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NIGERIA

Toyin Falola and Chukwuemeka Agbo

Writing on religion and politics in the developing world, Jeff Haynes observes that:

there has been little general academic awareness of the importance of religion in most studies of politics in the Third World. Indeed, until recently it was generally considered in Western academic circles that religion was a declining force in politics in general.

*(Haynes, 1993: 1)*

Back in 1959, Wright Mills had argued that religion had no significant place in politics. He states that ‘neither preachers nor the religious laity matter, [they could] be readily agreed with and safely ignored’ *(Wright Mills, 1959: 150).* Discussing the place of religion in relation to politics and the state in the 1960s, Steve Bruce’s observation corroborates both Haynes’ and Wright Mills’ notes above. ‘Religion’, Bruce *(2003: 1–2)* writes:

In the comfortable societies of the modern industrial world is now largely a private and domestic matter. The radicals of the French Revolution may have wanted, in a phrase popularized by Diderot, to strangle the nobility with the guts of the priest. The English Methodists may have wanted to break the power of the established Church of England with the Great Reform Act of 1832. But by the late 1960s most Western Europeans would have thought there was little of interest to say about the impact of religion on politics. What we believed about the supernatural was a personal matter, its reach largely confined to the private sphere of home and hearth. Most democracies were formally secular. They accorded few privileges to their dominant churches and inflicted few disabilities on the followers of minority creeds. Modern bureaucracies managed national systems of education, social control, and social welfare that paid little attention to religious affiliation and claimed little by way of divine approval. Elites might pay lip service to some God and great state ceremonies might be graced by clergy, but piety and theological rectitude played very little part in government policies. Regional peripheries tended to be more traditionally religious than cosmopolitan centers, but that was treated, along with thick accents, as proof of quaint backwardness. In most Western societies active participation in organized religion was in decline. If the Christian churches were politically
active, it was usually in some worthy cause that was not especially religious: the plight of the homeless or the needs of immigrants. They were ignored by governments when they ignored public policy and they were ignored even by their own members when they criticized morals.

A close consideration of the religious and political history of Nigeria will provoke questions such as: is the above assertion by Wright Mills true? If it was true when he wrote his book, is the situation still the same today? Francois Foret’s comments on the interaction between religion and politics helps us to begin to answer these questions. Foret suggests that encounters between religion and politics are unavoidable. To Foret, religion and politics are two fundamentally charismatic domains where individuals may be called upon to sacrifice their lives, or where at the very least the individual enacts his or her core identity and values. It would thus be a source of wonder if there were no relationship between temporal and spiritual powers … Religion and politics are interrelated and are bound to impact each other.

(Forêt, 2015: 1)

As events in the domestic and international relations of states unfold in the twenty-first century, we are even more able to answer the above questions. A keen observation of developments in world history shows that the relationship between religion, political parties and politics continue to take new shapes and forms. The twenty-first century, for instance, has witnessed increased interaction between religion, state politics and political parties. An example can be drawn from the outcome of the presidential election in the United States in 2016.

Religious sentiments and support were one of the major strengths of the Trump campaign which ultimately gave Donald Trump victory in the 2016 US presidential election over Hillary Clinton, a candidate who, given her political profile and experience, was considered many times more qualified for the job. Clinton’s qualifications notwithstanding, Donald Trump defeated her and rode to victory largely on the wings of religion and right-wing nationalism. Eighty-one percent of Evangelicals voted for Trump during the presidential election.1 Almost two years into his presidency, Trump continues to maintain that support base. A recent CBS News broadcast revealed that 78 percent of Evangelicals still support Mr Trump’s presidency while only 18 percent disapprove of it. In the broadcast, Michael Graham, a CBSN Political Contributor, noted as follows: ‘they are in’ (talking about the Evangelicals) ‘because they have hired him to do a job’. Michael quoted an Evangelical woman as saying ‘we didn’t hire a pastor’. He says that ‘what this meant is that the Evangelicals have hired a political hitman. Donald Trump in essence has made a deal with the Evangelicals. Instead of having a president who sees you as a problem, I will be for you. It is a transactional relationship’.2

