

THE ISSUES OF CONTENTION BETWEEN RELIGION AND CULTURE IN AFRICA:
A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

BY

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the contentious issues in the relationship between religion and culture. This relationship appears to have been cordial and crucial for the corporate existence and development of the society. Although religion and culture are closely knit, there are issues of contention between them. However, these are two concepts or phenomena that exist together for the good of the society. In discovering the issues, the researcher adopts the literary method of study and examines the subject from that perspective. This paper revealed that there is culture in religion as there is religion in culture. These two elements of society (religion and culture) play different roles to keep the society functional. Notably too, religion give meaning to culture. However, our findings suggest the checking of the excesses of culture over religion to help develop a peaceful and socially conducive atmosphere for the people. This paper further recommends that religion should be given opportunity to shape and reform culture for the benefit of man.

Introduction

The penetration of new religious movements into peoples' culture has resulted in the introduction of cultural innovation. Although these innovations are those of recent and considered useful to people of a particular group as shown in their behaviour, the challenge remains that there are areas of contention between the two. It is true to say that cultures are susceptible to attack by several forces including religion. However, there are forces that encourage change and those resisting change. These forces jointly affect culture in one way or the other. These characteristics relate to both socially organized formations and everyday experiences, these are also concerned with the sustenance of cultures and systems within existing formations, which are also changeable.

According to Amadi (1982 1), in spite of man's technological advancement or

"... impressive advances in science, [man] is still deplorably ignorant and the universe is largely a mystery to him. He does not understand the nature of space and time, he does not know what matter is made of, if indeed it is made of anything, above all, he does not understand himself. Some of these puzzles are by their very nature, impossible to unravel, and this is one of the main reasons why man resorts to religion.

This means therefore that culture, too, is limited in answering man's puzzling questions. It also means that religion helps interpret man's culture, giving it meaning and helps alleviate man's fears.

By this view of Amadi (1982 2), "religion answers questions that culture could not. To say "God merely represents all that we do not know about the universe" is an over statement. This is because there is religion in culture. If this is true then there is God in culture, which includes visible things. There is clear link between religion and culture in the African context. Writing on *Christianity and Igbo Culture*, Ilogu (1974 41) says "that all Ibos, Christians as well as non-Christians, acknowledge this link with our patrilineal ancestors in the pouring of libation and in the giving of pieces of kola-nut." This statement gives strong indication that religion and culture exists together in Africa.

The relationship between religion and culture cannot be overemphasized. Religion relates with the entire society in a complex and paradoxical way. It demonstrates as a passive reflection of existing social realities, and a powerful, pervasive response to same. Religion acts as a social force, challenging, opposing protesting against, demanding and even effecting the change and transformation of existing social structure. According to Prayer (2006 155), "in many traditional Nigerian societies, religion is central to the social life" of the people. He affirms that "Religion is inextricably tied up with the people's culture (162). As a result of this closely knit relationship and the individual conceptual difference between religion and culture, there exist serious contentious issues that this paper attempts to highlight and proffer solution.

Defining Religion

The problem of defining religion is the challenge that everyone who attempts a research on religion will have to face. Weber (1957 1), a German Sociologist, says, "it is not possible to start a study of religion with an examination of the problems of definition". According to him, to define religion, or to say what it is, is not possible at the start of a presentation. Therefore, this work attempts a definition here from the beginning of this article as a methodological necessity. The reason is to give this work a guide and provide a framework to which the ideas are driven.

Man, considered from the socio-religious perspective has a dual nature. He is both spiritual and social. Through the spiritual he seeks communion with the sacred world. With the social nature, he seeks fellowship with others and a supportive community. This dual relational nature of man gives religion the etymological definition which exposes the significance and gives better understanding of the phenomenon – religion.

Etymologically, there are three Latin words "*religare*," "*religio*," and "*religere*" which are considered as the derivative of the English word "religion" (Idowu 1973 2). According to Idowu, "*Religare*" refers to that which binds (in the sense of being bound to what is worshipped); "*religio*" speak of a hindrance that one cannot escape from; and "*religere*" has to do with something that is recurring in the sense of a verdict which man cannot ignore no matter the level of his development (2). It (*religere*) also means to gather in the sense of community of faith (example is the church or Christian community) coming together to perform its sacred rites and duties.

