RECONCILING DIVINE KINGSHIP WITH SECULAR POLITY IN DEUTERONOMY 17:14-20 AND CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL QUESTIONS

Luke Emehiele IJEZIE*[1]

Abstract

The biblical portrait of Israel's political life is mostly coloured by the conflict between the religious establishment and the secular leadership. The text of Deut 17:14-20, regarded as the law of the king, attempts to establish a template for the relationship. The problem is that Israel by its nature is ruled by YHWH as a form of theocratic state, but historical exigencies constrained Israel to adopt the secular system of governance in the form of monarchy. The relationship between the two systems is riddled with many irreconcilable problems, which combine to explain many complex issues in the biblical account of Israel's political history. This paper examines the logic of the text of Deut 17:14-20 and its function within the larger context of the political system in Israel. The study also uses the biblical perspective as a springboard for exposition of the complex issues in the relationship between religious bodies and secular political systems in both the wider world and the Nigerian context. The analytical approach is both synchronic and diachronic as both explain the meaning of the actual text and its motivations.

Keywords: Kingship, People, Politics, Power, Priesthood, Prophecy

1. Introduction

The biblical portrait of governance in the Israelite context is very complex. It is to be supposed that the political life which other nations practised in the ancient period was not alien to the Israelite nation or the city states that lived under the common Israelite identity. The biblical literature, however, presents Israel as a religious nation that is expected to live at variance with the secular political ordinance common among other nations. Israel was to live as God's own state,

---

[1]*PhD, Professor of Old Testament Theology, Catholic Institute of West Africa (CIWA), Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria

and all political institutions have to be religiously oriented. This religious ideological portrait was hardly fully realized on the historical level. This explains the various accounts of negative evaluation of political actors in the text, particularly within the texts of Samuel and Kings. The text of Deut 17:14-20 presents from the religious ideological perspective how the monarchic state is to function within a religious, theocratic system.[2] This involves a complex organization of the system of governance in such a way that the political system is guided by religious laws. This system is found in some African traditional forms of governance, some forms of which still exist side by side with the modern secular systems. One finds a typical scenario in the Islamic system of governance which gives premium to the *Sharia* law in political governance.[3] So, the Israelite system is not completely alien. In fact, it reflects the mode of governance in many ancient traditional political settings.

The present paper examines critically the stipulations of the Deuteronomic law of the king in Deut 17:14-20 in the light of the biblical presentation of Israel's secular political life and its relations with contemporary political processes and conflicts. The approach is both analytical and descriptive and the text is analysed employing the results of the historical critical method of biblical exegesis. The areas of emphasis in the analysis are: the political issues that motivated the text of Deut 17:14-20; the viewpoint of 17:14-20; the implications for

---

[2] See the analysis of this text in Luke E. Ijezie, *The Interpretation of the Hebrew Word 'am (People) in Samuel-Kings* (European University Studies 23; Bern: Peter Lang, 2007) 271-276.

[3] See recent discussion in Ikenga K. E. Oraegbunam, 'Sharia Criminal Law, Islam and Democracy in Nigeria Today', *OGIRISI*: A New Journal of African Studies, Vol. 8 (2011) 181-209: doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/og.v8i1.10; See also Brandon Kendhammer, 'The Sharia Controversy in Northern Nigeria and the Politics of Islamic Law in New and Uncertain Democracies', *Comparative Politics*, Ph.D. Programs in Political Science, City University of New York, Vol. 45, No. 3 (April 2013) 291-231, in https://www.jstor.org/stable/43664322 – Accessed: 24 Feb, 2024. See also Cornelius O. Omonokhua, *Dialogue in Context: A Nigerian Experience* (Benin City: Plush Prints and Paperworks ²2023).

politics in Israel; and the contemporary significance of the text, with particular reference to the issues of religion and politics in Nigeria

2. Literary Context of Deut 17:14-20 and Motivation for the Text

The text of Deut 17:14-20 belongs to the corpus of texts in Deuteronomy 12-26, called the Deuteronomic Code. The Deuteronomic Code (DC) is one the three major legal corpora in the Pentateuch, and the other two are the Covenant Code (Exod 20:22-23:33) and the Holiness Code (Leviticus 17-26). Considering the nature of their contents, most studies concur on the point that the Covenant Code constitutes the oldest corpus, followed by the Deuteronomic Code, while the Holiness Code is the latest corpus.[4] The Deuteronomic Code is believed to have been written by the reform group called the Deuteronomists who had taken up the task of reforming and updating the laws undergirding Israel's religion and life. The texts of the code form the core of the book of Deuteronomy, and there have been much scholarly debates on the date of their composition. Most scholars trace their origin to the reforms of Josiah in the later days of the kingdom of Judah (see 2 Kings 22-23).[5] The Deuteronomic code is, however, very complex, and all its contents could not have been composed at the same time. While all of them are attributed to the reforming agenda of the Deuteronomists, some were later additions to the corpus.

