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### Religion: A Paradox

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#### Abstract

This paper examines the true nature of religion as it relates to human existentialism. Religion embodies a profound paradox. It is a source of inspiration, comfort, and peace, yet also a catalyst in the negative atavistic cultures, in areas of conflict, violence and division. The findings of this work corroborates the thesis that religion in spite of its positive peace-building process, it's quite essentially also, a negative influence within the same trajectory. In this work, I adopted a qualitative research method analysis to explore the

intricate relationship between religion, peace and conflict, by examining the ways in which religious beliefs and practices can both promote and hinder harmony. Thus, this research work enables us to delve into the paradoxical relationship in religion, which helps us in understanding the role religion plays in shaping human experience and informing our pursuit of positive peace-building in the society.

**Keywords:** Religion, Paradox, Religious Institutions, Religious Paradox, Faith and Reason

#### Introduction

Religion is one of the popular institutions that has greatly influenced the life of many nations of the world. It has made recognizable impacts on the political, physical, social, moral, spiritual and economic affairs of the modern world. This indicates the significant role it plays in the affairs of many nations of the world. The regards given to religion is portrayed by the diverse manner through which it is carried out in many societies (Anyacho, 1994:1)<sup>[2]</sup>. Hence, Oshitelu, (2010:8)<sup>[16]</sup> observes that there is no tribe without some rudimentary religious and phenomenology of religious ideas and customs. Religion is not only co-extensive with mankind but also peculiar to humanity. He writes:

Of all vast creation only man on this planet, reveals a craving for religion. No where in the lower orders of creation do we find even rudimentary religious ideas and practices. A lion's den is a place of noise not a place of worship (p. 8).

There is no doubt that religion plays positive roles in the development of any society. However, it has also been the underlying force behind conflicts, civil wars, social stagnation or even retrogression, oppression, and discrimination etc. Therefore, religion is a double edged sword which can cut either way with serious consequences. The paper deals with the definition and theories of the origin of religion. It also examined the concept of society; discussed the value of religion in society; the role of religious institution; and made recommendations and conclusion.

#### The Meaning of Paradox

Paradox is a statement, proposition, or situation that seems to be absurd or contradictory, but in fact is or may be true. It is a situation which involves two ideas or qualities that are different. It is also a statement that seems impossible because it contains two opposing ideas that are both true. The scripture and theologies or doctrines in religion, for example Christianity and Islam, have many paradoxes that are subject to different interpretations that are capable of convincing people that two opposing views are both true and acceptable for application in an active social life (Dzurgba, 2006: 85-86.)<sup>[6]</sup>.

### The Definition of Religion

Religion is a term which many scholars have tried to define. Each scholar has defined religion from the perspective of his academic discipline. Thus, scholars from the discipline of sociology have given the sociological definition of religion; those from psychology have defined religion from psychological terms. Durkheim (1965)<sup>[4]</sup> refers to religion as a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things. Thus for him, the real object of the group or church's worship is the group itself, and groups acts, such as dance, sacrifice, songs and others are means to this end. Karl Marx (1967:140)<sup>[12]</sup> defines religion as:

The sob of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, the spirit of conditions utterly unspiritual. It is the opium of the poor. The idea of God is the keynote of a perverted civilization. To suppress religion which provides an illusory happiness, is to establish the claims of real happiness.

In Karl Marx opinion, "Religion is the opium of the masses created and dominated by the ruling class of the society with the aim of providing moral pressure and psychological outlets which preserve the class structure." Marx not only traces the sources of religion in any society, but its essence as well. As an opiate, religion seems to make tolerable for the oppressed in society.

According to Idowu (1973:22)<sup>[9]</sup>: "Religion results from man's spontaneous reaction to his immediate awareness of a living power, wholly other and infinitely greater than himself; a power mysterious because unseen yet a present and urgent Reality seeking to bring man into communion with himself..." Nabofa (1988:43)<sup>[13]</sup> says that: 'religion is man's effort in satisfying certain emotional needs by establishing and maintaining cordial relations between himself and the supersensible world and his fellow man.' Omoregbe (1999:4) also defines religion as "interpersonal relationship between a man and a transcendent personal being believed to exist".

The word "Religion" is of Latin origin. It is derived from two Latin words namely: *Religio* and *Religo*. *Religio* means sacredness, piety or fear of the supernatural. *Religo* on the other hand means to hold together, to bind or to fasten. It is from these two words that religion is derived and used to represent a binding relationship between the human self and some supernatural forces or ultimate realities which man feel dependent upon for some benefits he will derive from the supernatural. It represents the coming together of a group which is bound by common feeling of dependence on a particular objects or subject believed to be more powerful than man. It has come to represent an attempt made by a group to understand and approach the universe and what lies beyond it. Religion has also come to include faith as well as rituals and ceremonies which are basically the means of communication and communion with the Deity or whatever man conceives as the transcendental reality (Anyacho, 1994:1)<sup>[2]</sup>.

