



## The Survival of Religion in the 21st Century: A Critical Survey

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### Abstract

The aim of this paper is to critically examine the survival of religion from the ancient period to the contemporary society where globalization has overshadowed every activity in the present day. Before now, religious activities were not digitalized as compared to recent developments in spreading religious messages or sensitization via electronic means. Notwithstanding, this research shall present issues such as which that constitute the survival of religion in the 21st century. The essay shall examine various worlds' religions as their adherents are consistently preserving the religious code for the next generation. Notably, this work will base its research findings on the library research not necessarily on participant observation because the researcher will not be able to visit other world religions because of the locality and time frame of writing this paper. It is on this basis that the work critically based on the objective study of the survival of religion in the present day.

**Key Words:** Religious Sustenance, Religion in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the survival of Religion

### 1.0 Introduction

The concept "religion" is as broad as the "universe" itself in the sense that its beginning and end cannot be measured. However, it is of importance to scholars, philosophers and thinkers, to understand that the length and breadth of religion cannot be measured in totality

as compared to other phenomena in the area of science whereby discrete concepts, such as: gravity, speed, weight and sound, etc, can be measured with relative accuracy through basic scientific instruments. It is in this regard that religious sustenance and survival of religion in the 1<sup>st</sup> century becomes an important reality which cannot be jeopardized.

To understand the importance of religious sustainability and its survival in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to critically look into the history of religion from the primitive stage of a man to the contemporary period. However, to study the existence of a phenomenon is to study the different historical perspectives of the phenomenon in their totality. Therefore, the existence of religion from the period of conception to the period of delivery and its continuity up to the 21st century is the hallmark of this research paper. In a critical and scholarly observation, “religion” is as old as ‘mankind’ or even older than mankind in the sense that man invariably inherited religion from the “Unseen Being” or the “Supernatural Being”. In an attempt to buttress the above view on the existence of religion, White Patrick puts it that religion is a “feeling of dependence upon the unseen powers, which control our destiny accompanied by a desire to come into friendly relationship with them” (cited in Anyacho 3). It is noteworthy that religion existed before mankind in the sense that man depends on the unseen creature for protection and survival just as a new born baby depends on the mother or father for protection and survival with a sense of belonging until he or she grew up to identify himself or herself with the parent and the family members *per se*.

Therefore, man naturally anchors his hope on the Unseen Being for guidance, protection, sustenance as well as survival. To this fact no man is completely irreligious because every man on planet earth has a systems of beliefs be it abstract or concrete. It is on this view that theism and atheism as different system of belief becomes widely recognized in the scientific study of religion known as *religio-wissenschaft*.

### 1.1 Religion: Its Etymological Perspectives

The critical study of any phenomenon needs the understanding of the root meaning or the etymological stand-point of such a phenomenon under study. It is on this point that the phenomenon in question is known as “religion” and proportionately its survival in the 21st century. Although various attempts had been made to present a unified acceptable definition of religion, but could not stand because various authors, writers as well as scholars have attempted different definitions of religion or definitions of religion based on their own perception of religion or from their respective religious backgrounds. To consider the definition or a definition of religion, several opinions as it has been raised by various scholars to come out with a generally acceptable definition of religion, but unsuccessful because of the arguments and controversies surrounding the individual scholars matters of religion. In the layman’s understanding of religion, it is simply a system of belief and the fear of the “Unknown”. The point narrated here above concerning a layman’s understanding of religion, can not be overemphasized since apparently man is bound by beliefs and the fear of the Unknown. This is a mere assumption but a simplistic way of explaining the concept of religion. However, in a more elaborate and scholarly manner, the etymological meaning need to be understood.

