

JOCRES

Journal of Christian Religious Studies

ISSN: 2276 - 7231

Vol. 5 No. 4, October, 2023

A Publication of the

DEPARTMENT OF CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS STUDIES

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THE PLACE OF RELIGION IN POLITICAL GOVERNANCE IN ANCIENT ISRAEL AND THE NIGERIAN CONTEXT

Peter Olanrewaju Awojobi, PhD.

Abstract

Political leaders in ancient Israel were appointed by Yahweh but confirmed and announced by Religious leaders. However, some religious leaders and traditions in Africa frown at the involvement of their adherents in politics. This is based on the view that religious person cannot be a politician. For a long time most adherents of the Christian faith in Nigeria held that Christianity and politics are two parallel lines that cannot meet. Christians who dabble into Politics were castigated, persecuted and labeled as backsliders, liars, children of the devil and friends of the world. For the fear of being labeled as such many Christians in Nigeria saw politics as a no go area for them. The thrust of this study is to examine how religion was used in ancient Israel to promote political governance with the view of establishing the relevance of religion in the political space in Nigerian democratic process. Historical method was used. A closer look at the origin and development of ancient Israel revealed that religion and politics were inseparable. Religious leaders in ancient Israel were actively involved in the selection of political leaders. Religious leaders served as king makers, cabinet members, and consultants to political leaders. The primary functions of religion are: to determine the relationship between man and God and to regulate relationships among humans. The paper concludes that Church leaders in Nigeria are to encourage their members to take active part in political process. Christians are to shun corruption or any act that will bring the name of Christ to disrepute.

Keywords: Religious leaders, Political Governance, Ancient Israel, Christians, and Nigeria

Introduction

The place of religion in political governance has been a bone of contention among scholars in Nigeria. Some scholars are of the view that religion should maintain the traditional role of being the moral conscience of the nation. This was the position of the white missionaries that evangelized Africa. These missionaries were strongly influenced by the Lutheran pietism, which advocated strict separation of Church and State because of the perceived negative influence politics may have on the Church (Kunhiyop, 2008: 83). This position became the stand of many Mission Established Churches in Nigeria. For a long time, this group of churches maintained and insisted that the Church was to be seen entirely different from the state. Christians were forbidden to have anything to do with politics because it was considered dirty and worldly. Churches and their members held themselves aloof from politics and were deeply suspicious of it. Church members were discouraged from having anything to do with politics. Some members that venture into politics were considered as sinners and some were seriously criticized and persecuted.

Others rejected this view and asserted that religion must be actively involved in political governance of Nigeria. Initially, this view was common among Muslims who were more politically oriented than other religious groups in Nigeria. Muslims have made some deliberate attempts to completely take over the political governance in Nigeria especially in the northern part of the country were Islam is the dominant religion (Samuel, 2019: 311). This study

therefore examined the place of religion in political governance in ancient Israel and the Nigerian Context.

Religion and Politics Examined

Attempt is made in this section to examine the two principles that make up the fulcrum of this paper and they are: Religion and Politics. These would be discussed one after the other. The term religion is difficult to define. Even the origin of the word is disputed. Carol noted that it is very difficult to agree on a single definition of religion (2019). Kauffman defines religion as something that has to do with God or gods or the ultimate values of life, depending upon one's point of view (1967). Religion may also be seen in terms of morality, belief or worship. The cognate terms translated religious or religion can indicate positive reverence for the gods or else negative fear of the gods (Church, 2003: 1373). According to Abe, religion is the concept of systems of faith, belief, worship and practice, which make dynamic impact on the control of human life. It may project a god or a deity and in some quarters reflect on spiritual, scientific, psychological or social needs (2008: 135). Most religions identify a being or state as ontologically ultimate. The religion ultimate provide explanation for the Cosmos, gives life its meaning and defines the spiritual goal of religion. Yet religions disagree on the nature of its ultimate significance (Harold, 2000: 822). At this point of discourse, one could see the term religion is complex nature and it designates the diverse realm of human experiences and it is a worldwide phenomenon that has played a part in all human culture. It is a much broader and much more complex category than the set of beliefs or practices found in any single religious tradition (Paden, 2009: 4). A good understanding of religion must recognized the distinctive qualities and patterns as a form of human experience, as well as the similarities and differences which exist in religions across human cultures. In all cultures, human beings make a practice of interacting with spiritual powers or beings. These powers or beings may be in the form of gods, spirits, ancestors, or any kind of sacred reality with which humans believe themselves to be connected. Sometimes a spiritual power is understood broadly as an all-embracing reality, and sometimes it is approached through its manifestation in special symbols. It may be regarded as external to the self, internal, or both. People interact with such a presence in a sacred manner. There are three major religions in Nigeria and these are: Christianity, Islam and African Traditional religion. In a nutshell, Religion is depicted as a psychological mechanism shared by all human minds and as such is a fabric of people's lives, strongly tied to their cultural identities as well as their effort to survive amidst life's contingencies and securities.