The election and continued support for the Trump presidency by the Evangelicals is a strategy for mediating conflicts between their Christian culture/values and socio-political policies that opposed them. ‘The message from the church communities now’, said Graham, is you have to do it our way. This is why they are opposed to a Hillary Clinton presidency, who spoke against their treasured ideals back in 2015. They just wanted to be left alone to practice their faith and they felt like the government was not going to do that. But Donald Trump was the guy who stepped up to create some space for them and defend their freedom.3
Rev. Samuel Rodrigues of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, responding to William Bragham’s question on why Evangelicals keep faith in President Trump, said:

public policy. Evangelical experienced or felt that in the last number of years, in the past ten years, issues of religious liberty, issues of advancing original Christian values stood in a de facto and de jure matter for that fact threatened … their ability to advance the gospel of Jesus. So, all of a sudden, we have President Donald Trump and the public policy initiatives as it pertains to faith is much more favourable to the Evangelical community indeed.4

To the Evangelicals, the future of American Christianity was at stake during the elections hence, their support of Trump. Dr Michael Yousee equally noted that, ‘Evangelicals don’t just care about the candidate, but the people he surrounds himself with. So, the choice of his Vice President and the fact that he is a Christian gave him advantage over Hilary’.5

Bruce states that ‘in the United States in the 1980s, television evangelists led powerful political pressure groups. In Britain’s parliamentary elections of 1997 the Pro-Life Alliance fielded candidates on an anti-abortion ticket’ (Bruce, 2003: 4). The events of 1997 in Britain are similar to what played out in the United States in 2016. Evangelicals believed that Trump was pro-life and supported their argument on abortion. So, they gave him their votes.

Nigeria experiences its share of the impacts of the interactions between religion, political parties and politics. Religious considerations affect not only the choice of political parties citizens identify with, it also impacts political decisions and government policies. Nigerian politicians and political party leaderships are aware that religion had become a significant and unavoidable force in its politics. The interaction between religion, political parties and politics is not new in the history of Nigeria. As far back as the colonial era, religious and political interests have overlapped.

This chapter examines the intersections of religion, political parties and politics in Nigeria. Drawing examples from Christianity and Islam, it examines how religious and political interests in Nigeria have been pursued and managed. This chapter will attempt to answer the following questions: is religion relevant to political parties and politics in Nigeria? Why do religious leaders and institutions get involved in politics? What are the reasons for the increased interaction between religion, political parties and politics in Nigeria? What factors shape the nature of this interaction?

Understanding the concepts

Efforts to study religion, politics and political parties have led to interesting conceptualisations of these terms. As a background for understanding the operationalisation of these concepts in this chapter, a few of these conceptual ideas will be highlighted in this section.

Robert A. Dowd (2015: 3) defines religion as ‘a system of beliefs in the transcendent that communities develop and use to explain the world around them’. Bruce (2003: 9–10) defines religion as ‘beliefs, actions, and institutions that assume the existence of supernatural entities with powers of judgement and action. Religion may act as an autonomous force in politics’. For Haynes, ‘religion refers to the formal religious organisation and their practices, to groups sponsored or inspired by such religious organisations and, finally, to the general models of appropriate or proper behavior that helps to organise everyday life’ (Haynes, 1993: 8).

In another study, Bruce and Wallis (1992: 10–11) suggest that religion refers to
actions, beliefs, and institutions predicated upon the assumption of the existence either of supernatural entities with powers of agency, or impersonal powers possessed of moral purpose, which have the capacity to set the conditions of, or to intervene in, human affairs. Further, the central claims to the operation of such entities or impersonal powers are either not susceptible to, or are systematically protected from, refutation.

Foret (2015: 5) adds that ‘religion retains a significant and potentially explosive power as a communicational raw material within the media and cultural landscape’.

Kenneth Minogue notes that politics was formerly restricted to ‘the actions of monarchs, parliaments, and ministers, and to the activities of the politically committed who helped or hindered their accession to authority. Everything else was social or private life’ (Minogue, 2000: 7). Bruce (2003: 9) presents his concept of politics to mean ‘the nature and actions of states and governments, to political parties, to the actions of groups intended to influence governments, and to the basic liberties that these days, states are supposed to protect’. Haynes (1993: 8) defines politics as ‘formal political institutions and the relations of power in an organized setting’.

