

## **An Appraisal of Religion and Nigerian Public Policy**

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**Abstract.** Nigerian public sees religiosity mostly as a “Nigercentric” affair which influences policy making and decision taking. This nigercentrism describes the public and political dominance of religion in Nigeria. In other words, the geography of religion influences the geography of politics in all national decisions, including elective and appointive offices even in the admission to public schools and institutions. In fact, Nigerian society since independence till date is strongly connected to religion. The consistency in the use of religion is attributable to the essentials and fundamentals of virtually all the successive regimes in the country in recognizing the pride of place it has always assumed in the policy and style of government. Thus, public policy describes the notion of decisions and actions of government in relation to issues and questions affecting the society. The affinity of religion and public policy in essence gives the indication that the two institutions are inter-changeably important, instrumental and enforceable through governmental processes which is universally applicable to society as a whole.

### **1. Introduction**

Religion in Nigeria is a Nigercentric affair, strong actor and cord, which has transnational reach. Internally, religion becomes strong cord in the manipulation of

decision makers in the nation polity. Since the inception of Nigeria as a nation, religion has been the determinant factor of her destiny and governance. However, politicians, policy makers and religious leaders are the past masters in the exploitation and manipulation of decisions. To this end, it is the intention of this paper to take a cursory look at religion and public policy in Nigeria with an eye bird’s view.

### **2. Religion: An Overview**

In all ages, religion has come to grips with the existence of all human endeavours. Religion at all times plays pivotal role in shaping the thought, perception, approach, feeling and history of humankind. Thus, religion embraces all aspects of life and it represents wholeness of all existence and as well is life itself. Apparently, religion is the keystone or cornerstone of the people’s lives and cultures. Religion is far more than a believing way of life in the Nigerian context, where a distinction or separation is not made between religion and other areas of human existence. It serves the aim of building and maintaining human society. No doubt, with its consciousness and sensitivity, there is no known society exists without religion. Dopamu is apposite when he states that there is no known society without the existence of religion. In line with the above position of Dopamu, Abe argues that

religion is the provenance and consummation of all things. According to him, “in the beginning, it was religion; and in the end it shall be religion.” In fact, religion has explained the world and human understanding of it. Without equivocation, religion has been explained by gamut of scholars. However, the explanation seems to defy the satisfactory quest for a universally acceptable definition. Yet, new definition is not offered either. It is most appreciative to examine their relevance hereunder.

Kenny aptly describes Religion “as any system which relates men to ultimate values, whether God or something else and which embodies a creed, a code and a cult.” In another development, Keqley distinguishes three basic features of religion as belief, feeling and action. It is imperative to note that what is pivotal to religion is belief in God or gods, the nature and destiny of the meaning of history and the end. On the basis of this, we come to appreciate the fact that religion does not only command loyalty but also gives its adherents something they are glad to live for and if need be, die for... In the same vein, Ejiofor also attests to the fact that:

*Religion is the complex of beliefs and behaviour of men in the supernatural sphere and realities and in the dynamic linkage of supernatural with the natural... Religion is one major drive behind human behaviour. Religion has had an important disciplinary effect on the whole social order in any given civilization.*

The above shows that religion is a very deep factor in the lives of men. In point of fact, religion identifies itself with the first instinct for self-preservation. “Men take off from religion, men march along with religion and they arrive at religion with a minute-to-minute phenomenon,” Ejiofor further buttresses that religion is:

*The pride of the mind, the strength of the will, the relish of human emotions, coveted object of delicate sentimentality... In short, it is the comprehensive resume of man’s spiritual, rational and corporate existence.*

These above definitions reveal certain essential elements as relating to Religion in Nigeria. Thus, the concept of God, gods, relationship of man to ultimate values, a creed, a code, a cult, belief, action, feeling, super sensible world, law and social order, the relish of human emotions, and the pride of the mind are indispensable to religion in Nigeria. Perhaps, in all things, Nigerians are religious.