The immediate literary setting of Deut 17:14-20 is the division of offices in Deut 16:18–18:22. G. N. Knoppers examines the nature of the institutions mentioned in Deut 16:18–18:22, which comprise of the local courts (Deut 16:18; 17:2-7), the central court (17:8-13), the

---

[4] See O. Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament. An Introduction* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965) 143-145, 212-239; F. Crüsemann, 'Das Bundesbuch – historischer Ort und institutioneller Hintergrund', *Congress Volume. Jerusalem 1986* (VTS 40; Leiden: Brill, 1988) 28-35; cf. L. Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Das Bundesbuch [Ex 20, 22–23,33]. Studien zu seiner Entstehung und Theologie* (BZAW 188; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1990) 271-417.

[5] See discussion in A. D. H. Mayes, *Deuteronomy* (NCB; London: Oliphants, 1979); E. Nielsen, *Deuteronomium* (HAT 1/6; Tübingen: Mohr, 1995); A. F. Campbell – M. A. O'Brien, *Unfolding the Deuteronomistic History. Origins, Upgrades, Present Text* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 39-41.

kingship (17:14-20), the Levitical priesthood (18:1-8) and the prophetic office (18:15-22), and sees the monarchy as the only institution that does not have any influence on the workings of other institutions.[6] For instance, the central courts require the existence of the judges and Levitical priests whose role is also strategic in the conduct of war. But the judiciary, the priesthood, the prophetic office and the military institution do not depend on the king, implying that Israel can as well do without the monarchy.[7] As Knoppers points out, while the other offices are shown to be essential to Israel's constitution, the monarchy is presented as optional and practically irrelevant to the normal processes of the national polity.[8] In other words, Israel can function politically without the monarchic system. The writers of Deut 17:14-20 make it as a rule that the king must obey the teachings of the Torah whose official instructors are the religious leaders. Thus, the king is to be under the tutelage of the religious leaders. These religious leaders are mainly the priests and the prophets. One sees here a clear demotion of the king and the monarchic system in the Israelite context.

3. Historical and Ideological Setting of Deut 17:14-20

The apparent demotion of the king in the law of the king in Deut 17:14-20 may be explained on the ground that the text was written when leadership was no longer in the hands of kings. But one cannot avoid the question: If the monarchy was no longer there, why make a law for it at all? A current of opinion traces the origin of the law to the later monarchy, linking it specifically to the northern prophetic circles who presented it as part of the materials for the reforms of Josiah (2Kings 22-23).[9] But some others point to a post-monarchic date on the ground

---

[6] G. N. Knoppers, 'Rethinking the Relationship between Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History: The Case of Kings', *CBQ* 63 (2001) 397-399)

[7] Knoppers, 'Rethinking,' 397-399. See also B. Halpern, *The Constitution of the Monarchy in Israel* (HSM 25; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981) 234-235.

[8] Knoppers, 'Rethinking,' 397-399.

[9] See E. W. Nicholson, *Deuteronomy and Tradition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967) 69, 80-82.

that the text was, probably, written within the climate of further hopes for the reintroduction of the monarchy.[10]

The internal argument of Deut 17:14-20 shows that it was the product of an ideological conflict. It was written as a response to a situation of conflict between the secular monarchic system and the religious establishment. The monarch had assumed many powers and prerogatives and was seen as a danger to the religious tradition as defined by the religious experts of the time. Whether the text was monarchic or post-monarchic in origin, this ideological setting remains valid.

4. Structure of the Text
The text of Deut 17:14-20 begins in v. 14 with the statement of the divine permission for the institution of the monarchy in Israel. This is followed in v. 15 by the instruction on how to choose the king. The longest section is on the code of conduct for the king in vv. 16-20a. The text ends in 20b with the rewards that will accompany the faithful king.

