

## **Secularism and the Politics of Religious Balancing in Nigeria**

OMOTOLA, Jeremiah Shola

Department of Political Science and Public Administration,  
Redeemer's University, Redemption City, Mowe, Ogun State, Nigeria

### **Abstract**

This paper analyses the problem of secularism as a constitutional mechanism for religious balancing in Nigeria. Though constitutionally a secular state, religion continues to cast an ominous shadow on the governance of the country. The attempt to secure religious freedom for some infringes on the freedom of others. This, coupled with the weak institutionalization of the forces of democratization and the economic softness of the state, creates room for the transformation of ethno-religious identities. Secularism has not been able to find a solution to this. Thus, the presumed positive correlation between secularism and sustainable inter-religious and ethnic relations in Nigeria remains problematic. This is partly because secularism is not rooted in political institutionalization, capable of generating sustainable social capital, that is, a generalized sense of trust among the citizenry. Consequently, secularism become a liability, rather than an asset, in the socio-political processes of the state.

### **Introduction**

This paper explores the constitutional adoption of secularism as a religious balancing device in Nigeria. This is important, given the continuous ominous shadow of religion on the governance of the country. Nigeria is not only a plural society with several ethnic and religious groups, but also one where ethnic and religious boundaries overlap. Each dominant ethnic group in a geographical area is associated with a particular religion. The ethno-regional cum religious overlaps add troubling twist and turns to the configuration. The need to curtail the threats this poses for nation-building informed the constitutional adoption of secularism in Nigeria (Agberemi, 2006; Falola, 1998; Ilesanmi, 1992). Through secularism, Nigerian seeks not only to maintain some form of neutrality and independence on religious matters, but also allow Nigerians religious freedom. The essence was to demarcate between the two realms – state and religion – and by so doing reduce the influence of this powerful force of identity on nation-building.

Contrary to expectations, however, Nigeria's secular posture has been challenged on many occasions, thereby curtailing the religious freedom it sought to protect. Conflicts over the status of Sharia Islamic law have dominated constitutional politics and ethno-religious relations in Nigeria for decades (Davies, 1995; Elaigwu, 2005; Omotola, 2009a;

Omotola and Aderinto, 2009). Most recently ‘the adoption of stringent Sharia codes by 12 Muslim majority states in northern Nigeria, beginning with Zamfara in 1999, was particularly contentious, provoking broad concerns about the viability and survival of Nigeria's innovatively structured multi-ethnic federal system’ (Suberu, 2009a: 547).

This paper seeks to contribute to a critical understanding of the dynamics of secularism vis-à-vis religious balancing in a plural and complex setting like Nigeria. Drawing insights from state and societal practices, the paper argues that the fact that religion continues to cast an ominous shadow on the governance of the country represents an indictment on Nigeria’s secular posture. The attempt to secure religious freedom for some infringes on the freedom of others. Secularism has not been able to find a solution to this. Thus, the presumed positive correlation between secularism and sustainable inter-religious and ethnic relations in Nigeria remain problematic and may be in the mythical realm. The problem is partly because secularism is not rooted in political institutionalization, capable of generating sustainable social capital, that is, a generalized sense of trust among the citizenry. Thus, secularism become a liability, rather than an asset, in the socio-political processes of the state.

### **The Concept of Secularism**

Secularism is a highly contested concept, which is why across different political systems, it is ‘unquestionably the most misused word’ (Kamath, 2007: 1). This is partly because the concept can be used in several related, but different ways, thus making it difficult to know its exact meaning. It is, therefore, not surprising that secularism is often equated with an ideology or a philosophy. Secularism is also sometimes used to imply separation of state from religion - a social movement. In some cases, secularism is considered a religion.<sup>1</sup> Against the background of this conceptual problem, it is ‘more useful to describe a secular society or a secular state, than to define “secularism”’ (Agberemi, 2006: 332).

