

## **Unpacking Religion, Ethics and Society: Lessons from Nigerian Experience**

By

**Kalu, Chukwuma Amogu PhD**  
**Department of Religion and Cultural Studies**  
**Faculty of Humanities**  
**Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu Alike, Ebonyi State**  
**Email Address: [dr.akaschukwuma@gmail.com](mailto:dr.akaschukwuma@gmail.com)**  
**[kalu.amogu@funai.edu.ng](mailto:kalu.amogu@funai.edu.ng)**  
&  
**Rev. Fr. Moses Patrick Sade, PhD.**  
**Department of Sociology, Faculty Social Sciences**  
**Ritman University, Ikot Ekpene, Akwa Ibom State**  
**Email Address: [iniabasimoses82@gamil.com](mailto:iniabasimoses82@gamil.com)**

### **Abstract**

Religion, Ethics and Society are tripartite human reality all over the world particularly in Nigeria. The increase in scientific and technological advancement across the globe is moving the world from the state of religiosity, morality and integration to that of secularism. In view of this trend, there is little or no regard for religion, ethics and societal issues. This is leading to a decline in the relevance of the value of religion, ethics and society. Religious traditions, beliefs and practices, ethical values and societal norms that used to be the hallmark of society are fast being eroded. The objective of this paper is to examine the relationship between religion, ethics and society. To achieve this objective, the paper employs a historical survey approach involving primary and secondary sources of data collection. The primary sources of data collection comprises of information obtained from oral interviews and secondary sources of data collection involves obtained from oral interviews and secondary sources of data collection involves information obtained from journals, books, Internet materials and conference papers etc. The paper in its findings noted that one of the aftermaths of the decline in the recognition of religion and ethics to the society is the increase in social and moral problems, corruption, juvenile delinquency, sexual immorality, ritualism, economic exploitation, insecurity, criminality and ethnicity. The paper concluded that there is need to bring to the fore the relevance of religion, ethics and society in order to create a morally stable society

*Keywords: Unpacking, Religion, Ethics, Society, Traditional, Experience and Lesson.*

### **Introduction**

Religion is profoundly typified in the Nigerian concept of life, the world and universe. Religion is so strong that a nation's religious beliefs affect her economic, social, cultural, educational, health, political and judicial processes. Religion has been the root of ethical values and societal norms (Kalu, 2013:119). Religion plays a significant role in the lives of people all over the world and religious practices of some sorts are evident in every society. That makes religion a "cultural universal" along with other general practices found in every culture. Currently, an estimated four (4) billion people belong to the many religious faiths of the world (Williams et al, 2008:1)

Ethics and morality are the norms of every decent society, and we must begin to acknowledge their importance in our own society as the bedrock on which a wholesome, efficient, just and prosperous entity can be built (Alli, 2002). Basically, ethics is a systematic study of human actions and intentions in order to determine their goodness or badness, correctness and incorrectness and with attention given to such course of action and intention being evaluated affects the person who performed the action or showed an intention in question, the person at which it is directed, and the society or the environment where the action is performed or the intention is muted (Ayantayo, 2009: 4; Smith, 1997:7)

A society is a group of individuals involved in persistent social interaction or a large social group sharing the same spatial or social territory, typical subject to the same political authority and dominant cultural expectations. Societies are characterized by patterns of relationships (social relations) between individuals who share a distinctive culture and institutions. Societies construct patterns to behaviour by deeming certain actions or concepts acceptable or unacceptable. These patterns of behavior within a given society are known as societal norms. Societies and their norms undergo gradual change (Wikipedia, 2023).

A society where the individuals live is above the individuals always. There is something that is above the individual and the society. In relation to religion, ethics and society, Durkheim claims that what is sacred is society which is always represented in practice by religious sacred objects. As society changes structures, also its religious symbols change, its ethics change and society changes also. This trend shows the tripartite nature of religion, ethics and society (Durkheim, 1915).

Based on the aforementioned reasons, it is pertinent to bring to limelight that religion, ethics and society are gradually changing with its attendant effects on both the people and the society. Therefore, the paper is aimed at unpacking and carrying out a critical examination of religion, ethics and society: Lessons from Nigerian experience.

### **The Concept of Religion**

The question of what religion is, has been one about which no consensus of opinion exists. It has so far defied any precise definition, a defiance that is perhaps, accounted for, by the changing nature of the subject. Religion usually has to do with man's relationship to the unseen world. It is an inescapable involvement of every member of the human race. The word religion may be said to be derived from any of these three Latin words:

- a. **Religere:** This means to read again and again, that is, to do much study of something, to observe conscientiously or to study closely. If this derivation is accepted, religion therefore signifies an attentive and deep study of and concern for matters pertaining to God and the divine (Anyanwu, 2004:1)
- b. **Re-Eligere:** This means to choose once more or again, to select as one's own. In this case, according to St. Augustine, Religion signifies that one chooses once more God whom one has lost through sin (Anyanwu, 2004:1).
- c. **Religare:** This means to unite oneself again, to bind oneself to something, hence, it means to bind ourselves fast to God or the divinities in worship and adoration (Anyanwu, 2004:2).

