

Religion, Politics, and Power in Africa: The Nigerian Experiment and Lessons from The Sharī'ah Madīnah Plural Model

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores Nigeria's complex relationship between religion and politics within the context of the country's pluralistic society. Despite various constitutional clauses, faith is decisive in pursuing political power, as seen in the 2023 general elections. Both the Christian and Muslim communities campaigned heavily in support of candidates from their respective religions, resulting in the emergence of a Muslim President and Vice President. While previous studies have examined the role of religion, ethnicity, and money in Nigerian politics, this paper seeks to fill the gaps by employing the historical method to uncover ancient African empires and their political structures. By doing so, the report offers a historical explanation for Nigeria's political experiments while suggesting a new arrangement to help unite the country's religious diversity. This research is crucial for understanding why religion holds such sway in the Nigerian public sphere, why Nigeria struggles to define itself as either secular or religious, and how to resolve this political problem.

Keywords: Nigerian; politics; religion.

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INTRODUCTION

Like most African countries, Nigeria is a pluralistic society with diverse religious, political, ethnic, national, and cultural affiliations. The pluralistic feature of Nigeria as a country is a significant factor in the country's political development as a result of the country's ethnic, religious, and legal pluralism. In legal pluralism, there is contestation of the interpretation and application of the constitutional provision for the role of religion in politics. The relationship between religion and politics continues to be debated despite the constitutional clause not adopting a state religion. One reason for this is that religion often plays a vital role in pursuing political power, as was too glaring in the country's 2023 February and March general elections. For example, both the church and the Muslim Community, to some extent, campaigned majorly in support of a presidential candidate and or gubernatorial candidates of their religious affiliation.

The extent and form of this support are as crucial to the Nigerian power struggle as it is to the country's polarisation. Moreover, there has been a growing call in the country by two major ethnic groups for cessation or, at least, the country's restructuring. A critical fallout of this electioneering is the substantial attention given to the emergence of both a Muslim President and Vice President come May 29, 2023, with particular reference to the concerns and needs of Christians in the country. Several studies have recorded the critical roles that religion, ethnicity, and money played in Nigerian politics, as well as the perennial debates over the secularity or non-secularity of the country. However, some questions, such as why religion has continued to hold sway in the Nigerian and, indeed, African public sphere perennially, are still begging for answers. Other questions include why defining Nigeria as a secular or religious state is difficult. Whose definition of a secular state should prevail in the country? What can be made of the persistent roles of religion, including the Sharī'ah, in the Nigerian state? Should this continue, and if so, why and how? To answer these and other questions, the paper employs the historical method to revisit ancient African empires and their political structures to explain the perennial Nigerian and African political experiments and suggest a new arrangement to help unite the country's religious diversities.

The remaining sections of the paper examine the keywords and the relationship between religion and politics in the Nigerian state, both in theory and practice. This is followed by a review of the historical emergence of the modern secular state, the nature of secularism, and its interface with the establishment of the Church in Europe. The following section attempts to explain the history of the fixation on religion in the African political and power structures. In contrast, the fourth section discusses the last general elections in Nigeria to analyze the role played by religion and ethnicity as well as their implications for the future power structure of the country. After that, the penultimate section provokes debate from the angles of the Islamic political Model to determine the solutions to the country's political debacle, while the last section summarises the findings of the paper, which reveals why, despite the Nigerian constitutional clause for religious neutrality in political engagement, it is neither fully subscribed to by adherents of the dominant

religions (Islam and Christianity) nor adequately enforced by the governments at all levels and other ways in which religion and politics can continue to intersect for the progress of the country.

Religion is an organized collection of beliefs, cultural systems, and worldviews that regulate people's conduct regarding values, behaviors, expectations, actions, and interactions. Sociologically, it is understood as a unified system of beliefs and practices regulating human conduct and social interactions (Durkheim, 2021). On the other hand, politics can be defined as the science of how people govern themselves, decide how their societies are led, and determine the allocation of power and resources in their communities. It usually involves a social contract, a constitution that binds the people together, and a system of government. In the case of a democracy, it requires the formation of political parties, the political actors, and the electorates, made up of individual citizens. It is closely linked to power, which may be defined as the social production of thoughts, ideas, or actions, which influence and determine the emotions, feelings, capacities, and behaviors of others. It might be exerted by force, persuasion, oratory ability, etc. The method of the diffusion of power determines its legitimacy and the acceptance of the wielders of power by the people. This makes citizenship education and liberty of conscience key aspects of civic duties, political engagement, and socioeconomic, cultural, and political development of democratic countries (Aghazadeh & Mahmoudoghli, 2017).

