

**THE ROLE AND PLACE OF RELIGION IN THE POLITICAL  
PHILOSOPHY OF DR. NNAMDI AZIKIWE**

**Paulinus C. Ejeh, PhD**

Philosophy Unit,

General Studies Division,

Enugu State University of Science and Technology

[paulinus.ejeh@esut.edu.ng](mailto:paulinus.ejeh@esut.edu.ng); 07038546333

DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.23433.67684

**Abstract**

*The relation between religion and politics has continued to be an important theme in political philosophy. This is because religion is one of the oldest, deep-rooted and most important traditional institutions on the face of the Earth. It is a divine reflection of mankind's craving and effort to interrogate and understand the reasons of creation of the universe, and the meaning of life on Earth. Religion is said to have an important influence on forming the individuals' worldview in general and correspondingly their political perception and identities. However, the influence of religion on politics in Nigeria and in particular on the political leaders could be positive or negative or both positive and negative. The political office holders are misusing religion as a tool to get to power while religious leaders are mishandling it to get personal gain from those who hold public office. In other words, as religion enhances national development, so also it could be counter-productive. The study makes use of descriptive methodology to explore the role and place of religion in the formation of Nnamdi Azikiwe's political thoughts.*

**Keywords:** Religion, Politics, Role, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Office Holders

**Introduction**

Religion and politics have always co-existed, and are so close that one cannot easily talk of one without the other. As a phenomenon religion can be used for different purposes – some good and some bad depending on the intention of the user. Many politico-economic thoughts have been influenced by religion and vice versa. In the latter instance, they may favour religious ideology or as in the case of Marxism which is a direct confrontation against Christianity. There is an incontrovertible connection between religion and politics. While the actual role that religion plays in politics has remained debatable, the nexus between the two concepts has been established for long (Falana, 2010)

Religion does not make people good or bad. On the contrary, it is being used as an instrument of oppression and deceit in Nigeria. It appears that Nigerians have resigned themselves to fate and this is possibly further compounded by poverty, illiteracy, and lack of political education on the part of majority. This position is further aggravated by the general perception that politics is a dirty game and that only people who can deceive, manipulate, and greedily accumulate wealth are meant to participate (Egbewole and Etudaiye, 2011). The number of religious people in Nigeria run into million, yet the level of insecurity, destruction of lives and properties and crimes committed in God's name is overwhelming. The need for political stability in Nigeria cannot be overemphasized. A major variable in the Nigerian polity is the relationship between religion and politics which some consider as inseparable while some support the notion of the separation of religion from politics, so that the former will not imbibe the corruption inherent in the latter. Generally speaking, there is a common fallacy that religion and politics are two different fields of social activity. This leads observers sometimes to speak of the politicization of religion, and aver that it is against the original intent of the founder of religion, or God himself (Van der Veer, 1996:50).

All over the country, religion plays an important role in the daily lives of her citizens; the way we interact with one other, our choice of dressing, food, and politics are mostly affected by religion. In other words, religion and politics are intertwined and it empowers man to function in his society by contesting for a political position so as to contribute his ideology. Nigeria's population of over 140 million is divided nearly equally between Christians and Muslims. The importance of this division is well illustrated by the fact that religion, not nationality, is the way in which most Nigerians choose to identify themselves; though not in all cases. Thus, the domains of religion, secularism and politics are becoming increasingly intermingled in both overt and covert ways. Invariably, sectarian politics is inherently problematic (Tar and Shettima, 2010). Thus, there is a need to look at the effects of religion on politics in Nigeria since independence. In addition, the study intends to find out how religion can bring sustainable development to our politics. It concludes by agitating for religious tolerance and the hinging of politics on moral codes.

In the social sciences there is no generally accepted definition of religion. This is partly because religion is "historically, geographically, culturally and demographically situated within a language" (Maduro, 1982) and partly because religion means different things to different people of different professions, cultures and orientations.

