



RESEARCH ARTICLE

RELIGION AS AGENT OF DEVELOPMENT IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA

SIMEON.U.N. DURUJI ¹, K.C. UGWULEBO ², O. C. AKAKURU ³

^{1&2} Department of Religious Studies, Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education, Owerri, Nigeria

³ Departments of Social Studies and Civic Education, Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education, Owerri, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

The incessant and unwanted bombing of churches, public buildings and killing of innocent citizens by the Boko Haram sect, Islamic state west Africa Province (ISWAP), Lakurawa and other vice groups in the country in the recent times seem to suggest that the role of religion in the life and piety of the nation Nigeria can no longer be viewed with benign neglect. This paper revealed that religion if adequately practiced will enhance peaceful co-existence among people of various ethnic groups living in contemporary Nigeria, and encourage people to live good moral life. Religion, therefore, as a contributor to over 70 percent of the social life of the teeming population of this nation remains a veritable tool of socialization, development and good governance

Keywords: Religion, morality, value system, Boko Haram, development.

Corresponding Author

Simeon U. N. Duruji

Email Address: venduruji@gmail.com

Telephone Number: +23408037106438

Received: 3/1/2026; **Revised:** 22/2/2026; **Accepted:** 11/3/2026; **Published:** 29/3/2026



1.0. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of Christians as elected presidents in Nigeria has always triggered one form of crises or the other, especially from the Islamic north since after the second republic. Obasanjo's election in 1999 resulted in the sharia controversy. The election of President Jonathan by the year 2011 also triggered unrest in the Moslem dominated Northern part of Nigeria, given rise to the Boko Haram Saga and unplanned return of Easterners (who are mostly Christians) back to their states of origin. Events in the country in the past few years would suggest that the role of religion in our life can no longer be viewed with benign neglect.

Indeed, there is hardly any government development programme that has been unaffected by one religious factor or another. For instance the issue of the National Population Policy, a grand government project has attracted a lot of criticisms from the populace. Spokesmen of the three major religious groups in Nigeria argued strongly that the government policy of limiting the family to four children contravenes God's law of unlimited procreation. Therefore, the policy aim at curtailing an alarming increase in the nation's population was strongly opposed.

Though religion proclaims peace and has served the cause of peace, on the other hand, religion has been the cause of many wars globally. Even, some of the wars are fought in the name of God (Holy Wars). Arab/Israeli conflict, the Iraq/Iran war, the civil war in Sudan, Lebanon and Northern Ireland, were all fought under the religious banner. During the eighties, two great world leaders - President Anwar Sadat and Indira Gandhi died at the hands of religious extremists.

Here in Nigeria, the maitasine disturbances of 1980, 1982 and 1984, and the religious disturbances and bombings in Kaduna, Jos, Kano, Madalla, Abuja etc in 2010, 2011 and 2012 were great threats to peace in Nigeria. As indicated by Amaechi & Duruji (2010:193), and Iwuagwu (2003) religious disturbances consequently results to socio-economic and political underdevelopment.

Unfortunately, these increase in conception of moral decadence, and other social vices happen simultaneously with proliferation of churches and religion. It is believed that social development cannot be achieved without religion. And, social development according to Amaechi & Duruji, (2010), is the answer to the ominous symptoms of underdevelopment in Nigeria. Religion, also, is a veritable instrument for socialization. Eventually, these occurrences as stated above and others viz-a-vis increase in social vices, disunity, and underdevelopment in Nigeria, create much doubt as to the ability of religion to provide the much needed window for socialization and development.

According to Sen (1999), development broadly defined has come to mean more than increase in per capita income. He defined development as follows "in analyzing social justice, there is a strong case for judging individual advantage in terms of capabilities that a person has, that is, the substantive freedoms he or she enjoys to lead the kind of life he or she has reason to value". However, development can be seen as an overall social process including social, economic, political, cultural and moral aspects. It implies ethical values which presuppose a concept of man in the process of sustaining life in his environment.