From this assertion, religion is widely defined by Emile Durkheim (1915) and quoted by Anyanwu (2004), as a system of beliefs and practices which cluster around the sacred which unites the followers into a single community. Religion is described as man's awareness of the existence of a Supernatural Being whom he believes to be his creator and controller of the universe and his willingness to worship Him through intermediaries, solitariness and in group (Ibenwa, 2014:2).

As human societies have evolved over long period of time so also have religions. Each of the world's religion, in its own distinctive way, has conferred a sacred meaning upon the circumstances of a peoples' existence. In Nigeria, religion is a strong social mobilizer and factor. Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion are the dominant religious organizations and traditions. As religion and society evolve, a sense of sacredness takes concrete form in objects and images that become sacred, whether these are persons, animals or natural objects, human artifacts or symbolic expressions (Williams, 2008: 20).

### **Meaning of Ethics**

Ethics is the principle of human conduct or behaviour as it relates to what is right or wrong in human society (Kalu, 2023:5). According to Idang (2013:79-80); ethics is also called moral philosophy. For him, ethics deals with values relating to human conduct and human character. It is the philosophical study of moral judgments. It seeks to establish and rationally defend a universal valid theory of what is right or wrong, good or bad. Moral philosophy (ethical issues) is concerned with what is virtuous, just, morally right, morally good and proper. Ethics evaluates what is unjust, morally wrong, morally bad or evil and morally improper. Ethics is interested in those conducts and in questions such as what is the good judgment? What is good or bad? What is right or wrong?

Ethics or moral philosophy provides good intellectual training which enables people to analyze and evaluate moral and ethical problems arising from human conducts in the society, we would be in a position to evaluate such problems as well as recommend better ways of understanding and tackling them. For example, every profession has its ethics such as legal, medical engineering, business, sports, aviation, teaching ethics etc. (Idang, 2013:80)

A chronological survey of ethics can be traced back to the early Greeks. The sophists who were professional teachers of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC held that moral judgment must be supported by reasons and that rules of conduct must be rationally justified. Socrates (469-399BC) was concerned with the good life for man. He believed that man will not fail to act in a virtuous manner if he possesses the knowledge of the essence of virtue hence his diction "Virtue is knowledge". For Socrates, no man does evil willfully.

For Aristotle who ascribed three special moral tenets to Socrates based on the following:

- (a) Virtue, moral excellence, is identical with knowledge, and for that reason, all the commonly discriminated virtues are one thing;
- (b) Vice, bad moral conduct, is therefore in all cases ignorance, intellectual error,
- (c) Wrong –doing is therefore always involuntary and there is really no such state of soul as that which Aristotle himself calls "Moral weakness" knowing the good and yet doing the evil. Aristotle believes that the good life for man is the life of happiness. For Aristotle, happiness consists of pleasure. However, Aristotle insisted that in the search for happiness, people should do so moderately. Aristotle was the first great ethical naturalist.

### **The Meaning of Society**

In trying to understand the concept of society, it is good to break it down into its basic elements. The basic elements of society are three: population, territory and social organization.

- a. **Population:** A society has a population, while groups and organizations have members. The societal population is the self-perpetuating inhabitants of territorial areas. Population of a society shares a culture and views itself as one people. Population is a major characteristic of a society.
- b. **Territory:** A self-perpetuating societal population inhabits a given territory on a relatively permanent basis. Such a territory is the largest within which reproduction is common and residence is relatively permanent.
- c. **Social Organization:** A societal population in its territory is involved in complex processes of social interaction. It carries on a set of activities – economic, political, educational, religious, health and cultural spheres that organize social life. Each of these several social activities becomes a partly independent structure of social relations with their own specific characteristics. Yet these institutions overlap with each other, link together and share much in common, for they are activities carried on by the same population. These components give us a definition (Williams, 2008: 2-3)

Therefore, society is all of the systems of social interaction carried on by population within a specified territory. Human society is the outcome of collective adaptation to a natural environment, a process of finding how to live cooperatively in such a way as to make nature yield enough to sustain life. The nature of Nigerian society is so complicated that the practices of religion, culture and ethical issues have raised so much concern that needs urgent attention.