Etymologically, religion is derived from a Latin word “*religio*”. Its root word is known as “*ligare*” and it is prefixed “*Re*”. The term “*ligare*” simply denote the followings to ‘bind’, ‘join’ and ‘connect’. And the prefix “*Re*” is a connective which joins the two terms “*Re*” and “*ligare*” to mean rebind, rejoin and to reconnect. Etymologically, religion simply connotes that medium which rebinds, rejoins and reconnects us to the Unforeseen or the Unknown. Therefore, it is important to understand that the etymological meaning of religion takes its full meaning from the unity of “*Re*” and “*ligare*”. The etymological meaning of religion can also be seen in a two root words ‘leg’ and ‘lig’. According to Anc ‘leg’ means to take up, gather, or observe, to observe the signs of divine communication” while “Lig” means ‘to

bind' (Anyacho 2). Apparently, religion is a phenomenon that creates a uniting force among mankind. In this regard, therefore, the uniting force among the different religions of the world is an "Unknown" reality which denotes such superior realities such as the Supreme Being, the Transcendental Being, the Creator of all things, the Supernatural Being, etc. In this premise, it is obvious to understand that religion existed before mankind in the sense that mankind inherited religion or various religious experience from the 'Unknown'. This proves that religion is as old as the world not mankind rather.

By way of summary, it has been noted that religion is derived from the three Latin words; *religare*, *religio* and *religere* and that all three of these terms that define religion, are interpreted as the derivatives of the English word "religion". Furthermore, '*religare* refers to anything which binds. *Religio* therefore, refers to a constraint that cannot be evaded. *Religere* on the other hands refers to something that is recurring in the sense of a verdict which man cannot ignore no matter the level of his development. Although authors differ widely in the definitions of religion, however, the etymological definitions religion has remained widely accepted.

## **1.2 Religion: Its Historical View**

The history of any event or a phenomenon is the period in which certain facts and figures concerning it are established and documented, which had been written down in a form that is readable or ones can make reference to, although some events might exist in it salient mode but as long as it has not been documented it history can not be traced. However, in this sense religion existed as the creation of the world begin this is recorded in Genesis account 1:2 "And the earth was without form and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters" (KJV 1). Since the concept of the definitions of religion deal mostly with the recognition of the Supreme Being or Creator, it therefore means that the idea of worship began at the creation but man being the epitome of history was not there at the beginning and also no documentations show any forms of religion as at then. Based on the

above view, it is widely said or known that the history of religion is as old as the history of Man himself that is during the creation of Adam and Eve. "That is what archaeologists and anthropologist tell us. Even among the most primitive that is to say, underdeveloped, civilizations, there is no found evidence of worship of some form (Watch Tower 19). In that similar view, Streng put it that " the historical interpretation was justified by an appeal to documentation and by the claim that historical events are to be interpreted as a result of other historical event or as a result of human forces"(55). Summarily, the history of religion is dated back to the period when man was created and acknowledges the presence of a Supreme Being higher than and also spiritual in nature.

### **1.3 Definitions of Religion**

After exclusive and inclusive understanding of the etymological perception of religion, it is on this view that various scholars, writers, and authors in the field of religious study can put up a definition of or the definition of religion. However, a definition or the definition of religion by various scholars, writer, and authors maybe either as a result of their reaction to physical or spiritual events around them or preconceived ideas based on their religious background or societal occurrences in a given period.

Therefore, the following definitions of religion are considered necessary for this paper. As noted by Peter Berger, "religion is the human attitude towards a sacred order that includes within it all beings – human or otherwise. In other words religion is the belief in a cosmos, the meaning of which both transcend and includes man" (cited in Okon 18). Patterson described religion as "a relation between man and a Supernatural being" (cited in Edet 1). According to Bellah, religion is "a set of symbolic forms and acts which relate man to the ultimate conditions of his existence" (cited in Anyacho 3). In the words of Melford E. Spiro, religion is "an institution consisting of culturally pattern interaction with culturally postulated Super human beings" (cited in Akpan 30). John Dewey defines religion as "any

activity pursued on behalf of an ideal end against obstacles and in spite of threat of personal loss because it's general and ending value" (cited in Okon 19). Another erudite religious scholar known as Emile Durkheim presented a brilliant and excellent definition of religion in the year 1912 to mean "a distinction between the sacred and the profane. Sacred objects – for example, the Cross in Christianity – produce a sense of awe, veneration and respect, whereas profane objects do not". (Haralambos, Holborn, Chapman and Moore, 432). Similarly, Roland Robertson in the year 1970 put up a brilliant definition of religion to include "the existence of Supernatural beings that have a governing effect on life" (Haralambos, Holborn, Chapman and Moore 432).

