

ABSTRACT

NO LONGER SECULAR: RELIGION, DEMOCRACY AND THE STATE IN NIGERIA

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In the past decades, the 'return' of religion to public debate has transformed the global political arena. The impact of increased religious debate on the state and its institutions is complex and far-reaching, and it seems particularly relevant for Africa, where the growth of religious mobilisation has accompanied the 'Third Wave' of democratisation. On the basis of research for the component 'Religion, Politics and Governance' for the Religions and Development Research Programme (RaD), based at the University of Birmingham, this paper reflects on the ways in which the rise of religion has affected politics and governance in the Nigerian state.

The paper examines the relationship between religion, politics and governance on two levels. First it examines strategies of competition and co-operation between different religions at the federal level, where the equitable treatment of Christianity and Islam and the 'zoning' of public offices to equal numbers of Christians and Muslims have constituted an important feature of the 4th Republic (1999-present). This technique emulates established strategies of managing ethnic and sub-ethnic competition. In recognition of this fact, and in analogy to notions of plural ethnicity and multiculturalism, the Nigerian state could be considered multireligious rather than secular.

However, the presumed dichotomy between Christianity and Islam at the level of Nigeria's federal politics obscures more complex relationships, which include the ongoing importance of traditional religious practices as well as the high level of conflict within both the Christian and, more importantly, the Muslim community. The paper argues that the marginalisation of traditional religious practices implicit in this process relegates them into the realm of the 'occult' (cf. recent debate by Ranger and others in *Africa*), thereby strengthening notions of religion as monotheistic and exclusive. Moreover, the zoning and quota systems confirm beliefs that religion is aimed at the political realm, and in this manner they indirectly legitimise the political mobilisation of religious belief. This is of particular relevance at the state level, where national religious quotas do not apply and minority religious groups often feel insufficiently represented. As a result, the multireligious nature of the Nigerian state is uneven, thus further reinforcing religious assertion and demands for reform.