

Christianity and Politics: The Experience from Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: *Either directly or indirectly Christians involve themselves in politics. Today, the church interacts regularly with politics or with politicians and governments in three broad areas – in the articulation of its social teaching, in discussions arising from its involvement in schools, hospitals and welfare and in debate over particular moral issues as they arise from time to time. However, there is a common saying in the Christian fold, whether or not a true Christian should participate in politics by vying for a political post. Therefore, this study explores who is a Christian, Christian perspective on politics, reasons why Christians should be involved in politics and effect of Christian virtues in political system. The study concluded that politics is the thought, purpose and intention of God and the will of God for believers to participate in politics. Perhaps, the believer will be able to impart the lifestyle of God over the nation. People should not see politics as blight or bad, it should be admitted that politics in any form is not bad but the political players are bad.*

KEYWORDS: Christianity, Politics, Experience, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Christianity can be described as the religion based on the ideas of Jesus Christ. Its followers worship in a church, (Macmillan 2007:253). The term “church” as translated in the English Language is from the Greek word “ekklesia”. This term had been in use before the emergence of the Christian church and it basically means “called out”. According to the Holman Bible Dictionary (1991:259), “... use of the term prior to the emergence of the Christian church is important as two streams of meaning flow from the history of its usage into the New Testament understanding of the church”. While the first meaning from the Greek translation is “called out”, signifying “an assembly of citizens of a Greek city” as used in Acts 19:32,39; the second meaning of this Greek term “was used more than one hundred times in the Greek translation of the Old Testament in common use in the time of Jesus”. The Hebrew term for this second meaning is “qahal” which means “assembly” and it can be used in a variety of ways, referring to an assembly of prophets (I Samuel 19:20), of soldiers (Numbers 22:4), or of the people of God (Deuteronomy 9:10). See Holman 1991:259.

Invariably, whichever usage one adopts out of these two, it is evidently clear that the term “church” refers to a group of special and privileged people chosen or “called out” for a special purpose by God. Politics Just like Christianity, politics is variously defined as the ideas and activities involved in getting power in a country or over a particular area of the world. It is also a belief and attitude about how government should work (Macmillan 2007:1148). It can also be said that the science and act of government, political cativities, beliefs or affairs, factional scheming for power (Ceddes and Crosset 2011:). However, politics has been observed in human group interactions, including corporate, academic and religious institutions. It consists of social relations involving authority and power and refers to the regulation of a political unit and to the methods and tactics used to formulate and apply policy (Anifowose Remi 2005).

Politics ultimately comes from the Greek word “polis” meaning state or city. In Latin, it is “politicus” and in French “politique”, thus it became “politics” in English. “Politicus” describes anything concerning the state or city affairs. The great Greek political philosopher, Aristotle, began his famous work “politics” with the observation that “man is by nature a political animal”. By this, he means that the essence of social existence is politics and that two or more men interacting with one another are invariably involved in a political relationship. Men are engaged in politics as they try to define their positions in society, as they struggle for scarce resources and as they try to convince others to accept their points of view. Aristotle then concludes that the way to maximize one’s individual capabilities and to attain the highest form of social life was through political interaction with others in an institutionalized setting, designed to resolve social conflicts and so set collective goals (Temitope B. James 2009:82).

Political History

The First Republic: On October 1, 1960, Nigeria gained independence from Britain and an – all Nigerian Executive Council was elected headed by a Prime Minister, Alhaji Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa. On November 16, 1960, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, a pioneer of West African nationalism, became the first Governor – General of the Federation. Each of the Regions was headed by a premier with a Governor as Ceremonial head. The premiers were Dr. Michael Okpara, Sir Ahmadu Bello and Chief Obafemi Awolowo for the Eastern, Northern and Western Regions respectively. The Regional Capitals were Enugu (East), Kaduna (North) and Ibadan (West) with Lagos as the Federal Capital. On October 1, 1963, Nigeria became a Federal Republic and severed whatever ties were left with Britain. She decided, however to remain in the British Commonwealth of Nations. The Governor – General’s position was therefore, re-designated as president (Dr. Michael Adeleke Ogunewu, 2014, 7).

The Second Republic: The new civilian administration was sworn in on October 1, 1979. According to Omolewa, this administration began with severe problems as its legitimacy was challenged by the UPN leader, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, who contended that the election had not been free and fair. Chief Awolowo alleged that the military had influenced the election in favour of the NPN. Omolewa speaking further, states that a period of legal tussle ensued to determine what constituted two – third of the nineteen states of the federation which were required for a president to win on the first ballot. While this issue was still being debated, Alhaji Shehu Shagari was sworn in as president on October 1, 1979. It was obvious from the situation of the time that this declaration created disenchantment among some section of the populace (Michael Omolewa, 1991, 208).