Political parties also have received some level of attention. Edmund Burke defines political parties as ‘a body of men united for promoting by their joint endeavours the national interest upon some particular principles in which they are all agreed’. Nnamdi Azikiwe references the French sociologist, Gustave Le Bon, who sees political parties as ‘individuals differing greatly as to their education, their professions, and the class of society to which they belong, and with their common beliefs as the connecting link’. For Azikiwe (1957: 3), a political party is an organization of voters, freely and voluntarily formed, for the attainment of common ends. There is, however, an irresistible tendency actually to control the reins of government, and in so doing, there is a concentration of power in the hands of few people who are willing and have the time and ability to practice those arts by means of which the executive control is obtained and exercised.

For Adekunle Amuwo (2010: 86), political parties are ‘societal institutions that bring together like-minded men and women to wrest the levers of power with a view toward ruling according to their own agenda’.

While these definitions are important, this chapter draws more insights from the organizational aspect of Haynes’ definition. We look at religion as an organisation of people with a common belief and value system. Azikiwe’s definition of political parties suits our goal in this chapter, however, one fundamental aspect of that definition that is still lacking in Nigerian political parties is the absence of well-formulated ideologies.

**Background to the development of political parties in Nigeria**

The emergence of political parties in Nigeria dates to the colonial era. The introduction of political parties originates from the idea of majority rule as the fundamental basis for democracy (Azikiwe, 1957: 3). In Nigeria, the development of political parties followed the generally accepted idea of the time that parliamentary democracy was the standard of political behaviouralism (Azikiwe, 1957: 3). As political parties began to emerge in colonial Nigeria, the politics of imperial domination and exploitation characterised its development in the country.

The colonialists understood that a united Nigeria would be difficult to control. They, therefore, pitched the peoples of Nigeria against one another. The most profound lines of
division were ethnic and religious. Colonial Nigeria was carved up ethnically into Northern, Western and Eastern Regions, corresponding with the geographical homes of the three dominant ethnic groups in Nigeria – the Hausa-Fulani to the North, the Yoruba to the West and the Igbo in the East. Religiously, Nigeria was divided into the Muslim North and the Christian South. This ethno-religious division crept into Nigeria’s political space in the colonial era and has remained in place. Akinola has noted that political parties in Nigeria fall into two broad categories – the progressives and the conservatives. According to Akinola (2014: xiii),

the idea that one group is conservative and the other progressive, has its roots in colonial rule. The erstwhile politicians of southern Nigeria, where Christian missionaries had great influence, viewed themselves to be progressive, while their counterparts in the major political party from the Muslim-dominated north were the conservatives.

The indirect rule system which the British used to administer Nigeria helped to fuel this division. The system was better accommodated in the North which operated the emirate system of government. Power, authority and sovereignty lay in the Muslim emirs who served as both traditional and religious heads for the peoples. The emirates had a well-established system of taxation. This structure presented the British with a ready platform to colonise the people. Indirect rule was partially successful in the West where the Yoruba kingdoms existed. But it failed in the East, whose people adopted a republican political structure. European colonialists were, therefore, careful not to disrupt the religious/political structures of Northern Nigeria where the Islamic religion had been established (Post, 1964: 47).

One of the ways in which this colonial tolerance of Islam was manifested was in the educational policies of the colonialists. Akinola (2014: xiii) and Kastfelt (1994) have shown that the colonialists adopted a dual approach to education in Nigeria. The British strictly enforced the operation of two different education programmes in the country. Education in the South was in the hands of Christian missionaries. Although they were primarily interested in training the people to imbibe Christian values, they were also interested in their empowerment in other spheres of life. This ‘dual approach to education must be considered as the greatest legacy of disunity bequeathed to Nigeria by the British administration’. For instance, Falola and Agbo (2017: 621–641) as well as Kastfelt (1994) have shown that Christian missionaries and the influence of Western education which they spearheaded in the country were largely responsible for the rise of new African elites, who, empowered by the education which they had acquired and their understanding of the traditional practices of their peoples, were able to successfully wrest the political control of the country from the Europeans and lead the country to independence on 1 October 1960.

