

**CHRISTIANITY'S PERCEPTION OF POLITICS IN NIGERIA AND ITS
AMBIGUITIES**

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Abstract

Christianity is a structured religion that shows how the work of the government leads to peace and order. The power in charge shows itself through Christian scriptures, such as the Bible, and traditions passed down from the Church's Apostolic Fathers. Between the 14th and 18th centuries, Christian missionaries brought Christianity to Nigeria. The study seeks to investigate the Christian perception of politics and its ambiguity in Nigeria. In 1914, the north and south were united, forming Nigeria into a single nation with diverse ethnic backgrounds, cultures, and religions. Politics in Nigeria is perceived differently depending on the mindset of the governing authority. As a result, the governed experience dual emotions in their negative and positive output. To collect the necessary data, interviews and related literature are used. Christians in Nigeria are to promote good politics that will eliminate corruption and religious supremacy.

Keywords: Christianity, Religion, Missionaries, Nigeria, Politics

Introduction

Despite assertions to the contrary (including in research studies and newspaper reportages), religion continues to impact, if not fuel, political choices in many parts of the world, including in Nigeria (and sub-Saharan Africa). Hence, any thought or dream of an eclipse of the impact of religion on political and socio-cultural decisions, is yet to materialize. Indeed, it may never(materialize), since the mix of faith and ideologies is or appears (at least for now) unrelenting. Against the foregoing context, a thought on Christianity's perception of politics becomes essential, particularly in Nigeria where religion is recognized as an important factor in all ramifications of the people's life - political, socio-cultural and even economic. Therefore, Thus, given its undeniable influence and significance in Nigeria's overall, religion has become both a source for active participation as well as tension and confusion, in politics (in Nigeria), and more for its (religion's) perception of politics. Thus, this essay investigates Christianity's perception of politics and its confusion in Nigeria.

Broad overview on the idea of perceptions in politics

There is no denying that perceptions of politics can affect people's behavior in different ways, whether as participants or players in the political process. This explains why psychologists who have studied political partisanship through the point of view of social identity theory, argue that members of a group – social, religious, or otherwise - are usually motivated to promote and protect the group (they belong to) and its interest. Weir (2019) corroborates the above when he argues that individuals are often motivated to defend and justify the status quo, even when doing so appears to go against their own self-interests, but as long as the group to which they belong – including religious groups, support it.

In other words, it is evident therefore that how individuals and groups perceive issues (or things) informs and influences their attitude or how-they-treat them. Hence, the axioms that actions are influenced by conceptualizations or understanding is true, even of, or in, politics.

From the politics angle, one would argue that the gains and losses, or progress and retrogressions in the political process, including voter participation and apathy, electoral malpractices and other elections-related malfeasance, are linkable, and in some cases strictly traceable, to a person or peoples' understanding, nay perception, of politics per se. Understandably, the extent to which perception informs actions may not be so easy or so clear to determine or state strictly, what is true is that perceptions play a role in decisions and/or actions, and this applies to Christianity and politics. A study of Christianity's perception of politics and its implications is, therefore, not out of place.

Christians' and Christianity's perception of Politics

We observe that existing studies on Christianity (including in Nigeria or elsewhere) point to or agree on the absence of an unanimous definition, or a one-brush-fits-all, perception of politics by Christianity. This is true of Christians too. What is evident is a general, if not generic, appreciation of the interrelation between Christianity and the State down the ages.

In all, Christianity has had a chequered relationship with political power down its history – starting from the time of Christ (in his brushes with the agents or representatives of the State), through Rome (when Christians were misunderstood and vehemently maltreated, till Constantine's 'intervention'), and till date. Notably, the reign of Emperor Constantine marks a great point in Christianity's closeness to politics as Christians and Christianity were allowed to flourish undisturbed by State power. The relationship between Christianity or the Christian religion and politics around the world has however not always been cordial or friendly, partly because of the perception and attitude of Christians to politics.

While the involvement of Christians in politics since the time of Constantine have differed across the world,¹ but the general attitude of many Christians to politics for centuries

¹This claim is in reference to participation, including actively, by Christians in the different types of government that has obtained around the world in history, including some autocratic government or leadership (like Hitler), socialist and democratic leaders too.

generally, had been one of a complete lack of interest (in politics). It is an indifference that has its background in the Christian scripture, the holy Bible, or better still, in a misreading of the Bible. We shall return to this shortly.

The differences in perception of politics by Christians, including in Nigeria, points to a lack of any unanimous conceptualization or position on politics, by Christianity. The denominationalizing of Christianity in the years since the fifteenth century breakaway of Luther from the Catholic Church, has widened rather than narrow, any possibility of 'a one voice' of Christianity on issues, including on politics. And the gulf keeps widening with newer socio-cultural and political issues bringing more differences of opinion (in Christianity).

