

RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND ITS IMPACT ON GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA: A CONTEMPORARY ANALYSIS

SAMUEL C. IZUEGBU
DEPARTMENT OF RELIGION AND HUMAN RELATIONS
NNAMDI AZIKIWE UNIVERSITY, AWKA, NIGERIA
sc.izuegbu@unizik.edu.ng
+2348068913334
ORCID ID: 0009-0007-0637-1389

Abstract

From a functionalist perspective, society comprises various interdependent components, each contributing to the overall stability and well-being of the social system. Among these components, religion plays a significant role, particularly in a country like Nigeria, where religious diversity is a defining characteristic. Religious pluralism, in its ideal form, recognizes the inherent value of all religions and seeks to harness their positive elements for national growth, peaceful coexistence, and sustainable development. It fosters flexibility and tolerance by promoting the view that no single religion holds supremacy over others. However, in contemporary Nigeria, the potential benefits of religious pluralism have not been fully realized. Instead, the country experiences religious intolerance, conflict, and insecurity. Governance has, either consciously or unconsciously, become entangled with religious biases, thereby undermining national development efforts. This study, grounded in the theoretical framework of religious pluralism, argues that a more constructive understanding and application of religious pluralism—especially by those in leadership and governance—can foster unity and propel national development. The study relies primarily on secondary sources for data collection.

Keywords: Religion, pluralism, governance

Introduction

One of the defining strengths of any society lies in its diverse components, each contributing to the functioning of the whole. The interactions and interrelations among these components make society dynamic and, ultimately, liveable. When these elements collaborate effectively, they promote societal viability and progress. According to functionalist theory, each part of society performs specific roles that benefit the entire system. However, when any of these components fails to fulfil its function, societal problems emerge, hindering development and stability. Conversely, when all parts operate harmoniously, the result is a peaceful, progressive, and development-oriented society—one more likely to endure with fewer conflicts or agitations. Among the various elements of society, religion stands out as one of the most sensitive and influential.

Nigeria is one of the countries of the world where religion has visibly been witnessed in many activities of the countries. The stance of Mbiti (1969) that Africa is religiously notorious is a truism in Nigeria. Vou (2023) like other scholars holds that Nigeria is religiously pluralistic. Although, prior to the coming of Christianity and Islam to Nigeria, the people had their traditional religions which bound them together according to the cultures of various ethnic groups in the territories. The traditional religion intertwined with the peoples' cultures in such a way that there were no visibly problem affecting the pre-colonial administration of the territories negatively. Asadu (2015) observes that among the Africans, of which Nigeria is a part, religion and culture intertwined. The people's daily life and activities revolved around God starting from the time a child is born. To this Asadu holds, it was easy to internalize the religion of the people. The observation of Abbink (2014) is very apt here as he mentions that religious affiliation in among Africans determines their political behaviour and their voting pattern. It then follows that the idea that religion plays a very sensitive role in whatever Africans do remains a fact.

With the introduction of Christianity and Islam to Nigeria, the country today recognizes three dominant religions: African Traditional Religion, Christianity, and Islam. This does not, however, deny the existence of other religions in Nigeria, such as Judaism. Nonetheless, the three most prominent religions are African Traditional Religion, Christianity, and Islam—with the latter two gradually becoming more dominant over time. This historical shift has contributed to the current state of religious pluralism in Nigeria. While religious pluralism is not inherently negative, the way it manifests and impacts governance, national unity, and development has become a significant point of

concern. Asadu, Diara and Asogwa (2020) make observation that before independence of Nigeria in 1960, Nigerians were already divided along three religious lines. One could see Muslims dominated north and Christian dominated south while Traditional Religion was seen in every part.

The issue of religious pluralism and governance in Nigeria is particularly relevant, as religion often plays a significant role in the nation's political and administrative affairs. This raises important questions: Is religious pluralism a challenge in itself, or is it simply mismanaged in the Nigerian context? What does religious pluralism truly entail for a religiously and ethnically diverse country like Nigeria? What responsibilities do national leaders bear in navigating this complexity? These are the core questions addressed by this research. It is anticipated that the findings will offer guidance to policymakers on how to govern impartially, avoiding religious hegemony or favouritism. When governance is free from religious bias and sectarian interests, the positive potential of religious pluralism can be fully realized—fostering peace, national unity, progress, and sustainable development.

