PHILOSOPHY, RELIGION, AND THE POLITICIZATION OF ETHNIC IDENTITY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The interplay of philosophy, religion, and ethnicity has played a defining role in shaping Nigeria's political landscape. This article explores how philosophical thought and religious ideologies have been entangled with ethnic consciousness, contributing to the politicization of identity and the entrenchment of divisions within the Nigerian state. While philosophy ought to guide society through rational reflection and ethical reasoning, and religion should serve as a force for unity, morality, and transcendence, both have at times been co-opted to justify parochial ethnic allegiances and exclusivist political ambitions. From colonial strategies of divide and rule to post-independence manipulations of identity by political elites, the Nigerian experience reveals how ethnicity has been weaponized for political gain, often under the veneer of religious legitimacy. The article delves into how religious institutions and philosophical traditions—whether indigenous, Islamic, or Christian—have been used either to resist or reinforce ethnic boundaries. It also interrogates the implications of ethnic politicization for national unity, democratic governance, and the common good. Through a multidisciplinary approach combining political philosophy, religious ethics, and cultural analysis, the article argues for a de-politicization of ethnic identity and a reawakening of the philosophical and religious conscience of the nation. It proposes that the future of Nigeria's democracy depends on the extent to which these forces are reclaimed for justice, equity, and genuine pluralism. Only when philosophy reasserts its critical role and religion is de-ethnicized can Nigeria begin to dismantle the structures that perpetuate ethnic polarization and political instability.
Keywords: Philosophy, Religion, Politics, Nigeria, Democracy, Identity

Introduction

Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation and one of its most religiously devout societies, continues to grapple with a persistent and deeply entrenched crisis of identity politics. Despite decades of political independence, its socio-political fabric remains defined by a volatile combination of ethnic consciousness and religious affiliation. The manipulation of these identities has not only shaped the course of Nigeria's political development but has consistently undermined national unity, social cohesion, and democratic governance. The question that arises is: how did ethnicity and religion become such potent forces in the political arena of Nigeria? More importantly, what philosophical and ethical considerations can help interrogate and possibly redress this politicization?

Philosophy, by its nature, seeks clarity, truth, and justice. It provides the tools to reflect critically on the structures of power, the nature of communal existence, and the ethical obligations that bind citizens together. In the Nigerian context, however, philosophical reasoning has often taken a back seat to more immediate political calculations and ethno-religious passions. This has created a vacuum in the public space—one in which reasoned dialogue has been replaced by emotional appeals to ethnic loyalty and religious supremacy. As Kwame Gyekye asserts, African philosophy must be "directed toward the problem of national integration and solidarity" (Gyekye 113). Yet, Nigeria's political culture has largely ignored this insight, favoring the mobilization of identity for electoral advantage.

Religion, too, which should ideally serve as a moral compass and a unifying spiritual force, has become increasingly implicated in ethnic polarization. Religious leaders frequently align with ethnic blocs, and religious rhetoric is often deployed to sanctify political agendas. According to J.D.Y. Peel, "religion in Nigeria cannot be understood apart from ethnicity, nor can ethnicity be adequately analyzed without considering religion" (Peel 17). This inseparability underscores the depth of their mutual entanglement and the difficulty of disentangling political interests from communal identities. Christianity and Islam, the two dominant religions, have often mirrored the ethnic tensions between the largely Christian South and the Muslim North, fueling suspicions, conflict, and even violence.

The philosophical and religious dimensions of identity, therefore, cannot be treated merely as abstract or theological issues—they are deeply political. The legacy of colonial rule, which institutionalized ethnic identities for administrative purposes, has compounded the problem. As Mahmood Mamdani notes, colonialism did not just divide; it "ethnicized political identity," making governance a matter of group representation rather than shared citizenship (Mamdani 21). Postcolonial Nigerian leaders, instead of dismantling these colonial frameworks, have often reinforced them, transforming ethnicity into a permanent feature of national politics.

This paper argues that a philosophical re-examination of Nigeria's identity politics is urgently needed—one that challenges the normative assumptions about ethnicity and religion, exposes the ethical failures of their politicization, and proposes alternative visions rooted in justice, rational discourse, and spiritual integrity. Through this reflection, we hope to reclaim both philosophy and religion as instruments not of division, but of national healing.

Theoretical Foundations: Philosophy, Religion, and Identity

To fully grasp the politicization of ethnic identity in Nigeria, it is necessary to first understand the philosophical and religious frameworks that inform identity formation in African societies. The concept of identity in African philosophical discourse is neither static nor individualistic; it is deeply relational and communal. As John Mbiti famously declared, "I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am" (Mbiti 106). This communal ontology, while offering a strong sense of belonging and mutual responsibility, also provides fertile ground for group-based identity to dominate the public space—especially when manipulated for political purposes.