Secularism is commonly regarded as ‘an ideology that holds that religious issues should not be the basis of *Politics*, or (in the extreme) that religion has no place in public

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<sup>1</sup> See, “Secularism and Separation: What is Secularism? Who are Secularists?” Available at [http://atheism.about.com/od/secularismseparation/Secularism\\_Separation\\_What\\_is\\_Secularism\\_Who\\_Are\\_Secularists.htm](http://atheism.about.com/od/secularismseparation/Secularism_Separation_What_is_Secularism_Who_Are_Secularists.htm). Retrieved on 19/03/2007

life'.<sup>2</sup> Essentially, secularism seeks to preserve the religious neutrality of government and cultures. As Andrew Coates puts it, secularism connotes 'the freedom of the public sphere from religious dogma.' (quoted in Birchall, 2007: 1). This conception has been contested. Critics argue that reducing secularism to separation of state and religion amounts to conspiracy against religion and a contradiction of the facts of history. This is because, 'the secular,' according to Antje Jackelen, 'is a companion of religion rather than its enemy.' (Jackelen: 2005: 863). For John Hendryx, the pretended neutrality, often associated with secularism, has placed secularists in a dominant position, thereby handling them exclusive power in public policy processes. This, according to him, has not allowed for the use of secularism against the 'intrusive religious tyranny' of the secularists into public policy (Hendryx, 2006). Given this array of criticisms, it is better to examine the epistemology of the concept.

George Jacob Holyoake, a leader of the English secularist and free thought movement, formulated the foundational work connecting secularism to multicultural societies in 1846. He coined the term secularism to describe 'a form of opinion which concerns itself only with questions, the issues of which can be tested by the experience of this life' (Quoted in Jelliss, 2005). Holyoake was concerned with a humanist philosophy, one capable of guaranteeing human needs in life. While secularism, in this sense, generally encompasses a sphere of knowledge, values, and actions, which are independent of religious authority, there seems to be nothing about its original formulation that excludes possible interactions between religion and the state. Indeed, secularism was originally developed within a religious context particularly Christianity for the sake of preserving peace among Christians<sup>3</sup>.

By implication, it seems that the perversion and contradictions that surround the concept in the post-Holyoake era emerged from the neo-Holyoake exponents of the concept. Scholars appear to have substituted secularism with secularization, which emphasizes a kind of total separation of religion and state. It is, perhaps, this

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<sup>2</sup> See, "Secularity (Non-religiosity)" <http://help.com/tag/663808-secularity-non-religiosity>. Retrieved on 19/03/2007.

<sup>3</sup> "Secularism and Separation: What is Secularism? Who are Secularists?" [http://atheism.about.com/od/secularismseparation/Secularism\\_Separation\\_What\\_is\\_Secularism\\_Who\\_Are\\_Secularists.htm](http://atheism.about.com/od/secularismseparation/Secularism_Separation_What_is_Secularism_Who_Are_Secularists.htm). Retrieved on 19/03/2007

secularization of secularism that breeds secular fundamentalism because the more religious groups are alienated from the state, the more such groups become a symbol of resistance and the more the proclivity of such groups to fundamentalism. It does seem that one of the pretensions of neo-secularists is the idea of a completely neutral public sphere in religious matters. Such pretensions find resonance in political realities across nation states, making it difficult for the so-called 'secular states' to live a truly secular life. The Nigerian experience that follows illustrates this.

### **Politics of Secularism in Nigeria**

Colonialism laid the foundation for the politics of secularism in Nigeria. Prior to the advent of colonialism, each major group of what later became known as Nigeria had its distinct religion under what is generally referred to as African Traditional Religion (ATR). Many gods and goddesses were revered in different parts of Nigeria, including Ogun (god of iron), Sango or Amadioha (god of thunder), among others. Islam penetrated several parts of the Nigerian society long before the arrival of the Europeans. As part of their "civilising mission," the Europeans introduced Christianity as an instrument of civilisation. While the southern part of Nigeria received Christianity, the northern part was predominantly Muslim. By the early decades of the twentieth century, Islam had dominated the northern region while Christianity had been widespread in the south. For political expediency, the British prevented European missionaries from operating in the Muslim-dominated North, where their indirect rule system was very efficient. Thus religious tension and dichotomy existed in Nigeria throughout the colonial period.

