

RELIGION AND SOCIETY

Edited by G.S.Chukwuemeka

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Religion and Society

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this book to the Holy Trinity.

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

Religion and Social Activities by **Egbeja Cincin Julius & G.S.Chukwuemeka** 1

CHAPTER TWO

The Benefit of Religion in the Society by **Anure Kyaatsa Joseph** 23

CHAPTER THREE

Religion And Education by **Edwin Chinyeremugwu** 35

CHAPTER FOUR

Religion and Culture by **Akintunde Ojo Sunday** 53

CHAPTER FIVE

The History of Religion in Nigeria by **Kingsley Pardung & G.S.Chukwuemeka** 71

CHAPTER SIX

Family Life and Religion by **Simon Sunday Ayodele** 91

CHAPTER SEVEN

Society and Politics BY **G.S.Chukwuemeka & Tumba, Vandi Daniel** 109

CHAPTER ONE

RELIGION AND SOCIAL ACTIVITIES

By

Egbeja Cincin Julius & G.S.Chukwuemeka

Introduction

Religion and social activities is apt and timely at this time in our lives and in the Christian communities. The importance can never be overemphasized because; the practice of religion has come under intense criticism due to her failure to address some of the ills in our society. The impact of religion as one takes a look at a few of them such as Christianity, Islam and African Traditional religions in most societies, particularly in African nations such as Nigeria is questionable. Many questions are begging for answers daily in society, which appears as if the results are far-fetched. A society such as Nigeria is highly religious in its outlook but the irony is that the more religious they claim to be; the more the ills of the society are increasing. Atrocities such as immoral practices, killings and bad leadership are prevalent. Millions of Naira are spent yearly on pilgrimage to Mecca and Jerusalem but the above ills keep increasing. To be specific, Churches and mosques are springing up daily with most of them spending millions of dollars erecting gigantic Cathedrals and multiple Mosques in every town and city but most of the atrocities found in our societies can be traced to the failure of the dominant religions in our society.

The leadership of most countries of the world identifies with one religion or the other but their approach to

governance does not highlight what they claim to believe. The expected image of the society that is considered godly by her people is influencing the society positively to the extent that it has become a better place to be for all. Newton Noah Yakubu notes in his book, *Christianity in Nigeria, Ebira land in focus*, “As Christians, our creed should translate into our conduct and our belief should manifest in our behaviours. Our religious experiences should turn into our religious life.” (Yakubu, Newton Noah, 2000,10). However, this is not the case as the number of Churches and Mosques is increasing without the attendant impact.

This does not mean religion has never had any effect on her citizenry in the society or is not doing anything good in the society but the best they offer right now is not good enough. Historically especially in the African nations, there are various degrees of social activities of the foreign religions of Christianity and Islam in which much impact in the society has been made with long-lasting legacies in the area of education, economy, health and other social activities. However, the present scenario calls for a rethink of what the role of religion is all about. As Newton Noah observed, Religion emanated from society and in that case, there is no way she will not have a role to play in the activities of the society. (Yakubu, Newton Noah, 2000, 7). A critical look at the position of Theodore Huggenvik as he handles the means of grace in his book, *Fundamentals of Christian Faith*: We believe, will we automatically present the society as an avenue through which the means of grace is available to the Church and in this case (other religions in the society) is administered. (Huggenvik, Theodore 1950, 69). By this, I mean the state, which is the society that belongs to the

secondary means of grace is certainly an integral aspect of the mission of any religion in the society. By this, it will be abnormal for any religion to exist without a concrete role it plays in the activities of society. To this end, this section will address religion from the societal definition and state a few areas of the activities expected of her in society.

The Definition of Religion

RELIGION: Any attempt to define the term religion is a difficult task because there seem to be variances to the extent that one can hardly say the correct definition. Omoregbe however, notes “It is a well-known fact that religion has no universally acceptable definition.” (Omemoregbe, Joseph 2006, 1). This is because each scholar defines it from his or her field of study ranging from Sociology, Theology, Anthropology, Psychology, etc. Omoregbe in his book, *Philosophical look at Religion*, attempts to bring out what the term is all about. He traced it to its root meaning which according to him emanated from the Latin words, 'Ligare (meaning to bind,' 'Relegere' (Meaning to unite, or to link), 'Religio'(meaning relationship). By this, it is safe to define religion as, an essential relationship, a link established between two people who are the human person and the Divine person, which is God, believed to exist. (Omoregbe, 2006, 2-3). Religion can therefore be considered symbiotic in nature as it involves two persons relating in such a way that the feeling of each person involved is so strong that, the consciousness to be with each other becomes the only thing that matter. This is the reason Omoregbe sees it as a bi-polar phenomenon where on one end, you have the man (the religious man)

and on the other end, the transcendent Being (the deity), which the man believes to exist.

