

The Role of Religion in Political Transformations of Africa

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Abstract

Religion, the social institution which deals with man's relationship with the supernatural, has so much force that it has made meaningful contributions to political transformations in Africa. The diversity of religious beliefs and practices has played a pivotal role in shaping its political landscape. Kiros (2002), writing about the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, observed that "the church's teachings, values, and organizational structures have provided a foundation for Ethiopian national identity and have been instrumental in the country's resistance against foreign domination" (p.208). In the same vein, different religious leaders in Nigeria have, at various times and in different government regimes, influenced government policies that have made positive impact on the lives of Nigerians. This paper explores the role that religion has played in the political transformation of Africa. It will highlight how religion serves as a source of identity and mobilization and its impact on human rights and political reforms. Theories of social identity and resource mobilization will be used and data exploited from books, journal articles and Internet resources. The paper concludes that religion, if given the pride of place, will help to transform Africa in the foreseeable future.

Keywords: Religion; Politics, Transformation, Diversity; Africa.

Introduction

Religion, which is that social institution which deals with man's relationship with the supernatural or spirit beings, is invaluable to make the human society work. It performs innumerable functions some of which deserve a mention.

1. Religion promotes social cohesion. Religion inculcates shared values and beliefs that unite people from different backgrounds and this helps to create a sense of common purpose and identity, which can be especially important in diverse societies. Berger (1967) believes that:

Religion helps to unite a society by promoting not only the spiritual dimension of the society but also bringing about a unitize force to which every member of the

society will subscribe and, in cases where the cultures are diverse, religion tends to provide a single canopy for all the members of that culture. (p.31).

2. Provides a sense of community. Religion provides a sense of community and belonging to its practitioners especially for people who feel isolated or marginalized. This, according to Durkheim (1995), can be through participation in religious rituals, attending religious services or simply interacting with other members of the same faith.

3. Source of social support. Religion offers social support in times of need such as during a crisis or a period of hardship. This is usually through the provision of financial assistance, emotional support or simply a listening ear. This has led Stark and Bainridge (1985) to conclude that:

Religion, which many have predicted would die off due to scientific revolution, will continue to exist as long as humanity exists. It gives solace to those who are going through hard times, creates hope for the downcast, mobilizes support for those in needs and, gives meaning to life. (p.47).

4. Source of moral code. Religion furnishes the society with the moral code that guides people's behavior. This invariably helps to promote social order and stability as well as protect people from harm. Many social scholars believe that without religion, morality, the principles which distinguish between right and wrong or good and bad behavior, will not be achieved in the society.

5. Sense of identity. Religion also provides a sense of identity for people who feel lost or confused about who they are. This can be through the adoption of religious beliefs and practices as well as the sense of belonging to a religious community. According to a study by Smith (2020), "people who were religious were more likely to report feeling a sense of purpose in life than those who were not religious. The study also found that religious people were more likely to have a strong sense of community and belonging than those who were not" (p.173). In Nigeria as well as in Africa, religion has created a deep-rooted sense of identity which made it possible for people of diverse cultures and languages to come together as one entity. Jones (2019) agrees that "religion can help people to cope with difficult life events. Religious people were more likely to report feeling supported by their faith when they were going through a difficult time" (p.4).

6. Lastly, Religion as a source of mobilization. Religion has the ability to stimulate people especially their members to oppose or challenge government or political decisions they consider inhibitive. This is evident in the proliferation of religious movements that have made great impact on political narratives across the continent. Kiros (2002), writing about the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, observed that "the church's teachings, values,

and organizational structures have provided a foundation for Ethiopian national identity and have been instrumental in the country's resistance against foreign domination" (p.208).

Historically, Africa has a diverse religious landscape, comprising of indigenous African religions, commonly referred to as African Traditional Religion, various Christian denominations and Islam. Colonialism, missionary activities, and globalization have all shaped religious landscapes, affecting the interactions between religion and politics in Nigeria in particular and Africa in general. The main focus of this paper is to examine the role religion plays in political transformations in Africa. What it has done, what is left to be done and, how religion can help in the democratization of the continent of Africa.

Theoretical Framework

Theoretical framework, for the purpose of this short paper, refers to a set of interconnected concepts, theories, and principles that guide the researcher's understanding of the phenomenon being investigated or studied.

