

Religion as a Common Dominator in Human Society, the Gains and the Losses: The Nigerian Experience

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Abstract— This article examines the function of religion in Nigerian Society, emphasizing its contribution to social cohesion, moral guidance, and communal identity. Religion enhances societal welfare, ethical governance, and communal assistance while exerting social, educational, and humanistic impacts. Nonetheless, the paper underscores the detriments linked to religion, such as sectarian conflicts, intolerance, as well as politicization, which exacerbate political and ethnic divisions. It reveals the factors contributing to Nigeria's religious landscape's intricacy, including religious extremism, prejudice, and economic challenges arising from religious obligations. The research advocates for more interfaith communication to leverage the beneficial aspects of religion while mitigating its adverse effects.

Keywords: Religion, Common Dominator, Human Society, Nigerian Experience.

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INTRODUCTION

Religion is one of the most influential social forces that considerably influence human civilization. It is important to remember that religion impacts every aspect of human activity, including the people who belong to different socioeconomic levels and parts of Society (Udoh & Udo, 2022). However, there is little doubt that religion plays a significant part in the lives of humans, irrespective of their size or strength, level of education, money, or age. Religion is always present in a variety of contexts, including but not limited to the following: business, politics, marriage, athletics, education, and military service. It is abundantly obvious that religion significantly influences the political, social, cultural, and economic elements of African history and life more generally (Esther-Ojone, 2021). Furthermore, religion serves the requirements and objectives of power relationships, and it functions in line with a society's degree of development and complexity. This article analyzes the role of religion in Nigerian Society, highlighting its impact on social cohesiveness, moral direction, and community identity. In addition, it investigates the function of religion as an identifiable factor in human Society, with a particular emphasis on the Nigerian experience, and investigates both the benefits and the drawbacks of this phenomenon.

CONCEPTUALIZING RELIGION

Religion has been an essential component of human civilization for a long time. It has played a significant role in forming society structures, ethics, laws, and economic systems (Udo & Iccnua, 2020; Benson & Williams, 2023). Religion stands out as one of the most lasting characteristics of human Society, and it is often a strong force that either brings people together or drives them apart (Ottuh & Jemegbe, 2020). This is true across all cultures and countries. There is a significant amount of importance placed on religion in both public and private life in Nigeria, a nation characterized by its ethnic and cultural variety. Additionally, religion has been a cause of tension, conflict, and division in Society even though it has helped to bring about social harmony (Ottuh & Omosor, 2022). A person's religious ideas and practices are a personal collection handed down from generation to generation, with Christianity being the most well-known religion.

There is a strong religious culture in Nigeria, which comes from the country's vast Christian population. Ninety per cent of African Christians routinely attend church services. This religion, on the other hand, has the potential to bring about bigotry and a lack of common sense (Odey & Eric, 2017). Because the Bible instructs people not to touch the anointed and to avoid causing damage to prophets, for instance, some Christians could condemn a pastor for doing something that is prohibited. Nigerian Christians may be ready to criticize individuals who bring to light the wrongdoings of a pastor. This is because they feel that just because someone is a pastor or general overseer does not mean they are ignorant of their actions or innocent. This action is reminiscent of the Apostle Paul's commendation for the Berean Christians for supporting the gospel they were spreading. Rather than studying the Bible on their

own, some Nigerian Christians concentrate on the sections included in the sermon the pastor delivers.

Nigeria's rich religious origins have resulted in the country's absence of certain universal values, such as love for one's neighbour and honesty. Because of this, it is still being determined if Nigerians are actually dedicated to their religion or whether they merely enjoy the emotional appeal of their religion. Countries with a lower religious heritage tend to have a greater prevalence of these principles, and even politicians who do not abuse their power to enrich themselves are often active members of various denominations (Obii-Obioha, 2017). For Nigeria to turn its nation around, it is necessary to align its abilities with fundamental values that include love and honesty. Nigeria can progress toward a more harmonious society if it focuses on these fundamental ideals.

RELIGION AS A COMMON DENOMINATOR IN HUMAN SOCIETY

In its most fundamental form, religion may be seen as a set of beliefs, practices, and ethical principles that direct human connection with the divine, nature, and one another (Obii-Obioha, 2017). It offers solutions to basic existential issues, facilitates the development of a feeling of community, and often develops a moral compass as a guiding principle for both people and civilizations. Because of its capacity to transcend private identities and bind individuals with shared ideas, rituals, and ideals, religion is a common denominator in many different communities. Throughout human history, religion has played a pivotal role in forming societies and evolving cultures. From ancient civilizations such as Mesopotamia and Egypt to contemporary communities, religion has been an essential component in government administration, formulation of laws, and provision of social welfare (Idike & Okechukwu, 2015; Uloma, et al., 2019). Religion can give interpretations for the natural world and human life, as well as solace in times of crisis and provide guidelines for ethical action. In addition to functioning as a spiritual guide, religion has also supplied these explanations.