As sensitive as religion is, it is worth living for, a pride of place for people as they subsequently derive satisfaction from it as well as sense of security. In Nigeria, there is the practice of triadic religions of African Religion (Afrel), Islam and Christianity. Thus, the history of African Religion or Indigenous Religion is as old as the people themselves. It is a religion handed down by our forebears from the yore, and it is orally transmitted from one generation to another. It does not possess sacred scriptures, yet, it is thus written in memory of the very world we live and transmit orally as the occasion demands. This is not proselytizing religion, nor does it have a drive for membership, yet it is tolerant, it accommodates and remains autochthonous. Therefore, we are born into it, live in it and die in it.<sup>10</sup> Commenting on the overview of African Religion, Dopamu has this to say:

This is clearly seen in African Religion (Afrel), which encompasses all aspects of life. Africans do not know how to live without religion. They celebrate life religiously and they never embark on anything without bringing in religion. Thus at birth, marriage, death, warfare, healing,

the foundation of any project, planting, harvesting, enthronement of chiefs and kings and other areas of human endeavour, Afrel plays important roles.

Islam and Christianity are the proselytizing religions, which had been imported into Nigeria. Thus, Islam was introduced into Nigeria in the 11<sup>th</sup> century by the Timbuktu traders who had contact or encounter with the Northerners. It was in the 16<sup>th</sup> century that Islam spread to the south-west. While Christianity penetrated into Nigeria in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. However, this attempt to Christianize Nigeria failed due to many factors. Be that as it may, Christianity came to be planted permanently in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They have had disproportionate size. Interestingly therefore, Nigeria is secular and pluralistic state without any particular religion being a state religion. There is no gainsaying the fact that Nigeria is a country of diverse cultures, traditions and beliefs. But of the entire diverse elements, religion has proved to be most sensitive agent of legality in the society. It is this fact about religion that has made it an instrument of legality, unifying factor as well as social mechanism for national development. Of a truth, the tenets of religion provide individuals with shared values, roles and incumbents, altruism and responsibilities. Religion as a way of life is aimed at transformation of individual life. This individual life is a means of microcosmic structure in the overall macrocosmic structure of the society. Apart from this, “each of the patterns of life and practice presupposes a structure of shared beliefs. When the credibility of central religious beliefs is questioned other aspects of religion are also challenged.” Tersely therefore, religion is recognised as a channel for human and national development as well as legal instrument. Idowu becomes apposite

when he states that religion is the keynote of the people’s lives:

*Religion forms the foundation and all-governing principle of life for them. As far as they are concerned, the full responsibility of all the affairs of life belongs to the Deity; their own part in the matter is to do as they are ordered through the priests and diviners whom they believe to be interpreters of the will of the deity. Through all the circumstances of life, through all its changing scenes, its joys and troubles, it is the Deity who is in control.*

Without fuss, Religion has all-governing principles of life and infuses discipline and social order. Thus, religion is a cord that binds people together in order to promote social cohesion and communal well-being. As the rule of law is machinery set in place to guide the conduct of the people likewise religion is both social and legal mechanism for harmonious living and co-existence. Besides, religion is a divine law or mechanism that regulates human conduct and as well institutionalises social norms in human society. Religion has the knack of bringing people together where they can experience presently what it means to live the full human life. It is also a major instrument of transforming any human society into a community that acts justly. To this end, Religion becomes the law of life, pathway to God-realization, absolute value truth, living power, justice, and morality.

### **3. Public Policy: A Conceptual Meaning**

Public policy has been seen by political scientists and Administrators as a recent field which evolved in the 50s. As an academic doctrine or discipline, it is all about the quality of policy formulation and implementation especially in the emerging countries of the world. In which case, public

policy is apparent in both organized and unorganised systems. Since interpersonal relationships call for decision making, according to Olaniyi, Public policy has set in. He argues that public policy is conterminous with inter-personal and inter-group relationships.

In view of the foregoing, several definitions have been offered by various scholars on public policy. Suffice it to say that there is no straight forward definition. Sharkansky asserts that “policy can refer to a proposal, as on-going programme, or the goals of a programme, major decisions or the refusal to make certain decision”. Edwards and Roberts define policy as “a set of decisions taken by a political actor or group concerning the selection of goals and the method of attaining them, relating to a specified situation.” The basic tenets upon which this definition is premised are as follows: that policy makers usually choose specific political or socio-economic problems demanding attention on the bases of priorities; solutions to each of the problems are so designed in such a way that they will meet the desired results. Chandler and Plamo describe public policy as the strategic use of resources to alleviate national problems or governmental concerns. In the same vein, Dimock, et. al. argue that:

*Public policy is deciding at any time or place what objectives and substantive measures should be chosen in order to deal with a particular problem, issues or innovation. It also includes the reasons that should be chosen.*

The above definitions point to the fact that there is the awareness on the part of the policy makers that human needs are insatiable. Also, the resources available to these wants are inadequate. To this end, this problem calls for prudent management of

the meagre resources to meet some of the “pressing demands” of the populace.

