



•“None of the above, none?”

I SWEAR it: only in thinking and writing about this piece did it occur to me, for the first time in my life, that it was around the same time that I arrived at the age when I could legally vote and be voted for as a Nigerian citizen that I stopped being a religionist, specifically a Christian. At first, the roots of the temporal and existential closeness between these two major aspects of my life were very baffling, even inscrutable to me. But not for long. For as soon as I began to think carefully about the matter, the nature and source of the relationship between the two became clear to me almost immediately. What is this?

Quite simply, it is the fact that with these two changes in my life, I began the long, arduous but also enormously exhilarating journey into moral, psychological and spiritual adulthood. In other words, among the many issues that began to dominate my thoughts and feelings as a young person moving into early adulthood in my late teens and early twenties, the two issues that held pride of place in my mind were these two questions of, on the one hand, *politics*, with reference to citizenship rights and obligations and, on the other hand, *religion*, especially as it pertains to a deep worry or angst as to what could and would replace formal religion in my life. Well, so far, so good. But the question arises: why am I returning to these issues today, at this moment in time in the eighth decade of my life and two years before another round of elections in our country? More concretely and specifically, what does the fact of my not being a religionist have to do with the fact that I have never voted nor been voted for within the institution of electoral politics in our country? These are the questions that I wish to explore in the series that begins this week in this column.

My answer to these two related questions will perhaps surprise many readers of this piece, especially those who know of me only through this column. The answer is this: of all the areas of public life and culture in our country today, politics and religion are the two domains of our collective existence as a nation that I feel deeply regretful that I do not belong to a community; a fellowship; a congregation; a party. Most Nigerians belong to and are active in a religious congregation; an old boys' or girls' association; a social or recreational club; a hometown or tribal "improvement" organization; a volun-



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tary association engaged in charitable and philanthropic activities; or a nameless, informal and "free" collection of souls that meet regularly to talk, joke and commune around life and the current state of things over beer, soft drinks and snacks. Now, I do not belong to any of these kinds of groups; and neither do I, for that reason, feel that something important is missing in my life, something that would give a richer and more fulfilling meaning to my existence. But that is not the case with groups and collectives associated with politics and religion. What do I mean by this?

To put the matter as simply and unambiguously as possible, I wish that a political movement of the Left was in existence to which I could devote all the time, resources and acts available to me at this stage of my life; and I deeply miss the fellowship, the sense and reality of *community* that I once experienced when I was younger and belonged to the Christian faith. Indeed, as I look with deep anger, worry and fear at the state of affairs in our country and our world today, nothing would please me more than the opportunity to work voluntarily and tirelessly in a political movement that is equal to the tasks that must be done to set things right in our country, our continent and our world. And equally important, there is almost nothing I wish now more than to once again be able to meet and gather with others in a profoundly cherished experience of fellowship and community as I did from about the age of fourteen to twenty, the years at the summit of my membership in the Christian fold that started at birth and ended on the eve of my entrance into young adulthood. If this is the case, the question that arises is this: what is

stopping me from realizing these yearnings if they are indeed as fervent as I declare them to be?

My response to this question may shock many readers of this piece, but it shouldn't, in my opinion. And the response is contained in a twofold answer that states that (a) today, politics and religion are the most degraded and confounding areas of our public and associated existence as a nation and (b) this is so because nowhere else in the world are politics and religion so intertwined in a mutually reinforcing predatoriness as in our country at the present time. Because this view is so central to the issues I am exploring in this piece - and the series of which it is a part - permit me to restate the point that I am making here in simple English: politics in our country today is so single-minded in relentlessly looting and wasting the nation's resources and patrimony primarily because it is tremendously aided by religion; and religion on its own part is so obsessively devoted to money-making because it is closely aligned to politics. In other words, and simply put, one is the other side of the same coin of exploitation and ideological mystification based on the enslavement of the vast majority of Nigerians of all faiths, all political persuasions and all ethno-regional communities. If this is the case today, it needs to be stated with as much emphasis as possible that things have not always been like this in politics and religion in Nigeria. This observation leads me back to the point in time at which, simultaneously, it became legally possible for me to vote and be voted for and I stopped being a Christian, together with how this relates to the present period with the elections of 2019 looming ahead of us.