A feeling of belonging and unity may also be fostered by adopting religion as a shared denominator. It is common for religious organizations to function as community centres, where people congregate for worship, education, and social assistance. Religion plays a significant role in people's everyday lives in many different countries, influencing rituals, celebrations, and significant life events such as birth, marriage, and death (Ottuh & Jemegbe, 2020). Individuals can feel linked to something greater than themselves via religion, which results in forming a collective identity that is not limited by personal, ethnic, or national boundaries amongst people.

THE NIGERIAN RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE

Nigeria, which has a population of more than 200 million people, is one of the African nations that encompasses the greatest variety of religious traditions (Ottuh et al., 2023). Three primary religious traditions dominate the religious landscape of Nigeria. These are Christianity, Islam, and indigenous African faiths. Christianity and Islam, which were brought to the nation by European colonialism and trans-Saharan commerce,

respectively, have developed to become the most prevalent faiths in the country. On the other hand, indigenous African religions continue to exist in a variety of forms, particularly in rural regions. Christians were brought to Nigeria by European missionaries in the 19th century. Since then, Christianity has substantially expanded the nation, particularly in the southern and central regions (Paul et al., 2014). Religions such as Catholicism, Anglicanism, Pentecostalism, and other evangelical churches are all examples of Christian faiths that may be found in Nigeria. Christians influence many facets of southern Nigerian culture, including politics, education, and social life. The Christian religion plays a significant part in many of these sectors.

The faith of Islam was brought to Nigeria in the 11th century using trade routes that crossed the Sahara Desert (Ottuh & Erhabor, 2022). Over time, it gradually became the predominant religion in the nation's northern region. Islamic governments, such as the Sokoto Caliphate, which was established in the 19th century and played a significant part in the formation of northern Nigerian culture and politics, were crucial in the propagation of Islam and helped to make it more widespread (Enaruna, 2014). There are still a substantial number of devotees who practice Sunni Islam in the northern area, and Islam continues to be the major religion there. African traditional religions predate the introduction of Christianity and Isla

m and are founded on the belief in a supreme deity, ancestor spirits, and the force of nature. These religions have been practised throughout Africa for centuries. Even though traditional African religions are not as commonly followed as they once were, they continue to impact the cultural practices and worldviews of many Nigerians, especially those living in rural regions (Yesufu, 2016). Both a strength and a problem, Nigeria's religious diversity is a source of strength. However, on the one hand, it has often been a cause of conflict, notably across the lines of Christianity and Islam. On the other hand, it provides various cultural and religious activities.

GAINS OF RELIGION IN NIGERIA

Religion has a huge role in building social cohesiveness and identity creation in Nigeria, which is one of the country's most important benefits of religion. People from different socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds are often brought together via the power of religion, which acts as a uniting factor (Okon, 2003; Okon and Akpan, 2003; Asuquo, 2018). A nation with such a wide range of ethnicities needs to have religious organizations because they provide a feeling of community and belonging. Congregations are the foundation of support networks in both Christianity and Islam. These networks provide members with emotional, financial, and spiritual assistance. In addition to serving as places of worship, churches and mosques serve as community centres where people congregate to engage in social and educational activities.

Many people in Nigeria get their sense of morality and ethics from their religious beliefs. According to Ottuh and Onimhawo (2020), the teachings of many religions impact individual and communal behaviour, directing the choices and behaviours of individuals. Christianity and Islam teach principles profoundly ingrained in Nigerian

culture, such as honesty, compassion, generosity, and justice. These values are deeply ingrained in Nigerian Society. They often act as moral authority, pushing for peace, social fairness, and good governance (Udom & Okolie, 2022). Religious leaders frequently serve in this capacity. For instance, religious leaders have been known to appeal for unity and peace during political instability or crisis and urge their followers to embrace moral standards.

The contributions of religious organizations have significantly aided the delivery of humanitarian and social services in Nigeria. Churches and mosques often organize charitable activities to give the less fortunate food, clothes, and shelter. Schools, hospitals, and orphanages have been created by Christian and Islamic groups, which have contributed to the educational as well as healthcare systems of the nation (Koku, 2015). Particularly noteworthy is that the basis for Nigeria's formal education system was formed by mission schools created during the colonial era by Christian missionaries. Many of Nigeria's early political personalities and intellectuals attended these institutions.

It is not uncommon for religion to play a role in resolving disputes and encouraging reconciliation in Nigeria, a nation that is both ethnically and religiously diverse. There has been a significant contribution made by religious leaders, notably via the implementation of interfaith dialogue projects, to the promotion of reconciliation and peace among Christian and Muslim populations. For example, the Nigerian Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) facilitates conversation between the two largest faiths in the country and strives to address religious disputes before they become violent. Religion also contributes to Nigeria's economy, primarily via the formation of enterprises, educational institutions, and charitable organizations. Publication companies, educational institutions, and media outlets are only a few enterprises that religious groups own. A further way spiritual celebrations, such as Christian crusades and Islamic pilgrimages, contribute to the economy of local communities is by drawing participants who spend money on lodging, transportation, and other services.