Furthermore, a notable German scholar, known as Max Muller, simply defined religion as 'a mental faculty or disposition which independent of sense or reason, enables man to apprehend the infinite under different names and varying guises" (cited in Ekpunobi and Ezeaku 2). Another definition of religion put forward by a notable figure of the protestant reformation in the person of Martin Luther, thus, religion is "that to which thy heart clings steadfastly, that truly is thy god" (cited in Brown 4). Accordingly, religion is the "belief in God which culminating in continual worship of Him, strict observance of his words and rules, making petitions before him, identifying with his people and propagating his love" (Edet 2). Lastly, according to John Haggai religion " is the practice of praying, prayer gives us necessary grace to block negative thoughts distracting attitudes and worries that torture the mind and deteriorate the body" (cited in Edet 2).

## **2.0 Functional Perspectives for the Survival of Religion in the 21st Century**

Generally speaking, religion is not a phenomenon that can be short circuit in the sense that its continuity is limitless or boundless within a geographical area or any human race. In consideration of religious activities or its functions right from the primitive society to the contemporary society indicates its survival because the human society needs religion for both physical protection and spiritual coverage.

Based on the above view, the human society is in need of physical and spiritual protection from religion Roy Sieber defined religion as “man’s search for extra-human assistance in achieving a man’s needs from religion gave rise to the function which religion plays on mankind both spiritually and physically”(38). Notably, man quest for salvation of his soul, liberation from oppression, and deliverance from sickness, sorrows, and pains be viewed as the spiritual security that man require from God or the Supreme Being while acquisition of wealth, good health, and better standard of living are those physical security man needs from God (the Transcendental Being). Therefore, those spiritual and physical issues bring about the strength of the survival of religion in these recent days.

Nevertheless, the function of religion plays a vital role in the sustenance of religion for posterity. Considerably, the function of religion is primarily concerned with the aim of actualizing the basic needs of mankind in the society. However, “religion plays varieties of degree of social solidarity, religion function as value consensus and harmony, and integration between its parts” (Haralambos, Holborn, Chapman and Moore 431).Furthermore, religion sacralizes the norms and values of society; it venerates and deifies the moral principles of society. It brings added sanction to morality, religious feast and ceremonies are instruments of social solidarity. Religion brings people together in joy and fellowship. Religion equips man with functional principles for his moral life. Through religion various ethical codes has been the leading factor in sacralization of traditional education.

Edward Dayton has this to say “religion bestows on man and society the sense of the sacred. In Christianity and Islam, the sense of the sacred is articulated as the will of God, divine will or divine providence. The sacred seems to lie in the domain of the church or at least in religion... it is the sacred that gives meaning to life, all life” (cited in Okon 21).

## **2.1 Comparative Dimensions of Religion for its Survival in the 21st Century**

In consideration of any comparative analysis of a subject matter is to critically look into those issues that will be convenient to analyze other related phenomenon of the same subject matter. In this regard, therefore, the subject matter that concerned the writing of this paper is those phenomena that are relevance to the various world religions and its contribution to the survival of religion from the traditional period to the contemporary society. However, in discussing the comparative dimensions of religion that leads to its survival in the 21st century is necessary to look at those aspects that are very common and at the same time very important in sustaining religion. The dimension of any subject matter is the extent at which the length, breadth, and height of it can be measured. That notwithstanding religion is that phenomenon that cannot be measured because of its complexities. But in this regard, however, some dimensions maybe used as a yardstick to make a comparative analysis of the various world religion. Therefore, the following dimensions will be discussed; the ritual dimension, the mythological dimension, the doctrinal dimension, and the ethical dimension.