Conceptual Clarifications.

Religious pluralism

Religion is defined as a belief in a divine being, expressed through worship which in turn shapes one's relationship with his fellow man in the society. Pluralism implies the existence of diversity of views or stands. Religious pluralism is the existence of different religious views in a given environment. This understanding however does not convey the real understanding of religious pluralism. The Aspen Institute (2019) sees religious pluralism as “the state of being where every individual in a religiously diverse society has rights, freedoms, and safety to worship, or not, according to their conscience” (p. 1). This understanding of religious pluralism becomes apt for its recognition that religious pluralism is not a mere diversity but allowing every individual right to freedom of worship and tolerance. In this regard, no religion is held to be the sole and exclusive source of truth, and thus the acknowledgement that at least some truths and true values exist in other religions.

In this understanding, Objantoro (2018) sees religious pluralism as “existential acceptance of the other as the other, that is, without being able to understand or to co-opt him” (p. 2). This goes to show that in pluralism, no religion is superior over the other and any attempt at positioning any religion as superior over the other does not observe religious pluralism and hence elicits problems. In Asadu, Diara and Asogwa (2020) view, “religious pluralism could be correctly said to be synonymous with the acceptance of all other religions as enjoying equal existential, operational and methodological validity and genuineness as one's own religion” (p. 3). Religious pluralism therefore transcends mere diversity. It is about acceptance, tolerance of other religions; mutual co-existence and respect for other people's religion co-existing in a society; understanding that every religion has good as well as values in it for all to co-exist. In pluralism stance, no religion has the prerogative of the gateway to the Supreme Being and hence, no imposition of religion on others.

Governance

Governance has recently occupied a central stage among nations of the world. Fukuyama (2013) sees governance as a government's ability to make and enforce rules, and to deliver services, regardless of whether that government is democratic or not. In this case, governance implies the ability of leadership to make decisions and implement such decisions in a state or establishment. Uka, Kalu and Ugwu (2012) see governance as

An approach or perspective that focuses on state, societal institutions and relationship between them as well as on how rules are made in a society which are accepted as legitimate to enhance values that are sort by individuals and groups within the society. Governance ... identified with the founding values and constitutional policies that constitute the nature of governing institutions, guide their actions, and shape the complex relations between them and the society. (p. 82).

Governance in this way has to do with how a state law is made in relation to the expected value for the entire citizenry. Wikipedia (2013) defines governance as “the process of decision-making and the process by which decisions are implemented” (p.1). UNDP Policy Paper (cited in Okoli, 2012) defines governance as the “exercise of economic, political and administrative authority to manage a country's affairs at all levels. It comprises of mechanism, processes and institution through which citizens and groups articulate their legal right, meet their obligations and mediate their differences” (p.31). On his part, Kettl (2002) states that governance has to do with an outcome of interaction of government, the public service, citizens throughout the political process, policy development, program design and

service delivery. So, this research adopts governance to mean the process by which policies are made and implemented in a state based on the values of the state.

Religious Pluralism: A Fact or a Fiction in Nigeria

In the position of Harrison (2020),

Within the philosophy of religion, theories of religious pluralism are models that provide a philosophical account of religious diversity. They are not descriptive theories of religion, and the terms “religious pluralism” and “religious diversity” are not equivalent in the context of philosophical discussion. (p. 1).

From the understanding of religious pluralism in this work, it behoves that one considers how religions in Nigeria have been allowed to co-exist in principles and practice. From the foregoing, Nigeria is not a mono-religious state but a multi-religious state. The north has majority of Islamic faithful while the south has majority of Christian faithful. The issue that comes to mind is how the diversity in religion has been felt in Nigeria. According to Arogbonlo (2023), political parties as well as their candidates use social identification, emphasising aspects of social identity that they had in common, like area, ethnicity, or religion, in order to win over voters. This fact in Nigerian political space is a testament that religious pluralism is a fact in Nigeria. Kertyo and Ityonzughul (2024) by their analysis of the role of religion in 2023 Nigerian elections affirm the reality of religious pluralism in Nigeria. According to them, there is a simultaneous effect demonstrated by the ethno-religious hatred that predated and followed the elections. It is therefore a fact that religious pluralism exists in Nigeria and such has effects on the political issues and governance in Nigeria.