The preceding viewpoint of development involves man who is composed of both spiritual and physical aspects. Hence, it is not limited to mere economic or material growth but should not loose



sight of both the physical and spiritual well-being of man. It involves changes in life styles and ways of doing things, changes in the view people hold about institutions, government and society. It is also an organized effort to raise the standard of living of people. Hence, Iwe (1985), sees development as a transition from oppression and inequitable social structure... to an equitable social order based on the visible recognition of and esteem for human dignity on the true concept of social service and common welfare.

It will be necessary at this point to explain what religion is. Why is this necessary? This is because development as stated earlier involves man, moral and social lives. Religion has always been a universal phenomenon of human experiment. It is an inherent urge of ultimate concern which began when man started to puzzle due to numerous experiences coinciding with various aspects of nature and their changes. The importance of religion and the different roles it plays in the society cannot be overemphasized. However, it is almost impossible to have a single definition for religion.

In this context, it is needful agree with Amaechi & Duruji, (2010:194) assertion that Religion means different things to different people. It means one thing to the anthropologist and another thing to the psychologist. It means also one thing to the sociologist and another thing to the theologian and yet another thing to the Marxist etc. Nonetheless, religion is something that links or unites human beings with a transcendent being, a deity, believed to exist and worshiped by man. Obviously, therefore, religion is a relationship and link between God and human beings.

Religion promotes peaceful co-existence among people of various ethnic groups. It helps the spirit of self-discipline and dedicated services to humanity. It also encourages people to live good moral life. This kind of situation can encourage investors to invest in a place, while people living in the society can also embark on developmental facts without molestation. Obviously, development is a moral issue just as it is a social and economic one. It is a challenge in the believers (Christian or Muslim) conscience. Therefore the guidance and leadership of the church during the current crisis is as strategic and invaluable as that of the government. It therefore portends that since development is a moral and social issue, it is not far from religion. Religion, therefore, has a lot to do in development especially in the third world.

Anyanwu (1996:37) identifies the following functions of religion as presented in what follow. Religion promotes peaceful co-existence among people of various ethnic groups. Religion has been the source of a lot of intolerance, fraud, discrimination and devastating wars in different parts of the world, both in the past and present. Each religion however, claims to be the only saviour which God has sent down to mankind and that it is only by belonging to it that any human being can be saved. The spirit of peaceful co-existence, the spirit of live and let live should be what should characterize every religion.

Religion is inseparable part of culture. Every religion is a product of a particular culture within which it emerged. Its doctrine reflects the world view of that culture, the things at that particular time. By implication it means that religion promotes the culture of a given people. Every religion presents the way in which a particular people, and a particular culture looks at reality. It is an expression of the cultural world view of a people and the vehicle for the transmission of such a cultural world view.



Religion helps the spirit of self-discipline and dedicated services to humanity at large. It enables many people to see meaning and purpose in their-lives. It is a source of deliverance to some and of social integration for people who probably are not from the same ethnic group. It has provided man with a world view and describing his place with the scheme of things. Many frustrated people have found meaning, solace and consolation in religion. There would have been many cases of suicide but for the introduction of religion which has provided comfort and consolation to those frustrated people.

Apart from religion providing meaningful situation to life, it has also fulfilled important functions in the society, namely teaching and morality. Every religion has its own ethics and principles. This has encouraged people to live good moral life by providing them with the incentives to do so. This kind of situation can encourage investors to invest in a place.

2.0. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Conceptual Clarifications

Religion and Morality

The Nigerian society recognizes three major religions namely African Traditional Religion, Christianity and Islam. These major religions shall be considered in relation to morality. Ekeokpara (2004), opined that African Traditional morality rest upon the commandments of the Supreme Being, the divinities and the ancestral spirit.

In other words, African Traditional Religion (ATR) is the bedrock of traditional morality. The Supreme Being and his agents were the main sources of African morality. This is why moral laws were inviolate, immutable and no offender was left unpunished. In traditional African society, no attempt is made to distinguish between religious law and moral law. It is what religion forbids that the society also forbids and the religious values are the same as moral values Divine(1996) agree with Idowu(1982) when he says that "morality is certain, the fruit of Religion". Africans do not attempt to separate the two and it is impossible for them to do so without disastrous consequences.

