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## Religion as the Opium of the People: Reference to Socio-Political Dimension in Nigeria

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### **Abstract:**

*This paper is a sociological interpretation of religion and politics in Nigeria. The sociological tradition recognizes two broad approaches to the interpretation of religion in society, and each of them – substantive and functional – has had, and continues to have, its undaunted defenders. The issue, however, as Peter L. Berger pointed out, is not to decide which side of the debate shall eventually win, but to see how each approach enhance our understanding of the particular aspects of religion that we want to study.*

*The author argues that religion must first be seen in its primary identity, recognizing that it has substantive dimension, which precedes any of its functional manifestations. The researcher shall justify this approach by arguing that it enables us to understand most comprehensive the picture of Nigeria religiosity. This paper upholds the view that religion gets involved in politics and on many occasions, politics also gets theologized. However, when the religion has its face blunted while politics is bolstered by the resources of religion. There are three discernable patterns in which this unequal interaction can take place. In religiously homogeneous societies, religion may become an apparatus of state affairs; in some religiously pluralistic societies the appearance of religion may be an epiphenomenon, and in some other religiously heterogeneous societies religion may enter into power competition and consequently become political religions. It goes without saying that this last pattern is what we find in Nigeria.*

*The author shall first review the place of religion in society, then review Bryan Wilson's and David Martin's thesis of secularization. Thirdly, the interaction of religion and politics in independent Nigeria will be sociologically investigated. Lastly, the researcher shall discuss the ways in which the religions responded to the challenges posed by the social realities in young emerging Nigeria.*

**Keywords:** *Opium, religion, political, society, paradox*

### **1. Introduction**

The nature off the relationship between religion and society or politics has presented itself in the form of a paradox. As a phenomenon, religion is one of those variables that require a multi-factored mode of investigation. Though not intrinsically elusive, it has manifested itself differently from one society to the other. In some societies religion's involvement in politics charts the course for better integration and cohesion, which in others it has nothing to offer but division and social disintegration.

In short, religion can be both a blessing and a vise in society depending on the nature of the society and the doctrinal contents of the religion concerned. Recognizing this social ambivalence of religion, Aristotle argued that religious homogeneity is a condition for political stability.<sup>2</sup> Where opposing beliefs about ultimate values enter the political arena, they exacerbate struggles by preventing compromise.

The functional school has relentlessly defended the positive role of religion in society. The pioneer work of Emile Durkheim is still considered a masterpiece among the various sociological interpretations of religion that have been offered. In his seminar carried out among the Australian aborigines, Durkheim argues that religion is a vital means for cementing social relations, making and remarking the soul of collectivity and of individuals and strengthening the bonds that attach the individual to the society of which he is a member.<sup>3</sup> He pointed out that religion is an integration force in the traditional society because it brings people together, making them conscious of the groups they form, from the simplest to the most elevated; and thus those sentiments which the state expressed, defines and regulates, but which it assumes to exist come spontaneously into being.

Similarly, Ibi-khaldun stresses the cohesive role of religion. He argues that religion strengthens group feeling and solidarity (asabiyya), both of which are based ultimately upon bonds of kinship. He claims that: Once a religion is adopted and supported by (such) a group; it becomes a highly effective force. It creates a new loyalty, absolute belief in, and obedience to the demands of the law and the religious leaders. This is a source of a solidarity superior to, and more lasting than, the solidarity based merely upon the nature kinship and worldly desire....religion is the most powerful force in the creation of civilization and its commands are most effective instruments for preserving it.<sup>4</sup> Kenneth Thompson extends the range of functionalist thought by arguing that an adequate account of range of functionalist thought by arguing that an adequate account of religion must recognize the structure of the society. Drawing upon examples from contemporary western societies, he demonstrates how religion performs ideological function not only by its provision of symbols and

languages that are transposable into civic realm, but also by combining with other ideological discourse to create an imagined community which produce the ideological effect of forming a social comment.<sup>5</sup>

These account of religion, insightful as they certainly, were narrowly conceived. Not only do they ignore Weber's thesis that religion can also be sometimes dysfunctional.<sup>6</sup> They also fail to note that the index prestige accorded religion in society can diminish and sometime he almost extinguished. Specifically, the functional school fails to recognize the loss that religion usually suffers when it "enters" into all the process of social maintenance, reproduction conflict with a specific character donated by its character.<sup>7</sup> This original chapter will undergo destruction, and the degree of that destruction, according to David Martin, "will be related in the most complex manner to the angel of eschatological tension."<sup>8</sup>

This latter interpretation leans upon the substantive theory of religion. Social and historical realities often tempt us to forget this aspect and, in effect, most contemporary accounts of religion suffer from what Wayne Proudfoot identifies as "descriptive reductionism they fail to show what religion really is and emphasize only the function it performs or the uses it is made of in the society.

