

REVISITING THE DOCTRINE OF SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE IN THE NIGERIAN BAPTIST CONVENTION: A CONTEXTUAL AND THEOLOGICAL APPRAISAL IN A RELIGIOUSLY PLURAL SOCIETY

SAMUEL AYANTOYE ALABI^{1*}

^{1*}Pastor, First Baptist Church, 56/70 Ojo Road, Ajegunle, Apapa, Lagos
Postgraduate Student, Department of Administration and Leadership,
Faculty of Education, Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomosho

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* **Correspondence:** SAMUEL AYANTOYE ALABI



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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the doctrine of separation of church and state within the Nigerian Baptist Convention (NBC) and evaluates its theological significance and contextual relevance in Nigeria's religiously plural society. Historically, the Baptist tradition has emphasized the separation of church and state as a safeguard for religious liberty, freedom of conscience, and the autonomy of the local church. Rooted in the struggles of early Baptist leaders such as Thomas Helwys and Roger Williams, the doctrine sought to prevent both state control of the church and ecclesiastical domination of the state. However, the Nigerian socio-religious context – characterized by the strong influence of Christianity and Islam in public life and the integration of religion and governance within Islamic political thought – presents significant challenges to the classical Baptist interpretation of this doctrine. Using historical-theological analysis and contextual reflection, this study explores the origins of the Baptist doctrine of church-state separation, its transmission into the Nigerian context through missionary influence, and the tensions it creates in Nigeria's multi-religious political

environment. The paper identifies key challenges faced by the Nigerian Baptist Convention, including political marginalization, religious competition in the public sphere, and the misinterpretation of church-state separation as total political disengagement by Christians. Drawing on biblical teachings such as Matthew 22:21, Romans 13:1-7, and Matthew 5:13-16, the study argues that the doctrine does not require withdrawal from civic responsibility but rather promotes institutional independence while encouraging responsible Christian participation in governance. The paper further outlines the state's responsibilities toward religious communities, including protecting religious liberty, ensuring equal treatment of all faith traditions, refraining from establishing a state religion, and respecting church autonomy. The study concludes that the Nigerian Baptist Convention should neither abandon the doctrine of church-state separation nor reinterpret it in the Nigerian context. Still, it should instead reinterpret it to encourage civic responsibility, prophetic engagement, and interreligious coexistence while maintaining Baptist theological convictions. Such a contextual approach will enable the church to remain faithful to its heritage while contributing constructively to Nigeria's socio-political transformation.

Keywords: *church-state separation; Nigerian Baptist Convention; religious liberty; freedom of conscience; civic engagement; religious pluralism; Baptist theology*

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Nigeria is under a severe political siege. Nigeria's politics have no values; ethnicity, religion, and money determine who gets what, how, and when (Yamsat, 2019, p. 4). The relationship between religion and government has been one of the most enduring discussions in Christian political theology. Historically, the Baptists have tied the doctrine of the separation of church and state to the defense of religious liberty and freedom of conscience (Leonard, 2005). Baptists have consistently argued that the state should not control the church, nor should the church dominate the state. However, the socio-religious landscape in Nigeria presents unique challenges to this doctrine, especially in the 21st century. Nigeria is a religiously plural society where Christianity and Islam significantly influence social and political structures. Unlike Baptist theology, classical Islamic political thought generally integrates religious authority with political governance (Esposito, 2003). In

fact, some scholars have categorized Islam as a religious system, a political system, and a military system (Karimi, 2011). Consequently, the Nigerian Baptist Convention faces a contextual challenge: how to maintain its historic commitment to church-state separation while operating in a political environment where other religious traditions hold different assumptions about the relationship between religion and governance.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE BAPTIST DOCTRINE OF CHURCH-STATE SEPARATION

The Baptist doctrine of church-state separation emerged primarily from struggles against religious persecution in Europe and colonial America. It dated back to the beginning of the Baptist denomination (Olaniyan, 2018). Early Baptists such as Thomas Helwys and Roger Williams argued that religious liberty is a God-given right that the church must not allow governmental authority to violate (McBeth, 1987). In fact, history records that Thomas Helwys died in pursuit of this doctrine (Olaniyan, 2018). Roger Williams famously described the separation as a “wall of separation between the garden of the church and the wilderness of the world” (Williams, 1644/2001). This metaphor emphasized that the church must remain free from state control. Three principles define the Baptist understanding: (i) freedom of conscience, (ii) voluntary faith, and (iii) autonomy of the local church. These principles were later embedded in Baptist confessions and influenced democratic political thought, especially in the United States (Leonard, 2005).