However, when this term is subjected to its activities in society, the best approach should reflect the society or communion which it emanated from. Religion in the context of its activities in society will not be far from the definition given by Emile Durkheim, a Sociologist. From a sociological perspective, religion is “ the creation of the society and went on to say, it is the society that creates religion as a means through which the society can be controlled as peoples' minds are moulded and their thinking is directed towards the rulers. (Durkheim, Emile 1915,207).Drawing from this position of Emile Durkheim, religion therefore should be seen as God's instrument through which the expected activities in society are carried out later. Religion, therefore, exists as an avenue or instrument in this context to ensure that the desire of God for creating people in society is fulfilled. Any religion that fails to influence society in this direction by the above definition is not fit to be called one. It is meant to be a dispenser of God's resources made available to her through effective social services, which will be highlighted below.

The Concept of Society: From Cambridge advanced learners dictionary, 3rd edition, society is defined as, “A large group of people who live together in an organised way, making decisions about how to do things and sharing the work that needs to be done. All the people in a country, or in several similar countries, can be referred to as a society.” By Social service, therefore, we mean services provided for the benefit of the society in question, such as education, medical care, and housing.

These are services aimed at promoting welfare services, which are central to the people, creating a caring, inclusive, and productive **society**. These services vary and are not static as they differ from one organization to the other and from one volunteer body to another by this, there are of public services intended to provide support and assistance to particular groups, which usually include the disadvantaged. They may be provided by individuals, private and independent organizations, or administered by a government agency and religious body, which is the focus of this chapter. (Social Services: <https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-d&q=What+is+social+services> Accessed on 22/07/2022).

SOCIAL ACTIVITIES AND RELIGION

The place of religion in the society especially as it has to do with social activities can never be over-emphasized. As earlier noted Newton Noah Yakubu, notes that religion came out of the society because it is part of the cultural practices of man in the society. Religion, on many occasions, plays a dominant role in the life of the society to the extent that other cultural practices fizzle out into tin air as if they are not in existence. The address of George Washington, the former American President articulated it in his farewell address to the nation:

Of all the dispositions and habits, which lead to political prosperity, Religion and Morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of Patriotism who should labor to subvert these great Pillars of human happiness-these firmest props of the duties of Men and citizens? The mere

politician, equally with the pious man, ought to respect and to cherish them. A volume could not trace all their connections with private and public felicity. Let it simply be asked, where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation desert the oaths, which are the instruments of investigation in Courts of Justice? And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that National morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle. (Richardson, James D. 1907,213)

This is why the social activities of religion in the society are of paramount importance. Earlier on, most of the work of the father of sociology, Emile Durkheim has helped in no small way to highlight the place of religion in the society which made him define religion as the creation of the society. If one goes by this, the best instrument in the society when it comes to social services is religion. From his position, some of the social services rendered by religion in the society that are still relevant are discussed below:

Meaning and Purpose of Life: The life of a man itself is difficult to understand and to add to this are the things

that happen around a man who live in the society. Many happenings call for answers but such answers are hard to come, hence, man's faith and religious practices which he got from his religion help him to get such answers. As religious leaders such as the pastors and the imams explain in the holy books, some of the problems that trouble man is highlighted and the meaning of their existence is discovered to a large extend. Apart from man's religious belief, there is little chance for him to come out clearly in finding answers to what troubles him and what exists for him in the society.

Unity and Stability: The next to this is the unity *and stability* of the society. The society left to itself without a verifiable religion is bound to be in disarray and chaos. Religion plays the role of encouraging them to live in peace with one another. For instance in Christianity, the need to live in peace with one another is heightened as a criterion for making heaven. Heb 12:14-15, “Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness, no one will see the Lord. (NIV). In the holy Quran, from chapter 3, verse 103 reads:” And hold fast to the ... of God, all together, and be not divided. ”In addition, in chapter 2:205, the Quran say, “God abhors any disturbance of peace!” Which means peace is liked by Allah over anything.” It is therefore a clear indication that one of the major social services of religion comes from this aspect of unity and stability in our society. Without this, there will be anarchy and chaos everywhere in society.