It is therefore the fear of God that compelled individuals in Africa to behave according to moral demands of the society. Values and morals cover topics like truth, justice, love, right and wrong, good and evil, beauty, decency, respect for people and property, the keeping of promises and agreements, praise and blame, crime and punishment, the rights and responsibilities of both the individual and his community, character integrity and so on. They help people to live with one another, to settle their differences, to maintain peace and harmony, to make use of their belongings and to have a relationship with their total environment. A true adherent of traditional religion will be committed to the tenets of the religion; a situation where he will obey the Supreme Being. This obedience will make one to be sound in mind and to work for national development.

Christian Morality and Value System

Christianity provides rules and regulations for a good Christian living in the Ten Commandments. The first three commandments (1 - 3) deals with the relationship between God and man and the second set (4-10) deals with the relationship between man and man. These Ten Commandments are summarized into two by Christ viz: Love for God, and Love for one's neighbours. Thus, the scripture puts it "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And the second is like it, you shall love your neighbour as



yourself. On this two commandments depend all the laws and the prophets (Matt.22:37-40(GNB). Surface it then to say that a thorough understanding and commitment in the idea as stated above will make an adherent of Christian religion to be sound. In that sound mind, the person will suppress ego-centricism and support things that can move our nation forward.

Islamic Moral and Value System

Islam means "submission" or "Resignation" to the will of the Almighty Allah; while Muslim is one who submits or resigns oneself to the will of Allah. He believes in Allah and in Prophet Mohammed as the messenger of Allah. According to Riggobeth (2008) to become a Muslim or a believer in Islam, one must prophesy his faith thus; "*Ashhadnanna la ilahilah Mohammadu an rasul Allah*" meaning "I testify that there is no deity but God and Mohammed is the messenger of God". The five pillars of Islam are presented thus:

1. The Shahada - bearing witness that there is no god but Allah and that Mohammed is the messenger of Allah.
2. The Salat - the performance of the ritual; prayer.
3. The Zakat - the ritual almsgiving.
4. The Sawn - the Ramaddan fast, and finally
5. The Hajj - the pilgrimage to the house (Ka'ba) for those who can perform it.

However, Islam preaches, in common with other religions, that adherents should live a morally upright life to the glory of the Supreme deity - God or Allah. It should, also, be noted that African Traditional Religion prepared the ground for Christianity and for Bell (1995), Islam is taken as a break away from Christianity. So a morally sound life lived by adherents of these religions will help in developing the nation. To this end, a lot of people will be conscious of their actions since it is against God and man when it is wrongly done or to the glory of God and benefit of man if it is properly done.

Development

The origin of development is traced to the nature of man. Man is a conscious being ; a being who is interested in things around him, who want to understand their nature, meanings and uses and never stop asking questions about them until the resulting answers are satisfactory to him. When man became conscious of his presence in the world, he found himself in the mist of multitudes of natural resources. Seriously, man, seeing himself as the lord of creation, did not want to leave nature and its resources as he found them. He wanted to understand and fashion them to his taste and use. For Nnachie (1999:166), that is development.

FORMS OF DEVELOPMENT

Development are summarized in two forms, the first form of development results to the production of man-made facilities such as knives, guns, arrows, hoes, boats, iron, clubs and others. Such materials are subjected to other constant improvements with which to enhance man's capacities and power over nature. The second form similarly is concerned with human nature. Man as a social being needs the assistance of other members of his species to attain his goal. Hence, this form of development has as its product, peaceful co-existence of man, and internalization and observation of moral values in



their social interactions. These moral values are the thread that holds members of any society together and lubricate the webs of their social relationship. These are constantly improved upon for the good of all.

Classes of Development

The dominant classes of development are central to discussion in this article are material development, mental development, and moral development.

- (a) **Material Development:** This happens when things such as road, houses, schools and other infrastructures such as transport system, health facilities, domestic utensils, urban, environmental sanitation system, and agricultural tools etc are better than they used to be.
- (b) **Mental Development:** This takes place when people's mental capacities are enhanced; their ideas, thoughts, knowledge and views about every aspect of life are positively harnessed for the enhancement of their well-being.
- (c). **Moral Development:** This occurs when there are improvements on fairness, trust, truthfulness etc. which tend to bring people together; to work and play in an atmosphere of peace and harmony for the overall well-being of the society.