The Effects of Religious Pluralism in the Governance of Nigeria

One of the beauties of human society is diversity as earlier mentioned. Such diversity enables for appreciation and working together for the growth and development of the human society. Through interactions in a diverse society, knowledge is developed, skills are learnt as well as promotion of the common good for all. However, pluralism in terms of religion in Nigeria which ought to have been part of the beauties of the state has not been able to achieve the desired goals as in developed countries. It becomes apparent that religious pluralism in Nigeria has been mismanaged in such a way that religion has become a weapon in the hands of politicians against the common good of the Nigerian society. This has negative effects on the governance of Nigeria.

There exists manipulation of religion to achieving political gains which invariably affect governance in Nigeria. The end effect of such manipulation is counterproductive to effective governance. Kyom and Attah (2023) observe that

Religion has always been manipulated for political ends particularly in Nigeria starting from campaign, rally, and policy formulation and voting behaviour. Politicians seek advice and use religious leaders to attack and campaign against their opponents, whereas politics and religion are supposed to be independent institutions sometimes. The negative use of religion may lead to injustice and corruption against the masses. (p. 1).

The above observation carries inherent negative effects of religious pluralism in Nigeria on governance. When individuals who are elected into political offices for governance are elected through religious sentiments instead of objectivity, one is expected to experience a lopsided governance capable of prioritizing a particular religion above others. The observation that such could breed corruption and injustice is very apt. Corruption and injustice hampers governance in any human organization. The winner takes it all may be witnessed as those who profess a particular religion may be accorded positions to the detriment of others. This is a case in Nigeria. In this same vein, Gbinde and Asen (2023) unequivocally asserts that

Nigeria, ... known for its religious and ethnic diversity, grapples with the amalgamation of religious beliefs in the political domain. This integration is often marred by ethical dilemmas, including favouritism, discrimination, and the misuse of religious platforms for political gain. These ethical concerns have far-reaching consequences, impacting the democratic process and the overall governance structure of the nation. (p. 55).

The fact remains that pluralism which supposed to promote unity and strength in diversity has been smartly manipulated by the political class making religious pluralism a weapon. Such undermines democratic process in Nigeria and the country can enthrone mediocre as long as religious faith is concerned. Such a situation impacts negatively on the wheel of governance of the nation. The idea of having some individuals term ‘infidels’ who are not qualified to rule the ‘fidels’ is already a fundamental problem in the governance of Nigeria. The resultant effects include mediocrity, lack of accountability, political and economic instabilities.

There is equally politicisation of religion and regionalisation of politics in Nigeria. This is affecting governance in Nigeria. Gudu and Amase (2023) opine that such is a negative impact of weaponizing religion as such affects public office (governance). In their opinion

Politicisation can be said to be a procedure whereby the norm is overthrown and an ulterior agenda prioritized. Politicisation of religion which is one of the precursors of political polarization is increasingly taken over the Nigerian political space. Hence religious acrimony is evident in different parts of Nigeria. In recent times, religion has taken a central space in politics and public life. (p. 147).

The fact remains that governance in Nigeria is filled with religious biases. Appointments into political offices are being affected by religious sentiments. The religion of the person in position of authority affects the policies to undertake in the governance of Nigeria. It is becoming evident as people hailed the Muslim-Muslim ticket that ushered in Bola Ahmed Tinubu and Kashim Shettima into power in 2023 while others rejected the ticket. This was possible because it has become obvious that religious faith is a determinant in the governance of Nigeria. Where religion is well defined, separate from politics and governance, people are not bothered about the religious faith of the individuals. Instead, credibility of such individuals serves as a defining factor.