Jenkins sees Public policy as:

*A set of inter-related decisions by political actor or group of actors concerning the selection of goals and the means of achieving them within a specified situation where these decisions should in principle be within the power of those actors to achieve.*

The foregoing definition appreciates the fact that there are mirages of problems in any named human society. It is however the responsibility of the political executives to decide on which of them can be addressed at any point in time and how to achieve them within a specified period of time. No doubt, Olaniyi depicts public policy as the management of human and material resources by policy actors to address a policy problem identified in a polity at any point in time. David Easton, one of the celebrated political scientists perceives public policy as “the authoritative allocation of values for the whole society.” In reality, government is the only agency competent to act authoritatively on the whole society and logically too, whatever government chooses to do or not to do, invariably ends up one way or the other in some form of allocation of values. Implied in the definition of public policy therefore, is the notion of decisions and actions of government in relation to issues and questions affecting the society.

The systematic study of public policies has been assisted a great deal by the development of a number of concepts and theoretically models which provide a comprehensive understanding of political life and the dynamic of politics. As a result of the scope of this research effort, some models such as legitimacy, Group Model, Systems theory and system variables would suffice here.

According to legitimacy model, it is derived from the government which forms the basis upon which public policies assume the profile of legality which commands the loyalty of citizens. Ojo observes that there may well be policies emanating from other bodies, groups, organizations or associations in society to which individuals may also belong e.g. religious organizations, professional bodies, ethnic and cultural associations. Such policies are however not public policies because they are neither made, implemented or enforced through government institutions.

The Group Model is an approach explicitly designed to aid political analysis, group theory with the propositions that since interaction among groups is a central fact of politics, the fundamental unit of analysis must necessarily be the groups. Group theorists are of the opinion that the political system as a gigantic network of groups is in a constant state of interaction with one another. Again, Ojo is of the view that government from the angle of group analysis is an unbiased umpire which has as its main duty mediation and moderation of group interest, competition and struggle. Thus, in the never-ending process of bargaining, struggle and claims among interest groups, the government's role is to supervise and regulate competition among interest groups. As a matter of fact, group approach to the study of public policy represents an attempt to show that what emerges invariably as public policy at any given time is indeed the equilibrium reached in the group struggle. Government as an instrument of the political system is to that extent seen as charged mainly with the task of managing group conflict and competition which it fulfils by "establishing rules of the game to guide and mediate groups struggle, arranging compromises an balancing group interest and claims; enacting compromises in the

form of public policy and enforcing these compromises".

Systems theory perceives public policy as a response of the political system to the demands, pressure, challenges and forces brought to bear upon it from the environment as inputs. Within the context of systems theory, the environment is perceived as any condition of circumstances, which can be defined as external to the boundaries of political system. Thus, the systems model when applied to policy analysis portrays public as output of the political system. The idea of system connotes identifiable set of institutions and activities in society, the elements of which are held together in an interrelated process form that enables the system to respond to environment forces in order to preserve itself.

Lastly, on the system variables, policy looks beyond the confines of the political system itself to social, economic and cultural environment in the search for factors and forces which shape public policy. Public policy often manifests in various forms such as levels of government activities, levels of government spending, taxing and service and other important policy outcomes in areas such as education, health and highways. Public policies being an exercise in power and authoritative allocation of values for society, analysts have shown considerable interest in examining how political variables such as legitimacy may shape public policy. No doubt, system variables as relating to the environment contend orientation, attitude, beliefs and values towards political system. This includes what governments should try to do and what they should not do, how governments should operate, as well as what should be the relationship between the citizens and government. Public policy may

also find useful explanation when analysed in relations to environmental variables such heterogeneity, the level of political integration and stability, continuity the nature of political succession and regime turn over. A policy may arise as a result of the attendant policy questions and problems. Policy makers are likely to ensure that the content and process of public policy are geared towards policy questions set in the context of such environmental problems.

