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## **An analytical study of the role of religion and education in social development: the Nigeria experience**

By

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### **Abstract**

*Religion is a global phenomenon and practice that plays a predominant role in the spiritual formation and traditional belief system of any nation with Nigeria as a case study. Education on the other hand is believed to be a primary driver of national development. The multidimensional impact of religion and education cannot be underemphasized. Their interplay has always resulted to positive development in almost all sectors and concerns of the country. It is truism that Nigeria is reckoned as one of the most religious countries of the world. History equally has it that religious movements and institutions have helped in the educational development of Nigeria. Undoubtedly, Nigeria is Africa's most populous country, with an estimated 200 million people, and with more than 250 distinctive ethnic and linguistic groups. There are three (3) major religious movements in Nigeria which include African Traditional Religion, Christianity and Islam. Religion is often misconstrued and source of political divides and ethnic disparities in most African countries, most especially Nigeria. Religion is oftentimes employed in the political system of the country and has also influenced policy makers, and religious leaders in their decisions. Education has ever since given many Nigerians the knowledge and power to change their world for the good of all. Against the backdrops, this study seeks to evaluate the nature and impact of religion and education on the Nigerian society by exploring the manifestations of their existence in the country. Qualitative research method and the theory of crossing and dwelling will be employed in this work. The paper observes that religion and education are the driving force for national development. It concludes that religion as a unifying factor in the society should always work in synergy with education to achieve the expected result in the society and development of the nation. The paper therefore recommends that religion and education are indispensable factors for national development and should be employed for the betterment of the society.*

**Keywords:** Religion, Education, Social, Development, Nigeria, Critical, Inquiry

## Introduction

Religion is the oldest discipline in human history Omoghene and Okolie (2020:29). In recent times, religion has become an important factor for public debates and discourses. It has engineered political discussions and mobilization. However, the rise of religion has not happened in and for itself (Nolte, Danjibo and Oladeji, 2009:6). The predisposition of religion to politics in Nigeria is an obvious reality. In political aspect such as style of governance, policy formulations, and the electoral process in Nigeria, religion has always been a strong determining factor (Umeanolue, 2020:139). Since the emergence of nascent democracy in 1999, Nigeria as a country has gone through vigours and rigours of political rigmarole. Governance in nearly all spheres of Nigeria's walk to freedom has always been meted with discrepancies, irregularities and anomalies. In the Nigerian society, there are three (3) types of religion that are prominent and predominant, viz, African Traditional Religion, Christianity and Islam. The first is homegrown, while the last two are imported (Ogugua and Ogugua, 2015:194). Ever since, there seem to be a strife and struggle for recognition and supremacy between these religious groups in the political space of the Nigerian society. This is evidently and conspicuously protruding in the human, religious and ethnic dispositions of the Nigerian people. It is quite unfortunate to say that religion has brought about so much disparities and hostilities because of the selfish interests that have overshadowed the unifying interest of nationhood.

According to the Premium Times Newspapers of August 10, 2022, religion is currently unabashedly propagated by elite to gain an undeserved advantage. The sooner we stop this dangerous and divisive campaign, the better for everyone. War fought to establish the supremacy of one religion over others can only

end in tears. The reasoning skills of politicians currently in use will only exacerbate an already bad situation. The challenges facing the country will not be resolved in the religions of individuals. A person's religious persuasion is based on personal conviction which is basically private. Public space must remain secular, thus, current incitements to social representation based on religion are grounded in a certain misunderstanding of the demands of leadership in a multi-ethnic state such as Nigeria. Any purported religious leader, who ignores knowledge and competence as necessary criteria for measuring leadership ability, is an apostate.

Nigeria, regarded as the giant of Africa and also the largest black nation in the world, shares the view that religion has been one of the most significant social determinants of the shape of human society. As a consequence, religion represents the way people or culture look at reality. This reality is seen as a reflection, to a great or less extent, the people's religiosity. Having flourished as an increasingly multi-religious nation, Nigeria has felt and will continue to feel the impact of the penetration of African Traditional Religion, Christianity, Islam and other less prominent religious movements that are numerous to mention. In other words, religion, in all its ramifications has a chequered history in Nigeria; hence it had impacted immensely on Nigeria's path of democratic dispensation. The proliferation of religion has engendered as well as endangered the process and progress of Nigeria's nation building. Religious pluralism, having permeated the social structure of the country has played and will continue to play a great role in the national life and development of Nigeria.