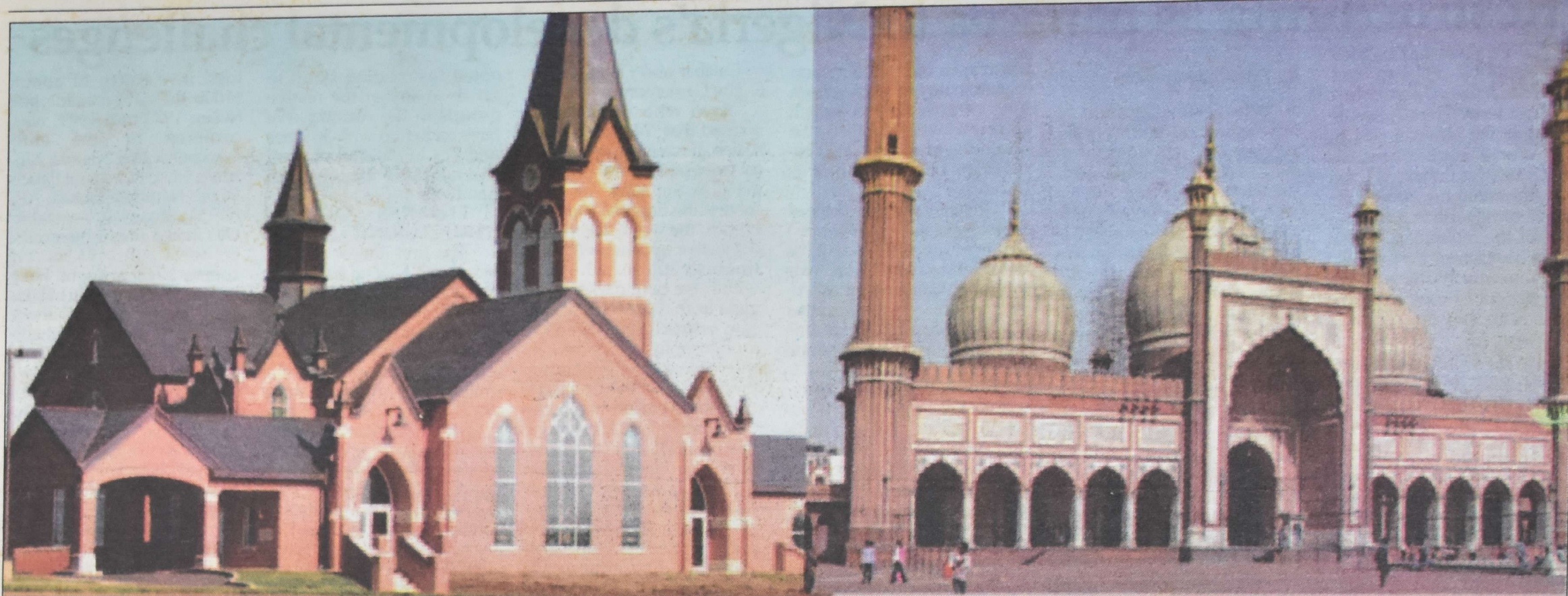
So, I repeat: about fifty years ago, I stopped being a Christian and I did not participate in electoral politics at any level when it became both legal and "civic-minded" for me to do so. As I have remarked earlier in this piece, these were both momentous and linked occurrences in my life. However, I absolutely did not feel *then* the void, the angst that I feel now in 2017. This assertion may surprise some readers of this piece, especially those younger than fifty. But the fact is that fifty years ago, I could not and did not feel a void because there was a genuine and extremely vibrant mass movement for radical and progressive change in this country that was more nationwide and influential than in any other country on the African continent, with the probable exception of South Africa. Certainly, many in that movement felt that we should form a mass party of workers, farmers and the oppressed and though I did participate in many attempts to form such a party, personally this was not a matter of great significance for me. The movement itself, *that* was the main thing for me. And that was largely because that movement recreated for me the sense and reality of a profoundly enriching and fulfilling community of spirit and idealism that I had felt *in* and *with* Christianity. As a matter of fact, I must say here, admittedly with a sense of nostalgia and sentimentality that I find embarrassing, that the sense of community and fellowship that I felt in that mass movement of progressives, radicals and revolutionaries in my young adulthood was deeper, wiser and more self-critical than the sense of community that I had felt as a member of the Christian fold.