A sociologist, Berger (1967 338) offers a definition of religion that says "...the belief in a cosmos, the meaning is both transcendent and includes man." Berger (1967 338) calls this a "valuative" definition. Martin Luther follows suite in giving another "valuative" definition of religion thus, "that to which thy heart clings steadfastly, that truly is thy god" (qtd. in Brown 1973 4). These definitions, along with other valuative definitions deal with what religion ought to be.

Another way of defining religion according to Berger (1967 340) is descriptive or substantive. This type of definition according to Yinger (1970 4) is clear-cut, and reasonably easy to apply. Such a definition naturally draws attention to the differences among religions as distinct historical entities, and places emphasis on religion as a cultural system. Iwe (2003 2), in his own scholarly manner defines religion as,

... man's natural and innate consciousness of his dependence on a transcendent super-human Being and the consequent natural and spontaneous propensity to render homage and worship to him, a configuration of doctrines, laws and rituals by which man expresses his loyalty to a transcendental being – the absolute God.

It is possible to continue listing the definitions but what is common in all the different definitions is the fact that religion deals with man's relationship with the Supreme Being (God). Religion gives guidance to man in his moral life and it is the custodian and manager of man's social values. Religion is what sustains man's knowledge of one greater than him whom he (man) could rely upon. One who is all-knowing and trustworthy and develops in him the inclination to render homage and worship to him. It is a vital element to human existence and gives man the ability to understand the unexplainable.

However, for the purpose of this article, it is necessary to adopt a definition of religion from the Webster Online Dictionary, which is somewhat new, comprehensive and simplified, which is quite relevant to our discussion. It defines religion as,

...a system of beliefs based on humanity's attempt to explain the universe and natural phenomena, often involving one or more deities or other supernatural forces and also requiring or binding adherents to follow prescribed religious obligations. Two identifying features of religions are ... (a) require faith and (b) seek to organize and influence the thoughts and actions of their adherents. Because of this, some contend that all religions are to some degree both unempirical and dogmatic and are therefore to be distrusted (n.p)

Defining Culture

Similar to Religion, culture is another phenomenon that is latent with meanings. Although there is no single universally acceptable definition of culture, there are common traits in available definitions by scholars. Tylor (75) defines it as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." This definition encompasses a wide range of areas of human life. It identifies culture as a way of life of people in any society.

The definition that contains all the ingredients necessary to provide good understanding of the topic is that given by Hiebert (2006 374). He defines culture as “the more or less integrated systems of beliefs, feelings and values, and their associated symbols, patterns of behaviour and products shared by a group of people.” The pattern of behaviour means the way people do things that are peculiar to their community. For instance in Nigeria as a form of greeting some tribes shake hands with all, some shake hands with male and embrace the female, others prostrate to greet the elders while others bow for same purpose.

Culture can be considered as the entire social custom of humanity; it is the convention of a certain people, a way of live acquired and transmitted by members of that particular group or people. Understanding the concept of culture is the key to understanding human behaviour. The phenomenon comprises objects such as artefacts, buildings and house hold crafts, and so on. People live in natural environments and must adapt or mould it for their own purposes. Most traditional societies live in an environment largely formed by nature. In complex industrial societies, much of the human environment is culturally moulded. Human behaviour and material objects are readily observable. Consequently, they are important entry points in our study of a culture. Culture should therefore be understood as shared principles, social heritage that make up the people’s way of life. Every human society functions effectively as propelled by various elements of culture. It is the peculiarities of a people of particular geographical locations. Culture is so complex that defining it becomes an arduous task for a scholar. According to Ojetayo (101), “if it is taken to mean the way of thinking and behaviour shared by a substantial social grouping which gives them identify in relation to others, then it is obvious that all persons participate in one culture or another.”

