Christianity and Democracy in Nigeria : Toward a Rethink of the Role of the Church for a Viable Democracy

Dr Hassan Musa
musahass735@gmail.com
ECWA Theological Seminary Kagoro, Nigeria

Abstract

The history of Nigeria's democracy has been both interesting and challenging. Embracing a democratic form of government, largely in opposition to military dictatorship, has been a significant move for Nigeria as a nation. This transition has opened the country to more critical and viable engagements with local and international partners, providing extensive democratic exposure. This essay attempts to reconsider the practical implications of democracy in Nigeria, with a view to addressing vested interests. It is our contention that democracy has not firmly taken root in Nigeria, nor across the broader African context. This is evidenced by ongoing struggles and contestations across ethnocentric, religiocentric, and sociocentric boundaries, which often seek exclusion rather than striving for a viable, inclusive democracy for the benefit of all. This essay proposes that religion, particularly Christianity, plays a vital role in fostering constructive and inclusive democracy in Nigeria. This argument is approached primarily from a theological perspective, with potential dialogues incorporating disciplines such as sociology, political theory, and history. The role of Christianity in providing principles of life that can serve as a strong foundation for establishing and maintaining good governance will be critically examined. This discussion aims not to create further divisions, but rather to highlight the responsibilities of all citizens, including non-Christians, in building an inclusive democracy for the common good. While this essay does not purport to offer a

definitive solution to Nigeria's democratic flaws, it seeks to present a clarion call that will hopefully awaken the conscience of the nation. It underscores the significant responsibility we all share in constructing and maintaining a viable democracy, one that is not merely a tool for the majority to further their vested interests at the expense of the minority.

Introduction

The emergence of democracy in Africa represents a significant social revolution. However, due to the continent's vastness and the unique characteristics of its various contexts, discussing the growth of democracy in Africa as a whole is challenging. Therefore, as the title of this essay suggests, the focus will be on the Nigerian context. From recent political events in Nigeria, it is apparent that democracy, when compared to international standards of political ideals, has not yet firmly taken hold. This essay calls for a "rethink" of the meaning and function of democracy, particularly in terms of religious contributions. Consequently, we aim to briefly discuss how Christianity, as a religious community, can contribute to rethinking democracy in Nigeria, not only as a political ideal but also as a social theory.

The approach primarily involves a biblical and theological perspective. Thus, the methodology will encompass theological reflection alongside numerous existing contributions. These contributions stem from the important theological voices in Nigeria, who have consistently engaged in discussions to support democratic growth. These voices viewed as essential theological conversation partners. This essay briefly discusses Nigeria's democratic struggle, highlights some emerging voices of political theology in African contexts, and explores the contributions that Christian theology can make towards the establishment and growth of democracy in Nigeria and Africa as a whole.

A Brief History of Nigeria's Democratic Struggle

In his book *Historical Roots of Ethno-Religious Crises & Conflicts in Northern Nigeria* (2010), Turaki builds on his earlier work, *The British Colonial Legacy* (1993). In this more recent book, Turaki outlines several persistent issues that

have hindered Nigeria's growth—socially, religiously, and politically. As with many things in life, these issues have historical roots. Without understanding this history, we cannot explain, correct, or improve our actions for the common good.

Nigeria's political struggle is deeply rooted in social and religious injustice, as well as ideological prejudice. These problematic elements are often overlooked or deliberately ignored by those who benefit from the status quo. Nigeria struggles to identify itself among democratic nations worldwide. The so-called democratic elections have caused significant social, religious, and political embarrassment. Leading figures who should model democratization are often embroiled in legal battles due to dishonesty and injustice. These issues are widely observed on media platforms, including YouTube, and through personal experiences showing how leading politicians have aided and abetted social injustices and corruption for personal political gain. In Africa, and particularly in Nigeria, politics is akin to a "Game of Thrones," where "you win, or you die; there is no middle ground" (Cersei Lannister to Lord Eddard Stark).

Turaki (Turaki 2010:1; cf. Aguma 2018:13) explored Nigeria's political history, tracing it back to the traditional African forms of governance in the pre-colonial era. After reflecting on pre-colonial societal norms and governance, he examined the British colonial era to understand the influence of British governance in Nigeria (Turaki 2010:47). He observed that British colonists divided Nigeria in ways that led to biased governance and power organization, fostering social and religious marginalization and injustice.

