

AN APPRAISAL OF THE PLACE OF RELIGION IN AWOLOWO'S POLITICAL THEORY

J. O. Fasoro

Department of Philosophy,
Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti,
NIGERIA.

rotimifasoro@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Awolowo's rejection of an African variant of socialism is informed by his belief that it (socialism) is a normative social science which cannot be localized or relativized. It, therefore, is a universal socio-political concept which enjoys global applicability or practicability. This said, Awolowo still goes on to attempt marriage between this normative social science and religion. The problem then is that such a marriage (between politics, in this case, socialism and religion) appears to negate the scientific pretensions of his theory. It is not argued that socialism must be anti-religion at all costs, but, one would expect that a truly scientific political theory should be separated (and of course, is separable) from religion which deals with the supernatural or transcendental reality.

Keywords: Socialism, Religion, Universal mind, Fundamentalism, Spirituality, Materialism.

INTRODUCTION

My thesis in this paper therefore that, even if it is argued that, to some extent, politics and religion play complementary roles in the state, yet their ultimate goals or objectives as well as the means of achieving these goals sometimes (if not most often) conflict. It is argued that religious matters should be left to individuals and religious organizations. What this means then is that politics should be separated from religion. If Awolowo is not prepared to do this, then, two conclusions seem to follow. First, that his brand of socialism (Democratic socialism) is a radical departure from the 'Scientific socialism' of Europe, in which case he cannot deny its peculiar African roots, or, secondly, that this democratic socialism possesses its own 'science' which is unique to it and it alone. But it appears Awolowo cannot adopt this second option because of his conviction that 'science' as well as 'socialism' is universal concepts which cannot be restricted to any culture or continent.

This paper is divided into three parts as follows: the first part presents Awolowo's arguments in support of the compatibility between politics and religion; the second part is a brief examination of the thesis of the founders of 'Scientific Socialism'; while the final part takes a critical look at Awolowo's attempt to make religion an integral part of national politics.

Politics and Religion

According to Awolowo (1981: 180):

...the purpose of politics is first and last the material well-being of man. The purpose of Religion, on the other hand, is to do this or to ensure that this is done, and to cater, in addition, to the spiritual welfare of man. In many modern states, what we see is not a separation of politics from Religion but a division between them.

For a proper understanding of the role played by religion in Awolowo's political theory, the importance of what he calls the Universal mind must also be considered. It is a known fact that religion stresses the equality of all men. If men are equal, then, why are they not also equal in their acquisition of wealth and needs in accordance with simple moral criteria? And if the prevailing social arrangements stand in the way of this possibility, why should it not be transformed peacefully. Let it be mentioned here that Awolowo's political theory is termed 'Democratic Socialism', which, as noted earlier, is said to be a normative social science. Awolowo argues that, in Nigeria from its present capitalist-oriented arrangement to a socialist state, as we shall see presently, has some religious undertone. He argues that once the criteria of socialism are set down, we must leave the method of their accomplishment of the Universal Mind who knows the best way to bring them to fruition. This Universal Mind is equated with God by Awolowo. The argument (or what Awolowo regards as a misconception) that politics is essentially materialistic and religion fundamentally spiritual, and that it is difficult for a man to be a successful politician and a good Christian at the same time, is, to Awolowo, fallacious. Against such an argument, he has this to say (Ibid, 182):

I want to admit, without the least hesitation that politics is essentially materialistic and religion fundamentally spiritual. But it cannot be gain said that living man is a combination of matter and spirit.

Religion and politics, so conceived, become two sides of a coin. What is more, the eradication of ignorance, disease and want, is said to be a matter of utmost concern to politics and as well to religion. He argues further that, as a matter of fact, in the early days the education of the young and old, and their health and general well-being were more or less the exclusive preserves of Religious bodies and their off-shoots and allies – the charitable organisations. In Awolowo's socialist state, the functions of politics will be complementary to those of religion, because, as he argues, the terrestrial part of man is inherently selfish, tyrannical and corruptible. The ethereal part of him (man), that is, the soul, is pure, just, incorruptible, uplifting and ennobling. Consequently, man is constantly subjected to internal conflict in which either the body or soul must win. In the short run, so we are told, victory may go to the former, but in the long run it is the latter that tends to be on the ascendant.

