Introduction: Where We are

As we approach the end of the second decade of Nigeria’s post-military return to a democratic experiment, otherwise referred to as the country’s Fourth Republic, we confront a massive decision about the character and quality of our common life as a nation. It is a phase in our history that requires us to take stock of the past and to envision a future that is neither
predetermined nor prescribed. What that future will be is up to us. There are competing and seemingly contradictory proposals on how to journey forward, all of which focus on the appropriate changes needed in our forms of interaction, on the supposition that we have it within our powers to create a new time and a new way of life. From many angles and in many venues, there are clamors for social change, cultural renewal, economic justice, and political restructuring that reflects Nigeria’s putative federalism. While the substance of the debate may be confounding, given the labyrinth of problems currently plaguing the nation, its occurrence as a form of civic ritual is not new. Rather, it is, in theory, a continuation, a re-enactment of some sort, of our implicit commitment and genuine fidelity to deliberative practice anchored in democratic ethos and constitutional tradition. The Preamble to the 1999 Constitution, not unlike its predecessors, begins with a self-referential insignia—“We the People of the Federal Republic of Nigeria,” who resolve, in a covenant-like act, “to live in unity and harmony as one indivisible and indissoluble Sovereign Nation under God.” Declaring this governing charter as the supreme law of the land and its provisions as having “binding force on all authorities and persons throughout the Federal Republic of Nigeria,” the Preamble further assures the citizens that the promotion of “good government and [their] welfare…on the principles of freedom, equality, and justice” shall be the supreme purpose of the Constitution. Against this backdrop, it can be tempting for anyone who has the privilege to address an august audience like the one here today to adopt an encyclopedic approach in the bid to cover all relevant issues. But this would be imprudent, considering the constraints of time and my own limited expertise. Thus, I will confine my reflection to a subject whose importance lies not only in its existential relevance to many Nigerians, but also in its imperviousness to the country’s sociological configurations and constitutional strictures.

It is hardly an exercise in hyperbole to assert that no other issue has given us as a people more political headache and cultural anxieties than religion in all its variegated expressions and manifestations. Arguably the fastest growing industry in the country, religion has also “always formed a shadow over the Nigerian federation, and has, since May 1999, not only formed a darker shadow over the polity, but even threatened to eclipse it.” Muslims, Christians, and adherents of the traditional religions are divided over the limits, if any, that should be imposed

---

on their freedom and the scope of responsibility they should have in shaping political life, broadly construed. Their disagreement remains the single most important issue in Nigeria’s post-colonial history, and is rendered more complex by other streams of pluralism that are latent in the country, including ethnicity, class, and region. In addition, the absence of common symbols of discourse deriving from the indigenous traditions with which to think and speak as Nigerians about the meaning of political reality and responsibility, coupled with the frequent eruption of civil tumults in the country, complicate the task of articulating an account of the proper relation between religion and the state.³

The coalescence of these conflicting signals—on the one hand, a commitment to the rule of law and, on the other, the “divergent epistemic notions of democracy that are disputed on cultural grounds”⁴—creates the need to reexamine the integrity of Nigeria’s evolving experiment regarding the constitutional status of religion. The experiment is facing a crisis of faith that centers on how to reconcile the perceived dissonance between Nigeria’s avowed political and legal norms and their equitable application to the diverse and competing spheres of culture and society. The fundamental question we have to address, as participants in this national conversation, is whether Nigeria is capable of creating and maintaining a political identity through constitutional and democratic avenues, which would prevent the state from identifying with any one of the cultural and religious segments within it. We know too well that it is not enough that a country declares an adherence to a constitution, written or unwritten, it is also necessary to inquire about the motivational rationale behind that commitment. As Richard Joseph rightly observes, “many contemporary dictatorships have constitutions which serve more to camouflage the exercise of power than to guide and determine it.”⁵

To be sure, the Nigerian polity is not a dictatorship, at least in appearance, in that it has sloughed off erstwhile tendencies toward an asphyxiating exercise of power; yet, the system is anything but consistent or predictable in its disposition to, and implementation of, its self-imposed constitutional precepts. What often emanate from the precincts of power, in terms of

