

**THE INFLUENCE OF RELIGION ON POLICY AND DECISION MAKING PROCESS  
IN THE CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA SOCIETY**

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**Abstract**

*Nigeria is one of the secular states in the world, as such decisions and policies made in her should be void of religious influences and undertones. In recent time, there has been myriad of questions and queries on whether Nigeria still operates a secular system or has there been a switch into theocratic state. This is owing to the fact that supposed distinctions between the two practices have been intertwined, hence erasing the witnessed demarcation between them. It will not be out of place to assert that most of the policies and decisions in the present day Nigeria have always been influenced by either the Christian or Islamic religions which are seen as the major faiths in the present day religious landscape. This observation leaves scholars with many questions begging for answer, of which this work is going to address. This study will be approached sociologically and will follow the theoretical framework of crossing and dwelling. The paper finds that religions has oftentimes influenced the decision making process of the nation which has its attendant implications on the society. The paper therefore concludes that policies and decision making in Nigeria should not be devoid of religion and religious backing and must always take into cognizance the interest of other religious traditions. The paper therefore recommends that for the contemporary society to move forward and reach its expected goal there should be a clear distinction between the secular and the sacred and matter of secular should be handled without giving room for any religious influence of any such.*

Keywords: Influence, Religion, Policy, Decision Making Process, Contemporary Nigeria Society

**Introduction**

In Nigeria, religion is deeply connected to everyday life and influences both how people think and how leaders make decisions. Nigeria's population is diverse, with major groups following Christianity, Islam, and Traditional African religions. In a society where religion plays such a big role, it's natural that Religions ideas influence everything from everyday conversations to big decisions about laws and policies. While this can be a good thing, adding moral values to leadership, it can also create challenges when policies begin to favor one religion over others or when religious beliefs limit progress on important social issues. Religious leaders have a lot of influence and are often respected by the public. This means that their views can impact government policies on important issues like education, healthcare, security, and the economy. The main challenge is finding a balance between using religious values for good and ensuring that government decisions are fair to everyone. A significant problem arises when religious views become a barrier to fair governance. Since many Nigerians deeply trust their religious leaders, these leaders' opinions can sway public policies in ways that may not always benefit everyone equally. For instance, religious beliefs about family planning, healthcare, and education can affect what policies get passed. In cases where religious views conflict with issues like women's rights, reproductive health, or even educational content, these policies may end up benefiting only certain groups. When one religion's perspective becomes dominant in policy-making, it can make other groups feel excluded or marginalized, potentially fueling social divides and even conflicts. This influence can also deepen Nigeria's regional and ethnic differences. For example, northern Nigeria is predominantly Muslim, while the south is largely Christian. This geographical divide often means that religious issues can spill over into ethnic and political conflicts, especially if government policies appear to support one region's values over another's. When policy

decisions on things like land use, law enforcement, or public spending favor one group's beliefs, it can create resentment and delay progress, as leaders struggle to find common ground that everyone can agree on. A practical way to address this issue is by promoting discussions and understanding between different religious groups. By encouraging dialogue, leaders from various religions can work together to support policies that benefit everyone, not just their followers. This approach helps build mutual respect, allowing for a more inclusive perspective when shaping laws and policies. In this way, religion can be a positive force for unity rather than division, contributing to policies that support the overall well-being of Nigerians rather than just a select group.

Sometimes, religious beliefs can lead to policies that seem to favor one group over another, causing division and feelings of unfairness. For example, beliefs about family planning or gender roles can affect policies, even if these policies don't serve the needs of all Nigerians equally. This can lead to tension and even delay important decisions, especially when certain policies align more closely with the interests of specific religious groups. One way to address this issue is by encouraging dialogue and cooperation between different religious communities to build a shared understanding of what's best for the nation as a whole. This could help religious groups play a positive role in shaping policies that are fair and beneficial for everyone, regardless of their beliefs. There is need for Nigeria to strengthen laws that keep government decisions neutral, without favoring any one religion, to create a fairer system for all. Public education on religious tolerance and the importance of separating religion from government matters could also make a difference. By educating people, Nigeria can reduce religious conflicts and encourage support for policies that promote unity and progress. Allowing religious leaders to focus on positive contributions to society, without pushing specific beliefs in government decisions, can help Nigeria harness the benefits of religion without letting it divide the nation. This approach is crucial for bringing Nigerians together, reducing conflicts, and making sure government policies address the needs of everyone fairly.