It has long been established that the Nigerian political experiment is characterized by the politicization of religion and the religionization of politics, and it is no longer new to find different political officeholders openly playing the religious sectarian card in campaigning for political power and canvassing for government support. According to Danaan (2020), religion has, over the decades, been used to polarise the people and perpetuate unhealthy political competition and rivalry. Religion has become so much a tool of political manipulation that it is hardly impossible for outrightly irreligious politicians not to pretend to be religious, especially when seeking political offices. They use religion to achieve their political aims and legitimize and sustain their political offices. Hence, Muslims and Christians have been locked in an unhealthy competition and rivalry for political control of the country (LeVan, 2019).

Religion has become a tool for political officeholders in the country to mobilize the masses and acquire power. Religious leaders use it to rally for their gains from the poor, the wealthy, and political officeholders. In contrast, the groups use it to console themselves in the face of disappointment from political and religious leaders and evade rational discussions and demands about life, the country, and the future. Hence, religion and ethnicity are the most significant, most divisive issues and clogs in the achievement of national integration in Nigeria as politicians continue to politicise religious identity (Beasley, 2015; Yesufu, 2016). Though there are great contestations on which of the two trumps the other in Nigeria's political history, religion's negative impact on politics and vice versa is the focus of this paper. What is not contestable, nevertheless, is the fact that Nigeria

is a multi-religious and pluralistic state whose constitution Federal Government of Nigeria, 1999, section 10 promulgates that “The Government of the Federation or a State shall not adopt any religion as State Religion”.

At the same time, there is evident and active political support for the two dominant religions. The constitutional promulgation has not prevented Nigerian governments from promoting and providing both covert and overt support for Islam and Christianity, as well as discriminating between their citizens based on religious affiliations. These discriminations include restricting access to political power, land acquisition to build places of worship and schools, use of spiritual dress codes in the public schools and offices, as well as the provision of funding for Muslim and Christian pilgrims both by the federal and state governments (Nwauche, 2008). This may explain Onaiyekan's in Akah & Ajah (2020) view that “Nigerians take their religion seriously”. Nigerians, especially Muslims and Christians, take their religions too seriously, making the two dominant religions sources of volatile and combustible tensions.

Against the above background, the paper will proceed to interrogate the place of religion in the modern state, the secular question, and the history of traditional African power structures to provide historical explanations for the religious links with politics and power in Nigeria. A central contention is that the claim by many that Nigeria is a secular state remains essentially just that due to the historical fusion of religion and politics in the country as well as the persistent interference of the state in religious affairs, and vice-versa, as seen in the last election. The claim often ignores the empirical evidence that even in developed democracies such as America, the debates persist about whether the United States underwent secularisation in the nineteenth century, whether it is secular or not, and whether America has embraced secularism.

METHODS

This article uses historical methods to analyze Nigeria's relationship between religion and politics. This method involved extensive research on ancient African kingdoms and their political structures and data collection on the role of religion in Nigerian politics. Data will be collected from reliable sources such as academic journals, government publications, and news articles.

The historical method proposes that the past shapes the present and suggests that we can better understand the present by analyzing the past. In this case, the historical process analyses explanations for why religion has excellent power in Nigerian politics despite varying constitutions. This method involves a detailed analysis of recorded data and their relevance to the current political situation in Nigeria. In addition, this article also uses a comparative approach, which involves comparing the political structure of ancient African kingdoms with present-day Nigeria. It allows the identification of similarities and differences in using religion for political gain. Through this method, this article seeks to propose a new arrangement that could help unify the country's religious diversity. The results of

data analysis will be presented in the form of a narrative to convey the study's findings effectively.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Secularism and the Church-State Debacle

While most people understand the terms secularism, secularity, secularisation, and secular to imply a kind of separation of politics from religion as they proclaim Nigeria's so-called secularism, secularism evolved from the European Protestant Reformation, Renaissance, and Enlightenment, which were predicated on the debate over the establishment of Church. The establishment of the Church refers to a kind of political arrangement where the government supports the Church's beliefs through legislation, education, and taxes, among others, as applicable in pre-Enlightenment Europe. It may also refer to a situation where a government official officially heads the Church, as in the case of the Church of England led by the monarch. At the same time, the Prime Minister is formally responsible for selecting some ecclesiastical officials who may also have established roles in the political spheres by their church offices. An established church may equally, in the words of Robert Bellah (1967), refer to "civil religion" or the state using the concepts of a particular religion in politics, such as Abraham Lincoln's usage of Christian imagery of slavery and freedom in justifying the American Civil War.