Therefore, seeing religion as “any system relating man to ultimate values, whether God or something else, and embodying creed, code, cult and communion (Kenny, 1984), I will, after presenting a brief biographical account of Dr. Azikiwe, examine the political thought he expressed in his essays on Neo-Welfarism with the intention of noting their religious underpinnings.

### **Azikiwe’s Brief Biographical Data**

Dr. Benjamin Nnamdi Azikiwe, fondly known as Zik, hails from Onitsha, Anambra State in Eastern Nigeria. He was born on November 16, 1904 at Zungeru in Niger State, Northern Nigeria and was baptized a Methodist in 1916. His father was a civil servant in the Nigerian regiment. Dr. Azikiwe later changed his first name to Nnamdi. Azikiwe received his early education in the Methodist Mission Schools of Onitsha, Calabar and Lagos. He was exposed to different Nigerian cultures and spoke three languages. He was educated in political science in the United States of America from 1925-1934. He graduated from the University of Pennsylvania and from Lincoln University. He became the first Nigerian to study in the United States. He taught political science in the latter institution in 1933. On his return to Africa in 1937, he became an outstanding journalist, founding and editing many renowned Newspapers and journals such as *African Morning Post*, in Accra and *West African Pilot* in Lagos, Nigeria. Among his notable political publications are *Renasant Africa* (1937), *Political Blueprint of Nigeria* (1942), *The Realities of African Unity* (1965), *Origins of the Nigerian Civil War* (1969), *I Believe in One Nigeria* (1969), *My Odyssey: An Autobiography* (1971), *Ideology for Nigeria: Capitalism, Socialism or Welfarism?* (1981).

Dr. Azikiwe’s political spirit was awakened at an early age. With Adekunle Ajasin, he founded and was the first president of the famous National Council of Nigeria and Cameroon (NCNC). As a member of the legislative council, he belonged to the Western House of Assembly from 1954-1959, during which he served as the minister of the Local Government and Internal Affairs of the Eastern Region and as the Premier of the region. He was a member of the Nigerian House of Representatives from 1959 to 1960. In 1963 he became the first president of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. But three years later, he and his civilian colleagues were removed from office in the 15 January 1966 military coup, and he was the most prominent politician to avoid assassination after the coup. Azikiwe was a spokesman for Biafra and advised its leader, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, during the Biafran War (1967–1970). After the war, Azikiwe was Chancellor of the University of Lagos from 1972 to 1976. He joined the Nigerian People's Party in

1978, making unsuccessful bids for the presidency in 1979 and 1983. He left politics involuntarily after the 31 December 1983 military coup.

Throughout his career, Azikiwe used his nationalist press, political connections, and kinship of his tribe to promote education, self-government, welfare, and progress. Dr. Benjamin Nnamdi Azikiwe was a Nigerian statesman and political leader who, apart from being the first President of Nigeria, was considered a driving force behind the nation's independence, and came to be known as the "father of Nigerian Nationalism. He died at the University Teaching Hospital, Enugu in 1996 after a long illness, at the age of 91.

### **Welfarism**

In order to clearly understand the concept of Neo-welfarism as the foundation of Azikiwe's political philosophy, it is important that we first understand what Welfarism stands for. Zik explains welfarism as, *A social system where the state assumes primary responsibility for the individual and social welfare of its citizen. It is the complex of policies, attitudes and beliefs which animate the state to provide its inhabitants with minimum standard in education, health, housing, pension, etc. where individual means are inadequate* (Azikiwe, 1981). The major thrust of welfarism is its demand on the state to care enough for the economic, social and political well-being of the citizens. The welfarist aims at bringing the greatest good to the greatest number by providing essential services to its citizen virtually free of charge. Welfarism is essentially attractive because, it promotes the principle of mutual aid on a humanistic basis.

However, welfarism as a social philosophy has its own shortcomings. It has an inherent problem arising from its provision of essential services, free of charge. Once it becomes known that these services are free, Azikiwe points out, there is bound to be mad rush of people to take advantage of these free services. And experience according to Azikiwe has shown that "any social service that is free is bound to be inundated with drop-outs, idles, adventurers, apart from the genuine sector of the population concerned.

