

**JASSOSER**

**JOURNAL OF AFRICAN SOCIETY FOR THE STUDY  
OF SOCIOLOGY AND ETHICS OF RELIGIONS**



*.... promoting the study of religions in the  
sociological and ethical contexts*

ISSN 2682-5643

**VOL 3&4, JUNE & DEC., 2018**

(JASSOSER)  
**JOURNAL OF AFRICAN SOCIETY FOR THE STUDY  
OF SOCIOLOGY AND ETHICS OF RELIGIONS**

A Bi-annual Publication of

**AFRICAN SOCIETY FOR THE STUDY OF  
SOCIOLOGY AND ETHICS OF RELIGIONS  
(ASSOSER)**

**PUBLISHED BY  
African Society for the Study of Sociology and Ethics  
of Religions**

Published twice a year

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ISSN 2682-5643

Vol. 3 & 4, June & December, 2018

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# THE RELEVANCE OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS IN FOSTERING AN ENDURING DEMOCRATIC CHANGE AGENDA IN NIGERIA

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Olusegun Peter Oke Ph.D

## Abstract

*Issues relating to expected roles of leaders generally in Nigeria have been discussed severally at various fora. But, an area where attention is yet to be focused on, is the aspect that has to do with the duties and responsibilities of religious leaders on matters affecting the political life of Nigerians, bearing in mind the high level of corruption, nepotism, favouritism, kidnapping, robbing Peter to Pay Paul syndrome and the menace of militant groups who have constituted themselves as clogs in the wheel of political development in our country. There is the need for the religious leaders to wake up from their slumbers and take the bull by the horn in order to find a lasting solution to the myriads of problems that have bedevilled the political structure in Nigeria. This is very important so that the change agenda of government will not be a mere wishful thinking. Therefore, the aim of this paper will be to examine the interconnectivity between religion and politics, the social responsibility of religion in the democratic change agenda and the role expected of religious leaders in Nigeria. Recommendations like the religious leaders being focused to their callings and others will also be made to address the seemingly insurmountable political problems in the country.*

**Keywords:** Religious Leaders, Fostering, Enduring Democratic Change, Nigeria.

## **Introduction**

While it is generally accepted that politics is all about the accumulation, organization and utilization of power in a society-in particular the power to legislate, control and govern. Religion, as the many available definitions of it, is often easier to define than find. And perhaps even more elusive is the character of religious belief itself which they hold and the efforts they make to have these beliefs realized in practice can and does vary according to time and space.

Because religion preaches brotherliness, rectitude and moral precepts, it is often regarded as the force that sanctifies and validates the customs and administrative institutions established for the maintenance of order and good government in human societies (Dzurgba, 1999). In actual fact, religious principles have little in common with democratic values. This is not in any way to deny the social influence of religion. For example, some faiths according to (Augustine, 1998) have produced individuals who have distinguished themselves to be good ambassadors of their religions by the way of exemplifying kindness, charity and other virtues. Most religions are also pre-occupied with the teaching of precepts covering every aspect of human relations, it is on this note that this paper intends to take a critical look at what should be the role of religious leaders in enhancing a solid democratic change agenda of government in Nigeria.

## **Leadership in perspectives**

Before going into detail on the issue of leadership, it is important to examine who a leader is. Definition of the term "leader" is as diverse as many people have written articles and books on the subject matter. This is because those who have attempted the definition do so from different perspectives. But, no matter the angle from which the definitions are viewed, a leader is one who exerts unusual influence and considerable power. A leader is someone who makes things happen that which would not happen

otherwise. That is, a leader possesses the power or influence of transforming something common into something precious. A leader has the task of helping the societies to understand their problems that all must face, to aid in the setting of goals and priorities, to work with others in finding paths to those goals chosen, maintaining public morale and motivation and nurturing a workable level of public unity.

