The Role of Religion in The Nigerian Society

By

Emmanuel Echezolochi Amadi, Ph.D
Department of Religious and Cultural Studies
Rivers State University
Nkpolu-Oroworukwo, Port Harcourt
Email: emmanuel.amadi/18@ust.edu.ng
Tel: 08062942929
&
Pius Barinaadaa Kii, Ph.D
Department of Religious and Cultural Studies
Rivers State University
Nkpolu-Oroworukwo, Port Harcourt
Email: pius.kii@rsu.edu.ng
Tel: 08033097923

Abstract

This paper examines the positive and negative functions of religion in Nigerian society. Nigeria is a pluralistic society with three religions/African Traditional Religion, Islam and Christianity. Since no particular religion is officially recognized as state religion; it is expected that the three religions should co-exist side by side on the same environment without friction. Despite this, the three religions conflicts among themselves sometimes resulting in killings, verbal assaults, intimidation, open confrontation, destruction of worshipping centers and indiscriminate destruction of religious objects, emblems and shrines due to differences in religious beliefs and practices. In spite of this, religion on the other still binds people together and invigorates; that is, it gives them a strong sense of social solidarity and obligation. The study relied on secondary sources. The study adopted historical and phenomenological approaches to ascertain the causative factors to religious differences and to describe the usefulness of religion. Findings reveal that though religion sometimes can cause chaos but at the same time stabilize the society. The study recommends that religious leaders at all levels should encourage their followers/adherents to cultivate the values of forgiveness, tolerance,

peace, love, truth to facilitate the practice of religion in a pluralistic society like Nigeria.

Keywords: Nigeria, Society, Religion, Positive and Negative.

Introduction

Religion has been described not only as an integral part of human development, but also as an essential feature of every human society. This is because there is no known human society that can exist without religion. This explains why Karl Marx defines religion as the opium of the masses. His definition showed to a large extent that he understood clearly not only the relationship between religion and the masses (society) but also the role of religion in society. The word opium simply means a substance prepared from poppy seeds used to receive pain or cause sleep. This is exactly what religion do in society. In our society today, there are so many difficulties, frustrations, sickness, wars, violence to the extent that without religion (opium) which relieves us from pains arising from all these in the human world (society), we cannot survive the frustrations which face us in the present life. Here, religion gives us hope where it appears there is no hope at all. It makes it possible for us to live till tomorrow simply because it has relieved the pains we are suffering today.

Background of the Study

Nigeria is pluralistic society not only with diverse ethnic groups but also multi-religions –African Traditional religion, Islam and Christianity. As a pluralistic, it means that the three major religions are free to express their beliefs and practices on the same environment without one inhibiting the other. Thus, the worshippers of these religions are meant to relate with one another in love, truth, peace and in solidarity as a people who came from one fatherhood, Almighty God; the creator of men and the sovereign ruler of the universe. Thus, the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria is also clear here as it does not recognize any religion as state Religion. This paper, therefore, reflects on the positive and negative functions of religion in our society, Nigeria.

Methodology

The data for this study were collected majorly from secondary sources (published and unpublished materials). The study adopts historical and phenomenological approaches to trace the causes of conflicts among religions (dysfunctions of religion) in Nigeria and to describe the integrative role of religion.

Conceptual Review

Society

Hornby (2000) defines society as a group of people, animals or plants living as and constituting a homogeneous unit or entity especially a group of persons regarded as forming a single community. Thus, it refers to all people collectively regarded as constituting a community of related interdependent individuals (p. 273). Society is also understood to means any organized group of people joined together because of some interest they have in common. It is state or condition of living in association, company or intercourse with others of the same species the aggregate of persons living together in more or less ordered community. The use of the word society in some contexts suggest also that it could be used to refer to a number of persons associated together by some common interest or purpose united by a common vow, holding the same belief or opinion following same trade or profession or a number of persons united together for the purpose of promoting some branch of study or research by means of meetings, publications (Nigerian Medical Association, NMA), or the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA), here are telling examples. Even a collection of individuals living under the same organization or government could be referred to as a society (Okwueze, 2003, p. 6).