---

official policies and idiosyncratic winks, are a tangled jumble of contradictions and mixed
signals regarding the permissible boundaries between religion and the state. Spokespersons of
religious institutions are themselves not innocent in creating or contributing to this conundrum,
lending credence to the perception of similarity of motives among the Nigerian ruling elite. In
other words, the prevailing modus vivendi in religion-state relationship in Nigeria encourages a
"hegemonic alliance" between the guardians of Civita Terrena and those of Civita Dei. It is a
pattern of interaction characterized by "the reciprocal assimilation of elites," understood as the
process by which various elite groups in the society--the administration, bureaucracy, military,
intellectuals, traditional rulers, and religious authorities--constitute themselves into "a privileged
zone of interpenetration and mutual reinforcement." Rather than seeing themselves as
occupying different roles with specific functions to perform in society, leading religious figures
often behave as "class actors in partnership with political elites to seek to achieve mutually
advantageous goals." Political elites return the favor by patronizing religious houses in the
belief that "access to the spiritual world is a vital resource in the constant struggle to secure
advantage over their rivals in political in-fighting." It is common knowledge that this
competitive struggle of both groups for state power is not for the benefit of the public, but
primarily "for accumulation, associated as it is with statism, monopoly of power, and the
interposition of coercion in the labor process, [which] raised to new heights on the capture of
state power." Unfortunately, the Nigerian elites are in an unenviable company on the African
continent. According to the late Professor Claude Ake, “The state, in the sense of a public force
or a truly public sphere, a commonwealth or res publica, hardly exists in a few instances. In
much of Africa, the public sphere is a contested space where strangers converge to appropriate
for the interest groups whatever is on offer, including the power of the state. Every interest group
is out for itself; each wants to appropriate and privatize state power to its own benefit.” The
predictable consequence of this entrenched system of co-optation is clear: it blurs the distinction

10 Ibid. 94.
between the state and the private order. Moreover, it makes it aberrant for religious spokespersons to confront the state determinedly when it infringes (as it so often does) on the fundamental rights of its citizens, for, on this reading, religious authorities are, like their counterparts within the elite circle, "brokers of power in the most mundane sense."\textsuperscript{11}

How then should we assess the place of religion in the Nigerian Constitution? What are the policy implications of the legal status of religion? Do the universities have a role to play in providing guidance on how to think about these issues, especially the importance of constitutional ideal in a liberal democratic context? I address these questions in turn in the rest of this lecture.

Constitution making as an enactment of political covenant

In book 3 of The Politics, Aristotle asked, “On what principle ought we to say that a State has [created and] retained its identity, or conversely, that it has lost its identity and become a different State?”\textsuperscript{12} His answer, which requires that we distinguish the physical identity of a state from its real [normative] identity, has contemporary relevance to our context, in light of the assertion attributed to one of the nationalist leaders and shared by others that Nigeria is not a nation but a mere geographical expression. For Aristotle, the “identity of polis [or a state] is not constituted by its walls.”\textsuperscript{13} Instead, it is defined by its constitution, which for him refers not just to the particular distribution of the offices in a polis, but more importantly to the specific end towards which the community aspires. As to what this end might be, John Locke provides a clue. He explains that the only legitimate goal of a [democratic] form of government is the public good, and the Constitution sits firmly under this horizon.\textsuperscript{14} Thus, for both Aristotle and Locke, the constitution is what gives a political community its identity; it is the foundation for both legal and social relations within it. However, the constitution is not a magic document. Its capacity to achieve the end for which it is designed depends on two ancillary factors. First, it has to reflect or take cognizance of the social character—what Aristotle calls the extra-constitutional features—of

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid, 190.


\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.

the society. Second, there has to be a correspondence between its precepts and the behavior of those who fall under its jurisdiction, otherwise the entire constitutional project would be short-lived. The norms contained in the constitution may indicate a commitment on the part of the citizens to create a particular identity, but until confirmed in their accumulated practice over a long stretch of time, this goal, however noble, will remain unfulfilled.

Without a doubt, Nigerians’ adoption of a constitution as a normative framework for organizing their social and political life sealed a twofold covenant inherent in the facticity of the act. The first aspect of the covenant as a moral vector of the nation is horizontal, which designates “a contract by which people bind themselves into a community prior to any state,” and the second is vertical, by which the same “people set a sovereign over them.”

In both respects, the covenant receives its binding ingredient from the parties’ common subscription to the moral ideal of political justice, whose focus is “the basic structure of society,…the way in which the major social institutions distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine the division of advantages from social cooperation.” Political justice presupposes that citizens of a religiously pluralistic society understand themselves as moral, rather than purely cultural, persons. It also seeks to shape the major systems of such a society to serve the mutual advantage of all.