The emphasis on the survival of religion from the period of inception to the present day is the momentum it had gathered through the ritual dimension that is embedded in the various world religions. It is quite interesting to know that no recognized world religion that does not have any form of feast or ceremonies. Various religion of the world has their sacred teaching and practices that uphold them to the Creator. So, their sacred teaching or practices may be the observance of prayer, meditation, chanting or singing of songs, forms of worship either by bowing down or kneeling down as well as standing erect to commune with the Unseen Being for solidarity and comfort. It is on this view that Smart put it that “religion tends in part to express itself through such ritual; through worship, prayers, offerings and the like. We may call this ritual dimension” (16). Similarly, to further strengthen the ritual dimension of religion, Streng put it that “rituals are means of communicating something of religious significance



through words, symbols, and actions” (68). Rituals “are set forms through which religious actions or ceremony is carried out” (Anyacho 6). The view point above by various scholars that regards ritual dimension of religion is a clear indication that every adherent of these world religions is involved in their ritual perspectives which had facilitated the sustenance and survival of their faith for posterity.

Another dominant feature that forges ahead the survival of religion in the 21st is the mythological dimension of religion. Mythological dimension of religion is a fact that is derived from the word ‘myth’. Myth is simply a story or fabricated stories that present a mental or imaginary view of events that occur in the past. It can also mean “a story from ancient times especially one that was told to explain natural events or to describe the early history of people” (Wehmeier, 776). On the other hand, ‘myth as it implies mean ‘story’ and in calling something a story we are not thereby saying that it is true or false” ( Smart 18).

Virtually, all the recognized religions of the world had their various stories either for the founder, the creation myth or divine contact with the Unknown or the Supernatural Being. For instance, in Christianity, the creation epic or creation hymn that is found in the Genesis account of the Holy Bible; Also “the Passover ritual in Judaism that re-enacts a highly important event that once occurred to the children of Israel, their delivery from bondage in Egypt” (Smart 18).

Another dimensional view that upholds the strength of the survival of religion in the 21st century is the doctrinal dimension. Every religion has its doctrine in the sense that it appease the Unseen Being through their doctrine which is known as system of belief or code of belief or religious code that is handed down from their founders who had a supernatural contact with the Unseen Creature. Notably, “doctrines are an attempt to give system, clarity, and intellectual power to what is reveal through the mythological and symbolic language of religious faith and ritual” (Smart 19). Apparently, every religion has contributed immensely in influencing the life or lives of their adherent through the

doctrinal perspectives with the phrase “mythological and symbolic language of religious faith and ritual”. Furthermore, doctrines are those religious perceptions that ignite and unite their adherents through their code of belief or religious code that are quite different from one another. That is to say the doctrine of Christianity is apparently different from the doctrine of Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, and so on. To buttress the above view of the doctrine being a differential or unifying factor in various religions of the world, Smart put it that “the distinction is important because the world religions owe some of their living power to their success in presenting a total picture of reality, through a coherent system of doctrine”(19). Based on the doctrinal dimension the survival of religion is guarantee in the 21st century.

The survival of any society lies on the ethical perspectives of the society that is, the standard in which people or inhabitant of the community must abide to. So, the ethical dimension of religion is the basis of standard behaviour that must be inculcated in their adherent. However, lending credence to the above view, Smart clearly stated that “ethic concern with the behaviour of the individual and, to some extent, the code of ethics of the dominant religion controls the community” (19). In responds to the above view, the dominant religions in Nigeria are Christianity and Islam which affected the territory both positively and negatively. The various religious dimensions perpetuate the survival of religion in the present climate in the sense that they guide both the religious activities of their adherent and the societal expectation of their members.

## **2.2 Factors that Sustain Religion in the 21st Century**

In recent times whereby globalization and civilization is in high degree, where literate and illiterate are in search of spiritual and physical protection, where the rich and the poor sought for divine provision, also where the strong are in continual effort to search for power and authority to rule the weak. These issues culminate to the factors that lead to the sustenance of religion in the 21st century because those facts enlisted above have related consequences with

mankind. On the other hand, however, the earlier mentioned issues that constitute the prevailing circumstances in the survival of religion in the 21st century can be detailed and explained under the following sub-headings; cultural factor, political factor , economic factor, capitalism factor and materialism factor.