Scholars have equally seen a situation where using religion as part of politics can affect the integrity of democratic processes and governance. Kukah (1993), Awoniyi and Umejiaku (2023) see a lacuna in democratic principles and governance when religion is not separated from politics. Alluding to the 2023 General Elections in Nigeria, the authors question the integrity of the democratic process. The implication is that if the process is not properly followed, such can adversely affect the governance process. As Awoniyi and Umejiaku opine “...religion remains a potent force in Nigerian society, its intersection with politics poses significant challenges to democratic principles and social cohesion” (p. 54). The major challenge is on the governance process. The idea that the citizens of Nigeria have not been able to make consensus and constructive criticisms of the leaders is because of religion. Any attempt at criticizing any policy is viewed from the lens of religious faith. The citizens are sharply divided alongside religion making it almost impossible for the citizen to condemn what is condemnable in one voice. In such a case, the citizens hardly demand for the kind of governance they want. To that end, governance in Nigeria still has much to be desired.

The fact remains that wittingly or unwittingly, religion is highly affecting governance in Nigeria negatively. With the enthronement of political leaders from religious sentiments, the leaders are conscious of such process that led them into power. Most of the policies are in line with the dictates of the religion that promoted the ascendancy of the leaders. This is why in some cases, there is feeling of disenchantment from other religious faiths that certain ‘juicy’ or critical positions or appointments are reserved for a particular religious faith. Such understanding and practice undermine proper governance. When policies are made to favour a particular religious faith, there is a fundamental problem in the governance structure. The inability of Nigeria government to deal decisively with corrupt public officials is not totally alienated from religious inclinations. To this end, transparency becomes a scarce commodity in Nigeria’s governance and corruption becomes the other of the day. It is important to note that when the citizens are hoodwinked from serving as watchdogs to the leaders, it is possible that everything may go wrong. The idea of weaponizing religious pluralism in Nigeria has made it possible that the citizens are already divided along line their belief. On that note, to get the citizens speak with one voice when things go wrong in the governance in Nigeria is almost a mirage. This is worrisome and may account for many governance setbacks that the country is witnessing.

Religious Pluralism: A Strength Not a Weapon of Negative Outcomes

It is important to note here that religion itself is not evil. Every religion has fundamental values that promote peaceful co-existence. The indigenous African Traditional Religion which is embedded in African culture promotes culture of togetherness, justice, equity, fairness and above all, the common good. In the same way, Christianity and Islam have sound ethics that promote peaceful co-existence, transparency, justice, equity and in general, the common good. The problem of religion is the selfishness of the adherents. The adherents out of selfish will, weaponizes religion and then makes religion to look evil. However, the evil of religion is man who is the subject of religion.

Being that different religious faiths promote ideals such as fairness, justice, transparency and the likes, it is a simple logic that religion ought to be strength to governance and not a problem as it is in Nigeria. Man accepts religious faith. This acceptance is expected to transform man who by his actions exhibits those ideals that are inherent in the religious faith. The application of religious ideals to public life including governance would have brought about an ideal state

where man lives in peace, justice, equity, and with a general sense of belonging. The underlining fact here is that manipulation of religion for selfish gain is an evil by man who professes a particular faith that abhors evil.

Where the adherents have internalised the principles of the religious faith properly and bring them into a country's affairs, good governance is assured. Understanding that different religious faiths in a country have ethics that promote governance is in itself a big strength in governance of a state. Religion, though is being bastardised by certain individuals for their selfish gain, is more of a way to achieving sound and effective governance judging from the principles it promotes. Having different religious faith in a country should be an avenue to showcase the good in each religion and not a way of intimidation or dealing with other religious faiths. Religious diversity should not be the same as religious discrimination. Diversity only calls for harmony and such harmony when achieved, brings in strength that would promote effective governance. If a Christian comes into political field with the ideals that are in Christianity, and a Muslim comes with the ideals in Islam, all for the good of all, the resultant effect is proper governance which would benefit all. In that one sees strength and not the other way round. Religious pluralism is to strengthen governance and promote peaceful co-existence not the other way round.