Summarily, Group model, systems theory and system variables are seriously relevant to the thrust of this paper. Reference shall be made to any of these models for comprehensive and deeper analysis of religious heterogeneity in Nigeria vis-a-vis government policy implementation.

#### **4. Religion and Public Policy in Nigeria**

Historically, the Nigerian Society since independence till date is strongly connected to religion. In fact, religion is a very powerful tool in Nigerian policy making. As a matter of fact, religion is now turned into a strong political weapon in Nigeria political arenas. This same religious cleaver age has penetrated into other organizations. The consistency or otherwise in the use of policy is attributable to the essentials and fundamentals of every successive regime in the country in recognizing the pride of place religion has always assumed in the policy and style of governance. As earlier noted, the geography of religion influences the geography of politics in all national decision, including elective and appointive offices and even in the admission to public schools and institutions.

In the annals of Nigerian political history, it is evidently clear that out of the thirteen rulers, eight of them were military leaders

through whom religious balancing act has played a major role as a matter of policy. Dan Agbese corroborates this assertion when he writes that;

“Religion has made the grade. The religious balancing act is firmly entrenched in federal state and local governments. States with a sizeable number or near equal number of the adherents of both religions are obliged to balance the act.

Without equivocation, tracing the Nigerian policy since the inception of the British imperialists, one could certainly discover that government policies were and are introduced and subsequently implemented along religious leaning. Truly speaking, the colonizers invaded Nigeria from the sea in the south and Brown men came in from the desert in the North. The white men brought Christianity and the brown men brought Islam. They meant well for Nigerians. Their good intentions went sore. The two religions became contentious issues of our national geography. The country finds itself divided between Christianity and Islam. The Politicians have managed to work out a delicate political balancing act intended to accommodate religious sensitivities or at least, not to offend them. “Inadvertent tipping of the scale has often brought horrendous consequences-killings and destruction. The manipulation of the religious fault line is as insidious as the manipulation of the tribal line. In both cases, the manipulation is either overt or covert but always irredentist”

The political heroes of Nigeria traded with religion as past time in the manipulation of government or regional policies. Chief Obafemi Awolowo, Dr. Nnamdi Azikwe and Ahmadu Bello used religion in determining national politics and policies. However, Ahmadu Bello had a slightly different take on this. He constructed his

own political base on the regional fault line but used religion, Islam as an important part in the final shape of his political base. He was unabashedly a champion of the North and promoter of Northern interest through religion. Dan Agbese remarks that Ahmadu Bello took steps to put the destiny of the region in its own hands. However, he was a past master at exploiting religious fault line and he had often been accused of a determination to Islamize the Northern Region. He contained religious extremism. His death opened the flood gates of religious extremism and at various times, various parts of the old region have been wracked by bloody religious riots.<sup>34</sup> Till date, forceful imposition of Islam through Jihad, Boko Haram and other available means have been the order of the day.

In retrospect, Hugh Clifford, Lugard's successor as governor-general, opened Katsina College in 1922. His inaugural speech at the occasion betrayed the colonial concept of this religious dichotomy even in the northern region. He said among other as quoted by Dan Agbese:

*This college is designed to serve all Mohammedan Emirates in Nigeria. It is very necessary that the youths who will receive their training in this college and who will thereafter carry the torch of learning and knowledge to all parts of the Mohammedan Emirates in order to thereby enlighten the ignorance of their country men... should cherish no other or ambition than that of fitting themselves by a long course of training for the great work of teaching others...(and) while living in this college...they should be subjected to no influences which might tend to make them careless about the observances of religious duties...*

Thus, Ahmadu Bello graduated from that college and other northern political cabals.

Not long after he assumed office as governor of Zamfara state in 1999, Ahmed Sani Yerima imposed Sharia, the Islamic legal system in his state. Other states in the North, where Muslims are in the majority, gradually followed suit. Nigeria became perhaps the only country where religious and secular laws work in some parts but not in others. This imposition of a religious legal system as a policy shows that the religious fault line remains a potent instrument in our national politics.