The educational policies of the colonialists left serious consequences in Nigeria’s political space.

The impact of this ambiguous educational approach on Nigeria’s party system can be viewed from two perspectives: first, the entrance of Christian missions to the non-Muslim areas of the North effected an antagonistic culture to the conservative culture of the Muslim areas; second, because the South had produced more educated men, well-nurtured in the dynamics of Western democracy, a feeling of suspicion and political incompatibility was developed by the North against the South. These effects, coupled with other tribal contradictions, would later translate into political loyalties.

(Akinola, 2014: 9)
The political loyalty referred to above was manifested in the ethno-religious focus of Nigeria’s pioneer political parties. The National Council of Nigerian and Cameroons (later National Council of Nigerian Citizens, NCNC) was the only political party at the time that started off with a nation-wide focus. But it was later pushed into focusing on Eastern Nigeria. The Action Group (AG) was a predominantly Yoruba party while the Northern Peoples’ Congress was dominated by the Hausa-Fulani. It would be recalled that it was this suspicion that led Nigeria to its bloody civil war between 1967 and 1970, ending the country’s first republic in just six years of regaining its independence from Britain. The ethnic and religious tensions introduced by the British were also responsible for the character of political party development in Nigeria. That political party formation in Nigeria first developed along ethnic and to some extent religious lines has its roots in the tense relationship which existed between the North and the South.

Religion, political parties and politics in Nigeria: an appraisal

To begin this section, it is important to take note of Kastfelt’s comments on the politicisation of religion in Nigeria:

The politicization of religion in Nigeria is nothing new. Ever since southern and northern Nigeria were united into one state in the early colonial period, the different religious orientations of the country’s regions have been inseparable from their political interests and strategies. What is new is the violent radicalization of religion which has taken place since the beginning of the 1980s. The historical roots of this tragic development, which has threatened to tear Nigeria apart along religious lines, are partly to be found in the 1950s with the emergence of constitutional regionalism and regionally based political parties.

(Kastfelt, 1994: ix)

The focus of this section is to present a critical analysis of the interaction between religion, political parties and politics in Nigeria. In doing so, emphasis will focus on the dominant religions in the country, Christianity and Islam. Kastfelt claims that the different political orientations of Nigerians cannot be separated ‘from their political interests and strategies’. Earlier in this chapter, we pointed out Wright Mills’ argument about the irrelevance of religion politics. With these two arguments in mind, this section will show that in the light of the present realities in the religious and political landscape of Nigeria, Wright Mills’ argument will not stand.

In 2015, Nigeria’s leading political party, the People’s Democratic Party (PDP), which had been in power since 1999, faced what became its fiercest electoral battle. A coalition of some opposition political parties led to the emergence of the All Progressives Congress (APC), the party which eventually won the presidential election of that year, the majority of seats at the federal legislature, as well as a considerable number of state governorships. The APC took advantage of the terrorist activities of the Islamic sect, Boko Haram, to defeat the government of the PDP led by Dr Goodluck Jonathan. The APC also laid several accusations of corruption in the PDP government as well as raising claims that Nigeria’s economy was in bad shape. These three issues became the major campaign arguments of the APC as it promised Nigerians to make these issues the core focus of its government if elected to office. Muhammadu Buhari, a former military dictator, was the presidential candidate of the APC. Goodluck Jonathan of the PDP who was seeking re-election was ousted by the victory of the APC at the polls.

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Expectations were very high on the new feats the incoming government had promised. On 29 May 2015, the Buhari presidency was inaugurated, shifting the burden of leadership to the APC. It was time for the new government to nominate members of its cabinet as well as heads and directors of different federal government-controlled parastatals and agencies. This was the beginning of trouble for the APC as its insensitivity to religious matters immediately began to tear the government apart.