An analysis of the different definitions of religion suggests that it is a belief in other-than-man which influences the people's relationship with others. The first part of this definition is "belief in other-than-man" this other than man is anything apart from the believer, which the believer puts his trust in. Belief is a relationship established by the believer and this object. The believer makes this other than

man an object of worship. The object of worship could be called Ultimate Reality or the Supreme Being, the Ultimate Reality is given different names in different cultures like God, Allah, Chukwu, Olodumare, Nom etc. (Ekpunobi, 1999:9).

Religion can be considered a paradox for several reasons:

1. **Faith vs. Reason:** Religion often requires faith, which can conflict with reason and evidence-based thinking.
2. **Universal truth vs. Diversity:** Religions claim to possess universal truths, yet there are many conflicting beliefs and interpretations.
3. **Love and compassion vs. Violence and intolerance:** Religions promote love and compassion, but have been used to justify violence and intolerance.
4. **Moral absolutism vs. Contextual relativism:** Religions often teach moral absolutes, but real-world applications can be complex and context-dependent.
5. **Spiritual freedom vs. Dogmatic constraints:** Religions offer spiritual liberation, but can also impose strict rules and dogma.
6. **Personal experience vs. Institutional authority:** Religions emphasize personal experience, but often rely on institutional authority and tradition.
7. **Mystery and ambiguity vs. Certainty and clarity:** Religions deal with mysteries, but often strive for certainty and clarity.
8. **Inclusivity vs. Exclusivity:** Religions promote inclusivity, but can be exclusive and discriminatory.
9. **Tradition vs. Progress:** Religions rely on tradition, but must adapt to changing contexts and values.
10. **Human interpretation vs. Divine revelation:** Religions claim divine revelation, but are subject to human interpretation and bias.

These paradoxes highlight the complexities and nuances of religion, which can be both a source of inspiration and a cause of conflict.

### Theories of the Origin of Religion

A set of theories have been proposed on the origin of religion. These include: First, the cognitive theory of religion which traces the origin of religion to man's desire to know or to seek for explanations about things around him. The second is the emotional theory which sees religion as a consequence of man's urge to meet his emotional needs, and a third, the sociological theory which sees religion as product of man's "interaction and group life." We will examine each of these as detailed by Isokun, (1993: 99-101)<sup>[10]</sup>.

#### (1) The Cognitive Theory of Religion

The cognitive theory traces the origin of religion to man's attempt "... to explain the phenomena of dreams, echoes, visions and above all death" (Yinger in Rose 1967:706). In this regard, religion was to "provide a patterned and familiar way of overcoming life and environmental crises and of the preparation and hope for a comfortable future" (Otite and Ogonwo, 1979:155). Tylor's (1873) major contribution was in his famous theory of "*Animism* the belief in spiritual beings. He argues that the primitive man is confronted with such phenomenon such as death, sleep, dreams etc. in terms of a spirit which is separate from body. From this the primitive man went to believe in other spirits throughout all nature. Since such spirits are believed to control events and affect human lives, it was natural that men should reverence

them. Thus, for Tylor we have the beginning of religion with the belief in spiritual beings as its minimal condition. Tylor found the origin of religion in man's dream life, the separation of spirit from flesh and the presence of other (spirits) known to be elsewhere- Theory of Animism. Isokun, (1993) <sup>[10]</sup> asserts that Frazer went further to describe "animism" as the bastard science" which provided the "savage mind" the explanation for the wonders he had to live with.

### (2) The Emotional Theory of Religion

The second theory of the origin of religion is credited to Freud in his *'Totem and Taboo,'* and Spencer in his *'Principles of Sociology'*. Both traced the origin of religion to ancestor worship as a means of coping with emotional stress between the living and the dead. Freud traced such emotional stress to primordial incidence in which the children killed their father out of jealousy and sex rage. The proponents of this theory might have over-looked some factors associated with inheritance which could have given rise to ancestor worship, especially "in those societies which attach importance to descent groups with corporate interest in land, political positions, exclusive symbols and treasure" (Otitte and Ogionwo 1979: 154). However, there is no doubt that religion meets much of man's social and emotional needs. For example, in events when one loses a loved one or friends, especially without the hope of ever meeting again, it is religion that gives us the hope of ever meeting again. It is religion that gives us the needed courage to bear with such moments of emotional strain and stress.

### (3) The Sociological Theory of Religion

The sociological theory has to do with man's response to the demands of his social life. In this regard religion is seen "as something larger than the individual, standing for the collective representations of society" (Peil, 1977: 214). This was the view of Levy-Bruhl and Durkheim. However, the theory appears to have ignored the theological, philosophical, psychological, and historical origins of religion in favour of the sociological (Peil, p. 215).