Oguntola-Laguda (2008:123) points that there is need for political stability, hence all segments of the Nigerian society is interested in the political future of the nation, though

these thoughts are viewed from different perspectives. There seems to be a strong relationship between religion and politics in Nigeria. One major factor in Nigerian society is that religion is highly and widely multiplied and this eventually influences the decision making and polity of Nigeria. It is alarming that religious diversity in the social system of Nigeria has prompted a plethora of complicated approaches to the human and national development of the country. The tendency of Nigeria to equally and equitably meet up with the ever increasing demands and necessities of the numerous religious groups is a problem facing the nation. Another challenge confronting Nigeria as a multi-religious nation is the religion conceived differently and taken too personal by different adherents of the religious groups. In fact, some adherents conceive religion as a tool of dominion rather than a means of redemption.

## **Literature Review**

### **Concept of Religion**

According to Ogugua and Ogugua (2015: 193), religion springs up problems even in the process of conceptualization. There seems to be no generally acceptable definition of religion because what an anthropologist thinks or feels about religion is quite different from what a scientist thinks or feels. Rimansikwe Kitause and Hilary Achunike (2013: 45 -46) define religion as a reality in human existence which pervades through life, and also relates how man socializes with the Supernatural world or the Divine Being. Omoghene and Okolie (2020:29) argue that one's religion is what makes one a complete whole. In its simplest form, religion can be defined as a spectrum of beliefs and principles that guide the relation between people and a Supreme Being they perceive to be their Maker (Uche Eze, 2020:1). Religion is such an interesting phenomenon in human life and history that cannot be ignored because from creation, man has always demonstrated a natural inclination

toward faith and belief in anything he considers superior or difficult to understand. Perhaps, one of the most attitudes of mankind is religion. Imperatively, religion is one of the valuable components of human dispositions in the world (Ejim, 2006: 9). Everywhere in the world, humans are adherents of one religions or the other. Evidently, religion cannot be separated from human activities. Religion is widely believed to be a universal aspect of human culture. We shall now look at the three (3) main religions in Nigeria

### **African Traditional Religion (ATR)**

According to Religion and Development Research Program (2007:18), African Traditional Religion originated from Africa and has existed from the beginning of Africa's known history. ATR can be defined majorly from five distinctive elements which are (1) beliefs, (2) practices, ceremonies and festivals, (3) religious objects and places, (4) values and morals and (5) religious officials and leaders. ATR is described as the institutionalized traditional beliefs and practices of the indigenous people of Africa right from creation. Africa Traditional Religion is said to be the foremost and oldest religion in Africa. It is the indigenous religion of the African people from creation. It grew out of, and is also based on, or rooted in the various cultures of the Africa people.

There are no sacred scriptures or major historical writings, but the recognition and reverence of the hierarchical echelon of spiritual beings are common practice of the ATR, it is a living religion of Africa which is handed down from one generation to another. According to Ejim (2006:32), the African people believe in the Supreme Being who has a supernatural power over all things created. This Supreme God is described in different ways in different cultural setting. The Igbo's call this God "Chi" while the Yoruba's refer to Him as Olodumare. They also believe in deities or divinities with different assignments

and ancestors who must live a fulfilled life and given a befitting burial before assuming such a profile.

ATR worldviews include rituals, symbols, magic, life after death, moral standards and sense of the sacred. Africans value life and family relations. African sacred institution includes kinship, family, priesthood, divination, herbalist, etc. Before the advent of Christianity and Islam as missionary religions to Africa and Nigeria, the dominant religion has been the traditional religion. ATR is the beliefs and practices of the African people. The traditional value system, culture and norms are indigenous religious beliefs and practices of the Africans. It is the religion which resulted from the sustaining faith held by the forebears of the present Africans and which is practiced today in various forms and various shades and intensities by a very large number of Africans, including people who claim to be Muslims or Christians.