Without the nostalgia and the sentimentality, permit me to briefly write about that community spirit

in very concrete and graphic terms. I/we traveled everywhere in the country and met in countless meetings where the discussions, the plans were about what to do to save the country and our continent from foreign and local exploiters. The message, the hopes that we carried with us everywhere we went in the country were the same as the ones we discussed at "home" in the localities where we taught, worked or lived. We did not say one thing to "our people" and something else to Nigerians in other parts of the country. Indeed, when we met and discussed with total "strangers" in other parts of the country who spoke different languages from us and worshipped other gods and avatars than the ones we did, it was the same thing: a message of struggle, dedication and faith based on the belief that we could *and would* win not necessarily because our cause was just but because we directed our critical gaze at *everything* including ourselves. Let me put this in very concrete terms, drawing directly from my own experience: the things that I discussed as National President to rank and file members of ASUU at our Sokoto branch were not different in essence from the things that I discussed with farmers and rural dwellers at Ode-Omu near Ife where, for a short time, I had been part of a commune.

Have I said enough in this profile to make it understandable to the reader why the exclusion of electoral politics and religious community from my life as a young adult left no void in me and created no angst in my mind and consciousness? I certainly hope so. If not, here's one other consideration to bear in mind. Imagine for one moment anyone in the period asking me something like the following question: "You mean that you are not going to vote; you reject all the bourgeois parties; and yet you are not giving serious attention to the need to create and build a mass party of the Left?" My answer would have been yes and yes and yes! Now, in 2017, this would still be my response to the same question. However, this time around, the reason for this is profoundly different from what it was fifty years ago. This will be the starting point next week in our continuation of the series. As we shall see, politics and religion combine together at the present time in a manner that would have been completely unrecognizable fifty years ago.

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•“O come all ye faithful and all your problems as a Nigerian will be solved!”

FOR the continuation of the series that began in this column last week, consider the following proposition: fifty years ago, “ipolowo ibo” had very little competition from “ipolowo esin” since, in fact, the latter hardly existed at all. This is of great historical and cultural significance because today in 2017, by a factor of nearly ten to one, “ipolowo esin” has a commanding dominance of the field of play over “ipolowo ibo”. I should of course quickly give the meanings of these two terms.

“Ipolowo”, the Yoruba word that is common to both terms, means to look for customers, patrons or clients through paid and vigorous advertising. Applied to “ibo”, the vote or voting, it means canvassing for voters through all forms and media of adverts. Thus, in application to “esin” which means worship or religion, it denotes inducing and/or enticing worshipers and congregants to the church, the mosque, a vigil, a retreat or a revivalist prayer meeting. Beyond the literal translations that I have done here, “ipolowo” connotes the merchandizing of goods, services and values that is all-consuming in its aggressivity. Thus, bearing this connotation in mind, we can say that a country, a society like Nigeria in which “ipolowo esin” has far outstripped “ipolowo ibo” is a society beset by a great, confounding crisis. If this is the case, why has the merchandizing of religion become much greater than the merchandizing on politics and the vote in our country and what does this have to do with the subject of this series?