Explaining further, Morris (1989) defined a society as:

> A group of human beings sharing a self-sufficient system of action which is capable of existing longer than the life-span of an individual, the group recruited at least in part by the sexual reproduction of the membership

In the same vein, Martins (1986) opined that:

> The society is a complex web of social relations which has a boundary of its own with identifiable structures and functions; any

> human collectivity organized for a specific purpose whose members are aware of the other existence in the group and whose norms of relationship are understood by all its members (p. 20).

However, the word society has become so elastic in modern usage that it is no longer to be limited to a group of people who are related or who belong to the same profession but now extends to those who live together within a geographical location. In this sense, one can talk about the Nigerian society, the African society and even the world society where everyone who lives in the world lives in one common society with everyone. That is why it could be understood when one refers to the entire world as a village - that is a global village s it is usually put.

Improvement in the technology of communication has practically speaking made the entire world a village: where everyone knows about everyone and what everyone is saying or doing or trying to do or say. This feature of everyone knowing everyone and therefore acting as a check on everyone is the character of a typical village and the world through her improvement of communication has turned herself into global village; a global society. Incidentally, it is the above understanding of society as referring to people living in a given geographical location as Nigeria, as Africa and the world that we are talking about here (pp. 6-7).

Religion

Religion derives its etymological meaning from the Latin words "ligare" (which means to bind) 'relegare' (meaning to unite or to link together), and religion (meaning relationship). Put together, these words come to mean a link established between two persons, namely the human person and the divine person believed to exist (Omoregbe, 1993, p. 203). In other words, religion is something that unites man and human beings with a transcendent being believed to be in existence. In the words of vissudeva (1993), the idea of religion is to bring man to the recognition of or an awakened sense of a higher unseen controlling power or powers, with emotion and morality connected there with (p. 89). In his definition, of religion, Paul Tillich (1965) observes that religion is the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which

itself contains the answers to the question of the meaning of our life (p. 15). Eliade (2010) defined it as 'as a unified system of beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a church, ultimate non material fact and has a dynamogenic quality (p.35). Deton (2006) defines religion as a fixed relationship between the human and non-human entities, the sacred, the supernatural, the self-existent, the absolute or simply, Good (P.54). Okwueze (2003) defines it 'as a regulated pattern of life of a people in which experience, beliefs and knowledge are reflected in man's conception of himself in relation to others, his social world, the physical as well as the metaphysical world (p.3). Ugwu (1999) defined religion as faith and practices involving the relationship between mankind and what is regarded as sacred. According to him, religion generally includes the belief in the supernatural and a code of ethical behaviour; the outward act or form by which men indicate their recognition of the existence of God or of gods having power over their destiny, to whom obedience, service and honour are due; the feeling or expression of human love, fear or awe of some super human and over-ruling power, whether by profession of belief, by observances of rites and ceremonies or by the conduct of life" (p.2). Alfred (1960) defines it as 'the art and the theory of the internal life of man, so far as it depends on the man himself and on what is permanent in the nature of things' furthermore, he defines religion as what an individual does with his solitariness (p.15). William James (1960) defines religion as 'the feelings, act and experiences of individual in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they consider the divine' (p.50).

Radcliff Brown (1973) opines 'any religion normally involves certain ideas or beliefs on the one hand, and on the other certain observances; these observances may be positive or negative. However, in substance, religion involves a pattern of behaviour or practices based on common beliefs patterns (p.1). for Emile Durkheim (1947), religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to scared things, that is to say, to things set apart and forbidden, beliefs and practices which unite into a single moral community all those who adhere to them (p.37). According to A.C. Boughet (1954) religion cannot wisely or safely be ignored or neglected as it is by frivolous persons today. Even a selective or obsolete scheme of religion will serve the individual better than none at all. This is why so many old fashioned