Apart from the complementary role which religion and politics play in any society, Awolowo goes on to identify four examples which show that the best politics derives from and is firmly rooted in religious ideals. First, religion enjoins love of one's neighbour – love your neighbour as yourself. There is also the fact that men are equal before God. This is, according to him, also what a government should ensure, that is, equality before the law. Second, in all great religions, women are treated on the same basis of equality with men. "Our Lord Jesus Christ is the most outstanding exemplar in this respect". Third, many Fundamental Human Rights, particularly the three freedoms of conscience, of association, and of speech, have their origin in the great religions. There are many great religious martyrs – John the Baptist, Jesus Christ, Mohammed's flight from Mecca to Medina, and so on.

Many great names in politics drawing their inspiration from Religion also suffered or died for the same cause. It was for this cause that Socrates was sentenced to drink the hemlock and to death (Ibid: 183-84).

And fourth, both religion and politics enjoin democracy. Therefore, government (and hence politics) and religion, must exist side by side working for the good of man. For this reason, it is incumbent upon government and politicians to conduct their affairs in strict accordance religious and ethical standards, because, (Awolowo is here agreeing with Daniel O'Connell) nothing is politically right which is morally wrong.

Other writers like Senghor (1968: 385), Nyere (1968: 381), and Anyanwu (1983: 50) also argued that socialism, especially African socialism, is not anti-religion or anti-Christ. For Anyanwu, it is the religious ideals inherent in man that motivate him to seek for the well-being of his fellowmen and women. What Awolowo refers to as the Universal Mind becomes, in Anyanwu, the 'Great life – Force'. It however, remains to be convincingly proved that the first group of people that may be called progenitors of socialism were motivated by religious feelings or sentiments as Anyanwu wants us to believe. Again, the founders of Scientific Socialism – Marx, Engels, as well as Lenin were not religious in any obvious sense.

Judging from the ethical diversity in Nigeria, and the fact that the world religions – Christianity, Islam, as well as African traditional religions – cut across these ethical barriers, it not difficult to guess why Awolowo should bring in religion as a unifying factor in his political theory. People from different ethical groups belong to the same religious faith and fellowship, and this fosters unity among Nigerians.

“Differences of castes, tribes, clan or religion must be integrated into the political process and it is precisely because they loom so large as to the creation of the modern nation-state that the leaders place great emphasis on the primacy of the nation, and the elimination of traditional status differentiation” (Sigmund 1963:7). It may be argued, then, that the role which Awolowo assigns to religion in his political theory may be nothing more than a strategy to unite the masses in order to secure their unanimous rejection of foreign domination as well as rallying the people round the socialist party.

Before embarking on a critical appraisal of Awolowo's arguments in favour of combining politics with religion, let us see how classical socialists conceive the relationship between politics (socialism or communism) and religion. This is to show that Awolowo cannot run away from the obvious fact that his anticipated political programme has its roots firmly in the peculiar African socio-political milieu.

Marxism – Leninism and Religion

According to Lenin (1905: 83):

Religion is one of the forms of spiritual oppression which everywhere weighs down heavily upon the masses of the people, overburdened by their perpetual work for others, by want and isolation. Impotence of the exploited classes in their struggle against the exploiters just as inevitably gives rise to the belief in a better life after death as impotence of the savage in the battle with nature gives rise to the belief in gods, devils, miracles and the like... Religion is opium for the people. Religion is a sort of spiritual booze in which the slaves of capital draw their human image, their demand for a life more or less worthy of man.

One of the demands of the proletarian party in the struggle for democracy, Lenin argues, is that freedom of conscience, the separation of the church from the state and the school from the church.

He opines that a Marxist must be a materialist. This is, a Marxist must be one who treats the struggle against religion not in an abstract way, but in a concrete way, on the basis of the class struggle. Lenin however argues that a priest may be admitted into the socialist party provided he works conscientiously for the party without opposing party programmes. If, however, such a priest makes it his chief and almost sole work actively to propagate religious views in the party, it would unquestionably have to expel him from its ranks (1909: 402-413).

Those who argue that in spite of its ruthlessness, communism has not succeeded in eliminating Christianity even in Russia must bear in mind that the Christians in that country must be distinguished from those in our midst in contemporary Nigeria. It should be noted that the survival of Christianity in any communist state would depend to a large extent on its not being antagonistic to the authority of the state. In a situation where the Universal Mind permeates and pervades everything, where the prophets and Alfas 'receive divine messages' thereby disobeying the authority of the state, conflicts are bound to occur, and this may cause the break-down of the law and order.

