Confluences of Religious Tributaries: Navigating the Role of Religion in Nigeria's Socioeconomic Development

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Abstract

This study conducts a historical analysis of Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion (ATR) in Nigeria, exploring their contributions to socio-economic development. Using qualitative methodology, it examines their transformative impacts on society, addressing their roles in nation-building and economic progress. The enduring influence of ATR on cultural norms, governance, and socio-economic practices is emphasized. The research employs cultural diffusion perspectives, revealing hybridization in religious practices. The study recommends a nuanced approach to religious pluralism in Nigeria's development agenda for inclusive and sustainable progress.

Keywords: Christianity, Islam, African Traditional Religion, Socio-economic Development, Nigeria.

Introduction: Does Religion Matter?

Religion holds a vital place in every human community. The instinct to reach out for something greater and more powerful in times of crisis is a fundamental and widespread human impulse (Kalu 1989:11). Scholars widely acknowledge that at the heart of any religion lies the belief in the Ultimate Reality, Supreme Being, or God (Oates 1957:113). No human civilization has ever existed without recognizing the significance of religion. Edmund Soper (1921) emphasizes this viewpoint, stating:

> To understand any people or any man, to trace the history of civilization, or the growth of a custom, religion must be called to

> give its testimony, or we fail to probe the deepest springs of conduct and the controlling forces of human endeavor. (15).

As such, religion, as a human phenomenon, is an integral part of the everyday life of Nigerians. There is no separation between the sacred and the secular aspects of life. Every activity is rooted in religion. This religiosity is expressed in their embrace of three major world religions: Traditional Religion, Christianity, and Islam (Nabofa 1989).

This paper aims to objectively explore the contributions of these religions to Nigeria's growth and development. In other words, how have African Traditional Religion, Christianity, and Islam influenced Nigeria's development, particularly in terms of the standard of living for its people?

Nigeria's Religious Space

Arguably, Nigeria was and is never a secular state. This is because there is no aspect of the Nigerian state that does not draw from the religious atmosphere created by the three major religions found across the geographical entity. Hence, when one looks at every part of the nation, one easily notices a prime place given to any or all of these three dominant religions; namely, African Traditional Religion (ATR), Christianity and Islam.

African Traditional Religion

Before the advent of Christianity and Islam in Nigeria, ATR was the dominant religion across the land. In this belief-system is the existence of the Supreme Being, Divinities, Ancestors, Spirits, and Afterlife. This structure became the pillar upon which the religion stood, maintained the cordiality between the spiritual and physical worlds, and regulated everything including morality. As religion set the code for almost everything, all institutions in the society were religious-oriented. There was no demarcation between the sacred and profane (Idowu 1973).

The society ran on these principles without daring to alter the structure. The people believed that moral values are not human creations. Hence, man should use his conscience to behave in good way in order to avoid the wrath of the gods. Mbiti (1975) captures it thus:

> Morals guide people in doing what is right and for both their own sake and that of their community. They help people do their duties to society and enjoy certain rights from society. It is morals which have produced the virtues that society appreciates and endeavours to preserve, such as friendship, compassion, love, honesty, justice, courage, self-control, helpfulness, bravery and so on. On the other opposite side, morals sharpen people's dislikes and avoidance of vices like cheating, theft, selfishness, dishonesty and so on.

From the above, morality enhances integration such that no member of the society sees himself as complete without the other members. An individual may have certain personal morality; however, the social moral values guided his choice and actions.

Christianity

Early missionary activities in Nigeria began between 1472 and 1621 when the kings of Portugal launched pioneering missionary enterprise in the Kingdoms Benin and Warri. Similar attempts were also made at entering Bomo and Hausa lands by Catholics and Protestants alike. These primary attempts did not yield any lasting fruit. It was from the 1840s that efforts that yielded positive fruits began, as Samuel Ajayi Crowther led the Niger Expedition. Remarkable in this move was the holistic approach that bagged the "Bible and the Plough" together. Thus in this strategy commerce, education and agriculture were included as part of the Gospel of Jesus that Africa needed in other to conquer un-civilization (Galadima and Turaki 2001).