However, as already hinted, many well-intentioned people doubt this sanguine appraisal of the nation’s constitutional project and its potential to further the interests of justice. Their skepticism is less about the normative desirability of a constitutional regime than about the artificial genesis of the country, which lied in the arbitrary colonial amalgamation of socially disparate and culturally distinct peoples with minimal prior interactions, leading some to suggest, naively it seems, that a more viable path lies in the dismemberment of the existing structures as a way to bring about homogeneity in social composition. Even if this option were possible, its proponents often fail to prove that it would guarantee social peace and political justice, as countries such as Somalia, Yemen, and others clearly demonstrate. Implementing the vision in Nigeria would be impossible for any mortal to achieve, for the country is not only divided along ethnic lines but also religious ones, which are cross-cutting and inter-locking. The Yoruba alone are said to have over 300 divinities, each with its own coterie of devotees, in addition to the

---

17 Ibid. 14.
denominational compartments of Islam and Christianity. Without discounting the salience of historical accidents in the evolution of modern Nigeria, the country is not unique in being socially and culturally pluralistic. “The received puerile idea of a rigorous coincidence between ethnicity, language, civil society and culture, and as an extension of these, the State’, the late Prof. Abiola Irele argues, ‘not only flies in the face of the contingencies that have gone into the making of real history--migrations, conquest, the ebb and flow of inter-relations between peoples and cultures--but also involves practical difficulties which its neatness seeks.”

He further counsels, rightly it seems, that “there is no ‘natural’ nation and there has never been: a nation, as a concrete reality, can only be a creation, determined by all the vicissitudes that accompany human existence.”

Other scholars agree. Proceeding from a cosmopolitan perspective, Jeremy Waldron contests “the assumption that the social world divides up neatly into particular distinct cultures, one to every community,… and that what everyone needs is just one of these entities--a single, coherent culture--to give shape and meaning to his life.” What is truer to our quotidian experience, he further argues, is that we each “draw our allegiances from here, there, and everywhere. Bits of cultures come into our lives from different sources, and there is no guarantee that they will all fit together.”

In short, the correspondence between cultural or moral pluralism and the boundaries of political units is at best rough and often nonexistent, so that any legitimate state must take into account and respect the pluralism that exists within it, by enforcing basic individual rights, toleration, and freedom of voluntary associations.

But how can (or should) this be done in a country such as Nigeria? Is there a plausible defense for the way in which our constitution has framed religion? In addition, what conception of politics would be most compatible with this framing? One way to answer these questions is to distinguish between the ideal of constitutionalism and the actual constitutions of particular states. Particular constitutions are more or less approximation of the ideal of constitutionalism, the essential features of which include limited governmental powers, adherence to the rule of law, and protection of fundamental rights. These are also features of a constitutional democracy, itself an outgrowth of two mutually reinforcing socio-historical impulses--modernity and liberalism.

---

19 Ibid. 125.
21 Ibid., 110.
Central to both is the affirmation of the importance of the freedom of the individual, grounded in "a belief in the importance of moral freedom, of the right to be treated and a duty to treat others as ethical subjects, and not as objects or means only." Constitutional democracy, as a particular political expression of modernity and liberalism, provides the best safeguards against institutionalized social hierarchy and cultural, ethnic, and religious hegemony.

**A secular or multi-religious state: What is in a label?**

Nigerians are nevertheless divided on how these democratic and constitutional safeguards can best serve the interests of the religious communities. Specifically, what fundamental rights should religious beliefs and communities be *constitutionally* entitled to? What does it mean to enjoy *religious* rights within a constitutional democratic system? Are there limits to these rights or are they absolute? I will address these questions within the parameters of the three commonly cited religion clauses in the Nigerian Constitution. The first is the non-adoption norm contained in section 10 of the 1999 Constitution, according to which ‘The Government of the Federation or of a State shall not adopt any religion as State Religion’. The second, found in section 38(1), is the free exercise norm, and adapted verbatim from article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which says, *inter alia*,

> Every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom (either alone or in community with others, and in public or in private) to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship teaching, practice and observance.