For instance, J.K. Olupona once emphasize, as germane to a proper analysis of religion in modern society, the fact that religion serves "as a relying symbol with which the disfranchised minimally manifest their opposition to the political order and the prevailing socio-economic decadence in the society"<sup>9</sup> to be sure, what a thing is ought not to be confused with what is made to perform.

Quite, perceptively Martin pressed for recognition of themes religiousness of religion, that is, sacred dimension. He argues that whatever else religion may share with other organization in the terms of social inevitabilities, such as the definition of the maintenance of its own boundaries, the relationship is natural and territorial group and the control of sexuality, it possesses a differential specially, he whoever explain that "this differentia specific will be systematically blunted and even reversed in so far as it enters into comprehensive relationship with a society in its totality."<sup>10</sup>

## 2. Eryan Wilson's and Martin's Models of Analysis

Some considerably part of Wilson's and Martin's works on religion have focused specifically upon its growth, decline and distortion as it confronts and enters into different trajectories of social change. Both scholars agree on the significance of religion and on the fact that any analysis of this social cruciality of religion must begin from an understanding of its substantive dimension. According to Wilson, is socially significant in two respects: it functions both manifestly and latently. These two categories of function, in Wilson's view are not of equal value. The latent functions of religion are the more basic and fundamental, and these are religions intrinsic potentialities to socialize a group of people by holding up to them a sacred view of the social order, its provision of the *census communis*, its internal logic that offer them the possibility of expressing and regulating their emotions, and its capacity underline for them a common view of morality.<sup>12</sup> The latent functions are similar to what Peter Berger calls the "plausibility structure" which religion provides for society. The manifest functions are those pragmatic efforts which strives to make it is made to submit to the authority of the political community.

Wilson notes that the latent functions were only achievable in pre-technological societies because of the communitarian composition of the traditional societies as against the process of societization that has because the hallmark of civilization in modern, technological societies. The erstwhile institution activities and consciousness based on the supernatural. Characterizing the setting of pre-modern societies, have ceased to affect the essential operation of modern societies. Rather it has become privatized and it ceased to be invoked, deferred to, or obeyed in the public realm.<sup>13</sup> The reason is not that modern society is defector hostile to religion as such; it is simply that religion has been forced to lose its vitality, spiritual value, and modern men and women have become religiously unmusical.<sup>14</sup>

Scholars have labeled Wilson's position an example of "modernization theory". This theory predicts that societies which have been fully exposed to the current of modern life will accord a minor role to the practice and institutions will be transformed, through the influence and decisions of the state, into agencies of social welfare and social centres.<sup>15</sup>

Martin also upholds the relevance of religion to modern society, but argues that religion usually experience mutilation whenever it ventures beyond the administration of the "word and sacrament" and enters into all the complex structures and arrangements of the society. He defends this position in several of his works, with data draw from both western and third world countries, and shows that in some of these places religion has been on different occasions pulled into "the vortex of powerful and organized structures."<sup>16</sup>

This task, considered to be both a national and a sacred mission, is in line with the objectives the country set for itself when it became a republic in 1963. Contained in the republican charter is the vision of ensuring the unity off her people and faith in their fatherland for thee purposed of promoting inter-African co-operation and solidarity in order to ensure world peace and international understanding and so to further the ends of liberty, equality and justice in Nigeria.<sup>17</sup>

The pursuit of the objectives contained in this "national vision" had a role determinative effects on the future role of religions in the country and their respective *modus operandi*. The utterances of certain religious and / or their political leaders, both before and immediately after independence raised suspicion in the minds of the emerging nationalists that religion might be a disintegrating and divisive force in the country. The need to regulate religious activities became obvious, through official discussion regarding the place of religion within the body-politic antedated independence. However, after independence the view of many elite indigenes was that religion is a slipper terrain, more slippery than a banana peel, and that wisdom's path is to avoid it. In consequence of this unmistakable awareness, the Federal Government declared the country as a secular state with the provision that "the government of the Federation of the State shall not adopt and religion as state religion."<sup>18</sup>

The underlying reason for the adoption of this policy was the belief that “the secularization of the polity is one of the most fundamental ideological and structural changes in the complex process of political development. In other words, the aim was to leave the state neutral and free, free to moderate religious affairs of the citizens whose freedom the construction guarantees in a manner that will ensure the maintenance of religious equilibrium. It was not intended that matters of state should be put under the thumb of religion.<sup>19</sup>

