

# *Leaving religion and living without religion*

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SIR: Nigeria is often described as a deeply religious society where most if not all persons profess religious beliefs without qualification. Nigeria is often portrayed as a country where the religious demography is static- everybody is religious, everybody belongs to one faith or the other. Everybody professes religion, nobody renounces religion. Nobody is critical or sceptical of religious dogmas. Non religious and freethinking Nigerians are so insignificant. This is a misrepresentation of the religious demography and dynamics in the country. The time has come for us to rectify this misrepresentation.

No doubt, most Nigerians profess belief in God and identify themselves with one of the three main faiths- Traditional religion, Christianity and Islam. But there are many Nigerians who profess minority faiths and spiritualities or some forms of religious syncretism embracing elements of more than one religion.

Generally, in Nigeria there is a lot of social pressure on individuals to be religious and to remain religious from cradle to the grave. Remove this social and political pressure on Nigerians and the religious dynamics will radically change.

A very important and largely ignored aspect of Nigeria's religious demography is the non believing folk. These are those who renounce their 'family religion'. They see no existential value or meaning in the religion which they were born into. They live their lives without professing a belief in God, without belonging to any religion. They are called humanists, atheists and freethinkers. They exist in Nigeria. They live in Nigeria. But anyone who understands the intensive religious upbringing and bombardment every Nigerian child goes through will understand why most non religious people are in the closets.

So Nigerians are made to believe that professing religion is a must- and not a matter of choice. Hence so many Nigerians who were born into one religion or the other and who grow up to question, challenge or reject religious myths and superstition cannot express their thoughts and sentiments openly in the public. Many Nigerians are non believers in private and believers in public. They leave religion and live without religion but still remain in the closet.

Unlike religious folks, non believers do not want to be murdered or 'martyred' because the so called afterlife, which believers imagine they will inherit in the hereafter, is an illusion. In our families and communities, there is a heavy price on leaving religion and in living without religion. Those who renounce their faith in God are hated, persecuted and discriminated against. They are treated as enemies of the society. They are ostracized. In some communities those who openly denounced their faith can be murdered in cool blood otherwise the person loses the support, sympathy and solidarity of the family and community including the government. So because of the risks involved many Nigerians who leave religion or live without religion do not want to openly admit it.

Until believers abandon force, intimidation, violence and persecution of those who leave religion or live without religion, religious statistics will remain false and artificial.

Still there are Nigerians who have taken the bull by the horn. They have, in spite of the risks involved, openly denounced or rejected the faith of their fathers and confirmed their non religious identity. Names that easily come to mind are Tai Solarin and Wole Soyinka. But they are not the only Nigerians who have said farewell to religion. There are many freethinking non religious individuals out there in

our schools, colleges and universities, in the rural and urban areas. They are living rational faithless life are doctors and nurses, teachers and students, carpenters, tailors, drivers and mechanics, wives and mothers, brothers and sisters, husbands and fathers. They may not be as organized as our religious folks but the fact is that they are, and are going about their lives in a rational, ethical and lawful manner.

The time has come for use to acknowledge the non religious dynamics in our society. The time has come for us to recognize that there are Nigerians who have left religion and are living a happy and meaningful life like other human beings.

- Leo Igwe