Philosophy, especially political philosophy, equips societies with tools to evaluate the ethical dimensions of governance, power, justice, and collective identity. Classical philosophers such as Aristotle viewed politics as an extension of ethics—a means of cultivating the good life through the organization of the polis. In the African context, thinkers like Kwasi Wiredu and Kwame Gyekye emphasized consensus, communal rationality, and dialogical engagement as foundations for a just society. Wiredu, in particular, challenged the imposition of Western-style liberal democracy on African societies without consideration

for indigenous modes of deliberation (Wiredu 58). His advocacy for "non-party democracy" was premised on the need to avoid ethnic division embedded in party politics.

However, Nigeria's political system, rather than drawing on these philosophical resources, has often been driven by a logic of dominance and exclusion. Political actors mobilize ethnic identity not for the sake of collective well-being, but to acquire and retain power. This weaponization of identity transforms a philosophical ideal of communal belonging into a tool of political control. When political access becomes tied to one's ethnicity or region, merit and rational deliberation are sacrificed for loyalty and group interest. This distortion betrays the ethical core of African political philosophy.

Religion, too, is not merely a private belief system in Africa—it is a total worldview. As Laurenti Magesa points out, "religion in African life is not compartmentalized; it is life itself" (Magesa 9). In Nigeria, religion forms an essential component of group identity. It shapes values, guides behavior, and provides meaning to communal existence. However, this religio-cultural integration becomes dangerous when religious symbols and institutions are harnessed to legitimize ethnic supremacy. The fusion of ethnicity and religion fosters an "us-versus-them" mentality, which often culminates in political intolerance, discrimination, and sectarian violence.

Moreover, many Nigerian politicians deliberately exploit the religious sentiments of their ethnic constituencies, especially during elections. They attend churches or mosques not necessarily as a matter of personal faith, but as a calculated act of political branding. Sermons are sometimes turned into campaign platforms, and clerics are co-opted into partisan projects. This intertwining of religion and ethnic politics corrupts the moral authority of religious institutions and undermines their role as agents of peace.

From a philosophical standpoint, this represents a failure of ethical leadership and moral clarity. As Emmanuel Edeh argues, African philosophy must "confront the existential challenges of the people and speak to their historical experiences" (Edeh 43). The politicization of identity is one such challenge. It distorts the moral landscape, breeds mistrust among communities, and diverts attention from real developmental issues.

Ultimately, both philosophy and religion in Nigeria have been caught in a web of political manipulation. While they possess immense potential for nation-building and ethical transformation, their co-optation by ethnic politics has rendered them tools of division rather than unity. What is needed is a reclamation of their original purposes—reason, justice, transcendence, and the pursuit of the common good.

Historical Roots of Ethnic and Religious Politicization in Nigeria

Understanding the politicization of ethnic and religious identity in Nigeria requires tracing the historical trajectories that birthed and sustained these phenomena. Ethnic and religious divisions, though not invented by colonialism, were certainly institutionalized and weaponized by the colonial enterprise. The British colonial policy of indirect rule, particularly under Lord Frederick Lugard, emphasized governance through ethnic chiefs and religious leaders, thereby reinforcing identity as the primary mode of social organization. This system fragmented Nigerian society and cemented regional and ethno-religious distinctions as political categories.

Before colonialism, ethnic identities existed but were fluid and primarily cultural rather than political. Inter-group relations often revolved around trade, marriage, migration, and conflict resolution. However, colonialism altered these dynamics by introducing a bureaucratic system that privileged group identities over individual capacities. Mamdani notes that colonialism in Africa "differentiated citizens from

subjects," assigning political rights based on racial or ethnic categories, a strategy that left a lasting legacy of politicized identity (Mamdani 22).

The 1914 amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates further complicated Nigeria's ethnic mosaic. This unification, done for administrative convenience and economic exploitation, failed to consider the vast cultural, religious, and political differences among the constituent groups. The North, predominantly Muslim and feudal, was governed through emirs, while the South, largely Christian and Western-educated, was administered through a different colonial framework. As Falola and Heaton observe, "British colonialism effectively created a dual society in Nigeria, sowing seeds of future conflict" (Falola and Heaton 203).

The introduction of Western education and Christianity in the South gave southern ethnic groups such as the Yoruba and Igbo an early advantage in the colonial civil service and economy. This bred resentment among northern elites, who feared southern domination. The British exploited these tensions to maintain control, often favoring northern political conservatism as a buffer against southern nationalism. This policy of "divide and rule" left Nigeria with a deeply fractured political landscape at independence in 1960.

