

## IS RELIGION A CURSE OR BLESSING TO THE WORLD?

**Bisong, Peter Bisong**, *Department of Philosophy, University of Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria.*

Email: [pbbisong@yahoo.com](mailto:pbbisong@yahoo.com)

### ABSTRACT

In the face of increasing religious intolerance and skirmishes in the world, it has become necessary to attempt an answer to this potent question: is religion a curse or blessing to the world? This paper using philosophical/historical analysis believes that religion is more of a curse than a blessing to human beings and the world at large. This implies that a world without religion would be better for humans, plants, and non-human animals.

**Keywords:** World, religion, plant, animals, environment.



© 2020. The author. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-By-NC-ND). Users may freely share and redistribute this work provided that the author and the Journal of Development and Communication Studies are fully acknowledged. Users may not tweak or remix and offer this work for sale. The full license may be accessed at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

---

### INTRODUCTION

Will the world without religion be better than this present world with a variety of religions? This is a big question that could attract divergent answers. The advocates and supporters of religion could argue for religion on the basis that it helps maintain peace; encourage virtuous living; gives meaning and purpose to existence; gives hope to the hopeless, etc. Are these really enough to justify the need for religion in the world? I do not think so! A 'religionless' world to my reasoning would be a better world, a more glorious place to be. Religion has hindered human progress and added significantly to the environmental crisis plaguing the world today. If all humans were atheists, that is, if all did not believe in a god, the world will be safer, healthier, happier, and more developed.

This paper aims at giving out reasons, why religion is a curse to the world. It will not dwell on the perceived merits of religion, for it believes that whatever merit, religion has for the world is dwarfed by its demerits. This paper, however, does not argue for the extermination of religion, it, however, aims at helping the various religionists to see reasons to improve the impact of religion in the world. If there must be religion in the world at all, a better one must be constructed. This paper gives an exposition of the negative impact of religion in the world, it is hoped, will help religion to fare better. This paper is, therefore, inherently not a destructive criticism but a constructive one. Sometimes the faults of a man, when made bare and clear, could instigate him to change for the better. The weaknesses of religion when made bare and clear could instigate positive change.

## **NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF RELIGION ON HUMAN BEINGS AND THE ENVIRONMENT**

As has been alluded to already, the seeming merits of religion are swallowed by its demerits. This will become clearer when we consider how many atrocities, maiming, destructions, killings, wars, a betrayal that have befallen mankind due to religious intolerance. The wars that have been premeditated or motivated by religion and religious crisis combined, could arguably be said to be the highest single cause of death in history. The discord and crisis that have emanated from religious activities are far greater than its attempt at peace. Religiously motivated wars and crises started in the prehistoric period. This warfare started as soon as primitive societies were able to have an organized structure, with their different gods. Warfare between societies at this period particularly the Bronze Age was often conceived as warfare between national gods. This is significantly portrayed by the Trojan War, which according to Homer was a result of a conflict between factions of the gods, and was fought using human armies.

Though wars were seen at these periods as resulting from conflicts between gods, there were examples of wars that were fought chiefly for religious reasons. One of such ancient religious wars was the Sacred Wars waged by the Amphictyonic League that was aimed at protecting the Temple of Apollo at Delphi. Other early religious wars were the conquest of Canaan by the Israelites in the book of Joshua, the conquest of the Amalekite by Saul in the Book of 2 Samuel, the Muslim conquests of the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Christian Crusades of the 11<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries and Wars of Religion that occurred in 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. In the modern era, the religious argument could be seen to predominate wars like the Yugoslav Wars, the civil war in Sudan, the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Syrian civil war, and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The religious wars in history have claimed a lot of lives as shown in the table below.