Robert R. Alford, who agrees with Aristotle that there might not be a rapport between religion and politics in religiously pluralistic societies, also offers sociological alternatives by which such nations attend to the problem of religious pluralism. First, such nations may adopt secularization of religious decline in general. The second alternative is compartmentalization, that is the separation of religion from other areas of life. Third, there can be homogenization, which is the convergence of many religions up a vaguely defined consensus on teaching and practice<sup>20</sup>. In the light of Alford's tripartite sociological analysis, I propose that secularism, which was, and still is, the ideology adopted by Nigeria government shows a decline in the social impact and integrity of religion. For both Christianity and Islam, it means a restriction of their proselytizing ambitions, a constraint that requires them to submit to the “national ordering of things”. Mission schools and hospitals were taken over, and the erstwhile chaplaincy role, which symbolized the sacred power of the churches in their educational and health services, become a matter of complacent responsibility. Many devices were contrived by the national policy makers to channel people's gratitude to the state rather than to religious institutions, and thus, it was not surprising to mission – named and mission – related hospital becoming component of state universities and youths were indoctrinated with national ideologies to replace all partisan, especially religious, teachings. In Lieu of various religious youth association that have been intermittently banned on campuses, the national youth service corps became the only nationally approved mark of identify for young Nigerians at their liminal state.

We can explain this attitude toward religion against the backdrop of the secularizing tendencies of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries championed by Thomas Hobbes and Jean Jacques Rousseau, though it would be hyperbolic to label the Nigerians version of secularism as purely Hobbesian or Rousseunian. The relevant point is that the Liberia principle always advanced in support of secularism draws inspiration from Hobbe's and Rousseu's theories of the nature of political society.

Hobbes argues for the centralization of all authority in the state and regards all association and groups as “breeding areas of dissension and conflict” with the requirement of the unitary state. He argues against the existence of an autonomous spiritual authority within the state, since it would be self-contradictory to have multiple sovereigns within a sovereign nation. He requires the religious life of the people to be governed by the head of the state and this view informed his own definition of a church as “a company of men professing Christian religion united in the person of one sovereign, at whose command they ought to assemble, and without who authority they ought not to assemble<sup>21</sup>.”

Evidently, the Nigerian official attitude toward religion as not as far as Hobbes has proposed. The government does not presume to have control over the private religious life of the people. Rousseau's position is much closer to the Nigeria situation. In his social a contract, he distinguished using Christianity as an example. Substantively defined, Christianity, as a religion is entirely spiritual, occupied solely with heavenly things; the country of the Christians is not of this world<sup>22</sup>. However, these very virtues of Christianity are, for Rousseau, its vices because Christianity concentrated upon men and women rather than citizens. He therefore concludes:

It is not enough that a nation should have a religion; the religion must be identified in the mind of the people with the values of national life; else it will create disunity and violate the general will<sup>23</sup>.

Rousseau was convinced of rightness of his position and capped it with a proposal that a purely religion must be instituted whose articles of the sovereign should fix.

He defends himself by arguing that the existence of other religions within this framework can still be permitted to exist alongside the civil religion. Providing there is nothing in their articles, which is deemed by the sovereign to be inimical to the development of citizenship<sup>24</sup>. The sociological implication of this proposal, which Rousseau might be obvious of, is that while the nation become sacralized, religion will become systematically, since everything ultimately depends upon what was “deemed fit” for the country by the sovereign.

The idea of civil religion has been taken up by some 20<sup>th</sup> century sociologists of religion to describe and analyze the religious situation of some nation, especially those in which the separation of state from religion has become a faith accompli. First popularized in the sixties by Robert N. Bellah to interpret the serializing of the American nation<sup>25</sup>. “it has also been extended to other nation J.K. Olupona argues that what today we have in the name of nationalism, nation pledge and the institutionalization of the nation youth service corps are expressions of the official legitimation and general consciousness of civil religion in Nigeria. In his article, “Beyond ethnicity: Civil religion in Nigeria” he opines that Nigeria, a country of 250 ethnic groups has been able to achieve a degree of social and political integration through the introduction of a civil religion. In the tradition of Rousseau, Durkheim and Bellah, he argues “any coherent society must rest on a set of moral beliefs, which ground the political order in a transcendent basis”<sup>26</sup>. He traces the historical origin of Nigeria to civil war of 1967-70 and argues that of the disintegration disclosed in that war came paradoxically the ideas, symbols and achieves integration where existed. He states that Nigeria religion consist of a universal God without sectarian and of great cultic figures such as Muritala Muhammed, whose “elevation” reminds me of Lincoln's placed in the America pantheon. He concludes that Nigeria civil religion is being propogated by national holidays, by the school system, through the NYSC, and particularly in the rhetoric of Nigeria leaders<sup>27</sup>.