The religious division of the country played major roles in the political arrangement, which came into existence at independence in October 1960 when Nigeria inherited a parliamentary democracy deeply implicated in ethnic and religious pluralism. The ethno-religious configuration and attendant troubled inter-group relations set the tone of the politics of secularism. The Nigerian state soon realised the deadly impact religious issues could have on politics, following the virulent and vituperative debates it generated in the 1977–78 constitutional conference, which gave birth to the Second Republic in 1979. Hence, the constitutional adoption of secularism.

The attendant politicisation of religion has limited the effectiveness of the secular clause. As the Nigerian experience illustrates, religion can hardly be separated from the state and its politics, in so much as people give serious considerations to it when they are confronted with political issues and decisions. Discourses on secularism in Nigeria have been reduced to engagement and/or confrontation between Muslims and Christians, allowing adherents of ATR little or no space to engage the state. This may not be unconnected with the relative powerlessness that has come to characterize ATR, especially given its limited population vis-à-vis other religions. The exact population of each religion has been controversial, but a popular estimate puts it at 50:40:10 for Islam, Christianity, and ATR, respectively. This has been challenged by another source, which claimed to be relying on “informed estimates,” puts it at 53:45:2 on the same order (Agberemi, 2006: 315, 369).

Another dominant feature of the secular politics in Nigeria is the upper hand of Islam over Christianity in the public sphere. The overlap of ethnic and religious boundaries made the North predominantly Islamic and the South primarily Christian. At independence, the North had only one region and the South had two (East and West), but the northern region was larger in size and population than the two southern regions combined. Today, the continuous processes of adjustment to the structure of Nigerian federation have altered the balance in favor of the Islamic North. Through state creation exercises (1967, 1976, 1989, 1991, and 1996), the North has gained at the expense of the South, as they now have nineteen and seventeen states respectively. The same goes for local government creation, a development that gave the North more access to national wealth since state and local governments are the bases of revenue allocation. This development may not be unconnected with the long rule of the military where ethnicity was an issue and northern officers were more prominent than southerners'. Of the thirty years of military rule in Nigeria, the northerners led for twenty-five years, leaving the south with only five.

The politics of secularism in Nigeria violates what is generally known as the principle of institutional separation, that is, ‘the constitutional provision which forbids the making of any law, and therefore the taking of any executive action, that involves the interlocking of the official functions of the state with the official or institutional functions

of any [religion]' (Hollenbach, 1991: 104; quoted in Ilesamni, 1992: 107). Some of such contradictions manifest in state patronage and involvement in religious institutions or affairs in various forms. The politicization of secularism by all principal actors (the state, Islam, and Christianity) mainly underscores its ineffectiveness in guaranteeing religious freedom, harmony and stability in Nigeria. Shria'a, for example, has intermixed with politics to cause disturbances, riots, and insecurity since democratic rebirth in 1999, thereby constricting the public (religious) space for non-Muslims in the North.

### **Secularism as an Effective Balancing Device?**

Religion has been identified as a distinct analytical category in Nigeria's multiple minority problems (Omotola, 2009b). The religious composition of the country underpins the struggle for ascendancy between the dominant religions as well as the marginalization/exclusion of religious minorities. This poses important challenges to the state in terms of religious balancing, not only to ensure neither of the two dominant religions becomes the state religion, but also to see that all Nigerians have religious freedom, irrespective of ethno-religious leanings.

Despite the constitutional adoption of secularism, the religious question remains problematic. The expanding landscape of religious fundamentalism in Nigeria, owing largely to the fact that religion is no longer merely about the control of the theological space, but also an arena of accumulation, underscores the increasing influences of religion in the political economy of the state (Ibrahim, 1991). The 'shift from the theological to the mundane in motivational conceptions' (Kukah, 1993: 75), has been a source of intra-religious contestations, which manifest in the form of 'continuing struggle over matters of doctrine and the control of the theological space.' (Egwu, 2001: 23). The resultant polarisation, for example, among the Christians into Catholic, Protestants, and Pentecostals and among Muslim into the Sufi and anti-Sufi, are clear pointers to the politicisation of religious identity in Nigeria (Enwerem, 1995).