Conclusion

Man is the subject of religion. Religion itself is not in any way evil but it is the selfish of man that brings about the evil perpetuated in the name of religion. Nigerian is a country with diverse religious faith and this has affects governance in Nigeria even before independence. There have been various manipulations of religion especially during political processes. This has led to enthronement of individuals based on religious faith instead of capability and credibility. The result is ineffective governance due to certain policies. It is therefore a threat to governance in Nigeria. Religious pluralism ought to be strength towards governance in Nigeria where people through their religious faiths practice the ethics of such religion especially those that hint on governance. Nigeria as a nation can be properly governed if the adherents of various religious faiths apply the ideals in political processes and governance. Weaponizing religion to achieve political ends is counterproductive and evil. It is therefore necessary to understand that religious pluralism should be a beauty of a nation and not a curse. Political leaders should therefore compete in practising the proper ideals inherent in their religion and not using religion to hoodwink the citizens. By seeing religious pluralism as strength, governance in Nigeria may begin to experience positive outcome.

References

- Abbink, J. (2014). Religion and Politics in Africa: The Future of the "The Secular" African. *Spectrum*, 49, 3.
- Arogbonlo, I (2023). *Five facts to know about BVAS before Saturday election*. In the Nigerian Tribune. March 17, 2023.
- Asadu, G. C. (2015). *Ibagwa-Aka Ozuzikoro in church history: Origen, growth and impact 1914- 2014*. Nsukka: Great Ap Express.
- Asadu, G. C., Diara, B. C. & Asogwa, N (2020). Religious pluralism and its implications for church development. *HTS Theological Studies* 76 (3). <https://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i3.5955>
- Awoniyi, S. & Umejiaku, U. E. (2023). Religion and politics: A socio-ethical evaluation of religious interference on the 2023 general elections. *Journal of Nigerian Association for the Study of Religions*, 33, 2, 45-57.
- Fukuyama, F. (2013). *What is governance?* Retrieved on 2nd December, 2013 from www.governancejournal.net/2013/03/04
- Gbinde, S. A. & Asen, I. S. (2023). Ethical issues and religious beliefs in political space in Nigeria. *Journal of Nigerian Association for the Study of Religions*, 33, 1, 55-72.
- Gudu, P. & Amase, E. E. (2023). An appraisal of the impact of ethical issues and religious beliefs on the Nigerian political space. *Journal of Nigerian Association for the Study of Religions*, 33, 1, 141-153.
- Harrison, V. S. (2020). *Religious pluralism*. Retrieved, 15th July, 2021. <https://oxfordbibliographies.com>
- Kettle, D. F. (2002). *The transformation governance*. John Hopkins University Press.
- Kukah, M. H. (1993). *Religion, politics and power in northern Nigeria*. Ibadan: Spectrum.
- Kyom, S. & Attah, J. A. (2023). The manipulation of religion by political gladiators in Nigeria. *Journal of Nigerian Association for the Study of Religions*, 33, 1, 1-19

- Kertyo, P. M & Ityonzughul. T. T. (2024). Religion and politics in Nigeria: Analysis of the 2023 presidential election. *Nigerian Journal of African Studies*, 6, 2, 98-103.
- Mbiti, J. S. (1969). *African religions & philosophy*. Oxford: Heinemann
- Objantoro, E. (2018), Religious pluralism and Christian responses, *Evangelikal: Jurnal Teologi Injili dan Pembinaan Warga Jemaat* 2(1), 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.4644/ejti.v2i1.94>
- Okoli, A. B. (2012). Governance and challenges of development in Nigeria: Religious perspective. *Journal Religion & Human Relations*, 1,4, 30-42.
- The Aspen Institute (2019). *Religious pluralism 101*. Retrieved, 13th July, 2021 from <https://www.aspeninstitute.org>
- Ukah, F. O., Kalu, O. O. & Ugwu, J. O. (2012). Good governance, a panacea for peace and stability in Nigeria nation. *Proceedings of International conference on sustainable development*, 9,7,82-88.
- Vou, V. A. (2023). Influence and implications of religion on the Nigerian political system. *Journal of Nigerian Association for the Study of Religions*, 33, 1, 284-302.
- Wikipedia (2013). *Governance*. Retrieved on August 8, 2023 from www.wikipedia.com