It has become a convention in Nigeria’s politics to maintain some kind of religious balance in making federal appointments. Where the presidential candidate of a political party is a Christian, the vice-presidential candidate is automatically drawn from Muslims and vice versa. In 1999, Olusegun Obasanjo, the presidential candidate of the PDP, a Christian, chose Atiku Abubakar, a Muslim, as his vice president. In 2007, Umaru Musa Yaradua, the presidential candidate of the PDP, had Goodluck Jonathan as his vice president. President Yaradua died in office in 2010 making way for Jonathan to become president. Jonathan was immediately faced with the challenge of choosing a vice president. He chose Namadi Sambo, a Muslim. In 2015, Muhammadu Buhari of the APC chose Yemi Osinbajo, a Christian pastor, as vice president.

In the sixteen years that the PDP controlled the federal government of Nigeria, 1999–2015, religious considerations were also a very important issue to consider in their allocation of the party’s strategic offices in its National Executive Council. In 2014, when the APC was formed, the party’s major challenge with gaining the confidence of Nigerians, especially Christians, was the allegation that its officials were mostly Muslims. Thus, Christians, especially in the South, concluded that the APC was a party of Muslims with the agenda of Islamising Nigeria if voted into power. The candidacy of Muhammadu Buhari, a devout Muslim, did not help matters for the APC. But the APC managed to win the election despite its alleged Muslim domination.

The next issue for the new government was nominating members of the president’s cabinet. Again, religion was a major consideration. The Buhari presidency failed to demonstrate that it understood the character of politics in Nigeria. Buhari’s appointees were dominantly Northern Muslims. For example, in his appointment of security chiefs, the APC government of Muhammadu Buhari was accused of laying the foundation for the Islamisation of Nigeria by appointing more Muslims to lead the country’s most strategic security institutions. In fact, one of the major issues the APC and its government have had to deal with in its almost four-year rule is religious confrontations. It would appear that the PDP did better with managing religious matters than the APC has done. This is traceable to the poor handling of sensitive national issues by the Buhari administration.

One such sensitive issue is the wanton killings that have characterised the conflicts between the Fulani cattle breeders and local farmers in different parts of the Nigerian Middle Belt region. Nigeria under the APC government of Buhari has witnessed gross insensitivity by the presidency on the country’s diversity while value for human lives could be said to be at an all-time low. Fulani cattle breeders share two things in common with Buhari – they come from the same region as the president and they are mostly Muslims. Christian leaders constantly accuse the president of victimisation and also condemned him for allegedly entertaining religious and ethnic sentiments in his handling of the uncontrolled killings of innocent Nigerians, mainly Christians, by his Fulani kinsmen.

The Buhari government has not only refused to condemn these killings, it has also failed to take responsibility for the security of lives and property in the regions most affected by these killings. President Buhari himself did not accept that Fulani cattle breeders were responsible for the killings in Central Nigeria. Instead, he shifted the blame to the late Libyan leader, Muammar Gaddafi. While on a visit to Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Buhari said:
the problem is even older than us. It has always been there, but now made worse by the influx of armed gunmen from the Sahel region into different parts of the West African sub-region. These gunmen were trained and armed by Muammar Gaddafi of Libya. When he was killed, the gunmen escaped with their arms. We encountered some of them fighting with Boko Haram. Herdsmen that we used to know carried only sticks and maybe a cutlass to clear the way, but these ones now carry sophisticated weapons.\(^7\)

On another occasion, the Special Adviser to President Buhari on Media and Publicity, Femi Adeshina, responded to the killings in Nigeria by releasing a checklist of killings under the PDP. At a time when the APC government was expected by Nigerians to find a solution to the killings in the country, the party and its officials in power resorted to blame games and finger-pointing. In the over three years of its administration, this is common with the APC and the Buhari government. In an article published in one of Nigeria’s newspapers, Reno Omokri noted with disappointment the ‘childish’ behaviour of the president and his officials, describing the checklist as a reduction of the lives of Nigerians to a ‘mere killing contest’.\(^8\) Mr Omokri noted that the president was dealing with issues in different parts of the country with different standards and rules. He tasked the president to take responsibility for every issue in the country, just as he takes credit for federal government projects initiated under the previous administration of the PDP but completed under his tenure. A lengthy excerpt from Omokri’s notes is instructive at this point to help our understanding of the situation in Nigeria. Omokri writes:

What a kindergarten President Nigeria has in Muhammadu Buhari. This is the same man who on Tuesday July 26, during his visit to Plateau State said: ‘there is nothing I can do to help the situation except to pray to God to help us out of the security challenges.’ Did we elect a president or a prayer warrior? I am shocked with Buhari’s statement that there is nothing he can do about the herdsmen violence other than pray. Did he pray before ruthlessly dealing with the Indigenous People of Biafra? Did Buhari pray before unleashing his army to kill 347 Shiite men, women, children, and infants on Saturday, December 12, 2015? Did he not send the military to kill defenseless IPOB demonstrators? How come he has now been reduced to prayers when it comes to his kinsmen? To say that Buhari is too sectional and biased to govern Nigeria is an understatement … President Buhari is able to roar like a lion for IPOB, for Shiites, for militants, and to some extent to Boko Haram, but when it comes to his beloved herdsmen kinsmen, he turns [in]to a pussy cat … [and] a prayer warrior.

[T]welve hours after the Plateau killings, the Miyetti Allah\(^9\) Chairman spoke with a journalist and justified why herdsmen members killed almost 200 Christians in Plateau State and then eight hours later, the Buhari Presidency releases a statement absolving the herdsmen, who already claimed responsibility, and blaming politicians! And besides, look at the insensitive statement President Buhari released. It is so shameful that President Buhari’s statement blamed the death of 150 Nigerian citizens in Plateau on ‘one hundred cattle that were rustled by a community in Plateau.’ Even if this were true, does that justify killing 150 people? Is that the type of a talk a president talks? And I can’t believe President Buhari called what happened yesterday in Plateau State a ‘herdsmen/farmers clash.’ Those are his exact words. In 2018, more people have died from herdsmen attacks in Nigeria than the total 2018 war casualty in Afghanistan. These are not clashes. This is WAR! According to the International Crisis Group, herdsmen killed 2500 Nigerians in 2016, while Boko Haram killed 1079 in the same
year. Where is the sense in Buhari declaring victory over Boko Haram when his herdsmen are killing 2 and a half Nigerians for every Nigerian killed by Boko Haram?

Responding to what has been described as confusion and incompetence by the APC, religious leaders, especially Christians, have spoken out at various occasions against the killings and the government’s response to them. Bishop David Oyedepo, the president and founder of the Living Faith Church (AKA Winners’ Chapel), has on several occasions challenged the government to take responsibility for its failures. He has also consistently condemned the cattle breeders’ killings of Christians, describing them as a form of Jihads aimed at the extermination of Christians from Nigeria and converting the country into an Islamic state. Oyedepo has alleged that the president is in support of these killings hence his refusal to condemn the killings and take responsibility towards ending it and protecting Nigerians from such attacks.

Citing a communique released by the Fulani Nationalist Movement, Bishop Oyedepo stated that the Fulani claimed to have received Nigeria as their inheritance from God. He further said that they claimed to have invited Muslims from around the world to come to Nigeria for a holy way to take over Nigeria. Further, Oyedepo has also criticised the government for its failures in securing Nigerian citizens, building a robust and prosperous economy, and the provision of basic amenities which the APC promised Nigerians during the campaigns. On one of such occasions, the revered bishop asked the president to resign because he was not performing.

Early in the year, another popular pastor, Prophet Isa El Buba, on at least two separate occasions spoke against both the president’s conduct and the Fulani cattle breeders. Buba described the herdsmen as terrorists. He called President Buhari wicked. He encouraged all Nigerians to get their permanent voters’ cards (PVCs) and prepare to vote out the president in the upcoming general elections in February 2019. He advised the country to elect a leader who would fulfil God’s purpose for the country whether he/she is a Christian or a Muslim. Addressing the killings by the Fulani herdsmen, Buba asked the people to defend themselves because it is better to die fighting than to die a coward. After one of Prophet Buba’s messages against the government, the president was reported to have sent Nigeria’s secret police to arrest the pastor for criticising his government. But members of the pastor’s church vehemently resisted the arrest of their pastor.