There are many types of leadership and each has its own peculiar attributes. But, basically for the purpose of this work, two types of leaders that are relevant to this work will be considered; they are instrumental leadership and the societal leadership. The instrumental leader uses power and influence primarily in the pursuit of private (personal, close family, cohorts) goals. His main concern is how he can use his office to achieve personal objectives. The second type of leadership is the societal leadership. While the instrumental leaders use their positions to promote private and selfish goal, the societal leadership subordinates private narrow goals for broader community objectives. To the societal leader, power and influence are useful when utilized to solve human problems. While the societal leaders are likely to resign when they are convinced they cannot influence changes to the benefit of the public, the instrumental leaders would hold on to power as long as their private objectives are achieved. This is the situation we find in Nigeria.

From the above therefore, it is very clear that majority of our leaders in Nigeria both the military, political and even the religious leaders are instrumentals and mere opportunists who are mired in the pursuit of selfish and personal goals at the expense of broader national goals. More attention is given to self over the interest of the society. They are out to grabble power and embezzle as much money as they could without minding the effect of their actions on the society at large.

What the nation is experiencing today is the absence of societal leaders; leaders that are committed to the cause of the

people. Those who are not ‘power-drunk’ this has being the bane of the country since independence. This is while Chinua Achebe said in his book “The trouble with Nigeria” that:

The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership ... there is nothing wrong with the Nigerian character, there is nothing wrong with the Nigerian land or climate or water or air or anything else” but leadership.

The lacks of selfless, non-corrupt and committed leaders have contributed immensely to the socio-political and economic predicaments facing the nation today. Unfortunately, Nigeria has had many non-leaders in leadership seat. The failure of those at the corridors of power to address Nigeria’s problems and consolidating democratic governance in the interest of the masses lies in having a government or leadership that works on the principle of good governance and most importantly people. In assessing the leadership situation in Nigeria, Adejinmi is of the view that most of the policy makers as well as those involved in decision making are engaged in bribery, corruption and egoism. They are distracted to an extent that they forget the nation’s policies aimed at improving the lives of the people in the society. The unethical behaviours of leaders have led the followers to see government as the best way to make money and this they do with impunity. So, when we talk about change, it is not only the leaders, but has something to do with the followers who constitute the majority. Desired change will be a mirage without the combination of both committed and purposeful leaders and followers alike. The followers determine the kind of leadership they want. The bottom-line therefore, is that when the followers are corrupt, self-centred and visionless, the leaders that will emerge will be an instrumental leaders. Since power resides with the people, leaders cannot do anything without the followers. When followers allow impunity, corruption and other vices in the name of religion, tribalism and sectionalism, then the outcome is under-development.

### **The Change Agenda**

Change is ubiquitous in any society, particularly in that which strives to fulfil human needs. It takes a committed leadership to accomplish a propitious change in a society. Nigeria has witnessed versions of change and they have never being for the benefit of common man. Only those at the corridor of power have gained from those with multiplicity of riches, while the ordinary citizens have remained in wallowing penury. In other words, the masses have been preoccupied with the struggle for daily survival. Every successive government in Nigeria promise change but unfortunately, the change promised could not be achieved as a result of greed and self-centredness coupled with expectations from their family and political loyalists who see political posts as opportunity to embezzle money since such chance may not come their way again. The reason given by military for taking over power from the civilian is corruption while politicians are saying that the worst civilian government is better that the best military government. Direction of change in a particular society depends on the manner in which resources are mobilized by the leaders and the attitude of the people towards change.

We have witnessed leaders in Nigeria who were concerned with the needs of the ruled, and strive to achieve it. We have also witnessed those whose purpose in government is to loot the treasury dry. Change has been defined as the significant alteration of social structure. Social structure here mean the: “the pattern of social action and interaction,” which include norms, values and cultural phenomena. Change can start anywhere. In fact every system is to some extent altered by changes in any of its parts. Change should not be mere slogan but there must be a concerted effort to march action with words. This is why we commend effort of the government of the day under the leadership of President Muhammadu Buhari to bring sanity into the system of government. The slogan now is “The fear of Buhari is the beginning of

wisdom.”For any intended change to occur in any society, the people must be convinced by the leaders that such change is both possible and desirable; hence, the need for systematic ideology that reflects the feasibility and desirability of such change. The words of Kofo Awosika is relevant here where she emphasises areas where there is need for urgent attention of those in power for the people to have confidence in them.

