that:

1. Every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom (either alone or in community with others and in public or in private) to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance.

2. No person attending any place of education shall be required to receive religious instruction or take part in or attend any religious ceremony or observance if such instruction, ceremony, or observance relates to a religion, other than his own or a religion not approved by his parents or guardian, and

3. No religious community or denomination shall be prevented from providing religious instruction for pupils of that community or denomination in any place of education maintained wholly by that community or denomination.

The constitution further emphasizes that national integration shall actively be encouraged. Accordingly, discrimination on the grounds of place of origin, sex, religion, status, ethnic, or linguistic association or ties shall be prohibited, while national ethics shall be Discipline, Integrity, Dignity of Labour, Social Justice, Religious Tolerance, Self-reliance, and Patriotism. Also, membership of political parties is opened to every citizen irrespective of his place of origin, circumstances of birth, sex, religion, or ethnic group.

From the foregoing, the religious policy in Nigerian constitution can be understood, theoretically. The legal provisions are made in order to ensure that citizens enjoy religious freedom and that the state or government does not affiliate itself or show preference for one

religion. The principle 'live and let live' is held and the contribution that religion can make to the life of citizens are recognized, hence the belief in religious tolerance. However, it is a fact that religions are potent brotherhoods; displaying rather efficacious acquired family relationships on earth.

Biasness of Nigerian Nation against African Traditional Religion

On the issue of public holidays, Christianity and Islam are adequately taken care of as work free days are observed during their festivals. But, in the history of Nigeria, no public holiday has been declared for traditional festivals by the Federal Government. Though no official reason has been given, one is noticeable. The traditional religion is segmented and invariably, there is no common interest. Festivals are celebrated locally and many of them could last for a week or more and the times they are observed vary from one community to another. For this reason, there are no specific days or times as obtained in Christianity and Islam.

More importantly, it has never been seriously impressed on the government, especially at the federal level, to declare public holidays for the celebration of these festivals. It follows that not so many people could proudly associate themselves with African Traditional Religion. The religion is highly segmented, localized and not universal. Also, as said by Mbiti (1982) zeal for evangelism manifesting in membership drive is not its attribute. Prior to the arrival of Christianity and Islam in Nigeria, traditional religion was firmly rooted. It is, therefore, ironical that Christianity and Islam are now more recognized than the traditional religion.

Religious organizations have never pretended not to be interested in the affairs of the country as they are, for prayers are offered for leaders and the country as an entity. These prayers are both solicited and unsolicited. Sometime ago, the President of Nigeria, Muhammadu Buhari, enjoined all Nigerians to be praying for the nation (Asemota 2009). While we are not condemning this, one is concerned about its constitutionality. This request did not appeal to the sensibility of those who believe that most of the problems confronting Nigeria are man-made. The states of health of the former president, Yar'dua, and the former president, Buhari, engaged the services of many religious personnel, who consistently prayed for their quick recovery. It was reported in the news media, shortly before the death of President Yar'dua, that some renowned clergy men visited him even when the then acting President, Dr Goodluck Jonathan, did not have free access to him.

Another way of understanding the erosion of secularity in Nigeria is the establishment of the Pilgrim Welfare Boards by Nigerian governments. The implication of this is that government now has serious influence on pilgrimage and a great deal of public fund is expended yearly to run the Board. Moreover, the government, at different levels, has sponsored pilgrims to Jerusalem and Mecca, which has made the exercise to be an appendage political activity. According to Onwubiko (2010) the two dominant religious organizations viz: Christian religion and Moslem religion have held both the federal and state governments on

the jugular veins to be committing unimaginable amount of scarce public funds to sponsoring their adherents to the yearly pilgrimages abroad. Since the blackmail to sabourtage government if it fails to sponsor pilgrimages gained ascendancy, federal and state governments have been contending with the needs of these religious organizations and their leaders.

This development questions the spiritual relevance of pilgrimage. Concerned Nigerians will be gaping in wonder if the amount of public funds committed to the yearly religious pilgrimages of the two religious organizations is made public. Also, the building of the central Mosque and Christian Center in Abuja was supported by the government, while in various Government Houses, there are either a Chapel or a Mosque or both, depending on the prevailing religious situations in the states concerned. These structures are maintained by public funds. This shows that there is indeed a budding politico-religious culture in Nigerian politics. The country, though officially and problematically secular, now features religious rituals in public offices, institutions and functionaries. Churches, mosques, Chapels, priests, Emirs, prayers, etc compete with one another in government houses, institutions and functions.

Furthermore, there are some fundamental principles underlying religious factors in the electoral process in Nigeria. One of such is how religion often determines the choice of flag bearer/running mate for the posts of the president and governor in some states. This is done to ensure that the interests of adherents are protected. Where this principle is adopted, there is usually a Muslim/Christian, Christian/Muslim, Chtistian/Christian or Muslim/Muslim ticket.

