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The Sacrifice of Governance on the Alter of Religion

Nigeria is the only secular country in the world where the government regularly pays for her citizens to attend religious pilgrimages. In 2012, the Federal Government spent NGN766m on Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca and NGN577m on the Jerusalem pilgrimage. In addition to direct funding, the Federal Government provides subsidy of approximately 10% on exchange rate to pilgrims. Furthermore, most State Governments in the country, except a few such as Kano State, which recently stopped, also fund pilgrimage operations annually. According to the National Hajj Commission of Nigeria, Kano State abolished the funding of pilgrimage in 2011 and saved over NGN1 billion in that year alone. Likewise, Niger State spent over NGN5.1 billion in six years on Hajj pilgrimage only. Funding of pilgrimage is only one example of the decadence resulting from the meddling of government in religious affairs.

Religious activities in Nigeria appear to be increasing significantly, while crime and corruption are deepening. Men-of-God have become superstars, manipulating multitudes and living lives that are totally devoid of morals; and yet hundreds of thousands follow blindly. Dropouts and unemployed men find the business of pastoring churches to be hugely profitable – telling lies and promising miracles to even the most educated of men. People chase after signs, blessings, spouses, children and prosperity as if God is merely to be served for material reward. Young men breed hate, kidnap young girls as forced brides and then blow themselves up in the name of religion. Sadly, the deepening of religion in this society has not translated to an improvement in morals or standards of behaviour. One is left wondering why the government should promote religion or fund its programmes.

What is wrong with current practice?

In a secular state like Nigeria, the law supersedes religion. This means that where a conflict exists between the law and a religion, the law takes precedence. However, this has not been the case in Nigeria. In 2013, religious sentiments influenced the debate on the minimum age for marriage and jeopardised the introduction of a minimum age of 18 years for all marriages. Our laws clearly state that marriage should be between consenting adults and that the age of adulthood is 18 years. Yet Muslim legislators opposed this law on the grounds that their religion did not state any age for marriage and a woman is considered of age once married. In other words, it is believed that marriage determines adulthood and not age. As a result, paedophilia is being legalised under the pretext of religion. Young ladies continue to develop vesicovaginal fistula (commonly termed VVF), which presents them with



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urinary incontinence due to early childbirth. Furthermore, domestic abuse continues to rise as children partner with adults and are taken advantage of and deprived of their childhood.

Religion is a personal belief and should remain personal. Each person has a right to choose what he/she believes and also a right not to be adversely affected by the beliefs of others. In year 2000, there was a backlash, though later silenced, when the erstwhile Governor of Zamfara State introduced Sharia law to the state. This directly infringes on the rights of non-Muslims who live there.

Rather than uphold the national constitution, again the matter was politicized and Sharia law subsists there today. The ratification of the Turkish constitution in 1924 brought about significant political and cultural changes. It removed sharia law as the system of governance and adopted a secular civil code which led to the elevation of the rights of women and their more prominent participation in economic activities amongst other things. It is noteworthy that Turkey achieved this progress despite a 99% Muslim population. Today, for instance, it is illegal in Turkey to marry more than one wife, meaning that while citizens remain Muslims in Turkey, they must obey the laws of this secular state.

Resources in the country are to be used for the benefit of all the people and not only a select few. It is unfair and an abuse of power to channel state funds to the advantage of a few. There is no clear selection criteria for determining eligibility of persons for state sponsorship. Many who can afford to pay their own way repeatedly receive sponsorship from the respective state and federal governments. Allocation of funds to pilgrimage has become a slush fund, which leaders use to advance their individual agenda. It fuels corruption and further increases inequality amongst men. It promotes a beggarly culture and the exploitation of citizens. Government resources should be used to improve the lives of people and promote such areas as education, healthcare and transportation as Governor Kwankwaso of Kano State achieved from not funding pilgrimage. Instead, government funds must be channelled to imperatives such as education for children, to prevent them from being indoctrinated into extremisms such as 'Boko Haram'. The Delta State government, for example, enacted a law that makes education compulsory, as it is free. It also put in place an enforcement team to ensure that all children are in school and parents of children who do not attend school are prosecuted. This is clearly a better investment of public funds.

What happens around the world?

In Saudi Arabia and the Vatican City, one cannot speak of a separation between religion and the state as they are intertwined. These states do not claim to be secular. The constitution in Saudi Arabia is the Quran and it is expected that everyone who lives there or chooses to go there will abide by the tenets of Islam. Likewise, the Pope is the de-facto president of the Vatican and its constitution is based on the principles of Roman Catholicism and everyone who lives in the Vatican is subject to the tenets of the Bible and the pope.

Governments in secular states do not ordinarily contribute financially to religious organizations or to the promotion of religion. The Church of England, which is the official church in the United Kingdom, does not

receive any funding from the government. Funding comes from church members, donations and investment trusts set up by the church. Similarly, Indonesia, with the world's largest Muslim population does not fund pilgrimage and the United States of America, with its large Christian and Jewish communities does not fund any of these religions.

Turkey, though home to a predominantly Muslim population, states in its constitution, that "there shall be no interference whatsoever of the sacred religious feeling in state affairs and politics." Its great military hero, who eventually became the first president of modern Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, was successful at using secular nationalism as a uniting factor in building national sentiments especially given the country's immediate past history and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

What is required?

We must urgently draw strict boundaries between religion and government policy, politics and governance. The government (both federal and state) should immediately stop funding religious pilgrimages. These are individual acts that do not benefit all men equally. Funds that were hitherto used to pay for these religious activities should be channelled into education and healthcare. In addition, people and groups can independently hold services and prayers for a worthy cause but these should not be officially promoted by government. When our leaders go to church or the mosque, it should be solemn and private and when they choose to go on pilgrimage, they should fund these trips from their pockets.

People must see religion for what it is – a personal belief and a relationship with one's maker rather than an exploitative tool, which it has become. We must stop following religious leaders blindly, as they are mere men and subject to the flesh and the desires thereof. People should seek God for themselves and worship Him for who He is. More importantly, people should be guided in their individual actions by the precepts of their faith and not the lure of wealth or hope for prosperity.

Lastly, we can decide as a nation to become a religious state. Nothing stops us. The only difficulty would be how to select the dominant religion. Clearly, we find Muslims who attend church, church-goers and supposed men-of-God who dabble into the occult and new movements which are building followership. We are unable to accurately state the number of citizens in Nigeria, let alone the number of followers of one religion. As such, we might rather remain a secular state. However, in so doing, we should play by the rules of a secular state and clearly take religion out of governance.

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