On the other hand, politics is intricate and more, complex than one could imagine. This is due to the changing/ dynamic nature of the issues covered in politics and the complexities of man. Despite these limitations, difficulties and impediments, politics is a means to an end. It is not ubiquitous in nature. It is essentially a struggle, a battle and an attempt to establish order and justice. Politics can be define "as the activities involved in getting and using power in public life, and being able to influence decisions that affect a country or society" (Hornby, 2008: 1122). Harold, defined politics as "who gets what, when, and how" (2000: 824). Many people are involved in politics for the struggle for power or struggle over power and resources. If power is removed from any academic engagement of social science, family, you will be dealing with something else other than politics" (Ufuoma, 2013: 28). Therefore, politics is power! Power concerned with the absolute principles on which governmental authority or power can be obtained and carried out satisfactorily. It is a responsible interest. It has dimensions that created

the activities at the basic terrains of locality, community, nation, state, region, continent and the world.

The noun word politics was derived from the Greek word "polis" which means city-state. The inhabitants of the city-state are naturally citizens. In Greek, the word for citizen is *politicus*. The city-state has a constitution: The activities of the citizens plus the leaders guided by the constitution make up politics (Oghale, 2001: 13). That is a clear indication that politics is an invention of the Greek and they themselves were very active in it. The Athenians understood politics as a creation of society can affect every fiber of the nation, particularly if it is backed by socio legal mechanism. This is because politics is a creation of the working of human interaction in society and as such must conform to the yearning and commands of society and socio justice. Interestingly, politics is considered as a game of threat and counter threat. This schism represents one of the interests that draw people into the study of politics so as to be able to comprehend political life as a whole. Thus, in complex and primitive societies, politics appears in everyday life as a continuous process of conflict management between individuals, groups, organizations and government.

Interest in politics has been with man ever since civilization begun, and in politics, man has always found tremendous capacity for good and evil. It is therefore necessary to conceptualize the subject appropriately by either explaining or describing the concept due to its ambivalent nature. Politics is an ideal philosophical concept, then existential. In other words, politics is seen from the point of reality, which is an obvious indication that politics cannot be separated from the real political world. In politics, human beings engaged in cooperation and conflict in other to arrive at a possible solution. So, in order to overcome society problems, human being engaged themselves in interaction with one another (Oghale, 2001: 13). This is what politics is mordantly. This means that a set of interactions of brief duration can be analyzed as a political system.

As a corollary, politics have been regarded as an organized dispute about power and its uses, involving choice among competing values, ideas, person, interest and demands. It is concerned with the discretion and analysis of the manner in which power is obtained., exercised and controlled, the purpose for which it is used, the manner in which decisions are made, the future that influence the making of these decisions and the context in which these decisions take place (Oghale, 2001: 16). One could see that politics is a continuous and timeless process but an ever changing one. The purpose, the context, the personnel and the arena of politics are always in state of flux. From the discourse, one could observe the question of conceptual problem of politics. One may be amazed to note that politics lacks a single lexicographical meaning. A scan at the literature may draw one's attention to the idea of politics as in academic discipline as a vocation and relevance. This raises some epistemological questions which border on ontological reality, the real political world and its relevance to the society and or the purpose of the state. But be that as it may, whether the idea of politics is traditional or modern, liberal, Marxists or radical, they relied on the way people think about the society.

Aristotle said that man is a political animal. This observation was the result of extensive thinking and exploration of the nature of man and the nature of the social and political organization of man in politics. Admirably, political philosopher and theorist have continued to idealize a best or most suitable way to organize society (Agbefe. 1993: 10).

