
The Role of Religion in Human Development

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Abstract

Religion has been destructively criticized and is still passing through criticisms. This is due largely to the sufferings and devastated situations humanity has passed through over the centuries as a result of many wars caused or justified by religion. The Islamic Jihads, the Crusades, the European Religious Wars, are some of the examples. It was on the instances of the above negative manifestations Bertrand Russell, regards religion as a source of untold misery to the human race. This research aimed at discovering the positive contributions of religion in civilizing humanity. To achieve this objective, historical method was adopted and data were collected from journals, articles, textbooks, internet sources and magazines. The finding indicated that although religion has been seen as a source of worry to humanity, it has played enormous role in the sand of history in the development of humanity. Religion laid the foundations of formal education and library system, university institutions, the cultural foundations of Europe, Arab and numerous countries of the world. It also contributed to scientific discoveries and technological innovations. Religion laid the foundation for the sanctity of human life, fundamental equality of all men, man's liberty, antislavery and abolitionist attitude, religious freedom, domestic stability and favourable attitude to work. The study recommended that religious leaders should as a matter of urgency and commitment review the tenets and creeds of their religions and get rid of anything that

tends to erode their cherished value of human development and focus more on their works of civilizing humanity.

Introduction

Fundamental to the human development approach is the concept of capabilities. Capabilities (what people can do and what they can become) are the tools one has to pursue a life of value. Basic capabilities valued by virtually everyone include: good health, access to knowledge (education), political freedom, guaranteed human rights, and sustainable standard of living. Other capabilities essential to a fulfilling life could include the ability to take part in the decisions that affect one's life, to have control over one's living environment, to enjoy freedom from violence and to have societal respect. Human development is interrelated with human rights and the goal is human freedom. Therefore, in pursuing capabilities and realizing rights, this freedom is vital. People must be free to exercise their choices and to participate in decision-making that affects their lives.

Human development and human rights are jointly reinforcing and helping to secure the well-being and dignity of humankind. The idea of human development stipulates the need for education, better conditions for work and more choices for individuals. The idea goes with human rights. For instance, the right for education relates to intellectual development, and political rights relates to the level of the political development of that society (UNDP). Religion as an institution complements as well as motivates human development. It can also obstruct or undermine human development. The avenues by which religion influences developmental activities in different faiths and religions vary from religion to religion and culture to culture. Religious adherents and

institutions may be agents of advocacy, funding, innovation, empowerment, social movements, and service delivery. Equally, religious adherents and institutions can incite violence, model hierarchy, oppose empowerment, repel, and cast aspersions on service delivery (HRDPIP). One therefore, might be tempted to think or imagine based on the negative and unguided aspects generating from religion across the globe that religion is a problem to humankind. Perusing through the annals of ancient and medieval, modern and contemporary history, amid the institutions of society, religion must be recognized as one of the greatest benefactors of humanity.

Scholars from various fields of study have their definitions and views of religion; hence, religion is one thing to a sociologist and another thing to a psychologist, an anthropologist, a philosopher and a theologian. In spite of the differences surrounding the root of the word, religion, authors are in agreement that religion connotes the association and relationship between the creature and its creator, the finite and the infinite, man and God (Idowu 22-24). Iwe (2-3) summarized the definitions of religion into four basic points of view, namely: subjective, objective, moral and institutional. He viewed his subjective point to mean “man’s natural and innate consciousness of his dependence on a transcendent Supra-human Being and the consequent natural and spontaneous propensity to render homage and worship to him.” He defined his objective perspective as, “a complex or configuration of doctrines, laws and rituals by which man expresses his loyalty to a transcendental Being – the Absolute God”. An enduring quality, a habit, which disposes him who has it to pay, steadfastly and well, the debt of honour and worship to God is what Iwe saw as a moral perspective.

Finally, he interpreted his Institutional to mean a religious institution possessing its own definite system of beliefs, system of activities and system of values like any other social institution. In this sense the world religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Toasim, Confucianism, Shitoism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam represent religion as institution and in these institutions people observe and appreciate their submissions to supernatural being. Religion as an institution is also referred to as organised religion. It is on the institutional premise of religion this study is anchored and it is limited to Christianity and Islam which are the two largest religious communities in the world. In this inquiry the researcher seeks to ascertain the contributions of religion to the development of humankind; it is divided into two sub-headings: the aberrant manifestation of religion and the role of religion in the development of humanity.