### **Christianity**

Christianity originally from Palestine is the world's largest religion with over 2.1 billion followers (Mohammad, Ahhachhar and Wandisgutt, 2014:300). It is a religion based on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ and believed to be the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6). The Bible is the Holy Scripture of the Christian faith. The base of the Christian faith is on the life and death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. Most of the teachings, Creeds and Principles of the Christian faith are encapsulated in the scripture, reason and Apostolic Traditions. Christianity is preached all over the world. There are denominations under Christianity which are numerous to mention. The foremost of them all include Roman Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Methodist, Apostolic Church, etc. We also have Pentecostal Churches under the frail of Christianity.

In Nigeria, Christianity is one of the major religions that were imported, the second is Islam. Christianity makes up 48.2% of the population and also has the largest membership in Africa (Ngbea and Achunike, 2014:159). Kitause and Achunike (2013:47) pointed that it is said to have entered the shores of the country in three phases. The phase one was that Christianity is reported to have its appearance in Nigeria in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century. History has it that Benin and Warri in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria were the first cities to be visited by Portuguese Missionaries in 1482. The second phase was in the 16<sup>th</sup> century under the Oba of Benin and it was a success. Most chieftains in Oba's court were baptized and churches were built.

History has it that though Christianity had a great stride in the Benin Mission but subject to Royal Court. Other missions like Warri Mission, Lagos Mission and Calabar Mission ensued. Henry Townsend and Samuel Ajayi Crowther of Nigeria were at the forefront. The Westerners formed the Wesleyan Methodist Mission and the Church Missionary Society (CMS). Finally, the third phase (1900-1918) saw the emergence of British Government in Nigeria under Sir Fredrick Lugard who strictly stopped missionary activities, though this paved way for the amalgamation of the Southern and Northern regions to become a country called Nigeria – Niger Area.

### **Islam**

Adeyemo (2006:133) defines Islam as the religion of peace and total submission to the will of God (Allah). It was founded by Prophet Mohammed (SAW) in 620AD. It is founded on the five (5) pillars which are Imam (Creed), Salat (Prayer), Sawm (fasting), Zakat (Charity or arm giving) and Hajj (Pilgrimage). Islam is an Arabic verbal noun which means to surrender, to submit, to concur, etc. It is equally derived from one of the tracts of God which means Lord of Peace. It is a religion and

a comprehensive way of life that covers all ramifications of human life and disposition. An adherent of religion is called a Muslim, which is one who is submissive, one who is willing to submit to God in all things.

History has it that Islam penetrated Nigeria through the Northern part of the Nigerian borders. It entered Nigeria about five or six hundred years before the advent of Christianity. Kitause and Achunike (2013: 47) has it that Borno was first point of call of Islam in Nigeria territory, and overtook the Hausa States between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. The spread of Islam in Nigeria dates back to the 11<sup>th</sup> century when it emerged in Borno and later spread over Hausa States. It later went far Kano and Kastina. Islam gained momentum when Ahmadu Bello became the premier of the Northern Region of Nigeria after Independence in 1960 (Ngbea and Achunike, 2014:164).

### **Social Development**

Aruma and Ugwu (2018) view social development as an education process which stimulates consciousness among the people in order to be aware of their capabilities to address prevailing situations or realities in participating communities in the society. The Government of New Brunswick, Canada in her assessment of economic and social inclusion pointed that social development revolves around improving the wellbeing of everyone in the society so that they can achieve their full potentials. The success of society is related to the wellness of every citizen. Social development means investing in people. It requires removing barriers so that all citizens can walk towards their dreams with confidence and dignity. It is invariably about refusing to accept the idea that people who live in poverty will always be poor. It is all about helping people so that they can move forward on their paths to self-sufficiency.

Social development entails social restructuring, integration and people oriented policies that can change the life of people. It speaks of social progress in every human society, improving the life and safety of the adults and children, family relationship, social interventions and sustainable development not just for the present but also for generations unborn. Providing a safe and affordable place or environment to live and work in is very paramount in helping people achieve self-reliance. Social development permeates family life, where family can live safely and peacefully, take good care of their children; build cordial communal relationships and social service for the elderly. Without a decent place to co-habit, it will be uneasy to participate as a productive member of the society.