Furthermore, the Senior Pastor of the Dunamis International Gospel Center, Pastor Paul Enenche, has been very vocal in his condemnation of attacks against Christians and the inability of the government of the APC to live up to its responsibilities. Beside open condemnation of these killings and government’s failures, Pastor Enenche and Bishop Oyedepo had at different times led their congregations in prayer and fasting sessions for divine intervention in the country. These churches have also been involved in helping surviving victims of these attacks who now live in displacement camps because their houses and businesses were destroyed in the attacks.

The unfortunate conditions in Nigeria painted above provoke important questions: first, why do religious leaders and institutions get involved in politics? What are the reasons for the increased interaction between religion, political parties and politics in Nigeria? And, what factors shape the nature of that interaction? The remainder of this chapter shall briefly discuss these questions.

One of the possible explanations for the involvement of religious leaders and institutions in politics is that religion serves as the conscience of the nation. In the midst of corrupt leadership and poor value system in the society, the examples cited above would appear to suggest that religious leaders and institutions position themselves as moral judges for the society. The examples of the Fulani cattle breeders and the carnage they have unleashed on their victims and
their communities presents a clear example of how religious outcry plays a major role in redirecting the society and its leadership to reprioritise its values. The society through religious institutions have to some extent held the government accountable for the uncontrolled loss of lives and property in the affected areas.

In the midst of the failure of political parties and the governments they sponsor to power to meet the citizens’ expectations and deliver the dividends of democracy to the people, religion becomes an alternative for them to reduce the effects of government failures. Haynes has observed that:

From the 1970s, government legitimacy plummeted in the wake of corruption, economic failure, and political repression. People turned to others to champion their interests. Ethnicity and religion intertwined in a cultural worldview … utilized potent forms of pressure within and upon political systems to try to gain political ends. As ruling elites failed to deliver the developmental goods in the overwhelming majority of Third World states, their own legitimacy was called into question by religious and/or ethnic leaders, who often framed their criticisms in religious doctrinal or sub-nationalist terms. Such leaders’ motivations were religious, political or personal; frequently, however, concerns were mixed. Such calls came in the midst of the failure of modernization to improve generally the poor’s living standards. Religion in its myriad forms would become an alternative to the failed certainties of the secular global ‘religious’, communism, socialism, liberal democracy, and capitalism.

(Haynes, 1993: 7–10)

Whether the motive behind the activism of religious leaders and their institutions are informed by collective or personal gains, what is most important to us in this chapter is that they present the people with a unifying platform to hold political parties and the governments they produce responsive to the demands of the people. Religious institutions since the colonial period have been significantly involved in nation building in Nigeria. Kastfelt (1994) has shown how Christian missionaries were instrumental to the development of Western education in the Adamawa Province in Northern Nigeria during the colonial era. In the last 16 years, religious institutions have invested markedly in the education sector in Nigeria. The Living Faith Church which Bishop Oyedepo heads, for instance, has established schools at all levels of education across Nigeria. With two universities and many of its elementary and high schools scattered across the nation, the church is a leading figure in the twenty-first-century development of education in Nigeria. The Redeemers University was established by the Redeemed Christian Church of God. Different dioceses of the Anglican church have combined to establish universities in the Eastern and Western regions of Nigeria respectively.

Bruce (2003: 1) believes that poverty in the developing world is responsible for the increased interaction between religion and political politics. He notes that ‘religion in the comfortable societies of the modern industrial world is now largely a private or domestic matter’. Religion does not only offer succour and hope to the people, it turns them to God as the solution to their problems and, where necessary, offers financial and material support to members to alleviate whatever they may be passing through.19

Another important explanation for the nature of the relationship that occurs between religion, political parties and politics in Nigeria is religious diversity. In his study of the interaction between Christianity, Islam and liberal democracy, Dowd opines that religious diversity affects how religious leaders and ordinary believers apply their faith to politics. Christian and Islamic religious communities in Sub-Saharan Africa have tended to contribute more effectively to the
formation of a liberal democratic political culture in settings that have long been religiously diverse than in those settings that have long been religiously homogeneous. Religious diversity has prompted religiously inspired support for liberal democratic political culture – a political culture that is characterised by social tolerance and civic engagement (Dowd, 2015: 2).