For the philosopher T. S. Eliot (2014), a pro-establishment scholar, the state requires a substantial amount of established Church to ensure social cohesion among its citizens and avert social fragmentation. Thus, to ensure citizens have this sense of cultural cohesion, the state must, in some specific ways, privilege a religion or religious institutions over others, as is prevalent in Nigeria today. However, anti-establishment liberals oppose this by appealing to the value of fairness and the need for the secular state to remain neutral among religions (Morieson, 2021). The establishment of Church arguments is central to the thoughts of John Locke, who fled Britain to Holland, where he employed the Christian notion of the liberty of conscience to argue for the separation of religion and politics. Hence, Lockean liberty of conscience continues to motivate the American experiment in the non-establishment of faith (Bejan, 2021).

The term secularism was historically coined around the 1840s in England by George Jacob Holyoake, a young freethinker who had been jailed for blasphemy when he lectured contemptuously about God and religion. For him, secularism meant that the state and schools should completely dismiss God and religion and should not, in any way, take them into account in worldly affairs (Argyle, 2021). Thus, Holyoake's secularism seeks to build a wall between religion and politics. Put another way, it calls for a wholly irreligious state (Ibrahim & Lateef, 2014). Therefore, according to Familusi (2013), secularism "as a doctrine rejects religion. It maintains that religion should have no place in civil affairs. Thus, a secular state

is a state where religious communities have no recognized political roles and no formal relation to the state."

France is an example of a Western country that upholds the extreme liberal conception of a secular state. Through its vision of *Laïcité*, which has been used since the end of the 19th century to denote the separation of government from the influence of the Church, the French state today makes it illegal to wear a religious dress such as the turban and hijab. Though these laws have been opposed by Muslims and Sikhs, whose religions require female Muslims to wear the hijab and male Sikhs to wear the turban, France does not permit discrimination in public institutions in the name of religious practice as liberty of conscience does not include giving public expression to what the state perceives as religiously discriminatory even if doing so is not inimical in any way to fellow members of the public. This interpretation of secularism has moved France into "a kind of authoritarianism" once it defines the religious dress its citizens should uphold (Uthman, 2013).

Whereas it is argued in Nigeria by many that by promulgating in section 10 of the 1999 Constitution that the federal and state governments shall not adopt any state religion, the Nigerian Constitution stipulates that the country is secular where the *Shari'ah* for example, has no place, this contradicts the historical influences of religion in general and the *Shari'ah*, in particular, on politics long before the country's independence. I will, therefore, attempt to trace the historical roots of the interface between power, religion, and politics in the country by revisiting the history of Africa.

Religion, Politics, and Power in African Societies

Historically, the Western notions of the separation of Church and state are unAfrican if not totally at variance with the African philosophy and way of life. For this reason, as John Mbiti and Bolaji Idowu have asserted, African Religion is a total way of life, which has enabled religion to impact all facets of individual and societal lifestyles. Religious beliefs and practices, therefore, determine and guide the political and secular spaces in African traditional societies (Mbiti, 1990). For example, the Yoruba referred to their Oba (king) as the Igba Keji Orisha (Second in command to the Orisha) (Robinson, 2021), in Idowu's view, "are the ministers of Olodumare, looking after the affairs of His universe and acting as intermediaries between Him and the world of man" (Idowu, 1970). By quoting Idowu here, the aim is to emphasize that the king in traditional Yoruba societies represented the gods who spoke and acted in their names. It is not, in any way, meant to endorse the view that Olodumare is a male or supreme divinity in Yoruba cosmology, a point that scholars such as Kola Abimbola (2006) have challenged. Abimbola has shown that Olodumare as a High Yoruba 'Deity' "is neither male nor female" and has always co-existed with "three other divinities" (i.e. Obatala, Esu and Ifa).

