



# CODESRIA

**12th General Assembly**  
Governing the African Public Sphere

**12e Assemblée générale**  
Administrer l'espace public africain

**12a Assembleia Geral**  
Governar o Espaço Público Africano

ةي عم جلا ةي موم علا ةي ن اشل ا رشع  
حكم الفضاء العام الإفريقي

## **Religious Space in the Nigerian Public Sphere: Its Burdens and Prospects**

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07-11/12/2008  
Yaoundé, Cameroun

## **Abstract**

An average political scientist across the globe would think that political spaces are ordinarily filled with political smartness, ingenuity, manipulation, strategising, calculating, harnessing of good political manifestoes, consistent campaigns, simple foresightedness, formulation and effective execution of political policies among other factors. But this is not absolutely the case in Nigeria where religion is always a factor in her public sphere in spite of the constitutional claims that the country is a secular nation. This obvious fact has not received much scholarly attention, hence the justification of this study. Therefore, this paper attempts a survey of the content, intent and context of religious spaces in Nigerian public sphere as manifested in spiritualising of politics and election, interpreting of political manifestoes, voting patterns, choosing of candidates and party leadership, swearing of oath of office designing and executing of political policy, to mention but a few. Attention is also paid to the implications of the above variables for promotion of political ethics and ideologies. Within the context of information to be gathered through interview from selected political functionaries, actors and actresses coupled with historical document of political evolutions in Nigeria and analysed within the ambit of functional theory of religion, this work examines factors, which, create a space for religions in the Nigerian public sphere relevant at a time when some schools of thought have predicted the possible abolition of religion in public domain. However, the work equally looks at the burdens and prospects inherent in the religionization of public space in Nigeria. From this standpoint recommendations would be made towards making religion qua religion a continuous veritable tool for promoting good governance of Nigerian public sphere on the one hand and African public sphere on the other hand now and in the future.

## Statement of the Problem

It is sociological truism that Public sphere discourse is multidimensional and multidisciplinary in content and context<sup>1</sup>. Relating it to Governance in Africa to which, it is closely knitted, we notice that more often than not an average political scientist across the globe does think that African public sphere particularly political spaces are primarily characterised mainly by political smartness, ingenuity, manipulation, strategising, calculating, harnessing of good political manifestoes, consistent campaigns, simple foresightedness, formulation and effective execution of political policies among other factors<sup>2</sup>. But this is not absolutely the case in Nigeria<sup>3</sup> where religion is always a factor in her public sphere. This remains constant in spite of the belief in some quarters that religion is redundant in the modern age. Therefore, those who belong to such school of thought even advocated for the death of religion<sup>4</sup>. In Nigeria, this obvious fact has not received much academic attention in governance and public sphere discourse, hence the justification of this study which, surveys and discusses the content, intent and context of religious spaces in Nigerian public sphere as manifested in *sacredizing*, *sacrilegizing* and *colourizing* of politics and election, interpreting of political manifestoes, voting patterns, choosing of candidates and party leadership, swearing of oath of office designing and executing political policy from religious points of view, to mention but a few. Attention is also paid to the implications of the above variables for promotion of political ethics and ideologies in the modern Nigeria.

Methodologically, our subject matter in this paper is approached from historical and analytical points of view. This decision becomes expedient given the fact that governance and public sphere by nature are inherently historical; hence the need to dig deep into the history of religious occupation of the Nigerian public sphere. The study covers the periods such as pre -- colonial, colonial, post colonial and contemporary times in Nigeria during which, religion *qua*

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<sup>1</sup> Habermas, Jürgen, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Cambridge Massachusetts: The MIT Press, p 30. See also Fraser, Nancy, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy". *Social Text* 25 (26): Duke University Press, 1990, pp 56–80. It is also republished in Fraser, Nancy, *Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy*, vol. Habermas and the Public Sphere, Cambridge Mass.: MIT press, 1992, pp. 109–142,

<sup>2</sup> J. F. Ade Ajayi and B. Ikara, *Evolution of Political Culture in Nigeria*, Ibadan: University Press Limited and Kaduna State Council for Arts and Cultures, 1985

<sup>3</sup> We have chosen Nigeria as our case study in order to do in-depth study and also as a result of the need to avoid overgeneralisations often associated with political discourse among some scholars

<sup>4</sup> Leon Morris, *The Abolition of Religion*, London: Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1965

religion could be said to have influenced both negatively and positively the Nigerian public sphere. In light of this, relevant political, official cum historical and non historical documents such as daily newspapers, magazines, the constitution, national anthems and national pledge among others were collated and scrutinised with a sociological tool which, has its roots in Durkheim's functional theory of religion. It asserts that religion is a functional element in society<sup>5</sup>. The information gathered from such an enterprise would be harnessed with information gathered through interviews from selected political functionaries, actors and actresses in Nigeria. The work, however, in addition would look objectively and analytically at the burdens and prospects inherent in the religionization of the public space in Nigeria.

In terms of scope, the work is divided into seven sections covering the concepts of Governance and public sphere, governing of the Nigerian Public Sphere at a glance, Religious space in the Nigerian public sphere , manifestation of religious space in the Nigerian public sphere, burdens and prospects , concluding remarks and finally the recommendation which, is geared at making religion *qua* religion a continuous veritable tool for promoting good governance of Nigerian public sphere on the one hand and African public sphere on the other hand now and in the future.

### **The concepts of Governance and Public sphere**

Governance has to do with exercise of power and authority to rule and control political affairs of a people or group of people at one time or the other. But ultimately, the power to rule belongs to the people who through a process or some processes such as selection, handpicking or election transfers such power to a vested authority. The people or perhaps better put, the public do not rest on their oars after transferring their power to certain authority as earlier stated: they still influence the political affairs because they are at the receiving end regarding how such vested authority is used.