### **Religion and Social Development in Nigeria Spirituality**

The spiritual development of the country has always been emphasized and enjoyed by the different groups in the Nigerian society. The spiritual health of the nation contributes immensely to the social development of the country. There is a pertinent need for every Nigerian to maintain a stable state of spirituality. Nigeria as a nation has thrived all through to establish an enabling society for all the religious groups to co-exist, co-habit and co-operate toward engendering a peaceful co-existence for all. Those laws safeguarding the nation are all or to an extent divine laws of the religious people. The religious activities such as the prayers, worships, conventions, vigils, crusades, seminars and other religious engagements by the different religious groups are means of projecting the face of God in matters of spirituality or religiosity. They help to channel the problems and challenges of the nation unto God for response. With the active presence of these religious groups, the country is strengthened in faith and power to manage her affairs.



## **Morality**

One important function religion fulfills in the society is that it teaches and encourages morality. Religion is one of the ways of looking at morality. It helps people to deal with the ethical issues in their lives and in the society at large. It provides people with meaning and sense of purpose of life. Religion builds in man morals and virtues. It teaches man to live an exemplary life of high moral standard. It takes moral men and women to build a moral society. Religion teaches on how to do what is good for all like the adage that says “what is good for the goose is equally good for the gander.” Religion builds in man moral consciousness and responsibilities which he or she transfers or translates in any given society. In essence, what people of different religions regard as the divine commandments are rather reflections of the moral obligations of the society. Therefore, the strict compliance to morality is only a religious duty of the members of the society.

## **Economy**

In traditional Nigerian society, religious people are mostly pottery workers, craftsmen, blacksmiths, weavers, farmers, and artisans. These professions in pre- Independence and post-independence contributed evenly and enormously to the economic growth of the country. Religion permeated the system of production and exchange in Nigeria. The religious consciousness of our leaders like Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo, Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, etc, encouraged human and natural development of the nation’s resources. Education of Nigerians has made the elite to enact laws and policies that will help improve or expand the economy. Religious groups are fully involved in the direct economic growth. For example, churches now build educational, social, economic facilities that employ jobless people and to create wealth for the nation. There are

concerned efforts or campaign made by religious groups and institutions to intervene during economic crisis or meltdown. For example, the recent flooding cases that swept the economy of the nation have made some churches to make donations. Those who have godly heart also contributed because they know that the scripture says that they should help those in need.

## **Politics**

Umeanolue (2020:139) points that religion has been a dominant factor since Nigeria’s post-independence era. It has influence political aspects such as style of governance, policy making, and electoral process. There has always been interplay between religion and politics in Nigeria and this has generated series and degrees of debates and discourses. Most religious groups believe that political authority did not come from man but from God. In the pre-colonial times, the Nigerian societies highly relied on religion as the basis for political power. The influence of religion in Nigeria has made some of our religious leaders to be conscious of the religious implications of their actions. Religion teaches that bad leadership has repercussions, whether in Executive, Legislative or Judicial arms of government. Religion has helped in the formulations and amendments of the Constitution of the country. It has helped also in the reduction of crime where we have Sharia Court and Customary Court. The Islamic North and the Christian South have always agitated for the establishment of inter-religious organisations that will help unite and promote the interest of the religions. For example, we have the inter-faith dialogue in the political space of Nigeria.

## **Conflict Management**

The challenge of managing Nigeria’s political and ethnic plurality has not been an easy task (Uhunmwuagho and Epelle, 2011:111). This has resulted from one conflict to another, from

regional to tribal, from religious to communal, from political to economic, there are crises everywhere. Mankind has fallen victim of the ruthless and powerful force called religion. In different communities, localities and nations, religious wars have claimed the lives of many. In Nigeria, religious and socio-political conflicts have occurred and many lives and properties have been lost. It is commonplace to say that Nigeria's history is marked by civil wars, conflicts, disputes, hostilities, due to ethnic, religious, tribal, linguistic, or regional differences. Anwuluorah, Udeh and Nnoruga (2019:65) point religious fundamentalism, religious intolerance, religious insurgency, terrorism of Boko Haram and Fulani herdsmen and religious bigotry are dimensions of religious conflicts. The Inter-religious dialogue groups or interests have been actively felt in the corridors of powers in Nigeria. Peacekeeping missions have been established to quash or dash any uprising or upsurge of conflicts from any quarters. This is rather a good step or development from the religious groups involved.