In chapter three of his book *Tainted Legacy*, Turaki discusses the "legacy of Christian missions" (Turaki 2010:91). He notes how some missionaries aligned with colonialists, acting as religious colonizers rather than preachers of God's goodness and the gospel of salvation and freedom. Chapter four focuses on the post-colonial era (Turaki 2010:107; cf. Aguma 2018:20), highlighting Nigerians' ongoing struggles in the aftermath of both British and Islamic colonization. This era is of particular interest because it reflects our current context of continued struggles under the lingering shadows of these former colonial eras.

From Turaki's analysis, the "parliamentary system" that was established at the time of Nigeria's independence in 1960 was essentially a continuation of the colonial system (Turaki 2010:107). Many critical thinkers still agree that Nigeria has not been truly liberated and is in dire need of genuine freedom. The parliamentary system left the nation's power in the hands of individuals who remained subservient to British interests or, worse yet, became more oppressive in their own form of colonization. Turaki rightly laments, "Unfortunately, Nigerians themselves have held on tenaciously to structures and values of inequality and injustice" (Turaki 2010:109). Unless we critically identify and reconstruct these "structures and values," Nigeria will never be liberated from both external British influence and internal colonizers—namely, the political elites and religious aggressors who unjustly hold the country ransom with their own power.

Contrary to the popular notion of fighting for freedom, there is a suspicion of conspiracy benefiting some at the expense of many. This is evident in the fact that "Ethno-regional politics and sentiments brought the military into power in January 1966. Political rivalry between the North and South kept the fires of ethnicity and regionalism burning" (Turaki 2010:110). This contradicts the claims of almost every military leader professing to be the savior of the country from the ills of the previous regime. This kind of self-glorification has persisted to this day.

While there have been some "military reforms" (Turaki 2010:114; Aguma 2018:24), these often manifested in the creation of more states, leading to further stratification rather than unification of the country. Despite claims of fighting corruption, these leaders frequently failed to address corruption within their own ranks. Claiming to fight corruption while failing to expose and condemn internal corruption and hypocrisy undermines the credibility of such efforts. The fight against corruption must be a collective endeavor, not a means for a select few political elites to elevate themselves.

Regrettably, it is necessary to note that "By the time Chief Olusegun Obasanjo took over as the elected President of Nigeria in May 1999, the Nigerian polity had swung to the extremes of the politics of ethnic nationality and Islamic revolution" (Turaki 2010:128). Towards the end of Obasanjo's tenure, the push to enact Sharia Law in Northern Nigeria nearly came to full force, resulting in

the destruction of many lives and properties across the country. Sharia Law was primarily an Islamic agenda to establish a theocracy "based upon exclusive negative religious and cultural values" (Turaki 2010:129; cf. Dudley 1968).

To some, describing Sharia Law as having negative religious values may seem offensive. However, this view is prevalent among those outside the Islamic community. Ironically, even those sympathetic to Islam yet observing the aggression from extremist groups may not realize how their freedom and dignity could be compromised under Sharia Law. Despite claims that Sharia Law would not affect Christians, these assurances have remained largely unconvincing. As long as the Jihadist history of Northern Nigeria remains unaddressed, the threat of Islamization persists. True societal progress requires Islamic leaders in Nigeria to stand in solidarity with Christians and non-Christians alike to ensure freedom and dignity for all.

From the sociopolitical crises of the 1960s onward, there has been an ongoing "crisis of nationhood" (Turaki 2010:130). Questions of unity and the unification of the country have often been sidelined, as different groups vie for dominance and the final say in national affairs. It is important to note that "the crisis of nationhood inflames ethno-regional-religious conflicts" (Turaki 2010:130).

Turaki (2010:130) further reveals that "Crises and conflicts in Northern Nigeria are simply responses to the revival of ethnic nationality and militancy. The militancy of Boko Haram, Fulani herdsmen, and Niger Delta militants is a product of Nigeria's crisis of nationhood, which is rooted in primordial social factors". Understanding and deconstructing these negative "primordial factors" is a critical challenge that must be addressed seriously if we are to achieve true political growth and participation in our time. We need to come together to combat "political and social alienation" (Turaki 2010:154) and "group power politics" (Turaki 2010:155).