Relationship Between Religion and Culture

Alala (2008 83-92) sees religion from an anthropological context as “a complex and sensitive cultural phenomenon” (83). He sees religion as a social institution with a long history. As a scientific discipline with the focus to explore human culture, anthropologists over the years have paid attention to the evolution and formulation of belief systems. The anthropologists view religion as social machinery that is indispensable to an orderly society. According to Murphy (1989 187),

Religion is long established in human culture. Certain burial practices indicate that our Neanderthal precursors believed in afterlife and it is safe to assume that religious acts, thoughts, and sentiments arose long before their time... activities and attitudes that we classify as religious are universal in contemporary cultures [and] form the simplest primitive world....

According to Okon (2008 20):

Culture is a reflection of the spiritual dimension of social life. It is the key to understanding the people’s cognitive world and primordial values. Culture enriches man’s intellect through spiritual values. It expresses man’s creativity, aspirations and hopes. It helps comprehend man’s vital problems more deeply, and helps deal with them more effectively.

Hiebert (2006 376) gives an illustration of the heart of culture. He points out four areas in culture which include beliefs, feelings, values and allegiances. According to him:

Shared beliefs about the nature of reality makes communication and community life possible; culture also has to do with the feelings people have – with their notions of beauty, tastes in food and dress, likes and dislikes; culture includes the values by which people judge the experiences of their lives. These values determine what is right and wrong, what is good and what is evil, in the culture.

From the forgoing, the purpose and preoccupation of culture is man. Culture enhances the interest of man and the value of human existence. Culture is only meaningful through man. “It is inconceivable without man and man’s life inconceivable without it. Man manifests and affirms himself as a conscious thinking, active being by means of culture. Culture by affecting man and social development, displays its transforming function in relation to nature, society, and man himself” (Arnoldov 1988 252).

On the relationship between religion and culture, Zunini (1969 145) says, “...no culture has appeared or developed except together with religion.” In line with this assertion Iwe (1992 146) affirms that culture is inseparable from religion. Furthermore, Iwe (1992 146) adds, “...consideration of religion as a culture ‘product’ is therefore only comprehensible in the sense that every culture possesses a religious sense. But this does not mean that culture and religion is one and the same thing.”

Speaking on the origin of religion it is reasonable to begin with the fact that there is no religion without man and no man without religion, therefore man and religion began together. This assertion means that religion grows and develops together with culture or as Akpan (2010 29-38) puts it, “religion is an outgrowth of human relations and has great impact on the society” (30). It is a child of nature but transcends nature, a creature that experiences disorder and incoherence but who also thinks about the struggles with it. It is an aspect of the human spirit (Tillich 1964 5).

Speaking on the role of religion in society, Akpan (2010 29-38) posits that religion has impacted greatly in modifying our cultural heritage. There are certain aspects of human culture that were disreputable and obnoxious before the advent of Christianity (31). Uchegbue contends that “beyond the destruction of tyrannical costumes, Christianity paved the way for the evolution of a new culture in the areas of material, social, economic, scientific, technological and medical systems” (52). The above are indications of the power of religion over culture. Although religion and culture may originate and grow together with humanity, religion certainly overshadows culture, shapes it, and expands the level of cultural viability in society (Uchegbue 2011 52).

Similarly religion comprises of logically arranged of beliefs, standards and deeds, assimilated by people of the same community. According to Bodley (2008 1), “These patterns are systematic because their manifestations are regular in occurrence and expression; they are shared by members of a group. Within all religions, however, there is not homogeneity; there are differences of interpretation of principles and meanings” (Encarta web source).

Religion has contributed so much in modifying our cultural heritage. Iwuchukwu (qtd in Akpan 2010 29-38) expressed the same view when he says: "Religion has also impacted greatly in modifying our cultural heritage. Africans were deep in the practice of their religion most of which permitted acts such as ritual sacrifices, immolation, killing of twins and the use of the deadly *esere* beans to detect witches..." (33). This co-operate existence of religion and culture is an indication that one cannot exist without the other. With the existence of the two concepts the principle of "checks and balances" is clearly observed.

