

Spirituality and Governance: The Interplay between Religious Leaders and Governance

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Abstract

This study is an examination of the multifaceted relationship between spirituality and governance with a focus on how spiritual values and religious leadership can shape political decision processes. The paper tries to look at the roles of religious scholars and leaders in influencing government policies, political systems, and societal values, with a view to determining the degree to which religiosity can stimulate the emergence of robust governance. Through a comprehensive analysis, the study analyzes how religious leaders can leverage on their influence to impact spiritual development, social justice and enrich governance and decision-making. It also highlights the effective means of fostering a more inclusive, equitable, and compassionate political system by analyzing the intersection of faith and policy. It is discovered from this study that religion and politics, as presently practiced by political gladiators, are inconsistent with the principle of good governance and social justice in Islam.

Keywords: Governance, Politics, Religious scholars, Social justice, Spirituality.

Introduction

The growth of a nation can be judged through the overall well-being of its citizens. And in order to make life worth living, every human being depends on fellow humans to sustain a good standard of living. The modern-day society is however bedeviled

with a lot of social and mental turbulence, corruption, and insincerity which makes the pursuit of good governance a pressing concern for every nation and community.

From time immemorial, religion and governance have been recognized as good bedfellows. In Nigeria, all religions, namely traditional or indigenous religions, Christianity, and Islam which are rather the popular faiths in our environment constitute one of the living springs of human life which has influenced and continues to direct the courses of life of many in diverse ways. Throughout human history, the positive values of religions, rather than their dysfunctions have generally been acknowledged through the role played by religious leaders in shaping the social, moral, and spiritual fabric of communities and societies worldwide. Their impact and influence however extend beyond the realm of faith, with much impact on governance, policy making, and social justice. So, to promote effective governance for the common good of citizens, the need for collaboration between the stakeholders, including the religious leaders in shaping values and actions cannot be overestimated because of its power in guiding and deepening a sense of purpose, compassion, and responsibility.

Relationship between Religion and Good Governance

Spirituality means the state of being spiritual or being attached to questions and values of religion.

Spirituality is therefore a broad concept that encompasses various aspects of human experiences and mainly has to do with connection to something higher or greater than oneself (Muhammad, 2023) In Islam, spirituality is inseparable from religion because it helps Muslims to develop a strong spiritual foundation and has a similar connotation with taqwa (God-consciousness). So, spirituality as a term is deeply rooted in Islam and connected to our beliefs, practices, and moral practices.

Religion according to Anyawu (2004) is defined as “human interaction with the supernatural to cope with life’s crisis”. Hornby (2000) defined religion as the belief in the existence of God or gods and the activities that are connected with their worship. For the purpose of this study John Dewey’s definition is more apposite here, Dewey according to Livingstone (2001) defines “religion as any activity pursued on behalf of an ideal and against obstacles and despite threats of personal loss because of its general and enduring value”. So, religion is part of everyday life and has always been a justification for a particular morality in society. This is why it tends to take a leading role in helping to ensure that the norms of society are imbibed.

In order to understand religion and its influence on the lives of people, social scientists such as Fagan and Fitzgerald (1996) distinguished between two distinct orientations or religious practice; the intrinsic and extrinsic religious orientation. The intrinsic practice is God-oriented and based on the belief that transcends the person’s existence while the extrinsic is self-oriented characterized by outward observance as a guide to behavior or attitude. However, extrinsic behavior is more harmful than intrinsic because it is directed toward some ends other than God and degenerates into a rationalization for the pursuit of other ends, such as status, personal security, self-justification, or sociability.

Intrinsic has a greater sense of responsibility, and greater internal control, and is more concerned with moral standards, consciousness, discipline, and

consistency. Also, those with intrinsic attitudes are more sensitive to others, more open to other’s emotions, and often do better in their political activities. On the other hand, extrinsic are more likely to be dogmatic, authoritative, less responsible, indolent, and achieve little in their political life. Every citizen therefore belongs to either of these religious orientations. Social scientists such as Fagan and Fitzgerald cited above, discover that the intrinsic are generally less anxious about life’s ups and downs, while extrinsic and those without religious beliefs are more anxious. In addition, the practice of intrinsic is more integrated and is more likely to tolerate opposition, obey rules and regulations, vote based on principle, and above all, be transparent and govern within the confines of the law.

It is not uncommon to hear Islamic scholars describing Islam as *Din wa Dawlah* i.e. a religion and government which implies that Islam transcends being only ritualistic, but rather a complete way of life that sees no demarcation between spiritual and mundane life. The division between private and public, the state and society which is common in Western culture is alien to Islam because religion from an Islamic perspective cannot be divorced from politics and the political process in particular. So, all public life in Islam is religious and should be pursued in the service of Allah as expressed in *Shari’ah*. In essence, the concept of good governance in Islam is premised on the principles of *al amanah* and *al adalah* (Trust and Justice). Nevertheless, the hope of good governance right from the first republic up to the present period in Nigeria in the opinion of this writer has been without the two qualities in the lives of many adherents of various religions.