Awolowo's socialist state may eventually be saddled with some religious sects that rate the church over and above the authority of the state (2012). For example, Bishop Enlogius (1909: 414) was quoted as saying that:

All I say is that the initiative for these (church) reforms must come from within the church, not from without, not from the state, and, of course not from the Budget Commission. After all, the church is a divine and eternal institution; its law is immutable, whereas the ideals of the state life as we know are subject to constant modifications.

One might regard an utterance such as this is pure clericalism, but its social implications are enormous. If the church laws are immutable, then, they are unaffected by the changes that may take place in the political arena within the same state. Any wonder then why religious fundamentalists are always prepared to slay thousands of lives to 'purify' their societies. Here, in Nigeria, there were occasions when state governors or commissioners of Education expelled some students from their respective schools because of their refusal to recite the pledge as well as sing the National Anthem. This, the students claimed, was against their religious belief.

What is more, Bishop Enlogius goes on to say that "the task of the church is eternal, immutable, hence it is not possible to link up the church with politics" as if to say that it is not within a political state that the church operates. We observed earlier that Awolowo argues that there is no fundamental difference between the roles played by politics and religion, but here, we are now being told that there is no link between the two. We now come to the last part of the paper, which is, taking a critical look at Awolowo's attempt to marry politics with religion.

Religion and Politics: Some Comments

Lenin (1918: 180) once argued that, "the deepest sources of religious prejudice is poverty and ignorance, and that is the evil we want to combat."

There is no denying the fact that part of Awolowo's socialist objectives is the eradication of poverty and ignorance in the society. Poverty and ignorance constitute part of what he refers to as 'imperialisms' to be combated. But when Awolowo talks of God being on the side of those who fight in a just cause, one wonders if this is not the same God believed by the capitalists (exploiters), whose blessings they take to be responsible for their success in their business transactions. Others also believe that whichever position one finds oneself in the state, it is the will of God that makes one so. It follows then that there is no question of anyone trying to abolish one class in order to establish a conducive social order in the state. For this reason, the capitalists often offer prayers to 'their God'. Some even build churches in their communities where they and other people can worship. If we must agree with Awolowo that it is lack of understanding of the Universal Mind, and therefore of the never-failing efficacy of its working when put in motion by constructive thinking that makes people fear

evil-doers and to devise elaborate plans for their destruction, then, he has no justification whatsoever for his anticipated transformation of Nigeria from a capitalist state to a socialist one. Since he believes that, capitalism, which involves the exploitation of man by his fellowman is evil, then, it is my considered opinion that Awolowo should leave this too to the Universal Mind so as to punish those who perpetrate such evil against their fellowmen and women.

Again, we are told that once the criteria for socialism are satisfied, the socialist should leave the actual mode of accomplishment to the Universal Mind which may or may not necessarily bring about the use of force or violence. This assertion is a curious one, bearing in mind that Awolowo's rejection of violent revolution has, as observed earlier, a religious undertone, because religion enjoins democracy. But we can now see that the same Universal Mind 'may or may not' use force or violence to bring socialism into fruition. What this means in essence is that we, mortals, are forbidden from violent struggle, but the Universal Mind may after all, employ it to accomplish a particular objective. Makinde (1984, p.25) has argued that the admission of God to Awolowo's socialist theory makes his (Awolowo's) political theory anti-scientific. It is true that we do not yet have a conclusive scientific proof of the existence or non-existence of God. Nonetheless, what one would like to know from Awolowo is, even if there is a God – the Universal Mind – that permeates and pervades everything, why did He allow the exploitation of man by man up to a stage where that man, in order to free himself from further exploitation, has to take up arms against his fellowman? That is not all. The fact that the Federal Constitution of Nigeria proclaims the Republic a 'Secular State' is enough to inform Awolowo that he might be going against the Constitution if his socialist government should give state recognition to any particular religion or religions. No matter the degree of the Universality of Awolowo might like to claim for his political theory, it must take into account the secular nature of Nigeria whose citizens are going to be the ultimate beneficiaries of his socialist programmes. He cannot possibly introduce any religion into the state until after his government has amended the relevant sections of the constitution which declares Nigeria a secular state. Moreover, it is difficult to understand why a socialist government must saddle itself with a sensitive issue like the introduction of official religion(s) to the state. Awolowo may perhaps think that without at least an officially recognized religion in the state, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to effectively combat the nation's social ills which he calls 'imperialisms'. But this will make simply because the teaching of moral values is quite different from imparting religious values on the entire citizenry. One cannot but agree with Nwanwene (1970, p.147) who argues, inter alia:

It is a unique contribution to political philosophy to attempt a justification of the state on both naturalistic and religious grounds. The religious justification will sell Awolowo's socialist state to religious enthusiasts, while the naturalistic or utilitarian justification will render his socialist state acceptable to those who profess no religion...