One of the channels of exerting influence on the government is what scholars tagged as public sphere which, in the words of Hauser Gerard, is an area in social life where people can get together and freely discuss and identify societal problems, and through that discussion influence political action. That is, public sphere is "a discursive space in which, individuals and groups congregate to discuss matters of mutual interest and, where possible, to reach a common

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<sup>5</sup> E Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* ,trans Joseph Ward Swain(New York; Collier, 1961) p52

judgment.<sup>6</sup> In the context of this definition, Fraser, Nancy describes the public sphere as "a theatre in modern societies in which, political participation is enacted through the medium of talk and "a realm of social life in which, public opinion can be formed"<sup>7</sup>.What can further be generated from the above is that public sphere presupposes participatory democracy which, by implications rests on the capacity of and opportunity for citizens to engage in enlightened debate. This brings to the limelight the relevance of public opinions which, essentially are characterized by attitudes, perspectives, and preferences of a population towards events, circumstances, and issues of mutual interest, .It ultimately snowballs into political action thus making public opinions a tool in public sphere for steering political activities relating to formulation and execution of governmental policies ranging from social to economy, science to technology and education to business among others. At every point government is expected to listen to the public sphere; this makes for legitimate government.

### **Governing of the Nigerian Public Sphere at a glance**

Nigeria political history is filled with various political developments spanning different periods in time but starting from the period before colonisation during which, it operated her unique traditional political structure and which, had theocratic tendencies. This was characterised by the rules of Oba (among the Yoruba), Obi (among the Igbo) and Emir (among the Hausa).The government was divided into three segments that is legislature, executive and judiciary. In this structure, there was no absolute separation of power. However, there were rooms for check and balances and public opinion reinforced by such social structures as councils of chiefs, age-grade associations, warrior bands, secret societies and religious injunctions<sup>8</sup>. Precisely, religion and mythical ancestry played pervasive role in this system of government and to a large extent the government was also characterized by public participation in public policy-making.

This type of government gave way to foreign rule in 1906 during which Britain formed the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria. The period also witnessed the establishment and perhaps the institutionalization of foreign religions such as Christianity and Islam in Nigeria. Each of these religions played vital roles in colonial rules in Nigeria. For example, the colonial masters

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<sup>6</sup> Hauser, Gerard "Vernacular Dialogue and the Rhetoricity of Public Opinion". *Communication Monographs* 65 (2), 1998: 83–107 Page. 86.

<sup>7</sup> Fraser, Nancy "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy" *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press 1992, pp. 109–142

<sup>8</sup> B. Dudley, *An Introduction to Nigerian Government and Politics*, London: Macmillan, 1982

gave more power to the Emir to rule and contain their subjects in such a way that they were made obedient to the imperial rule. This came through what is called indirect rule. Christian missionaries who brought Christianity also became involved in politics and “thus religion was used to manipulate ethnic groups, and to acquire and consolidate political and/or economic positions<sup>9</sup>. Thus, religion and politics served as part of the motivation for mass conversions to Christianity.

In 1946, Britain via her agents – (colonial masters) divided Nigeria into three regions based on tribal divisions. After a lot of agitation for self rule by nationalists both at home and abroad, in 1960 Nigeria became an independent country<sup>10</sup>. The first five years of the country were marked by growing ethnic rivalries. This brought about military rule from 1966 to 1979; civilian government was restored on October 1, 1979, under a western-style constitution promulgated in 1978. This constitution was suspended following a military coup on December 31, 1983. The military seized power in 1983 and ruled fully or partially till May, 1999, when a civilian president was sworn in. During the military regimes, the public and their opinions were not reckoned with in the political system as some members of pressure groups who suggested the need for public involvement in governance were killed, jailed or sent on exile<sup>11</sup>. From 1999 to date, the government is in the hand of civilians.

However, generally speaking, the Nigerian public space has been characterised by some degree of popular participation, which, according to Adedeji and Otite involves three things viz: (1) the opening up of political space to accommodate more people, freedom of opinions, tolerance of differences and acceptance of consensus on issues (2) ensuring the full participation of all the people and their organizations and associations (3) creating necessary conditions for such empowerment<sup>12</sup>. The participation further manifested in the formation of associations to defend and promote their interests in the public realm. The whole structure is often politicised and religionized for the purpose of influencing the public realm to satisfy the interest of their members. It is in the light of this background information that we shall proceed to discuss the space religions occupy in the Nigerian public sphere

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<sup>9</sup> Casmir Chinedu O. Nzeh. *From Clash to Dialogue of Religions: A Socio-Ethical Analysis of the Christian-Islamic Tension in a Pluralistic Nigeria*. Peter Lang Press. Berlin, GER: 2002, p. 174.

<sup>10</sup> J.S. Coleman, *Background to Nigerian Nationalism*, Broburg and Wistrom, Benin City, Katrineholm, 1986

<sup>11</sup> T. Babawale, “The Impacts of Military Rule on Nigerian Federalism” in Tunde Babawale, etal (eds) *Nigeria: on Governmental Organizations and democracy*, Fredrich Ebert Foundation, Malthouse, Lagos, 1998, pp73-87 1997

<sup>12</sup> A. Adedeji and O Otite, *Nigeria: Renewal from the Roots? The struggle for Democratic Development*, London: and Ijebu Ode : Zed Books and ACDESS, 1997, p7