persons possess, in spite of their defective views on some topics, a wholesome and completeness of character, which is absent in young ultra-moderns (p.154). For Anyacho (1994) religion is a belief in or worship of God or gods or a particular system of belief or worship. He further defines it as the human enterprise by which a sacred cosmos is established, a cosmization in a sacred mode; a quality of mysterious and awesome power than man and not related to him, which is believed to reside in certain objects of experience (p.28). For Madu (1996) religion can be defined subjectively and objectively. Subjectively, religion for him, is the very consciousness of dependence on a transcendent being and the very propensity or inclination to exhibit cult or worship. Objectively, religion according to him is a complex of truths, law and rites by which man is subordinated to the transcendent being (p.19). Idowu (1973) defines religion as the serious and social attitude of individuals or communities toward the powers of power which they receive as having ultimate control over their interest and destinations (p.72). For Max Muller, religion is a perception of the infinite (in Idowu, 1973, p.70). Immanuel Kant describes religion as the recognition of our duties as divine commands. For him, religion is the belief which sets what is essential in all adoration of God in human morality (in Tasie, 2012, pp. 3 – 4). Religion is the law in us, in so far as it obtains emphasis from a giver and judge over us, it is morality, directed to the recognition of God (Idowu, 1973, pp. 70 -71).The most overriding interest in all these definitions as Omoregbe (1999) has pointed out show that through religion a link is established between God and man (p.3).

Positive Functions of Religion

One noticeable role of religion in our society is that it unites peoples' scattered experiences and integrates them. It does this sometimes by providing man with a unitive and meaningful vision of life in a way which both science and philosophy are unable to give. Here, it is important to note that the meaningful visions which religion gives to the society go beyond this worldly vision, rather it is something that finds it full meaning in transcendence. In other words, religion elevates people's mind to God, the ultimate Being on whom men in society depend. In addition to this is that socially, religion binds people together and invigorates/gives them a strong sense of social solidarity and obligation, religion creates forums for the experience of this oneness in transcendence through series of rituals of worship.

In addition, it confers sacred value to people's social laws, values and social institutions and makes them mandatory with eternal sanctions. For example, in the Old Testament, the human and social laws of men are believed to derive (emanate) from God who entered into a covenant with the Israelite (***Lev. 19***). In the New Testament, law of love as given and expanded by Jesus Christ – the God man is believed to be rooted in God (***Mt. 5:20 – 45***). Consequently, the apostles reflected deeply on this law of Christ, explained its implications to Christ's disciples and made it mandatory (a rule of life) for all (***Rom. 12:3-13; 1-4***).

Moslem social and human laws are regarded as sacred by the devotes of Islam. This is because they are believed to be sacred since they are revealed to prophet Muhammed by Allah and codified in the Moslem Quran and Haddith. Thus moslem social laws and values are sustained and nourished by Islamic culture. In traditional African society, social laws and values are believed to have religious interpretations because they are believed to be rooted in God, the divinities, spirits and ancestors. These social laws and values are clearly spelt out for the traditionalists in their system of taboos. Taboos in the words of Awolalu and Dopamu (1979) are prohibited action, the breaking of which is followed by the supernatural penalty" (P. 212). It is the fear not to incur the anger of God, divinities, spirits and ancestors that deter people from such anti-social actions such as theft, murder, false witness, adultery, poisoning especially one's kinsmen (study.com.). Following closely is the discourage from materialism. Here, religion discourages any outlook that makes materialism, an end in itself. Rather, it arouses man's spiritual outlook and hunger for communion with God (divinities, spirits and ancestors in African Traditional Religion), or Allah (for the Muslims). It does this through religious prayers, sacrifices, offerings, rituals, ceremonies and other religious exercises such as fasting (Lent for the Christians), Ramdan (for the muslims); (abstentions from certain food and sex for the traditionalists). By this, the religious and spiritual dimensions of men are satisfied. In addition, religion is an important tool in the education of men. It teaches men eternal truths about God and the supernatural world about man, the human destiny and the last things – death, Judgement, reward and punishment. These are truths which the society long to know.