Polit & Beck (2017) agrees that "it provides a conceptual lens through which researchers can interpret and analyze their data, helping to develop a robust and structured research study" (n.p.). Creswell (2014) further states that theoretical framework serves to contextualize the research problem within an established body of knowledge and contributes to the generation of new insights or theories in the field ... (p.86). In this paper, two theories will be used--theories of social identity and resource mobilization.

Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory refers to a socio-psychological theory which explains how people's sense of self is influenced by their group membership. It is a theory that has been used to explain a wide range of social phenomena including intergroup conflict, prejudice and discrimination. It provides a useful framework for understanding how religion can function as a source of social mobilization influencing collective action and shaping group dynamics. Tajfel and Turner (1979) asserts that "Religion plays a crucial role in the formation of social identities. It provides a sense of belonging and shared values, which contribute to the development of a religious group's distinct social identity" (p.35). Propounded by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in 1979, the theory has been used to develop interventions that helped to reduce intergroup conflict and promote social harmony. In Nigeria as well as Africa in general, religion has been used to foster intercultural cohesion and promote harmony amongst different groups. Ndukwe (2000) has observed that "Religion helps to improve social identity when it brings individuals together and they are more likely to engage in collective action, driven by a sense of duty and commitment to their religious community" (p.43).

Resource Mobilization Theory

This theory highlights the ability of religious organizations to mobilize their resources, including human, financial, and organizational to effect political change. According to McCarthy & Zald (1977), It examines how religion provides social capital, networks and organizational structures that can be utilized for political activism, advocacy and social transformation (n.p.). Scholars agree that resource mobilization theory emphasizes the importance of socio-political contexts in shaping mobilization efforts. Factors like social networks and institutional opportunities provide an in-depth analysis of the external conditions that contribute to collective action.

Snow, Soule & Kriesi (2004) believes that:

The theory of mobilization highlights specific mechanisms that drive collective action, such as framing processes, recruitment strategies, or the role of leaders. These mechanisms offer valuable insights into the micro-level dynamics that mobilize individuals and groups to act in matters most favorable to their community (n.p.).

From the foregoing, it is apparent that the theories of social identity and resource mobilization are so intertwined that it becomes evident that religion influences social dynamics, group cohesion and intergroup relations. While the theory of mobilization provides explanatory power and attention to contextual factors, social identity theory enriches our understanding of identity processes, intergroup conflicts and in-group favoritism. These theories are pertinent to this short paper in that they provide bases for interpreting the roles religion have played and will continue to play in the political transformation of Nigeria in particular and Africa in general.

Relationship between Religion and Politics

In Africa, religion has been an integral part of societies and has significantly had impact on political transformations throughout history. It will be pertinent, therefore, to outline some of the contributions religion has made in this regard:

1. Indigenous African Religions

Indigenous African religions have played a role in political transformations by shaping societal values, ethical systems, and modes of governance. For instance, African traditional spiritual leaders have often played influential roles in mediating conflicts, providing socio-cultural guidance, and promoting collective identities. Kalu (cited by Agbiji & Swart 2015), has argued that:

The intrusion of spirituality in contemporary political dynamics is, firstly, given impetus by the claim of African politicians that African political ethics are rooted

in an African traditional worldview. Secondly, religion is employed in the political and economic spheres by those who legitimate their power by appealing to ritual sources to be found in traditional religion and culture. These two factors “enable traditional secret societies such as Ogboni, Nyamkpe, Owegbe, and Ekine to serve as instruments for mobilising economic and political power” in contemporary African society (pp.4-5).

2. Islam

Islam was brought to Africa through trade and conquest, and it has significantly influenced politics in Muslim-majority regions. Islamic scholars and institutions have contributed to governance systems, such as the establishment of Sharia law, which has had implications for political structures and legal frameworks.

3. Christianity

Christianity has had a profound impact on politics in Africa through colonialism and missionary activities. Christian churches have played a role in shaping political ideologies, human rights movements, and resistance against oppressive regimes.

This has led Agbiji & Swart (2015) to conclude that "Religion constitutes the main fabric of African societies, and is intertwined with their general existence, including their socio-political and economic development" (p.2).

Religion and Democratization

Religion has always played and will continue to play enormous role in the democratization process in Nigeria and Africa in general. Religious movements, for instance, have, at different times, effectuated political and social change by mobilizing communities and advocating for political reforms.