Agent of Social Control: As Emile noted, “Religion is an agent of social control and thus strengthens social order.”(Moberg 2008, 95). This is one of the areas that

made people criticize the relevance of religion in Nigeria. Religion teaches people moral behaviour and thus helps them learn how to be good members of society. In Christendom, the ten commandments in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 6, we help Christians to be obedient citizens of the society. Qur'an chapter 4:59, "O ye who have believed, obey Allah and obey His Messenger and the people of authority amongst you. And if you disagree over anything, return the matter to Allah and His Messenger (Muhammad, pbuh) if you truly believe in Allah and the Last Day. That is the best [way] and best in the result." The most vital tools in the society to strengthen order are found in religion.

Abolition of Inhuman Practices: This is the aspect of the abolition of inhuman practices in the society, especially by the foreign religions such as Christian missionaries, that contributed greatly to the abolition of the slave trade and the practice of killing and eating of human beings with reference to Mary Slessor. (Yakubu, Newton Noah 2000, 2). Of recent, the present day Churches and to some extent the Muslim faithful have embarked on some social activities that have a direct impact on many lives in society. They have helped in a rigorous campaign during Covid 19, as both Pastors and Imams have to preach to their followers on the need to take caution to avoid the spread of the disease. In light of the above statement Egbeja Julius in his *Book: Men on Essential Services: Christian Response to a Pandemic*, notes:

We must also be wise enough to watch and this involves taking the necessary precautionary measures as stated in the advice

of the professionals in that field. Using COVID-19 as a study, we are to wear a nose mask, wash our hands and avoid staying in crowded areas. No one should say because I have prayed and fasted, there is no need for the above-mentioned. Our failure in this regard is like tempting God, which as Christians, is forbidden Matt. 4:7. It is our duty to obey all the rules put in place at such times, such as staying at home and others as instructed by the government. We must not over-spiritualize such measures. Doing them will not make us sinful nor are we going to be seen as disobeying God. God instituted those in authority as stated by Apostle Paul in Romans 13:1-5. We should obey them that are in places of authority. (Egbeja, Julius 2020,109)

This is one of the areas religious leaders' played a vital role in sensitizing people on the need to be careful when there is a life-threatening outbreak of diseases in society. Because they are respected, the people in the society easily obey the message.

Politics: This is another area that religion needs to be active. Politics, which has been seen as a dirty game, led us into having bad political leadership in society. Gershinen Paul Dajur in his book, *The Church and*

politics said:

The God of the Church has never been against her involvement in politics because He created her to politicize...to be human and apolitical is a none existing fact.” He quoted Philosophers of old such as Plato and his disciples Aristotle who agreed that human beings is by nature political. (Gershinen 2019, 42).

There is no better way to remedy the politics of any nation than using religion as a tool. The preaching of the religious leaders in the political period ought to carry a political tone as they sensitize people like in Nigeria to get their PVC, vote for the leaders of their choice, and pray for people before, during and after the election etc. This is one of the best activities any normal religion in the society should participate.

Sports: Right from time immemorial, sports and religion have been closely linked. They shared common characteristics of conveying the important values and appropriate societal behaviours in the society. History has it that the original Olympics, which started in the fifth century B.C. and were, of course, Greek, had religious colouration. The activities were connected to the Greek worship of the gods. Everything about it was a religious exercise. It was said to be “a display of religious devotion and worship. Their performances were usually dedicated to the Patron god and the prizes won were religious crowns of olive leaves made from trees in a sacred grove

dedicated to the god of Zeus.”(Kimberly Winston, 2016). The link between religion and sport generally is symbiotic in nature because it is a bipolar kind of relationship by which you see religion on one side and sport on the end. The ceremonial raising of the Olympic flag, the playing of the Olympic anthem (originally titled “The Olympic Hymn”) and the reverential lighting of the Olympic torch are still in place .” (Kimberly Winston, 2016).

While sports have become more secular today, religion continues to have an impact. On a psychological level, studies have shown that religion and spirituality enhance performance in sports. As with any human being, athletes face their fair share of challenges and often cite religion as a key factor in overcoming their adversities. (Illya mclellan, 2008)

There are religious benefits especially when we look into the unifying factors of sports in games such as football, where our colours, races, tribes, and religious affiliations are carpeted at such times. Football many times is like bait for the propagation of a particular religion that is dominant in such an environment. As ministers, we have had a situation where members were assured of getting a television ready for them if they will come to church on Sunday when Nigeria was to play in the finals of the Junior World cup with Spain in 2007. The attendance was doubled and after the first section of the service, those who are addicted to football went in to watch after they had prayed for victory. Luckily, Nigeria won the match on that day. It could be said in simple terms that, football is the new world religion from every indication.