The impact of this approach indeed yielded the expected results even in the face of challenges. The people, to whom the gospel was brought, picked interest in developing legitimate trade, got equipped for their independence through education, developed the vision of Venn's three *selfs,* and thus the foundation for a vibrant Christianity was laid.

To the Nigerian, Christianity from onset went beyond the recitation of some catechisms or mere expression of beliefs. Far from this, Christianity in Nigeriarode the back of African pragmatism. In other words, for it to make impact, Christianity

took the centre stage in the daily lives of the people to get established. This accounts for the success it has recorded, claiming the adherence of over 45% of Nigerians.

Islam

Islam means total submission to the way and will of Allah. It also means peace with your Creator, peace with yourself, peace with your fellow human being, and peace with all other creatures (Abbas 2). Islam is established on five pillars in which everybody has to believe and practice, before he is considered a Muslim. They are stated as follows:

i Belief in oneness of Allah and the Prophethood of Muhammad (SAW)
ii Five daily prayers
iii Giving of the obligatory alms (*Zakat*) to the poor, the needy and the other beneficiaries as spelt out by Allah in the Qur'an (Qur'an, al-Taubah:60)
iv Fasting in the month of Ramadan; the ninth month in the Muslim lunar calendar.
v Performance of pilgrimage to Makkah at least once in a life time for those Muslims who have the means.

Unlike the African Traditional Religion and Christianity, Islam emphasizes implicit monotheism, the concept of worshipping the Supreme Being, Allah without any intermediaries. This is because Allah is the creator of the universe and its contents including this world and the hereafter, He alone deserves to be worshipped.

According to Fafunwa (1992), Islam was first accepted by the Kanem ruler Umme Jilmi who ruled between 1085 and 1097 at the hand of an eminent Muslim scholar Hammed Muhammed Mani. But the real Islamisation of Borno took place during the reign of Mai Idris Aloma (1570-1602). Islam was brought to Hausa in the early fourteenth century by traders and scholars, but, not until 1463-1499, during the reign of Mohammed Rumfa, that it became firmly rooted. This time Islamic principles were taught in different places. It was during this time too that Muslim scholars from Timbuktu came to Kano to teach and preach Islam. It was this Islamic education which gave cultural prestige to Islam. Currently, it claims more than 46% of the population of Nigeria.

In the case of Nigeria, a country characterized by a rich tapestry of religious diversity encompassing Islam, Christianity, and indigenous belief systems, Cultural Relativism becomes instrumental in unraveling the dynamics at the confluence of these religious tributaries.

By embracing Cultural Relativism, scholars can adopt a methodological approach that eschews ethnocentrism and recognizes the legitimacy of varying cultural norms. This approach fosters a nuanced examination of how religious ideologies influence attitudes toward socioeconomic development. In Nigeria, where religious affiliations often intersect with ethnic identities, the theory allows for a comprehensive analysis of the multifaceted ways in which religion shapes economic policies, educational systems, and social structures.

Furthermore, Cultural Relativism encourages scholars to navigate the complex terrain of religious pluralism in Nigeria, acknowledging the divergent perspectives and practices within different religious communities. This nuanced understanding is paramount for comprehending the potential synergies or conflicts arising from the interplay of religious influences on economic progress, social cohesion, and governance.

In essence, employing Cultural Relativism as a scholarly lens facilitates a sophisticated exploration of the role of religion in Nigeria's socioeconomic development. It enables researchers to delve into the specificities of religious dynamics, appreciate their cultural embeddedness, and decipher the intricate interconnections that contribute to the nation's complex developmental landscape.```

Contributions of Religion to Nigeria's Socio-economic Development.
Christianity

I) Dignity in Labor

In the context of Nigeria's socio-economic development, the Christian concept of the dignity of labor plays a vital role, emphasizing the intrinsic value of work based on biblical teachings (Genesis 2:15; Ephesians 4:28). The Protestant work

ethic, influenced by Christian principles, emphasizes virtues like hard work, diligence, and responsible stewardship (Moltmann, 1981), suggesting that productive labor is not just a moral duty but also contributes to personal development and societal well-being.

