

STATE SECULARITY AND THE NIGERIAN CHRISTIAN

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INTRODUCTION:

The purpose of this brief paper is to take a close look at the terms and ideas which have featured in the long-standing and on-going debate on the secularity of the Nigerian State. What do people mean when they speak of a "Secular State"? Is there any agreement on the conceptual content of this expression? And if we agree on what we mean, can we agree on what we want? And suppose we cannot agree on what we want, would such a disagreement be compatible with our corporate existence as "one nation"? Or would this be an area where we must agree — or disintegrate? In particular, the line of battle in the debate has been drawn roughly speaking between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria. Is the secularism option a position that is per se christian, or at least ideally so? If not, why do Nigerian christians by and large keep defending the secular state while the opponents of the secular state are almost always Muslims?

Our primary objective is to clarify these issues in the debate so that christians can see their way more clearly in the discussion about an issue that may be crucial to the future of the christian faith in Nigeria. If at the end I do take a position, this would be only a suggestion that does not intend to preclude other options. It may not necessarily be a tragedy if Nigerian christians do not have a unanimous view on this matter, which on the long run is more political or pragmatic than theological or theoretical.

1. What is a "Secular State"?

Etymologically the word "secular" comes from the Latin word "Saeculum" meaning "age", period of time, a century. In particular it is used in Latin for the time here on earth as distinct from eternity. Hence, it has come to mean that which pertains to this world in distinction from what concerns the world to come; the temporal and material as different from the eternal and spiritual.

But when the word "secular" is used in describing the state, we need to go beyond mere etymology. By its very nature, the state belongs to the organisation of human relations in this world, and must therefore necessarily be "secular" from the etymological point of view. We must go into history for the origin and meaning of this expression.

I think one can trace the origin of this idea to the great political and social revolutions in the Christian West starting with the Protestant reformation of the 16th century. What started first as a struggle for autonomy vis-a-vis papal influence on State rulers culminated in the French Revolution in the vindication of total autonomy of state authorities vis-a-vis all religious influences.

Until then, it was taken for granted that the state was ruled according to God's will, and that religious authorities were the authentic interpreters of this will; which the temporal ruler had to obey. When the idea of "secular" state emerged, it referred to a state in which the temporal, "secular" ruler enjoyed his full autonomy as ruler with no control from religious or "spiritual" authorities. Per se, it did not mean that the state no longer recognised religion, its rulers and its impact on society. Nor did it necessarily mean that the state ignored, less still went against the will of God. But it could, and did at times, mean these things, especially where temporal rulers had to fight against spiritual powers for effective control of the state. Historically, secular states have taken a wide variety of forms, ranging from benevolent recognition and generous encouragement of religion, to active suppression of all religious influences. Thus, the expression "secular state" has now become a vague and imprecise concept. With such a serious equivocity, it is impossible to carry on any fruitful discussion.

2. Do we want a secular state?

The "secularity debate" is once again a great controversy. Although much of one's answer depends on how one understands a "secular state", it has become more and more clear of recent that our problem is not only a matter of terminological disagreement. It does seem that even when we agree on what we mean, there are serious disagreements on the substantive issue.

The debate started in earnest during the discussion in preparation for the inauguration of the Second Republic. It began already with the Constitution Drafting Committee, whose sub-committee on National Objectives proposed as an opening to its article one the follow-

ing.

Nigeria is one and indivisible sovereign Republic, secular, democratic and social.....(1)

In the final draft presented to the constituent assembly, the word "secular" had dropped out, and not merely for editorial convenience. The constituent assembly took up the matter again. Many, especially Christians, wanted the word "secular" reinserted to make sure no one would ever think of imposing any official state religion on the country. Others opposed the word. They feared it could render unconstitutional many areas of government direct involvement in religious matters; e.g. the Sharia as state law; Pilgrims' Boards, government religious schools etc. The famous "Sharia Debate", which almost broke up the Constituent Assembly, was therefore only a particular aspect of the "secularity debate". The formulation which we now find in article 10 of the 1979 Constitution was thought to be a good compromise.

The Government of the Federation or of a state shall not adopt any religion as State Religion.

Right up to the present, all official government pronouncements have insisted that government intends to maintain the letter and spirit of that clause.

Unfortunately, we now know that the clause as it stands is too vague to be effective. When does a government "adopt a religion as state religion"? Is it only when it explicitly says so? Or must one resist also making a religion effectively a state religion by giving it preferential treatment and establishment status? Many people insist that Nigerian must be deemed effectively an Islamic State for as long as the Sharia remains a recognised state law, and as long as our country remains in the O.I.C.