These social and political thought derive from the search of man's basic needs is the best way of organizing life in the society and how people should act towards each other. From the fore going, one could conclude that political philosophy attempts to deal with the whole question of power relationship and its attempt to establish some ethical and moral basis for establishing power relationship among human beings (Agbefe, 1993: 10). Government activities affect the lives of everybody in a country irrespective of the type of job, tongue, tribe which may differ, they are under the government (Ufuoma, 2013: 28). Many religious leaders have come to understand this simple truth and this is why every religion that wants to effectively carry out her goals and objectives has to be interested in the politics of the country where the religion is operating.

Religion in Political Governance in Israel

As far as many biblical scholars are concerned, ancient Israel was considered as exclusively a religious community. Her mode of government was primarily referred to as theocracy, that is the government or rule of God. When it changed to monarchy, it was regarded as a religious state governed by Yahweh through the instrumentality of Kings. This is because, from the cradle of Israel's existence, there have been religious significance attached to every aspect of her history with a continuous relationship with Yahweh. Yahweh's dealings with Israel made the nations of the world to refer to her as the community of God (Abe, 2008: 95). In the light of this understanding, and the honour bestow on Israel by Yahweh, Israel became more conscious of her significant place among the nations of the world. Consequently, Israel's social and civil life was embraced under her religious life.

The Prophets were the main interpreters of the history of Israel. Emphasis was placed on the uniqueness of the Israel among other nations, because of her relationship with Yahweh who is greater than all other national deities. Yahweh's religion is supreme and as such deserves to be worshipped. Israel was enjoined to disregard or ignore all other gods. This made the religion of Yahweh monotheistic. Yahweh was considered as Israel's private God. Israel was chosen by Yahweh to be a channel through which God will bless mankind. This fundamental redemptive idea was constantly expressed by the Prophets of Yahweh as the centre of the Yahweh and Israel relationship. The moral and religious significance of Israel's relationship with Yahweh was that Yahweh belonged to her, and that she should be responsible to him in all aspects of their existence, be it military, political, social, economic, or religious (Abe, 2008: 98).

Religion in Political Governance in Nigeria

Before discussing the place of Politics in political Governance in Nigeria, it is important to give a brief history of Nigeria.The period of 1906-1912 which preceded the amalgamation of the northern and the southern protectorates by Sir Fredrick Lord Luggard, is one of the most crucial in the history of Nigeria because it marked both the beginning of effective administration and the rejection of standards and culture that had endure for many centuries (Crowder, 1962: 20). Although Nigeria was the creation of the European ambitions and rivalries in West Africa, it would be an error to assume that its people had little history before the final boundaries were negotiated by British, France and Germany at turn of the twentieth century. This newly created country contains not just a multiplicity of tribes, but a number of great kingdoms that had evolved complex system of government and independent contact with Europe (Crowder, 1962: 20).

Nigeria came into being in 1914 when the two protectorates, the northern and southern, were amalgamated by Sir Fredrick Lugard. Many Nigerian historians are of the opinion that Flora Shaw, who later marry Lugard sixteen years earlier, first suggested in an article for The Times that the several British Protectorates on the Niger be known collectively as Nigeria. The union of the northern and the southern protectorate was sudden and the country created covered such a widely differing group of people that not only the British who created it, but the inhabitant themselves have often doubted whether it could survive as a political entity. Fortunately, on October 1st 1960, despite many challenges, mainly focus on the differences between various component groups, Nigeria became a sovereign federation (Crowder, 1962: 20).

Nigeria lies mainly between latitude four degree and fourteen degree of the equator and between longitude two degree and fifteen degrees east of the Greenwich meridian. The country encloses a south to north length of six hundred and fifty miles and a west to east span which average seven hundred miles (Ademoyega, 1962: 11). Thus encloses an average of three hundred and seventy-three thousand, two hundred and fifty square miles. Nigeria has over three hundred and eighty-nine ethnic group and it is a country with multiple tribes, dialects, and religion (Alexander, 2012: 117). In other words, Nigeria has political and religious pluralism which indicate different co-existing forms of practice in different area of life. Nigeria is inhabited by a large number of tribal groups rangingin size from a few thousand to millions, speaking between them several hundreds of languages and dialects. Nigeria verity of custom, language and social organization can be classified into a number of linguistic groups which gives a fairly good index of her wider cultural affiliations.