The Aberrant Manifestation of Religion

It is truism that humanity has passed through devastated situations over the centuries as a result of many wars caused or justified by organised religions. The Islamic Jihads, the Crusades, the persecution of heretics in the Middle and later Middle Ages, the Inquisition, the European Religious Wars, the conflicts in the Middle East, the slaughter between Iraq and Iran, the Hindu-Sikh clashes in India and many other bloody crises and untold sufferings orchestrated by religion are some cases in point (Mankind Search for God 13-14). The activities of Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, ISIS in Iraq and Syria, the violent and murderous activities of the Maitatsine sects in Nigeria between 1980 and 1985, and the present Boko Haram violence are few examples of sad situations religion has caused humanity. It was on the instances of the above negative manifestations Bertrand Russell, the famous British

philosopher regards religion as a source of untold misery to the human race (Russell 25). The incidences mentioned have obviously raise questions about religious beliefs, ethics, teachings and practices and as well seem to confirm strongly the view that religion has been the source of human tragedies.

In some developing countries of Africa, under the guise of religion, many religious fundamentalists and violent religious fanatics have frequently plunged into unnecessary wanton destruction of innocent lives and properties (Iwe 4). In Nigeria some Islamic fundamentalists and fanatics have in the guise of religion, knowingly or reluctantly, repudiated the spirit of Islam as a religion of peace and social justice, by their irrational and reckless destruction of the lives and properties of their fellow citizens and their defiance of constituted military and civil authorities. The intermittent outburst of violent destruction of lives and properties by ill-advised Moslem youths who sometimes surface from their Mosque or after a secret deadly resolution to impose catastrophe and havoc on their fellow citizens for flimsy and unjustified reasons is also another instance. These fanatics and fundamentalists, misguided by a wrong understanding and interpretation of the true spirit of Islamic jihad have often sought to provoke war and violence for selfish interests (James 143).

These negative manifestations of religion, created the opportunity for the emergence of anti-religious critics and theoretical atheists. In reality anti-religious criticisms are more a reaction against the shortcomings of organized religion and its agencies than a direct negation of the authentic spirit of religion and its social values (Okereke1-4). Fortunately, the negative aspects and historic failures of organized religion are just but one side of the religious

coin. We must here affirm and uphold that it is an unjustifiable mistake to look on institutional religion from this point of view and no other, this is because organized religion, on the balance sheet of history, has a much greater claim to esteem than to disdain; and its positive dimension is far richer than its negative features (Zunini 328).

The Role of Religion in Human Development

Not minding his disbelief in the existence of God and regard of religion as a source of untold misery to the human race, Russell (24) acknowledged that religion has made some contributions to civilization. For him, religion contributed two things to humanity: it helped in early days to fix the calendar, and it caused Egyptian priests to chronicle eclipses with such care that in time they became able to predict them. Apart from Russell's reluctant admission, religion has played numerous and significant roles in civilizing humanity. Here the role of religion in the areas of education, culture, health-care and fundamental human rights is discussed.

Education: In obedience to the injunction to teach others (to make disciples of all nations) by Jesus Christ, his disciples did not stop teaching that "Jesus is the Christ" at the apostolic era (Acts 5:42) rather they continued after the death of the apostles, initially in teachers' homes. In 150 A.D. Justin Martyr established catechetical schools in Ephesus and Rome. After some time, these schools included reading, writing, and other subjects, in addition to religion. These schools ultimately included both boys and girls regardless of class or ethnicity which was unheard of in the culture of that era. By the mid 1500s, Martin Luther and John Calvin had convinced civic authorities to implement tax-supported, universal,

compulsory education. By the 1700's education was expanded to include the deaf; by the 1800s the blind (Alvin 4-5).