Kagoro (2000) has observed that:

Religion has intersected with the process of democratization in Africa. As countries transition from authoritarian regimes to democratic systems, religious organizations have played crucial roles in advocating for human rights, social justice and political reforms. In Uganda, the Inter-Religious Council of Uganda (IRCU) emerged as a significant force during the democratic transition in the 1990's. The IRCU, composed of leaders from various religious groups, facilitated dialogue, mediated conflicts and promoted peaceful elections. Their involvement ensured that religious values, such as justice and inclusivity, were integrated into the democratization process (p.1107).

Elphick & Davenport (1997) further recalls that:

Religious movements have frequently been at the forefront of political resistance and liberation struggles in Africa. Religious leaders, motivated by their spiritual convictions, have mobilized their followers to challenge colonialism, fight for independence, and advocate for social justice and human rights. ... One notable example is the role of clerics during the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. Figures such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Reverend Frank Chikane utilized their religious platforms to condemn the oppressive regime and advocate for equality. Their moral authority and involvement in political activism influenced both local and international perceptions, ultimately contributing to the fall of apartheid in South Africa (n.p.).

In Nigeria, religious leaders have also been at the forefront of calls for political change. In 2012, according to Achimefu (2013), a group of Christian and Muslim leaders formed the National Peace Committee to mediate the political crisis that was unfolding in the country. The committee was successful in brokering a deal between the government and the opposition, and it helped to prevent a civil war (p.3). Ndukwe & Iheaka (2023), discussing the 2023 Nigerian general elections, recalls that:

Many have argued that since Nigeria is a multi-religious country and in order to avert a religious marginalization, a Christian or a practitioner of another faith other than Islam should be elected as the president of Nigeria come 2023. Furthermore, there are those who believe that Christians have suffered more marginalization in the present Buhari administration than the previous administrations and so should be allowed to accede to power with a view to correcting the imbalance (p.118).

Ndukwe & Iheaka posits that religion often influences the political landscape of countries in Africa. The clamor for a religio-political shift in the 2023 Nigerian general elections goes to show the deep-rooted interposition of religion in the democratic process in Africa.

Again, during periods of colonialism and apartheid, religious movements such as liberation theology played significant roles in advocating for justice, human rights and political freedom. Religious leaders, acting as moral authorities, played a crucial role in mobilizing communities and resisting oppressive regimes. Okefor (2018) notes that:

Religious institutions have provided social services including education, healthcare and welfare, filling gaps left by the government. And, religious leaders have acted as moral compasses and mediators offering guidance and conflict resolution mechanisms in times of social or political crisis (p.31).

Religion as an Instrument for Poverty Alleviation

Poverty is a global problem that affects billions of people. According to the World Bank (2016), about 736 million people lived below the international poverty line of \$1.90 per day in 2015. This number is expected to decrease to 689 million by 2030, but even this number is still too high (n.p.). Unfortunately, Africa is one of the worse hit continents due to many factors such as war, economic inequality, drought, political instability, unemployment and, sad to say, the prosperity sermons of the religious clerics which tend to make the youths in Africa to become indolent and expect manna to fall from heaven.

To define poverty, Townsend (2006) states that:

People can be said to be in poverty when they are deprived of income and other resources needed to obtain the conditions of life--the diets, material goods, amenities, standards and services--that enable them to play the roles, meet the obligations and participate in the relationships and customs of their society (p.5).

Burkey (1993) further defines poverty as:

In terms of basic needs and he distinguishes between absolute and relative poverty. Absolute poverty refers to the inability of an individual, a community or a nation to meet basic needs such as the need for food, shelter, potable water, healthcare and education. Relative poverty refers to conditions where basic needs are met, but where an inability persists to meet perceived needs and desires. Most African countries fall within the absolute poverty category (pp.3-4).

To help alleviate poverty in Africa, religious organizations need to:

1. Provide common services to their members or communities. Such services will include food and shelter, education, healthcare, micro-financial help such as loans, job training and community development.
2. Promote social justice and economic development of their immediate environment. Agbiji & Swart (2015) laments that:

Religious practitioners have often encouraged "God-talk" that weakens the resolve of the masses to rise up against unjust political and economic systems in Africa. Much of this nonchalance with regard to public issues is initiated by the political elite and given impetus by religious leaders and by the faithful. In the face of socio-political and economic challenges on the continent, instead of Africans rising to the challenge, they resort to prayer. Whilst praying over issues of socio-political and economic importance is necessary, prayer should not replace responsible actions that are geared towards fighting unjust systems (p.8).