Some may perceive Turaki and the authors of this essay as being deliberately controversial in their views on Islam in Nigeria from an outsider's perspective. However, revealing one's internal thoughts, even when they are perceived as gross misunderstandings, can be helpful. Such revelations can prompt insiders to rethink their agendas and be aware of the self-awareness of outsiders. Turaki is not alone in his insights about inequality in Nigeria, particularly from

a Northern Nigerian perspective. Other scholars and historians have shared these views. Dudley (1968) wrote about the partisan politics of Northern Nigeria, where power has almost exclusively been given to Muslims, who wield it regardless of the sentiments of Christians and others. Similarly, Kukah (1993, 1999 cf. Turaki 2002, Waldman 1965; Willis 1985) has been influential in discussing the religious and political tensions and prejudices in the country.

The persistent inequality between Muslims and Christians is reflected in the tainted legacies of both the colonizers and, unfortunately, the missionaries (Turaki 2010). The missionaries, whether Christian or Muslim, often became tools of colonization and further stratification within the country. While we cannot undo what they did, we can continue to critically read history with the hope of liberating our country from unjust structures and values. This is not to say that everything about the missionaries was negative, but there were areas where things went awry, and we unfortunately take some of these missteps as normative. We need to continually address these issues if our country is to survive and thrive.

Christian Faith and Democracy

The construction of "political theology" as part of public theology is both necessary and urgent. Moving beyond merely identifying problems, as outlined in the preceding section, we need to address historical and ongoing issues stemming from the colonial era and their impact on political power. It is essential to ask questions that seek solutions rather than exacerbate these problems. We must explore ways in which Christian theology can contribute to constructing theologies that are distinctly Christian, yet public and inclusive.

Numerous public theologians have developed political theologies that can serve as leading paradigms for us in Africa today. One such scholar is the American public theologian Robert P. Kraynak. In his book *Christian Faith and Modern Democracy* (2001), Kraynak (2001:165) titles one of his chapters "Rethinking Christian Politics: The Two Cities in the Modern Age". This concept of "rethinking" should be an ongoing process, both in this essay and in our social, religious, and political journeys in Nigeria. During this process, we would engage in "assessing Christian democracy" (Kraynak 2001:166).

Some may object to the notion of "Christian democracy," but as long as we are distinctively called by God to live a different kind of life, our participation in politics and democracy must be critically examined. By recognizing what we are doing, we can identify what we ought to be doing but are not. According to Kraynak (2001:167),

> "...the belief in a close connection between Christianity and modern democracy has the benefit of placing the churches squarely against totalitarianism and dictatorship, ending the confusion and waffling seen in the twentieth century when fascism and communism posed genuine threats to the world".

Often, our political and religious practices subtly tend toward totalitarianism. We need to deconstruct such tendencies and reconstruct ourselves in ways that promote freedom, justice, and righteousness. Kraynak (2001:176) views the concepts of rights and democracy as complicating the transition from tradition to liberalism. Democracy should not be seen as insensitive to order and godliness, nor should rights be seen as a license for arrogance and carelessness. Instead, rights in democracy should be viewed as essential goals, and democracy itself as a political system that supports truth and freedom, providing the context in which human rights are recognized and collectively upheld.

Regarding democratic citizenship, Kraynak reminds us not to forget the Augustinian legacy of the doctrine of "the two cities" (2001:202). We are both citizens of heaven and the concrete world. Our responsibility to order in heaven does not nullify our earthly responsibilities; rather, both should be mutually understood and interactively managed. We need Christian democratic participation that can deliver us from "democratic despotism" (Kraynak 2001:202), which arises from the arrogance of power. Where human freedom, justice, and dignity are not protected and promoted, there exists the danger or practice of democratic despotism. The quest to recognize the role of the Church in establishing and maintaining democracy is also a global call (Witte Jr. 1993). Christianity must work diligently to contribute to the world order by promoting God-intended righteousness and justice (De Gruchy 1995). In South Africa, churches have been described as the "midwives of democracy"

due to the vital roles they played in its establishment and sustenance (De Gruchy 1994).