It is supplemented by the third, in section 42, the non-discrimination principle, which declares that

> A citizen of Nigeria of a particular community, ethnic group, place of origin, sex, religion or political opinion shall not, by reason only that he is such a person (a) be subjected either expressly by, or in the practical application of, any law in force in Nigeria or any executive or administrative action of the government, to

---

disabilities or restrictions to which citizens of Nigeria of other communities, ethnic groups, places of origin, sex, religious or political opinions are not made subject; or

(b) be accorded either expressly by, or in the practical application of, any law in force in Nigeria or any executive or administrative action, any privilege or advantage that is not accorded to citizens of Nigeria of other communities, ethnic groups, places of origin, sex, religious or political opinions.

A standard interpretation of the non-adoption clause, for example, is that it confers a secular status on the Nigerian state and restricts religion to the private realm. This interpretation accords lexical priority to the non-adoption norm over the free exercise principle, seeing the institutionalization of secularity as a precondition for a legitimate exercise and enjoyment of religious freedom. In his plea for what he calls the “the politics of the public sphere,” which “presumes basic secularity and the relationality of religious truths,” Ebenezer Obadare asserts that Nigeria’s goal of becoming “an all-inclusive political community” would be undermined and its democratic aspirations frustrated if “polarized religious and ideological persuasions” are not held to “an integrative social vision.”23 Similarly, Jibrin Ibrahim calls for an overlapping consensus among Nigeria’s social forces on the sanctity of “a domain of the profane that cannot be subsumed by the religious domain, irrespective of the level of religiosity in question.”24

A purposefully secular state, according to this viewpoint, enjoys a monopoly of coercive power and maintains strict neutrality among the different religions and between religious and non-religious groups. There are no religious courts with official jurisdiction in a secular state; it is also a state that cedes complete freedom to religious institutions in the governance of their internal affairs. Having no theology of sainthood or heresies, a secular state relates to religious and irreligious groups non-preferentially, regardless of numerical strength, and treats all as voluntary associations, with none possessing the ability to seize the coercive power of the state or to use tax money to advance its parochial purposes.

On the opposite side are those, principally radical Islamists and Christian evangelicals, who retort that no such inferences can be drawn from the norm, for all it says is that the government cannot adopt any religion as state religion, and since secularism functions as an ideological equivalent of conventional religions, adopting it would commit the state to a basic contradiction. Besides, to attribute secularity to the Nigerian State would contravene the free exercise norm, which guarantees a zone of freedom to every citizen for maximal expression of one's religious or non-religious fundamental beliefs. The logic of secularity, they contend, entails certain philosophical assumptions about the relationship between the individual and the state, private and public, spiritual and temporal, that are incompatible with the Islamic theory of government. It challenges the affirmation of religious principles, e.g., shari’a or the gospel imperatives, as the basis of political legitimacy, and constitutes an obstacle for religious adherents to be governed by these principles in all spheres of their lives. Imposition of a secular order, therefore, amounts not only to a cultural affront on a significant portion of the population, but would also reduce them to the status of second-class citizens as they would be impeded from being able to fully exercise their religious human rights.

Religious partisans—both Christian and Muslim—are befuddled by what seems to be the unwillingness of their fellow citizens to seize on the moral impulse of the human rights provisions in the Constitution. They regard the constitutional entrenchment of human rights language as providing an opportunity to the religious people to radically transform the conceptions and premises of the political order, the constitution of the political arena, and the characteristics of the political process. They cite the dysfunctional conditions of the Nigerian State as a reason to employ religion to launch a moral challenge to past conventional legitimations of political life and to unleash different possibilities in the construction of a new one. Any concessions to secularism, they contend, would inflate the already bloated propensity of the state to absolutize its moral status, and this would only entangle the country in a vicious circle, as the moral level of public life cannot be, and is not being, sustained by the secular state. Only religion is capable of generating civic responsibility and high levels of moral performance in everyday life. On this reasoning, it is clear that both camps disagree on the scope and limits of democracy. While one camp tends to see constitutional democracy as a constraining principle on theocratic ambitions (the priority of the non-adoption norm), the other infers from it the moral license to subordinate the state to religious oversight (the priority of the free exercise norm). At
issue is the extent to which men and women with religious convictions can be expected to leave
them behind at the entrance to the public sphere, especially of a democratic society.

**Religious pluralism and Democratic Preconditions of Wellbeing**

If the demand for the protection of religious rights is a euphemism for seeking a political role for religion, how can we reconcile this position with a vision that insists on the official disengagement of religion and the state? Is there a way to defend both positions without seeming like an intellectual prostitute? I wish to argue in the remainder of this lecture that this is not an impossible task, but I can only offer a sketch of my argument here. My argument has three parts. The first centers on the interdependence of pluralism and constitutionalism; the second attempts to clarify the kind of protections intended by the free exercise norm and the non-adoption norm. Finally, I sketch an argument for the role of the universities in fostering the kinds of habits that can sustain democratic values and institutions.