The Third Republic could have been headed by Mashood Kolawole Kasimawo Abiola but his election mandate was annulled. In the face of intense public outcry, Babangida was pressurized to relinquish power, which he reluctantly did. He handed the rein of government to a non-elected military-civilian interim national government on 26th August, 1993. The interim government which was headed by chief Ernest Shonekan, was later ousted from power by the military under the leadership of General Sanni Abacha, on 17th November, 1993. Once again, Nigeria was back in the hands of the military.

The Fourth Republic: The fourth republic was headed by Olusegun Obasanjo. He was elected president and his party, the People’s Democratic Party (PDP), won a majority of the seats in both the senate and house of representative. In 2003, Obasanjo and his party won re-election and were to relinquish power in 2007. However, there was a speculation of his seeking a third term to enable him remain in power till the year 2011, but this never succeeded. Consequently in 2007, Obasanjo handed power to his successor, Umaru Yar’Adua, also of PDP, marking the first time in Nigeria’s history that one civilian leader transferred power to another.

On May 29, 2007, Alhaji Umaru Musa Yar'Adua was sworn in as president and commander-in-chief of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. He started initiating programmes along the proclaimed "Seven Point Agenda" of his administration. Unfortunately, Yar'Adua did not live long to actualize any meaningful programme for the country. He became seriously ill during the second year of his tenure, and passed away on May 5, 2010.

On his demise, his vice president, Goodluck Jonathan was sworn in as the president, after which he contested and was elected on the platform of the People's Democratic Party in 2011.

On May 29, 2015, General Mohammadu Buhari was sworn in as president and commander-in-chief of the Federal republic of Nigeria. His coming into office after the four years rule of Goodluck Jonathan marked the continuation of the fourth republic which was successfully from one civilian administration to the other of different party that even cause the nation to be at peace. For Max Weber, politics is the operation of the state and its institutions. Politics for him means striving to share power or striving to influence the distribution of power among individuals or groups within a state. Hartold Lasswell, thus defines politics as he who gets what, when and how – a process of determining the distribution of society's rewards and balancing power relationships and claims (Harold Lasswell, 1958). This definition tallies with that given by Easton who defines politics as the process through which authoritative binding decisions are made for the allocation of scarce resources in the society (Easton D., 1965: 17). There are various definitions of politics by different scholars, the appeals of the definitions flow out of its apparent flexibility or wide scope. Politics is found whenever power relationship or conflict situations exist, which means that political scientists can legitimately study the politics of a labour union, religious organization and sharing of power there.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHRISTIANITY AND POLITICS

As it has been pointed out above, politics implies a great diversity of process, norms and behaviours. Thus, if Christianity as defined is a system of beliefs and practices by which a group of people interpret and respond to what they feel is sacred and usually supernatural as well, there should be a variety of ways in which Christianity is related to the institution of politics. For instance, if one looks at the concept of "theocracy", it means "rule by God". Thus, Christian leaders are seen as ruling the society in God's Name and obviously according to His wishes. When it comes to Christian involvement in politics, our goals should not be to impose our views on everyone else and turn our nation into a theocracy that is going to achieve nothing but hostility. Our goal should be to ensure that biblical principles are adhered to where they matter most.

CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVES ON POLITICS

Most Christians proof that it is very wrong to get involved in politics because of Jesus' refusal to be made king by His followers. They go on to tell any would-be Christian politician that the Christian task is evangelism, not politics that being involved in politics will cause a distraction from the Christian task of bringing lost sinners to Christ. Generally, Christians trying to get into politics are usually criticized: going into politics is going to be very tough; the pressure will be immense, one would find himself frequently walking a tight rope between remaining faithful to one's Christian principles and breaking down misunderstandings generated by popular negative perceptions against Christianity, etc. However, one concludes that it is too hard to be involved in politics, that means the whole arena of leadership and governance is surrendered to the hand of Satan, and to those who love power rather than love God which is nothing less than a disaster for the country.

REASONS WHY CHRISTIANS SHOULD BE INVOLVED IN POLITICS

God Ordained the Institution of Government

The church is referred to in the scriptures as the body of Christ, the assembly of the saints, etc. Everything about the church points to God being the Author and the Finisher of our faith. In Romans 13: 1-4, Paul makes it absolutely clear that God has put the governing authorities in place. Government is not the invention of power-hungry, self-seeking men and women. This was God's idea. There is no authority except that which He allows, and His intention is that it should serve Him. Politicians are supposed to be His representatives before the nations and they are therefore ultimately accountable to Him.