#### **The Challenges of Religion, Ethics and Society: The Nigerian Experience**

Several researchers and people have tried to explain the problems militating against religion, ethics and society. However, it is worthy to note that Akinpelu (1983), noted that the Nigerian moral problems and ethical disorientation was as a result of ideological shifts. There was a shift from traditional egalitarian communalism to individualism and from African humanism to materialism. Individualism and materialism are products of the European and American value system now adopted by the Africans with the attendant negative ethical implications. According to Arinze (1990), what Nigeria is lacking is ethical orientation, morality and religious awakening. There is ever-growing erosion of moral and ethical principles in our society. Okolo (1993) in his own observation noted that Nigerian problems are basically religion, immorality and value disorientation, pointing out that perhaps the most glaring one is excessive love of money. Achebe (1998) blames the Nigerian problems to the failure of leadership.

Ethical malaise or moral decadence, religious problems and other social problems are the major challenges of Nigeria. Corruption for example in Nigeria, gave rise to the crisis and collapse of ethics, ethical values and societal norms. Many Nigerians have seen the terrible effects of the crisis and collapse of ethics and ethical values in the country on the social, political, legal, educational, economic and religious aspects of the nation's life (Kalu 2013:127-129). Also, the excessive love for money which

led Nigerians into other mundane values, and which caused multiple problems in the Nigeria society should be avoided by Nigerians.

The practice of electoral fraud, violence and rigging as witness in the 2015, 2019 and 2023 elections which allowed voting candidate who are not qualified for leadership positions but are elected on the basis of their wealth, religion, social status rather than moral integrity and ethical character is a challenge to religion, ethics and society. Electoral fraud refers to any illegal or unethical activity intended to manipulate the outcome of an election. This can involve various forms of deceit or misconduct during the voting process, either to alter the results in favour of a particular candidate or part or to undermine the integrity of election. Some common examples electoral fraud include: voter impersonation, voter suppression, ballot stuffing, vote buying, misleading voters and electronic voting tampering. On the other hand, electoral violence refers to the use of force, intimidation, or threats to influence the outcome of an election or to disrupt the electoral process. Electoral violence involves physical harm, coercion or fear directed at voters, candidates, election officials and political supporters. Also, election rigging is type of electoral fraud where the election process is deliberately manipulated to produce a desired outcome, usually to ensure a particular candidate or party wins.

The practice of religion in Nigeria has been that of conflict-of-interest oppression, marginalization and intolerance. Religion has created a lot of intolerances and conflict between Christians and Muslims as well as Traditional Religious worshippers. Religion has created social inequality through gender inequality and tribalism, Nigeria has witnessed so many religious conflicts right from inception. There is also commercialization of religion in Nigeria, prosperity gospel and the get rich syndrome leading to money rituals particularly amongst our youths has become a major problem of Nigeria.

#### **The Role of Religion, Ethics and Societal Norms in the Process of Re-Building Nigeria.**

The application of religious traditions, ethics and societal norms are the values Nigeria as a nation needs most at the present for national development in the face of political instability, economic hardship, religious conflicts and host of other social problems. Associated with the respective religions, ethics and society are the prevalence of certain prescribed or recommended and forbidden courses of action, which as a matter of duty must be integrated into social, political, religious, cultural and economic aspects of life. Therefore, this section examines the role religion and ethics in the development of society based on Nigerian experience

1. **Love:** This is a religious virtue and principle as well as an ethical/moral obligation for social living. All religions preach love as a condition for a good society. Love manifests in several ways. Love in religion presupposes love for God and fellow men. In traditional religion, love for fellow men manifests in the African concept of brotherhood. Brotherhood presupposes being one's brother's

keeper, which also involves helping the needy, and the poor. Love is a key to social integration and cooperation. Nigeria is at the brink of collapse and what the nation needs now is the virtue of love. Love conquers all sorts of societal problems. This is why in traditional societies, the family and the entire community act as agents in inculcating morality in Nigeria in dealing with several unethical practices, such as stealing, lying and disunity conceived as socio-ethical issues (Ayantayo, 2009:70:71, Okafor, 1974:14)

2. **Cooperation:** This implies co-partnership where there is cooperative spirit, there is always growth of fraternity, solidarity, fellow-feeling, voluntary association, coalition, mutual assistance and reciprocity. Nigeria has lost the value of cooperation which existed in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Nigeria has disintegrated based on religion, tribe and political affiliation. In Traditional African society which is deeply rooted in African Traditional Religion, ethics and social norms, cooperation among members is encouraged. In Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion, cooperation is recommended. Cooperation is an ethical value which manifest in interpersonal relationship at local, national and international levels. The need for cooperation has informed the history of alliance among various tribes in Nigeria (Ayantayo, 2009).