Religion occupies a major position in the political governance of Nigeria. Many people have observed that religion has been able to determine or influence the behavior or the decision of electing political leaders in Nigeria over the years especially in post-independent Nigeria (Josiah, 2019: 11). This is more pronounced in some Northern States of Nigeria such as Kaduna, Katsina, and Sokoto which are predominantly Islamic and some Southern States such as Anambra, Delta, Akwa Ibom, Rivers, and Bayelsa States which are predominantly Christian. However, there are some instances where both Muslims in the North and Christians in the South unanimously voted for a political leader regardless of his or her religious affiliation. For example, majority of the Muslim in the Northern part of Nigeria with the Christians in the Southern Nigeria voted for a Christian, Olusegun Obasanjo, during the 1999 presidential election. During the 2015 presidential election, many Christians in the southern part of the country with the Muslims in the Northern voted a Muslim candidate, in person of, Muhammad Buhari. These two instances may seem to negate what many have observed, but it is important to mention that these are just isolated cases where religion seemed not to be a strong determining factor in the choice of political leaders in Nigeria. However, in the 2023 general elections, religion played prominent role. The issue of Muslim – Muslim Presidential and Vice Presidential candidates generated serious debate among Nigerians. Some Christians in Nigeria condemned the idea and resolved that they will not vote for any political party that fielded Muslim – Muslim ticket. The All Progressive Party (APC) fielded Bola Ahmed Tinubu (a Muslim from the South) and Kassim Shettima (a Muslim for the North). They were later declared winners by INEC. The presidential candidates of the Peoples' Democratic Party (Atiku Abubakar) and that of the Labour Party (Peter Obi) have gone to Court to challenge the election results.

Arguably, one could say that religion has had a firm grip on politics in Nigeria. For instance, former President Shehu Shagari was reported to have said: "if you appear to be anti- Islam, you are finished" (Josiah, 2019: 12). This was a clear indication of the place religion occupies in Nigeria's politics. Many political leaders in Nigeria see religion as a power tool and a factor that can swing voting during elections. While the Muslim politician in Nigeria appeals to the Muslim majority in the Northern Nigeria for votes, the Christian politicians appeal to the Christian majority in the Southern Nigeria for votes as their major constituency. These Christian politicians drew the Churches in their States of origin into the political sphere. These politicians see the large Christian population as their major constituency, and therefore, appealed to the Christian voters for support during elections. Before elections in Nigeria, there have been situations were some politicians intentionally paid visits to some big Churches and make public declaration about their faith in Christ and donate large sum of money towards Church Projects. This indeed is a way of canvasing for votes from the church members.

Many Christian political officers are fascinated by the wonderful story of the Israelite deliverance from the Egyptian bondage recoded in the book of Exodus, and they often see and project themselves as "the Moses of our time". The biblical tradition of liberation with reference to the Israelite's deliverance from Egyptian slavery, restoration from Babylonian, deliverance from complete annihilation by Haman and individuals experience of deliverance recorded in the book of Psalm have been repeatedly invoked at critical junctions in the political history of Nigeria. These kind of public declarations have gained some politicians considerable favor with the Christian community in the State (Awojobi, 2022: 50).

For many Christians, political leaders in the Southern Nigeria, the book of Exodus gives a clear picture of God's deliverance of the Israelites from Egyptian oppression. They believe that salvation here has a sociopolitical dimension. Exodus reveals that the God of Israelite hears the cry of the oppressed. God knew the suffering of the Israelites as slaves in such a way that their experience became his own and he moved in such a dramatic and powerful way to literate them from such situation. Exodus depicts God as a liberator and Moses his servant demanded Israel released from slavery (Fretheim, 2002: 254). Even Luke's gospel (quoting Isaiah passage in the Old Testament) presented Jesus Christ himself as someone who has come to preach deliverance to the captives (Luke 4:18-21). These biblical passages had great influence on the contemporary politicians in the Southern Nigeria, who often see themselves as "the Moses of this generation". These politicians have been able to furnish activities from these passages with the resounding slogan: let my people go, release the oppressed by making such scripture do political work during political rally (Exod. 10: 3).