It Is a Command from God for His People to be involved in Ruling the World

The word of God command man to rule and have dominion over creation under heaven – Genesis 1: 26; Psalm 24: 1; II Corinthians 2: 10. Also, God command the believers to be involved in Great Commission, which involves discipling nations to observe all that Christ has commanded – (Matthew 28: 19-20). From the above, it is impossible to fulfill these two tasks effectively without being involved in this world. Believers should understand that government is of God.

It Satisfy the Wishes of the Citizen of the Country

The citizens of the country are looking for security, good legal system, equity, peace, integrity, honesty and transparent governance. This could only happen through a godly government that will ensure justice for all. Godly government will suppress evil, stand against abortion, homosexuality, lesbianism, gay-marriage, money laundry, killing, kidnapping, thurgery, and praise the wonderful works of upright citizens and other works. Christians should enter into politics and point to God's righteous laws that can bring good benefit for the populace and lasting happiness as well.

To Provide a Proper Atmosphere for the Church to Carry On Their Work of Intercession

The book of I Timothy 2: 1-4 and Matthew 22: 15-21 – show mutual relationship of church and state in the normal event of life. The state provides a proper atmosphere in which the churches carry on their work, for example, fire, police, protection, national security, postal services, general stability in society, education, water service and electricity. The church in the other hand has been instructed by God with the spiritual welfare of man by praying, for the governing authorities, pray for tranquility, for peace and preaching the gospel to bring men to faith and change their hearts, teach them to live godly lives. The only means it has to accomplish this is through the word of God. If Christian can partake or involve in politics, it can be of help, with the aim to enable every citizen to enjoy a quiet, undisturbed life, etc. in other words, the government is to enact righteous laws that led to peaceful prosperity.

It Provides Godly Heritage for Our Children and Grand-Children

When Christians participate in the government system of their country, they would be in a position to influence good and godly heritage that will guarantee religious liberty for our children and grandchildren. Our children are going to inherit our work habits, our attitudes towards others, our family life and the examples we have set; they are going to inherit the education system, the health care system, justice system, political system, and religious system. Our children are going to inherit our country and its value system. The critical issue in the life of any nation is what one's generation passes on to the next. Our challenge is to ensure we establish a government based on Christian principles and pass this on to our children and grand-children. This is their real

inheritance. If we fail in such terms, then the nation will be bankrupt of Christian values that make a great nation

To Demonstrate Love

Our society is hungry for love – agape love. Most of the ills of society, including those in the political space can be traced to lack of love. John 13: 34-35 describe the Christians’ identity as love. It is only with love that we can conquer our nation for Christ.

EFFECT OF CHRISTIAN VIRTUES IN POLITICAL SYSTEM

Christians are called as the lights of the world; we must not let our lights dim in both thought and deed. They are to abstain from bad habits. St. Aquines adopted the four (4) cardinal virtues of plato (justice, courage, temperance and prudence) and added to them the Christian virtues of faith, hope, charity, goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, honesty, accountability, long-suffering, patience and faith.. As Christian, there is need to put these virtue into politic. When this done, politics would no longer be called a dirty game.

Emperor Constantine was a Christian leader, before his time, Christianity was regarded as “illicit religio” (illegal religion). When he came into power, he made Christianity a legal religion; he stopped the persecution of the Christians and built churches. He allowed some of the bishops to be part of the ruling body of the government, etc. It was seen that during his time, there was peace and tranquility in politics. In history, Constantine was the Christian leader who made changes in politics of his time and even in the lives of Christians (Temitope B. James, 2009, 87).

Baptist in Virginia, led by John Leland, brought pressure on Thomas Jefferson, Maddison and others to include a guarantee for religious liberty in the first amendment to the United State of America’s constitution. This led to the bill of rights which begins the following sentences: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof”. Following Jefferson’s assumption of office as president of the United State of America, Danbury (Connecticut) Baptist Association wrote to him to clarify the meaning of the amendment. Jefferson replied in a letter (1802) to them that “religion is a matter between man and God and that government has no power to regulate such matters” thus the first Amendment built a wall of separation between “church and state”. If Baptists in America did not participate in their government, they would have been in a position to influence this amendment that guarantees religious liberty (Oroniran D.F., 2013, 253-255). My submission is that if there are enough mature Christian leaders in politics, there would be goodly governance.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Political participation refers to citizen’s political consciousness and involvement in the process of governance (Weitz – Shapiro and Winters, 2008, 4). Political participation in a democracy can take many forms, ranging from voting for representatives at regular intervals to voting on politics in referenda, forming political groups, and engaging in legal or illegal protest. The individuals engaged in such participation likely expected at least hope that these actions will have some impacts on the content of government policies. Giving further insight to the concept of political participation (Klein 2005, 1) iterates “political participation can take many forms, the most notable of which is voting in elections, but also including joining a political party, standing as a candidate in an election, joining a non-governmental advocacy group, or participating in a demonstration”. Citing the UN’s 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and 1976 International covenant on civil and political