### **Religion and Policy/Decision Making**

Religion significantly influences the moral foundation of policy and decision-making by providing ethical guidelines that shape individual and societal perspectives. Religious teachings often emphasize values such as compassion, honesty, and justice, which are reflected in policies addressing social issues like marriage, family, and education. According to Ojo (2020), religious values contribute to establishing an ethical base for policies, as leaders often seek to incorporate these principles into governance to create a morally driven framework. In many cases, this moral foundation is especially evident when policies aim to address welfare and social equity concerns, where religious beliefs may advocate for the protection of vulnerable groups. In societies with a strong religious identity, religion also serves as an integral part of cultural identity. This is evident in Nigeria, where Christianity, Islam, and traditional beliefs are deeply woven into the cultural fabric. The alignment of policy with dominant religious views promotes broader acceptance and compliance, as policies that resonate with cultural and religious values are more likely to be respected by the public (Adeyemo, 2019). Leaders often craft policies that reflect shared cultural-religious norms, recognizing that such alignment fosters trust among the populace and supports cultural cohesion. Political leaders often derive legitimacy by aligning their policies with religious beliefs that resonate with their constituencies. This alignment can foster a sense of shared values, as religious endorsements lend credibility to policies and strengthen public trust in leadership. According to Ibrahim (2021), leaders in Nigeria frequently seek support from religious institutions, whose authority bolsters public approval and helps solidify the leaders' standing in the eyes of the public. As a result, aligning policies with religious values is a strategic way for political figures to reinforce their legitimacy, especially in communities where religion is highly valued.

Religion also serves as a tool for social control and stability by promoting norms that help maintain social order. By embedding religious principles in policy, governments can cultivate behaviors and attitudes deemed morally appropriate, thus fostering societal stability. Anjum (2020) suggests that in societies where religious and civil expectations overlap, policies based on religious ethics can guide public behavior and encourage compliance with laws. This alignment with religious norms can help foster a sense of community duty, where following the law becomes both a religious and civic obligation. However, religious influence in policy can lead to conflicts and biases, particularly when policies favor the beliefs of one group over another. In Nigeria, where multiple religious groups coexist, prioritizing one group's beliefs in policy-making can lead to exclusion and division. Nwankwo (2018) points out that religious bias in policy often alienates minority groups, creating a sense of inequality and undermining social unity. This bias is especially problematic in multi-religious societies, where governments are tasked with balancing diverse beliefs while crafting policies that serve all citizens fairly. Religious beliefs also shape policies around human

rights and ethical issues, impacting areas such as gender equality, reproductive rights, and freedom of expression. Religious perspectives can either support or oppose progressive policies, depending on how these policies align with specific doctrines. In Nigeria, for example, religious opposition to certain reproductive health policies has at times limited the scope of healthcare access for women (Olagunju, 2019).

### **Decision Making Process**

Decision-making process refers to a structured approach by which individuals, groups, or organizations choose a course of action from multiple alternatives to address a specific issue or achieve a particular goal. This process involves a series of logical steps, each aiming to clarify options, predict outcomes, and select the most effective solution. It is essential in various fields, including business, policy-making, and personal life, as it provides a roadmap for reaching informed and purposeful choices (Robinson, 2017). The decision-making process typically begins with problem identification, where the need for a decision is recognized and the scope of the issue is understood. This step is foundational, as an accurate understanding of the problem shapes how the entire decision-making process unfolds. Following this, decision-makers gather information, seeking relevant data and perspectives to fully understand the factors at play. This step is essential for ensuring that decisions are based on comprehensive knowledge rather than assumptions, reducing the likelihood of oversights (Simon, 1977). After collecting information, decision-makers identify and evaluate possible solutions, generating a range of options. This involves considering various approaches to solving the problem and examining the advantages and disadvantages of each. The goal is to assess which alternative best aligns with the objectives and values of the decision-making entity. This stage is often accompanied by a cost-benefit analysis, where potential risks, rewards, and consequences are weighed to gauge the effectiveness and feasibility of each option (Harrison, 2018).