### **Social Stability**

Every religious group and institution preaches and enjoins Nigerians to always co-operate and contribute their quota in not only unifying the nation but also developing every region, sector and interest of the nation. Being our neighbour's keeper is the religious language that speaks and points to social development. Nigeria has been a place where religious activities make every nook and cranny buzzing. In Nigeria, many social, religious and economic institutions are usually created to preserve law and order for religious worship, business transactions and for people's comfort and relaxation. In most societies of the world, the Almighty God is simply a symbol of the might of the society. The society uses religion as an instrument to control the affairs of the people. Religion has always been the force

behind the universal message of brotherhood of man and the equality of women in Nigeria.

### **Education and Social Development in Nigeria**

Education is a veritable tool of the society that enables an individual to live effectively and efficiently for his or her own benefit and that of the society (Okafor, 2011:1). The first and foremost use of religion in Nigeria is its use for western education (Apyewen, 2020:65). Education covers both the formal, non-formal and informal education. Formal education is the age-specific, teacher-related process requiring full attendance and an obligatory curriculum, while the non-formal is an organized and sustained educational activities that do not correspond exactly in the formal type which is outside the formal system. The informal is the truly lifelong process whereby every individual acquires attitudes, values, skills and knowledge for daily experience and the educative influence and resources in his or her environment - from family, neighbour, place of work, market, library, etc. This is the traditional education of the people.

### **Impacts of Traditional Education in Nigeria**

Traditional education is collective and social activities that are multi-dimensional in approach that starts in infancy and stretches to adulthood and even lasts till death. Informal method of instruction depends on oral tradition. The curriculum includes moral instruction, social studies, agriculture, trade and craft, physical and health education. The agents of traditional education are the family, age-grade, trade and craft centres and secret cults. Therefore, the impact of indigenous education according to Umeh (2011:62) includes the following

Education makes the life of the people to be useful and functional in the community. This

is usually done through oral transmission and transfer of ideas, norms, beliefs and festivals. The assimilation of a high degree of discipline from adult to child in the family and social setting is pertinent in traditional education. There is a strict observance to norms and rules guiding the land and any infringement is liable to strict discipline. Traditional education has done enormous in terms of teaching technical skills like basket making, arts, crafts, pottery, smiths, bead making, etc. This may be called technical school in modern times. Learning is decentralized and therefore very easy to access. This makes traditional education flourished, it was not meant to raise funds but to create wealth of experience among the people. It emphasized much on moral and cultural education. The moral, ethical and cultural values of the people take paramount place in every traditional society. Traditional education solves immediate problems. Those who are involved usually channel their issues, problems, challenges and expectations which may likely be responded to. Everyone lives happily when lives and situations are attended.

### **Impacts of Islamic Education in Nigeria**

Islam as a religion of peace and total submission to the will of God (Allah) has created a niche in Nigeria. Likewise, Islamic education is one aspect Islam has proven its presence in Nigeria. We shall look into the impacts of Islamic education in Nigeria. According to Ndubuaku (2011:73) the aims of Islamic Education in Nigeria includes: (1) To build up the individual who is willing to act as God's representative (Khalifah). (2) To raise up the good and righteous man who will worship (God) Allah in the sense of the term, build up structure of his earthly life in accordance with the law (Sharia), (3) To serve God and man (4) Training people, (5) Help people adapt in any situation.

In essence, Islamic education has impacted in the lives of Muslims and the country at large. First, Islamic education has helped Muslims to appreciate Islam as a religion and a way of life which Prophet Mohammed (SAW) came to reveal to them. Secondly, it has taught them the importance of sacrifice of love for one another and for the nation. Thirdly, it centers much on morals and social responsibilities for every Muslim in the community. Fourthly, it teaches about law (Hadith) and the essence of being law abiding in and outside the Islamic community. Fifthly, it enlightens the Muslims and others of the need to live peacefully or co-exist here on earth.