Post-independence politics in Nigeria continued the colonial legacy of identity-based governance. The First Republic was marked by intense competition among the three major ethnic regions: the Hausa-Fulani in the North, the Yoruba in the West, and the Igbo in the East. Political parties aligned themselves along ethnic lines—the Northern People's Congress (NPC), the Action Group (AG), and the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC)—and elections became contests of ethnic arithmetic rather than issues-based engagement.

The 1966 military coup, largely perceived as being led by Igbo officers, and the subsequent counter-coup and Biafran War (1967–1970), entrenched ethnic mistrust and deepened the politicization of identity. These events, as Chinua Achebe lamented, "marked the end of Nigerian nationalism and the beginning of ethnic realism" (Achebe 89). Ethnicity became not just a political tool but a survival strategy, and religion increasingly functioned as a cultural shield.

In more recent times, the return to civilian rule in 1999 has not reversed this trend. On the contrary, the adoption of the "federal character" principle and the informal zoning arrangement of political offices, while intended to ensure inclusion, have further institutionalized identity politics. Politicians now mobilize ethnic and religious blocs to gain electoral advantage, and national offices are distributed not based on merit but on regional rotation and communal entitlement. As Osaghae explains, this has created a "clientelist system" where ethnic loyalty supersedes national commitment (Osaghae 36).

The rise of religious extremism, particularly Boko Haram in the North and Christian militia movements in the Middle Belt, has added another layer to this politicization. These groups often derive their legitimacy not only from religious ideologies but also from perceived ethnic marginalization. In such a context, both religion and ethnicity become rallying points for violence and secessionist agitation.

This historical evolution reveals that Nigeria's problem is not simply the existence of multiple ethnicities or religions, but the deliberate politicization and instrumentalization of these identities for power and control. Philosophical reflection must interrogate these historical patterns, question the ethical foundations of the current political culture, and advocate for a new model of identity—one rooted in shared humanity, civic virtue, and nationalContemporary Manifestations and Case Studies:

In present-day Nigeria, the politicization of ethnic and religious identities is evident in the country's electoral processes, political appointments, conflicts, and even public policy decisions. Far from being vestiges of the past, these identity-based cleavages have become the very grammar of political life,

dictating how power is contested, shared, and maintained. The Nigerian state, rather than being an impartial arbiter among its diverse constituents, often becomes an arena where the most dominant ethnic or religious bloc imposes its will under the veneer of federalism and democracy.

A striking example of this politicization is Nigeria's informal practice of rotational presidency, often referred to as "zoning." Although not enshrined in the Constitution, zoning has become a dominant norm in political discourse. It seeks to rotate the presidency between the predominantly Muslim North and the largely Christian South, and among the major ethnic groups—Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo. While some view this as a pragmatic tool for national integration, others see it as an admission that competence and ideology are secondary to identity. As Suberu points out, "this reliance on ethnic arithmetic institutionalizes the very divisions that democracy ought to transcend" (Suberu 98).

Similarly, the principle of "federal character," embedded in the 1999 Constitution (Section 14(3)), mandates equitable representation of Nigeria's diverse groups in federal appointments. Though designed to promote inclusivity, in practice it often reinforces mediocrity, encourages nepotism, and inflames ethnic consciousness. Appointments to key positions such as service chiefs, heads of parastatals, or ministerial roles frequently generate national debates, not over qualifications, but over whether the appointee is from the "right" ethnic or religious group. This undermines the meritocratic foundation of a functional state.

The manipulation of religion in politics is also glaring in electoral campaigns and legislative processes. Political aspirants routinely use religious platforms to curry favor with voters, often framing their candidacy as a divine mission or an act of religious duty. Campaigns are launched in churches and mosques, with religious leaders sometimes endorsing candidates along confessional lines. This was vividly seen in the 2023 elections, where the selection of a Muslim-Muslim presidential ticket by the All Progressives Congress (APC) provoked widespread Christian outrage. Critics argued that it violated the delicate balance of Nigeria's religious demography and inflamed sectarian tension. As Kukah warns, "When religion is made the handmaiden of politics, both religion and politics suffer corruption" (Kukah 44).

Ethno-religious tensions have also flared into violent conflict, with tragic consequences. The persistent herder-farmer clashes in the Middle Belt are often cast in religious terms—Muslim Fulani herders versus Christian farming communities—but they are also deeply entangled with ethnicity, land ownership, and political marginalization. Similarly, the Boko Haram insurgency in the Northeast, though ideologically couched in Islamic extremism, is inseparable from grievances over northern underdevelopment and elite manipulation. As Campbell notes, "Boko Haram thrives on the failures of the Nigerian state to deliver justice, education, and security" (Campbell 122).

The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), a separatist movement in the Southeast, further illustrates the interplay of ethnic and religious identity in contemporary politics. IPOB's narrative of Igbo marginalization after the civil war taps into both ethnic pride and Christian victimhood. Their campaign is often couched in theological overtones, portraying their struggle as divinely ordained and morally superior to the current state apparatus. This blend of ethnonationalism and spiritual rhetoric fuels their appeal among disaffected youths.