Writing on the Old-Oyo Empire, Abimbola argues that in its constitution, "there was no real separation between religion and the state" as both the Emperor

and his executive council of Chiefs, the Oyo Mesi "were the highest-ranking leaders of some of the most important divinities of Yoruba religion." The Alaafin, the Emperor himself, was highly revered as "the representative of Sango, the Yoruba god of thunder, lightning and justice." At the same time, each of his eight chiefs "was also the leader of an important Yoruba deity." In fact, "the Bashorun, the leader of the Oyo Mesi, was also the head priest of Orun. Orun is the personal divinity of all Oyo Emperors."

Abimbola writes further, "every reigning Alaafin was regarded as a demigod-specifically, the representative of Sango" and "as a demigod, the Alaafin was revered, and he rarely appeared in public" and when he did, "his face was always shrouded behind the veil of beads of his heavily adorned crown." Therefore, "because the Alaafin was a demigod who was not in touch with his citizens, the eldest son of every reigning Alaafin held the important title of Aremo" who "to all intents and purposes, had more influence in society than his father.

The ancient Borno Empire also believed that the Mai (king) possessed certain divine powers that were fortified and mystified through the ritual seclusion of the king, during which access was granted only to those who were members of his inner circle or initiates. As a result of these divine and mystical powers, the ancient Borno people paid obeisance to their king, believing that he possessed the divine power to cause life, death, sickness, and health, among other capabilities; hence, their religion was rooted in the worship of their king. Similarly, the great ruler of ancient Kano, the Barbushe, was a king and spiritual leader who could only ascend the throne and gain political power and ascendancy over his competitors through his victory in the religious and mystical powers of the ancient people of Dalla. The Barbushe was a traditional spiritual king with political and judicial authority derived directly from traditional magical powers (Abar, 2019).

The above was the complex power structure in Africa when Islam was introduced into the continent alongside the Islamic educational system, which started graduating teaching, clerical, judicial, administrative, and other personnel and officers for the empires; Islamic scholars, thereby, began to gain access to the courts of kings and started to play significant roles in policy making (Hassan Bello, 2018). This later brought about a shift from the traditional African religious power structures to the Islamic power structures in many parts of Africa as the coming of Islamic scholars was highly welcomed by African kings, who saw the Islamic scholars as powerful mystics who could use their spiritual powers to solve some challenges of their empires, such as causing rainfalls during droughts, winning the wars of the cartels and also offering protection against witchcraft or nullifying its adverse effects. Hence, the Islamic scholars served as spiritual doctors, scribes, advisors, and ministers to the kings (Pouwels, 2005).

The introduction of Islam to Africa was, therefore, largely peaceful through the activities of Islamic traders, scholars, and preachers and not through confrontation, as Lamin Sanneh's *Beyond Jihad: The Pacifist Tradition in West African Islam* has made clear (Sanneh, 2016). In contrast, Dan Fodio and his

followers had thought they could reform Islam in Hausaland through religious dialogue, but this dialogue approach failed. They were compelled to resort to force, which eventually gave them victory (Abar, 2019). Similarly, Murray in Bodansky (2015) explains that the Shaykh resorted to jihad as a last option, given the aggressive treatment received from the Hausa kings. Based on these historical reports, several arguments can be offered. One, the religious station of politics and the politicization of religion in Africa and, indeed, Nigeria neither began with the advent of Islam nor with the arrival of the colonial masters. Instead, the fusion of religion and politics was part of the African traditional power structures long before the coming of Islam and colonialism. Two, this interconnection between religion and politics was sustained by the British, whose history of establishing the Church is not entirely at cross purposes with the African political arrangements. Third, despite the jihad movements in Africa, the history of Islam in the continent also reveals a pacific or quietist dimension, which is usually glossed over in the discussion about the militant approach.

Therefore, the religionization of politics and politicization of religion did not begin with the above jihad. However, following the impact of Islam on politics in Nigeria and the subsequent religious interactions in the country, it has been widely argued that there is a link between Nigerian politics and the activities of the terrorist group Boko Haram (Walker, 2018). While some have gone to the extent of viewing the movement as an attempt by Muslims to Islamise the country and thereby further religionize "Nigeria's secularism," it is apparent that these claims cannot be farther from the truth. Instead, they only reflect the extent to which Islam and Christianity vie to influence the state and obtain undue religious favors and advantages in employment, political appointments, admission, pilgrimage patronage, control of educational institutions, and the fielding of candidates for elections, among others. The prevailing competing influence of Islam and Christianity on the polity implies that Nigeria's government is competitively influenced by its two dominant religions. Hence, religious sensitivity is high. Moreover, this makes religion a crucial element in understanding and contextualizing specific political trajectories.