The treatment of a historically religious minority in Nigeria, the ATR, as well as the rise of new religious minorities, has been another sore issue in ethno-religious relations in the country. For example, the ATR has never enjoyed the kind of state patronages at the disposal of Islam and Christianity. Not only does the state, despite its

secular posture, sponsor Muslims and Christians to holy pilgrimages, it also declares public holidays to mark the commemoration of these festivities. Moreover, the federal government provided ₦10 million each to Muslim and Christians groups to build their places of worship at the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja in 1982 (Kukah, 1993: 62). This tendency not only casts shadows on the practice of secularism in Nigeria, but also validates the existence of religious minorities, with little or no political space of operation.

The situation is worse in Northern Nigeria where the question of religious minorities continues to manifest through the politics of Sharia. The recent introduction and implementation of the Sharia criminal legal code in 12 northern states created complications. Non-Muslims, particularly Christians who live in such states, though a majority in the wider context, became religious minorities (Egwu, 2001: 45). These religious minorities are usually the victims of the politics of Sharia, suffering more casualties in death tolls, loss of property, and population displacement. These include native northern Christians, for example the Katab, Kaje, Abagyi, Numana, Kono, and Kagoma of southern Zaria in Kaduna state, and non-native (settlers) southern Christians. The same is true of Muslims in the historically Christian-populated south, particularly the southeast, where Muslims have been victims of violent reprisals as a result of religious violence in the north. Yet the emergence of new religious minorities, which cannot be wholly classified as Christians, Muslims, or ATR, adds another dimension. The most notable example here is the Eckernca religious sect (Omotola, 2009a).

The politics of Sharia contradicts the secular clause. The 1999 Nigerian constitution provides in its section 10(1) that ‘the government of the federation or of a state shall not adopt any religion as state religion’ (FRN, 1999). This provision is further strengthened by section 38 (1-3) of the constitution, which guarantees freedom of thought, conscience and religion. Section 38(1) stipulates:

Every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom (either alone or in community with others, and in public or private) to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance (FRN, 1999).

Ideally, these constitutional provisions should be enough guarantee for religious freedom and stability. This is yet the case because of the political and economic instrumentalization of religion, which manifests essentially in the transformation of religion from its pure theological foundation to that of political and economic empowerment. As such, religion features prominently in political campaigns and mobilization as much as in the search for solutions to excruciating economic conditions. The political sharia introduced by some northern states was an example. Thanks to the ingenuity of then President Olusegun Obasanjo in applying existing federal framework to manage the attendant religious impasse (Suberu, 2009a; 2009b). Rather than respond violently in his characteristic manner, Obasanjo only described it as a ‘political Sharia’ that would die a natural death. (*Tell*, 1999: 13-23). Truly, the Sharia crisis has declined in substance. This does not imply that religion has ceased to be a central force of identity transformation in the country. It continues to rear its ugly head intermittently.

## **Conclusion**

This article has analysed the adoption of secularism for managing religious pluralism in Nigeria. The continuing manipulation and transformation of religious identities for political ends, resulting in a threatening regime of ethno-religious violence across the country, even as crucial national political debates are being influenced and colored by religious forces, attest to the inadequacies of secularism. The “secular” state, that is supposed to be neutral and unbiased, if it must intervene, has been severely compromised. Not only has the Nigerian state become an active participant in religious affairs, given its ‘secular practices,’ it also has been grossly incapacitated in maintaining fairness and equity in its relations with existing religions, thereby causing secular marginalization and exclusion. This is partly because secularism is not rooted in political institutionalization and therefore incapable of generating sustainable social capital among the citizenry. Thus, secularism become a liability, rather than an asset, in the socio-political processes of the state. To engender religious balancing and a truly secular state in Nigeria, there is need to address the problem of weak institutionalization of politics and its institutions. The state would have to develop a stronger level of political will to

divest itself of inherent sentiments and contradictions in its secular practices. These require a continuous process of socio-political reengineering at all levels of governance.

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