In the light of our experience of the recent past, we now need to go beyond what is contained in article 10 of the 1979 Constitution. In the spirit of that clause, we must table for frank discussion and spell out clearly what government may or may not do in the area of religion. Rather than engage in sterile debate on the theoretical concept of "secularity", we should face concrete issues that have so far raised dispute and cast doubt on the secularity of our nation. These include the following: the Sharia as state law, pilgrims' Boards, financing of National Mosque and "Cathedral", Nigeria's membership of the O.I.C. and the establishment of the Advisory Council on Religious Affairs (AORA).

3. An Open question: a clear answer.

We see therefore that it is still an open question whether Nigerians want a secular state or not. Some people have in fact rejected any suggestion that Nigeria is a secular state. They point out, and rightly too, that the word "secular" does not exist in our Constitution. It does seem that there is a serious difference of opinion among Nigerians on the basic issue of whether Nigeria is a secular state or not. Furthermore, I am quite convinced that this is an area where we must agree, at least in principle, or disintegrate. A clear and workable answer is needed, and needed quickly.

The way the discussion has gone so far, one may get the impression that it is typically christian to agitate for a secular state, while it is "Islamic" to insist on a religious state. We need to point out, and insist that there is nothing particularly "Christian" about the secular state option. Nor do I believe that it is basically "unchristian". The Christian can thrive in any state system where justice and freedom are maintained. This can be demonstrated both in practice and in principle.

4. The Long history of Christian States.

Both Christians and Muslims in Nigeria need to be reminded that christianity has a long history of being the official religion of the state. As from 323 AD, when the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great, became a christian and declared christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, it became normal for christians to expect that the state in which they live be christian.

This is not only a matter of past history, to be associated with medieval centuries. Even today, there are many countries in which christianity, in one form or the other, is recognised as the official state religion. As late as 1980, Barrett² listed 23 countries as being officially Catholic. There are also other states which have adopted other christian denominations as official state religion. Many of these countries are considered modern and progressive. For example:

Catholic Countries include the following:

Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Costa-Rica, Haiti, the Holy See, Italy, Luxemburg, Malta, Monaco Philippines, Portugal, Spain and Venezuela.

Anglican Countries include Bahamas, Channel Islands, Isle of Man, Great Britain.

Lutheran States: Denmark, Greenland, Norway, Sweden

Unspecified Christian: Finland, Liberia, Samoa, and Vanuatu.

From the above examples, it is clear that it is neither unchristian nor strange for christians to live in a christian state.

From the same study, we have the following statistics for the whole world:

- a) Atheistic States, 30, with 34% world population
- b) Secular States 90, with 36% world population
- c) Religious States 101, with 30% world population

Among the religious states, 23 are Islamic with 8.6% of the world population. Christian states of all denominations total 44, with 7.4% of the world population, of which Catholic states alone number 25 states with 5.3 of the world population.

The same study shows that while 46% of christians live in religious states of one form or the other, (including states that have adopted a non-christian state religion and are often anti-christian) 36% live in secular states, while about 18% live under atheistic regimes. This shows that christians can adjust to life under any religious climate.

5. The Choice is Ours

Nigerians have the good fortune of being able to discuss the matter of religion and state quite freely. The opportunity must be well used. Many people live under a system inherited from the past or imposed by a dictatorial regime, be it religious, secular or atheistic. From the christian viewpoint, there are a few factors to keep in mind.

a) Whatever the regime, the christian must recognise the direct relevance of God and his laws in the running of human affairs. How this will find expression in the concrete arrangements for government and politics is quite another matter. It is often guaranteed by a system of religious state. But it can be guaranteed too under a "Secular state" arrangement, depending on how this is understood.

b) Therefore, the famous quotation "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's" must never be interpreted to mean that God has no say in matters of government. The state too, and all that make it up, including Caesar himself, belong to God. Christians living with Muslims, as we do in Nigeria, should not continue to give the impression that we do not recognise the rights of God in temporal matters. Religion, even for the christian, is a total way of life, for clergy and laity alike.

c) Even though labels and systems of government are important, what is most important on the long run is the *content* of good government. This must include justice, fair-play, honesty, due freedom, basic equality, and a general atmosphere of peace understood as tranquility in order. These are ideals that every religion and ideology proclaims; and around which all people of good will can be mustered.

d) In particular, as regards the secularity debate, freedom of religion must be properly understood and adequately protected. Freedom of religion does not mean license, disorder and anarchy. It is freedom to decide on one's religion and to practice it freely, with due regard for the rights of others. It is also freedom to profess or not to profess religion. Thus, freedom of religion is encroached upon where people are forbidden to believe or not to believe, or where people are forced or unduely pressurised to follow one religion rather than another. We should add too that freedom of religion is not incompatible with holding firmly to one's religious view-point; as absolute in one's own regard.

6. The Options before us:

In order to ensure an arrangement that will make for peace, collaboration, and mutually good relations between religious bodies in our nation, we need to take into account our own circumstances. There are many ways in which different states and nations handle religion, each according to its own historical and socio-political realities. What might be working well in some countries may not necessarily work well for us.