### **Eclectic-Pragmatism**

Azikiwe's philosophical method is a combination of eclecticism and pragmatism because it flows and follows through the principles of eclecticism and pragmatism.

Hence Eclectic-pragmatism aptly describes Zik's philosophical method. According to him:

eclectic-pragmatism is a term used in philosophy to identify a composite system of thought which incorporates ideas selected from other systems. It does not modify but blends opposite views. According to an authority its essence is the refusal to follow blindly one set of formulae and conventions with a determination to recognize and select from all other sources those elements which are good or true, either in the abstract, or in the concrete, so far as they are practicable and useful (Azikiwe, 1981).

This system according to Azikiwe does not attempt to reconcile or combine irreconcilables; rather it leaves the contradiction unresolved but blends incompatibles to make them practicable for utilitarian purposes. He extols the merit of the eclectic approach as lying in the fact that any person or group of persons can add, subtract, multiply or divide any idea and adapt it to their situation or historical circumstances.

Pragmatism in the other hand is a theory of truth. Truth according to William James is made by successful experience. In line with this proposition, Azikiwe asserts that pragmatism is a philosophical theory of dealing with things which are real. By emphasizing practicability and workability, Pragmatism appealed to Azikiwe in his quest to construct a system of philosophy which works to the advantage of the many, and not that which speculate to the disadvantage of the many when accessed by its practical results, politically, socially and economically.

Eclectic-pragmatism for Azikiwe is the most suitable method for dealing especially with the multi-faceted reality of economic and political matters. It is a method which attempts to harmonize apparently opposing views, not by resolving the contradictions, but by selecting and blending what is useful and practicable in each for the purpose of attaining the desired goals. It is a method which also recognizes that the various systems of thought contain some truth, but not the whole truth, and that better picture of the world and human experience will be achieved, if the truths in the various systems are sifted and blended. Thus, eclectic pragmatism seems to be the most suitable method for dealing with African problems in view of the variegated and traumatic experience which precipitated them.

Having critically examined the major political systems, Azikiwe finds each of them wanting. But none of them in his view is totally bad without some good elements.

With the assumption that what Nigeria needs is an ideological re-orientation and not ideological imposition, Azikiwe through the eclectic-pragmatic method, proposes a harmonization of the good elements of capitalism, socialism and welfarism. The outcome of this eclectic harmonization of opposite is what he calls Neo-welfarism.

### **Neo-Welfarism**

Dr. Azikiwe wrote about neo-welfarism in 1981. He defines it as:

An economic system which blends the essential elements of capitalism, socialism and welfarism in a socio-economic matrix, influenced by indigenous Nigerian moves, to enable the state and the private sector to own and control the means of production, distribution and exchange, whilst concurrently enabling the state to benefit the citizens according to their needs and officially specified minimum standards, without prejudice to participation in any aspect of the social services by voluntary agencies (Azikiwe, 1981).

According to Zik then, the neo-welfaristic state determines the minimum standard of living of its people and provides equal opportunities for them in education, health, housing, pension and rehabilitation. It sustains and champions the social and economic well-being of its citizens through a system of laws. The neo-welfare state aims at bringing the greatest good to the greatest number of its people by providing all of them with essential services. Hence, Zik pointed out that "What we need as a cure is a system of philosophy which works to the advantage of the many, and not that which speculates to the disadvantage of the many when assessed by its practical results" (Azikiwe, 1981).

Neo-welfarism permits private enterprise(s), but invites the state to participate and cooperate in its management, control and sponsorship in order to attain the optimum welfare for the people. The other basic system of neo-welfarism is pragmatism and it is influenced by four factors: "psychology, logical, ethical and religious" (Omoregbe, 1990). In this light, neo-welfarism aims at "the restoration of democracy in Nigeria with political and religious freedom, economic security, and social equality" (Azikiwe, 1981). These involve, among other things, the following two principles: 1. The insistence on the rule of law and 2. The total restoration and reinforcement of the fundamental human rights of all citizens (Azikiwe, 1981).