To start with, I want to suggest that there is something worth preserving in the Nigerian constitutional experiment, even with all its imperfections and contradictions. The virtues of the experiment crystalize when we compare Nigeria with other similarly situated post-colonial states that opted for a different constitutional direction. To avoid the charge of “intra-imperial isomorphism” in their national constitutions, which is the act of imitating and reproducing the constitutional models of the former colonizing powers, countries such as Pakistan, Malaysia, Tunisia, among others, “either: (a) explicitly name a specific religion as the official state religion, (b) make reference to a specific religion as providing certain legal principles, (c) have some kind of provisions which directly elevate a particular religion or (d) have some combination of these.”

However, in so doing, these countries undermined the process by which a sociologically diverse society can become a democratic, pluralist polity.

Generally speaking, pluralism is the primary reason for embracing the ideal of constitutionalism and the end which this ideal is intended to serve. In the absence of some kind of pluralism, modern constitutionalism would make little, if any, sense. Their interdependence is

---


26 As explained by Abdullahi An-Na’im, “the phenomenon of diversity is a permanent feature of all human societies everywhere, manifested in different forms and dynamics among them over time… [But] pluralism is an ideology and system that accepts diversity as a positive value and facilitates constant negotiations and adjustments among varieties of difference without seeking or expecting to terminate any or all of them permanently.” See Abdullahi An-Na’im, *Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Shari’a* (Harvard University Press, 2008), 225.
a reflection of their common association with certain normative presuppositions from which they
derive their valence and identity. “In a completely homogenous society, with a commonly shared
secular or religious conception of the good, constitutionalism would be superfluous, as the
governors would be identified with the governed, the law makers with those subject to laws, and
as the organically cohesive polity would delimit a normative realm relying on duties rather than
on rights.”27 I have already argued that such a completely homogenous society hardly exists in
history; in fact, no human society corresponds to it because pluralism is an existential
inevitability; it is inherent in what it means to be human. As such, in the constitutional universe,
every citizen has two distinguishable selves: the constitutional self and other kinds of self, such
as cultural, religious, ethnic or individual selves. The universe also privileges the constitutional
self over the non- and pre-constitutional selves, but treats all constitutional selves, by which I
mean citizens of a liberal democratic State, as equals. The transformation from a pre-
constitutional self to a constitutional self constitutes an attainment of citizenship that “consists in
the identification with the ethical-political principles of liberal pluralist democracy and with
commitment to defend its institutions.”28

However, the linkage between constitutionalism and pluralism is neither merely
conceptual nor accidental; it arose out of historical experience and judgments about the most
desirable way to handle the phenomenon of difference in human society. Differences of
worldviews, religious convictions, and conceptions of the good had been used in the past, and
they are still being used now, as the menace of Boko Haram clearly demonstrates, to justify
persecution and discrimination. Constitutionalism reflects a deep political and moral orientation,
construed in the West as political liberalism, that a certain set of institutional checks and
balances needs to be created to mitigate the tendency of persons and groups to unleash evils
against others on the basis of identity difference. I shall characterize this as the negative function
of constitutionalism. There is also its positive function, arising from the same orientation, which
is instantiated in the two realities that liberalism fosters: “cooperation between persons and
groups of diverse normative persuasions, and the freedom of the same persons and groups to

27 Rosenfeld, at 44.
28 Chantal Mouffe, “Agonistic pluralism and democratic citizenship,” in Adras Sajo and Shlomo Avineri (eds), The
pursue their normative agenda.” Constitutionalism therefore has a dual relationship to pluralism: on the one hand, the reality and awareness of plurality or difference prompt a reflection upon how best to curb its deleterious effects; on the other hand, the response itself is designed to delimit the scope of pluralism without erasing it.