Max Weber's "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism" explores the link between Protestant values, particularly the Calvinist and Puritan work ethic, and the rise of capitalism. This aligns with biblical principles and Apostle Paul's emphasis on industriousness (2 Thessalonians 3:10-13, ESV) (Weber, 1905).

Apostle Paul's teachings reinforce the idea that labor is integral to Christian living, echoing the Protestant work ethic and its emphasis on the dignity of labor for individual and societal fulfillment. In academic discussions, recognizing the dignity of labor within Christianity aligns with the broader theological understanding of vocation, promoting responsibility and respect for all forms of work (Moltmann, 1985). The implications of the foregoing are palpable. Christians are exhorted to engage in legitimate means of livelihood. These values have fostered a strong work ethic among Christian professionals, academics, civil servants, entrepreneurs, and artisans, all contributing to the economic growth of the country.

The very beginning of modern Christian missionary activities in Nigeria were motivated not only by the desire to introduce Christianity but also to bring European commerce and civilization (Ajayi 1965:10). The 'civilizing mission', advocated by Thomas Buxton, aimed to replace the slave trade in Africa with Christianity, commerce, and civilization. Buxton argued that missionaries and teachers should serve as agents of civilization and agriculture. Christian missionaries enthusiastically took up this challenge, arriving with 'the Bible and Plough', and introducing new crops like cocoa and cotton, among others, as a means of 'tapping into the abundance of Africa's resources'.

While the material gains from this mission were limited, the vision was later championed by Henry Venn of the C.M.S. Venn wrote in 1857:

> We hope that with God's blessing on our plans a large body of "Native" growers of cotton and traders may form an intelligent and

> influential class of society and become founders of a kingdom which shall render incalculable benefits to Africa and hold a position among the states of Europe' (Sanneh 1983:68).

The convergence of these perspectives underscores the ethical dimensions of labor within Christianity, contributing significantly to Nigeria's socio-economic development narrative.

ii Education

Venn's plan aimed to develop an African middle class who would be leaders in society, church, commerce, and politics. He proposed the establishment of industrial missions to teach practical skills like new cropping methods, carpentry, masonry, and more. A parallel innovation was to be initiated within the church, ultimately making it self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating.

Economic considerations continued to influence the establishment of schools by Christian missions. According to Lamin Sanneh (1983), educational endeavors were driven by the ideal of instilling respect for the dignity of labor (151-152). Other missions followed the example set by the C.M.S. For instance, the Roman Catholic Mission founded the Topo farm in Badagry in 1875. Here, inmates were taught the Christian virtue of industry. In 1895, the Presbyterians established the Hope Waddell Training Institution in Calabar, a school with a comprehensive outlook, placing emphasis on technical skills like carpentry, coppering, dressmaking, and naval engineering.

According to Hadi (2006:6), through contribution of its educational institutions especially their technical, commercial and vocational schools, religion sometimes exerts a direct positive influence on economic progress, ushering in new forms of economic activities, new types of employment opportunities, new services and products. In the mass media industry, for instance, the Church was a pioneer institution by launching *Iwe Irohin Yoruba*, a CMS paper, as the first newspaper in Nigeria in the 19th century and other magazines like the "Catholic Life" in the 20th century. Igbolekwu (1981:177) notes how Noting how Christian missionary education and evangelism gave rise to missionary involvement in the book

industry by remarking that such development "marked the beginning of printing and publishing in Nigeria".

Christians have also been pioneering in the establishment of higher institutions, such as polytechnics, colleges of education and universities. For example, many recently approved private universities are owned by denominations like Babcock University (Seventh Day Adventist), Bowen University (the Baptists), and St Paul's University (the Anglicans). These institutions engage in research, scientific and technological development, complementing the efforts of existing universities in improving the living standards of Nigerians and driving economic growth.

Industrial development

This forward-looking plan led to the establishment of a cotton gin in Abeokuta in 1859, which processed cotton for export. Similar institutions were set up in Onitsha in 1861 and Bonny in the 1890s. These training centers shared the same ethos as the Abeokuta project. Before its collapse, the Abeokuta project boasted around 300 gins and more than five presses, leading to an increase in cotton exports (Sanneh 1983:136).