2.2. Theoretical Framework

Scholars have expressed their views in various Ways about development and each, with an emphasis on the aspect of it that interest him or her for example. Omeregebe (2003), regarding human person as absolute value in the whole universe writes:

"The human person is of absolute value, he is supreme in the universe and he should never be used simply as a means to any end. In view of the prime importance of the human person, authentic development in any nation can only mean primarily the development of human person, and his consists mainly in the development of his mind and Swill. The training of the mind to see things critically and to seek the meaning and intelligibility of things is an improvement aspect of the development of the human person" (Omeregebe, 2003:197).

Thus, for Omeregebe, development of human person should be the purpose of the development and to achieve that, the mind of man has to be developed to the fullest so as to enable him have a sound knowledge of the world and his place in it. In his own view Igbafen(2003), observed that development process must be such that can serve to enhance the well-being and freedom or autonomy of the individual and nations; by which we mean freedom from servitude and dependence not only in relation to other people or nation states but also to the force of ignorance and human misery.

This, therefore, means that, authentic development is one that is able to enhance ones capacities to be himself, to be free from all constraints - natural and human, - from tyrannies of ignorance, poverty and disease. Furthermore, Levin (1994:74) sees development as a human right. To him, it is not ultimately about finance, but about people, their motivation, aspirations, creativity and values. This is to say, though increase in people's income is a welcome development since it improves the standard of living of people, it is not the most important thing about them. They need environment that motivates them to aspire for good things of life and as well enhances their creative resources with which to bring



them about. However, Iwe (1991) is of the view that development is essentially a holistic study of all the elements of the culture of the society. According to him, any discourse of development devoid of its understanding in terms of a complex interrelated and intertwined whole is not all encompassing.

3.0. METHODOLOGY

This study is qualitative in nature. Series of information were drawn mainly from secondary sources (published literature such as textbooks and Journals). Using discourse analysis, the phenomena of religion, morality, value system, and development were clearly elucidated as indicators for balancing the emerging national security issue and proffer direction for promoting peace in Nigerian societies.

4.0. CRITICAL ANALYSIS AND DISCOURSES

Religion whether traditional religion, Islamic or Christianity as practiced in Nigeria or Africa provides mankind with moral values and enlightens people on what is just or unjust, right or wrong, good or evil, virtue or vice as people usually apply religion in their social, emotional, economic intellectual and spiritual life. To them therefore religion cultivates the whole person and produces virtues the society appreciates. It is this moral attitude created by religion that will enhance development.

Religion unites people and through it individual communicates and nations are united under the umbrella of God. United, they say, we stand while divided we fall. Unity enhances development. Mbiti (1977) asserts that ATR provides customs and ceremonies passed on community history so that it is learned by each generation. It makes people fulfill their family responsibility. Within this time, people were involved in serious activities such as farming, fishing, weaving, cooking, carving, and knitting. Hence, development was within the ranks and file of the age.

The emergence of missionary religion (Christianity) into Africa marked the beginning of remarkable development ranging from establishment of schools, commerce and industry, hospitals, abolishment of slave trade, to the construction of roads, bridges, railways etc. This development is still aiding our nation and continent even now. In recent study it is established that

"Christianity has tremendously affected the African life, ... often the impression one gets is that Christianity has made such a huge success in Africa that the traditional religion has no strong grounds again" (Onunwa (1990).

Islam, has in no small measure, contributed positively to changes in the life of the indigenes socially, politically, morally, ethically, psychologically and economically. Through the evangelical strategies of these religions, a lot of amenities are introduced in the areas of dominance and so people experience rapid, aggressive and tremendous growth in their moral, economic and health life.