IMPORTING THE DOCTRINE OF CHURCH-STATE SEPARATION TO NIGERIA

Dualism is a principle or philosophy that suggests withdrawal from or isolation from the public space. According to Jan Boer, as documented by Musa (2009), the World Missionary Conference held in 1910 agreed that all missionaries should abstain from politics in dealings with the colonial government and the local people because politics is a dirty game and true Christians should not participate in it to avoid worldliness. Historically, Baptists in Nigeria also emphasize the separation of church and state. Unfortunately, there is no separation of religion and state in Islam (Karimi,

2011, p. 49; Chapman, 2007, p. 159) and African traditional religion (Musa, 2009, p. 28).

THE NIGERIAN SOCIO-RELIGIOUS CONTEXT

Nigeria presents a unique religious configuration where Christianity and Islam dominate the public sphere. According to the Pew Research Center (2015), Nigeria is roughly divided between Muslims and Christians, with Islam predominating in the northern regions and Christianity in the south. Religion significantly influences politics, governance, and social identity in Nigeria. Since 1999, several northern Nigerian states have implemented Sharia law in aspects of civil governance, reflecting Islamic perspectives on the relationship between religion and the state (Ostien, 2007). Unlike Baptist theology, classical Islamic jurisprudence traditionally does not distinguish sharply between religious and political authority. Islam historically developed within political systems in which religious law (Sharia) governed both spiritual and societal life (Esposito, 2003). This difference in worldview creates a complex environment for Christian denominations advocating strict church-state separation. Similarly, Oladipo (2009) argues that the relationship between Christianity and other religions will continue to involve careful inhaling and exhaling. However, it is perilous for Christians in the contemporary world to cut off devotees of other religions or to try to replace their faith traditions with Christianity. Ours is an age of interconnectedness or interdependency, and devotees of other religions will continue to need Christians as Christians need them.

THE ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE ON RELIGION AND STATE

Islam is an ideology that pervades every sector of socio-political-economic life. There is no separation of religion and state in Islam (Karimi, 2011). Islamic political thought often integrates religion and governance. The concept of *din wa dawla* (religion and state) holds that Islam provides guidance for both spiritual and political life (Esposito, 2003). Historically, the Prophet Muhammad functioned as a religious, military, and political ruler in Medina (Karimi, 2011). This precedent shaped Islamic political philosophy in which governance is expected to reflect divine law (Lewis, 2002). Consequently, many Islamic scholars view the separation of religion and state

as a Western concept rather than a religious requirement. While modern Muslim-majority societies interpret this relationship differently, the integration of religion and governance remains influential. In Nigeria, this perspective has influenced debates surrounding Sharia law and the role of religion in governance.

CHALLENGES FOR THE NIGERIAN BAPTIST CONVENTION

The Nigerian Baptist Convention faces several challenges in maintaining a classical interpretation of church-state separation:

1. **Political Marginalization:** Politics is the intrigue to gain authority or power to rule. Muslims (Olaniyan, 2018) and nominal Christians have dominated Nigerian politics over the years. A strict interpretation may inadvertently discourage Christian participation in governance, thereby reducing their influence in policy-making.
2. **Religious Competition:** When other religious groups actively engage the political system to shape public policy, Christians' withdrawal has weakened Christian advocacy for justice and religious freedom. The advent of Islamic fundamentalism and fanaticism that led to riots in Nigeria from 1980 to the middle of the 1990s motivated the northern Christian Association of Nigeria to mobilize its members to participate in partisan politics (Musa, 2009). This mobilization is nothing but a religious competition to the writer.
3. **Misinterpretation of Separation:** Some Nigerian Christians interpret church-state separation as complete disengagement from political processes, especially after the World Missionary Conference held in 1910 agreed that all missionaries should abstain from politics in dealings with the colonial government and the local people because politics is a dirty game and true Christians should not participate in it to avoid worldliness (Musa, 2009), a view that was never the intention of early Baptist thinkers.