Viewing neo-welfarism from the above, one could easily surmise that neo-welfarism has no religious dimension. But is that the case? Let's find out.

### **The Influence of Religion on Zik's Political Philosophy**

Born into Christianity, Zik absorbed its religious tenets. Thus he said: "I was reared in a Christian atmosphere and in a home where Christian idealism was translated into our daily lives" (Azikiwe, 1970). Neo-welfarism reflects the teachings of Christianity. How? It is evidenced in Zik's concept universal fatherhood, universal brotherhood, and universal happiness which truly reflects the teachings of Jesus Christ - brotherliness, communalism and the care for one another. In his statement on the 31<sup>st</sup> of December 1933, Zik remarked: "henceforth, I shall strive, to my utmost, to live as a true Christian; forgiving those who offend me, forgetting the evils perpetrated against me, and praying fervently to God to forgive my sins and to forget my shortcomings" (Azikiwe, 1970).

Zik understood that to live as a true Christian entails bringing God into one's daily activities whether one is a president or a laborer. One should always seek for the good of others and for the glory of God. This then, is the underlying factor in Zik's political activities. He brought Christ into his political thoughts or philosophy for the good of the people and for the glory of God. Although we are not discussing the influence of religion on the person of Zik, the above precious statements should not be discarded because it helped to form his political philosophy - the neo-welfarism.

Zik was inspired at the impressionable age of 16, by a sermon delivered in 1924 by Rev. Dr. James E.K. Aggrey, at the Tinubu Methodist Church in Lagos. In the sermon, Rev. Aggrey called for a reorientation of values in Africa. This made a deep impression on Zik, who later wrote: "I became spiritually electrified. It dawned on me that life had a meaning and I had a mission to fulfill. Thus it was my task to make life worthwhile for my fellow men and to be a friend to struggling humanity" (Azikiwe, 1970).

Another person who influenced Zik was Marcus Garvey, a Christian Crusader whose political philosophy - "One God, one aim, one destiny" galvanized Zik into drafting it as his philosophy of life "so far as was practicable towards the evangelization of universal fatherhood, universal brotherhood, and universal happiness" (Azikiwe, 1970). From these, we can see the effects of Zik's education in the States - the resolve to fulfill a mission of making life worthwhile for his fellow men and to be friend of struggling humanity. To accomplish this aim, he

chose neo-welfarism – a system of government that protects the peoples’ rights to religion; and as we well know, in religion, one find security and protection. Note that it was not in a political rally that Zik received this inspiration but at a Christian Church. What was he doing there; political campaign or a religious worship? Surely, he was there for a religious worship. Thus, he acknowledged:

Dr. Aggrey’s sermon gave me intellectual curiosity, and Marcus Garvey’s motto gave me the ambitions to be of service for the redemption of Africa. These were sparks which kindled my spirit and made me seek avenues to articulate my feelings and yearnings” (Azikiwe, 1970).

Zik found these avenues and articulated his yearnings in neo-welfarism. Neo-welfarism is therefore born out of Zik’s realization of the ultimate good and the actualization of the religious principles of the people. According to Zik, neo-welfarism as a suitable system for Nigeria is based on two schools of thoughts: eclecticism and pragmatism. Eclecticism aims integrally at the utility of doctrines (Omoregbe, 1990). Since one of the aims of neo-welfarism is to restore the fundamental rights of all citizens, including freedom of religion, can it not legitimately be said that religion was one of the reasons for Zik’s neo-welfarism? In his autobiography, Zik writes: “Religious education had given me a positive conception of universal fatherhood and universal brotherhood” (Zik, 1970). Even while travelling to Canada for treatment on May 25, 1993, Zik said: “What I expect to see on my return is a Nigeria where everyone is free; where if you are qualified, you should vote and be voted for irrespective of tribe and religion” (The Guardian Newspaper, 1993). In his political neo-welfarism he considered all men to be his brothers. This is a fundamental Christian attitude. Zik’s ideology of neo-welfarism reflects his consciousness of the place of religion in society and his insistent on respect for all. In opting for the fundamental human rights, he permits the unrestricted growth of religion. He warned his political opponents who wanted to impose their leadership on the majority of Nigerians thus: “I am supremely confident that Almighty God will frustrate their knavery and ultimately expose their machinations and consign them to the garbage heap of forgotten tyrants. History will vindicate the just, and God shall punish the wicked” (Tel Magazine, 1994).