In time of economic frustration and crises, religion helps to solve these problems by encouraging charitable organizations, and groups to social actions which are meant to benefit the masses. The donations of cash and food items such as yam, bags of rice, bags of beans, bunches of plantain, red and ground-nut oil, onion, magi, salt, tomatoes, pepper, etc to those affected in the hospitals and other designated centres during the outbreak of covid-19 are telling examples (Amadi, 2021, p. 35). Thus, it also attaches eternal reward to those actions.

Another usefulness of religion is that it discourages economic activities which are not beneficial and unhealthy for the society. In other words, it condemns such negative actions – hoarding, cheating, oil theft, child labour, prostitution, organ harvesting, embezzlement of public funds, etc. Here, it attaches eternal punishment to such negative actions (study.com.).

In addition, religion preaches and promotes such moral values as humility, honesty, justice, tolerance, etc. By emphasizing the concept of humility, religion gives a new direction to the all important concepts of leadership and greatness. This virtue was vividly demonstrated by Christ. By preaching socio-political-economic morality, religion serves as a potent force of integration. What is more, through the projection of such concepts as life after death, immortality of the soul, heaven and hell, etc, religion encourages and instill high ethical standard or virtue in its adherents.

Another important value of religion in society is that it promotes peaceful co-existence even in the face of religious crisis and tensions. Religion does this by continuously encouraging the spirit of co-operation among different belief groups. In order to achieve this, it emphasizes the need for dialogue or interaction among varying religions. It is common these days for Christian leaders to and their followers to send good will messages to the Muslims during their festive periods and vice-versa. It is equally common these days for Christians to marry or pick their partners from Muslim extraction and Muslims too marry Christians and traditionalist as well (Asogwa 2009, pp. 153 – 154).

Explaining further, Okai (2008) in Bhikkh (2002) however, maintains that the proper role of religion has been:

> To provide a higher purpose and meaning of life, one that transcends limited self-interest; to counter balance the disruptive tendencies of politics and economics with shared values able to hold society together; to provide a moral structure in which human beings act (social ethics); to stand up for and protect the "little ones", those who are marginalized and oppressed within the usual power schemes (p. 78).

In much the same vein, Iwe (1979) further considers the positive role of religion to fall into the following eight categories:

i. To define the relationship between the creator and is creature, through its core belief dogma and doctrines. This may be seen as it functions as the intermediary between the creator and his creature, and seeks didactically to satisfy the intellectual nature and yearning of man.
ii. To provide man with a spiritual and adequate ***weltanschauung*** or an overall philosophical and spiritual out-look on life, by infecting fundamental meaning and purpose into human life and existence. Religion performs this role by lifting man above the morass of mere material l and carnal satisfactions to the practical acknowledgement of the transcendental Absolute God, and of a satisfying eschatology or explanation of the "last things" (or the life-after-death). Religion discharge this role through the basics of its belief system; its dogma and creed.
iii. To equip man with adequate and practical guide in his moral life; this function is performed by religion through its code of ethics, through which religion becomes really living and practical meaningful in the life of its adherents. A living religion must possess a living ethical dimension through which it renders itself relevant and consequential in human life and society. Here, Christians and Muslims are guided by ethical systems based on and inspired by the Bible and Quran respectively.
iv. To stand as the repository and custodian of human and social values. As religion functions as the custodian of social order and values, it is often negatively perceived by its critics as the conservative agent of the status quo,

hostile to salutary changes. However, true this may or really be at times, it must be acknowledged that every healthy and stable society must preserve its members and the future generation. As religion plays its priestly conservative and stabilizing role, it slanders as an indispensable agent of social control, functioning as the custodian of and defender of established norms and values in human arena personal and spiritual, domestic and political, social and cultural against all threats and violations. In this role, religion has been quite eminent and irrepressible. In this regard, religion is socially treated with sense of gravity and reverence, and of finality and ultimacy.

