

Finding a Common Religious Soul for Sustainable Democracy in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper emphasises the central role played by religious beliefs in shaping the political inclinations of citizens of Nigeria. While recognizing the variations in religious beliefs among individuals and various religious groups in Nigeria, the paper argues that there is a need to identify a common religious soul i.e., a common religious space which will create a united religious ground for the determination of issues of national interest that can serve as the unifying factor to sustaining democracy within the nation.

Keywords and phrases: beliefs, religious beliefs, common religious soul, liberal democracy

Introduction

Religions and religious practices are characterised by various beliefs that shape the private and public lives of adherents of these various religions. The influence of these religious beliefs and doctrines are so much that they influence the level and manner of participation of citizens of particular states in the political administration of their states. Consequently, to understand the level and manner of participation of certain people in the political administration of their state, it is important to understand the influence of religion on the political decisions of these people.

However, to understand the influence of religion in politics, it is important to understand the character of the Religious beliefs that shape the attitude of people towards the political sphere of their lives. This requires proposing a particular conception of ‘belief’ that will provide a basis for understanding the nature religious beliefs. This paper examines the nature of religious beliefs and their influence on the attitude of citizens of Nigeria towards the political administration of the state. The paper examines the complex nature of religious beliefs in Nigeria and how this affects the development of sustainable democracy. The paper argues that for democracy to thrive in Nigeria there is need to identify a common religious *soul* which will serve as an agreeable foundation for public policy making and administration.

The paper is divided into five sections. The next section examines the nature religious beliefs with a view to understanding the kind of influence they have on believers. Section III examines the nature of contemporary Nigerian society and discusses how the complex nature of religious beliefs in Nigeria affects public political action. Section IV discusses the concept of a common religious soul and argues that this is required to develop sustainable democracy in Nigeria.

The Nature of Religious Belief

Characterising the concept of ‘belief’ is a difficult task, one which has occupied the attention of epistemologists over a long period of time. To keep the paper focused on its primary task of understanding the character of religious beliefs, this paper does not intend to enter into the debate about the character of beliefs. Rather, the paper adopts the characterisation of beliefs proposed by Robert Audi.¹ This model is instructive because it presents a comprehensive model for analysing the nature of beliefs and it identifies a number of elements that are ordinarily associated with belief states. According to Audi’s model, there are two complementary notions through the concept of belief can be understood. The first notion is the content notion. This notion focuses on the content of the belief possessed by the believer. In other words, the content notion of belief focuses on the elements that are contained in a belief. Three elements are identified that, given the content notion, may serve as the content of beliefs.²

The first element is propositions. An important element of every belief is a proposition. To say that an epistemic agent has a belief that *p* is to say that the agent has a disposition to accepting a particular proposition which expresses *p*. For instance, it may be said of an epistemic agent *A* that s[he] believes that the number of planets in the universe is eight. In this case, the propositional content of Jones’ belief is the proposition ‘the number of planets in the universe is eight’. Thus, the content of a propositional belief is a proposition, and it involves a disposition to accept a certain proposition as true. A second element based on the content notion of ‘belief’ is an object. This is because the content of a belief is usually that some certain object has, or lack, some certain property. This is Objectual Belief. Thus, for instance, the content of Jones’ belief may be that there are white unicorns.

In this case, part of the content of Jones' belief is the conception of a particular object which is believed to have the property of being white. A third element of the content notion of belief is relating to attitude. Attitudinal Belief is the belief *in* a particular thing. Attitudinal belief represents some kind of trust or reliance on a particular object, institution or state of affairs.