Later, from the time some African churches seceded from the CMS and promoted economic development through agriculture and 'legitimate' trade. One of the founders of the secessionist African church, J.K Coker, emphasized the link between agriculture and Christianity by establishing extensive cocoa farms. For instance, his cocoa farm at Ifako had over 30,000 seedlings. By the early 20th century, J.K Coker was one of the wealthiest Nigerians, with an estimated annual income of £20,000. He also owned valuable property in Lagos and Ebute-Meta. Thus, J.K Coker exemplified Venn's dual vision of economic self-sufficiency and ecclesiastical self-rule (Sanneh 1983:137). This may explain why, before the 'oil boom', cocoa was the cornerstone of the Western Region's economy. Similarly, Shendam, earned the reputation of introducing the cultivation of yams in the area in the early years of the 20th century. Now that the Shendam district of Plateau State has become one of the greatest yam producing areas in Nigeria, it is interesting to note that an aspect of socio-economic development has arrived on the wheels of religion (Nwosu 1988).

In contemporary times, churches continue to foster economic growth through various business ventures. They have established transport facilities, printing presses, bookshops, computer and Internet facilities, hospitals and clinics, orphanages, craft centers, among others. All these endeavors aim to enhance the standard of living for Nigerians and promote overall economic development.

Social Cohesion and human development

The Bible, in numerous verses, extols the virtues of honesty, industry, and the dignity of labor. For example, II Thessalonians 3:16 cautions against indolence and laziness, urging Christians to engage in legitimate means of livelihood. These values have fostered a strong work ethic among Christian professionals, academics, civil servants, entrepreneurs, and artisans, all contributing to the economic growth of the country.

Christianity as a religion exhorts its adherents to virtuous deeds, thereby playing a very vital role in facilitating development in Nigeria. Some of these virtuous deeds are: peace, politeness, honesty and transparency, truth and justice, courage and patience, forgiveness, sympathy, leniency, and doing good to others, love and sympathy to mention a few (Abbas 14). Hence, through honest leadership, Christianity plays a crucial role in combating crime and corruption, particularlyin the political sphere. Akin Omoyajowo (1978) succinctly states the task of Christianity in a developing country like Nigeria:

> The alleviation of human suffering and the achievement of an abundant life for all... (and) the elimination of the social causes of suffering, ... care for the victims of social injustice and misfortune as well. This concern for just relationship in society is one aspect of the compassionate ministry of Christ... (97).

Islam

Islam, like Christianity, has played significant roles in stimulating growth and development in Nigeria. The Quran contains numerous verses emphasizing the Islamic message in growth and development. For instance, al-Quran 2.60 states, "Eat and drink of that which God has provided and act not corruptly, making mischief in the world." This implies that Islam encourages Muslims to enjoy the blessings provided by God without imposing specific limits on the extent of

growth and development in society. Thus, the pursuit of material well-being is regulated within acts of virtue.

i). Education

Adeyemo (1979:9) defines education as the skill and experience, which one acquires from the time he was born up to the time, he dies. It entails an all-round development of an individual;- spiritually, morally, socially, intellectually, economically, politically and so on. With its supply of ethics and morality, religion as a specific system of belief or way of worship plays a very significant role in making education to be very functional and very relevant to the commandments of the Supreme Being. From this point of view, in Islam education provides such ethical values that make education successful in achieving its purpose. These values include: quest for education in order to serve Allah, the Almighty, and to offer services to humanity, self-reliance, courage, sincerity, justice, kindness, sympathy, simplicity, honesty and many other ethical values. When these and many other moral values are in the content of education, it becomes relevant to the needs and aspirations of the society. Through education, the contributions of Islam to the development of Nigeria are no longer hidden. Many Islamic schools, and higher institutions dot the educational landscape of Nigeria. These include Islamic economics have found itself established in some Nigeria universities especially from the 1970s, as a "social science, which studies the economic problems of a people imbued with the values of Islam". Khan (1994:33) opines that "Islamic economics is aimed at the study of human *falah* achieved by organizing the resources of the earth on the basis of cooperation and participation". As scholars of repute are developed in this field of knowledge, there is the tickling effect on the banking sector in Nigeria.