### **Cultural Factor**

The cultural factor as its name implies has its basis on the culture of the people in a given society and in the same vein it is inseparable from religion. So, this factor is a predominant feature that sustains religion in the 21st century in the sense that as people uphold their culture so also religion because one cannot be separated from the other, due to the fact that both are a “system of belief”. On the other hand, people’s culture can be their religion. To further strengthen the view of cultural factor as one of the embodiments for the survival of religion in the present day, a cogent definition of culture shall be put forward, thus; according to

B.O. Ukeje culture is defined as “the fabric of ideas, beliefs, skills, tools, aesthetic objects, methods of thinking, of eating and talking as well as customs and institutions into which each member of the society is born. It includes the way each individual makes a living, the music he plays, celebrations and festivals, modes of communication and transportation, the house we lived in and the food we eat” (cited in Anyacho 31).

The analogy in the above definition of culture proves that cultural factor sustains religion, because it includes all the various dimensions of religion as well as showcasing culture as a factor that unites people as religion does. Cultural factor plays a pivotal role in the survival of religion in recent times through the social needs of the people in a given society likewise religion. Thus; “religion is derived from cultural and social needs. As a product of human mind and social interaction, however, it plays a decisive role in the patterns and forms that constitute any culture” (Streng 46). Notably, cultural factor aids the

survival of religion through the functional aspect of religion by socializing the people in the community. Further studies in the area of cultural anthropology prove that cultural factor is one of survival tenet of religion in the 21st century. Thus, Streng puts it that “ at the turn of the century, cultural anthropology emphasized studies of tribal societies and the function of religion was understood to be the preservation of the integrity of the society through rites and ritual – with a concentration on the initiation ceremony of the adolescent” (47).

### **Political Factor**

Political factor is one of the necessitating features for the survival of religion in the 21st century because it is seen to be a social feature in the society. In terms of leadership or rulership religion plays a dominant role in selecting or electing their leader. For instance, in a city where Islam is a predominant religion to Christianity, most of their leaders will emanate from Islamic and as the case may be for other religions.

Lending support to the above statements, Anyacho put it that “religion affects politics and the government of a state, in many ways it affects the political behaviour seriously. It affects voting behaviour of the people. To win an election in many states today, one has to be identified with a particular religious group” (37), since winning an election is a determinant figure of religion, it therefore means that government continuity can be determine by the survival of a particular religious group in the society.

### **Economic Factor**

The survival of religion in a given society can be precipitated by the economic factor of that society. Since religion brought about socialization of people, so also economic factor that brought about social changes in the society. Karl Max has often been interpreted as saying that “religion is determined by economic factors” (Anyacho 45). The process of production, sales, consumption, storage, demand

and supply can affect religion positively or negatively. “Definitely, the economic changes in the society do affect religion. The belief, practices and consequences dimensions of religion are affected by the economic realities” (Anyacho 45). The survival of religion in the 21st century can be championed by the economic realities of the society because the advent of Christianity and Islam into African continent brought revival to the economic situation among the African countries.

### **Capitalism as a Factor**

The idea of wealth creation initiated by some religion also helps in the survival of religion in the 21st century because so many adherents of these religious groups ignore the spiritual aspect of religion but seek the physical aspect – that is wealth creation which eventually leads to exploitation, extortion and embezzlement of public fund that was meant for public use. Based on this view Weber claimed that the origins of the spirit of capitalism were to be found in the ethics of ascetic Protestantism. Throughout history there had been no shortage of those who sought money and profit: pirates, prostitutes and money lenders in every corner of the world had always pursued wealth” (cited in Haralambos, Holborn, Chapman and Moore 448).

### **3.0 Recommendations**

The following recommendations will serve as guide for further studies in the survival of religion in the recent times; various religious organizations should seek for both the spiritual and physical guidance for their adherent. There should be a reduction in the exploitative mechanism adopted by some religious organization. Lastly, the sacredness of religion should supersede the profane as it is suppose to be in the present day.

#### **3.1 Conclusion**

This write up makes a critical overview of religion through the etymological understanding of religion, scholarly definitions of religion

as well as the functional aspect of religion in the society. It also critically looked into the various dimensions that are common to the various world religions; like rituals, doctrines, mythological, and ethical dimension. It also brings into limelight those factors that leads to the survival of religion in the 21st century which includes; cultural factor, political factor, economic factor and capitalism factor.

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