The Late Aminu Kano was a leftist politician in the conservative, rightwing political territory of Northern Nigeria. He was a different breed as a politician because he constructed his own unique political base on the poor and down trodden, known in Hausa as Talakawa. He became their champion and a louse in the lock of the Northern aristocracy. Since his death in 1983, his most genuine attempt to establish what could be loosely called a third force in our natural national politics did not feed on tribe or religion, rather as a national policy. It derived its relevance from championing a better national policy for the poor and the oppressed. Dan Agbese remarks that the talakawa do not constitute a fault line in our national politics. Everybody loves the talakawa. After all, everyone seeks political power to arguably promote the poor out of poverty by making them well, not poor any more.

Since 1979, the essence of the religious policy of the Nigerian state has been best expressed by section 10 of 1979 and 1999 constitutions which carry a short prohibition section stating that: "The government of the federal or of a state shall not adopt any religion as a state religion". Christian and Muslim activists passionately argued for the adoption of an expressly secular and a more pro-sharia provision in the constitution

respectively. The formulation in Section 10 was done by the Obasanjo Administration in 1979 in such a way as to assure each group that the constitution respects its core values.<sup>38</sup> Essentially, the consciousness of political consideration is poised by religious actors acting in the political terrain. In other words, religious cleavage informs political decision.

Etanibi and Okoye observe that very many Nigerians have seen the implication of the retention of section 10. To them, a political choice for an ambiguous formulation has been deliberately made to allow political actors have more room to make public policy choices on the terrain.<sup>39</sup> Thus, it is this ambiguity that has created the conditions for the current political crisis over the introduction of sharia, as well as created room for recent political debate on the implementation, re-interpretation and amendment of the 1999 Nigerian constitutions. All these are powerful tools of public policy making of the government. As a matter of fact, religious groups can systematically influence legislation and administration, particularly on a national scale. They are directed to some stake that their members have in particular political policies. The goal of religious groups is to affect policy and to this, they elect their friends into office to further their course. This is evident in Nigerian survey when especially Christians reacted to the purported registration of membership of Nigeria into Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC), in 1986 during Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida's Military's tenure. As a Muslim head of state, establishing such relations went beyond diplomatic tie, rather, it was religiously motivated based on his faith. However, it was received with much criticism from every nook and cranny of Nigeria, especially the Christian leaders and Christian

Organizations. This was seen as divisive policies to perpetuate his stay in office.

Furthermore, religious interest may be ad-hoc in nature, but they can influence decisions. They also have other purposes apart from lobbying the government. They also influence policy makers. From the foregoing, we can observe that recently in Nigeria, the Central Bank Governor, Mallam Sanusi Lamido released a bombshell on the generality of Nigeria, when he introduced Islamic Banking. Even before reactions from various quarters as a policy that emanated from CBN, fellow Muslims are divided over the acceptability and durability or otherwise of Islamic Banking. Muslims who support Islamic Banking are of the view that it is good because no usury is required. While those who are not in support are equally of the opinion that the banking system is all about interest making and business transaction. Therefore, Islamic Banking cannot fit into the Nigerian Banking system. In other words, Muslims are divided over this view. In fact, it would not be surprising when non-Muslims are opposing its introduction. With its introduction, the aim of banking is defeated. Therefore, it would be an error in futility to venture into such a banking system. Although, the truth remains that religious consideration is always evident in policy making. Today's policy is centred on religious divide and consideration.

In sum, Ojo asserts that an application of group theory or implication of the group model for the analysis of public policy includes that a linkage must be done between issues and problems in the society, which pressurize government on the one hand and on the other the configuration of groups and group interest in the society. In a country such as Nigeria characterized by group heterogeneity, the group model for the analysis of public policy is bound to provide

great insight into the basis and consequences of different policies such as those relevant to the revenue allocation, the education system, appointed into key positions at the federal, state and local level, agricultural and industrial development. Group approach as a frame work for public policy analysis centres on aggregations of political actors and emphasizes social forces of relations and it leans heavily open such relational concepts as power, influence, pressure and authority.