Economic Development

It is noteworthy that the impact of religion on education is a coin of two sides, with each side adding to the beauty and completeness of the whole. This is very true in Islam where every understanding is subject to "submission to the will of Allah." In Islam's view, the main reasons behind poverty are insufficient production, laziness and unemployment, ignorance of technicalities of work, poor consumption habits, and weak distribution system (Hadi 2006). To give humanity the opportunity to overcome poverty, Islam teaches that Allah from the time of

Adam gave His blessings for agriculture. From agriculture, other occupations relating to economic matters emerged. Even the prophets at various times engaged in one occupation or the other. For instance, Prophet Dawud was a blacksmith, Prophet Zakariyya and Prophet Nuh were Carpenters and Prophet Muhammad (SAW) was a herdsman and a business man too, i.e., an Importer and Exporter (Abbas 7).

There are Qur'anic injunctions which encourage Muslims to engage themselves in lawful and wide range of business activities. Allah says:

> O you who believe (Muslims)! When the call is proclaimed for the *Salat* (prayer) on Friday, come to the Remembrance of Allah and leave off business (and every other thing). That is better for you if you did but know. [Al-Jumu'ah:9]
>
> Then when the (*Jumu'ah*) prayer is finished, you may disperse through the land and seek of the bounty of Allah (by working or engaging in business etc.), and remember Allah much that you may be successful. [Al-Jumu'ah: 10]

From the above, Muslims are to engage in economic activities without neglecting their duties to Allah. They are to close business and answer the call of Allah; and are continue with their business transactions in accordance with the teachings of the Qur'an after the prayers. They are encouraged to transverse the length and breadth of the land in other to be successful.

In addition, there are also numerous Prophetic traditions that stress business creation and growth. The Prophet (SAW) was reported to have said:

> For a man to take his rope and go into the forest to collect wood is better than to beg from people, whether or not people give him what he wants. [al-Bukhari]

The Prophet (SAW) said again:

> The sincere, honest merchant will on the Day of Judgment be in the company of the Prophet, the faithful and the martyrs. [al-Tirmidhi]

The Prophet (SAW) also said:

> No one has ever eaten better food than what he eats as a result of the labour of his hands. [al-Bukhari]

From the foregoing, it could be deduced that dignity and self-respect would elude a person who is economically dependent on the charity of others over a long period of time. Hence, Allah strongly encourages business creation and growth, while seriously discourages laziness and sycophancy. Above all, the Qur'an succinctly lays down some business ethics to guide muslims. They include sincerity of intentions, devotion and seriousness, high moral standards, transactions in consonance with *Shari'ah*, partner and workers selection, consultation, high quality and perfection, moderation in spending, honoring obligation, community based business, and God-consciousness (Abbas 8). Islam advocates moderation in spending, honouring obligation and God-consciousness. It strongly prohibits usury and interest, monopoly, hoarding, gambling, exploitation, uncertainties, and confusion, extravagance, deception and other unethical dealings.

Islam prohibits begging and advocates for every Muslim to earn their livelihood. According to one of the Hadiths of Prophet Mohammed, everyone is obliged to earn a living through lawful means, even if it means gathering firewood. This indicates that one of a Muslim's economic objectives is to earn an honest living in accordance with their abilities. Relying on charity or resorting to begging and unethical practices contradicts the spirit of Islam. Consequently, one finds Muslims engaged in various jobs and small-scale trading in other to make a living.

The synthesis of material and spiritual aspects of life is a distinctive feature of the Islamic economic system, setting it apart from capitalism and socialism. The Islamic economic system aims to enhance the physical and spiritual well-being of Nigerians, making it a valuable component of economic growth.