## **Religious space in the Nigerian public sphere**

What we intend to demonstrate in this section is that religion *qua* religion occupies significant space in Nigeria public sphere as a case study. This is manifested in the reading of religious meanings into the conception, understanding, and workability of African public sphere. This tends to suggest that religion and politics intertwine as far as Nigeria is concerned. This development, no doubt is a clear manifestation of the popular Mbiti thesis that Africans are notoriously religious, and each person has its own religious system with a set of beliefs and practices. Religion permeates all departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it<sup>13</sup>. Relating this to politics brings to mind the idea of theocracy which, is a government by a god/God; that is, a kind of polity in which, God is regarded as the sole sovereign and the laws of the realm are regarded as divine commands. In practice, theocracy manifests in the belief that God is the political king, ruler or leader who rules his people indirectly through a set of people (leaders). These rulers in the words of Mbiti<sup>14</sup> are regarded as earthly viceroys or earthly vicegerent in traditional African societies. It is interesting to note that belief in theocracy is also cardinal in Islam<sup>15</sup> and Christianity<sup>16</sup>. Under such an arrangement, the state is seen as the enforcement and necessary agency of religion because African people had tendency to deviate from societal norms only to consequently depend on religion for its authority. This perhaps further explains why many African nations and even advanced nations in history were subordinated to the religious institution in its act of governance. For example, an excursion in history reveals the theory and practice of church-state relations the world over especially in the medieval Europe prior to the 18th century enlightenment age when educated people thought that beliefs should depend on reason and scientific proof<sup>17</sup>. While advanced nations like the US severed religion from her polity, Nigerian nation still invokes religious sentiments in acts of governance. However, there has been much demand today for separation of religion from politics so that each could exist on its own without undue interference. The workability of the total separation remains in doubt as religion continuously manifests in her body polity, including its public sphere.

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<sup>13</sup> J.S. Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy* London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 1969, p.1

<sup>14</sup> J.S Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* London: Heinemann, 1980, p82

<sup>15</sup> See Qur'an III; verse 27

<sup>16</sup> Romans 13:1-3

<sup>17</sup> R: L; Johnstone, *Religion in Society: A Sociological Approach*, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2001, p131

### **Manifestation of Religious space in the Nigerian public sphere**

It is worthy of note at this starting point that religious practitioners and in fact religious institutions are part and parcel of Nigerian public sphere. They have capacity to influence politics and society. At group or sub group levels, religious practitioners do meet, freely discuss, identify societal problems, and through such structure influence political action. This is done by interpreting religiously governance in its entirety especially as it relates essentially to policy formulation and execution of public import. In other words, every governmental machinery such as political power, authority, and control are coated with religious flavour and they therefore provide a basis for government legitimacy and the need for obedience to constituted authority. The government officials too, do influence the public under religious canopy in marketing and implementing their political policies. This feeling is expressed in conception of political power and nation, political manifestoes, voting patterns, choice of candidates and party leadership, and swearing of oath of office. We shall prove this assertion as follow:

### **Conception of Political Power and Nation**

An average Nigerian public believes that political power is of God and whoever gets the power must have gotten it from God. This perhaps is the basis of the popular dictum that the voice of man is the voice of God. Nigerian Christians are fond of quoting the Bible stating that all authority is ordained while Muslims also explain the concept of political power and nation as something that have their bases in Islamic principle of unity which, are part and parcel of Islamic -predestination theology<sup>18</sup>. Even ordinary election results which are man-made and mere practical political action are explained religiously. All the riggings and election malpractices associated with 2007 elections were explained away religiously to the extent that some private and public figures or individuals (who ordinarily should have come together to protest the rigging and through that influence political action in the country), advised the so called losers against taking their cases to election tribunals. In our estimation, this practice is anti-public sphere in theory and practice at a time when there is a need to correct social ills in our contemporary governance.

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<sup>18</sup> M.W. Khan, Islam ;creator of the Modern Age, New Delhi: The Islamic Centre ,1993p23



The concept of nation is not conceived in the same way by political scientist and religious person. For example, the concept of a nation which, to political scientists, is interpreted just a human community possessing an historic territory, shared myths, symbols, and memories, a common and distinctive public culture, and common laws and customs for the members is interpreted by an average Nigerian as a religiously based community. This mentality impeccably reflects in the preamble of Nigerian constitution which states as follows:

We the people of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, having firmly and solemnly resolved, to live in unity and harmony as one indivisible and indissoluble sovereign nation *under God*, dedicated to the promotion of inter-African solidarity, world peace, international co-operation and understanding and to provide for a Constitution for the purpose of promoting the good government and welfare of all persons in our country, on the principles of freedom, equality and justice, and for the purpose of consolidating the unity of our people, do hereby make, enact and give to ourselves the following Constitution<sup>19</sup>.(the italic is mine )

Adjunct to that is the ending of Oaths of Allegiance sworn by public officers with the word ...*So help me God*. However, this practice which, is not peculiar to Nigeria falls under what Jonathan Smith labels as civil religion, which, refers to the set of religious or quasi-religious beliefs, myths, symbols, and ceremonies that unite a political community and that mobilize its members in the pursuit of common goals<sup>20</sup>. According to Jean –Jacques who was the first to use the term, civil religion implies that:

there is a purely civil profession of faith, the articles of which, it behoves the sovereignty to fix, not with the precision of religious dogma, but treating them as a body of social sentiments without which, no man can either be a good citizen or a faithful subject<sup>21</sup>

The idea of civil religion refers to the view of some people that the foundation of their societies and the events that mark its progress through history are parts of a larger, divine scheme of things. This thesis could also best explain religious coloration of Nigerian national symbols such

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<sup>19</sup> See a copy of the Constitution of the Federal republic of Nigeria,1979

<sup>20</sup> J. Smith (ed) *The Harper Collins Dictionary of Religion*, San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1995p.275

<sup>21</sup> 'Of Civil Religion' in *Social Contract* (ed), Ernest Barker, London. Oxford University Press, 1960,pp305-306

as currency, statue, tower, national anthem and national pledge. These symbols among others are of national significance because they signify common national traits which, by implication, remind Nigerians of their origin, history, and political development. Such consequently propels them to work in unity as people of common identity and origin.