v. To serve as the prophet and conscience of the society: here, religion plays this quasi revolutionary role by calling to both man and society as they go astray along the path and precipe of self-destruction, immorality and social injustice. Religion, armed with its transcendental reference points and standing as the acknowledges custodian of human ideals and values constitutes eminently the necessary and salutary critique for any given and prevailing situation in human society. A living religion is thus the dynamic conscience of its society, the purificator of its culture and its antidote against unhealthy cultural accretions

vi. To uphold and promote the sense of the sacred and or inner mystery, in which all meaning is to be found. In such major world religions as Christianity and Islam, this sense of mystery and the sacred it at time articulated as divine providence, the will of God or divine will. Lack of this sense of the sacred, and of mysterious divine providence, creates a terrible void in human life, as it renders life artificial and shallow, uncreative ultimately a purposeless boredom. Here, religion through its theodicy and its culture of the sense of divine providence and the sacred, offers explanation to humanity in its recurrent experience of patterns of bane and blessing, woes and glories.

vii. To celebrate life and man's relationship with the Transcendent, through ritual prayers and acts of worship. As religion, through its codes and practices, celebrates the major stages of human life: birth, marriage, other significant human events and death, it also periodically summons man and society to acts as public worship for the expression of their commitment to the transcendental (God) and their own welfare.

viii. To enlighten man with an adequate and satisfying eschatology, through an acceptable explanation of the mystery of death and life-after-death. Christians and Muslims in their discharge of this eschatological function of religion, have offered to their adherents the prospects of a personal God who will, after death, judge every person forward or punishment according to each person's stewardship here on earth (pp. 8-12).

Positive Functions of Religion

Difference in Religious Beliefs, one noticeable causes of conflicts in society is the differences in religious beliefs. These conflicts often result in open persecution of one religious group by another or rebellion of a religious sect against the society on grounds of religious convictions or beliefs. In Nigeria, religious beliefs have repeatedly brought about conflicts between Moslems and Christians; various Christian denominations especially Catholics versus Protestants, even within Protestant sects. The net result here is that they affect the political, social and economic lives of the nation.

Closely following conflicts in religious beliefs are conflicts in religious practice. These arise when in certain places where people are not allowed freedom of worship or religious expression. In such a situation, it appears one religion is given official recognition by both the government and majority of her people while other religious groups are either suppressed or made to suffer for their faith. The incessant religious crises resulting in killing of Christians and destruction of churches in the North are telling examples here.

Another area of conflict in religious practice in Nigeria is the activity of some over-zealous missionaries (Christians and Moslems), self acc-laimed preachers, evangelists and revivalists. Sometimes, their activities lead to wanton destruction of people's religious emblems, objects and shrines. All these are regarded as irreligious acts. Thus, in public transports, some of these preachers would not allow non-members travelling with them any rest. They claimed that they have got mandate from either God or Allah to convert others. In that process, members of other denominations may challenge them thereby leading to fighting. In addition to this is difference in religious organization. At the level of organization, the

problem or religious conflicts sometimes manifest themselves in a different dimension. This happens when members of different religious sects who occupy positions of Authority in public places often use their positions to favour only the interests of their respective religion instead of the general public. Some of them even go to the extent of forcing their subordinates to observe or adopt their particular brand of religious beliefs, rites, and disciplines. Failing to do, is greeted with consequences some times, leading to either false accusation, reports which may earn the innocent victim great punishment from higher quarter or expulsion (medium.com).

Conclusion

This essay examined the role of religion in our society, Nigeria. Naturally, religion can perform either positive or negative functions in society. Positive functions of religion in this essays,we should note, are concerned with those cherished and essential ingredients religion posses in its capacity to greatly contribute to the building up of a healthy society. Negative functions often called dysfunctions of religion on the other hand, tend to destroy mutual or cordial relationships in society. Religion whether Christianity, Islam, or African Traditional Religion, God still remains a cohesive unifying factor of this religions.

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