Making the decision is the next step, where the preferred solution is chosen based on the assessment of alternatives. In organizational or group settings, this choice may be reached through consensus or voting, reflecting a balance of opinions or priorities. Once a decision is made, it moves to the implementation phase, where the chosen action is put into practice. This step involves coordinating resources, assigning responsibilities, and setting timelines to ensure that the decision is effectively carried out (Tversky and Kahneman, 1981). Finally, an evaluation phase assesses the decision's success, allowing for reflection on its outcomes and identifying areas for improvement. This feedback loop is crucial for refining future decisions, as it provides insights into what worked well and what could be done differently. The decision-making process, therefore, not only leads to immediate solutions but also contributes to better decision-making skills and more informed strategies over time (Mintzberg, 1994). In essence, the concept of the decision-making process is about making deliberate and logical choices that are informed by analysis and consideration of all available options. This structured approach helps reduce uncertainty, clarify objectives, and ensure that actions align with desired outcomes, making it a vital tool in effective leadership and organizational management.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Max Weber, a German sociologist, propounded the Theory of Social Action in the early 20th century. His ideas on social action were primarily developed in his work *Economy and Society* (originally published in 1922, but it was translated into English in 1968). This theory became a foundational concept in Weber's broader sociological framework, which focused on understanding how individuals' actions are motivated by various social, cultural, and economic factors, including religious values. The concepts of "Value Rationality" and "Instrumental Rationality" were part of his attempt to categorize and analyze the motivations behind human behavior and decision-making. Max Weber's Theory of Social Action is relevant to understanding how religious values influence decision-making in governance and policy-making especially in Nigeria. Weber's theory distinguishes between different forms of social action that guide individuals' behaviors. Value rationality refers to actions that are motivated by a commitment to particular values or ethical beliefs, regardless of the outcomes. This is especially pertinent when analyzing how religious beliefs may shape political or policy decisions, as political leaders or citizens may make decisions based on religious doctrines, ethical principles, or religious duty rather than purely pragmatic, result-oriented factors. In the case of Nigeria, the intertwining of politics and religion often leads to policies shaped by religious ideologies, especially in the context of Islamic, Christian, or indigenous beliefs that are deeply embedded in the societal fabric.

On the other hand, "Instrumental rationality" focuses on decisions made based on efficiency, practical outcomes, and achieving specific goals. In the Nigerian context, this could be applied to decisions where religious influence may be seen in the formulation of policies that aim to achieve a certain social order or economic benefit, yet still influenced

by underlying religious motivations. Weber's framework helps to explore how Nigerian policymakers may combine both value-oriented religious motivations and pragmatic concerns when crafting policies that affect society. This dual influence can be especially visible in areas such as education (e.g., the introduction of Islamic studies or Christian Religious Knowledge into the school curriculum), healthcare (e.g., policies surrounding family planning and reproductive rights), or social justice (e.g., policies promoting religious tolerance or addressing religious violence). Weber's framework also states the importance of understanding the social context in which these decisions are made. In Nigeria, where religion is a key element in social and political identity, Weber's theory offers insight into how religious values are interwoven with political actions and policies.