Even seemingly mundane political decisions—like the siting of federal universities, road projects, or new military formations—often ignite ethnic and religious protests. States or regions not "favored" in such distributions decry marginalization, while the benefiting zones are seen as privileged or dominant. These accusations, often traded in the language of identity, erode trust in the fairness of governance and deepen societal fractures.

The media also plays a complicit role. Headlines, framing, and reportage frequently reflect ethnoreligious biases, with news outlets owned by ethnic or religious interests amplifying narratives that serve their constituencies. Social media, with its unregulated space, further intensifies the problem by enabling the spread of hate speech, conspiracy theories, and identity-based propaganda.

These manifestations point to a systemic malaise. Nigeria's political culture has normalized the reduction of citizenship to communal identity, where loyalty to ethnic or religious group often supersedes allegiance to the nation. This is antithetical to the philosophical ideal of a republic, where all citizens are equal before the law, and public office is entrusted based on capability and the common good. As Soyinka argues, "There can be no democracy where tribe is thicker than justice and creed weighs heavier than truth" (Soyinka 11).

Therefore, a transformation of the political ethos is needed—one that challenges the underlying logic of identity politics and reinstates the principles of justice, equity, and reason as the foundation of public life.

Identity, Ethics, and the Common Good

Philosophy, at its core, is a search for truth, justice, and the principles that undergird human flourishing. In the context of Nigeria's politicized ethnic and religious identities, philosophical reasoning offers critical tools to deconstruct inherited prejudices, challenge political manipulations, and provide a more just vision for social coexistence. This section examines how identity, ethics, and the idea of the common good can be engaged philosophically to understand and resolve the crises emanating from Nigeria's politicized diversity.

First, the concept of identity itself must be interrogated. Philosophers from Socrates to Foucault have explored how identities are not merely innate but constructed through language, power relations, and historical contingencies. In Nigeria, ethnic and religious identities are often treated as fixed and sacrosanct, yet they are social constructs shaped by colonial mappings, cultural narratives, and political interests. As Kwame Anthony Appiah notes, "Identities are made, not found. They are the products of choices—often made by others—that shape our sense of belonging" (Appiah 66). In this light, the rigid attachment to identity becomes problematic when it impedes civic nationalism and undermines the project of shared citizenship.

Furthermore, the ethical implications of identity politics are profound. From the standpoint of moral philosophy, particularly Kantian ethics, human beings must be treated as ends in themselves, not as means to political power. When politicians mobilize ethnic or religious loyalties to win votes or dominate state resources, they effectively instrumentalize individuals, reducing them to tools for sectional advantage. This undermines the moral dignity of citizens and corrodes the foundations of a just society. John Rawls' theory of justice also offers a compelling critique. Rawls argues that justice requires fairness and that public institutions should be designed to benefit the least advantaged, regardless of their group affiliations (Rawls 54). By contrast, Nigeria's ethnically-driven governance often protects the interests of dominant groups at the expense of minorities, thereby violating both fairness and equity.

The Nigerian political system also stands in tension with the communitarian view, which emphasizes the role of community in shaping moral and political life. Thinkers like Michael Sandel and Charles Taylor argue that identity can be a source of meaning and solidarity. However, in the Nigerian context, ethnic and religious communities are frequently weaponized against each other. Thus, instead of fostering social cohesion, they become battlegrounds of mutual suspicion and antagonism. This reveals the necessity of reimagining communal identity not as an exclusive possession but as a foundation for inclusive solidarity.

The African philosophical tradition also contributes rich insights to this discourse. The principle of Ubuntu, summarized in the phrase "I am because we are," underscores interdependence, mutual respect, and shared humanity. Ubuntu is deeply resonant in African societies and challenges the zero-sum logic of identity politics. As Ramose explains, "Ubuntu as a philosophy urges us to view identity in relational, not adversarial, terms" (Ramose 40). Applying Ubuntu in Nigeria would mean affirming ethnic and religious diversity without allowing it to dictate access to power, privilege, or belonging.

In the same vein, Leopold Senghor's idea of négritude and Kwasi Wiredu's advocacy for "conceptual decolonization" speak to the need for Africa—including Nigeria—to develop a political and ethical framework rooted in its own cultural values but critical of colonial legacies. The colonial partitioning of Nigeria, which lumped over 250 ethnic groups into an artificial nation-state, laid the groundwork for identity conflicts. However, post-independence political actors have failed to transcend these legacies. A philosophically grounded politics would require moving beyond colonial categories and embracing a pluralistic yet cohesive national identity.