In short, there is no necessary connection between pluralism, religious or otherwise, and social chaos. While it certainly can be disruptive of political order, the solution is not to suppress or obliterate it. One lesson of history since the 16th century Protestant Reformation up to our contemporary situation in Nigeria is that we must recognize and accommodate “the plurality of conflicting, and indeed incommensurable, conceptions of the good affirmed by the members of existing democratic societies.” This is because our ability as individuals and social entities to promote our own life projects, to pursue our own conception of the good, and to live in accordance with self-chosen goals and relationships are important components of one’s well-being. When the state interferes with these freely chosen pursuits, either by allowing the subordination of minority religions or ethnic groups to the dominant ones, or the subordination of all cultural groups to a Grand Cause espoused by the state, civil strife and internecine wars are the logical outcomes. A regime of subordination also creates and entrenches a caste system in which certain members are treated as second-class citizens on religious or other arbitrary grounds. In fact, to define such members as citizens appears to be a contradiction in terms, since citizenship denotes a grammar of political relations informed by liberty and equality for all. For Nigeria to continue to lay claim to membership among constitutional democratic nations, it must be fully committed to a system of laws that do not penalize religious beliefs, unless when those beliefs lead to conduct that harms public good. “There is one condition attached to all exercises of freedom: that the use of the freedom will not breach minimal responsibilities owed to the larger society as those responsibilities are embodied in legitimate laws.” Further, its laws have to be nondiscriminatory about practices, that is, the same laws must apply to all citizens, regardless of regional affiliation or class status, in matters touching on religious activities.

The vision of political life prescribed by the norm of equal liberty and respect is what is intended in the three religion sections of the Nigerian Constitution—10, 38, and 42—cited

earlier. Read together, they yield a single principle that affirms the legal equality of all citizens, and helps shed some light on how we might re-think the religion-state quandary in Nigeria. This is the principle of state impartiality, rather than indifference, toward religion and non-religion alike. The principle of state impartiality “prohibits government from making adherence to a religion relevant in any way to a person’s standing in the political community. Government can run afoul of that prohibition… [by its] endorsement or disapproval of religion. Endorsement sends a message to nonadherents that they are outsiders, not full members of the political community, and an accompanying message to adherents that they are insiders, favored members of the political community.”

An underlying premise of the impartiality principle is the conceptual distinction between “state” and “politics”. The state (at both the national and regional level) is the “formally vested agency of coercive power” while politics is the terrain where citizens deliberate and seek to justify competing interpretations of the good. What the non-adoption norm and the free exercise norm, taken together, prescribe is the institutional separation of religion and the state, not of religious beliefs and politics more generally. It is not only anti-democratic but also illiberal to exclude religiously based beliefs from the process of political deliberations simply because they are religious, just as it would be if secularly based beliefs are excluded from the same process simply because they are not religious. The keyword here is deliberation, which presupposes that the conflicts and disagreements of political life are best handled by argument, bargaining, and compromise. Where the arguments come from should not matter. A democratic society should not be in the business of inquiring into how or where the political views of its citizens are shaped, neither should it censor the doctrinal or rhetorical forms in which those views are expressed. If believers are convinced that the best arguments come from God, or His prophets, or His authorized texts, they should say so. Their only obligation, as citizens of a democratic society, is to be prepared to persuade their fellow citizens. This is because God’s word carries no special authority in this society, even if citizens are free to proclaim His word, if they think they know it. In essence, deliberations about the basic moral and political values that are to determine a constitutional government’s relation to its citizens and their relation to one

---

34 Mouffe, “Agonistic pluralism and democratic citizenship,” p. 34.
another have to be guided by the ideal of public reason. “A citizen engages in public reason,” Rawls writes, “when he or she deliberates within a framework of what he or she sincerely regards as the most reasonable political conception of justice, a conception that expresses political values that others, as free and equal citizens might also reasonably be expected to reasonably endorse.”35 The idea is to argue with “others…as free and equal citizens, and not as dominated or manipulated, or under the pressure of an inferior political or social position.”36

The Role of the Academe in the cultivation of Democratic Virtues

Our problem in Nigeria today is the deficit of this democratic virtue of inter-personal and inter-group deliberation, what the German philosopher, Jürgen Habermas, calls communicative action. While it is easy to point accusing fingers at the religious and other communal groups as being responsible for this tempestuous climate, those of us privileged to belong to the academic communities must also engage in some serious introspection, by asking ourselves whether we have been not only negligent but complicit in the parlous state of our public discourse. In a country where an educated person, among the Yoruba, is literally referred as an olajú, that is, an enlightened person, the main institutional arteries where this knowledge is produced and transmitted to the society—the universities—have an opportunity, and a responsibility, to influence the political culture in a way that no other institution can. Measured in purely instrumental or utilitarian terms, our insights may be less profound or even valued than those generated by our fellow citizens. Yet, our membership in the scholars’ guilds uniquely commits us to the task of “explaining the society to itself and to its members; interpreting the metaphors and myths that constitute the society’s complex significations; alerting the society to the shortcomings of the ways of being human to which it may have become wedded, and of leading the society in formulating new ways of being human.”37