### **Choice of candidates**

Election time always provides an opportunity for the public to get together, freely discuss and identify societal problems inherent in politics, and through that discussion influence political action by nominating or selecting candidates of their choice. One of the problems is whipping of religious sentiment into public matters in such a way that interests of people belonging to different religions are taken care of. At this time, supporters of almost every candidate for public office at all levels can be heard during the campaign talking about trying to get the “Catholic vote”, “Muslim vote”, “Baptist vote” or “Pentecostal vote”. Such interest according to Johnstones gives very explicit recognition to the correlation that exists between religious affiliation and commitment on the one hand and voting behaviour on the other hand<sup>22</sup>. In Nigeria, such practice is spearheaded by religious bodies such as CAN (Christian Association of Nigeria) and the Nigerian Supreme council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) in such a manner that the choice of a candidate to a public office is made with reference to religious affiliation such candidate belongs. At this point, we hear of Christian /Muslim or Muslim/ Christian ticket. This is common where we have two positions running concurrently such as the positions of President and Vice President, Governor and Deputy Governor. This practice is evident in the political history of Nigerian past leaders as shown below:

1. Nnamdi Azikiwe /Tafa Balewa (Christian / Muslim ticket), (1960 – 1966)
2. Shehu Shagari/Alex Ekwueme – (Muslim/ Christian)-1979-1983
3. Buhari / Idiagbon (Muslim/Muslim Ticket)-1983-85
4. Babangida/Ebitu Ikwe, Aikhomu (Muslim/ Christian)-1984-93
5. Shonekan/Abacha (Christian / Muslim ticket)-1993-97
6. Abacha /Diya, (Muslim/Christian Ticket) 1997-98
- 7 Abudusalami/ Akhigbe (Muslim/ Christian) 1998-1999
- 8 Obasanjo/Atiku (Christian / Muslim ticket) -1999-2007

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<sup>22</sup> R. Johnstone, Religion in society :A Sociology of Religion, Sixth edition, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2001 p134

### **Religious law as bait during electioneering campaign**

We have instances in which, religious bodies put pressure on politicians to entrench their religious laws in the governmental structure as a condition to secure their votes. Some politicians count on this note and therefore during electioneering campaigns in Nigeria, promise to introduce one religion law or the other if he/she is voted into power. For example, the immediate past Governor of Zamfara state, Alhaji Ahmed Sanni Yerima during his electioneering campaign in 2003 promised the Northern Muslims that Sharia laws would be introduced in the state if Muslims voted for him. On the basis of this, he got elected and on getting to power, he made the state an Islamic state with the introduction of Sharia law. However, the development had since then generated controversy among Christians and Muslims in the state because Christians in the state complained of being denied their religious rights and freedom<sup>23</sup>.

In the same year, 2003, Major General Muhammad Buhari of the ANPP adopted the same strategy when he was alleged to have advised Muslims not to vote for Christian candidates but Muslim candidates. This development has also generated argument, counter argument and war of words in the media and public forum among Christians and Muslims. Christians did not only condemn the standpoint of Buhari but they also asked for public apology from him<sup>24</sup>. Save for several appeals from the CAN and individual Christians, the controversy could have degenerated into a religious war. On the account of this, we can argue that whipping of religious sentiments is a serious issue posing threats to democracy because of the danger inherent in it. Perhaps it is in the light of this that Ahanotu exclaims that:

The struggle on how the Muslim or Christian communities will live and be governed in the modern state Nigeria has produced mutual fear, suspicions and tension. There is religious shivering, certain verbosity and quite a bit of irritation in both communities<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> J.K. Ayantayo, "A Sociological Examination of Interreligious Conflicts in Africa" in I.O Albert (ed) *Perspectives on Peace and Conflicts in Africa. Essays in Honours of Gen (Dr) Abudusalami Abubakar*, Ibadan: Peace and Conflicts Studies, University of Ibadan in Collaboration with John Archer Publishers, 2005, pp 55-64.

<sup>24</sup> "Cleric wants Buhari's apology before April polls" Reported by Silvanus Eze, *Nigerian Tribune*, Wednesday 26 February 2003, p13

<sup>25</sup> Ahanotu, Austin Metamora, *Religion, State and Society*, Ahanotu, Austin Metamora, (ed) *Religion, State and Society*, New York: Peter Lang, 1992;p89

### **Use of God language**

This is another significant instance in which, religion is brought into the election process. Spiritualization of election entails the use of God and religious language rather than capitalizing on political terms bordering on political manifestoes which, parties or individual contestants intend to offer the public in order to convince them about the need for them to be voted for. This practice was pronounced during the second republic (1979 to 1983). For example during the electioneering campaigns of the National Party of Nigeria in 1979 and 1983, the party made bold of the fact that it meant well for the nation because it was the only party laid on religious foundation. On the account of this, the party appealed for one Nation with one Destiny under one God. Some Northern Christians interpreted this to mean that Islam is being placed over and above Christianity in Nigerian politics. This generated acrimony and insinuations in some quarters on the ground of the assumption that the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) was designed to advance the course of Islam against Christianity. It is no wonder why some Christians in that circle likened the idea of raising one finger as the logo of the party during electioneering campaign to mean one religion, which, is Islam. Given this, the same set of people therefore interpreted the raising of two fingers by the Unity Party of Nigeria, to mean two Gods /gods which, is tantamount to polytheism. For this singular reason, Muslims in the Northern part of the country were enjoined not to vote for the Unity Party of Nigeria. According to Hassan Kukah, the concept of one Nation with One Destiny under God, which, was advanced by the N.P.N., was an extension of the old Nigerian People Congress's (NPC) One North, One People. He adds that the same was also set within the context of the politics of the late Sardauna of the Northern ruling class<sup>26</sup>. One could be tempted to subscribe to Kukah's thesis because in the Northern part of the country especially during the first republic, religion was a factor in advancing the political interest of the Northern elites. Alliances among parties were done with religious considerations. For example when NEPU went in alliance with NCNC, a Southern party, they were projected as people who had sold out their religion<sup>27</sup>. In the same vein, those who were outside the NPC were regarded as traitors who had departed from the path of God, the idea that the party had constantly advanced. It is important to note at this juncture that it had been the Article of faith within the Northern Caliphate that "the hand of God is on the community and he who sets himself apart