For instance, the content of Jones' belief may be a belief that a particular system of government will be more acceptable in organising the society. This is an instance of the belief *in* a particular object.³

The second notion, from which the concept of belief may be analysed, as proposed by Audi, is the psychological notion. This notion focuses on the psychological state of the possessor of the belief. Audi also identifies three elements of this notion to which are relevant in understanding the concept of belief. First is the entrenchment of the belief i.e. how deeply the possessor holds the belief. Second is the centrality of the belief, which determines how influential the belief is in forming and accepting some other beliefs. Third is the intensity of the belief which focuses on how convinced the possessor of the belief is about the belief.⁴

Audi notes that religious beliefs apply to both the content and psychological notions. This is because, at some basic level, religion requires *believing in* 'an article of faith', e.g. God.⁵ Religious beliefs also entail accepting the truth of certain propositions. For instance, a Christian takes as true the proposition "Jesus is the Son of God". A religious belief also usually entails the acceptance of the existence of certain objects around which the beliefs are centred. In fact, objectual beliefs seem to be more basic than propositional and attitudinal beliefs because it can serve as the base from which the other two elements of the psychological notion of beliefs can arise. Notice that *believing in* an object presupposes the existence of such objects. This object of belief then serves as a foundation for some propositional or attitudinal beliefs. For instance, believing in a supernatural being may serve as a foundation for believing the truth of certain propositions that predicate certain properties of such a supernatural being. It may also serve as a foundation for displaying some level of trust in such a being.

On the psychological notion, one may ask the question about how entrenched, how central or how intense religious beliefs are. Generally speaking, this is to ask how closely believers' lives and choices are guided by their religious beliefs. An answer to this question is presented by Bronwyn Williams who argues that our religious beliefs are often very deep and they usually form the basis for various social and cultural expressions of reality.⁶ This claim is corroborated for instance by the fact that believers usually require little evidence to justify their religious beliefs and will require very strong, almost infallible evidence to refute them. Usually, believers are not tolerant enough to even listen to any evidence against their religious beliefs. Rather, they are quick to reject any form of opposition to such beliefs.

Why are religious beliefs so deeply entrenched in the possessors so much so that these beliefs are able to shape and influence their disposition to life and living in the serious manner described? According to Fowler, this is because "religion is an effective desire to be in right relation to the power manifesting itself in the universe".⁷ Given the observed pattern of things in the universe, there is the common tendency to assume that there is an active force that is responsible for these observed patterns.

This suggests that every possessor of religious beliefs has a belief (attitudinal) in a particular force or power which s[he] believes is in control of the affairs of the universe. Not attuning oneself to such a force will likely lead to grave consequences. As such, a believer wants to remain attuned to the discerned force and live according to the purpose or direction of this force. Understood in this manner, it is not surprising that there is a strong interplay between religion and politics. If religious beliefs are so deeply entrenched in their possessors that they want it to be the guide for their living pattern, it is understandable that these religious beliefs play very influential roles in organising the political structure of their societies. Noting the influential role of religions in political and economic administration of a society, Benedicte Bull states argues that religion presents one of the key ideological frameworks which the elite use to control the American political economy. This is because the religious framework is used to supply a certain vision of society that allows elites to sustain their privileges.⁸

Religious Complexities in Contemporary Nigeria

Like many other African societies, the interplay between religion and politics is greatly pronounced in Nigeria. John Mbiti's famous claim about the religious inclination of Africans readily comes to mind here. According to Mbiti, Africans are religious people and they live in a religious universe.⁹ Hence, the life and activities of African people are shaped by their strong religious inclinations. This is also evidenced in the naked fact around us about the way religious inclinations influence decision making among Nigerians, both at the individual as well as the social levels. If this is the situation in Nigeria, then the pivotal role played by religion in politics is understandable. As Lucian Leustean succinctly remarks, "it is inevitable that in the social systems where religion acts as a very strong social factor, the influence of religious doctrines and teachings affect the people's behaviour in the political world".¹⁰

It may be argued that religious beliefs played the role of a unifying factor in traditional African societies. For each of these traditional societies, there was a common object of worship which served as the objectual base for possessing certain attitudinal and propositional beliefs. In other words, religious beliefs in traditional African societies were centred around common objects. In traditional Yoruba societies for instance, the basic object of religious belief is *Olodumare*. Given this background, religion was able to transcend the individual level and was institutionalised at the public level. Since the attitudinal belief of the members of the society had the same object, it was relatively convenient to share religious beliefs in the public space. As such, to a large extent, the propositional and attitudinal beliefs derived from the shared objectual beliefs were also shared in the public domain. Religion and religious beliefs therefore created a factor that aided the cohesion of these traditional African societies.

