

**HARNESSING RELIGION AS AN INSTRUMENT OF SOCIAL CHANGE IN NIGERIA:  
EXPLORING EXAMPLES AND ILLUSTRATIONS**

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**Abstract**

This research delves into the multifaceted role of religion in driving social change within Nigeria. Through an extensive examination of various examples and illustrations, including its impact on the economy, politics, education, and security, the study explores how religious institutions, leaders, and teachings shape societal norms, values, and behaviours. Employing a comprehensive data collection strategy, which integrates both primary and secondary sources, the research incorporates personal observations, oral interviews, and a thorough review of published and unpublished materials. Utilizing a qualitative research method, encompassing cosmological, historical, and sociological approaches, the study aims to provide a nuanced interpretation of the data, facilitating a contextual understanding of religion as an agent of social change and its transformative influence on Nigerian society.

**Introduction:**

Religion in Nigeria transcends mere beliefs and practices; it permeates every aspect of societal existence. Despite Nigeria's secular status, it hosts some of the world's largest Christian and Muslim populations, reflecting the profound influence of religious identity. As Africa's most populous nation, Nigeria's religious fervor profoundly shapes social dynamics and impacts various facets of life. (Yesufu, 2016)

Apyewen (2020) highlights the constructive role of religious beliefs, practices, and doctrines in fostering human development and peaceful coexistence. However, religion in Nigeria serves as more than just a source of individual spiritual fulfillment; it acts as a potent force for both continuity and change.

Moreover, Nigeria's deeply entrenched religious landscape holds significant implications for social cohesion, identity formation, and collective action. Despite the absence of an official state religion, religious affiliations profoundly shape individual and communal identities (Seul, 1999). The coexistence of Christianity and Islam in Nigeria underscores the nation's religious diversity and the intricate dynamics of interfaith relations.

This study therefore, employs a comprehensive data collection strategy, integrating both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include personal observations and oral communications. Secondary sources comprise an extensive review of published and unpublished materials, including journals, textbooks, online resources, articles, and other library materials. The research adopts a qualitative research method, incorporating cosmological, historical, and sociological approaches to analyze the collected data. This multifaceted methodology facilitates a nuanced interpretation of the data, ensuring a thorough exploration of this work.

**Religion as a Catalyst for Social Change in Nigeria**

Religious beliefs, institutions, and practices wield significant influence in shaping and driving societal transformation. Religious institutions serve as essential pillars in addressing societal needs and bridging gaps in service provision. They offer a wide range of social services, including healthcare, education, and welfare support, which contribute to positive development outcomes and societal advancement.

In Nigeria, religion serves as a dynamic force that impacts attitudes, behaviors, and social structures, leading to shifts in norms, values, and practices that contribute to both positive and negative changes across various domains of life (Okobia et al, 2016). Religious organizations in Nigeria play a pivotal role in addressing gaps left by

inadequate state governance and underfunded public institutions. They not only provide essential services and benefits but also serve as key agents of social change. These organizations offer both “communal good” exclusive to members of their religious communities, and broader public goods, extending charity and social services to the wider community, regardless of religious affiliation. (Yesufu, 2016). It is important to emphasize that different religious body like Roman Catholics, Anglicans and Pentecostals has established orphanage homes, old people’s homes, food banks and schools to assist the poor in the society.

### **Religion and Economy**

Thomas Weber, a prominent German sociologist, economist, and politician of the 17th century, is renowned for his argument that religion serves as a catalyst for social change. His seminal work, "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism," posits that capitalism emerged in Northern Europe as a consequence of the Protestant ethic's influence on individuals' attitudes towards work and wealth accumulation. (McKinnon, 2010)

Weber contends that the Protestant work ethic, characterized by values such as diligence, thrift, and the pursuit of worldly success as a sign of divine favor, played a pivotal role in shaping the economic landscape of Northern Europe. Under the influence of Protestantism, large segments of the population were motivated to engage in secular work, establish their own businesses, and participate in trade and commerce. (Weber et al, 2002)

This emphasis on hard work and economic activity, driven by religious beliefs, facilitated the emergence of modern capitalism. Individuals, guided by the Protestant ethic, were spurred to accumulate wealth not merely for personal gain but also as a means of fulfilling their religious obligations and demonstrating their virtue. Hence, this individualistic approach to religion, laid the groundwork for the development of what Weber termed the "Protestant work ethic." And through this lens, religion serves as a catalyst for social change by shaping individual beliefs, values, and behaviors, which in turn influence broader societal structures and institutions. (Shea, 2015)

The Protestant work ethic, rooted in Calvinist theology, inadvertently contributed to the emergence of capitalism by promoting a culture of hard work, frugality, and entrepreneurial spirit. Weber's analysis highlights the complex interplay between religious ideas and economic development, illustrating how religious beliefs can have far-reaching implications for the organization of society and the economy (Steenkamp, 2013).