This statement carries a biblical tone, for the Bible emphatically says that the wicked shall perish. Let us consider the followings: “so we are going to the ladder, not only for one year but by the grace of God, we shall become a permanent member of the council” (Nigerian Tribune, 1993). Also, when Ernest Shonekan, the then Head of Interim Government led a delegation of government officials on

courtesy visit to Zik, Zik told them: “We pray God for your administration to give Nigeria good government so that we move forward. We must learn to cooperate to make things possible. The task is great, but if you work hard you will succeed, with God on your side” (The Guardian Newspaper, 1993). Note that Zik did not cite famous politicians like Karl Marx or Lenin. He cited God himself. In his statement regarding the future of Nigeria he said: “Now I see a future of greatness for Nigeria, provided we continue to remember that God made us and the fingers of our hands” (The Guardian Newspaper, 1993). In other words, Zik saw that the future of Nigeria depends on our bringing God in whatever we do, thus the neo-welfarism. Let us consider the following narration of his early life which proves that religion is not only a part of his teachings but the core motivation of his political thoughts: Christianity has always appealed to me as a great world religion. From my youth I had been a first-rate student of the scriptures. As a student of history, I enrolled in a theological seminary with a view to understanding the history and basic doctrines of Christianity... I had the sacraments of the various churches bestowed upon me, being a Methodist..., admitted to Holy communion as a Presbyterian, and married as a Methodist” (Azikiwe, 1970). Herein lies Zik’s political philosophy! Herein lies the birth of neo-welfarism! It is clear from the above quotation that Zik’s neo-welfarism is based on his religious convictions. This is also evidenced in his exhortations in which he passionately urged: “Let mankind learn to love one another. Let mankind emulate the founder of Christianity and apply the noble ideals of Christianity so as to change this mad world into a paradise on earth” (Azikiwe, 1937).

Zik’s idea of neo-welfarism was influenced by religion in his emulation of Christ in order to change Nigeria and Africa into a paradise on earth. He saw the need for religious values in both political and economic life of the nation which he transmitted in his neo-welfarism.

### **Evaluation and Conclusion**

Neo-welfarism as a system is not perfect. In fact, it has its own shortcomings. Moreover, it never materialized. But this should not prevent us from seeing that given a chance, neo-welfarism would have been the best system of government for Nigeria. Besides what matters as far as this paper is concerned is not the workability of neo-welfarism, but the influence of religion on Zik in the neo-welfarism which has been aptly shown above.

Although Zik's political philosophy was stimulated by concern for the political, economic, and social welfare of the people, it is certain that they are not the only factors behind his ideology. In fact, religion is the core motivator. Zik's concept of neo-welfarism and his whole political thought was motivated by religion. He used religion advantageously to confront political and economic issues. This is quite commendable especially as the history of Nigeria political leadership is replete with over-zealous and religious fanatics who used and are still using religion to the advantages of a section of the country to the detriment of the rest of the nation. Zik's early Christian education and up-bringing influenced his political activities positively. He sought for the good of all and not just his own people (the Igbos). In fact, many people (including the Igbos) still blame Zik for being too good; for being too universalistic, for standing for the whole nation instead of for his own people.