Philosophy also challenges us to transcend the politics of fear, which often drives ethnic and religious mobilization. As Martha Nussbaum observes, "Fear distorts reason, erodes compassion, and narrows our moral vision" (Nussbaum 89). In Nigeria, many political campaigns are premised on fear of domination by the 'Other'—be it the North, the South, Muslims, Christians, or specific ethnicities. This fear, when unchallenged, becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy that justifies exclusion and retaliation. A philosophical ethic rooted in courage, truth, and universalism is necessary to confront this dynamic.

Finally, the concept of the common good must be reasserted as the telos of politics. In Aristotelian thought, politics exists not merely to ensure order but to promote the highest good of the community. When ethnic and religious identities are politicized, the common good is sacrificed at the altar of factional interests. The result is a fragmented society where loyalty to ethnic leaders or religious figures supersedes commitment to public institutions. Only when Nigerians—citizens and leaders alike—begin to prioritize the collective well-being above sectional gain can the dream of nationhood become a reality.

In conclusion, philosophical reflection reveals that the politicization of identity is neither natural nor inevitable. It is a product of flawed political reasoning, institutional decay, and moral complacency. To overcome it, Nigeria must rekindle a culture of critical thinking, ethical leadership, and civic education that affirms diversity while working toward justice and unity.

Religion and the Crisis of Identity in Nigeria's Political Sphere

Religion occupies a central and deeply embedded place in the consciousness of the Nigerian people. Christianity, Islam, and traditional African religions each command immense loyalty and influence across the diverse cultural and ethnic configurations of the country. Far beyond its spiritual mandate, however, religion in Nigeria has evolved into a potent political force—sometimes as a platform for national transformation, but more often as an instrument of division and power consolidation. This section critically examines how religion has contributed to the politicization of ethnic identity in Nigeria, highlighting its dual role as both healer and instigator of identity-based conflict.

To begin with, the colonial enterprise sowed the initial seeds of religious and ethnic fragmentation by geographically and politically structuring Nigeria along religious lines. The North was predominantly Islamic, the South predominantly Christian, and traditional religions remained embedded within numerous ethnic groups. These religious divisions were later codified in administrative practices, access to education, and political appointments, creating an enduring fault line in postcolonial governance (Falola and Heaton 185). The British colonial government's preference for indirect rule in the Muslim

North, and their missionary-driven educational expansion in the Christian South, entrenched both religious rivalry and the ethnic identities associated with them. Thus, religion was not only a belief system but also a marker of privilege and regional power.

In post-independence Nigeria, this religious configuration has been continuously manipulated to serve ethnic interests. Politicians frequently exploit religious sentiment to mobilize support from ethnic constituencies. For example, a Hausa-Fulani Muslim candidate is often expected to draw on Islamic rhetoric and secure votes from core northern states, while an Igbo or Yoruba Christian politician may similarly appeal to denominational and ethnic loyalties in the South (Kukah 211). This reciprocal entanglement of religion and ethnicity reinforces suspicion between groups, as political ambitions are cloaked in divine legitimacy and spiritual superiority.

Moreover, Nigeria's constitutional secularism has proven largely symbolic. While the 1999 Constitution prohibits the adoption of any state religion (Section 10), the actual practice of governance is steeped in religious references, patronage, and favoritism. Political office holders openly associate with religious leaders, endorse pilgrimages with state funds, and attend religious conventions that double as political endorsements. Religious institutions, in return, act as power brokers and legitimators, influencing the moral and political choices of their adherents (Marshall 72). This close alignment between sacred and secular powers blurs the boundaries necessary for religious neutrality in statecraft.

Religious institutions also bear responsibility for perpetuating exclusionary narratives. While many religious leaders have acted as voices for peace, some have aligned themselves too closely with political actors or ethnic militias, thereby eroding the prophetic role of religion in society. For instance, Pentecostal leaders in the South have often supported candidates from their ethnic or denominational groups, invoking divine visions or prophecies that reinforce existing loyalties. Similarly, in the North, Islamic preachers have, at times, declared political allegiance as a religious obligation, conflating faith with ethno-political identity (Ibrahim 17). Such practices intensify communal polarization and elevate religious differences into political imperatives.

The violent consequences of this entanglement are visible in Nigeria's recurring ethno-religious crises. From the Kaduna riots to the Jos conflicts and the Boko Haram insurgency, religion has often served as a rallying point for violence, even when the underlying causes are socio-economic or political. These conflicts are typically framed in religious terms, but their dynamics reveal deeper issues of marginalization, territorial control, and access to state resources—issues often along ethnic lines. Boko Haram, for instance, emerged not merely as an Islamic fundamentalist group, but also as a socio-political protest against perceived northern neglect, youth unemployment, and elite betrayal. The group's Islamist ideology is inseparable from the regional and ethnic context in which it operates (Onuoha 46).