This is the case for Nigeria where the tensions between Christians and Muslims and the activism of political leaders have helped to strengthen the country’s democracy. As Nigerians prepare to choose their next set of leaders in 2019, a peace committee comprising Christian and Islamic leaders are working towards peaceful elections in the country. The committee recently got the presidential candidates of different parties to sign a peace accord which, among other things, binds them to ensure that both themselves and their supporters eschew violence and conduct themselves in ways that will not jeopardise the peaceful atmosphere needed to have a successful election exercise.20

The influence of religious diversity seems also to suggest that geographical location and environmental factors shape the nature of the relationship between religion, political parties and politics. Dowd (2015: 6) records that ‘the religious, economic, social, and political environment may prompt religious leaders and ordinary believers to amend social teaching and create new political theologies’. One example of how a religious organisation adjusts in different environments to achieve political ends could be found among the Islamic community in Onitsha, Eastern Nigeria. Muslims in Onitsha have recognised that they constitute a minority in a predominantly Christian society. They have, therefore, adopted the strategy of supporting the traditional leadership of Onitsha people as well as the state government as a way of recording their presence in the city and gaining some level of political influence.

Every year, during the ofala festival21 of the Obi22 of Onitsha, Muslim leaders in Onitsha visit the Obi with gifts to pay homage to the king. This has facilitated their gaining the Obi’s audience whenever they have any issue that required his attention. Likewise, whenever a new government is elected in the state, these leaders visit the governor to congratulate him/her and introduce themselves to him. Every Christmas, they send gifts to key leaders in the state. They do the same during Islamic festivities as well.23 The above example goes to corroborate Bruce’s (2003: 95) assertion that the political behaviours of religious leaders and their institutions is determined by their size and power relative to the rest of the population.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that while the nature of the interaction between religion, political parties and politics in the developed world seem to be concerned with the preservation of religious values from political policies that threaten to erode them, in Nigeria, the relationship is defined by the politics of development. Thus, every society functions with its own challenges in mind. The concern of Nigerians is to first have a government that respects and upholds the sanctity of human life by putting in place a well-developed security structure.

As Nigerians strive to break the lines of poverty and have their basic needs provided for, religion responds to political parties and politics with these issues in mind. Widespread poverty has contributed to the increased interaction between religion, political parties and politics. As successive governments fail to meet the peoples’ expectations, citizens seek solutions from other means. Religious institutions play the vital role of providing the needed alternative.

Religious diversity and the seeds of division planted by the colonialists continue to fuel suspicion and divisive politics in Nigeria. It was in line with this that Nigeria’s first republic political parties were mostly formed along ethno-religious lines. This was also the reason why the APC found it difficult to be accepted by Christians when the party came on board in 2014.
Notes

2 See ‘Why the Evangelicals Still Support President Trump’, www.youtube.com/watch?v=mROBFuEYE.
3 ‘Why the Evangelicals Still Support President Trump’, www.youtube.com/watch?v=mROBFuEYE.
6 See www.counsehero.com/file/p7cv3f/Edmund-Burke-had-defined-the-political-parties-in-1770-thus-Party-is-a-body-of/.
9 Association of Muslim cattle breeders.
11 Jihad is the Islamic word for holy war.
12 www.youtube.com/watch?v=1AszEMiOcE.
13 www.youtube.com/watch?v=pDJalmD8bQ.
14 See www.youtube.com/watch?v=9zsKy6t6A7Q.
15 www.youtube.com/watch?v=vExnpGPYg0J0 and www.youtube.com/watch?v=T6CBPmNNQfE.
17 See www.youtube.com/watch?v=dVgRJG-kWnw and www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vvdx84JuYc. See also www.youtube.com/watch?v=wBZ-79GSILw.
19 www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZVkJR.2vAF8ok.
20 www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oan65LESc5k and www.youtube.com/watch?v=txTPJ0OU_DM.
21 Ofala is the annual commemoration of the coronation of the Obi of Onitsha.
22 The Obi is the title of the monarch of Onitsha Kingdom.
23 Interview with politician, Ilyasu Mohammed, 2014.

References