### **Religion and the Policy and Decision Making Process in Nigeria**

Religion plays a role in influencing policy and decision-making processes in contemporary Nigerian society. For instance, religion is deeply embedded in cultural and social identities, both Islam and Christianity, along with indigenous belief systems, it also contributes to the shaping of the politics. Some of the ways religious ideologies often guide policymakers in their decisions, particularly in areas such as education, lawmaking, healthcare, and social justice are as follows:

- i. One of the key ways religion influences policy-making is through the integration of religious values into political decisions. In Nigeria, policies that reflect religious beliefs can be seen in the way religious practices are accommodated in the public sphere. For example, policies such as the inclusion of religious education (Christian Religious Knowledge and Islamic Studies) in school curricula reflect the influence of religious values on public education (Olowu, 2015). These policies are driven by the desire to ensure that young people are educated in ways that align with the religious values of the nation's predominant faiths, which in turn shapes national identity and social cohesion.
- ii. Moreover, religion in Nigeria often shapes the political agenda, particularly in relation to social issues. For instance, issues such as family planning and reproductive rights are influenced by religious beliefs. In certain parts of the country, especially in the northern states, Islamic teachings often guide decisions on family planning policies, influencing governmental stances on issues like contraception and maternal health services (Gureje, 2018). This is due to the belief systems embedded in Islamic doctrine, which may oppose certain reproductive policies. On the other hand, in more Christian-dominated areas, policies on issues like same-sex marriage and abortion may also reflect religious convictions, as Christian teachings generally oppose such practices.
- iii. Religious leaders in Nigeria, often seen as influential figures, have a significant role in guiding political discourse. Their sermons, teachings, and public pronouncements can influence public opinion and, in turn, influence the policies that political leaders propose. For example, religious leaders have been known to mobilize voters or protest certain government decisions based on perceived contradictions with religious values. This interplay between religion and politics can be seen in the way electoral campaigns and political ideologies are sometimes shaped by religious perspectives (Kuru, 2015).
- iv. Religion also plays a role in resolving conflict and promoting social justice through religious organizations that engage in advocacy and humanitarian work. These organizations often serve as intermediaries in peace building processes, influencing government decisions regarding security, reconciliation, and social welfare. For example, Christian and Muslim organizations in Nigeria have worked together to advocate for religious tolerance and the protection of minority groups, contributing to national debates on social justice and human rights (Falola and Genova, 2012).
- v. However, the influence of religion on policy-making is not without challenges. The country's religious diversity sometimes leads to tensions, especially when policies appear to favor one religion over another. For example, the introduction of Sharia law in some northern states has raised debates on the balance of religious freedom and political governance, leading to tensions between religious and secular laws (Ibrahim, 2013). Such situations underscore the complexities of balancing religious influence with the principles of secular governance in a multi-religious society like Nigeria.

### **Response to the Influence of Religion on Policy and Decision Making Process in Nigeria**

In order to address the irregularities between religion and policy-making in contemporary Nigerian society, the following solutions can be considered:

- i. Promoting Interfaith Dialogue: One way to mitigate religious conflicts in policy-making is through the promotion of interfaith dialogue. By encouraging discussions between leaders of different religious groups, there can be a better understanding of the diverse perspectives that influence policy decisions. Religious leaders should be engaged in meaningful dialogue to foster a more inclusive approach to policy formulation that takes into account the needs and

values of all religious communities. This could help to reduce tensions and promote peace in a multi-religious society like Nigeria.

ii. Establishing Clear Guidelines on Religious Policy: To balance the influence of religion in policy-making, clear and transparent guidelines should be established regarding the role of religion in the governance process. While respecting the religious beliefs of the population, these guidelines should help policymakers focus on secular and pragmatic considerations when making decisions that affect all citizens, regardless of their religious affiliation. This would ensure that policies are inclusive, equitable, and sensitive to religious diversity while safeguarding the principles of democracy and secularism.

iii. Secularizing Educational Policies: One of the ways religion influences policy in Nigeria is through the inclusion of religious education in the school curriculum. To avoid undue influence, it is important to secularize educational policies. A balanced curriculum should focus on citizenship education, human rights, and ethics, which can be taught from a neutral perspective, independent of religious doctrines. While religious studies may still be offered as electives, ensuring that public education remains secular would allow students to grow up in an environment that promotes critical thinking, religious tolerance, and respect for diversity.