estimate of death	The highest estimate of the death	Event	Location	From	To	Religions involved	Percentage of the world population
130,000 <sup>[19]</sup>	250,000	<u>Lebanese Civil War</u>	<u>Lebanon</u>	1975	1990	<u>Sunni Muslims, Shiites, Jews, Druze and Christians</u>	
1,000,000 <sup>[16]</sup>	2,000,000	<u>Second Sudanese Civil War</u>	<u>Sudan</u>	1983	2005	<u>Muslim and Christian</u>	0.02%
1,000,000 <sup>[17]</sup>	3,000,000 <sup>[18]</sup>	<u>Crusades</u>	<u>Holy Land, Europe</u>	1095	1291	<u>Muslim and Christian</u>	0.3%–2.3%
2,000,000	4,000,000 <sup>[15]</sup>	<u>French Wars of Religion</u>	<u>France</u>	1562	1598	<u>Protestants and Catholics</u>	0.4%–0.8%

estimate of death	The highest estimate of the death	Event	Location	From	To	Religions involved	Percentage of the world population
e3,000,000	11,500,000 <sup>[14]</sup>	<u>Thirty Years' War</u>	<u>Holy Roman Empire</u>	1618	1648	<u>Protestants and Catholics</u>	0.5%–2.1%

Aside from religious wars that have been undertaken in the name of religion or gods, other killings have occurred severally in history either for love or hate of a religion. The perpetrators believe that what they have done is right because God in their written scripture tells them so. This is true of the men who flew planes on September 11, 2001, into buildings in the U.S.A. killing many, the Pakistan who carried out a murderous rampage in Mumbai, the Bali bombers and more recently the Boko Haram insurgency which has claimed tens of thousands of life in Nigeria. These killings and many more that have ravaged and threatened the world, would not have existed if there was no religion – if all were atheists. The religious have murdered throughout history in the name of their god, I am yet to see an atheist who has killed in the name of atheism. I am not saying here that atheists are not capable of evil like other humans. Every human is capable of killing for different reasons: for political reasons, patriotism, tribe or family, but so far none has killed in the name of atheism. This means a religionless world would have been more peaceful and safe than the present religious world. Nigeria would not have so many nightmares from sects like Boko Haram and others that have come before it (Ogar and Oar 2018).

All killings are motivated by strong beliefs: political, economic, cultural etc. But no belief could arguably be stronger than religious ones. Religions hold onto numerous beliefs, most of which are not rational but in spite of that, the adherents are compelled to hold onto them as dogmas (Edet 2007; Edet 2011; Asuquo 2019). A lot of people have had to willingly allow themselves to be killed as a result of strongly held beliefs – they are called martyrs by the church. They saw death as better than throwing away their beliefs.

Others have been killed because they were perceived as attempting to change the religious beliefs of the people, notable among them are historical figures like Socrates and Jesus Christ (Eyo 2019). Compared to religious beliefs, other held beliefs like political and cultural, have not produced as many martyrs. The readiness to die for a belief is what proves the strength of a belief. More religious adherents are ready to die for their beliefs than others, making religious belief to be stronger and thus more capable of erupting violence. This means that if there was no religion, the violence in the world would have been reduced. Most violent crisis in Nigerian history, especially the ones involving the North and the South have always been coloured by religion. Without religion, therefore, Nigeria will have known little crisis and tension.

Aside from the violence, meted to the world, the stifling of ideas and knowledge by religion, has also been a big curse for the world. It is right to postulate that the world would have gone miles ahead in terms of development in science and technology and other areas of human endeavours, if not for the existence of religion and its limiting effect. Religion in the past had stood firmly in the way of scientific development. Just think of Copernicus who was persecuted for his postulation that the earth and other planets were revolving round the sun and not the other way round as the church had taught and Galileo who was threatened with a ban for postulating that the earth was not the centre of the universe. He was even placed in house arrest until his death (Aigbodioh, 97). Many people who dared put forth theories and ideas that were against the church, were branded heretics and most of them were burned at the stake. Due to this fear of religion, a lot of intellectual adventures that would have revolutionized the world never took place. A lot of highly gifted minds have had to die with their ideas for fear of the church. Spinoza for daring to go against the Jewish religion in his philosophizing was excommunicated by the Judaists (Llyod, 1-3). This deterred many philosophers who played along with the church in their philosophizing. In the Dark Age, the church totally took control of philosophy and

learning and this greatly hampered the growth of knowledge. The Muslims for burning the ancient library buried a lot of knowledge that would have been improved upon to make the world a better place today. In the United States, the ban on stem cell research was for religious reasons.