“People are poor because they are being denied access to opportunities. People are hungry and destitute because they cannot earn wages. They have no wages because they have no work. They have no work because they have been retrenched. They have been retrenched because industries cannot cope with their wage bill. Industries cannot cope with their wage bills because production costs have increased. Production costs have increased because our infrastructures have collapsed. Infrastructures have collapsed because the funds meant for their upgrading, repairs, maintenance and installations of others meant for common good end up in private pockets of few individuals”.

### **Religion and Democracy**

It is pertinent at this juncture to consider the relationship between religious leaders and democracy; in other words, the relevance of religious leaders on democracy and vice versa. From time immemorial, man has always been known to be a community builder. He is meant to extend Gods love, goodness and riches of life flowing from Him; to use his mental ability for the development of the welfare of the people around him. Since man is a community builder, he has no choice but to be involved in the public arena of human existence (Peter, 1991). It is for this reason that any system of government which helps to promote selfish, individualistic policies or programmes, who is fond of embezzling public money for his own self aggrandisement, involving in the killing of opponents in order to get power or to remain in power is opposed to democratic values and this must be vehemently condemned by any serious and God fearing religious leader.

### **Religion and its Social Responsibility**

To be sure, religion plays so many socially useful roles that it is possible to interpret some of these as democratic in nature. Many creeds, for example, provide the ideology that inspires the organization and associations, brotherhoods and communities of believers. Indeed, religion has been known to bring warring political entities together under a common coherent administration {Raul, 2001 }

Another important role being played by religion is the provision of emotional stability to believers. This is because religion provides psychological relief and seeks to proffer answers to the perplexing questions of man's existence in a world full of vicissitudes. Religion is a sort of opium that serves as balm. It is reassuring for the faithful to be told that there is somebody who cares, who watches over his life, responds to his yearnings and prayers and he is ever ready to crown his endeavours with brilliant success.

Religion thus contributes to the stability of the society by enhancing the emotional and psychological equilibrium of its members. Thus laws which have derived their legitimacy from traditions are either modified or up-dated in line with prevailing social circumstances, and then proclaimed to be community divine injunctions from God. This is generally how religion is made that are laid down for the good life and the harmonious foundation of society's social order, through its precepts.

### **The Roles of Religious Leaders in fostering an enduring Democratic Change Agenda**

Though, the issue of change should be tackled holistically. Not only by religious leaders, but should be the concern of all and sundry. But, I decided to focus attention on religious leaders because of their positions in the society. Therefore, In order to have an enduring democratic change agenda in Nigeria, there is the need for religious leaders to wake up from their slumber and take up the

responsibility of educating the politicians on the need to sustain the democratic setting. Though, it will be difficult if not impossible to have an exhaustive list of the roles religious leaders can play, it is therefore intended in this paper to outline few of the roles expected of them.

(Yusufu, 2001) in one of his works opines that one of the roles religious leaders can play is to build a nation of God fearing people with unadulterated faith in one God which will prompt a spiritual awakening in the people, inspire moral consciousness in our daily conduct and cultivate a culture where love for one another, respect for the sacredness of life, justice for all, honesty before God and fellow human beings will constitute our lifestyle since these politicians are members of one religious body or the other.

Secondly, religious leaders have a duty of rekindling in every citizen and politicians in particular the need for a nation where unalloyed loyalty to God and to our country Nigeria shall inform our private and public actions and conducts. Where all our God-given resources, talents and potentials shall be devoted to the service of Nigeria in particular and humanity at large, where we shall relentlessly promote the image of the country, uphold her dignity. This can only be done through enlightenment on why we should all labour until Nigeria becomes a united place where every citizen shall experience true love on the mountain and in the valley of life.