### The Value of Religion in Society

Value here refers to what is good or desired. It is quite obvious that religion has important functions to play in society. Our attention then should now be addressed to these manifest and latent functions of religion.

**1. Ritual Functions:** In African society in general and Nigeria in particular, it is believed that the well-being of the society depends upon the good-will of the divine forces. Therefore before any function is embarked upon in the society the divine forces are consulted and taken into confidence. At the beginning of farming, hunting and fishing seasons, the gods are called upon to assist for successful ventures and at harvest they are also given the first fruit of the harvest. Religion is also not left out during festivals, and when serious decisions are to be taken the spiritual forces are also solicited for divine guidance. In fact everything done by a Nigerian, birth, marriage, farming, trading, fishing, hunting, traveling, holding meetings or conferences, learning, examinations, looking for employment, eating, drinking, going out, jubilating and mourning, religion is never left out. Hence, in Nigeria religion permeates life.

**2. Individual Integration:** Religion performs the function of individual integration. It does so through better integration and personal adjustments. This is a reflection of

older religious tradition, but it has also been stated in modeled psychological terms. As discussed in Dzurgba (1993:81) <sup>[5]</sup>, Hartman saw the main function of religion in the individual as integrative, through which the inner mental processes are synthesized with social adaptation. Draper also emphasized that religion directs aggressive emotions and activities, arising from the instincts, into higher or more desirable channels- the sublimation of aggressive drives through religion. Although some scholars appreciate the positive role of religion in this regard, some others insist that religion achieves a little individual integration. Hence, Sigmund Freud regards religion as a refusal to face reality, and it means that the religious people may be more dependent and without adequate self-assertion. Marx also re-iterates that, religion is taking away man's esteem for himself and leading man to less independence and integration.

However, there are revealing facts which support the positive individual integration by religion. Church members and church attenders are better adjusted on measures of psychiatric impairment and to old age. People who attend church regularly also enjoy better physical health and they are less likely to commit suicide. The religious individuals may be able to face better some life crises and even death. They are less likely to abuse alcohol and are better adjusted in marriage. Moreover, church members. Lire helped in terms of individual identity and communal feeling.

**3. Social Integration:** Religion performs the function of social integration. Sociologist of religion ever since Durkheim (1915), have explained the function of religion in terms of its ability to provide legitimization for social arrangements or social construction of reality. Religion provides a unified and unifying system of values for example, ecclesiastical laws and code of ethics. Through its system of values, religion contributes not only to the integration of the whole society, but also the proper functioning of other social institutions, for examples, the family, legal, educational, political and economic institutions. Schaefer (2000: 324) in Asalu (2006) <sup>[3]</sup>, affirms that religion whether it be Buddhism, Christianity or Judaism offers people meaning and purpose for their lives. He also argues that religion gives people certain ultimate values and ends to hold in common. Hence, religion is not an individualistic enterprise. Miller asserts that: "it is a fellowship, a covenant among people who possess a common stock of emotion, feeling and trust towards the mysteries of human existence and God" (Asalu, 2006:101) <sup>[3]</sup>. In that regard, Christmas unites all Christians, Ramadan unites Muslims, Passover feast, provides a forum for Sabbatharians to unite. In some parts of Nigeria, new yam festival provides an occasion for people to forget their political affiliations and celebrate together the blessings from divine.

**4. Self -Identity:** Religion helps man to identify himself. When individuals accept religious values and beliefs about human nature and destiny associated with them, they develop important aspects of their own self-understanding and self-definition. Secondly, as they participate in religious rituals and worship, they act out significant elements of their own identity. In these various ways religion affects individuals' understanding of "who they are" and "what they are". Davis, a sociologist has expressed the idea that religion gives the individual a sense of identity with the distant past and the limitless future. It invokes in him the

sense of awareness. It expands his ego or spirit by making his spirit significant for the universe and the universe significant for him. Religion has in two of the above various ways contributed to the integration of the personality. In periods of rapid social change and large-scale social mobility, religion helps in no small way to contribute to self-identity. For example, one of the important ways in which Africans have established their status in the society or established their identity or recognition is by belonging to one of the imported or foreign “civilizing” religions: Christianity or Islam. Nowadays, very few people come out openly as being adherents of African Traditional Religionist. As Christianity and Islam are regarded as religions of civilized and high class men. Many Africans attach themselves to them so that they may be identified as civilized men.