5. Analysis of the Text

17:14-15 Institution of the Monarchy and Election of the King:
The author of 17:14 presupposes the establishment of the monarchy in 1 Samuel 8-12. Literary critics see the ideological viewpoint in Deut 17:14-20 as having a clear literary relationship with the accounts of the monarchy.[11] There are, however, significant divergences in orientation. In 17:15, three main conditions are given for the election of the king: i. the king must be one chosen by YHWH; ii. the king is to be appointed

---

[10] For this, see N. Lohfink, 'Distribution of the Functions of Power: The Laws Concerning Public Offices in Deuteronomy 16:18–18:22', in *A Song of Power and the Power of Song. Essays on the Book of Deuteronomy* (ed. D. L. Christensen; SBTS 3; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1993) 336-352; J. G. McConville, 'King and Messiah in Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History', in *King and Messiah in Israel and the Ancient Near East. Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar* (ed. J. Day) (JSOTS 270; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 279-281.
[11] Cf. McConville, 'King and Messiah', 271-295.

by the people; iii. the king is to be a kinsman or brother (*aḥ*).[12] It is not specified how the people are to elect the king, but what is clear in the first and second elements is that the text balances the king's popular legitimacy with his divine legitimacy. The fact is that no one can make oneself a king without the support of both the people and God. The divine support alone is not enough, and the popular support alone is equally not enough. Both must be present for the human monarch to function properly. This point is well exemplified in the rebellion of Absalom in 2 Samuel 15-19. The text underlines the overwhelming popular legitimacy of Absalom but subtly exposes his lack of divine legitimacy.[13] While David enjoys the divine legitimacy, he has to reacquire the popular legitimacy before being reinstated in office.[14] The third element is that the king is expected to be a brother Israelite. This means that he must not be a foreigner. But it is also a statement of equality between the king and the people.[15] Being a brother in this sense connotes the idea of equality. On this, G. E. Gerbrandt explains: 'If Israel was to have a king, then the king should be a brother, someone who was under the covenant. This requirement was really basic to all other limitations. Only someone who recognized the true nature of Israel's existence could be expected to fulfil the royal functions within Israel. The king was thus a brother to all other Israelites, and was expected to act as a brother even when king.'[16]

17:16-20a: The King's Code of Conduct

The text in vv. 16-20a makes these rules for the king: i. he shall not accumulate a large number of horses; ii. he must not take the people back to Egypt; iii. he must not accumulate a large number of wives; iv.

---

[12] See G. E. Gerbrandt, *Kingship According to the Deuteronomistic History* (SBLDS 87; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986) 108-116.

[13] See Luke E. Ijezie, 'Popular Legitimacy and Divine Legitimacy in the Light of the Political Rebellion in 2 Samuel 15-19', in *The Christian, Elections and Faithful Citizenship in a Pluralist Society* (eds. L. E. Ijezie, S. Audu, A. I. Acha; Port Harcourt: CATHAN Publications, 2019) 214-230.

[14] Ijezie, 'Popular Legitimacy', 226-227.

[15] Daniel I. Block, 'The burden of leadership: the Mosaic paradigm of kingship (Deut 17:14-20).' *Bibliotheca Sacra* 162, no. 647 (July 1, 2005): 259-278.

[16] Gerbrandt, *Kingship*, 111.

he must not accumulate a large amount of silver and gold; v. he must have a copy of the law (Torah) and read and observe it meticulously; vi. he must not turn from his countrymen through pride nor turn away from the law.

17:20b: Rewards for Keeping the Law

The reward the king will derive from keeping the law is a long dynasty for him and his descendants in Israel. The position of Deut 17:14-20 on the king can be summarized thus: a. The king is the same as his Israelite brothers. Because the king is not a superior essence, he has no right to raise himself above his brothers by expropriation (Deut 17:16, 17, 20). b. Since the king is also a subject of the law (Torah), just like every other Israelite (Deut 17:18-19; cf. 1Kgs 2:1-4; 9:4-5; 2Kgs 23:1-3), he cannot impose any legislation, superseding the already given ancient divine law.[17] The king is not the promulgator of the law, as in the ancient Near East, but receives the divinely communicated Mosaic legislation just like every other citizen.[18]

The subjection of the kingship to the Mosaic Law is also another way of saying that the monarchic polity has to function on the basis of the same cultic and religious features which characterize the tribal system under Moses. c. The unity of the nation is not based on the person of the king, but on the authority of the law, which binds all equally. This is implied in Deut 17:19-20 where a regular and attentive study of the law is stipulated for the king 'so that he will not exalt his heart above his brothers' (v. 20a). John Van Seters explains this basic equality with the theme of election:

> The doctrine of Israel's election as the chosen people of Yahweh set the nation apart from other peoples. It was a special feature of its identity. All other callings and elections, whether to kingship, priesthood, or prophecy,

---

[17] A. Alt, *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966) 241.