3. Provide a sense of community to the poor, the elderly and persons with disabilities.
4. Encourage hard work in their communities. St. Paul instructed Timothy to encourage members of the church to work for their provisions thus "But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially his family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an infidel" (1 Timothy 5:8; New King James Version).

The Holy Quran also says "man will not get anything unless he works hard" (Surah al-Najm, 53:39). This implies that nothing belongs to man except what he strives for, there is no doubt about the fact that man cannot make any progress without effort and hard work.

Religious leaders should avoid the get-rich sermons of today's messages and emphasize more on hard work which brings about God's blessings.

5. Avoid the politicization and radicalization of religion. This has, unfortunately, led to violence, deaths, injustice, poverty and hardship which will be very difficult to eradicate from the continent.

Kalu (2010) believes that:

Religious riots and Islamic terrorism in Nigeria, Kenya, Libya, Egypt and other parts of Africa all demonstrate the negative impact of religion. These negative trends have not only claimed hundreds of thousands of human lives but are also responsible for the enormous destruction of resources that could have been used for the development of African nations (p.278).

The Way Forward

To sustain the transformational change that has characterized the political landscape in Africa due to internal and external forces, the place of religion and its role in helping the transformation process should not be pretermitted.

This paper believes that the following factors will invariably help to move Africa forward positively in the foreseeable future:

1. Avoid Religious Leaders Paley with Politicians

The Paley between religious leaders and politicians has been criticized in many forums, scholarly works and other forms of discourses. They are often seen as being too closely aligned with the government or the opposition and it makes it difficult for them to maintain their credibility and to build trust with the people. It is, therefore, incumbent on the religious leaders to focus on people, develop and inspire trust, have a long-term perspective, show

originality and challenge the status quo and, of course, dissociate themselves from the political class.

2. Reorientation of Religious Ideology

Religious leaders' inability to contribute to positive social transformation in Nigerian society as well as Africa as a whole was to a great extent the result of a negative leadership ideological orientation that has shaped the mind-set of the religious and political leadership for centuries. Agbiji & Swart (2015) has, therefore, cautioned that:

Nigerian religious and political leaders should be reminded that they are not simply [spiritual or] political heads [respectively]: they are the divine symbols of their people's health and wellbeing. Christian religious leadership ideology should be re-orientated towards the wellbeing of the Nigerian populace, who find themselves engulfed in poverty and deplorable living conditions. This should be seen as a sacred responsibility that should be diligently carried out. As leaders, the office is the link between human rule and spiritual rule. Christian religious leaders should re-orientate their leadership ideology and practice based on the conviction that their prophetic voice and engagement are both a social and spiritual contract for which they are accountable to God and to the people of God. (p.244).

3. Encourage Good and Accountable Leadership

It is obvious that one of the banes of African positive transformation is poor leadership. This led Achebe (1983) to assert that "the problem with Nigeria is simply a failure of leadership" (p.1). Agbiji & Swart (2015) opines that:

Christian religious leadership has a responsibility to rise to the challenge of addressing the scarcity of credible leadership in Nigeria so as to be able to engender sustainable transformational development. Most of the leaders in Nigeria identify with both the church and with other religious entities. Nigeria, for example, boasts a large Christian population which is engaged on a daily basis at different levels in Nigerian society. This implies that a well-mobilised Christian fold with the desirable leadership and development ideology could effectively contribute towards the socio-economic and political transformation of the nation. (p.5).

Conclusion

Religion has played positive roles in the political sphere of Nigeria and other countries in Africa. It has also helped to transform the society by embarking on helpful projects that benefit its communities. Religious organizations also promote social justice and economic development. It is the utmost belief of this paper that, to help entrench a political transformation in Nigeria and Africa in general that will persist:

1. Religious leaders need to deal with internal divisions within their own communities. This, according to Haynes (2015), will help make it possible to speak with a united voice on political issues.
2. The religious leaders can use their moral authority to speak out against injustice and to promote peace and democracy in their domain.
3. They can also work to build bridges between different socio-religious and political communities and to promote tolerance and understanding amongst different faiths.
4. Religious leaders need to be willing to engage in the political process; work with other stakeholders including the government, the opposition and civil society organizations. They also need to be willing to compromise and to build consensus.
5. Lastly, they should divorce themselves from unnecessary relationship with the government and politicians which normally lead to unfair compromise.

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