One may ask why does Zik so frequently refer to God in his political activities? Is God a political or a religious concept? If God is a religious concept – as he surely is – and Zik in his political ideology keeps referring to Him and drawing his political teachings from Him, then the logical conclusion is that religion must have influenced him greatly. Zik is not an atheist but a solid Christian. His reference to God is therefore not a coincidence but a normal phenomenon proper to all Christians who wish to spread the message of the kingdom of God. Being a Christian, Zik wished to do that in his political teachings – neo-welfarism.

It is therefore, no doubt that religion played a major role in Azikiwe's political activities. Can there be any political ideology without religious underpinning? Look at Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, who postulates that everybody is related regardless of race, colour, and belief. A closer look at the world political system would reveal great religious-minded leaders whose political thoughts were motivated by religion. Thus, religion need not be separated from politics nor politics from religion. The two go together, and in some cases, there is only but a thin wall between them. No doubt, religion has in the past an even in the present caused lots of problems and divisions in the society, yet, in every religion there is always an aspect that is truly authentic, worthwhile, commendable and unifying. It is this aspect that we should embrace and Zik as well as many other religious-driven leaders sought for this aspect of religion that is positive and life-changing. When a leader is positively motivated or driven by religion, his political thoughts or ideologies become purified as is the case with Zik. Neo-welfarism is the religious manifestation of Zik. For this reason, in spite of numerous voices clamoring for the separation of the state and religion, we maintain that there is no need for the separation between the two. In fact, the separation of the two would cause more problems than it could solve.

Therefore, since religious ideology resounds in Zik's entire political thinking, religion is then the vehicle that transported his political thoughts, and he used it to conscientize Nigerians and Africans.

## References

Azikiwe, N. (1937). *Renascent Africa*. London: Frank Can and Co.

Azikiwe, N. (1970). *My Odyssey: An Autobiography*. London: Hurst and Company.

Azikiwe, N. (1981). *Ideology for Nigeria: Capitalism, Socialism or Welfarism?* Lagos: Macmillan.

Egbewole, W . O., and Etudaiye, M. A. (2011). *Religion, Politics and Justice: Interplay of Forces in Nigeria*. Retrieved from [http://www.etudaiyeandco.com/.../religion\\_politics\\_and\\_justice\\_interplay\\_of\\_forces\\_in\\_nigeria.pdf](http://www.etudaiyeandco.com/.../religion_politics_and_justice_interplay_of_forces_in_nigeria.pdf)

Falana, F. (2010). A public lecture delivered at the 51st birthday anniversary of Rt. Rev Alfred Adewale Martins, Catholic Bishop of Abeokuta, Ogun State on Saturday June 5, 2010.

IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities. Vol. 7. No. 2. (2021)  
ISSN: 2488- 9210 (Print) 2504-9038 (Online)  
Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Tansian University

- Kanu, I. A. (2011). Zikism: Towards an Indigenous Ideology For Political Regeneration In Africa. *AMAMIHE: Journal of Applied Philosophy*. Vol. 9. No. 1. pp. 18-26.
- Kenny, J. (1984). "Religious Movements in Nigeria: Divisive or Cohesive? Some Interpretative Models in *Orita*, Ibadan. Vol 4, 22, p234.
- Maduro, O. (1982). *Religion and Social Conflicts*. New York: Orbis Books.
- Tell Magazine*, "Zik at 90" Exclusive Interview", N0. 47, Nov. 21, 1994.
- The Guardian Newspaper*, "Zik Canvasses for Peace, Dialogue on Political Crisis." Friday July 30, 1993.
- The Nigerian Tribune*, "Zik Canvasses for Peace, Dialogue on Political Crisis." Friday July 30, 1993.
- Omoregbe, J.I. (1990). *Knowing Philosophy*. Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers Ltd.
- Tar, U., and Shettima, A. G. (2010). *Discussion Paper 49: Endangered Democracy? The Struggle over Secularism and its Implications for Politics and Democracy in Nigeria*. Nordiska. Afrika institutet, Uppsala. p. 5.
- Van der Veer, P. (1996). "The ruined center: Religion and mass politics in India". *Journal of International Affairs*50(1):254-277.