iv. Inclusive Representation in Governance: Ensuring that all religious groups are adequately represented in governance and decision-making bodies is a way to mitigate the influence of any single religious ideology on policy-making. By promoting inclusivity and diversity in political offices and ensuring that all major religious groups have a voice in legislative processes, Nigerian politics can become more representative of its diverse population. This would foster an atmosphere of equity and fairness in policy decisions that affect society as a whole.

v. Strengthening the Rule of Law and Secular Institutions: Strengthening secular institutions such as the judiciary and legislative bodies can help to prevent religious bias in policymaking. The judiciary must be independent and uphold the constitution, ensuring that policies are in line with national laws and human rights standards, which include religious freedom. The rule of law must prevail, with laws that safeguard the rights of individuals, irrespective of their religious affiliation, while preventing religious dogma from undermining legal frameworks.

vi. Encouraging Research and Data-Driven Policy Making: Policymakers should rely more on empirical research and data-driven approaches when formulating policies. Research on the social, economic, and cultural impacts of various policies can help provide a clearer picture of what works best for the majority of the population, beyond religious affiliations. This evidence-based approach can guide the development of policies that are pragmatic, effective, and grounded in real-world outcomes rather than being swayed by religious sentiment.

vii. Enhancing Religious Literacy among Policymakers: Policymakers in Nigeria should undergo regular training to enhance their understanding of the diverse religious dynamics within the country. This would involve understanding the basic tenets of various religions, their socio-political implications, and the potential impact of religious sentiments on policy decisions. Religious literacy would help leaders make more informed, respectful decisions and avoid policies that alienate certain religious groups.

viii. Fostering National Identity over Religious Divides: Emphasizing a collective national identity that transcends religious divisions can help to unite Nigerians around shared values of peace, security, and prosperity. Policies that focus on national development, economic growth, and social welfare should prioritize the welfare of all citizens, irrespective of their religious backgrounds. By fostering a sense of national pride and unity, policymakers can reduce the influence of religious extremism in political decision-making.

## Conclusion

Religion influences the policy and decision-making processes in contemporary Nigerian society, as it shows the country's religious and cultural diversity. Religion also plays a critical role in shaping various aspects of governance, from educational policies and social welfare to healthcare and lawmaking. Religious beliefs often serve as guiding principles for policymakers, with decisions influenced by religious doctrines that may resonate with a large portion of the population. In many instances, policies, such as those promoting religious education or addressing issues like family planning, are deeply intertwined with religious ideologies. This influence has both positive and negative implications for governance, highlighting the challenges of balancing religious convictions with the need for inclusive, secular policies that serve all citizens. While religion can foster social cohesion and provide moral guidance in policy decisions, its influence can also lead to divisiveness when policies appear to favor one religious group over another. For example, the integration of Sharia law in some northern states and the role of religious leaders in influencing electoral outcomes illustrate the complex ways in which religion shapes political discourse and public policy in Nigeria. These religious influences sometimes result in policies that may alienate certain religious or ethnic groups, causing tensions in an already diverse society.

To address these challenges, several solutions must be considered. Promoting interfaith dialogue can foster mutual understanding between different religious groups and ensure that policies reflect the diversity of Nigerian society. Establishing clear guidelines on the role of religion in public policy is crucial to ensure that decisions are made with consideration for all citizens, regardless of their religious affiliation. Secularizing educational policies is also vital in reducing religious biases in public schooling, ensuring that students are taught in a manner that respects diversity and promotes critical thinking. Furthermore, promoting inclusive representation in governance, strengthening secular institutions, and encouraging evidence-based policymaking will help reduce religious influence in decision-making. Policymakers must be equipped with religious literacy and an understanding of the broader social, economic, and political consequences of their decisions. Finally, fostering a national identity that transcends religious divides will enable Nigeria to adopt policies focused on the collective good of all its citizens. In essence, while religion will continue to be an influential factor in Nigerian politics, ensuring that it is balanced with secular principles and inclusivity will be essential for a more cohesive, peaceful, and progressive society. By carefully navigating this intersection, Nigeria can craft policies that promote unity, social justice, and sustainable development for its entire people.

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