[18] See J. A. Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992) 137; J. L. Ska, 'Le droit d'Israël dans l'ancien testament', in *Bible e droit. L'esprit des lois* (ed. F. Mies; Namur: University Press, 2001) 26, 28, 30-38.

were viewed in association with the choice of the people as a whole. Many of the Near Eastern historiographic documents that have to do with kingship deal with the special election of the king to rule, and even recount the divine providence by which he gained the throne and was victorious over his enemies. But nowhere outside of Israel was the notion of special election extended to the nation as a whole, such that the complete history of the people could be viewed in this way.[19]

Thus, the real ruler of Israel is YHWH himself, and all, including the human ruler, have the common identity as his subjects.[20] It is this ideological position of seeing the whole nation as belonging to YHWH, and not to the king, which colours the Dtr presentation.

6. Reconciling Secular Monarchy and Divine Kingship in Deut 17:14-20

The basic argument of the writers of the Deuteronomic law of the king was that Israel was established as a religious polity and not as a secular political society. The nation was basically YHWH's kingdom. So the real king of Israel was YHWH. How then does the human king function in such a theocratic state? The religious leaders saw themselves and let themselves be seen as the direct spokespersons of the Deity, and everyone was meant to obey them, including the human king. In real life, this was difficult, as the kings did not usually take orders from the religious leaders. As a matter of fact, many of the accounts of the monarchic system in Samuel-Kings are either pre-Deuteronomistic or originally non-Deuteronomistic. These accounts project the power of the human king without any negative criticism, but in the Deuteronomic law, the king is divested of all power, thus making it even problematic

---

[19] J. Van Seters, *In Search of History. Historiography in the Ancient World and the Origins of Biblical History* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1983) 360.

[20] According to Noth (*The Deuteronomistic History* [JSOTS 15; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, ^{2}1981] 89-90), the main interest of the Dtr is the bond between God and people, and it is always with reference to the old traditions that Israel is depicted as God's people.

to call him a king (*melek*) in the ordinary sense of the term. This already shows how ideological the Deuteronomic law of the king is. In fact, there is the question how such a law could have been a constitution for the monarchy.[21] In this regard, B. M. Levinson considers the Deuteronomic law as utopian delimitation of the royal power, which was never implemented.[22]

The Deuteronomistic redaction of the institution of the monarchy in 1 Samuel 8-12 was designed to address the issue of reconciling the power and authority of the king with the reality of YHWH's kingship. The Deuteronomic ideal is that the monarchy should be a continuation of the old tribal system, which understands Israel as a theocratic nation. In the accounts of the monarchy, the Dtr anchors its evaluation of the kings and people on their mode of response to this theocratic model. The pro-Davidic redaction in Samuel-Kings presents the Davidic kingship in such a way that it fits within the parameters of the Deuteronomic ideal. The point of this ideology is that Israel became an organized single polity in the desert under the leadership of Moses and the judges (cf. Deut 1:9-18), and this structure gets reversed only in the complex text-block of 1 Samuel 8-12 which marks the transfer of the administration of the same Israel from the judges to the king. But from the historical point of view, there is yet no absolute certainty that a structured tribal system in Israel existed either before or after the monarchy. However, the literary account makes it precede the monarchy.

The Deuteronomic ideology evaluates community and its institutions in accordance with Moses and his legislation. This point is elaborately developed by Robert Polzin in his *Moses and the Deuteronomist*.[23] According to him, Deuteronomy deals with the legislative and judicial word of God and the two conveyors are Moses and the narrator. The

---

[21] See McConville, 'King and Messiah', 276-281.
[22] B. M. Levinson, 'The Reconceptualization of Kingship in Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History's Transformation of Torah', *VT* 51 (2001) 511-534
[23] R. Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist. A Literary Study of the Deuteronomistic History. Part One: Deuteronomy Joshua Judges*, Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Seaabury Press, 1980) 205.

main thesis is that the Deuteronomist unites the voice of Moses with the voice of YHWH so that the word of YHWH becomes identified as the word of Moses. In this way, the author presents his own ideology in the whole Dtr corpus as the word of Moses. As he puts it:

> It is possible to drive home one truth by shouting out its denial. This was the case with the main ideological position in Deuteronomy. The Deuteronomist composes a powerful testament to the unique prophet, Moses, in such a way that the more authority he invests in his hero, the more he will take to himself in the following books of his history. The more exalted Moses is, the less he becomes. He portrays Moses as promulgating a lawcode that so tightly weaves together God's word and man's that each is finally indistinguishable from the other. The necessity of subsequent interpretation of Moses' word is secured by its prior merging with God's word. The boundaries between God's word and Moses' interpretation have been deliberately blurred to illustrate the condition of all interpretation.[24]

According to the Deuteronomistic ideology, the ideal Israel is the Israel structured along the institutional lines established by Moses, an Israel that acts according to the laws of Moses, and the ideal leader of Israel is one chosen in accordance with the Mosaic law. This Mosaic character of the leadership is expressed with some emphasis in the discourse of Moses with regard to Israel's leaders in Deut 16:18-18:22. From the perspective of the authors of Deuteronomy, it is from these tribal institutions established by Moses that the monarchy emerges and is regulated.

7. Reading Deut 17:14-20 in the Context of Contemporary Political Questions

The text of Deut 17:14-20 does not necessarily present a model of relationship between religion and politics but explains more the reasons

---

[24] Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist*, 205.

for conflict between religion and politics. The situation presented in the Deuteronomic text under study resembles the situations of conflict between religion and politics in many contemporary settings. The Nigerian case is particularly relevant for now. This can be looked at from diverse perspectives:

Traditional Religious Institutions and the Political Society: In many Nigerian traditional societies, one finds a similar scenario as in Deut 17:14-20 where the religious establishment controls the political class. The traditional priesthood often controls the activities of the local king who sees himself usually as under the common patron deity whose chief mouthpiece is the chief priest. The king cannot dare to disregard the instructions of the chief priest. This functioned well on the local level in the traditional society because all the people saw themselves as being under the superior divine government. In most situations, the king or traditional ruler combined the two roles of priest and king, with the title of priest-king. In this capacity he acts as the representative of the deity. John S. Mbiti points out that such traditional political titles, as kings, queens and chiefs, are not common among all Africans, and where they exist, they function as representatives of the divine or as symbols of divine presence.[25] According to Mbiti,

> Where these rulers are found, they are not simply political heads: they are mystical and religious heads, the divine symbol of their people's health and welfare. The individuals as such may not have outstanding talents or abilities, but their office is the link between human rule and spiritual government. They are therefore, divine or sacral rulers, the shadow or reflection of God's rule in the universe. People regard them as God's earthly viceroys.[26]

The reason is that most Africans do not conceive their social organisations as secular political unions, but as webs that bind both the living and the dead together with the deities. Mbiti argues:

---

[25] John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heineman, 1969) 182
[26] Mbiti, *African Religions*, 182

> In traditional life, the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. He owes his existence to other people, including those of past generations and his contemporaries. He is simply part of the whole. The community must therefore make, create or produce the individual; for the individual depends on the corporate group. Physical birth is not enough: the child must go through rites of incorporation so that it becomes fully integrated into the entire society. The rites continue throughout the physical life of the person, during which the individual passes through one stage of corporate existence to another. The final stage is reached when he dies and even when he is ritually incorporated into the wider family of both the dead and the living.[27]

All these explain why the African social organisation is a sacral phenomenon. Political governance is a sacred function and, thus, part and parcel of the religious activities.

Islamic Religion and Politics: The control of political leaders by the religious class is exemplified in the Islamic approach to politics. Islam sees religion and politics as two sides of the same coin, all under the direction of Allah and the sacred book, the Quran. The laws guiding both the religious establishment and the political society are all enshrined in the Sharia law. The religious leaders interpret the law which the political leaders have to follow. The Islamic conception of the human society explains it all. According to Hayatullah Halludin, 'Islam perceives society as an association, which is formed in accordance to the divine law with the purpose of harmonious and peaceful coexistence. The Divine revelation as contained in the al-Quran and the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad [s.a.w.] constitutes the foundation of social order in Islamic society.'[28] According to

---

[27] Mbiti, *African Religions*, 108.
[28] Hayatullah Lalludin, 'Concept of Society and Its Characteristics from an Islamic Perspective', *International Journal of Islamic Thought*, Vol. 6 (2014) 12, in https://doi.org/10.24035/ijit.6.2014.002 – Accessed on 19th Feb, 2024

Halludin, the Islamic concept of society is a comprehensive one, being a synthesis of the material and spiritual aspects of the human life, based on what Muslims call the *tawhid*, that is, the Oneness of God.[29] The function of the human person in society is to submit completely to the will of God. For traditional Muslims, the political life is regulated by religious laws. For this reason the idea of a secular state does not strike a concordant tune among many Muslims.[30] This is part of the reasons for conflicts between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria.