The scripture notion of divine deliverance from slavery was one of the most enduring ideas in many African Churches and many Nigerian politicians have been able to take advantage of it. It was dramatized in the epic event of Israel's Exodus proclaimed in the year of Jubilees described in Leviticus 25 and Isaiah 61 and Luke 4:18, and reinforced by the core concept of redemption and the Pauline language of Christian liberty (Cofey & Noll, 2021). These scriptural themes and rhetoric of deliverance are usually spiritualized and politicized by politicians within the local churches in Africa in the twenty first century. They have also become a viable tool and resources for criticizing the government by social and political activists in Nigeria, who feel marginalized. These political activists in their struggle for freedom and liberation from the oil exploration appealed to the biblical narratives in the Old Testament as a sociopolitical typology, reimagining themselves or the oppressed as modern

Hebrews suffering under pharaoh fleeing Egyptian bondage, crossing the red sea, and wondering in the wilderness (Awojobi, 2022: 53).

Some scholars are of the view that religion is the custodian of morality in the society. This is a fundamental role from which religion cannot shy away from (Josiah, 2019: 13). Many religions believe that God who is the primary custodian of morality hates injustice and oppression and must be enforced in his creation. For instance, the Christian religion text is replete with passages where God's servants spoke against social injustice, economic depression and political disorientation or oppression. The scripture notion of divine deliverance from slavery in Exodus 25, Isaiah 61 and Luke 4:18, is a popular idea in many African Churches and these scriptures which have been spiritualized within the local church have also been politicized outside the Church setting within Nigeria society. Although rhetoric of deliverance has been used many times by some political rulers, they have also become a viable tool and resources for criticizing the government by the church, social and political activists in Nigeria, who feel Nigerians, have been oppressed and victimized in their own land by greedy political office holders. These political and social activists like Late Ken Sarowiwa in their struggle for freedom and liberation from the oil exploration, for instance, appealed to the biblical narratives in the Old Testament.

Religion can also be the seen as the moral industry that can produce morally sound and disciplined political leaders who will govern the affairs of Nigeria with justice, equity and competence (Metish, 1979: 94). Nigeria no doubt is endowed with both natural and human resources which have not been translated into development. Nigerians are yearning for credible, competent and morally sound political leaders that have genuine interest in serving Nigeria as a nation, and many people believed that religious institutions is the moral industry where such transformational and selfless political leaders are made for the growth and development Nigeria (Awojobi, 2022: 52).. Unfortunately, nearly every system is corrupt in Nigeria, including the religious institutions, and almost all the political leaders in Nigeria are either Christian, Muslim, or Africa Traditional Religion. Unfortunately, Islam and Christianity and African Traditional religion have not been able to produce leaders who will take Nigeria to the next level of development (Josiah, 2019: 14). Many still wonder why religion which is believed to be the moral industry where transformational leaders are made for the growth and development Nigeria has failed to produce such purpose driven and transformational leaders in Nigeria.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, religion, no doubt, occupies important places in the political governance in ancient Israel and Nigeria. First, religion served as the moral conscience of the people and has the moral courage to constructively criticize, correct or speak to the political leaders when they depart from the set standard in the society. Second, religion is the moral industry that produces morally sound and competent political leaders who will govern the nations with justice and equity in order to take the people to the next level of development. Third, region also has the power to determine and influence the decisions or the choice of voters during election. In other words, religion determines who is elected or nominated into political office. Forth, religion plays a definite role in building strange, dynamic and vibrant political governance in Nigeria by promoting peace, unity and fundamental human right. Fifth, religion is one of the major factors responsible for nepotism in Nigeria political governance. This is because political appointment and employment in government institutions is done on the basis of religious affiliation. Six,

religion is a tool of political manipulation and oppression in the hands of Nigerian politicians. Many religious leaders have come to understand this simple truth and this is why every religion that want to effectively carry out her goals and objectives has to be interested in the politics of the country where the religion is operating. Government activities affect the lives of everybody in a country irrespective of the type of job, tongue, tribe which may differ, they are under the government. Events in Nigeria political experience have shown that religion could be abused and that some political leaders in Nigeria use their religion as a viable tool through its cultic functionaries, to serve their selfish interest and to the detriment of the citizens of Nigeria.

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