He goes on to say that on the method of achieving the Socialist State, Awolowo leaves too much to the operation of the Universal Mind which he equates with God. I have already argued that it is inferable from Awolowo's writings that the only method opens to man in accomplishing the socialist goals is what he calls the constructive or democratic means, any other methods are to be decided and used by the Universal Mind alone. Our thesis which says that religion should not be included in the governance of the socialist state anticipated by Awolowo appears not to impress Professor Samuel Aluko. He seems not to agree that religion should be left to individuals in the state.

It has been argued in this paper that religion, unlike politics, deals with the supernatural and therefore must remain a private affair of the people in a state. However, Aluko (1964: 69) argues that the ‘myth’ that Christianity and science are opposed is untrue. He opines that their compatibility can only be communicated to the world by Christians of intellect and integrity, who can speak on equal terms with the scientists or who are scientists themselves.

If Awolowo is genuinely committed to eradicating those societal ills which he calls ‘imperialisms’ then he ought to explore all means of achieving that objective. His political theory may turn out to be a time bomb in the hands of religious fanatics, the more reason why a political theorist like Awolowo needs to separate this from politics

...The objectivist theory, so far from minimizing the use of force to settle moral conflicts, can be, and constantly has been used to justify it. It is no accident that religious persecutions are the monopoly of objectivist theorists (Nowell-Smith: 1954: 41).

However, I am not to be understood as arguing that a relativist or even a subjectivist theory is a better promoter of tolerance among people(s) of diverse religious persuasions. Rather, my thesis is that religion, being an expression of man’s ultimate conviction of the universe and its possible creator, or a man’s personal relation with his God, he should be left alone to decide how best to maintain and strengthen that relation. The government may however play a supervisory role by ensuring that the people’s lives and property are safe in the state. Those who argue that the early Christians were communistic in their day-to-day activities always overlook the fact that mere preaching and making reference to the bible for the redistribution of wealth in the state is not in any obvious sense communistic. Leaving the quest for social, political and economic justice to God to accomplish has nothing to do with either ‘scientific socialism’ or even the ‘normative social science’ of Awolowo. In Socialist States, perhaps with the possible exception of Awolowo’s, abandoning one’s profession, for instance, as a tanner, to become a full-time evangelist or an apostle can hardly be regarded as work. Whatever the amount of socialistic favour Awolowo might attribute to St. Paul (someone whom Awolowo believes was an example of Christian Socialist), he (Paul) could be regarded as one of those whom Lenin believed should be expelled from the ranks of Socialist party. It is not clear how Awolowo is to justify his conviction that there can be no real antagonism and antithesis, as regards principles, between socialism and religion. He argues that ‘indeed, because of their indisputable identity of principles, they should both be mutually sustaining’.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, it is not argued that a political theory (and hence, a political theorist) must be irreligious. Rather, it is argued that since Awolowo rejects almost all the presuppositions of ‘African socialism’ for the reason that socialism is the same in all climes, then he ought to present his ‘normative social science’ in the spirit of science without necessarily spicing it with religious flavour, which, to say the least, is not scientific. It is not also clear why Awolowo rejects the presuppositions of ‘scientific socialism’ of Marx, Engels and Lenin, save the method of achieving socialist objectives as proposed by these theorists. The paradox then is this: if Awolowo’s brand of socialism is not African, and at the same time not Marxian, then what is it? If he is propounding a socio-political theory that is meant to address the peculiar Nigerian (or perhaps, African) social, economic and political problems, then, why denying its peculiarity as well as uniqueness to Nigerian situation? For example, his socialist programmes of full employment, free education at all levels, and the rest of them are not meant for either United States of America or European countries. Rather, they were

designed to eradicate those 'imperialisms' clamped on Nigerians as a result of the government's adoption of capitalism.