Managers and players are held up like saints and prophets of old and often deliver moments of genius that some would say are biblical in proportion. (<https://bleacherreport.com/articles/59738-the-cultof-football-a-religion-for-the-twentieth-century>). Football is a game that has cut across every nook and cranny of the universe and there is no living religion that could survive without having a link to it.

Kingship: One area religion plays a great role is the Kingship in the society. Kings belong to what in African Traditional Religion, is called 'Specialist.' Others under this category are, Medicine-men, rainmakers, and Priests. These are people who perform religious duties whether in the temple, shrine, sacred grove or elsewhere. (Mbiti, 1969:167). Kings in particular controls social relationship between people in a given community: They govern social activities such as marriage customs and regulations, and the behaviours of people in the community. Their activities in the actual sense cover everyone's lives and tribes in the community and go as far as animals, plants and non-living objects through the totemic system. (Mbiti, 1969:167). The religious side of this as already noted above is displayed through other components of this office which has to do with the priestly role emanating from the religious circle. Just as it is with virtually all religions, it is also the same in traditional religion where, the King is enthroned by the Chief Priest, and plays the role of a seer and a middle man between the King in the Community and the gods. The Kings take the directives of the Priest and religion controls the activities of the Kings in the society.

Religion and Social Ceremonies

Ceremony, however, is a sacred rite, a formal act or a series of acts prescribed by ritual? It is a visual demonstration of a reciprocal affirmation of recognition, responsibility and accountability of a deity to a devotee and a devotee to the deity (spirit). (Turaki, 2001: 148). The purpose is to renew and in some cases restore bonds between the human, gods and fellow man. It is to gain favour from God or gods and to provoke socio-psychology affirmation among the participants.

Naming Ceremony: This ceremony has been there right from the beginning of human existence as we can see in Gen. Chapter 2 where names were given to all the creatures. Reference to the naming of Obed, John the Baptist and Jesus are clear examples of this exercise in the Scriptures. Historically, the naming of a child is very significant, which dates back to the era of superstitions beliefs. Many reasons were given why some children were given names. This varies from one society to another and the meaning as well can't be the same. In the scriptures, we have instances where God directed certain children to be named based on the roles they were going to perform. We have the case of John the Baptist (Luke 1:13) and Jesus (Luke 1:31). (James A. Freeman, 1998:60). In the African context, names are given for many reasons among which could be the period the person is born, the circumstances surrounding the birth, the family name, the living dead and so on. (Mbiti, 1969:119). The ceremony usually attracts many people and during such ceremony, some items are presented to the child prayerfully and most of those items have religious significance. For instance, in Bassa-Nge

kingdom of Kogi State, Bitter Kola signifies the aspect of life, which may not be rosy all the time, meaning life itself has a bitter taste once in a while. Salt and sugar are the opposite of this. Writing materials, which signify academic performance and in the light of Christendom, the Bible, hymns and prayer books are given. During the ceremony, the child's leg is made to touch the ground, which is a sign of possessing the land and also, the child is made to enter and come out of the door of the parent's house which is a symbol of open doors. All these are the wishes of the parents for the child.

Marriage Ceremony: The place of religion in the marriage ceremony cannot be over-emphasized. From the Christian point of view, it was God's idea as recorded in Gen. Chapter 2: 18 and Matt. 19: 1-4. It was to be for mutual love, procreation and in the context of 'a helper meet for man,' for a man fulfilling God's assignment. The ceremony differs from one community to the other with many rites. The religious implications are many. One of such is that it contributes to a strong and successful next generation, improved the physical, intellectual, mental, and emotional health of men, women, and children, and equips them with the values and habits that promote prosperous economic activity. Religious practice is also related to the positive outcomes of marriage for the stability and quality of marriage. (Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher, 2000). Others are greater marital stability, higher levels of marital satisfaction, and an increased inclination. In addition, couples who acknowledged a divine purpose in their marriage were more likely to collaborate, to have greater marital adjustment, and to perceive more benefits from

marriage. Faith in Christian marriage helps couples to deal with difficult times, and are able to find a source of moral guidance in making decisions and dealing with conflicts, and encourages them to maintain their commitment to their marriages. This by no means reduces the rate of divorce and gives room for mutual satisfaction. (Lee G. Burchinal, 1957: 306-310).