At the most literal level, this question may be answered simply, without any complications: in present-day Nigeria, we canvass and/or advertise for votes only cyclically while, in contrast, the aggressive drive for souls to come to the church, the mosque or the pastorate takes place all the time, unchecked by seasonal variation. Day in day out, month after month, on radio, television and through posters and billboards that you see everywhere, “ipolowo esin” surrounds us and pervades our living environment. There is also the fact that once a cycle of elections is over and the victors have gained virtually unlimited access to the spoils of office, the “ipolowo ibo” stops, to be resumed only many years later in the next cycle. But “ipolowo esin” is or has become a perpetual phenomenon because the pastorate, the imams must bring flocks and multitudes of the faithful to God all the time to ensure that the coffers of the church or the mosque are brimful. The proverbial church rat of poverty, of great physical insubstantiality has long gone out of existence in our country!

So: fifty years ago, “ipolowo ibo”



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was far greater and more pervasive as a social phenomenon and a cultural force than “ipolowo esin” which, as I have stated, was hardly in existence at the time; now, the reverse is true and “ipolowo esin” is king. But that is not the most significant thing in this transformation, indeed this *transmogrification*. No, the thing that is most remarkable is the fact that the contents of the two are now so similar, so mutual in their co-implication that one is now the mirror image of the other. Let me express this in plain, unmistakable terms: the things that the churches and mosques, the priests and the imams now promise in their drive to bring the faithful to their clutches are almost exactly the same things that the politicians promise in their canvassing for voters and votes: an end to poverty and hardship; to joblessness and failure at school, at home or on the job; to the absence of peace, security and unity in the land. Oh come, all ye faithful and all your problems will be solved!

True, the pastors and imams have not (yet) promised their flock good roads; factories that will bring employment to hundreds of thousands; adequate electricity generation and distribution; hospitals, clinics and health centers that are functional; and a criminal justice system that inspires confidence and respect at home and abroad. But then, let us not forget that many of the politicians are clients of the pastors and imams: they take their problems, in effect our problems, to the priests and imams. Indeed, sometimes, in a fit of rare “honesty”, the politicians declare their utter helplessness in engaging the political tasks that they face by declaring that only God can save Nigeria, that we should all fast and pray and be led in these by the priests and the imams. Olusegun Obasanjo in particular - with Goodluck Jonathan not too far behind - led the way in the implantation of

this historic negative dialectic in which the political class *symbolically* ceded sovereignty to the pastorate in the likes of the Adeboyes, the T.B. Joshuas, the Olukoyas and the Oyakhilomes.

At this point in the discussion, it is perhaps necessary to give some concrete and easily recognizable features to these general observations. Thus, compatriots, please let us remember that it is not all churches and mosques, not all pastors and imams that hobnob with the kingpins of the political class. It is the mega-churches, the highflying jetsetters among the pastorate. In the combined concentration of financial power within this group or class of religious organizations, trillions of naira and billions of dollars are in play. In other words, we are talking, compatriots, of some of the richest men and women, not only in Nigeria but in the whole world. And as everyone knows but pretends not to know, in these mega-churches, the medium and low-level clergy are considerably underpaid, while for the majority of the congregants, the release from unemployment and/or job security that they seek will never, never come under the present politico-religious diarchy that runs the system and makes capitalism in our country one of the most predatory and unregenerate of the range of national, regional and hemispheric capitalisms in the world. This point brings me back to the framing issue of this piece and the series of which it is a part: the link between, on the one hand, why I have never voted and/or be voted for and, on the other hand, why I stopped being a religionist, together with how this all relates to the looming countrywide elections of 2019.