Issues of Contention Between Religion and Culture

With the Christian childhood, the researcher has firsthand knowledge that Western religion seeks to alienate the believer from his/her culture because this person must act with the mind that focuses on heaven or the hope of spending eternity in heaven. In recent times, there have been religious based wars in various countries of the world including Nigeria. Some countries, particularly in the Middle East view the West as infiltrating their culture forcefully with Christian culture under the guise of bringing democracy. For that reason, Muslims who form the majority of the people of the area see it as a threat to their known culture and sometimes view it as an aggression. In countries with Christian majority, Christianity is also affecting government policies and laws. It is quite clear in today's world that there is war between cultures. There is the feeling that a new perspective on the interaction of religion and culture is required if the world is to survive this current global turmoil.

Cultural differences have posed serious challenge to missionary activities of religions such as Christianity. Going to other culture, the language of that people becomes the first challenge. The challenge of giving meanings to certain religious terms like "sacred" is bound to arise. In Christianity 'sacred' may refer to the place of worship (sanctuary or temple) and other worship materials but to the people in different cultures, sacredness may refer to the importance of life itself. Bodley (2008 1) explains further that, "'supernatural' implies that there is a realm of the world (the natural) and the realm of the super— (beyond the natural). This is a concept that is well-defined in the West, but of little significance in many other cultures...."

Despite the positive impact these phenomena (religion and culture) have on each other, there these areas of contention exist between them. When either religion or culture decides to exerts unnecessary influence on each other, there will be negative reaction that will result in conflict. According to Akpan (2010 29-38), when Christianity came to Africa it superimposed its principles on African culture. This act was viewed as an insult on the integrity of the African people. What it meant was that Africans who became Christians were only putting on white culture over black culture (34).

Another area of contention is that when two or more religions express conflicting opinions about a particular element in the culture of the people, culture is left at the mercy of the stronger religion. In Nigeria the culture of polygyny is frowned at by some Christian denominations but accepted by Islam and African Traditional Religion, and some indigenous churches. As a result polygyny still thrives in the Nigerian society.

Harmony Existing Between Religion and Culture

It is worth noting that the level of progress and achievement man has made and the results of his ingenuity in the physical world are evident in culture. Culture exposes man's inherent qualities. This is the evidence that man is naturally resourceful. On its part religion introduces the source of society and culture. According to Arnoldov (1988 252), often man does not realize his spiritual and moral resources as the creator of both society and culture.

Critical Appraisal

It must be acknowledged, the role religion has played in our society. Culture has been refined by religion and made it more acceptable, while some aspects of culture has been destroyed or 'killed.' Religion which is considered spiritual should strongly control culture, which is the physical. It could be seen that in the western countries like the United States of America, Christian principles have become the culture of the people; in Saudi Arabia, we see Islamic tradition (Sharia) has become the way of life of the people. It therefore means that the real culture of the people is overshadowed by religion. The problem here is that such countries are made unfavourable for people who are not practitioners of the religion in control.

The advantage of culture to man must be acknowledged. Its preoccupation is man. It expresses man's nature, essence and social meanings. It enhances the interest of man and the value of human existence. Its progress connotes the development of society's moral, spiritual and intellectual perfection of people to achieve the aim of harmonizing the natural and social environment (Okon 2008 21). For these purposes, religion should assist culture to develop. Culture as well should provide enabling environment for religion to thrive.

One characteristic of culture given by Murdock (1957 23) says, "culture is gratifying." This means that culture satisfies basic needs of man. However, because of culture's inability to accept change easily it becomes "conservative" (Murdock 1957 23). Culture must be prepared to accept change in view of the religious pluralistic nature of our society. Religion must also be able to influence culture positively. It should present a non-condemning posture and not accept aspects of culture that does not promote man's progress, respect for sanctity of life and human right. Culture must be prepared to grow out of primitivism and embrace reforms and key into the modern scientific and technological advancement of society.

Conclusion

Religion and culture need to continue to exist together in view of the numerous advantages to the society. Both have roles to play in the sustenance of human life and relationship with both man and the divine. With the principle of checks and balances existing in such partnership, the two must exist together. The spiritual dimension should be encouraged to uphold good morals and reform the culture to the benefit of the people thereby keeping such good cultures alive.

Religion must play its role of reformation and not elimination. Religion must stand or rise against culture that humiliates and oppresses man, destroy environment, disrespects human right and encourages violence.

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