Religion has tended to put pressure on the government to ban some researches they perceived would invalidate their claims and beliefs, and this has greatly hampered the growth in biological sciences. Unfortunately, most of these religious leaders are not even well abreast with science as to know which stage of research is dangerous to religion, they blindly stop the research at whatever point they want. I am of the belief that if there was no religion in the world, these roadblocks to the free flow of ideas would not have occurred and the world would have been a better place. Everybody is a witness to the tremendous development in science, technology and other fields of knowledge, since the modern period when the church lost control of the world. The world is said now to be moving at a jet speed, thanks to the speed at which ideas are generated. Religion, therefore, had been a curse to scientific development and development in general, and when the curse was removed in the renaissance period, the world has tended to advance much.

The influence of the church on the world has lessened seriously, such that people are now able to publish works and formulate theories that are directly against the church and still move freely in the society. Rather than leading and sometimes coercing the world to follow its path, as it used to be, the world is today leading the church. The church/religion now moves along the lines dictated by the world. In spite of this glaring change in leadership, the influence of the church/religion has not totally gone. Most adherents to these religions are still very strongly gripped by their beliefs, to the extent that most of them almost literally live in the church. When we consider the lost labour/intellectual hours due to the religious activities of people, it will become clearer to us, how much religion has stifled the intellectual and material growth of the world. If there was actually

no religion, all these hours spend in religious activities would be spent in other activities that will contribute to the development of the societies. If the influence of the religion is totally absent, as it would be when there is no religion, and people are totally freed from fear, the strides the world has made today would have been more. The world would have developed more economically, scientifically, technologically, politically, culturally and financially, if there was no religion in the world.

Religion with its emphasis on dogma stifles inquisitiveness which is the hallmark of scientific and other discoveries. In religion, a faithful is expected to receive without questioning and believe without reasoning. It is, therefore, very hard to be a faithful believer and an inquisitive scientist, politician, technologist, etc at the same time. It also implies that it is very difficult to be a faithful believer and an inventor at the same time since invention requires inquisitiveness. Religion drags its adherents with a chain and puts checks and limits to their activities and even reasoning. I have had to contend with a lot of rebukes by many believers, for daring to question the religious beliefs of the people. For them, the reason should not go near faith, for faith and reason do not go together. But should reason not really accompany faith? Faith without reason has been the root cause of most fundamentalism in the world; it has been the root cause of most religious wars and killings; it is behind most religious suicides and martyrdom; it is the reason behind the stifling of ideas and knowledge. Most religious people are so scared of proofing their precious held beliefs wrong, thus, they prefer to bury themselves in darkness, hoping their beliefs are true than to undergo any research that may shake their beliefs. I understand the fact that it could be a great psychological discomfort to have one's faith invalidated by scientific discovery, but it is better to face this discomfort than to live in perpetual ignorance.

I have the feeling that the world would have been more virtuous if there was no religion. Man according to Aristotle is a being led by passion and not reason. Thus, it is difficult to convince him to use rational arguments to do what is good. According to him:

Arguments and teachings, I am afraid, are not effective in all cases; the soul of the listener must first have been conditioned by habits to the right kind of likes and dislikes, just as the land must be cultivated before it is able to foster the seed. For a man whose life is guided by emotion will not listen to an argument that dissuades him, nor will he understand it (Nicomachean Ethics 1179b5-10).