The challenge, then, lies in reclaiming the redemptive role of religion as a force for justice and reconciliation. This demands a theological reorientation that emphasizes the universal values of love, justice, humility, and solidarity that cut across religious traditions. From Christian ethics to Islamic jurisprudence to African traditional moral systems, there is a shared emphasis on the dignity of the human person and the imperative of peace. Religious leaders must therefore transcend ethnic boundaries and speak prophetically against corruption, bigotry, and sectionalism, even when these are perpetuated by their own co-religionists.

In this regard, the role of interfaith dialogue becomes crucial. Inter-religious initiatives that promote mutual understanding, joint community service, and shared civic values can counteract the narrative of division. Institutions like the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) and local peacebuilding initiatives have made strides in this direction, but more sustained efforts are needed. Religious education,

both in mosques and churches, must prioritize critical thinking, civic responsibility, and respect for difference over doctrinal superiority and tribal loyalty.

Finally, a return to the ethical foundations of religion is necessary to resist its instrumentalization. Religion should not serve as an extension of political ambition, nor should it be manipulated to justify exclusion. As Martin Luther King Jr. aptly stated, "Any religion that professes to be concerned about the souls of men and is not concerned about the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them… is a spiritually moribund religion" (King 89). In Nigeria, a morally awakened religion must confront not only personal sin but also structural injustice, including the politics of ethnic and religious discrimination.

In conclusion, religion in Nigeria, while capable of immense good, has too often been co-opted into ethnic partisanship and political expediency. The path forward must involve a reawakening of religious conscience, a separation of sacred duties from partisan ambitions, and a shared theological vision for the nation that affirms plurality, peace, and the common good.

The Consequences of Politicized Identity on Governance

The politicization of ethnic and religious identity in Nigeria has resulted in far-reaching consequences for both governance and national cohesion. While ethnic diversity in itself is not a weakness, the manipulation of that diversity for political gain has turned it into a national liability. Nigeria has struggled to evolve a shared political vision not because of the multiplicity of its ethnicities or religious affiliations, but due to the elevation of those identities above citizenship, competence, and ethical leadership. This section explores how the politicization of identity affects governance structures, weakens democratic institutions, and undermines the pursuit of a cohesive national identity.

One of the most visible effects is the weakening of meritocracy in public service. In a system where political appointments and resource allocations are often based on ethnic and religious considerations, competence and integrity are frequently sidelined. Politicians are more inclined to reward loyalty to ethnic blocs than to appoint individuals who possess the requisite qualifications. This practice is sometimes rationalized as a necessary political strategy to maintain balance, such as in the implementation of the federal character principle embedded in Section 14(3) of the 1999 Constitution. However, while the federal character principle was intended to foster inclusivity, it has also become a tool for legitimizing mediocrity and entrenching regional patronage networks (Suberu 51).

In practice, government ministries, parastatals, and military commands are often skewed to reflect ethnic or religious allegiances, especially when appointments are made from the ruling party's region or religious background. This has been especially contentious during transitions of power between administrations dominated by different regional, ethnic, or religious interests. For instance, the appointments made under successive governments—be it under Presidents Obasanjo, Jonathan, Buhari, or Tinubu—have often been scrutinized through the lens of ethnic and religious favoritism (Adebanwi and Obadare 103). Such skewed appointments not only alienate entire sections of the country but also diminish public trust in the fairness and competence of the state.

Politicized identity also manifests in the disproportionate distribution of infrastructural development and public investment. States or regions aligned with the ruling party often receive more favorable treatment in federal budgets, while those seen as politically hostile are marginalized. This breeds resentment and a sense of exclusion among minority groups. The failure to provide equitable development across the federation has, in turn, fueled agitations for secession or regional autonomy, as seen in the movements

for Biafra, Oduduwa, and Arewa Republics (Osaghae 126). These agitations reflect not only historical grievances but also current disillusionment with the state's failure to deliver justice and equity.

Another consequence is the institutionalization of ethnic and religious fault lines within the electoral process. Elections in Nigeria are rarely contested on the basis of ideological clarity or development agenda. Instead, they often descend into contests between ethno-religious constituencies. Voters are mobilized not based on policy debates but on identity loyalties. Candidates, in turn, rely heavily on ethnic endorsements, regional kingmakers, and religious leaders to gain legitimacy. This undermines democratic accountability, as political performance becomes secondary to ethnic affiliation. According to Eghosa Osaghae, "what has emerged is a system where ethnicity has become a currency of political negotiation and competition, often at the expense of democratic values" (128).

This entrenchment of identity politics fuels a winner-takes-all mentality, in which access to power is seen as access to national resources for a specific group. The consequence is that political transitions are rarely peaceful, and electoral contests are frequently marred by violence, voter suppression, and post-election disputes. Each election cycle deepens the perception that Nigeria is a federation of tribes rather than a nation of citizens. This perception undermines national unity and impedes efforts to build a shared sense of purpose and patriotism.