We need similar challenging calls in our Nigerian context, where the Church can be active and sensitive to its role in promoting good and godly governance. From a South African perspective, Boesak sees the witness of the Church in the public sphere as a call for the formation of a "spirituality of politics" (Boesak 2005). This concept emphasizes the Church's responsibility to act as the conscience of the state in a constructive and evangelistic manner.

In discussing the tenderness of the Church's conscience towards the state, Boesak was optimistic about the possibility of transformation that can make life better and more meaningful. He views this transformation from a personal perspective, believing that "overcoming my past is possible, forgiveness is possible, a new life together is possible" (Boesak 2005:211). To move forward with joy and inclusive love in our political and religious systems, we must learn to transition from the past to the future with hope and the joy of forgiveness.

Christianity and Democracy in Nigeria: The Way Forward

At this juncture, it is important to reflect on the way forward in the discourse on Christianity and democracy. As previously mentioned, there have been social, political, and religious flaws over the years. It is neither fair nor productive to single out one region or religion as solely responsible. Instead, in terms of collective responsibility, we all need to acknowledge our shortcomings and work towards amending them for a better life and country. The abuse of religious rights and human dignity continues across religious and political boundaries. To find a viable solution, we must first closely understand what democracy entails. This essay will examine that from a Christian theological perspective.

Gwamna (2014:167) in his book *Religion and Politics in Nigeria*, quotes Hans Küng: "There is no peace among nations and within nations unless there is peace among religions". He proposes this from the perspective of interreligious dialogue and outlines four types of dialogues: "dialogue of life, dialogue of discourse, dialogue of spirituality, and dialogue of action" Gwamna (2014:174). Some people may be disillusioned with interreligious dialogues in

Nigeria, often feeling that "it does not work." Therefore, we need to rethink our frameworks and propose something within interreligious dialogue that is sustainable and effective. Critical to this effort are the values of honesty, integrity, accountability, freedom, and justice. If these values are critically considered and upheld within religious dialogue, there is hope that our religious confessions of salvation history, human dignity, freedom, and peace will contribute to establishing a more viable democracy.

Turaki (2006:785) has also contributed to our understanding of democracy and its Christian foundational values. It is undeniable that "we are still faced with many social, political, religious, economic and cultural crises". Our task is to think and work towards managing these crises to the barest minimum, recognizing that total eradication may not be possible due to human frailty.

Democracy has been defined as "government of the people, by the people, for the people" and is associated with civilian government, elections, free speech, and human rights (Turaki 2006:785). However, its practical significance remains elusive in our personal and corporate lives in Nigeria and the larger African context. Turaki calls on Christians to view democracy as a human creation, "just like all other political systems." This means it is not a utopia that promises and delivers everything. It emphasizes our human responsibility to contribute to its viability.

It is important to recognize the role of submission to God in achieving true accountability. The creation of all human beings in "God's image" (Gen. 1:26) constantly reminds us of our human dignity, which should be respected by all. This represents a true realization of the Christian foundation of democracy. Additionally, the life and death of Jesus Christ for humanity's redemption helps us understand our immense worth in the eyes of God. Romans 14 warns us not to cause any brother to stumble or fall, emphasizing the respect for the rights and dignity of all people. Romans 13 also calls us to obey constituted authorities, as they are established under God to bring justice and order to society. 1 Timothy 2 urges us to pray for all leaders, demonstrating our love and encouragement for those in political offices, which is a crucial step towards establishing a viable democracy.

Hill (2012 cf. Cullmann 1956) also sees the teachings of the New Testament as contributing to the establishment of good democracy. In the life of Jesus, we learn about love, compassion, and the provision of dignity, freedom, and life to all those in need. The Bible does not disdain civil government; rather, it advocates for a government that acknowledges the supremacy of God and upholds justice for all its citizens (Calver 1974; Hill 2012:99). Even though Hill notes that "Heaven will not be democratic" (2012:100), this does not imply that Christians should exclude themselves from democratic processes. We are only prohibited from engaging in unjust, godless, and merciless forms of government, regardless of their labels. We need to live in total equality before God, our Creator (Hill 2012:100; Koopman 2015:19-32). This should continually remind us that God desires order, honor, obedience, justice, and humility (Mic. 6:8). The true democratic country we seek and need to build is one where truth, freedom, justice, equity, and honest respect for human rights and dignity are upheld in both words and deeds.