It is, however, essential to note that the politicization of religion and the religionization of politics has manifested in the escalation of violent religious conflicts, as could be seen in the increasing rise in the Hijab imbroglio in southwest Nigeria over the freedom and right of Muslim female students to use the Hijab in public schools and the lopsidedness of religious affiliations in political appointments in the country.

The Implications of the 2023 Elections, Religious and Ethnic Balancing

Compared with other pluralistic nations such as the United Kingdom and the United States discussed above, the results of Nigerian successive elections since independence and the 2023 general elections conducted by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) have consistently confirmed the dangerous faultlines of the Nigerian political landscape (Anejionu & Ahiamunnah, 2021).

The employment of the country's religious, regional, and ethnic identities as a stratagem for garnering votes at the ballot during the election has sustained the bifurcation along ethnic, regional, and religious lines. Therefore, riding on these cleavages to power is politically divisive and has untold consequences on the country's unity. In the last 2023 elections, the winner and president-elect of the ruling All Progressives Congress (APC), Asiwaju Bola Ahmed Tinubu, and his vice, Kashim Shettima, were Muslims from the Southwest and Northeast of the country, respectively. This arrangement was probably to neutralize the prospects of the leading opposition party, the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP), Atiku Abubakar, who is also a Muslim from Northern Nigeria but who strategically opted for his deputy Ifeanyi Okowa, a Christian from the Southsouth as well as the candidate of the Labour Party (LP) in the election, Peter Obi, a Christian from the Southeast who also, to balance the religious equation in the country, picked Dr Yusuf Datti Baba-Ahmed, a Muslim from the North.

Following the outcome of the election, one may argue, as Faruqi Kperogi (2003) has consistently done, that both the PDP and LP helped APC Asiwaju win the election or that "nothing in both Atiku and Obi's eight-year record as vice-president and governor of Anambra State respectively indicates that they are the solutions to the country's political crisis or that they can do much on the poverty in the country since Atiku supervised the sale of the national assets with no concrete development while "Data from the National Bureau of Statistics, which Charles Soludo referenced in a 2015 article" reveals that Obi took his state from the most prosperous where poverty was just 20% in 2004, which was the lowest in the country at the time to 68 percent in 2010 after his first tenure. Faruqi also explains that the LP candidate was Nigeria's most virulently anti-worker governor, who, for instance, merged the school fees of three terms into one and required that they be paid at once, which forced children from poor homes to drop out of school as he also refused to pay the minimum wage and fired workers who went on strike. He was also responsible for doctors "going on strike for 13 months over a demand for a 60 percent raise in their take-home pay" as well as "ASUU at the then Anambra State University," which was on strike for six months during which he fired the Vice Chancellor for supporting the welfare of his staff.

However, the question for me is not which of the candidates is the solution to the country's leadership debacle but to what extent are people of other faiths not justified in being distrustful of the incoming administration, where a Muslim not only succeeds another Muslim as the president but also with a Muslim vice president. Does this development not ignore the need for religious balancing in the political arrangement of the country? This is another question begging for an answer. Again, is it not equally significant that Obi, the Christian presidential candidate in the 2023 general election, is also from the Southeast? Is this geopolitical zone yet to benefit from the equitable regional balancing of power rotation in the recent Nigerian political trajectory? Is it inconceivable to view the coming Tinubu Presidency as a usurpation of the opportunity for political equity for the Igbo people in modern Nigerian politics?

For the Christians, Ibos, and other Nigerians who have been consciously canvassing for the religious and geopolitical balancing of the Nigerian presidency, the outcome of the election was completely unacceptable. Nevertheless, campaigning or voting along religious and ethnic lines, both at the presidential and gubernatorial levels in the 2023 general elections, indicates the negative impact of not only the religious but also the regional and ethnic divisions on the cohesion and stability of Nigeria. To this end, the paper will discuss how the country can move forward by proposing the unification of religion and politics through governmental control and regulation of all religions using the Islamic political model of the Prophet Muḥammad saw.