Governance, at its core, requires the prioritization of the common good over parochial interests. However, the Nigerian state has often failed to act in this capacity. The politicization of identity erodes the neutrality of state institutions, particularly the judiciary, police, and electoral commissions. These institutions, when perceived as favoring certain groups, lose their moral authority and legitimacy. The collapse of trust in these institutions often leads to self-help strategies among communities, including the rise of ethnic militias, vigilante groups, and separatist organizations. This breakdown in social cohesion and institutional integrity leaves the state vulnerable to both internal and external threats.

The broader consequence of these dynamics is a pervasive sense of alienation among citizens, particularly the youth, who find themselves disillusioned with a system that rewards connections over competence and identity over merit. This alienation has contributed to brain drain, political apathy, and in some cases, radicalization. When young Nigerians see their aspirations blocked by invisible walls of ethnicity and religion, many either emigrate in search of fairer systems or become easy recruits for groups promising identity-based empowerment.

From a philosophical standpoint, this crisis represents a moral failure of the Nigerian state. Justice, as articulated by philosophers like John Rawls, requires that social institutions be arranged so that everyone has fair opportunities and that inequalities are structured to benefit the least advantaged (Rawls 72). In contrast, Nigeria's identity-based politics often entrenches existing inequalities and undermines the ethical foundations of justice and fairness. Similarly, from an African communalist perspective, the emphasis on solidarity, mutual respect, and communal wellbeing is contradicted by the winner-takes-all ethos of identity politics.

Religion, instead of being a counterbalance to these failures, often intensifies them. Many religious institutions align with ethnic causes, and some spiritual leaders endorse candidates based not on moral character but on regional affiliations. This compromises their prophetic voice and weakens their ability to hold political actors accountable. In a country where over 90% of the population professes one religion or the other, the failure of religion to transcend ethnic boundaries and promote justice is a tragedy with national implications (Paden 97).

In sum, the politicization of identity in Nigeria has created a governance model marked by exclusion, inequality, and fragmentation. It undermines democratic development, erodes institutional trust, and

deepens the crisis of national integration. Unless urgent steps are taken to reimagine citizenship and redefine leadership beyond identity markers, Nigeria risks perpetuating a cycle of instability and underdevelopment. The role of philosophy and religion in breaking this cycle will be examined in the next section.

Reclaiming Philosophy and Religion as Tools for National Integration

The politicization of identity in Nigeria has not only eroded the principles of justice and equity but has also distorted the moral authority of two foundational institutions: philosophy and religion. However, these same institutions—if disentangled from partisan manipulations—can be powerful tools for national integration, ethical reorientation, and democratic consolidation. In this section, we explore how philosophy and religion, when authentically applied, can help restore Nigeria's fractured civic space and contribute to building a unified national consciousness that transcends ethnic and religious barriers.

Philosophy, particularly social and political philosophy, offers an avenue for critical reflection on the nature of the state, justice, and the good life. At its core, philosophy emphasizes rational inquiry, universalism, and the dignity of the human person. These values are indispensable in a pluralistic society like Nigeria, where multiple identities coexist. From Plato to Rawls, philosophical thought has consistently insisted on the primacy of justice, fairness, and the common good. In the African context, philosophers such as Kwasi Wiredu and John Mbiti have stressed the relevance of communalism, consensus, and moral responsibility as central to African ethics (Wiredu 22; Mbiti 108).

These philosophical values can help deconstruct the myth that one's ethnic or religious identity is the ultimate determinant of political legitimacy. Philosophy teaches us to examine assumptions critically, to interrogate structures of power, and to pursue ethical leadership based on reason rather than sentiment. As Nze (41) contends, African philosophy should serve as a mirror through which society critiques itself and pursues moral clarity. Nigeria's political landscape, tainted by ethnic chauvinism and religious partisanship, desperately needs this philosophical intervention.

Moreover, civic education rooted in philosophical reasoning can foster a sense of shared citizenship among Nigerians. When young people are taught to question tribalism, to value ethical consistency, and to appreciate diversity as a strength, a new generation of citizens emerges—one less beholden to narrow parochialism. Such civic formation should not merely be academic but should shape national discourse, political debate, and policy formulation. This is where public philosophers, intellectuals, and educators have a crucial role to play. Their task is to reframe national conversations in ways that transcend identity politics and call attention to systemic injustice and ethical failures.

Religion, too, has a transformative potential that is yet to be fully harnessed in Nigeria's search for unity. While it is true that religion has often been used to legitimize ethnic loyalties, this is a distortion of its essential message. At its best, religion promotes transcendence, compassion, justice, and peace—values that align with the highest aspirations of political community. Whether in Christianity, Islam, or African Traditional Religion, there are core teachings that emphasize unity, respect for others, and the sacredness of human life.