Conclusion

As previously mentioned, democracy comes in "many shapes and sizes" (Hill 2012:103). It is multifaceted and complex. What we need in Nigeria and the larger African context is a godly democracy, one that pursues the virtues and values of God-given love for all, respect and dignity for all, and mutual economic and social empowerment. We must move beyond the flawed religious ideologies that seek to conquer or eliminate others simply because they belong to different cultures or religious persuasions. It is crucial that we avoid repeating the mistakes of the past, so as not to jeopardize the future of the coming generations. We must transcend our African traditional (pre-colonial) primitivism, if it can be called that, and move beyond the colonial segregationist policies that have shaped our social, political, and economic landscapes. Our personal quests and interests should not be disguised as democratic endeavors. We need to shift from a democracy that serves only the majority to one that is truly inclusive. We require a godly democracy, not merely because it reflects the majority view, but because it is inherently good, true, and constructive.

Bibliography

Aguma, D. U. 2018. *Financial Corruption in Nigerian Politics* Garki: JCEE Business.

Boesak, A. 2005. *The Tenderness of Conscience: African Renaissance and the Spirituality of Politics*. Stellenbosch: SUN Press.

Calver, R. D. 1974. *Towards a Biblical View of Civil Government*. Chicago: Moody Press.

Cullmann, O. 1956. *The State in the New Testament.* New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

De Gruchy, J. 1994. Midwives of Democracy: The Role of the Churches in South Africa," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 86, pp. 14-25.

De Gruchy, J. 1995. *Christianity and Democracy: A Theology for a Just World Order*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Cape Town: David Philip.

Dudley, B. J. 1968. *Parties and Politics in Northern Nigeria*. London: Frank Cass.

Gwamna, J. D. 2014. *Religion and Politics in Nigeria.* Bukuru: ACTS.

Hill, J. 2012. The New Testament and Political Democracy. *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 31(2), pp. 91-104.

Koopman, N. 2015."Men and Women in Church and Society: Equal in Dignity? United in Diversity? In Mouton, E., Kapuma, G., Hansen, L. & Togom, T. (eds), *Living with Dignity; African Perspectives on Gender Equality*. Stellenbosch: SUN Press.

Kraynak, R. P. 2001. *Christian Faith and Modern Democracy: God and Politics in the Fallen World*. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press.

Kukah, M. H. 1993. *Religion, Politics and Power in Northern Nigeria.* Ibadan: Spectrum Books.

Kukah, M. H. 1999. *Democracy and Civil Society in Nigeria*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books.

Turaki, Y. 1993. *The British Colonial Legacy in Northern Nigeria. A Social Ethical Analysis of the Colonial and Post Colonial Society and Politics in Nigeria.* Jos: Challenge Press.

Turaki, Y. 2002. The Politics of Religion and Ethnicity in Northern Nigeria National Round Table on "Democracy and Nation Building: The Challenge of Our Time." ECOWAS Secretariat, Abuja, Nigeria, April, 7-10.

Turaki, Y. 2006. Democracy. In T. Adeyemo (ed), *Africa Bible Commentary*. Nairobi: Word Alive Publishers.

Turaki, Y. 2010. *Tainted Legacy: Islam, Colonialism and Slavery in Northern Nigeria.* MacLean: Isaac Publishing.

Turaki, Y. 2010. *Historical Roots of Ethno-Religious Crises& Conflicts in Northern Nigeria* Jos: Challenge Press.

Waldman, M. R. 1965. The Fulani Jihad: Reassessment. *Journal of African History* 6, pp. 333-55.

Willis, J. R. 1985. (ed), *Slaves and Slavery in Muslim Africa: Islam and Ideology of Enslavement*. London: Frank Cass.

Witte Jr. J. 1993. *Christianity and Democracy in Global Context*. Boudler, Colo: Westview Press.