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<sup>26</sup> Hassan Kukah, *Religion, Politics and Power in Northern Nigeria*, Lagos: Spectrum Books Limited, 1993, p146

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p13

from it will be part in the hell. He who departs from the community by a hand span ceases to be a Muslim<sup>28</sup>

Based on the fact that religious sentiment had some attraction for the process of political bargaining, in 1983, the presidential aspirant under the banner of National Advance Party in person of Dr Tunji Braithwaite, changed his political agenda from a plan to eradicate rats, mosquitoes, cockroaches, etc to “...take the nation back to God as an answer to national paralysis, spiritual decay, callousness and decay...”<sup>29</sup> It is interesting to note that at the end of various elections that year the NAP did not win a single seat at any level. This is suggestive that God apparently may not have anything to do with the election or that whipping of religious sentiments does not absolutely imply that someone would win an election. To our mind, the act of sensitizing people to vote for a party in the name of religion is just a diversionary tactic that may or may not work well at all times. This reminds us of President Babangida’s tactic of using God language precisely “Insha Allah” (meaning by the will of Allah) whenever he was to answer questions on whether or not he would vacate office after the general elections of 1993. He was fond of saying “Insha Allah” to prove his sincerity about his plan to vacate office for whosoever won the 1993 presidential election. Unfortunately; he annulled the election, which, was regarded as the freest and fairest election even when the election was said to have been won by a fellow Muslim. At the end of this, he was pressurized to leave the office<sup>30</sup>.

### **Spiritualization of electoral process and body polity**

Spiritualization of electoral process connotes act of taking into spiritual or supernatural realm thereby creating an impression that success in election is independent of wisdom, foresightedness, logical plan, wide spread political tour and good campaign, adequate political logistics, and people oriented political manifestoes but by divine intervention or divine help, manipulation and inducement. For example, the CAN- Christian Association of Nigeria, Shomolu 1 Bariga Chapter of recent held a prayer session for hitch –free council polls in election slated for October 11, 2008<sup>31</sup>. In the same vein, after the re-run of Gubernatorial election in Cross Rivers of Nigeria, that held 30th August 2008 the winner Liyel Imoke remarked publicly that prayers

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<sup>28</sup> Dudley, B, Parties and Politics in Northern Nigeria, London: Frank Cass, 1968, p143

<sup>29</sup> Miles W; Election in Nigeria A Grassroots Perspective, London: Lynne Rainer Publications, 1988, p72

<sup>30</sup> O .Irinoye, “Challenges of Democratic Consolation :The role of Civil society Organizations” in Bash A.Olasupo, Electoral Violence in Nigeria: Issues and Perspectives Lagos: Frankad Publishers,2003,pp145-159 ,

<sup>31</sup> This was reported in the Nation Newspaper, Wednesday, August 27<sup>th</sup> 2008

reinstated him and not political diplomacy<sup>32</sup>. The impression the public and even politicians do have is that electoral issues are better settled spiritually thorough prayers, manipulation of angelic beings and the use of magic than making appeals to political wizardry . Some candidates practically demonstrated this by boasting that if certain groups of people or individuals refused to vote for them, then, some natural objects like stones, pebbles and leaves would instead vote for them. Counting on this, some politicians did express their much reliance on the power of prayer or magic to win elections. This also goes with the use of charm, magic and occultic powers to either threaten political opponents to withdraw in election contest or at times to threaten electorates not to vote for candidates of their choice even after they might have been convinced of the need to do so going by the content of political manifestoes such party or individuals might have presented to the populace during campaigns. Some equally used magic to hypnotize voters to vote for them or for a particular party against the party they initially had in mind<sup>33</sup>. Though, we do not have statistical data at hand to practically demonstrate the degree at which, the religious methods mentioned above had worked or are working, but we cannot deny the fact that they are issues during election periods in Nigeria and that they negate the spirit of democracy.

Our contention at this juncture is that, laying emphasis on religion as against other factors like political manifestoes as a factor influencing voting decision is dangerous to democracy. This point is arguable on the ground that democracy always makes provision for freedom of choice regarding which, party one should vote for with attention paid to political manifestoes presented to the electorates during the campaign exercise. Therefore to blindfold voters with religious sentiment would amount to diversion of the voter away from the appropriate direction –political manifestos that have capacity to influence which, candidate or party that should be voted for. The practice of holding constant and organised prayer sessions to influence governmental policies in public offices and outside it in places like schools, churches, universities, mosques, shrines, market places and stalls is another way by which, religion is used to influence Nigerian public sphere. This exercise is captioned as '*Nigerians pray*'. This was sometimes spearheaded by General Gowon, Nigeria's former Military head. The prayer sessions were characterised by many prayer points geared towards making Nigerian government humane and changing the stony hearts of some public officers to flesh type.