Notice that the role of religion as a unifying factor is not restricted to traditional African societies. Over the ages, various civilizations have been grounded on various religious inclinations. For instance, the political structure of the traditional Jewish society was built on a religious foundation with the messages of prophets to complement the Mosaic laws as their basic guide.

The Traditional Greek society with the pantheon of Gods and *Zeus* as a sort of Chief god is another example. Even in the attempt to relegate religion to the private plane, the British society fell into adopting Anglicanism as a state religion. These examples abound in the history of the evolution of various civilisations. Noting this fact, Bryan Turner states the following:

Religious cultures were, however, fundamental to the development of nationalism, national citizenship and national identity to such an extent that historians frequently refer to religious nationalism.¹¹

It is important to note that in the traditional societies where religion was able to serve in the public space as a unifying factor and the determinant of national identity, basic and religious beliefs were shared, either voluntarily or involuntarily. This is not the character of modern societies characterised by variations in religious doctrines and the ensuing religious beliefs. As a result of this religious heterogeneity, there is a conscious attempt in contemporary societies all over the world to push religion to the private region of individuals' lives. This is owed to the fact that there are a lot of religious sects with varying sets of beliefs. The beliefs of each sect influence the inclinations and dispositions of the members of the sect making it difficult to have a unified religious base for national action. Thus, while noting that religion is a 'glue' of social solidarity on which whole communities are built, Turner notes that "many societies are precarious because they cannot construct an integrating political shell to house those diverse communities".¹²

A number of factors can be held responsible for the heterogeneous (including religious heterogeneity) character of the contemporary society in Nigeria. These factors include Colonialism, Globalisation, Migration, and the nature of religious beliefs. Note that the heterogeneous character of Nigeria is not limited to the religious plane. Rather, it cuts across various other areas of social life within the nation. It is important to note the role of colonialism in the formation of Nigeria. Colonial administrators merged various tribes into a single unit, thereby creating a state with wide varieties of cultural identities and values. The various identities and values include varied religious values and beliefs. The result of this merger is that the contemporary Nigeria consists of various tribes trying to identify common values within the diverse cultural realities that make up the state. In his description of the effect of colonialism on African culture and civilisation, Precious Obioha states as follows:

In the historical moment of colonialism, through the process of forced acculturation, western civilization came heavily on the African cultural world bringing about a battering and shattering experience and an irreparable cultural trauma.¹³

One other notable factor responsible for the complexity of contemporary sub-Saharan African nation-states is Globalisation. This factor also contributes to the heterogeneous character of e Nigeria. According to Obioha, Globalisation aims at bringing together the nations in the world to enhance “socio-political and economico-cultural interaction, integration, diffusion and give and take facilitated by information flow and perhaps for the enhancement of the global world”.¹⁴ This implies that globalisation is an attempt to overcome the barriers that exist among peoples of various cultures and nation-states. This makes it easier for people to move across various nations in the world regardless of their varying cultural backgrounds. One advantage of globalisation for Nigeria is that the cultural integration that accompanies globalisation has helped to eradicate certain outdated belief systems and practices. However, part of the challenge that has accompanied globalisation is the bringing together of people with varying cultural and, especially, religious background and inclinations to live together within the same state.

The nature of religion itself is also one important factor responsible for the heterogeneity of religious beliefs. The role of religion in this regard is clearly captured by Jon Bialecki who argues that religion is very much underdetermined because religion involves interaction with invisible agents. This fact engenders multiplicity of religious positions about relations with the invisible agents which are the objects of religious beliefs. In Bialecki’s words:

Unconstrained by any single necessary semimaterial form it [religion] enjoys more freedom to vary than other social institutions, and it also enjoys a freedom for its branches to extend themselves further in the development of answers to an original problematic.¹⁵

The above suggest that the fact that the object of religion is not visible makes it possible for various people to develop various conceptions of the object of such beliefs. This also makes it possible for various people to develop varying, and sometimes conflicting, beliefs about the object of religious beliefs.