LOSSES OF RELIGION IN NIGERIA

While it has been connected with a great deal of success, religion in Nigeria has also been linked to great failure. There have been instances in which the interaction of religion with governance, cultural affiliation, and socioeconomic issues has contributed to escalating tensions and conflicts inside the nation-state (Yakubu & Rothfuss, 2012). The advent of religious disputes and bloodshed in Nigeria is one of the most significant losses that can be attributed to the association of religion with the country. Religious conflicts, especially those that exist between Christians and Muslims, frequently result in violent battles, which have led to the loss of lives and property that have occurred. In particular, the northern region of Nigeria has been the scene of several wars that religious considerations have fueled. One such conflict is the Jos crisis, which entailed violent clashes between Christians and Muslims (Koku, 2015). Even though these

disputes are often driven by underlying political, ethnic, and economic grievances, they are framed in terms of religion, making reconciling them more difficult.

This demonstrates the devastating potential of religious fanaticism, as seen by the growth of extremist organizations such as Boko Haram in the northeastern region of Nigeria. The terrorist organization known as Boko Haram, whose name literally translates to "Western education is forbidden," has been responsible for several terrorist incidents, including bombings, mass murders, and kidnappings (Ottuh & Erhabor, 2022). Their ultimate goal is to create an Islamic state in Nigeria. The operations of the organization have resulted in the area being more unstable, millions of people being displaced, and the nation becoming more religiously divided.

The country of Nigeria has enormous issues when it comes to religious intolerance and prejudice. The formation of pervasive divides in politics, education, and employment is often the result of the intimate connection between religious identification and ethnic identity. Those who adhere to minority faiths may experience discrimination in the workplace, in political appointments, and in the provision of social services in jurisdictions where one religion is the predominant religion. For example, certain governments in the north have implemented Sharia law, which has caused non-Muslims to be concerned about the consequences of this on religious freedom as well as equal treatment under the law. The social views of a society may also be a manifestation of religious intolerance. For example, persons who convert from one religion to another may be subjected to social exclusion or persecution. Marriages between people of different faiths are often discouraged or openly prohibited, which further deepens the religious gaps that already exist.

The relationship between religion and politics in Nigeria is very complex, and this relationship has both beneficial and harmful repercussions. Furthermore, the politics of religion have often resulted in splits and disputes, even though religious leaders and institutions have the potential to serve as moral counsellors and champions for justice (Ottuh & Omosor, 2022). It is not uncommon for politicians to take advantage of religious beliefs in order to garner political support, which might result in religious conflicts. For example, political parties may associate themselves with religious leaders or utilize religious language to appeal to voters, further exacerbating the differences that already exist throughout Society. The inclination to see political and social problems via a religious prism has made it more difficult to confront the difficulties that Nigeria is facing. Rather than concentrating on problems like joblessness, impoverishment, and corruption, political discourse is often dominated by religious concerns, which distracts from the quest for answers applicable in the real world.

Even though religion can cultivate a feeling of community and belonging, it also can erode national unity when religious identity is stressed above national identity. In Nigeria, in which religious and ethnic identities are often linked, this has resulted in a lack of cohesiveness and dispersion of the country's population. A further deepening of differences has occurred because different areas or ethnic groups are directly linked with particular faiths. Such a geographical and religious difference, which often

manifests itself in politics and administration, may be seen, for instance, in the northern part of Nigeria, where the majority of the population is Muslim, and in the southern region, where the majority of the population is Christian (Ottuh & Jemegbe, 2020). Religion can be a significant factor when it comes to the financial responsibilities that religion may place on people and families, especially in the form of religious duties like tithing, gifts, and pilgrimages. Religious leaders in Nigeria often urge their followers to make charitable contributions.

CONCLUSION

The function that religion plays in human Society is complex and complicated, especially when it comes to the Nigerian environment. Religion serves as a common denominator in human civilization. It is a strong force that contributes to the social cohesiveness, moral direction, and communal support that the community needs. In addition to providing millions of Nigerians with spiritual consolation, religion establishes a solid basis for the construction of identities, contributes to the delivery of humanitarian and social services, and contributes to the supply of services. Religious institutions have enormously contributed to advancing education, healthcare, and economic progress via the ethical precepts they impart and the community-building initiatives they undertake. On the other hand, religion in Nigeria is full of difficulties and losses. Extremism, intolerance, and religious disputes have often contributed to the escalation of political and ethnic tensions, which in turn has resulted in bloodshed and division. The politicization of religion has made it more difficult for the government to achieve national unity. Furthermore, people may experience financial difficulty as a result of their religious duties, and discriminatory acts directed at religious minorities continue to promote feelings of anger and social fragmentation.

Religious beliefs continue to be a double-edged sword in Nigeria, having the power to either bring people together or drive them apart. The positive effects of religious intolerance and conflict are obvious. However, the negative repercussions of religious intolerance and conflict underline the need to maintain interfaith communication, tolerance, as well as respect for the variety of religious beliefs. It is imperative that Nigeria prioritizes the promotion of religious harmony and the use of religious institutions for the greater benefit of Society in order to achieve the goal of harnessing the beneficial attributes of religion and mitigating its negative repercussions. For Nigerian Society to strive toward a future in which faith serves as a bridge for unification rather than a cause of division, it is necessary to acknowledge both the benefits and the drawbacks of religion.

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