Burial Ceremony: Burial permeates all through the various religions in the world. It is a ceremony where loved ones and friends gather to mark the passing of someone. (<https://www.memorialplanning.com/resources/religious-funerals-guide>). In this case, a religious leader will preside over the event and guide mourners through the process of saying goodbye to their loved ones who had departed to the world beyond. At such event, congregants are usually present to help guide everyone through the ceremony and any religious rituals that are associated with the event.

Each society attaches significance to this. For instance, among the Urhobo of Delta State of Nigeria, death is given high regard to extent that, even the women married outside the land are expected to return to their father's land after giving up the ghost. Two stages are noted in their burial rite which is the interment and the last preparation of the soul of the deceased for presentation to his kin and fellow companion in the world beyond. (Usikaro 2017: 150-151). Some communities involve rituals in their practice while in some cases where the Christian religion has taken the upper hand, such is not the case. It is usually a time of merry-making, especially when the deceased had lived to a ripe age.

However, most religions also prescribe a customary colour of mourning which has significance. Some go with white and others may be black or red as the case made be in each society. Very often, the colour that is associated with honouring the departed is either black or white. (<https://www.memorialplanning.com/resources/religious-funerals-guide>)

Religious activities, in this case, are the aspect of providing a context by which a man in the society especially the immediate family of the deceased can understand and cope with the loss. In this case, the faith which comes from their religious belief offers them structure and guidance in their grief. It is also significant to note that religion offers the answer to why a person has to die. In another word, faith in religion answers the reasons why death occurs and points to hope beyond death.

Religious Festivals

By way of explanation, a religious **festival** is a time of special importance marked by adherents to that religion. Religious festivals are commonly celebrated on recurring cycles in a calendar year or lunar calendar. The science of religious rites and festivals is known as heortology. (Scullard,1981:38–39).

In Christendom, there are several festivals which are observed in the church to commemorate particular events in the Bible. Some of these are:

- 1. Advent Season [mid-Nov/Dec]:** The Christian year begins with a period of preparation for Christmas. It is time for looking toward Jesus' second coming

(Parousia). It is also a season of expectation.

2.Christmas [25 Dec - Jan 6] Celebration of Jesus' birth (Nativity): This festival emphasizes the **INCARNATION** ["the Word/Logos was made flesh and lived amongst us."]

3.HOLY WEEK begins with **PALM SUNDAY**, commemorating Jesus' entry into Jerusalem.

4. GOOD FRIDAY is the solemn memorial of Jesus' death by crucifixion.

5. EASTER SUNDAY [April]: This is one of the greatest of Christian festivals. It celebrates the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. [Every Sunday is also a commemoration of the Resurrection.]

6.PENTECOST SUNDAY [WHITSUN] [May/June]. Ten days after the Ascension [50 after Easter], this festival celebrates the gift of the Holy Spirit to the apostles and other disciples. It marks the birth of the Church.

(<http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/history/dfg/jesu/festxtn.htm>).

In the African settings, there are several festivals such as yam festival, age grade, new year, and others.

Festival is an arm of religion in the following ways:

I. Traditional festivals do not only make us who we are but bind us to pass it on from one generation to another within the society such are found.

ii. It brings positivity to man during turbulence in society.

iii. Festivals act like stress relievers and helps us balance our emotions.

iv. It brings various blessings to the communicants.

v. It also provides an opportunity to reduce friction and brings estranged friends and relatives together in a bond of love.

vi. Nothing brings people together as festivals do.

vii. It is a unifying factor in the society where religion and ethnicity are downplayed.

viii. Festivals contribute immensely to feelings of social cohesion.

ix. Festivals have historically been a great source of entertainment especially before the advent of mass-produced entertainment.

x. Festivals are workshops that teach us actual righteousness or moral conduct in the society.

xi. They are opportunities given to the people to learn how to actually perform duties in the society. (Kahar Zalmay, 2017: (<https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/188562-why-festivals-are-important>)). Festival helps our subtle body to gain momentum after death; realize the changes in the nature; increase in devotion through birthday celebrations of Incarnations; gets motivated to do spiritual practice; and enhanced spiritual education.

CONCLUSION

Religion, therefore, is an integral part of the society and for that, it contribute its quota to the society to which it belongs through the above mentioned factors. Although the expectations of the public on religion may not be reached however, the absence of it is a disaster for any society. This is why all the leaders of all the religions that

exist in the society must wake up to their responsibilities to ensure that their activities in the society are carried out to the later. A religion that cannot affect the social life of the society it belongs, has no need to be in existence in the first place and may not live long because it is a symbiotic relationship in which, the religion directs the social activities of the society and the society, in turn, follows the dictate of the religious leaders. A failure on any side will lead to the end of the journey.

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