Lessons from the Sharī'ah Madīnah Experiment

About the historical fusion of religion and politics in Nigeria, it is deemed appropriate to recommend the Sharī'ah model of religious pluralism based on the plural project of the Prophet saw., especially in Madīnah. The Islamic political prototype of pluralism was first started in Makkah, where the Muslim community encountered stiff opposition and hostility. However, the Prophet maintained an amicable and cordial relationship with the Makkans. Rather than creating a subcontract religious minority community or total separation and withdrawal from Makkan Ishrāk culture, the Prophet ensured that while the minority Muslim community preserved its spiritual practices, identity, and culture, they were also fully integrated into the social and economic life of the society. He made use of the existing Arab tribal security system to promote Muslims' liberty of religion, identity, and culture. He and his followers entered several tribal security pacts to protect their lives, faith, dignity, and wealth (Olowo, 2021).

The tribal security system, which was based on Arab tribalism, served as protection for both the individual members of the qawm (clan) or qabīlah (tribe). As a result of what ibn Khaldun has termed 'asābiyyah (solidarity), the loyalty and devotion to the qawm or qabīlah were greatly ingrained in the psyche of the Arabs (Alon, 2021). According to a famous poem by Durayd, a pre-Islamic poet, "I am of Ghaziyya. If she is in error, then I will; and if Ghaziyya be guided right, I go right with her" (Hāmeen-Anttila, 2020). Hence, the Prophet and the Muslims benefitted from the Arab tribal security system by making defense pacts with all the seventeen Arabian tribes of Makkah, and these were the precursors to religious, political, and defense alliances made by him with the Aws and Khazraj tribes of Madīnah (Abar, 2019).

The next phase of the Islamic political model occurred in Abyssinia when the Prophet ordered mainly the weak and vulnerable members of his community who could not secure any security pact to emigrate to the country in 615 C.E. This was the first hijrah by the Muslim community in Makkah. This shows that where Muslims are unable to find any constitutional, customary, and conventional means to protect themselves and their religion, they are permitted to emigrate to the homeland of people of other faiths, provided they would get protection, security, and justice (ibn Taymiyyah, 1414/1993: 88-90 and ibn Hisham, 1971: 1, 448-449).

Though the leaders of Makkah attempted to get them deported back to Makkah because they had abandoned the religion of their ancestors and yet refused to accept the faith of the Negus of Abyssinia, Negus invited the Muslims to defend the allegations. Here, Ja'far ibn Abi Talib, who was chosen to protect them, made his famous speech on the message of Islam, which reads in part as follows:

“O, king! We were a people of ignorance, worshipping idols, eating the flesh of carrion, committing abominations, breaking family relationships, and doing evil to our neighbors; the strong among would devour the property of the weak, and we were doing that until God sent us a messenger from among us. We knew his ancestry, truthfulness, honesty, and chastity. He invited us to the oneness of God, to worship Him, and to free ourselves from the stones and idols that we and our ancestors were worshipping. He commanded us to speak the truth, to fulfill the trust, to unite the family, to do good to the neighbors, and to restrain from the forbidden and bloodshed. He prohibited us from abominations, falsehood, devouring the property of the orphan, and defaming the chaste woman, as well as commanded us to worship God and not associate partner with Him and commanded us to pray and fast. We were convinced by his truthfulness, believed in him, and followed him in the message that came to him. Then, we started to worship one God and did not associate any partner with Him... Then, our clan members rose against us, persecuted and tormented us because of our faith... we emigrated to your land and chose you above others because we long for your asylum and hope that we would not be oppressed in your presence; O, King!” (Hishām, 1990; Taymiyyah, 1994).

The Negus of Abyssinia then asked that he read from the Qur'an, and Ja'far read to him the first forty verses of the Qur'an 18, the chapter of Mary on the miraculous and virgin birth of Jesus (AS). After that, the Negus declared that the Qur'an and the revelation Moses (AS) brought were from the same light. "He then turned to the Makkan emissaries and said: go away! By God, I will never release them to you" (Taymiyyah, 1994).

As a result, the Muslim emigrants to Abyssinia lived peacefully with their Christian hosts for about twenty years, during which the Negus was believed to have accepted Islam secretly and sent a delegation of Abyssinian Christians to meet with the Prophet. According to ibn Taymiyyah, the reported conversion of the Negus as contained in Prophetic traditions, proves many points on regulating religion in diverse societies from the Islamic perspective. For one, it suggests the possibility that the Negus did not publicly practice the obligations of Islam, such as the five daily prayers, paying the compulsory alms, fasting in the month of Ramadān, and performing the pilgrimage. Furthermore, he could not govern them in line with the Sharī'ah and never invited them to Islam, not to mention compelling them by the sword (Taymiyyah, 1994).