rights, (Klein 2005) argues that political participation is a fundamental citizen's right that permits them to seek to influence public affairs. Further still, Klein distinguishes between general and specific forms of participation in public affairs such as "the activities of civic association, neighbourhood groups, social involvements, and social clubs, as well as formal procedures of governments" (Klein, 2005, 2), the specific form involves participation in elections.

Drawing from the above, we can conclude that it is the responsibility of the church and its members to engage in all or some of the following:

- Forming or joining political parties,
- Standing as a candidate in elections,
- Joining non-governmental advocacy group or civil society groups,
- Participating in lawful and peaceful demonstration,
- Voting during elections and referenda, and
- Discussing politics.

However, believers' orientation in politics needs to change. Invariably, our theological institutions should commission our pastors and the leadership of the church should give direction to her members.

Nigerian political system identifies aspects of the Nigerian political culture that appear to have dissuaded the church from getting involved with politics. These include:

- Do-or-die politics: Political actors of all political persuasion in the country have been seen to undertake acts of violence in the quest for political position. Many aspirants are ready to do anything including killing their perceived political opponents to ascend to positions of leadership. Politically motivated assassinations are therefore common occurrences during electioneering campaigns.
- Politics of bitterness: A situation where politicians begrudge one another is a common practice in the country. As a result, many politicians exhibit pseudo-loyalty. You will often hear the common phrase, "I am loyal" when indeed there is no measure of loyalty in the one speaking.
- Money politics: It is a generally held notion that money answereth all things. This view has been misapplied to mean that votes can be purchased with money. As a result, politicians exploit the economic downturn in the country to offer money for votes.
- Politics without ideology: Politics is supposed to be practiced based on ideologies. This does not however seem to apply in the country. The political parties in the country can hardly be distinguished by their ideological persuasions.
- Politics of god-fatherism: There are those who have been elevated to positions of demi-gods in the political arena. These persons break the rules of engagement with impunity and single handedly determine those to be appointed into positions of authority with no consideration for the tenets of democracy. When their benefactors get into positions of authority, they are made to pay "royalties" from the common wealth of the masses to the end that development is jeopardized.

Looking at these antecedents of the Nigerian democratic experience, one is likely to conclude that the undemocratic practices in the polity are the results of the moral decadence in our society. These have grave consequences for the national development and it is therefore the responsibility of the church to attempt to transform the Nigerian political culture by (Dr. Dawari IBIETERA George, 2014, 202-203):

- Praying for political systems and leaders: The role of the believers in praying for transformation cannot be emphasized enough. Believers are admonished to pray for those in authority (I Timothy 2: 1-2).

- Displaying integrity and decorum in all facets of life: Transformation cannot happen in this nation without the display of godly example by believers in all fields of endeavour. In Romans 12: 1-2, Paul admonishes believers not to conform to the patterns of this world; we must not let our lights go dim.
- Being exemplary in the conduct of the business of the church: We often complain of the violent tendencies in the political arena but are we not exhibiting similar tendencies in the church denominational meetings? How do we conduct our business meeting in or local assembly meetings with all the “points of order” that at times take us out of order? We must, therefore remove the log in our eyes before attempting to remove the speck in the eyes of others (Matthew 7: 3-5).
- Demonstrating love: Our society is hungry for love – agape love. We believers need to demonstrate sincere love in our heart for all, and living an exemplary Christian life. Most of the blight of the Nigerian political space can be overcome in our nation and it will no longer gain access in the mind of those in political space with the sins of pride, selfishness, malice, hypocrisy, killing, envy, lying, etc.

CONCLUSION

Politics is the thought, purpose and intention of God and the will of God for believers to participate in politics. Perhaps, the believer will be able to impart the lifestyle of God over the nation. People should not see politics as blight or bad, it should be admitted that politics in any form is not bad but the political players are bad.

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