3. **Honesty:** All religions preach about honesty and honesty is an ethical principle in every human society. Honesty means the act of sincerity, that is, being sincere to oneself and to others in the course of one form of interaction or the other at every given time. In daily social interaction, society regards as honest, anything that is substantially or categorically true; that is, a fact that is true to life. Honesty, therefore, goes with truthfulness, uprightness, sincerity, and straightforwardness. The religious basis for honesty is that social relation is based on trust. Every form of relationship is based on trust because relationships have to do with the past, the present and the future. Honesty or truthfulness connotes righteousness, courage, forgiveness, humility and justice, truth-telling etc. Honesty touches all aspects of life and that is what Nigeria needs at the moment (Nzeako, 2006).

4. **Tolerance:** Tolerance is a by-product of cooperation. It simply suggests accommodation of views, opinion and people different from us. It implies that people are not the same in terms of traits, opinion, sentiments and thoughts. In all religions of the world especially in Nigeria, Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion, tolerance is recommended because of its potentiality in promoting cordial relationship. Tolerance is an ethical factor enhancing cordial, human and social relations in Nigeria. Tolerance is anchored on the concept of “live and let live” in which both the rich and the poor are entitled to co-exist.

5. **Justice:** This is the principle of liberty, freedom, equality and fair-play. Justice implies also that we must endeavour to defend innocence and to promote justice and truth among mankind. It

connotes equality of all persons irrespective of race, colour, sex, language, religion, birth and origin. All religions of the world and ethical principles preach justice as a virtue. Justice is seen as the moral basis for human and social relations especially in business, economy, politics, religion, social and cultural spheres. Nigeria is saddled with the problem of injustice. The application of justice in the Nigerian Socio-political, economic and cultural Spheres is important now that the country is in search of justice and national unity. (Sigmund, 1952:780; Ayantayo, 2002).

6. **Respect:** This is a religious and ethical principle to hold, honour, to esteem, to regard and value others. It is an act of identifying and appreciating the existence and work of others. Accepting the existence of others besides us in any society or setting is the basis of respect. We also have self-respect and mutual respect. Religion and ethics teach about respect and sanctity of human life, the fundamental human rights, human dignity etc. Religion and ethical values recommend respect for those in authority. We should respect the religion, views and opinions of others for mutual cooperation and existence (Ifemesia, 1979:2).

7. **Patience and Perseverance:** The word patience is derived from patient, which means to show restraints, to sustain, to repress. It also means to pacify, and to make one's mind easy. The value of patience is indispensable in man's relationship with circumstances of life or circumstances which surround man in his earthly enterprise. Patience is an integral part of perseverance. Perseverance means to persevere. The impression is that whatever situation religious people are passing through, they are expected to be patient and persevere to the end. Therefore, the two virtues are to be incorporated into the daily living of Nigerians in anticipation of the future especially in this difficult economic and political instability of country.

### **Conclusion**

Understanding the connection between religion, ethics and society is the crux of this paper. The functional interpretation has been the dominant one. It asserts that every society has a number of necessary conditions that it must successfully meet in order to survive and these include: cohesion or solidarity of its members. Religion provides this function for society. Religion performs the role of social control, social change and social support in many societies. Sharing of religious beliefs creates moral cohesion and thus makes society morally legitimate, (Wilson, 1969; Schaefer and Lamm, 1997; Mckee, 1981).

From the findings of this paper, we understand that ethical value regarding the rightness or wrongness of something or an action. Ethics and ethical values are relevant to national development in several important ways. When Nigerians abide by ethics and ethical values, they would not indulge in economic sabotage, corruption, fraud and other criminal vices. In other words, handling the national resources, wealth and funds with honesty, accountability and truthfulness would certainly enhance sustainable development in Nigeria. Ethics eradicates selfishness and make citizens and leaders render selfless services to the people and nation. Furthermore, a nation that has leaders who are grounded with ethics, ethical values and principles, has no doubt, filled a crucial condition for a morally stable and functional society. Finally, ethics and ethical values would minimize crimes and corruption amongst the citizens and the leaders.

In conclusion, the paper noted that the application of religious principles, ethics and ethical values constitute the bedrock on which Nigeria as a society can be built and sustained devoid of religious conflicts and ethical malaise. Religion, ethics and society are tripartite and therefore inseparable from each other as they play complimentary role to each other for the society to function well.

### **Recommendations**

From the findings of this paper, the following recommendations are made as a way forward:

- I. Government should make the study of religion compulsory at all levels of education and to ensure it is embedded in the curriculum of the schools for moral education.
- II. Government should create a Ministry of Ethical Values and orientation to re-orientate and create a new moral and ethical value for our leaders and citizens.
- III. There should be a synergy between religious beliefs, practices, and values as an instrument of development and not as a tool of disunity, instability and conflict.
- IV. Finally, religion and ethics should be the bedrock of Nigeria's development and must be inculcated in the citizens from childhood. It is recommended that the findings of this paper should be published for further researches, reference purpose and policy making.

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