It is also an issue that voting and campaign, in some cases, are based on religious sentiment. In this case, religion could be used to either canvass support for a candidate or dissuade the electorate from voting for him or her. This is why some Christians will not support Muslim candidates and vice-versa. In 2003, Major General Buhari, of the All Nigerian Peoples Party, was criticized for his stand on religious matters and this, no doubt, worked against his political fortune. As a perceived advocate of the Sharia law and fundamentalist, he was quoted to have said that Muslims should not vote for Christian candidates. This could contribute to the reasons why he lost the 2011 presidential election in Nigeria. From the foregoing, it can be inferred that religion could be a dangerous factor in an electoral process.

After conducting elections in Nigeria, during swearing in ceremonies, the oath of office is administered on whoever is elected or declared as such. The main thrust of the oath is the promise to act faithfully and in accordance with the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. In doing this, the help of God is solicited. Though religious leaders are not given specific roles to play when the oath is being administered, the mention of God's name, coupled with the holding of scripture or any religious object, is enough to establish the invocation of the divine.

It must be understood as a chance of occurrence that states like Sokoto, Zamfara, Kebbi and Kano, among others, have never produced Christian governors. In 2010, the issue of swearing in the then Deputy governor of Kaduna State, who is a Christian, as the governor of

the state generated crisis in the state when the then governor of the state Namadi Sambo was adopted by president Goodluck Jonathan as the vice President of Nigeria. The questions that come to mind at this juncture are; of what relevance is religion in the choice of candidates? Does religion determine the level of competence and performance of a leader? Unarguably, Nigerians do manipulate religion for their selfish ends in ensuring electoral victory. Ironically, this does not guarantee good governance. The recent happenings in the country, especially the Boko Haram attack, herdsmen crisis and recurring ethno-religious violence in Northern Nigeria, among others, suggest the strong influence of religion in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Secularism is not the absence of religions in the state. Rather, it is the absence of state sponsored religion so that everyone will be free to choose a religion of their choice. Regardless of the popular misconceptions that surround it, secularism is not a principle of anarchy even though there are many religious people who would give it this interpretation to condemn it. Secularism is a principle of tolerance. The impact of religion in a secular state seems to have played out negatively in Nigeria, as politics and religion are mixed in the attempt to gain political power. The Nigerian state has variously been characterized as a patrimonial, pre-bender and reinter state. These characteristics of the state have implication for state civil/society relations and consequently, inter-ethnic and religious relations. The study has revealed through its perceived findings that secularism has a negative impact on Nigeria's fourth and fifth republic. The study therefore concludes that if there must be development in Nigeria, the major religions in Nigeria especially Islam and Christianity must live in harmony and must accommodate African Traditional Religion. Their identity would be respected while mutually respecting each other. This is the only way the country can achieve a meaningful development in terms of providing security, and social amenities which include quality education, transportation infrastructure, youth employment, portable water, and medical care.

Recommendations

There should be respect for religious inclusiveness in Nigeria. For instance, Muslim and Christian holidays are observed. Nobody respects the wishes of traditionalists. Politicians want power to rotate between Christians and Muslims as if every Nigerian must be either a Christian or a Muslim. Pilgrimages are sponsored by the state. The billions of Naira that is often channeled for pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia, Israel and Italy suggest the opposite of secularism. But no one gives a thought about traditional religious adherents.

Section of secularism in the Nigerian constitution is expected to be righteously up held by Nigerian leaders. The essence of secularism in the Nigerian constitution is to promote unity, balances, and the superiority of the state over all other institutions in the state. The important

of this provision is that where as sovereignty resides in the state, the state in itself derives its sovereignty ultimately from the people who had collectively yielded sovereignty to the state via the constitution.

Rural to urban migration should be discourage because the attitude of the people would change when they move from rural to urban centres, because they are in the urban centre for business and equally, they can do anything to survive including drug trafficking, prostitution, robbery etc. All these are then slaughtered at the altar of respect for African values and respect for the African Tradition Religion.

All foreign religions in Nigeria should be monitor and regulated by the Nigeria government. It might sound bizarre but the fact is that foreign religions in Nigeria have contributed to the cause of secularism in Nigeria.

Efforts should be put in place at all cost by Nigeria government and concerned citizens to reduce poverty rate in Nigeria. Poverty is one of the causes of secularism in Nigeria. Nigerians because of poverty travelled to countries that they are better in overcoming the problem of poverty. Consequently, when Nigerians leave African soil in search of greener pastures, their contact with other cultures will enable them to come back with bad ideas in the culture they met and all these things are not in the interest of the African world and their traditional religious values.

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