Here, I deem it necessary to make some clarifications as to where I am coming from and where I am headed in this series by drawing some comparisons and contrasts with others

who have deliberated a lot - some very profoundly - on the problems that we face as a nation and a people. For instance, famously, in his widely-read collection of essays, *The Problem with Nigeria*, the late Chinua Achebe defined our most basic problem as that of leadership. When and if we have leaders that will lead by example, that will inspire with their moral courage and galvanize us all to action with their indomitable political will, our country will at last rise up to the challenge of expectations that its size and human talent pool generates at home and abroad in the world at large. For other thinkers, we have asked all the questions and know what the answers are; the problem is with execution. For still other pundits, especially those belonging to the regular or “official” commentariat, our most important problem is “restructuring”, a term that now has a peculiarly Naija ring in the number of projects gathered under its ideological, political and even constitutional umbrella, from destruction of the centralized, bloated state to considerably devolution of autonomy to the federating units, and from “resource control” and increased share of the national wealth by the oil-producing states to recognition of historic bonds of ethnic belonging, indigeneity and regional “commonwealths”.

For me and for most members of the Nigerian Left of my generation, although these were/are all valid prognoses of the “problem with Nigeria”, our point of departure laid elsewhere. It laid/lays precisely with capitalism in our country and the world, especially as this pertains to the enigma of why capitalism in our country has historically been - and continues to be - one of the most corrupt, thieving, wasteful and unjust capitalisms on the planet. To me/us, the fundamental question to which all the others can be linked, is whether

or not significant reform of Nigerian capitalism can be made short of a revolutionary overthrow of the entire system. This is not as abstract, as formulaic or as outdated as it may seem to many reading this piece. Permit me to explain what I have in mind here.

Although this is widely known all over the world, it is very little known and appreciated in our country that everywhere in history and in the world, capitalism has constantly had to renew or even reinvent itself, quite apart from the fact that there are many varieties of capitalism in our world. Indeed, right now at this very moment in history, global capitalism is undergoing one of its greatest crises in decades. Large and considerable blocs of anti-globalists of the Left and the Right have risen up against neoliberal capitalism in many parts of the world, including the heartlands of global capitalism in Europe and North America. But this enormously crucial fact has hardly percolated to the ideological and political “ears” of our political class and both its supportive and critical pundits. Which is why, at the very moment when neoliberal capitalism is being hotly contested in America and Europe, the main planks of the political class in Nigeria - of all the ruling class parties - are striving to fully implement key features of neoliberalism that have been soundly contested and in some cases retrenched or even defeated elsewhere in the world, features like deregulation and the sale and total privatization of national assets and public enterprises.

The Christianity into which I was born and from which I departed in my young adulthood was as unlike the fully “neoliberal” Christianity of present-day Nigeria as night is different from day. The “old” Christianity knew little or nothing about “ipolowo esin”; for that reason, it never garnered huge wealth for any pastor or imam that anyone knew about. In contrast, the “new” Christianity, the new religious dispensation in the country not only openly and aggressively preaches a gospel of wealth for all but is in deep collusion with the political class in *preying* on the people while asking them to *pray*. As far as I know, no existing bourgeois political party in the country has any program or manifesto remotely dealing with this predatory alliance between politics and religion in our country. And yet it must be engaged; it must be transcended. Perhaps then, a political party of the Left for 2019? My answer to this question is an unequivocal no! This will be our starting point in next week’s conclusion to the series.

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THESE were the closing sentences of last week's piece in this series: "As far as I know, no existing bourgeois political party in the country has any program or manifesto remotely dealing with this predatory alliance between politics and religion in our country. And yet it must be engaged; it must be transcended. Perhaps then, a political party of the Left for 2019? My answer to this question is an unequivocal no! This will be our starting point in next week's conclusion to the series".

Well then, as promised, I start from that concluding declaration last week. And I say, compatriots, we will need far more than a political party – even of the Left – to powerfully and successfully challenge the deadly, extremely predatory alliance of religion and politics in our country. More pointedly, I say that we will need not a political party but a broad mass *movement* that combines the best traditions of the anti-capitalist humanism that exist in politics and religion. Since this is the bottom line in this concluding piece in the series, permit me to explain what I have in mind here as clearly and concretely as possible.