His introduction of religion into political philosophy is very unique. But we are quick to add that if necessary care is not taken, religion can be used as an instrument for destabilising the state rather than being a unifying factor in bringing the people together under a socialist party, or any other parties for that matter. Recent religious riots in some parts of the country show that religion is a very sensitive phenomenon that must be handled with caution. Religious fundamentalists do not care whether the government in power is either socialist or capitalist, welfarist or neo-welfarist. They are almost always prepared to slay thousands of lives in order to propagate their doctrine so as to 'purify' the 'infidels'. And in fairness to some of these religious fundamentalists, religion, by its nature, encourages this type of 'cleansing' or 'purification' of new converts as well as those who are yet to be won into the fold. We insist on the separation of religion from politics because we believe that, inherent in nature of religion it is the crusading spirit of winning converts, the result of which, more often than not, is conflict either within members of a particular religion, or between members of various religious sects.

This, of course, appears to be the message of the biblical injunction which says 'go ye forth and conquer'. And the zeal and zest with which the 'faithfuls' carry their conquest of the 'lost ones' are better imagined. What we are saying then is that the way some religious devotees carry out their proselytizing mission cannot be sometimes conflict with the government's determination to maintain law and order in the state. This development becomes tractable if only such religious fundamentalists are not seen as enjoying government's support both morally and financially. Moreover, individuals in the state should be left on their own to seek their spiritual upliftment without any interference from the state as long as this is done in a peaceful manner. All we have said above as to why religion should be kept separate from politics may be regarded by some as matters of contingent circumstance. That is to say, the intolerant tendencies and crusading spirit of some religious fanatics would not serve as adequate reasons for not marrying politics with religion. But this will be a mistake. Once it is granted that one cannot rule out such contingencies in the day-to-day governance of the state, a socialist government which preceded it, imperialisms that are to be vigorously fought and destroyed, must strive to avoid more imperialisms in order to be able to devote more time and energy to improving the well-being of the people of the state. For example, a government, no matter how benevolent and responsive it may be, is still seen by these religious fanatics as inferior or subordinate to God or some gods, hence, state laws are perceived as secondary to religious injunctions. And since these devotees are not prepared to sacrifice the 'truth' at the altar of religious tolerance, the government may, unwittingly, be inviting chaos and social unrest. It is my considered belief then that Awolowo can still argue for his brand of socialism (Democratic socialism) without necessarily bringing religion into it. Marrying religion with politics can only lead to conflicts and tension in the state between believers and non-believers on the one hand, and between one religious group or sect and another, on the other hand. And this type of conflict and tension can be avoided, or at least be brought under control insofar as no religion is seen as enjoying government support at the expense of other 'private' religions.

REFERENCES

- Aluko, S.A. (1964). *Christianity and Communism: The Challenge to our Church* (Popular edition), Ibadan: Daystar Press.
- Anyanwu, K.C. (1983). Presuppositions of African Socialism, *The Nigerian Journal of Philosophy*, Department of Philosophy, vol. 3, Nos. 1 & 2.
- Awolowo, O. (1968). *The People's Republic*, Ibadan: Oxford University Press.
- Awolowo, O. (1981). Politics and Religion, A lecture given to students of the Adventist College of West Africa, Inishan-Remo, on 27th January, 1961, in *Voice in Reason*, Fagbamigbe Publishers.
- Lenin, V.I. (1905). Novaga Zhinzu in *Collected Works*, vol. 10.
- Lenin, V.I. (1909). Proletary, No. 45, May 13, *Collected Works*, vol. 15.
- Lenin, V.I. (1910). *On Religion*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1965.
- Makinde, M.A. (1984). *Obafemi Awolowo and African Socialism: A Philosophical Study*, Centre for Afro-American Studies, Ohio University, Athens, Ohio, United States of America.
- Nowell-Smith, P.H. (1954). *Ethics*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Nwanwene, O. (1970) Awolowo's Political Philosophy, *The Quarterly Journal of Administration*, Institute of Administration, University of Ife, Ile-Ife, Nigeria, 147.
- Nyerere, J. K. (1968). *Ujamaa: The Basis of African Socialism*, in *Modern Socialism* (1968) edited by M. Salvadori, New York. 381.
- Salvadori, M. (ed.) (1968). *Modern Socialism* (A Documentary History of Western Civilization): New York, Walker and Company.
- Senghor, L.S.(1968). The African Mode of Socialism in M. Salvadori, *Modern Socialism*, (ibid), 385.
- Sigmund, P. (ed.) (1963). *The Ideologies of the Developing Nations*, New York.