**5. Religion gives Solace:** Every man needs moral and spiritual support in the face of uncertainty, he needs consolation when he is disappointed; and reconciliation with society when he is alienated from its goals and norms. Religion provides important spiritual and emotional comfort and consolation in the face of failures and disappointments in life. According to O’Dea in Oshitelu, (2010:13) <sup>[16]</sup> “religion makes relationship between man and the divine possible through cult ceremonial rituals and thereby gives man assurance for a new security and firmer in the midst of the uncertainties and impossibilities of the vicissitudes of life”.

### The Negative Functions of Religion s

Religion also performs negative functions such as:

#### 1. Intolerant of other peoples’ Faiths

All religious institutions proclaim positive moral qualities. Yet religion occasionally proves itself to be an aggressive, hostile, cruel, violent and destructive phenomenon. It acts mercilessly and destructively against its own members and those of the general society. In such cases, societies have witnessed the total reverse (not the violation) of the benign ideas, doctrines ethics, beliefs and practices of religion. Such situations have led to loss of lives and properties because of riots. Hence, the role of religion is paradoxical. When the same positive functions are carried out to the extreme, those positive functions tend to become negative. For example, religion powerfully organizes, integrates and controls its members and gives them a sense of belonging as well as a special identity. This unifying function may isolate its members from the members of other religious institutions in particular and society in general. In Nigeria for example, this has led to persistent prejudice, suspicion, distrust, intolerance, hostility, aggression and destruction of life and property. In Christianity, the Bible says: “He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it”, (Mathew 10:39). This can inspire rioters and warriors who declare holy riots and holy wars respectively. In this case, the life in heaven is balanced against the life on earth and the latter counts for nothing. Hence, religion provides an impetus for religious hostilities. Okwudiba (1978:129) states the negative functions of religion in society as:

Religious differences have a high potential for separating people from one another. Throughout history, these differences have been the basis of tension, animosity, hostility and war. Many times a certain fanaticism is associated with religious beliefs which excludes social

relations with people of different religion or hampers mutual trust and confidence where such relations happen to exist.

**Religious Conservatism:** It is a fact that religion provides an education which is God-centered and it is held to be divine-oriented as against secular education which the society provides through government schools. However, in preserving these gains, religion takes a conservative, rigid and authoritarian position. This posture prevents rapid social change or social transformation when human language, social conditions, human ideas, human needs and the times are rapidly changing. In Nigeria there are fanatics among Christian and Muslims who think there will be no peace in this land until everyone has accepted their own religion. For example, recently the sect known as ‘*Boko Haran*’, says “it is waging war against all forms of western education and its establishment” (Lawani and Abdulsalam, 2009) <sup>[11]</sup>. Such people pose very serious threat to peace and progress.

**3. Deficient Personality Integration:** Religion is related to deficient personality integration. Religious people have been associated with a narrowness of perspective which they show in their measures of authoritarianism and dogmatism. They rigidly apply authority and their dogma (a system of beliefs) is to be accepted by their followers as true and without questions. Their dogmatic tendencies are pervasively and powerfully inculcated in personalities of their members. The religious people are found to be more suggestible and dependent because theology insists that the religious people should not depend upon their knowledge, wisdom, initiatives strength and hard-work, but depend on God’s merciful and benevolent supplies of their spiritual and material needs according to their measures. In some cases, the emphasis is on divine miracles and this can make religious people lose sight of the importance of human creativeness, initiative, innovativeness and hard-work which can create new elements in business, commerce, science and technology. Industrialization of society does not depend on lazy and idle expectation of divine miracles. Therefore, miracle-oriented people cannot be “notable innovators” Martin in (Dzurgba, 1993:90) <sup>[5]</sup>. It is also lamentable that some kind of religious-orientation causes many students to reject the importance of academic excellence and, as a result, they pursue their academic studies without seriousness and inadequate commitment and hard-work.

### Conclusion

There is no doubt that religion has positive value in society, it has aided social progress, educational development, interpersonal and international cooperation as well as mutual understanding among peoples. The effects it has produced in human society all over the world cannot be ignored. It has totally transformed the structures of societies, the lives of countless individuals; and institution all over the world. On the other hand, it has also produced fanatic men who have done incalculable damage to mankind, men who slaughtered their fellow men in hundreds and thousands. It has driven many fanatics into pathological illusions and rendered them cruel, heartless, wicked, inhuman and Godless, all in the name of God; hence, religion is a paradox.

### Recommendations

Religious dialogue should be encouraged from the family level and to the wider society. There is need for reawakening of the indigenous cultural values to encourage brotherhood despite the different faiths in Nigeria.

Comparative study of religion should be encouraged at all levels of educational institutions for better understanding of other faiths and religious tolerance. The National Orientation Agency (NOA) should shoulder its responsibility by educating the masses on the essence of religious tolerance so as to dethrone religious conflicts. This will no doubt go a long way in reducing the negative functions of religion while encouraging the positive ones.

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