What do Nigerians in general feel about politicians and political parties, beyond the common factor that they come from and have their ethnic and regional bases in certain parts of the country? Hasn't APC, the new ruling party that replaced the old one, the PDP, lost all credibility as a force for change? Isn't the PDP itself now a spent force beset by insurmountable internal and external fault lines? And the other ruling class parties, the ANPP and APGA? Beyond the certificate of registration that they have from INEC and the dwindling followership that they enjoy in certain parts of the country, who sees any future, any political *weight* in them? And that other unregistered, nameless ruling "party" rooted in the armed forces – who wants it back in power, who? What of the non-ruling class political parties, especially of the Left? Are they not too small, too insubstantial in membership and visibility? How many blocs and formations of Nigerians know of their existence, know what they stand for, know who their leaders are, and have the confidence that in office they will think and act differently from the bourgeois parties?

I am of course presuming that the reader implicitly recognizes that in asking these questions so tendentiously, I am deliberately suggesting that most people reading this piece share my view that the moral and ideological capital of politics and politicians in our country is at an all-time low in the opinion of most Nigerians. I don't know if most readers also share my view that the best indicator of the abysmal state of politics and politicians in Nigeria at the present time is our political parties themselves. Dear reader, think of this observation by reflecting on the open secret of how little the President, Muhammadu Buhari, apparently thinks of his own party, the APC. Think, think also of what Olusegun thought of his party, the PDP, of how crudely and disrespectfully he dealt with the party's national officers, constitution and even other members of party's Board of Trustees (BOT) of which he was the Chairman.

The upshot of these observations is as clear as it is inescapable: beyond floating them as vote-getting machines, our politicians have such little respect for their own political parties that it is a wonder that at least every four years, they have the effrontery to come and regale us with stories and propositions that these parties can be instruments for a just, civilized and



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• Why did and do these men think so little of their own political parties?

vibrant democratic order. This is as fatuous, as delusory as the idea that most of the hospitals and health centers in the country are places where sick men, women and children in their millions get proper, life-saving and enhancing treatment! Indeed, this telling analogy between the state of our hospitals and health centers throughout the country and the abysmal state of all our political parties brings me back to the instigating ideas of this series of articles: why I have never voted and why I am not a religionist. What do I mean by this observation?

I don't think about it consciously but all the same, I know that deep down, I make every effort not to have to go to any hospital clinic or health center. Certainly, the fact that for part of the year I live and work in America helps a lot, but this habit goes all the way back to when I lived and worked entirely at home in Nigeria. On the surface, this may seem to be a universal phenomenon: most women and men everywhere hope fervently that the need for them to have to go to a hospital would be as few as possible. But the Nigerian variation of this common human factor is significant and has been growing bigger and bigger over the years and decades to the extent that, as everyone knows, India has now become the thirty-seventh state of Nigeria – as far as going to hospitals for dear life is concerned. Mercifully, at least so far in my life and in about the four to five months in the year that I am in Nigeria, the need to go to a hospital has been infrequent. However, ultimately, like everyone else in the

country, the need does arise for me now and then to go to a hospital and be seen by a specialist or be treated by general, non-specialist staff and/or auxiliaries.

Analogically, this profile of my attitude toward hospitals and health care centers in Nigeria is pretty close to my attitude toward elections, political parties and religion. As I have said repeatedly in this series, I myself don't vote, have in fact never voted, but I do not sit by in idleness and indifference during elections. As regular or dedicated readers of this column know, in every election cycle that comes around, I participate in vigorous debates about the parties, the candidates and the officials conducting the elections. In some cases, I have been fierce in my advocacy of a candidate and/or a party, but in very limited, very specific instances. One instance that I hope some readers will recollect clearly is the contest between Ogbeni Rauf Aregbesola and Iyiola Omisore in Osun state in August 2014. Similarly, in the presidential elections of 2015, I wrote passionately in support of the gallant efforts of my old comrade, Professor Attahiru Jega, then Chairman of INEC, to conduct free, fair and credible elections in the face of the relentless, proto-fascist efforts of Jonathan, Dasuki and the military chiefs either to steal the elections outright for the PDP or postpone the elections indefinitely and rule the country through a duplicitous "government of national unity".