Also, in Nigeria's religious landscape, almost all religious doctrines especially Christianity often emphasize material prosperity as a divine reward for faith. Success in areas such as business, politics, and career is viewed as evidence of holiness, fostering social norms of reciprocal giving and generosity to the religious community (Smith, 2021). This phenomenon has led to societal pressures to demonstrate wealth and contribute generously to religious causes.

Similarly, within Islam, the concept of zakat underscores charity and wealth redistribution as obligatory duties for all Muslims. Zakat serves as a means of providing social protection and solidarity within the Muslim community, as well as supporting collective well-being. It promotes principles of social justice and equity by ensuring wealth is shared with those in need, thereby fostering a culture of communal support and mutual assistance. (Ganiyev, & Umaraliev, 2020)

Hence, religious teachings and practices regarding prosperity and generosity among various religious communities in Nigeria act as powerful agents of social change. They advocate principles of charity, solidarity, and communal well-being, thereby addressing societal needs, filling gaps in service provision, and nurturing a culture of giving and mutual support. Consequently, religion plays a crucial role in fostering positive development outcomes and advancing society as a whole.

### **Religion and Education**

The concept of religion as an instrument of social change is vividly illustrated through the lens of education in Nigeria. Religious institutions, such as the Islamic Education Trust (IET) and Christian missionary schools, have played pivotal roles in advancing education and literacy, particularly in underserved rural areas. By providing access to education, these institutions empower individuals, foster social mobility, and catalyze economic development within communities.

Christian and Islamic education, as highlighted by scholars like Obilom (1989) and Azuakor (2019), respectively, emphasize moral values and intellectual development to nurture good citizenship. They instill principles of sacrifice, love, and peaceful coexistence, promoting social cohesion and harmony. Moreover, they go beyond religious teachings to encompass various academic disciplines, thereby contributing significantly to societal development.

The contributions of individuals like Samuel Ajayi Crowther, who spread Christian education among freed slaves, exemplify how religion can serve as a catalyst for social change. Their efforts, alongside those of missionary schools, laid the foundation for Nigeria's educated elite, who in turn contributed to national progress and development. (Mazabane, N. (2020)

Furthermore, the recognition of education as a fundamental tool for development underscores the transformative role of religion in societal advancement. Musa (2016) emphasizes education's significance in human and material progress, highlighting its pivotal role in nation-building.

In essence, Christianity and Islam serve as potent agents of social change in Nigeria by promoting education, moral values, and community development. Through their educational initiatives, religious institutions contribute significantly to the country's overall progress, illustrating the transformative power of religion in shaping societies for the better.

### **Religion and Politics**

The idea of religion as an instrument of social change in Nigeria is also exemplified through its profound influence on politics. In the post-independence era, religion has significantly shaped the political landscape, acting both as a unifying force and a source of division. It serves as a potent tool for mobilizing citizens and shaping political discourse and provides a sense of identity and community cohesion, allowing individuals to rally around shared beliefs and values. (Umeanolue, 2020)

This has been evident in Nigeria, where religious groups have played pivotal roles in advocating for social justice and political change. For instance, the 2015 general election in Nigeria witnessed a significant shift in the political landscape, as religious sentiments and hegemony from northern Nigeria exerted a profound influence, overshadowing the traditional political demographics of the country. (Akpanika, 2019).

This influence was particularly evident in the overwhelming support garnered by candidates from the northern region, driven largely by religious affiliations and perceptions. The political discourse during this period was heavily colored by religious rhetoric, with candidates leveraging religious identity and symbolism to mobilize voters and secure electoral victory, as a result, the religious dynamics of the northern region played a decisive role in shaping the outcome of the election (Oboh, 2017). Highlighting the potent influence of religion on Nigeria's political landscape during this period, Onapajo, (2016) thus observes:

The 2015 general elections provided another arena for religion to be used for electoral gains. The political elites employed religion proficiently as part of their campaign and mobilisation strategies, which was further encouraged by the coincidental climate of perceived religious terrorism orchestrated by Boko Haram fighters who claim to be on a mission to Islamise Nigeria. (p. 133)

Religious leaders frequently utilize their platforms to engage with matters of governance, exerting influence over political outcomes, social disparities, and human rights issues. Through their teachings and advocacy, they mobilize their followers to actively demand accountability from political leaders. This underscores the role of religion as a powerful instrument for effecting social change, as it empowers individuals and communities to challenge injustice, promote equality, and advance societal progress.