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR ENGAGEMENT: THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Biblical teaching supports responsible civic engagement while maintaining the church's distinct mission. Jesus' statement in Matthew 22:21 – Render therefore unto

Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's – suggests both distinction and responsibility. Similarly, Romans 13:1-7 affirms the legitimacy of governmental authority while maintaining God's ultimate sovereignty. These texts suggest that Christians should exercise their responsibility to the government without allowing the state to control the church. According to Ademola Ishola (2009), the church, as God's agent of transformation, must fulfill its purpose of turning things around for good. The church is "the salt of the earth," meaning an agent of preservation – keeping things from going bad and decaying in society (cf. Matthew 5:13). As salt penetrates, so is the church to enter into the corrupt society and transform it. Salt also adds flavor to what is bland, meaning the church is to make society a relishing, pleasant place to live in. Salt also quietly spreads, and so the church should engage the world without unnecessary flamboyance, but work irresistibly as salt makes its presence felt in every good meal. The Lord also calls the church the light of the world (cf. Matthew 5:14-16), meaning that, just as light penetrates, so the church must beam her character to dispel the forces of evil and the corrupt darkness. Light reveals what is in the dark, and the church must get involved in exposing works of darkness. Therefore, the Lord never intended the church just to be concerned about heaven, thus concentrating on the salvation of souls without corresponding concern about the people's welfare to survive in God's economy. The Lord "gave to Caesar what is Caesar's," and the apostolic church taught members to join the governing authorities to entrench peace and seek the prosperity of their communities. Hence, Ademola Ishola (2009) submitted that the following ideas may help collaborate with the government: (i) the church must become Christ-centered, (ii) the church can serve as agent of peace, (iii) the church must teach civic and civil responsibility, (iv) the church must become the center of revival of virtues, and (v) the church must become the voice of reason.

TOWARDS A CONTEXTUAL BAPTIST REVIEW

According to Israel Olaniyan (2018), the separation of church and state does not mean that Baptists should not participate in politics and governance in their locale. It does not mean there is no relation between the church and the state. It does not mean the separation of God from government or the division of the sacred and the secular.

God is involved in all affairs of human life. It does not mean separating religion from politics. It does not mean the separation of Christians from their nation's citizenship. It means that no government can establish a state religion or support any religion with public funds. No state has the right to discriminate against one religion in favor of another, such as the practice in some northern states of Nigeria, where the Sharia legal system has been instituted in conformity with the beliefs that they are Islamic states. The separation of church and state does not mean the church promotes a division between the sacred and the secular; it does not entail dualism. The Baptist believes that Christian leaders should lead the church into political and governance activities because God is involved in all human affairs.

Nevertheless, the church should understand that no government has the right to discriminate against one religion in favor of another or unilaterally control the affairs of one religion at the expense of others. Nigeria is a multi-religious state, and the government should treat all religions equally and fairly. Contemporary Christians and the church cannot afford to withdraw from the world, including politics, if we intend to be the light and the salt that Jesus called us to be (Matthew 5:13-16). Therefore, the Nigerian Baptist Convention should review – not abandon – the doctrine in ways that remain faithful to Scripture and Baptist tradition while responding to Nigerian realities. The review includes:

1. **Reaffirm Religious Liberty for All:** Baptists must continue advocating freedom of religion for both Christians and Muslims. Religious liberty remains the moral foundation of Baptist political engagement.
2. **Encourage Responsible Civic Participation:** Baptists should encourage members to participate actively in politics, governance, and public policy while maintaining Christian ethical values.
3. **Promote Prophetic Engagement:** The church should act as a prophetic voice addressing injustice, corruption, and oppression within the state.
4. **Clarify the Meaning of Separation:** The church should clarify the doctrine as institutional independence, not social withdrawal.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE STATE TO THE CHURCH

Within Baptist political theology and democratic governance, the relationship between the state and the church is defined by the principles of religious liberty, institutional independence, and mutual respect. While the Baptist tradition strongly advocates the separation of church and state, this separation does not imply hostility or indifference. Rather, it emphasizes that the state has certain responsibilities to ensure that religious communities, including the church, can function freely and contribute to society's moral and social development. Several responsibilities of the state toward the church can therefore be identified, namely:

- 1. Protection of Religious Liberty:** The primary responsibility of the state toward the church is protecting religious liberty. Religious liberty is the freedom of individuals and communities to practice their faith without coercion or government interference. Baptists have historically emphasized that freedom of conscience is a God-given right and that the state must not compel religious belief or restrict legitimate expressions of faith (McBeth, 1987). In a democratic society, this protection ensures that churches are free to conduct worship, preach the gospel, evangelize, and organize their internal affairs. Leonard (2005) notes that the Baptist struggle for religious liberty in Europe and colonial America laid the foundation for modern understandings of freedom of religion in democratic societies.
- 2. Non-Establishment of a State Religion:** Another responsibility of the state is to avoid establishing or privileging any particular religion. The Baptist doctrine of church-state separation holds that the government must remain neutral in matters of religion and must not establish an official state religion. According to Olaniyan (2018), this principle protects the integrity of both institutions: the church remains free from political manipulation, while the state avoids using religion as a tool for political control. In multi-religious societies such as Nigeria, this responsibility is particularly important because favoritism toward one religion can generate social tension and undermine national unity.
- 3. Protection of the Church from Persecution and Discrimination:** The state also has the duty to protect religious communities from persecution, violence,