This means that no matter the preaching; no matter the oratory of the pastors, it is difficult to make a man virtuous. Aristotle asserts further:

Words only seem effective with those already in love with the beauty and the noble. The many remain untouched. Words cannot turn them towards what is beautiful and good ... they obey the rule of fear not of shame, and shun what is base not because it is ugly but because it is punished (Nicomachean Ethics 1179b20-30).

He believes that "he who lives as the passions directs will neither hear argument that dissuades him, nor understand it if he does ... in general passion seem not to yield to argument but force" (Nicomachean Ethics 1179b30). For Aristotle therefore, preaching and rational arguments are not enough to make men virtuous, it is not a task of teaching but of forced training. Religion since it employs teaching, by Aristotle understanding, an understanding which I share, cannot suppress the passions and thereby make man virtuous, it is the force of the law that can achieve this. Nigerians for instance, "are very religious people. But religion seems to have no impact in their lives; because almost on a daily basis one hears of cases of people being swindled of their monies, or of people corruptly enriching themselves" (Ushie, Bisong & Odok 3). The world therefore, does not

need religion to instil virtue in people, the proper formulation and implementation of physical laws can achieve this. If we look critically at human beings, we will discover that most of the good we do are not influenced by religious belief. Humans have that natural instinct to do good. If we see an accident, we rush to help the victims not because of the teachings of any religion but because this sight pricks our natural instinct of sympathy. When we see a child drowning, we do not call on our religious teachings before we rush to rescue him/her. So many times we engage in fights not because we were directly affected by the actions of the other but as a result of the instinct of fellow feeling that is natural to man. Many things we do are not done because we are religious but because we were created that way - because we are humans. Sympathy, mercy, love, charity, fellow feeling etc are natural instincts in man, and could either be enhanced or clouded by our experiences in the world. Religion helps cloud than enhance them.

The nonhuman environment also feel the negative impact of religion. Noise generated in the various religious houses not only cause restlessness and stress to humans, it also contributes to the present environmental degradation that is rocking the world (Mendie and Eyo 54; Okafor and Osim 33; Bassey, 2). Noise pollution contributes to diversity loss in plants and animals. According to Fletcher, long term exposure to noise could lead to excessive stimulation to the nervous systems of animals and thereby results in chronic stress that is harmful to the health of wildlife species and their reproductive fitness (1980 614). Noise drives away animals from their habitats and contributes immensely to the current extinction rate. This extinction affects plants as most of them depend on these animals for pollination and the spreading of seeds. Noise pollution thus, not only reduces the biodiversity of animals, but it also reduces that of plants.

Religions also contribute to environmental degradation through it beliefs and teachings, which tend to pitch humans against the environment. In this regards, Schopenhauer writes:

Because Christian morality leaves animals out of account ... they are at once outlawed in philosophical morals; they are mere things, mere means to any ends whatsoever. They can therefore be used for vivisection, hunting, coursing, bullfighting, and horse racing, and can be whipped to death as they struggle along with heavy carts of stone. Shame on such a morality that is worthy of patriarchs, Chandalas, and Melchias and that fails to recognize the eternal essence that exists in every living thing (96).

This sort of morality and teachings that exclude the animals need revision, for a "morality that would sustain the environment needs to include non-human nature. In this morality, an action is not only immoral and wrong if it affects humans but also if it affects the animals, or the plants" (Bisong & Paul, 17). Church and other religious buildings also contribute to an environmental crisis like rising in sea level, flooding, deforestation, global warming, tsunamis etc. Religious houses which are increasing everyday deplete forest trees and consequently lead to deforestation and its attendant effects. There is, therefore, no gainsaying the fact that, without religion, the environment will be less degraded.

## **CONCLUSION**

Religion is not without its merit. One point I cherish about religion is its capacity to spread hope where there is no hope. Even in hopeless cases, where a man's situation has been certified by medical experts to be hopeless, a pastor will still say to the man words like nothing is impossible for my God; as long as Jesus lives you shall be healed; Jesus is the doctor of doctors, he does what no man can do, etc. This may not actually make sense and in most cases, the patient dies, but at least he/she would not die wretchedly. It makes death easier and fearless for the patient. By imbuing hope in the patient, the patient's fears will be lifted and this is the best time to die.