Social Cohesion and human development

Islam recognizes that all the messengers of God were sent, to among other things, establish justice, and deal with injustice and oppression among humanity. In Islam, muslims are commanded to be just not only among themselves, but also

among believers of other religions. This provides viable machinery for the establishment of social stability. Allah says:

> Whenever you judge between people, you should judge with (a sense of) justice (al-Nisa'i:8)
> Do not let your hatred of a people incite you to aggression (Qur'an, al-Ma'idah:3)
> And do not let ill-will towards any folk incite you so that you swerve from dealing justly. Be just, that is nearest to heedfulness (Qur'an, al-Ma'idah:8)

As part of the process of ensuring social stability, Islam safeguards and protects five necessities of life (*al-Darurat al-Hamsah*). These are preservation of religions, lives, lineage, honour and wealth (Abbas).

Islam urges Muslims to master nature, as the Quran asserts that all resources in the heavens and earth have been created for the service of mankind (al-Quran5.87-88). This suggests that striving for a higher rate of economic growth through research and technological advancements should be a societal goal.

In the pursuit of a more prosperous life, Islam has established the practice of al-Zakat (or poor-rate) to ensure fair income distribution in society. The payment of Zakat recognizes the existence of individuals who, due to personal disabilities or handicaps, cannot achieve a respectable standard of living through their own efforts. As al-Quran 3.93 states, "By no means shall you attain righteousness (paradise) unless you give freely of that which you love." Neglecting this Quranic command can lead to economic imbalances, reduced purchasing power, and subsequent production halts, resulting in unemployment.

Muhammad Chapra (1977) further emphasizes that ignoring the Quranic injunction on Zakat can lead to increased manifestations of social issues like frustration, crime, alcoholism, extramarital relations, divorce, mental illness, and suicide. These behavioral distortions can have catastrophic consequences, putting strain on the country's already limited financial resources.

African Traditional Religion

African Traditional Religion, although marginalized, has contributed to the development of Nigeria. There is no gainsaying that ATR has remained subsistent across all spheres of life as individuals engage in their daily activities. The thriving of the traditional worldview in the face of the other religions and western civilization is no longer a mere assumption. It is a reality. Indeed, recent developments with regards to the resurgence of cultural awakening has brought to light such consciousness that the structures that bear the growth of the Nigerian nation needs to recognize and follow the basic traditional principles that shaped and shapes the philosophy of the people.

Before the advent of the Christianity and Islam, ATR boasts of various agencies that ensured the cohesion of the society, enthronement of peace, such political, social and economic structures that made *ubuntu* run in the blood of the people. For instance, in the traditional society, rituals, economy, politics, and the wellbeing of the society are intertwined, making it challenging to separate one from the other. Almost every activity has religious underpinnings. For instance, crafts like ceramics, drums, masks, carvings, and others are sustained by traditional religious practices. Additionally, blacksmithing, a traditional trade, was encouraged due to its perceived mystical inspiration, and this reverence helped the trade thrive. Political offices are guarded by the gods and oaths such that issues like bribery and corruption are visited with serious consequences. The gains of such combination may have given the impetus for the recent calls that the gods and traditional oaths be incorporated into Nigerian swearing-in ceremonies.

Religious artifacts and symbols are preserved in National Museums and Art galleries, serving as both a source of national pride and a tourist attraction. Festivals like the Osun religious festival in Osun State and the Arugungu Fishing and Cultural festival in Kebbi State draw international visitors and contribute to foreign exchange earnings.

The Traditional Religion also upholds values like hard work, honesty, perseverance, and moral integrity. Among the Ikwerre people of Nigeria, stealing, coveting, or begging were considered taboo. Everyone was encouraged to earn a

living through their efforts, fostering a social order that supported economic growth.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined the contributions of religion to the growth and development of Nigeria. Recognizing this positive impact, the Government has sanctioned national religious holidays and sponsors pilgrimages to significant religious sites. It is essential to note that any negative impact attributed to religion is often a result of misguided practices by some adherents, rather than a fault inherent in the religion itself. As John Mbiti rightly points out, religion has not only enriched human sensibilities but also inspired remarkable achievements in various fields. Thus, religion will continue to play a significant role in the growth and development of Nigeria.

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