And now to the *raison d'être* of the observable lethargy of Christianity (and Christians) to politics. The apparent indifference of Christians to politics may have other sources, but they have been strongly linked to a reading, or misreading of the Christian scripture. Thus, Christ's injunction "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's" (see Matthew 22: 21), has been read by many as a rejection of any involvement in and with politics, by His followers. While studies have exegetically given interpretations to what Christ's command in Matthew 22:21 truly implied or implies, the truth remains that a misunderstanding of the text had contributed to if not caused, an aloofness to politics or any political involvement by Christians. Also, Jesus' injunction to His followers that they are '... not of the world' in 15:19b has been (mis)interpreted by Christians to equate a denunciation of the world, and all in it, including political power and participation. For the above reasons, for some, Christianity perceives politics as something dishonourable, to be avoided. The experience of St Paul who initially persecuted Christians whose their lives upset the political set-up of the time, but who with time came to see Christ 'the evidence that this age was, after all, passing away thus becoming a proclaimer of a messianic judgment (Acts 2:47), stands out for Christians too. St Paul's acceptance of Christianity despite his former high-standing religio-political role that saw him execute letters that led to the death of Christians, has been interpreted as a further sign of evidence of the divorce between Christianity and political power. In fact, no more than Jesus did Paul think of any gradual reform of the Roman Empire, and despite his Roman citizenship he obeyed God rather, or at least more, than man. Some Christians in imitation, or mis-imitation of St Paul despair of political rule, like he did of Roman political rule.

The case is even worse among Catholics whose priests, otherwise spiritual guides, are outrightly banned from partisan politics by the Canon Law which is the guiding of the Church (see Canon 1983, no. 285.3; 287.2), a situation that became somewhat akin to 'if the head is stopped from taking part, how safe is it for the members to take part in it?

On the other hand, however, there are evidence of attempts by some Christians, particularly the popular ones (among them), to project their personal, individual and sometimes selfish views on political issues as that of Jesus Christ or God's.² It is apposite to underscore that

²Mention is made here of the politicking of some Christian leaders especially during elections, wherein some of them claim their individual political feelings or positions as 'prophecies' and therefore revealed t them by Christ or God. Some of them even go so far as 'anointing' or 'endorsing' their preferred candidates, while making it seem as if it is God's decision. In many cases, such claims have turned out for what they are: mere individual feelings or positions of the individuals involved, and not representative of Christ and Christianity.

efforts by individuals to see their individual opinions as Christ's or Christianity's, should be understood for what it is, that is: personal (sometimes selfish) views, and not a universal unanimous position of Christianity. Thus, what individual Christians perceive politics to be is more their personal idiosyncratic opinion, and not any universal norm of Christianity on what it (Christianity) perceives politics to be. Undeniable too, is that the attitude or situation whereby individual Christians cast their personal opinions or views as Christ's or God's, goes to raise questions or issues on whether there is a perception of politics common to Christianity, and what such a perception is on the long run.

Christianity Does Not Shun Politics

The foregoing notwithstanding, Christianity does not encourage an aversion for politics. It is a misreading of the Christian scripture and misinterpretation of its laws, to associate the faith with a loathing for politics, irrespective of what understanding one has of politics. A broad view of Christianity's understanding of politics – especially as seen in Nigeria, therefore indicates that Christianity has continued to support and advance the future of humanity and the society by governments and citizens. Furthermore, Christianity's perception of politics in Nigeria (going by existing studies and praxis or experience), does not show the faith or religion as having a one-way or one-view position, on politics, a point which agrees with or supports the assumption that the perceptions of politics do often vary widely, including from person to person, and are based more on such other variables like ethnicity, personality, skill-set, and the likes.

The evidence on this study or topic demonstrates that that determining a 'true' level of politics within an organization is likely impossible, because the constructs involved can be construed as largely perceptual in nature, which is often not the case. Hence, some decisions that could be assumed on face level as owing to religious teaching, could actually contain elements, or other constructs, that are far from religion. Some conclusions could be drawn, therefore, on the perception of politics by Christianity in Nigeria, but that does not erode completely the existence of other underlying perceptions as undergirding political observation, participation or even a complete denunciation of politics (by Christians). The above summation applicable to Christianity in Nigeria, is true of Christianity elsewhere around the world too.

Perhaps, that Christianity has does not shun or encourage shunning politics, rather has interest in it (politics or political development) even when its' perception is observably fluid, could be seen in the case of the Catholic Church's Holy See. The Holy See (of the Catholic Church)'s diplomatic office recognizes (and engages too!) many countries of the world and its leaders, irrespective of the type of government in power in such States or countries. So, how what is Christianity's perception of politics and how is it a source of (or solution to) confusion in Nigeria?