Scholars of various religions such as Kamil (2011) assert that Islamic social responsibility involves relationships between mankind as well as actions, tasks, and activities that can lead to respect, harmony, justice, and development of people and society. So, religion has always maintained peace and harmony by upholding moral standards which always keep individuals in check. The position of Islam on good governance is without any ambiguity because Islam

sees the common good of society as the basis of good governance. In other words, good governance is a matter of moral concern because religion is a changing factor in the spiritual, political, and social life of any society. Given the above, religions serve as the springboards for the inculcation of ethical values because every action of a Muslim is regarded as a responsibility between oneself and Allah the creator. Religious leaders therefore play vital roles in legitimizing and sanctifying customs and administrative institutions, thereby contributing to the establishment and maintenance of good governance.

Role of Religious Leaders in Governance

Governance is an act of governing or ruling by exercising power and decision-making for a group of people. Governance in Islam has to do with leadership and is regarded as a trust. The Holy Qur'an teaches that governing authorities are instituted by God.

Say, O Allah! Owner of Sovereignty, you give sovereignty to whom you will and you take away sovereignty from whom you will, you honor whom you will and humble whom you will. In your hand is all good. Indeed, you are competent over all things (Q3:26)

Laws, whether divine or humane, are aimed at promoting the well-being of humanity and not the other way around. The ultimate purpose of law therefore is to uplift and refine human character, bridging the divide between individuals and the creator (Allah). According to Hailan & Asyraf (2022), the central theme of the Islamic political ideal is the struggle for an egalitarian society that will wage war against corruption, oppression, and political aggression and advocate for a system that will raise the standard of living of its citizens, irrespective of their religious, political, and ethnic affiliation. To achieve good governance regardless of religious affiliations, religious leaders and organizations must stay informed about government

activities and policies and make informed opinions that can promote good governance.

Historically, religious leaders especially Islamic scholars like Imam Abu Hanifa, Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn Khaldun, and Imam Malik have all at one time or another served as advisers, jurists, and administrators in order to put the leader or the ruler on the right track. So, religious leaders and scholars can significantly combat the effects of bad governance stemming from corruption, injustice, and other societal ills in the following ways.

- Religious scholars are expected to give support, and commendations, provide guidance and ethical framework, and participate directly or indirectly, when and where necessary, especially in policy making. This is because politics transcends power struggles but it is at ensuring that leaders harness power for societal betterment and promotion of global wellbeing.
- Religious leaders should advocate for justice and human rights as enshrined in the Holy Qur'an:
 - you who believe! Be persistent in standing firm for Allah, witness in justice, and do not let the hatred of people prevent you from being just. Be just; that is nearer to righteousness. And fear Allah, Allah is fully aware of what you do. (Qur'an 5:8)

In Islam, justice (*adl*) is about placing things in their rightful place. The term justice therefore encompasses not only legal and social justice but also include moral and spiritual justice which will lead to a balanced and righteous life. In the Islamic system of government, the government is expected to carry out activities in order to satisfy the needs of the citizens. The Islamic system of justice therefore goes beyond race, creed, or religion because Muslims are enjoined to be just to friends and enemies. Allah says in the Holy Qur'an:

O you who believe stay out firmly for justice, as witnesses to Allah Even if it is against yourselves, your parents, and your relations

Or whether it is against the rich or the poor (Q4:35)

In Qur'an 5:8, Allah says "Let not the hatred of people swerve you away from justice, this is closest to righteousness"

Human rights as an integral part of the overall Islamic order is obligatory for all Muslims to implement as directed by Allah. Religious leaders therefore educate their members on their rights, obligations to protest against injustice, recourse to remedies for unwarranted personal injury or loss, and right to self-defense against oppression. Allah says in the holy Qur'an "We sent our messengers with clear signs and sent down with them the book and the measure to establish justice among the people". The phrase "our messengers", according to Mohammad (2017) shows that justice has been the goal of all Prophets and scriptures sent to humanity which is in accordance with Islamic law.

In order to maintain a society where justice and peace reign, it is the duty of religious leaders to facilitate interfaith dialogue and cooperation.