The stories of some Makkan support this thesis converts to Islam after the hijrah who could not emigrate to Madīnah. Consequently, they were forced to

conceal their new faith. As the great orientalist W. Montgomery Watt documented, the narrative on the Makkan newly converted Muslims resulted from the Prophet's generous treaty of ḥudaybiyah with the Quraysh of Makkah. A vital component of the treaty was as follows: Whoever of the Quraysh comes to Muḥammad without permission of his protector (or guardian), Muḥammad is to send back to them; whoever of those with Muḥammad comes to Quraysh is not to be sent back to him (Watt, 1953). There are also the stories of Prophet Yusuf, the secret believer who concealed his faith from Pharaoh (Q.S. Gafur: 28-33), and the wife of Pharaoh, who believed in Prophet Musa (Q.S. Al-Qasas: 9).

It is particularly instructive that some Muslims accepted Christianity and were not declared guilty of apostasy. The Negus himself conducted the marriage of one of the divorced Muslim women to the Prophet right there in Abyssinia. This engendered the efflorescence of the Muslim community in the country as Muslims, including newly-born Muslims, were fully integrated into its social and economic life (Abar, 2019).

The third dimension of the Islamic political model occurred after the Prophet, and most of his followers did the hijrah from Makkah to Yathrib. After that, Madīnah al-Rasul (the city of the Prophet), where the Muslim community came into contact not only with Arab polytheists, the Aws and Khazraj, and Jews, leading to the evolution of the Islamic state characterized by specific pluralistic trends based on a document, according to the which, each constituent is an autonomous ummah or religious community (Uthman, 2019). It is important to note that this polity was the result of intensive dialogue, where all the representatives of the constituent parties were present, including the three Jewish tribes of Banū Qurayzah, Banū al-Nadīr, and Banū Qaynuqā' who initially refused to sign the covenant with the Prophet (Uthman, 2020).

Thus, the above might entail the incoming Nigerian government, and I declare that it is in the best position to do so, setting up a special constitutional conference composed mainly of equal representation of all the religions and scholars of religions in Nigeria to develop a new Nigerian constitution along the Madīnah model. That is putting only the control of the military defense of Nigeria and diplomatic relations in the exclusive list of the federal government while all other educational, economic, socioreligious, cultural, political, and judicial matters are within the purview of the residual or concurrent lists. The constitutional conference might also recommend setting up a Ministry of Religious Affairs, as done in Sri Lanka in 1990 (Juergensmeyer, 2017).

The Ministry, during the next political dispensation, should be constitutionally charged with the primary responsibility to regulate the practice of religion in the country by undertaking the registration of mosques and churches as well as religious associations, identification and prosecution of perpetrators of religious violence, including their sponsors and promoters of religious hate speech in the courts of law as well as the protection of the places of worship. This will be in line with the Qur'anic command (Q.S. At-Taubah: 106).

CONCLUSION

Religion in Nigeria is one significant way most people choose to identify themselves, and this reality has continued to tear the country apart, especially during elections, as seen in the 2023 general elections. Thus, to answer such questions as whether it is Nigeria a secular or religious state, whose definition of a secular state should prevail in the country, and what can be made of the persistent roles of religion, including the Sharī'ah in the Nigerian state, this paper has joined others in calling for a convocation of an entire constitutional conference made up of the representatives of Nigerian diverse religions and scholars of religions? The terms of reference for the meeting should include a drawing of a new constitution for the country, in line with the Sharī'ah Madīnah Plural model discussed in the paper, as well as the establishment of a special Ministry of Religious Affairs to be headed by an Igbo Christian at inception.

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These departments of Religious Studies were established to, among other things, engage in the multidisciplinary and methodological study of religion to help overcome the challenges of diverse religions amidst the chequered history of religious conflicts, a vision that the UI Religious Studies department is pursuing through its giant strides such as the organization of this timely and essential conference as our country marches towards a new political epoch.

It is, therefore, gladdening that the Department of Religious Studies is keeping the dreams of its founding fathers alive by organizing this year's edition of the Religious Studies conference in honor of the former president of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), erstwhile President of the World Methodist Council and former university Don, the late Dr. Sunday Coffie Mbang.

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