Certainly, religion is still a living reality in Nigeria society but it will either support the “power that be” or he prepared to fold up. Perhaps, because of this honorific status accorded religion, the argument was proffered that “there is no society, however formally secular, in which religion is not a major component of both the structural and cultural life,

because it deals with man's ultimate concern" this argument loses sight of the very important fact that in a country like Nigeria an individual person's "ultimate concern"<sup>28</sup> can be dwarfed by the overarching nation pursuits that are of no consequence to the existential situation of ordinary citizen.

Religion institution and leaders are sometimes compensated by being invitees as member of one kind of committee of the other. Yet, when such partnership is sought the governments always retain its position of a suzerain. A number of clarion calls have out from the successive government to religion institutions, asking them to assist in the twin task of nation building and nationalism, they have been frequently warned not to see themselves primarily as an alternative system of authority and value, whose requirement contradict political requirement, but one which can help to legitimate existing arrangement, performing a role similar of indigenous religions in the past. On various occasions, the federal government has made pronouncements regarding the place and the role-expectation of religion in the official agenda. Such a pronouncement was made by President Babangida when he was addressing a committee of religious and political leaders during the OIC imbroglio. He urged the committee to offer suggestion on:

- How government can best assist the religion and spiritual development of Nigeria in terms that will be acceptable to all religious and
- How religion can best assist the religion and spiritual development of Nigeria in terms that will
- How religions can best serve the nation in its struggle for economic recovery and independence as well as for political and stability.<sup>29</sup>

The second injunction above could be understood in light of his earlier advice that "religion should be given the opportunity to assist in our development effort in all shares since it is a potent weapon of social mobilization."<sup>30</sup>

Peter B. Clarke appositely about West African; governments in general that "what the state often looks for and, in some instances, demands in present-day West Africa is that the Christian Churches and other religions avoid polemics and demonstrate a strong sense of common purpose in the task of nation building while not intervening directly in politics."<sup>31</sup>

### 3. The Religious Responses to Political Challenge

Martin's theory of "center and periphery" will be deployed here to give a sociological interpretation have the way in which the religious institutions redefined their social relevance and mission with the context of Nigerian society. Martin justifies the sociological utility of this concept by explaining that the notion of super-ordination or subordination is always present in any society with a certain degree of resources.<sup>32</sup>

In his interpretation of religion and political within this conceptual framework, Martin identifies some salient points. First, there is no religion which cannot be involved in clashes with other faiths, second, there is no religion which may not regard itself as a vehicle of civilization and as naturally dominant, classing people of their faith as second-class citizen or as religiously inferior, or as a danger to this integrity for one of the antagonists in a class to be secular ideology. Fourth, there can be an overlap with religion with nationality or regional ethnicity.<sup>33</sup> The actual manifestations and consequences of their observation may vary from another; however, in a religions pluralistic society it is most likely that there will be competition for the control of power at the center among different religions, and such, competition will be characterized by paradoxical mutual for political success on the one hand, and elimination of the faith on the other hand.

How does this theory form into Nigeria society? H. Hiskett points out that before independence what exercised the minds of the intellectual from the predominantly Muslim North was Islam and how Islam ought to be interpreted. In the new challenging circumstance of independence.<sup>34</sup> A different times and for various reasons, the Muslims have vouched for the place of Islam within the body politic. The continued debate over a proper interpretation of Nigeria secularity, disputes over the place of Islam law (Sharia), and its nature of Islam influence on domestic and foreign policies e.g. the issue of the organization of Islamic congruence (OIC) are a few instances of the Muslims determination to occupy the center of power. In fact, Billy Dudley observes that arguments over Islamic law replayed, sometimes implicitly, many of the old themes about the nature of Nigeria federalism and the nature of the power of the central government, the relationships between north and south, and the relationship between dominant and minority ethnic groups.<sup>35</sup>

Concerning the issue of secularism, Muslim believes that it cannot imperil their faith, though they expressed the fear that it might limit their expansionist ambitions. According to A.A Doi, secularism would not change Islam nor its doctrines or institutions, but it would change and barrow the sphere in which Islam can mould lives of its followers.<sup>40</sup>