Though of a completely different order of the investment of my hopes, aspirations and what remains of the idealism of my youth,

my attitude toward religion and the church is similar to how I relate to politics and elections: I go to church – about once or twice a year – when important milestones in the lives of very close friends and relatives are consecrated in special worship and celebration. I do confess that sometimes, on such occasions, the power and beauty of hymns and organ music as I used to experience them when I was a religionist, comes back to me in ineffable moments of uplift of psyche and spirit. But no, I am not returning to the church, to religion! Like political parties, like hospitals and health centers, churches, mosques and religion in general play vital, irreplaceable roles in our individual and collective lives. I not only accept this fact, I go further than mere acceptance of unavoidable aspects of life to assert that in fact, politics and political parties and churches, mosques and religion in general can be – and have many, many times been – invaluable reservoirs for the best aspects of the things that make us human, the things that could make us better and more fulfilled Nigerians and Africans. As a matter of fact, it is this conception of politics and religion that lies at the root of why I have never voted and why I stopped being a Christian, a religionist. Let me explain what I mean by this observation and in doing so bring this piece and the series of which it is a part to a close.

For the most part and for most of recorded history, only very rarely do we see politics in its noblest, most honourable and respected aspects: a Nelson Mandela; a Mahatma Gandhi; a Martin Luther

King, Jr.; the Euro-American suffragette movement for the rights of women to vote and be voted for; idealist revolutionaries throughout history who, against all the odds, launched waves and tides of revolts against tribal, feudal and modern slave-owners; the nationalist revolts against Western colonialism and imperialism in virtually all parts of the world at stages when their leaders were yet to be compromised and corrupted by taking over the reins of power from the departing Western overlords. At this level, politics is higher and more valuable than any other human institution and practice. I say this, I should add, without having suffered an amnesia about the contending and formidable claims of religion, science, technology, law, art, music, poetry. At its noblest, politics, in my opinion, is higher and more valuable than each and every one of them! With a whisper and not a shout, compatriots, I say that it is this conception of politics that has kept me from ever voting or be voted for in electoral politics in our country or any other country in the world.

I do not need to say as much about religion and the role it can and has played in directing the affairs of our humankind toward the best part of our nature. One role, one achievement that is not often remembered is the role that religion played for centuries in the advancement of knowledge and human understanding, both of who we are and our physical and intergalactic environment. Perhaps the most moving and astonishing aspect of this story is the moment when, after a period of great recalcitrance and obstructionism, religion gracefully stepped aside and allowed science to flourish unimpeded, even if this was not without a terrible struggle!

Religion has also sometimes been a powerful ally of the oppressed, the forgotten, the wretched of the earth: liberation theology and its activist priests in Latin America; the Revd. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Baptists of the Southern Leadership Christian Conference (SLCC) in America; the Anglican Church under Archbishop Desmond Tutu in apartheid South Africa.

Can politics and religion in Nigeria at the present time be brought closer to these sorts of historic and exemplary developments. I think so and, indeed, I hope so! But is any of the existing political parties of the Left positioned to be the catalyst for this development? I don't think so. In that case, why not create a new party from the existing ones and put everything we have in it? I disagree. What is needed now, I think, is a mass movement or, rather, the *recreation* of movements in this country that have enabled progressive, left-leaning parties and candidates to win and win big. In one case, the victories were at the level of the state governments of Kaduna and Kano, two of the most politically influential states in the country. In another case – June 12, 1993 – the victory was at the highest level of the political order. In every one of these and other cases, the critical factor was not the parties; it was the mass movement, compatriots. This mass movement for justice, genuine unity and peace: we do not have to wait for 2019 for it; and beyond that date, we will still need it!

The series is now concluded. But in a next week's column and under a new title, I will briefly address crucial theoretical, ideological and historical issues pertaining to the relationship between mass movements and political parties of the Left, especially in our country and our region of the world.

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