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<sup>32</sup> This was reported in the Nation Newspaper, Tuesday , September 2nd 2008

<sup>33</sup> I got this information from Mr Ajao Orimadegun, a politician in Ibadan, Ibadan, August 20 2008 .This story is also confirmed by some politicians in Molete area of Ibadan

## **Religion as mobilization tool of implementing government policy**

This is manifested in the use of religion by policy makers to convince the populace about the need to appreciate and allow government policy to function. At this point religious belief is explored as a tool to implement government policy .For example, the government of Lagos state in Nigeria of recent used selected Christian and Islamic religious leaders in paid advertisement to sensitise her citizens to pay tax as one of the sources of internally generated revenue (IGR).This view is expressed in the advert within the contexts of the following pictorial settings:

(1) We have the inscription stating “You are obeying God’s word when you PAY YOUR TAX  
(2) There is a bold picture of Pastor Adeboye, the General overseer of the Redeem Church of Nigeria.

(3) A small picture was inserted near the picture of the religious leader to suggest that some infrastructures are waiting for government funding.

(4) Following this is a lengthy quotation reading thus: “Let somebody shout Halleluyah<sup>34</sup> .Our Lord and saviour Jesus Christ in Mark 12:13-17 enjoins us to give unto Ceaser what belongs to Ceaser, and this includes paying our taxes. Paying our taxes is not only civic responsibility but being obedient to the word of the Lord .Now there’s abundant evidence to show that the Lagos State government has made it a duty to provide improved health care facilities, better sewage disposal, better road network and transportation. To do all these, the government needs your support and cooperation .That’s why I’m appealing to you, please pay your taxes Let somebody shout Halleluyah”

(5) Finally, we have the logo of Lagos Internal Revenue Service saying: Pay your tax<sup>35</sup>

Another one was published for the attention of Lagos Muslims and it appears in this manner:

(1) Every Religion supports payment of Tax, PAY YOUR TAX

(2) We have a bold picture of Imam Garuba Akinola, Chief Imam of Lagos state.

(3) A small picture inserted near the picture depicting infrastructures waiting for government funding.

(4) We have lengthy quotation reading thus: “Asalam alaikun waramotulai wabarakatum! My dear brothers and sisters in Islam, the Holy Quran enjoins us to discharge our civic

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<sup>34</sup> It is important to note that Pastor Adeboye is reputed to be fond of saying Let somebody shout Halleluyah to the extent that many people have taking the words as Pastor Adeboye’s passwords .

<sup>35</sup> The Nation Newspaper, Wednesday, July 9th, 2008, pA6

responsibilities by paying our tax so that we can contribute to the progress and development of Lagos State .Tax is the vehicle through which, government drives the provision of social infrastructural amenities for its citizens. Let us obey the teachings of Islam by cooperating with government in the payment of our tax. *Eko ko ni baje*

(5) In conclusion, we have the logo of Lagos Internal Revenue Service saying Pay your tax<sup>36</sup>

In the two instances, the Lagos state government has taken advantage of respect Christians and Muslims have for the two religious personalities in question to market their political policy aimed at generating resources for the running of government. The degree at which, this mechanism has worked or not would be a subject of verification for sociologists of religion in the nearest future.

### **Burdens inherent in the space religion occupies in Nigerian public sphere**

Exploration of religion as instrument of influencing politics in the Nigerian public sphere is not without its burdens because more often than not the practice is tantamount to manipulation of religion which, has its attendant problems such as intra and interreligious conflicts. Manipulation of religion theory was popularized by Usman Bala who defines it as an act of controlling the action of a person or group of persons without that person or group knowing the goals, purpose and method of that control and without even being aware that a form of control is being exercised on them at all<sup>37</sup>. This theory has been exemplified in various ways in which Nigerian political leaders have whipped religious sentiments in the process of interpreting some political policies and government actions some of which, have been mentioned in the preceding sections. What is alarming in the matter is that those being manipulated via religious sentiment are ignorant of being manipulated and ironically they consciously or unconsciously became puppets in the hands of their users-political elites. This perhaps explains why democracy has not worked to the satisfaction of Nigerians especially those people who believe that many of Nigerian politicians are not mature politically .The practice also has some moral implications because in our judgement whipping of religious sentiments to win the sympathy of electorates is a game of deceit given the fact that there is relationship between politics and morality. The relationship is very simple given the fact that politics is a subject of moral evaluation. It is in this sense that, we talk about political morality which, simply refers to as moral rules regulating

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<sup>36</sup> The Nation Newspaper, Wednesday, July 30<sup>th</sup> 2008, pA4

<sup>37</sup> Y Bala Usman, *The Manipulation of Religion in Nigeria 1977-1987*, Kaduna: Vanguard Printers and Publishers Ltd, 1987



political behaviour and activities such as voting, campaigning electioneering processes among others. It is also within this background, that we can associate moral values such as the following: truthfulness, accountability, responsibility, justice, faithfulness, love, tolerance and discipline with political activities. On this ground, we expect politicians to be truthful in governance and be disciplined in the use of power or mandate given to them by the public via election or selection processes as the case may be. For this reason, we can argue that the use of religion as a bait to secure votes is tantamount to falsehood, which, is also antithetical to democracy and good governance. The falsehood involved is detestable because it is a clear departure from the ethos of religion being used as bait because Christian and Islamic religious traditions and scriptures are replete with moral values associated with politics generally and how politicians should behave towards good governance<sup>38</sup>.