Moreover, religion has been instrumental in shaping cultural norms and fostering social values that promote peace, compassion, and equality. Religious teachings emphasize principles of justice, compassion, and solidarity, which can serve as guiding principles for political action. When religious values are integrated into the political sphere, they can inspire policies and actions that promote social justice and uplift marginalized communities. Niazi, Z. (2023)

However, the politicization of religion has also been a source of division and conflict in Nigeria. Political leaders have often exploited religious sentiments for their own gain, exacerbating tensions and undermining national unity. Sectarian violence and religious intolerance have been fueled by political actors seeking to manipulate religious identities for political purposes, leading to widespread unrest and instability. (Nwobodo, 2023)

Despite the challenges it faces, religion has caused more problem in Nigeria's politics. Through the utilization of religious values and teachings, both individuals and groups have the capacity to champion positive transformations and strive towards the establishment of a fairer and more equitable society. Consequently, the intricate interplay between religion and politics in Nigeria underscores the dynamic nature of this relationship,

which mirrors the broader societal and political dynamics within the country. In essence, religion serves as a catalytic agent for social change, influencing the direction and outcomes of political processes and contributing to the evolution of Nigeria's social fabric.

### **Religion and Insecurity**

The role of religion in security as an agent of social change is multifaceted and complex, depending on how it is interpreted and practiced within a given society. Hence, despite its emphasis on peace, religion can also be exploited to justify and incite violence. Extremist interpretations of religious teachings may be used to mobilize individuals and groups to engage in violent acts, including terrorism, insurgency, and communal violence. In such cases, religion becomes a destabilizing force, exacerbating insecurity and posing significant challenges to social stability and cohesion (British Academy, 2015).

In recent decade, religious fanaticism and extremism have emerged as significant drivers of insecurity in Nigeria, particularly through targeted attacks on mosques, churches and Christians in the Northern region by Muslim extremists. These violent incidents have resulted in widespread fear and instability, rendering several states in the north hazardous for residents and their properties (Sampson, 2021). The destructive impact of these extremist actions is evident in the profound words of (Chiebonam, & Nwando, 2018): "Religion has unleashed on mankind...it has left in its wake, a heavy toll of destroyed lives and wanton destruction of property. It has delayed workable political agreements and brutalized societies." (p.182)

Indeed, religion, when manipulated by extremists, has become a catalyst for negative social change in Nigeria (Agbibo, 2019). Communities once characterized by harmony and coexistence are now fractured and divided as people are forced to live outside the previously established order. The fabric of society has been torn apart by violence and fear, leading to displacement, trauma, and profound disruptions to daily life (Banban, 2018). In this context, religion has become a tool for perpetuating conflict, undermining social cohesion, and eroding trust among different religious and ethnic groups.

Hence, it is evident that the proliferation of religious fanaticism and extremism in Nigeria has resulted in significant adverse outcomes. This phenomenon has compelled both individuals and communities to navigate through a transformed reality marked by fear, violence, and social turmoil. The detrimental effects of extremist ideologies have fractured the societal framework, leaving in its wake a legacy of discord, suspicion, and instability. Thus, it becomes apparent that this manifestation represents a negative facet of social change within Nigerian society.

### **Conclusion**

Religion in Nigeria stands as a potent force for social change, driving initiatives across education, women's empowerment, healthcare, conflict resolution, and environmental conservation. By leveraging religious teachings and the influence of religious institutions and leaders, transformative impacts are realized, fostering positive development outcomes and societal advancement.

Moving forward, collaboration between religious and secular stakeholders is crucial for maximizing religion's potential as a catalyst for social change and sustainable development. As Nigeria grapples with various social, economic, and political challenges, religion emerges as a powerful force for resilience and transformation. Religious institutions and leaders often play pivotal roles in addressing societal issues, mobilizing communities, and advocating for positive change.

From education, politics and insecurity, religion permeates every aspect of Nigerian life, offering avenues for collective action and social progress. Concrete examples and illustrations reveal how religion serves as an instrument of social change in Nigeria, whether through grassroots movements, interfaith collaborations, or advocacy campaigns. Religious actors leverage their moral authority and spiritual influence to advance causes that promote justice, equity, and human flourishing. Overall, the impact of religion on social change in Nigeria is profound, with Christianity and Islam playing central roles in promoting education, moral values, and community development. Through their efforts, these religious institutions and individuals have contributed significantly to the progress and advancement of Nigerian society.

Therefore, religion in Nigeria is dynamic, shaping and reflecting the evolving contours of society. By recognizing and harnessing its transformative potential, Nigeria can address pressing challenges and build a more inclusive, resilient, and prosperous future for all its citizens.

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