In fact, this was the original vision and charge of the Nigerian universities at their founding,38 but like other organs of the society, they are now among major casualties of the

---

36 Ibid.
economic and political mismanagement of the country. To restore them to this original vision would require more than the practical task of retooling in terms of rebuilding infrastructure and refurbishing facilities, it may also be necessary to overhaul the curricula structure or modify the way we educate our students. A former intellectual giant of this university, the late Professor E. Bolaji Idowu of the Department of Religious Studies, suggested an approach that is still undoubtedly relevant to our current debate about the nature and purpose of university education. In his inaugural lecture delivered in 1974, he challenged the dichotomy that some have posited between the humanities and the sciences, considering this binary view of the episteme as facile and meaningless. The situation he described over four decades ago has hardly changed, where faculties “are so isolated and so artificially unrelated that each area of discipline considers itself self-sufficient,” resulting in “multiversities and not universities.”

In the sciences, this meant more efficient accumulation and dissemination of knowledge; in the humanities, it meant disconnection from the fundamental questions of human experience that breathe life and relevance into liberal education. Rather than functioning as the ideal locus for the unfettered exercise of thought and imaginations, our universities are organized (epistemologically as well as budgetarily) into disciplinary pigeonholes. The predictable result is the neglect of the education of our students as whole persons. We teach them science, or economics, or art, or literature, or engineering, or medicine—or whatever our specialty may be—while failing to consider the broader aims of educating as training for citizenship in a self-governing society. University curricula have fallen victim to what the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset called “the barbarism of specialization.”

To “educate” is to nurture an individual into a particular community. We must recognize plainly that all education is education for citizenship. What we teach, how we teach it, and whom we teach it to necessarily describe a vision of society and of the types of individuals we want to prepare for that society. Values do not merely infiltrate education from the outside, as ideological add-ons, but are constitutive of the very practice of teaching. It is more urgent than ever for universities to break the stranglehold of specialization, especially on undergraduate curricula, and to educate students with an awareness of what is required to produce an informed citizenry. If we want to see and live in a Nigeria flavored with the open flow of ideas, goods, and people;

---

transparent government adhering to the rule of law; respect for diversity; tolerance of difference; concern for vulnerable members of society; independent judiciary; and a free press, this is where the foundation should be laid, the university, by introducing students, regardless of their majors, to the texts, ideas, and norms of deliberative argumentation that gave rise to liberal-democratic politics. The purpose of education, Aristotle reminds us, is to reproduce in each generation the “type of character” that will sustain the constitution: a particular character for a particular constitution.40

It is appropriate that I conclude this lecture with a brief comment on the theme of character, not just in its anthropological sense, but also in its political connotation—the character of the Nigerian state, which to the majority of the citizens, is alienating and inauthentic because of its propensity to pauperize them. The very institutions and people charged with the fiduciary responsibility to improve the material conditions of the people and facilitate their economic prosperity are also the cause of their impoverishment. Our inability to checkmate the practice of diverting public funds to private ends has had the doubly negative effect of not only elevating undeserving individuals to heights of material prosperity – at the same time reinforcing social inequalities—but also depriving the nation and especially the humble communities within it of resources vital for the amelioration of their living conditions. Until and unless we are willing to establish a new moral law for the principled regulation of life, sustained by the most severe legal sanctions of offenders, we will not be able to break out of this vicious circle of indigenous spoliation. Until and unless we are willing to see ourselves as members of the same covenant political community, who feel subject to the same weakness and the same dangers, and whose interests as well as compassion make it a rule for us to lend each other assistance when required, we are unlikely to achieve any progress. In Nigerian traditional societies, the bond of covenant—majemu (Yoruba), ogbugba-ndu (Igbo), alkawari (Hausa) is subject to periodic renewal and reaffirmation to prevent complacency and moral amnesia among the covenanting parties. The task of ethical reconstruction, of building a new Nigeria, similarly requires a new mode of thinking and a new mode of action, for we are not just a political community but also a political community in the making. We are a reality, but also a project, a project we can neither abandon nor be cavalier about.

Thanks for listening.