Consequently, the practice of whipping up of religious sentiments in the Nigerian public sphere has uncountable effects on electorates, politicians and the democratic system of government itself. This effect manifests in diverse ways and at different levels particularly as they pertain to inter religious and inter party relations. For example the use of religious law as a bait to woo a religious group to vote for a particular candidate as against the other has potentials to generate inter-religious conflicts in Nigeria. For example the allegation that Major Mohammad Buhari once asked Muslims to vote for only Muslim candidates in the 2003 election generated cold blood between Christians and Muslims. Many rejoinders were written by Christians to protest the alleged (Buhari's) statement, which, also resulted to press war. For example one of them with the headline 'Cleric wants Buhari's apology before April polls' reads as follows:

The Catholic Bishop of Awka Diocese, Rev Dr Simon Okafor, has condemned the utterances of the presidential candidates of the All Nigerians Peoples Party (ANPP) General Muhammad Buhari (rtd) that Muslims should not vote for Christian candidates and asked for his apology to the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) before the forthcoming general election. He said Nigeria is a civilized country and cannot afford to be drawn into religious politics and that what Nigerians want is a Nigerian who can suffer and die for the people with good governance<sup>39</sup>.

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<sup>38</sup> A.Dzurgba, Nigerian Politics and Moral Behaviour :A Study in Politics and Ethics, Ibadan: John Archers Publishers Limited ,2003,p38

<sup>39</sup> Nigerian Tribune, Wednesday 26, February, 2003

Such political gimmick also heated up political terrain and consequently to a large extent, almost resulted to political and religious crisis. But for the political maturity that some Christians and Muslims exhibited, the press war could have led to another religious violence in Nigeria. The act itself demonstrates lack of patriotism and sense of selfishness on the part of politicians who use religion as a disguise to lure voters into voting for them. The act itself is unconstitutional because Section 42. (1) of the Nigerian Constitution in part states that no citizen of Nigeria shall be subjected to any disability or deprivation merely by reason of the circumstances of his birth, community, ethnic group, places of origin, sex, religious or political opinions<sup>40</sup>. The bad aspect of this development it is that political intolerance is antithetical to democracy, which, presupposes tolerance of opposition. Worst still, religious colouration of election which, we have likened to diversionary tactic often lead voters to vote for wrong, incompetent candidates in Nigeria; who could not deliver public good. This development has led to political instability, underdevelopment in politics and economy, absence or lack of continuity of government policy and finally bad governance in Nigeria. It is in the light of this argument that Lawal's observation is apposite when he writes that:

Nigeria's chequered political history is bedevilled with the gory tales of political instability, bad governance and maladministration...the problems of bad governance emanating from electoral crisis have had far reaching destructive impacts on Nigerian political system which, are manifested in suffering, insecurity and backwardness<sup>41</sup>.

### **Prospects of religious occupation of the Nigerian public sphere**

Hopefully, religion, if well harnessed has much potential to influence public sphere because by its nature, it is a group phenomenon exemplified in congregations, ceremonial gatherings, denominational, prayer meetings, family pilgrimages, and ecumenical councils. In history, the three major religions viz: traditional religion, Islam and Christianity have no doubt influenced and have indeed continued to influence the Nigerian public sphere in one way or the other because of the interplay between religion and governance in Nigeria. In other words,

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<sup>40</sup> See the Federal Republic of Nigerian Constitution

<sup>41</sup> G. Lawal, 'Governance and Electoral Process in Nigeria' in International Review of Politics and Development, A Journal of the Department of Political Science and Sociology, Babcock University, Ilishan, Vol 1, Number 2, June 2003, Pp125-132, p130

religion remains an issue in Nigerian political terrain or better put Nigerian public domain<sup>42</sup>. It is so because as stated earlier and as exemplified in the words of Mbiti, Africans are notoriously religious and this accounts for their constant interpretation of the content and intent of politics through religions. This is further exemplified in the fact that Africans were used to view government as ordained by God/god and political leaders as gods or direct agents of God. From the past to date Nigerian societies like many African societies have not become as secularised as most societies of the West though this process would still surface in the nearest future. But meanwhile, the place and space that religion occupies in public cum political domain remains indispensable

From the foregoing, appropriating religion in political terrain is like a tradition which, has become a way of life in Nigerian public sphere. The tradition, no doubt, strengthens and weakens political structures. It plays conflicting roles in politics. What needs to be done is to recommend ways of exploring the positive side of it and discourage the negative aspect of it. Invariably, it is not out of point to suggest that Nigerian religious practitioners should be taught and oriented on how to make good use of religion in public sphere to avoid rancour and acrimony often associated with the Nigerian politico-religious terrain. . The first step is promotion of political and particularly democracy education at secular and religious levels. By this we mean enlightening the public about the tenet of democracy and good governance, which, includes sovereignty of the people, government based upon consent of the governed, majority rule, minority rights, guarantee of basic human rights, free and fair elections, equality before the law, due process of law, constitutional limits on government, social, economic and political pluralism and values of tolerance, pragmatism, cooperation and compromise<sup>43</sup>. The object of democratic education is to produce citizens who are independent, critical and analytical in their outlook, yet deeply familiar with the precepts and practices of democracy.