Christian Religion and Politics: The Christian approach to religion and politics is more differentiated than the Islamic approach. Christians tend to distinguish the temporal sphere from the spiritual sphere and often try to keep them apart. This is based on the mainline Christian concept of society. While the Christian Bible recognises the human person as the image of God - *imago Dei* (see Gen 1:26), and also recognises the human society as both visible and spiritual, this does not abolish the secular dimension of the human nature and society. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines society 'as a group of persons bound together organically by a principle of unity that goes beyond one each and one of them.'[31] The Church sees society as embracing all humanity. The human person develops better by uniting with others in society. As regards involvement in the political life, the Church usually encourages her members to be fully involved but cautions its leaders against undue meddling in politics. The Vatican II Council states that the Church's mission is universal and is not limited to any particular social or political system: 'The Church, by reason of her role and competence, is not identified with any political community nor bound by ties to any political system. It is at once the sign and the safeguard of the transcendental dimension of the human person. The political community and the Church are autonomous and independent of each other in their own fields.'[32] All these show that the Church does not

---

[29] Lalludin, 'Concept of Society', 12.
[30] See Kendhammer, 'The Sharia Controversy in Northern Nigeria', 291-321.
[31] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1880.
[32] Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 76.

control the political society directly, but exercises control through her members and through her teachings.

Modern Political System in Nigeria and the Religions: Nigeria as a multi-religious country operates as a secular state, but religion plays an important role in the affairs of governance at all levels. The country does not see itself as being under the guidance of any particular religion or religious class. However, this is only on paper, as the different religions and faith groups compete for prominence within the political society and within the corridors of power at all levels.[33] Conflict arises when one religion tries to impose its tenets on the common political space. The introduction of the *Sharia* legal system in some states of Nigeria is a case in point. Religion is also used to cause political tension when adherents of a religion use it to dominate others or to win undue prominence.

History shows that many wars have been waged in the name of religion, and many ongoing violent conflicts in the world today are caused by the abuse of religion. In many political settings, people have been robbed of their fundamental rights and dignity because of religion. This has often exposed religion to ridicule and serious interrogation. In the contemporary African context, conflicts caused by religion are reflected in all facets of the social, cultural and political life. The fact is that without the development of the culture of mutual tolerance together with the existence of strong political institutions, religiously induced conflicts easily erupt. When people lack the culture of tolerance, the tendency is usually to impose their peculiar religious norms as the norms to regulate life in the multi-religious political society, and the inevitable consequence is conflict, which sometimes develops into violence. Conflict is minimised when the different religions share the same or similar moral or ethical norms. But when the moral norms differ, conflict often arises. While the abuse of religion often causes conflicts in the political society, conflict can also arise when religion is discouraged entirely. This often happens when a cross-section of the

---

[33] See Matthew H. Kukah, *Religion, Politics and Power in Northern Nigeria* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited, 1993) 1-244.

society professes no conventional religious belief and insists on a purely secularist political ordinance that negates religious values. Many modern societies are moving in this direction.

8. Conclusion

Our study of the text of Deut 17:14-20 has exposed an important dimension in the biblical approach to politics. The biblical Israel at the centre of the discussion was established as a theocratic sacral state and not a secular one. This theocratic dimension distinguishes biblical Israel from most modern states and also determines the types of alliances or systems Israel can adopt as a political society. It helps us to be more cautious and critical in the use of the data of the biblical text in resolving contemporary conflicts between religion and politics. It is always good to analyse the ideological and theological background of the biblical approach to politics. In the Israelite context, the sovereignty belongs to God alone and not to the human ruler. From the biblical portrait, Israel found it difficult to pay allegiance to human rulers all through her history. While contemporary religious leaders are often respected by political leaders, they hardly give them the type of allegiance the biblical and ancient traditional religious leaders enjoyed from the political leaders of their times. Conflict abounds when religious leaders unduly control political leaders and when political leaders try to undermine the freedom of religious worship.