O you people of the book, come to common terms as between us and you. That we worship none but Allah; that we associate no partner with Him, That we adopt not from among ourselves lords and patrons other than Allah. But if they turn back from these, tell them 'I bear witness that we at least are Submissive to Allah's decree. (Qur'an 3; 64)

The norms for the heavenly religions, Christianity and Islam are the promotion of peace through the acceptance and toleration of other people's beliefs and giving spiritual and temporal platforms for the expression of this belief system. By facilitating interfaith dialogue and cooperation among people of different faiths, the problem of social injustice, banditry, and the subsisting rapprochement between Islam and Christianity would fade away, because according to Professor Ade Ajayi, "Muslim and Christian leaders have to accept that there is no

alternative to a policy of cooperation and toleration if we really look forward to a good governance".

Religion as a unifying force that unites people together, irrespective of their ethnic, racial, educational, or historical background could be used as an integrative force that engenders Political stability and good governance. One of the factors that can be used to foster national cohesion if properly implemented, therefore, is religion and this can be achieved by strengthening the democratic institution in what ways?). The role being played by the duo of Sultan of Sokoto, who also doubles as the leader of the Muslim community in Nigeria, and Rev. Fr. Kukah in the pre-and post-election matters since the return to democratic rule easily come to mind.

By leveraging on their influence, religious leaders can drive positive change and help in creating a more just society by promoting transparency and accountability. It is however disheartening that despite the efforts of successive governments in Nigeria to combat corruption, the idea and the efforts have always been a mirage. Some of the efforts earlier made included the ethical revolution introduced by the first executive President, Alhaji Sheu Shagari (1925-2018), Mass Mobilization for Social Justice and Economic Reconstruction and Self Reliance (MAMSER) introduced by General Ibrahim Babangida, War Against Indiscipline (WAI) introduced by Buhari/ Idiagbon regime and later Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC) during President Olusegun Obasanjo regime.

All these programmes failed due to a lack of proper coordination, enforcement, and the failure of the leaders to live above board to serve as models for people to emulate. The religious leaders who are the custodians of religion and morality can of course assist in no small way in the reduction of social vices and crime because they are well placed to add their spiritual leadership to the local and global effort. The Qur'an as the primary source of Islamic law contains meanings and principles of social values that can be

integrated into civic responsibilities in order to have a civil society. Muslim leaders should therefore put into practice actions that could help in achieving the pleasure, help, and forgiveness of Allah because the Islamic worldview embraces the worldly life as a groundwork for the hereafter. Without mincing a word, an essential condition for establishing a civil society is to support civic values for sustainable development which will guide people's behavior to ensure they align with generally accepted norms and ethics. According to Abu Zarin (2023), "It is challenging and impossible to establish an inclusive, tolerant, and democratic civil society that upholds the ideals of democracy and social justice without the support of civic values and an effective structure".

Recommendations

One of the distinctive features of Islam is its systematic practical approach to the various problems standing between man and how to live a good life. Bhatti (2020) opines that one of the Islamic social responsibilities that is aimed at the overall prosperity of an organization or society is justice. Also, Nicholson (2006) defines conflict "as an activity which takes place when an individual or group wishes to carry out mutually inconsistent acts concerning their wants needs or obligation. Sandole (1998) in his view defines conflict as a situation in which at least two parties or their representative try to pursue their perceptions of mutually incompatible goals by undermining directly or indirectly each other's goal-seeking capability. Bringing in spiritual leaders into conflict resolution may bring social, moral, and spiritual value which can inspire a sense of engagement and values due to their credibility and established roles in their communities. It is therefore recommended that:

- Everyone must sincerely make some conscious effort to make sure that they display the virtues of their religions such as honesty, justice, respect for human rights, etc.
- In order to live a fulfilled life through good governance, religious leaders need to play a

significant role in the maintenance of peace and security through conflict resolution by reprimanding conflicting inciting parties, politicians, and elites and inviting them into their senses with a view to resolving their differences through peaceful discussion.

- Serious consideration should always be given to the inclusion of religious leaders in governance for peaceful resolution of conflict due to their unique position and their moral authority to influence and encourage mutual understanding within and between protagonists

Conclusion

The position of Islam concerning the issue of governance is without any ambiguity, especially when one considers its political theory which encourages its adherents to rise against any form of aggression and authoritarian regime. As noted in this paper, a lot of troubles have been experienced by many people due to bad governance which emanated as a result of the havoc caused by religions (substantiated by literature) or the nonchalant attitude of religious leaders.

To achieve peaceful democratic governance, we have to recognize the fact that the role of religious leaders is indispensable assets for sustainable development and good governance. Also, the government, religious leaders, and opinion leaders must make some conscious efforts for the adherents to display religious virtues when in a position of authority.

In a nutshell, religion and religious leaders as society's moral compass have the responsibility of promoting inclusive governance by fostering inter-faith understanding and providing ethical frameworks for decision making and encouraging leaders to prioritize public interest over personal gain.

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