This type of education would likely make it difficult for the electorate to be easily susceptible to political gimmick garbed in religious sentiment. Religion has much prospect to influence public sphere because by nature it is a group phenomenon. This is exemplified in congregations, ceremonial gatherings, denominational prayer meetings, family pilgrimages, and ecumenical

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<sup>42</sup> E.D. Smith, *Religion, Politics and social Change in the Third world*, New York: Free Press, 1971, pp140-169. See also Iheanyi M. Enwerem. *A Dangerous Awakening: The Politicization of Religion in Nigeria*. IFRA, Ibadan, Nigeria: 1995. p. 11 and Kristina Kempkey, "The Political Relevance of Religion in Africa: Case Studies of Nigeria and Rwanda" in <http://bcjournal.org> /2008/ retrieved on the internet on August 20<sup>th</sup>, 2008

<sup>43</sup> What is Democracy? Published by United States Information Agency, October, 1991,

councils. There are a lot of lessons to learn from the Nigerian traditional political societies where high premium was placed on the moral values which, have their roots in traditional religious beliefs and practices. Such values include responsibility, accountability, discipline, dutifulness, and justice and servanthood among others. The political structure itself allows for free participation in decision making that affects the village, town, or state. In the words of Kwame Gyekye who wrote extensively on Chiefship and Political Values in Africa, the method of arriving at decisions, reflecting respect for the individual is that of consultation and consensus, freedom of expression, and openness of deliberations at public meetings and assemblies<sup>44</sup>. These practices to a large extent are important elements of the democratic principles with basis in African social morality.

Also in Islam and Christianity a lot could still be derived from their scriptural teachings on values underlying politic which, in our judgement could be called political values. From the Christian religious point of view, good governance which, as a duty must be demonstrated in good leadership in public domain as an example presupposes discharging of certain responsibilities exemplified in knowing the key to maintaining high motivation and morale within the group. This also implies that every Christian leader must be responsible, growing, exemplary, inspiring, efficient, caring, communicating, good-oriented, decisive, competent, unifying and hard working. For Islam, the premise for political morality is that morality is taken as an integral part of Islam-. Therefore every Muslim irrespective of status or position is enjoined to do the right and forbid wrong( Surah:3.104,110),to be firm (Surah 8:24),be of good manner – (Surah25:62-68), be sincere lovers of truth and witness- (Surah58:19),to discipline self- (Surah:3.152;55:4), to be just Surah:4.40, promote justice- (Surah.21:47), to be humble- (Surah:6:42-43); (Surah 7:161;57.16); not to deceive themselves – (Surah:2:9); not to make mischief, fool or mockery – (Surah,2:11-12;2.13-15).In other words, Muslims are to fulfill obligations and oaths and promises exemplified in political manifestoes, election promises and oath of allegiance sworn to at before getting to office.(Surah;2:224-227;5:1;92) enjoined Muslim to work towards peace (political peace which, is devoid of thuggery and political assassination which characterize the Nigerian political terrain),while (Surah 2:177,207-208,212,3:16-17.92,133-135,,191-

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<sup>44</sup> K. Gyekye, African Cultural Values. An Introduction, Accra: Sankofa Company, 2002, p121

195,4:36,135,23:70-71,90 and 8.61) call for righteousness in public domain including engagement in public sphere.

The impression we are trying to create here is that the shrine, the church and the mosque have a duty of educating their members about the right action to embark upon and the bad action to desist from in public sphere and in fact in the overall political activities on the other hand. Corroborating the need for the mosque to offer political education from the Islamic perspective, Justice Ahmed Lemu writes that : ... there is need for proper education with the ultimate aim of facilitating the balanced growth of the total personality of man through the training of man's spirit, intellect , rational self, feelings and bodily sense<sup>45</sup> .For the Christian, Adeogun reasoned like Lemu by likening the church as a school for ethical development where its members particularly political leaders (quoting Philippians 4.8), should do whatever things are true, honest, just, pure, lovely, and of good report not only in their religious centres but in public domain where they as part and parcel of society engage themselves in Nigerian public sphere <sup>46</sup>.

### **Concluding remarks**

With religious approach to good governance as discussed above, it is our hope that the public generally would begin on serious note to do thorough assessments of political manifestoes as a guide towards public oriented voting decision, showing concern for merit as against bias and sentiment and placing emphasis on past records of achievement of politicians as against wooing of religious sentiment. With this arrangement, it is likely that Nigerian politicians on the one hand and the public on the other hand would handle with ethical consideration the Nigerian public sphere. Careful and ethical handling of religious dimension to public sphere is an important indicator of the overall democracy which, Nigerians have long yearned for. Such would consequently advance the course of democracy and development exemplified in good governance .To our mind, good governance is anchored on good morality which, is fundamental to religion. It is important to note that religion is unique in claiming a higher source of societal morality because religion ultimately invokes the sacred or the supernatural in order to influence the

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<sup>45</sup> Justice Sheikh Ahmed Lemu, 'The Qur'anic Basis of Ethical Revolution' in Religion and Ethics in Nigeria (ed) S.O. Abogunrin, Ibadan Daystar Press, 1986,pp172-178, p175

<sup>46</sup> E.O. Adeogun, Church as a School for Ethical Development, in Religion and Ethics in Nigeria (ed) S.O. Abogunrin, Ibadan Daystar Press, 1986,pp72 - 82, p 82

behaviour of individuals who are part and parcel of the public sphere<sup>47</sup>. What is necessary at this juncture is that Nigerians should appeal to religion positively which, is their cultural trait as a condition to take the lead in advancing good governance in Africa where it claims to act as big brother. Such choice is very much needed for Nigeria to advance enviable public sphere that would compete favourably with global public sphere as noted earlier somewhere.<sup>48</sup> It is our belief that an objective exploration of religion in governance in Nigeria and Africa would in no small measure facilitate sub-regional and regional cooperation in African public sphere. The time to do so is now

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<sup>47</sup> C.U. Manus, "Religion and Politics in Multi-Ethnic Society" in *Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies*, Vol. XXXVII, June and Dec., 2006, pp1-26

<sup>48</sup> J.K. Ayantayo, "Globalization: A New Ethnocentric Culture with Implications on African Social Values" in *International Review of Politics and Development: A Journal of the Department of Political Science and Sociology*, Babcock University. Vol. 2. Number 2, 2004, pp54-64.