The multiplicity of religious beliefs in Nigeria presents a great challenge for the attempt to institutionalise liberal democracy in Nigeria. The diverse religious inclinations of citizens of Nigeria hardly allow a ground for agreement on matters of national interest. These complexities of religious beliefs present hindrances to the growth of democracy in Nigeria. The religious complexities in society in Nigeria can be discerned on two different levels. One level presents conflicts among various religious sects (the conflicts between Islam, Christianity, other religious sects, etc) and this can be described as inter-religious conflicts. Inter-religious conflicts can be discerned in the relations between citizens from different religious backgrounds within Nigeria. These differences inform the pattern of choices that citizens make in their individual lives. They also affect the pattern of participation of citizens in the political administration of Nigeria. For instance, religious beliefs may affect the pattern of voting at elections in Nigeria. Citizens who hold on to a particular set of religious beliefs may be reluctant to vote a candidate as leader even if he is perceived to merit such a position.

On another level, conflicts can be discerned among various denominations within the same religious sect. Thus, religious complexities in the modern society in Nigeria bother on both inter-religious and intra-religious differences. The idea of intra-religious differences resides in the fact that within religious faiths of the 'same' inclination, there are different doctrines which define the pattern of worship of each denomination and these not only serve as mere differences but also as a brewing ground for inter-personal conflicts among members of these denominations. Among Christians, for instance, the Catholics hold a belief in both the divine and human nature of Jesus Christ. This creed defines the pattern of worship in the Catholic circle worldwide. Contrary to the Catholic belief of the humanity and divinity of Jesus Christ, some other denominations within the Christian faith insist that Jesus Christ is only a divine being. The inter-religious and Intra-religious variations are so serious that they manifest in every the aspects of worship, and also influence the attitude of members to realities around them. A similar observation can be reported about the Islamic religion which is replete with various doctrinal differences which are results of the interpretations of the basic tenets of the religion thereby giving way to disparate worldviews among followers of Islam. The same thing obtains in other religious practices that have come to be part of the religious consciousness of the citizens in the contemporary society in Nigeria.

Democracy and a Common Religious Soul

Consequent on the character of contemporary Nigerian society, for democracy to thrive, there is a need for a conscious attempt to resolve these complexities. How is this to be done? One option is to secularise society in Nigeria. Secularising Nigerian society will imply that religion and religious beliefs are restricted absolutely to the private realm of individual lives. Religious beliefs will no longer count in the determination of issues of national interest. The question is whether such secularisation is possible. Attempts to build a secular state have been made in Europe and other continents (including America) for centuries. In fact, the Universal Races Congress held at the University of London in 1911 and recommended that all distinctions of race and religion between citizens of the same country be eliminated from legislation and administration.¹⁶ It is not clear whether such attempts have been overtly successful. Commenting about the religious influence in contemporary American society, Kevin Moore states as follows:

...the religious has swamped the political, and we are now drowning in the fetid waters of moral rectitude and self-righteousness brought to us by radical fundamentalist Islamists, Christianists, Judaists, and Hinduists.¹⁷

Notice that the United States of America presents one of the models of liberal democracy practically available in any society in the world. The above suggests that attempts to secularise nations in the West has, at best, merely eradicated public religion; these attempts have not succeeded in eradicating the influence of religion in political life.

If previous attempts to secularise nation states have failed in a country like the United States of America, there is little evidence to expect that such an attempt will succeed in nation like Nigeria, where citizens are visibly conscious of their religious inclinations.

Another, arguably more serious, problem with this approach is almost obvious. Given the understanding that religious beliefs play a central role in regulating other beliefs and dispositions of the believers, an attempt by Nigeria to ignore the religious beliefs of its citizens may lead to resentment towards the state. If Nigerian society is pushed to a situation where its citizens no longer regard the state as important in guiding their lives, then a greater problem is created for the growth of democracy. For a liberal democratic regime to thrive in a state, the regime requires its acceptance by the citizens of the state. Citizens are likely to resent any regime that ignores, or resents, their religious beliefs given the centrality and depth of these beliefs.