### **Impacts of Christian Education in Nigeria**

One of the landmarks of National Development in Nigeria is the emergence of Christianity in the Nigeria Society. The realization of socializing with the people in a common language (English) and the need to share a common faith (Christianity) with other people was the beginning of a turnaround for the Nigeria people, most especially those from the Southern region. It was the Christian Mission that brought about the building of churches, seminaries, teaching or training centres, schools and mission Schools. It was the coming of Christianity that led to the building of roads, bridges, malls, parks, libraries, just to mention a few.

Eberechukwu (2011:87) notes that there are factors that influence the widespread of Christian education like the activities and contributions of the free slaves. They assisted in interpreting languages, clinical works, teaching jobs, etc. Others are job creation that includes civil service, teaching, trade and commercial activities, co-operation from local chiefs, absence of established and competing religion, caste system among Ibos really help in spreading Christian education. The activities of freed slaves actually contributed greatly to



the spread of Christian education. Many of them made their way to Nigeria and were used to spread Christian education like Samuel Ajayi Crowther. They were useful in reaching out to the local population, interpreting people's Western languages, and mediating or connecting people's minds with missionaries. Most of them have served in various positions as teachers, health care professionals, clerical staff, social workers and pastors. All of these were ways in which they were able to educate people.

Eberechukwu (2011:18) goes further to point out that by the first quarter of the twentieth century, there were lots of development in the traditional society, and this brought about employment. Local people were recruited into the civil service and other organizations to help the government better serve the community. A familiarity with the Western language was needed to enjoy the abundance of businesses around the villages. They need to speak the language in order to get foreign sponsorship. Trading was a profitable business at the time. Local chiefs were guardians of the law and the heritage of the land. The freedom that Westerners enjoyed in missionaries was obtained from local chiefs. There was great cooperation between the two and this helped in the speed of Christian education. Religion in the early ages of Nigerians saw the absence of established and competing religions. The Islam of the North and the Christians of the South were not in loggerheads with each other. Each had their own way of reaching out to and educating people.

The practice of the caste system in Igbo land was a major factor contributing to Christian education in Nigeria. This caste system is peculiar and characteristic of the Igbo people and is referred to as "Osu" or "Ohu". The representative system is a social construct for the Igbo that says that some people should be rejected and ostracized as outcasts. These

outcasts should not have any social relationship with the society. It was the advent of the Catechism that refuted and destroyed this system. The missionaries taught them that there was neither Jew nor Gentile, that people who accepted this message were easily converted. Finally, British colonial masters built a strong social structure and system of missionary activities. They provided safety and goodwill, and facilitated missions and other extracurricular activities, which aided the spread of Christianity and education.

### **Conclusion and Implications for Social Intervention**

1. The inculcation of the right type of values and attitudes for the survival of the individual and the sustenance of the Nigerian society. Both religion and education have built human capacity and as well raised personnel that will help transform every society according to the social laws and norms.
2. The acquisition of the appreciate knowledge, skills, abilities, whether physical, social, intellectual, psychological, cultural, or spiritual as veritable tools for the individual to co-habit and contribute to the development of the Nigerian society. Religion and education have built and are still engaging in human capacity building for a better future of the nation.
3. The training of the mind in the understanding of the world around which majorly precipitate from views, concerns and interest, and which afterwards translates in form of debates and discourses that are geared toward social interaction, exchange and integration. The enlightenment which religion and education have brought to the shores of the country has provoked

intensified intellectual disputes and works.

4. The introduction of English as the national language has actually helped to bridge the language gap and thereby bringing the interests, differences, objectives and visions together into an idealistic and energetic entity on the world map. English as a lingua franca of Nigeria has placed the nation not just in the frame of the Commonwealth, but a nation that can involve in diplomatic relations. Nigerians can transact and relate for goodwill and at will.
5. Solving of problems of people, meeting the expectations of the age has been the endpoint of religious and educational involvements in any given society. This has been the vision and mission of social service providers and of which religion and education have ever stood for or preach about. Both have been job and wealth creator to every society. Both are sources of power to the individual and the society at large.

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