Another important role expected of our religious leaders to the politicians is that they should teach them how to be committed to God and to one another. This will make Nigerians, irrespective of their status and position in life to feel as persons answerable before the laws of the land and ultimately before God, the supreme judge of all nations. Their goal as religious leaders should be to guide every citizen to behave responsibly enough. One wonders why many who claim to be adherents of these religious institutions embezzle money meant for public use with impunity. This shows

clearly that religious leaders should intensify their efforts in this area.

They should also live exemplary lives so that those who claim to worship God will do so in truth and sincerity. This will help in transforming sound doctrines into practical lifestyles characterized by love, peace, humanity, honesty, sincerity and justice. This is very necessary in order for them to lay good example for their followers.

One other fundamental role the religious leaders can play in any democratic setting is at the point of oath taking by the politicians. (Ayantayo, J.K. 1999) states that oath taking is the invocation of curses on who breaks such oath by reciting scriptural passages that deal with consequences of oath violation. This will instil fear in the minds of office holders and encourage them to hold tenaciously to their oath. In other words, religious leaders not only participate in the oath taking/swearing - in ceremony, but should be involved in it. If a religious leader of the faith of the office holders is allowed to be involved, cases of oath violation will be greatly reduced.

Also, religious leaders should be allowed to call members of their religious denominations who hold public office for the periodic renewal of their oath of office. This will serve as constant remembrance of the promises being made by their oath. Not only this, religious leaders should be given a free hand to expel from religious denomination any member fond of engaging in embezzlement of public funds, they should live up to the moral standard expected of them. In other to enhance a solid democratic structure, religious leaders must play prominent role in teaching virtues in our places of worship. Their teaching must be backed with the right action.

Religious leaders must do everything possible to be moderate. They must not be flashy and flamboyant. They should always display piety, honesty, morality and righteousness. Religious leader should shun all forms of gratification and be

contented with what they have. Majority of religious leaders are found wanting in this as many lobby for political posts in their different religious bodies. Religious leaders going about with fleet of cars, bodyguards and police escort for protection. This has really dented their image as spiritual leaders. It should also be noted that despite the fact that we have those who hold tenaciously to their calls, we have others who have turned their calls to a money making ventures as they lobby for political posts and go from one office of politicians to another for brown envelope under the guise of assisting them spiritually.

### **Conclusion**

It is our hope that the politicians from the president to the least government workers should put in place moral principles of discipline, loyalty, tolerance, impartiality, courage, love, honesty and so on. This is very important and will conclude with the words of Ifemesia who says; “we therefore propose that our religious leaders should be composed of men, prominent not through their power, but through their intellectual and moral contributions to what we optimistically call human civilisation; embezzlement, bribery, corruption etcetera should not be labelled with them. They should shun any attempt politicians may make in buying them over with their ill-gotten wealth. What we observed in the recent time is the way the so called religious leaders sing praises of those corrupt leaders, on many occasions, thanksgiving services are being organized for them to welcome them after their unmeritorious service of looting the treasury of the nation. This is where the religious leaders have to be very careful as they need to hold on to their calls and be satisfied with whatever they have.

### **Recommendations**

In order to find a lasting solution to series of problems that have entangled the political landscape of the country, the following recommendations will be offered.

Religious leaders should try as much as possible to remain focus to their calling and stop to sing praises of corrupt people in the house of God in order to get money or other gratifications from them.

Every religious leader should take it as a matter of importance the need to preach undiluted word of God to their adherents. This is because; the so called corrupt people we find around are not from the moon. Rather, they are adherents of one religious body or the other.

The importance of symposium, seminars, and conferences cannot be over-emphasised. Religious leaders should not be more concerned about how to generate money. But, much concern should be given to how members will be developed spiritually. Seasoned scholars from different fields could be invited periodically to sensitise members on how to contribute their quotas to the political development of the country in any way they feel without making a mess of their calls.

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