In spite of this evangelist inhibition imposed by the social realities, some subtle ways been sought by the Muslims to further the case of Islam. One such way was their embrace of western educational imbalance between Muslim and Christian. <sup>41</sup> From the Christian side, the interiority identify of Christian change into is direct opposite. Expectedly, the Christian were shaken by the total or partial taken over of church schools and hospitals, yet showed an unprophetic acquiescence to the political system. Claiming that the church is inescapably entangled in the tentacles of modernity, they argued that she must adjust to the changing reality, rather than condemn or withdraw from it, the church must balance the rigors of the ideal with the necessities of the day. The Christian council of Nigeria enjoins Christian thus; Without ceasing, the church must be the "watchman" on behalf of God, pointing to wrong polities and evil practices, and calling the state of observes the way of righteousness.

In addition to this ideal mission, Christians were also reminded their goal to the church and of the Christian must be known with increasing vigour of the creative aspects of social change (Christian) must increasingly aware that a period of rapid change, even if it so desires remain aloof.<sup>41</sup>

Their views, which can be said to be friendly representative of mainstream Christianity (catholic and protestant), are also different from those of the dependent African churches, they too encourage a sort of dialectical relationship

between the church and the state. They believe, along with other that the church cannot remain satisfied with the sole task of building a heavenly castle on earth<sup>42</sup>; it also needs to take care of "earth home" within which it lives now. According to "Akin Omolayo" the concept of church and state held by exercises temporal authority.<sup>43</sup>They also "reserve the right to advice and direct that state and religious matters and condemn injustice.<sup>44</sup>In other words, the wholesome upkeep of the state is the task of both the church and the state.

It is clear from this analysis that both Muslims and Christians have engaged in the struggle to have some medium of influence on Nigerian political culture, though historical evidence justifies the conclusion that the two groups, the Muslims are the keeper. The inevitability of these religions' interest and involvement "the major of the elites who exercise political power in Africa belong to the two religion.<sup>45</sup> Perhaps a strong reason is that the representative Muslim and Christian politicians also belong to the economical advantage social class and are able to manage a ping pong relationship religion between religion and politicians who have vociferously for mutual interaction between and are not themselves religion in the realm of the world. If religion is countenanced at all their lives, it is simply an epiphenomenal.<sup>46</sup> It only serves to provide them a language a set of value and institution through which they struggle and over which they contend, both with other and within themselves.<sup>47</sup> Ironically, religion institutes have also been serving as sacred canopies for socio-political arrangement. They have become legitimating centers of the status quo. Elected and unselected leaders go to church synod and other religious special events.

To justify their and relevant and sustain their existence in a rapid law of the land, institutional religions have joined the modern race of rational and scientific organizations of the world. Reference to the supernatural and its relevance in the age of social mobility and economic self-reliance is coming decreasingly significant. The patter of relationship has become almost impersonal and the mode of social existence is become increasingly anonymous. Society is becoming abrasive and interpersonal caring and concern being given fewer places in the conduct of public affairs. The established religion has developed, as part of their often transcends the understanding available to lay men and women, and the teachings they pound, in the light of social realities, are often arcane, abstruse and, if erudite sometime also recondite. It is nature, then that in a situation of structural inequality and political uncertainly some will seek alternative ways of deriving meaning in a word of shattered hopes, of obtaining consolation in a word where salvation seems to cost a fortune.

The new religious movement has sought to provide this distinctively religious meaning. A comprehensive grasp of these movements can be obtained in a recent work by J.K. Olupona<sup>49</sup>. It only pertinent out that their phenomenal growth is attributable to their preoccupation "largely with issues germane to the existence of the human person in this rhythm of life<sup>50</sup>. The new religious movement basically across to provide existential answer to the social and psychological anomies of life. The new religious heretically arose to provide anomie of life. They seek to provide existential answer the social and psychological anomie of life. They seem to provide a home, a community for those individuals who are dissatisfied with their life experiences in an atomized and structurally disjoined mass society.

#### 4. Conclusion

The socio-logic of the argument is that religion has its distinctive that is distinguished from and not identifiable with the functions it can in society. What a religion is should govern the type of functions it performs, but when it allows itself to be shaped by that are dictated by eternal factors, it loses its distinctive identify and become merely and ideological concept.

The researcher has also emphasized the difference in the nature of the alteration experienced by Islam and Christianity and that it is alteration that prompts the emergence of the new religions in Nigeria will continue to contend with the making involvement in the state and consequently mutilation of religion inevitable.

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