### 5. An Appraisal

Having considered religion and public policy in Nigeria, it becomes clear that bringing in religion as a parameter to measure public policy is not healthy for the future of the nation, because it does not represent good democracy and good representation. Evidently, Nigeria Public policy is driven by religion as a motivational and trans-national actor in her national security and economic interest. But it clearly shows that religion should be treated independently without bringing it in with other factors- victims of manipulation of religion. Dan Agbese made an allusion to the annulled June 12, presidential election where Muslim-Muslim ticket was the most eloquent evidence that Nigerian can, and do, see beyond the religious manipulation. It may be dangerous to draw a sweeping conclusion from this but it provided sufficient indication that a popular candidate is a particular candidate, whatever may be his religion. Nigerian governance through it programmes of religion divide has heightened tension by playing off one good against the other. The result of all this is that Nigerians still see themselves along religious and ethnic lines. Kukah remarks that a clear programme of good governance that works hard to achieve greater national integration will help to channel energies

away from the centrifugal forces of ethnicity and regionalism to the centripetal forces of purity.

Nigeria based on her heterogeneity in culture and religion, must accept a consensus of agreeing to live together as an indivisible nation void of religion and tribe. Etanibi and Okoye, call this “Nigerian Project” The Nigerian Project is the discovery that if we are to live peacefully together in spite of our difference, we must develop federalism and democracy in our society. The successful realization of the Nigerian project requires that this process of religious and ethnic sentiments be reserved. In the government area, every policy must be subjected to critical evaluation, whether such policy accepts the generality of the populace, such policy is effective, efficient, one-sided and biased. In other words, such evaluative analysis would provide a basis to decide whether a policy needs to be continued, modified or discontinued. Policy evaluation during implementation may also be useful in determining if there is need for any form of modification to the content and implementation strategy of a given policy or if there are any operational problems hindering the achievements of policy objectives.

Soyinka, in recent times, sternly warns the Nigerian nation that religion should be detached from national affairs. He asserts that:

*Nigeria is one enemy of potential nationhood that requires not just a separate address of its own... all of a frank, even brutally frank nature since the intervention of religion in nation being has been of utmost savage, unconscionable and increasingly intolerant kind. No word for it but butchery, waste and devastation. We cannot continue pretending that as long as any one religion aspires to dictatorship on secular matters, we cannot call ourselves a*

*nation....* Any religious following cannot evoke parallel but opposing sects of protocols, citing the authority of some unseen and unknowable god in realms that have no perceptible contact with the actual. Religion must therefore submit to community, to nation, otherwise co-existence becomes impossible and the human entity reverts to a state of brutishness.

Sequel to the above, the dethronement of religion from national policies is the survival or cord the Nigerian national largely depends.

However, in contemporary religious practice, Lawuyi strongly argues that religious variables retain their centrality in explicating unfolding political process because they embodied geographic identifications and cultural responses to specific to specific situations. With this view, religion is rootedly linked with the nature of the state.

## 6. Conclusion

As earlier observed, the consistency in the use of policy is attributable to the essentials and fundamentals of every successive regime in the country in recognizing the pride of place religion has always assumed in the policy and style of government. This work reveals that religion cannot be dethroned from national affairs. Having thus subjected the Nigerian Public policy to some models for analysis, we discovered that group model strengthens interaction among groups which is a central fact of policies; the fundamental unity of analysis must necessarily be the group. Government from the angle of group analysis is an unbiased umpire which has as its main duty mediation and moderation of group interests, competition and struggle. In the never-ending process of bargaining, struggle and

claims among interest groups, the government's role is to supervise and regulate competition among interest groups. Contrary to opinion, it is evident that Nigerian government draws its policies along religious divide as we have argued above. In this context, Nigerian government is no longer seen as unbiased umpire rather it is seen as biased umpire, which adorns itself with religious garment. Group Model can only be exonerated from religious influence when its original purpose and intent are re-negotiated.

Since Nigeria is characterised by group heterogeneity, Group Model is bound to provide great insight into the basis and consequences of different policies such as those relevant to revenue allocation, the educational system, appointment into key positions at federal, state and local level. And even other institutions and organizations are affected by these religious politics. However, a handful of scholars have diametrically opposed to religious interference to policy making and implementation in Nigeria. No doubt, this study reveals that religious variables retain their centrality in explicating emerging political process and policy implementations because they embody geographical identification and cultural responses to specific situations. To this end, religion is sincerely linked with the nature of the state.

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