A Summary of Christianity Perception of Politics!

The flowing nature of Christianity's overall perception of politics notwithstanding, it could be categorised and viewed from three standpoints highlighted elsewhere by Heywood.³ Hence,

³A, Heywood., Politics, Government and the State, in *Political Theory: An Introduction*, ed. A. Heywood, 51–88. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004

Christianity views politics firstly as the art or act of governance. This view of politics is the more traditional understanding of politics by Christianity, and therefore current. According to this view, politics is concerned singularly with government and its many institutions and agencies. Politics for this perception, deals with the just administration of the available human and material resources with the core motive of advancing humanity, or the society. This position has consequences, or follow-up, one of which is that politics is for this 'perception' or standpoint, more or less only a means to better organize or run the society or a group. This view or perception is however a restricted one (on politics!) since it sees politics to be the concern of just a small portion of the society, to wit: the legislature, the executive including governments departments, and so forth.

Next, there is the understanding of politics by Christianity that aligns with what Heywood calls the 'public affairs conception'. This perception sees politics from a mainly Aristotelian prism and distinguishes it into a 'public' versus 'private' sphere. In other words, present in this view of politics by Christianity is the dualism that characterized Aristotelianism per se, but has contains within itself the drawback of denoting explicitly where the distinction between the public and the private lies. To this particular position, that is of politics as public affairs, politics is conceived or understood as what is happening or has to do with the public range. Heywood (2002:8) actually notes a clarification of the 'public' versus 'private' distinction as one that links the former (public) to what concerns the state, while the latter (private) concerns the civil society. Thus, the ambient of the 'public' often capture or has to do with institutions such as the army, social security systems, and the police, as “they are responsible for collective organisation of community life”. The 'private' aspect instead are groups or agencies like companies, families, trade unions, and golf clubs and the likes, which are mainly or mostly designated as “non-political” as such, since they are mainly organized and managed by individuals and for themselves. In Christianity's perception of politics is therefore present this dualism of a public and private sphere, wherein politically related activities – including political campaigns, voting, party politics etc – are viewed or seen from a public vs private perspective

A third distinction in Heywood which fits into Christianity's perception of politics, a perception that views or holds that “politics is power”. It is a perception that has wider appeal or is the most popular perception, especially when compared or contrasted with the other two conceptualizations. This understanding of politics moves beyond the view that politics is bound to certain sphere(s), and is present in the different spheres of life. According to the tenets of this conceptualization of politics, it (politics) goes beyond any spatial configurations to any existing social relations. Politics is by this position seen in different ramifications of life, including between parents, among fellow Christians in the Church, as well as between Muslims in the mosque, in government and/or between States.

We argue, against the backdrop of the above, that what has characterized Christianity's perception of politics has generally remained one of ongoing evolution, besides its teachings on the points of moral and doctrines. The sum of Christianity's perception of perception could therefore be reducible to the three models above, and they have consequences which have been far-reaching. For instance, the above existing perceptions of politics has left Christians either aloof or distant, others partisan, and yet some just participative in politics and matters

related to it'.

Christianity's Perception of Politics and Confusion the World

The influence of and the interplay of religion and politics points to it as a universal phenomenon, even if sometimes it is difficult to specify exactly the extent of the one on the other. Across the world, religion has sometimes subtly (and at other times openly!), appeared as a serious concern in politics, including during elections and on policies and programs of governments. This is not peculiar to Nigeria or Africa, but to the whole world.

A clear example of the interplay of religion and politics could be seen in case of the United States of America. About the US in this regard, one observes that religion is often whipped up on the flimsiest of excuses to divide the people along party, or political lines, including on such issues as immigration, abortion, war and the likes. Elsewhere in Europe, the rise of nationalist governments in parts of Europe,⁴ have been linked to concerns with religion and its preservation. Hence, sentiments are easily whipped up at will along religious lines, even by clearly irreligious parties and politicians, all in the bid to win votes or push across a policy or policies, a situation that Kratochwell (2005) christens as the resurgence of religions on political decision-making at international level. Whether the open and subtle mix of religion in or with politics (in America and Europe) is understood as a 'resurgence' or an 'advent' a Christian perception of politics in those place ie America and parts of Europe, what comes through in the phenomenon is that the perception of politics by adherents of the various faiths, including Christians, informs or underpins their attitude towards politics, particularly in the arguments and choices they make on issues.