However, every human institution has its own challenges, triumphs, failures and victories. In the light of this, religion as an institution has the following as some of the problems it faces in relation to its role as an agent of development:

- (a) The relationship between the various religions in Nigeria today can be described as good, but is far from being amicable. Recent religious riots in Kaduna State, Plateau State and other states in the Northern Nigeria leading to burning of churches, mosques and loss of lives are



indication of the possibility of a religious war. We all know that war does not encourage development.

- (b) Religious bigotry and fanaticism are found both in Christian and Muslim circles. Hence, incessant bombing of public buildings by Boko Haram sect leads to death of hundreds of people.
- (c) The rejection of Islamic banking, which is expected to enhance development, by Christians owing to the name points to the fact that the relationship between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria is not palatable and does not encourage development.
- (d) Problem of materialism, crave for knowledge, education, and the global demand for broader views and independent interpretation of events tended to promote pluralism. People are now becoming open to things from any sources that would help to ameliorate their sufferings even at the risk of compromising their faith.
- (e) The invention of handsets, internet facilities and easy access to pornographic pictures/films works against the moral values which religion teaches her fateful remains one of the greatest challenges facing religion as an agent of development.

5.0. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

The role of religion in national orientation, social mobilization and national development cannot therefore be over-emphasized. The nation is striving to build a united state in which a better condition of living would flourish. To meet this challenge constructively, our forces, resources and potentials - economic, intellectual, moral, social, political and religious must be totally mobilized and effectively harnessed. Here religion has a role to play.

Religion should provide both the structures needed for the construction of a solid and virile nation, correct teaching on incentives for doing good and avoiding evil should be emphasized by the clerics of both faiths. It should regulate matters of spiritual and moral development, economic and socio-political affairs. Religion therefore should be given spacious rooms when talking about national development by bringing different religious' spokesmen to make public the interest of each of the major religion in the country over some issues that threaten the unity and peace of the nation.

A notable example is the Boko Haram and the Islamic Banking saga to avoid seeing religion as anti-development when actually the problem is of personal interest and not holistic. Government should endeavour to partner with religious sects in other to make life more meaningful to the people. The major religions should improve on their youth work. This will help in reducing youth restiveness as most of the crimes are committed by the youths who also belong to one religion or the other.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that no conflict of interest exist in this manuscript.



REFERENCES

- Amaechi, N. and Duruji, S.U.N. (2010) Religion as an Instrument in Rural Development International Journal of Vocational Studies C.C.D.S .I, (1).
- Anyanwu, H.O. (1996) The role of religion in national orientation, social, mobilization and national development. *Kosimee Journal of Religious Studies Department*, 1(1).
- Bell, R. (1995). *The origin of Islam in its Christian environment*. London. Frank Case and co.
- Devine, C.A. (1996) African religion and the question for ethical revolution in Abogurin S.O. (Ed) *Religion and Ethics in Nigeria*. Day Star Press.
- Ekeopara, C. (2004). Teaching African Traditional Religion in an HIV/ AIDS Environment. Unpublished Material Department of Religions, University of Calabar.
- Idowu, B.E. (1982). *oloedumare; god in yoruba belief*. Longman.
- Igbafen, M.L. (2003). *Basic issues and theories in the philosophy of development*, Aino printing press, Jones communication publishers.
- Iwe, N.S.S. (1985), *Christianity, culture and colonialism*. College of Education press.
- Iwe, N.S.S. (1991), *Social-ethical issues in Nigeria*. Pacific Publisher
- Iwuagwu, A. (2003). *Synod Report, Aba*. Diocesan Press.
- Levin, Kari (1994). *Quoted in goodwill message Cabbean Development Bank in Human right: the News Consensus*.
- Mbiti, J.S. (1977). *Introduction to African religion*. Heinemann.
- Nnachi, R.O. (1999). *Concise history, principles and philosophy of science*. John Jacobs classic publishers.
- Omeregbe, J.L (1993). *A philosophical look at Religion, Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publisher Limited*.
- Onunwa, U. (1990). *Studies in Igbo traditional religion*. Pacific publisher.
- Reggobeth, I.O. (2008). *Nigeria at a religious cross road; the way forward*. Serenity ventures.
- Sen, A.K. (1999). *Development as freedom*. Anchor Books.