Christianity, for instance, teaches that "there is neither Jew nor Greek… for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28), a powerful theological rebuttal to any ideology of exclusion. Islam affirms the brotherhood of all believers and condemns tribal arrogance, as seen in the Prophet Muhammad's final sermon, where he declared that "an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab… except by piety and good action." Similarly, African Traditional Religion underscores kinship and the interdependence of all members of the community. These teachings can serve as moral counterweights to the ethnicization of

politics, provided religious leaders embrace their prophetic mandate to challenge injustice, even when it is perpetuated by their own ethnic or religious constituencies.

The challenge, however, is that many religious institutions in Nigeria have become deeply entangled in ethnic and political networks. Churches and mosques are sometimes organized along ethnic lines, with sermons tailored to affirm group superiority rather than preach repentance, justice, and reconciliation. The way forward requires a deliberate theological shift—one that prioritizes national healing over sectional interest. This calls for a theology of public responsibility, where religious leaders speak truth to power, advocate for equity, and foster interfaith solidarity.

Interfaith dialogue and ecumenical cooperation offer practical means of achieving this shift. Initiatives that bring Christian, Muslim, and traditional leaders together to address national concerns can help model a different kind of politics—one based on mutual respect and shared moral purpose. Organizations such as the Interfaith Mediation Centre in Kaduna have already shown that such collaboration is possible and effective in reducing conflict and promoting peace (Udoidem 73). The state must also invest in such platforms and recognize the role of religion as a partner in peacebuilding, not just as a threat to national security.

In addition, both philosophy and religion should inform national policy. Policies on education, governance, and social justice must reflect ethical considerations grounded in philosophical and religious wisdom. For instance, the National Policy on Education should include comprehensive civic and moral education that challenges ethnocentrism and promotes empathy, critical thinking, and democratic engagement. The legal system, too, must uphold principles of justice that do not favor any group but protect the dignity and rights of all citizens.

Ultimately, reclaiming philosophy and religion as tools for integration requires intentional leadership. Political leaders must embody these values in their personal conduct and public service. Academic institutions must prioritize philosophical and theological research that addresses national problems. Civil society must organize around ethical principles, demanding accountability and promoting unity in diversity.

In a country as complex and diverse as Nigeria, the search for unity cannot be left to politics alone. It requires a moral awakening—a reimagining of national identity based not on geography, ethnicity, or religion, but on shared values and mutual commitment to justice. Philosophy and religion offer the intellectual and spiritual resources to inspire such a reawakening. But for them to do so, they must remain prophetic, critical, and committed to truth.

Conclusion: Towards an Inclusive and Ethically Grounded Political Future

The persistent politicization of ethnic identity in Nigeria is not merely a political or administrative challenge—it is a profound moral crisis. At its root lies a failure to cultivate a shared national consciousness anchored in ethical responsibility, mutual respect, and justice. This crisis has been exacerbated by the misuse of religion and the neglect of philosophy in shaping political discourse and guiding national decision-making. The tragic result is a fragmented polity where identity trumps merit, division overrides unity, and parochial loyalties eclipse the common good.

However, this trajectory is not irreversible. By re-engaging philosophy and religion in their truest forms—as disciplines of critical reflection and moral formation—Nigeria can begin to chart a new path toward integration, peace, and sustainable development. Philosophy teaches us to question power, to seek justice, and to value human dignity above sectarian interest. Religion, when untangled from

ethnopolitical manipulations, calls us to compassion, solidarity, and accountability before the transcendent.

An inclusive political future must be built on these principles. The state must consciously move away from policies that entrench ethnic divisions and invest instead in programs that promote civic education, interfaith dialogue, and equitable development. Religious and philosophical institutions must reclaim their prophetic voices, challenging the status quo and inspiring collective moral renewal. Academic communities and public intellectuals must take up the responsibility of reshaping the ideological framework within which Nigerians understand identity, citizenship, and governance.

The burden also lies with ordinary citizens. Nigeria's future depends on the moral courage of its people to reject leaders who exploit religious and ethnic sentiments and to support those who embody ethical integrity, inclusivity, and competence. The youth, in particular, must be intellectually equipped and spiritually grounded to navigate and challenge the false binaries of "us versus them" that have for too long dominated the political arena.

Ultimately, the reconstruction of Nigeria is not simply a task of policy-making but of soul-searching. It is a philosophical and spiritual journey that demands a reawakening of conscience, a commitment to truth, and a refusal to allow identity to be weaponized against unity. By reclaiming the redemptive potentials of philosophy and religion, Nigeria can transcend the shadows of politicized ethnicity and move toward a more just, peaceful, and united nation.

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