In sum, the perception of politics plays out in the people's attitude to it, and Christians are not left out. The case is not peculiar to Nigeria, rather gleanable in some other parts of the world, especially in America and Europe. It ought not be surprising when Christian who are politicians play partisan politics vaunting Christianity, because a very thin line demarcates the extent of each – religion and politics, towards the other. What is no doubt detestable then is a situation where religion and religious issues becomes instrumentalized in politicking, including by politicians who are Christians, as such usually leave division and confusion in its wake, both in individuals, the society but within the faith community too.

Christianity's perception of Politics and confusion in Nigeria

Christianity's perception of politics is believed to be responsible for the attitude of Christians to politics, and in politics in Nigeria. The said attitude of Christians arising from the perception of politics by their faith, no doubt has tremendous impact on the Nigerian society. The somewhat undecided nature of Christianity's perception of politics – besides its (Christianity's) general concern for overall well-being of the individuals and the society, explains the actions and inactions of Christians in the nation's politics, and the confusions

⁴Like in the rise of Viktor Orban in Hungary and Matteo Salvini in Italy among others, and their latching on religion to promote their purely ultra-nationalistic agenda or programs.

therein or involved. Hence, it remains undeniable that what Christianity perceives politics to be matters a great deal to the wellbeing and future of Nigeria, especially giving the teeming Christian population in the country.

That there are confusions arising from Christianity's perception(s) of politics in Nigeria is indubitable, neither are the reasons for the confusions far-fetched. First, the observable fluidity in the perception of politics by Christianity has been a source of confusion, for Christians and others too. It is challenging for many Christians to make political decisions – except on purely moral issued, based on any roundly-accepted position of Christianity in Nigeria.

The nature of politics in Nigeria itself has not helped issues. While politics is broadly seen 'a group of activities which are connected or associated with the making of policies, drawing up of programs and taking of decisions for the good or advancement of a group or state, including the disbursement of resources and appointments or positions. as the distribution of resources or statuses, the nature of politics in Nigeria has had its troubling peculiarities. It is such that party manifestos and policies ae jettisoned at will, and politicians continue to change parties effortlessly - a situation that rubs off on Christians who are politicians, with many seemingly unsure of what to stand for or what not stand for in their bid to be good party members, including in supporting their party members.

Furthermore, as already hinted a misreading or misinterpretation of the Christian bible – Christianity's *magna carta*, by Nigerian hassled to confusion among Christians, creating different groups of Christians with different attitudes to politics. For instance, there are still many Christians in Nigeria who see politics (and the world in its entirety) as anti-Christ (their founder) or anti-God, and therefore shun politics completely since being, in their understanding, a worldly (read evil!) venture. Their paradigm of Christianity finds root or explanation in a wrong perception of the Augustinian *two cities* – City of God and the earthly City, where there is absolutely no, or just very little relations, between god's city and the humans. We acknowledge nonetheless that there are many Christians who view politics as a step towards implanting Christina values in the world, and take part in it, including in voting and being voted for. What is clearly evident in the two attitudes is confusion arising from the understanding of Christianity's teachings, by Christians.

Christianity's perception of politics in Nigeria, has not been helped by the sometimes-exaggerated denominationalism present in Nigerian Christianity. The truth remains that despite the existence of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) - the umbrella body of the different Christian denominations in the country, that Christians have rarely agreed collectively on politics (even if they have all been concerned about policies and practices that go obviously or allegedly, go against Christianity. The situation has certainly not been helped by Christian leaders, especially some of who seeming think themselves superior, richer or 'more connected' than others. In all, the divisiveness on politics have left the Christians without a one-voice on politics, rather with din of voices. It has been a source of confusion for Christians on what Christianity's perception of politics is, rather than (voice) of unity.

Conclusion

It is unquestionable that religion matters in Nigeria – as it touches on different aspects of the people and the country's life. Nevertheless, religions (Christianity, Islam, Judaism, ATR) have not always touched Nigeria in expected ways, particularly nationally. Religion has more or less served often as tool for mobilizing voters and supporters during political campaigns, and for other parochial political reasons (regardless of faiths and denominational), but not for the core people-oriented policies, programs or engagements, that politics entails. Despite the foregoing, there is no understating that fuller participation of Christians, as well as a more Christianity-influenced politics would be a powerful witness for the faith, especially to the basic principle of Christianity: love of God and neighbour, without strings.

In sum, how Christianity perceives politics is as complex as could be imagined, and more for existing denominational and individual Christians positions, than for outright neglect of Christ's teaching, in its (Christianity's) position on politics. Christianity continues to contribute strongly to issues that touches on politics including the economy, justice and integral development among others. Again, Christianity continues to challenge and encourage its members, that is, individual Christians to participate in politics, contribute to nation building and to work for greater good of the society, and these despite the confusion that emanates within and from both politics and religion in Nigeria.

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