The options before us are not simply between being secular and non-secular. In each case there is a fairly wide variety of options within the two broad categories. For the purpose of our discussion, we want to distinguish four different positions,

- a) The *Mono-religious* state
- b) The *Multi-religious* state
- c) The *Arreligious* state
- d) The *Anti-religious* state

Examples exist in the world today of each of these categories, as shown earlier. But how does each fit our own local conditions?

- a) The *Mono-religious* state is one in which there is one official religion. It may or may not allow other religions. But where it does allow non-official religions, they are merely tolerated, without equal rights as the official religion. A few Muslims have asked that Nigeria be declared an Islamic state. But I do not think that such people represent the majority view of Nigerian Muslims, and therefore deserve to be ignored. They should however be restrained from propounding an idea which in our circumstances is clearly a recipe for chaos and subversion. Government should consider them as "security risks" and treat them accordingly. I do not know if any Christians are agitating for a Christian state in Nigeria. If there are, they too should be treated like their Muslim counterparts.
- b) The *Anti-religious* state is one in which government suppresses religion. While there are quite a few vocal critics of religion in Nigeria, there are not many advocating state suppression of religion. Such a state is clearly incompatible with the deeply religious feeling of our people.
- c) The *Multi-religious* state is one in which there are more than one official state religion. Some people say Nigeria is de facto a multi-religious state and should be so declared, since government in fact supports Islam and Christianity. The major lesson of the serious crises of religion that have engulfed our country of recent, in my view, is that we need to reduce, not confirm and increase government involvement in religion. In order that a multi-religious option may work, the state would need to decide what religions shall be recognised as official and by what criteria. Christianity and Islam are only broad categories. Within each group there are differences that are not negligible and can become troublesome to handle if it came to giving each religion an establishment status. For one thing, Catholics would feel the need to be considered as being a distinct group in the country. There is also the problem of deciding what to do for the different official religious groups and of being fair to each, as well as *appearing to be* fair too. If we wish to reduce areas of religious friction and thus save both government and religious groups the bitter rivalries and wranglings of the past, we should start looking away from the multi-religious scheme.
- d) The *Arreligious* state is one in which government is neutral in religious matters. This is what most Nigerians mean when they speak of a "secular state". It allows government encouragement of religion

but discourages direct government support of religious projects and structures. Above all, it guarantees religious freedom for all, within a general respect for law and order. Many modern states have adopted this approach and it has proved the best for both the state and religious groups.

7. Areas of Necessary Readjustment

In the Nigerian context, it means that we should be ready to take a close look at all areas of government involvement in religious matters and systematically reduce them to the minimum. Here again, we must mention the Sharia as state recognised and state financed legal system, Pilgrims' Boards, both Muslim and Christian, state funds for erecting places of worship, membership of religious international organisations like O.I.C.

Let us add immediately that it is either ignorance or sheer mischief to equate Nigeria's membership of the O.I.C. with her diplomatic relations with the Vatican. Nigerian Muslims should be told that countries with embassies to the Holy See include Algeria, Bangladesh, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Morocco, Niger, Pakistan, Syria, Sudan, Tunisia and Turkey; almost all of which are officially Islamic nations.³ In all these countries, there is a papal representative, as well as in Chad, Libya, and Mauritania. If anyone wishes Nigeria to review its diplomatic relations with the Vatican, they must produce genuine reasons, of a diplomatic nature, and not use religion or the O.I.C. as an excuse.

I appreciate the motives behind the formation of the Advisory Council for Religious Affairs; but I still believe it is a step in the wrong direction. It is not surprising that it is riddled with problems. If religious bodies are not able to meet on their own, government cannot force them to agree. The whole idea goes against the spirit of the arreligious state.

There are other areas of government involvement in religion which we must be ready to look at dispassionately; e.g. Christian and Muslim chaplaincies in Institutions and in the armed forces, religious schools and departments in higher institutions, religious programmes in government owned electronic media, etc. I am *not* advocating that all these be abolished. Rather, we should justify them on a clearly rational basis so that equity and fair play will be easier to be determined and maintained.

Conclusion

We are in the midst of a "transitional political programme". One important item on this programme is the review of our Constitution. This affords us an opportunity to learn from our past errors and devise ways of avoiding them in future. If there has been a lot of problems with religious issues of recent, it is because the present Constitution left too many points vague and imprecise. We should decide once and for all that Nigeria is a secular state in the positive sense described in this paper as "arreligious" state. Having taken that position, we should set about gradually but surely dismantling the vestiges of a theocratic system that we have long left behind us. The christian continues to be challenged to be a good citizen and faithful disciple of Christ. Both roles are not only compatible with each other. One is fulfilled in the other. It is only by keeping both together that the christian can make a truly valid contribution to government in our multi-religious environment.

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