and discrimination. Governments are responsible for maintaining law and order and ensuring that all citizens, including religious minorities, enjoy equal protection under the law. This responsibility aligns with the biblical understanding of government as an institution ordained by God to promote justice and restrain evil (Romans 13:1-7). When the state effectively protects churches from violence and discrimination, it creates a stable environment in which religious communities can carry out their spiritual mission. The advent of Islamic fundamentalism and fanaticism led to riots, killings of Christians, and destruction of church properties in northern Nigeria, beginning in 1980 with the Maitatsine riots in Kano, Kafanchan riots in 1987, Bauchi riots in 1990, and Zangon Kataf riots in 1992 among others, when it appeared the government's responses to these riots were very slow and did not protect the lives and properties of Christians led to the formation of the northern zone of Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), where CAN encouraged Christians to participate in politics mainly to protect the interest of the Church and Christian faith. This move of the northern CAN led many denominations to encourage their members to participate in partisan politics (Musa, 2009, pp. 32-33). The writer, however, opines that Christians do not have to participate in politics and use government resources to benefit only the church, but rather to benefit the entire citizenry of the country (Matthew 5:43-48).

4. **Guarantee of Equal Treatment of All Religious Communities:** Closely related to religious liberty is the state's responsibility to ensure equal treatment of all religions. In plural societies, the government must not grant special privileges to one religious group at the expense of others. Equal treatment includes fair access to legal recognition, property rights, and public services. Musa (2009) observes that in contexts where religious groups compete for influence in the public sphere, the state's neutrality becomes essential to maintaining social harmony and justice.
5. **Respect for Church Autonomy:** Another critical responsibility of the state is to respect the church's internal autonomy. Baptist ecclesiology emphasizes the autonomy of the local church under the lordship of Christ. Therefore, the government should not interfere in matters such as church governance, doctrine,

worship practices, or leadership selection (McBeth, 1987). When the state refrains from interfering in ecclesiastical matters, it preserves the church's spiritual independence and prevents the politicization of religion.

- 6. Provision of a Just and Orderly Society:** The state also has the broader responsibility of creating a just and orderly social environment in which the church can operate effectively. According to biblical teaching, government authorities are appointed to promote justice, reward good conduct, and punish wrongdoing (Romans 13:1-7). A stable and just political system enables churches to fulfill their mission of evangelism, discipleship, and social transformation. Leonard (2005) argues that when governments protect justice and freedom, religious communities are better positioned to contribute to society's moral and ethical development.
- 7. Recognition of the Social Contribution of the Church:** Finally, the state should recognize and respect the positive social contributions of the church. Churches often play significant roles in education, healthcare, poverty alleviation, and moral formation. In other words, the church is involved in social services to complement the state's social action (Stott, 2006). While maintaining institutional separation, the government may collaborate with faith-based organizations in social development initiatives that promote the common good. Such cooperation does not undermine church-state separation but rather reflects a healthy partnership in addressing societal challenges.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE NIGERIAN BAPTIST CONVENTION

To address contemporary realities, the Nigerian Baptist Convention should consider the following:

1. Be proactive and intentional by making disciples, equipping younger people, preparing them for ministry in the church, and encouraging effective participation in governance.
2. See politics as a ministry where Christians can go and demonstrate the spiritual gifts of leadership and administration.
3. Christians in politics should use government resources to benefit all citizens of the country, not only the church.

4. Develop a contextual theological statement of church-state relations in Nigeria.
5. Establish Baptist policy research institutes to engage public issues.
6. Promote civic education among church members.
7. Collaborate with other Christian denominations to advocate religious freedom.

CONCLUSION

The doctrine of the separation of church and state remains a vital Baptist principle, rooted in the defense of religious liberty and freedom of conscience. However, the Nigerian socio-religious environment – particularly the presence of Islamic political perspectives that integrate religion and governance – requires a contextual re-evaluation of how we interpret and practice this doctrine. Rather than abandoning the doctrine, the Nigerian Baptist Convention should reinterpret it to encourage civic responsibility, prophetic engagement, and interreligious coexistence while preserving the church's autonomy. Such a contextual approach will enable the Nigerian Baptist Convention to remain faithful to its theological heritage while effectively engaging Nigeria's complex political and religious landscape.

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