The way that seems open to addressing this problem is based on the understanding that religions or religious beliefs are not necessarily evil. Alluding to the first amendment to the United States constitution, Amy Sepinwall claims that religion is a “distinctive human good”¹⁸. This suggests that religion is a factor that may be harnessed for positive development of the political structure of a society. If this is so, it suggests that the problem facing democracy in Nigeria is not about religion or religious beliefs. Rather, the problem is the complex character of religious belief in the society. Given this understanding, the solution to the problem seems to lie in resolving the complexities surrounding religion and religious beliefs in Nigeria. Once these complexities are resolved, the positive aspect of the religious beliefs can then be harnessed for the sustenance of democracy in the nation.

How is this to be achieved? There is the need to find a common *religious soul* in Nigerian society. This religious soul is a common religious space which will create a united religious ground for the determination of issues of national interest. The common religious soul is not to be interpreted literally as a distinct ontological category. Rather, it consists in finding common religious grounds among the varying religions within the nation. This requires a conscious effort to identify basic religious beliefs that are common or agreeable to the various religious inclinations present within the nation. This common religious soul will serve as the soul of democracy in Nigeria. It will create the unifying factor for the determination of the national identity in Nigeria. Other religious beliefs that do not fit into this common religious soul are then to be restricted to the individual or sectional religious realm and cannot be used as basis for determining issues of national interest.

The process of evolving a common religious ground requires a number of things to be done. First, it requires recognition of the equality and oneness of human beings. Equality and oneness are great ideals which is required for democracy to thrive.¹⁹ Political and religious leaders ought to be educated on the importance of these ideals, as well as the need to teach them to their followers. There is a need for religious dialogues and various enlightenment programmes to create awareness in citizens on the need for such a common religious soul. Such dialogue requires recognition that some elements of the religious beliefs of citizens in the nation will have to be relegated to the private life of the adherents. In recognition of the equality of all human beings, there is need to reach compromises, even with regards to some of our religious beliefs.

The reality is that there are conflicts among various religious beliefs that influence the lives and decisions of individuals. As such, not all these beliefs can be accommodated within the public space. The desire to impose some of these conflicting beliefs is responsible for some of the crises that characterise contemporary Nigeria. As a result of this fact, every individual ought to be conscious that not all their religious beliefs will be accommodated in the sphere of public decision making. According to Amy J. Sepinwall:

What it means to live in a democracy is to recognize that one's policy preferences will not always prevail, and that one is under an obligation to obey the law if one's preferences have not prevailed.²⁰

Second, the process of evolving common religious grounds requires series of dialogues among adherents of various religious creeds in the country. The aim of these dialogues is to identify agreeable beliefs among the various religious groups which may serve as some of the foundation principles for public decision making. To ensure this, there is need, first, to convey intra-religious dialogues, then inter-religious dialogues, and ultimately, a national conference. The sole aim of the national conference is to come up with the collection of agreeable beliefs that can be adopted in public decision making. Examples of such agreeable beliefs may include a belief in one Supreme Being, respect for the law and constituted authority, the sanctity of human life, the need to protect human life and dignity, etc. The constitution of the membership of the national conference must be such that it adequately represents the various religious groups existing in the country.

The recommendations from the national conference must be taken seriously in reviewing the constitution of the country. Within the rules contained in the constitution, the roles and limits of religious beliefs in public policy making must be consciously stated. This is important to disallow extremists from hijacking policy making and imposing policies that may lead to religious intolerance. This is a difficult, but in our opinion not impossible, task for Nigeria to accomplish and a lot a work is required to be put into it.

This approach has the advantage that it recognises that religion has a place both in the private space of individual lives and the public space of social and political actions. A further advantage is that it harnesses the positive power of shared religious values to sustain the political structure of the society while avoiding the danger of tyrannically forcing citizens into adopting a state religion.

It is important to note that the common religious soul suggested here is not a recommendation for the adoption of a state religion. Rather, it represents an attempt to control the influence of private religion in public matters. It requires a conscious legislation and agreement on elements of religious beliefs that may be mutually consistent among the various religious beliefs. The common religious ground will not eradicate the influence of religious beliefs in determining individual political choices, but it will help provide a common religious platform for making public political choices, especially in the allocation of obligations and benefits. This will help to avoid many inter/intra-religious conflicts that militate against the development of a sustainable democratic government in Nigeria.

Endnotes

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