But is this enough reason, to let religion exists? I do not think so. Without religion, humans would definitely build their hopes on something else. They would always find what would sustain their happiness. A dying man could still die happily knowing that his children have been well catered for, or that his life has not totally been worthless. Humans are constituted in such a way that, they can construct their life around anything. Religion in the form we have in this world is a curse, rather than a blessing. It is a chain around the neck of the world. It is like an open wound that refuses to heal or a mosquito at the back of human beings. If religion must exist in the world, it must be reconstructed to positively affect society, rather than hampering it.

## WORKS CITED

- Aigbodioh, Jack. *Philosophy of Science. Issues and Problems*. Ibadan: Hope Publications, 1997
- Aristotle. "Ethica Nicomachean." *The Basic Works of Aristotle*. Ed. Richard, 2001.
- Asuquo, Offiong Offiong. "Humanism as a Category of Religious Alternative." *GNOSI: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Human Theory and Praxis* 2.1 (2019): 30-36.
- Bassey, Samuel Akpan. "Technology, Environmental Sustainability and the Ethics of Anthropoholism." *Przestrzeń Społeczna* 1 (2020): 19.
- Bisong, Peter & Joseph Paul. "A Philosophical analysis of the Impact of Christianity on the Environment." *Journal of Environmental Design and Construction Management*. Vol. 5 no. 3, June, 2015, 111-119.
- Edet, F. F. "Jesus in Africa." *Sophia: An African Journal of Philosophy* 10.1 (2007): 156-163.
- Edet, F. F. "The contribution of religion to national development: A case study of living Faith church aka Winner Chapel". *Sophia: An African Journal of Philosophy* 10.2 (2011):91-97
- Edet, Mesembe Ita, and Samuel Temitope Segun. "The Natural Law Theory in Traditional African Jurisprudential Thought." *JL Pol'y & Globalization* 26 (2014): 44.

- Edet, Mesembe. "A Case for the Abolition of Capital Punishment in Nigeria." *Ndunode: Calabar Journal of Humanities* (2003): 137-150.
- Eyo, Emmanuel B. "Servant Leadership and Its Ethical Challenges." *Journal of Integrative Humanism Vol 7 1* (2016).
- Eyo, Emmanuel Bassey. "Jesus Christ the philosopher: An exposé." *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* (2019), 20-27
- Fletcher, J. L. "Effects of Noise on Wild Life: A Review of relevant Literature 1971-1978, pgs 611-620". *Proceedings of the Third International Congress on Noise as a Public Health Problem*. Ed. Tobias, G. Jansen & W.D. Wards. A.M. Speech. Language-Hearing Assoc, Rockville, 1980
- Llyod, Genevieve. *Spinoza and the Ethics*. London: Routledge, 1996
- Mendie, Patrick Johnson, and Emmanuel Eyo. "Environmental Challenges And Axiology: Towards A Complementary Studies In Eco-Philosophy." *Journal of Integrative Humanism 7.1* (2016): 144-150.
- Ogar, Tom Eneji, and Joseph Nkang Ogar. "Psycho-Social Factors of Terrorism in Nigeria." *GNOSI: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Human Theory and Praxis 1.1* (2018).
- Okafor, Justus Onyebuchi, and Osim Stella. "Hinduism and ecology: Its relevance and importance." *Fashanu Journal 1.1* (2018).
- Schopenhauer, Arthur. *On the Basis of Morality*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1998.
- Ushie, Abel, Peter Bisong & Joseph Abang. "Aristotle's Concept of Virtue in the Context of Contemporary Nigeria". *Journal of Philosophy, Culture and Religion*. Vol. 7, 20.