The Greco-Roman culture had their philosophers of higher education but they had no permanent buildings or libraries. The origin of universities was in the monastery. The first was the Benedictine order in the monastery at Monte Cassino, Italy, in 528. More monasteries were built in other locations. They all placed great value on literature particularly those of antiquity. The Benedictines developed the first library system by collecting books and manuscripts. Although the libraries and monasteries were not full universities, they were the inspiration by which, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the first true universities were built (Alvin 6). Thus, the early beginnings of formal education and University institutions of the ancient Universities of Marseilles, Bologna, Paris, Oxford and Cambridge are fruits of Christianity; the teaching body was primarily of Dominicans and Franciscans (Lonchamp 39).

The scientific world owes a great deal to the Muslims. They invented the Arabic numerals; algebra is practically their creation; they developed trigonometry, optics, and astronomy; they invented the pendulum; and in medicine they made very remarkable progress. It was the Arabs who introduced the empirical method in the study of nature and cultivated it widely when they were leaders of the civilized world. In the words of Faith Forum:

Muslim scholars calculated the angle of the ecliptic; measured the size of the Earth; calculated the precession of the equinoxes; explained, in the field of optics and physics, such phenomena as refraction of light, gravity, capillary

action, and twilight; and developed observatories for the empirical study of heavenly bodies. They made advances in the uses of drugs, herbs, and foods for medication; established hospitals with a system of interns and externs; discovered causes of certain diseases and developed correct diagnoses of them; proposed new concepts of hygiene; made use of anesthetics in surgery with newly innovated surgical tools; and introduced the science of dissection in anatomy. They furthered the scientific breeding of horses and cattle; found new ways of grafting to produce new types of flowers and fruits; introduced new concepts of irrigation, fertilization, and soil cultivation; and improved upon the science of navigation. In the area of chemistry, Muslim scholarship led to the discovery of such substances as potash, alcohol, nitrate of silver, nitric acid, sulfuric acid, and mercury chloride. It also developed to a high degree of perfection the arts of textiles, ceramics, and metallurgy...” (Faith Forum)

In Nigeria the pioneering and remarkable contributions of the Christian Missionaries and Muslims in the area of formal education cannot be ignored. Many of the primary and secondary educational institutions as well as their personnel, now administered by the Government of modern Nigeria, were the achievements of, and inherent from, the religious Agencies, who are still actively contributing to the growth and progress of the nation educationally (Balogun 55-66).

Culture: Religion and culture are so intimately related and connected that in reality it is impossible for a society to have a culture without religion or religion without culture. Religion as

expressed in institutional forms and structures, has contributed greatly to cultural and social development and improvement of humanity. It was Christianity as an institutional religion that laid the ethical and cultural foundations of the Western World and some other countries of the world through missionaries and colonial contacts and tutelage. The history of Christianity is indivisible from the history of western culture and of western society. For many centuries Christian beliefs, principles, and ideals have tailored the thoughts and feelings of western man. The traditions and practices that have grown out of the Christian experience have left a permanent impress not only on development of purely religious interest, but of virtually the total endeavour of man. This manifests in art and literature, science and law, politics and economics as well as in love and war (Bainton 6).

In Nigeria, Christianity fought against cannibalism, superstitious beliefs, the killing of twins, trial by ordeal and human sacrifice. It contributed so much to alleviate human misery in the country: Motherless babies' homes, mentally ill-destitute homes, physically challenged homes and leprosy centres were built to give hope to the hopeless. All the areas of the Hausaland where the Fulani (Islam) took hold, war ceased to be the normal state of affairs, the political leaders remained on seat and peace and order reigned. Islam helped to bring the people who embraced it unity of belief and submission to a central authority. The teaching of Qur'an became the civilizing factor of government and every state came to be governed by the king nominated by the religious head. To an extent the system of government introduced by Islam in the north prepared the way for the adoption of indirect rule during Lord Lugard's era. The Islamic world is deeply indebted to Islam for the foundations and development of its culture. Islam taught that it

was good for men and women to cover up most part of their bodies hence the wearing of long Arab robes ensued in all the places Islam was adopted. The contributions of both Christianity and Islam, as the two major institutional religions in any society, to discipline and stability in family life and to public morality and order in general, cannot be ignored (Okonkwo, 170-172).

Health-care: Following the biblical injunction by Jesus: “Whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me” (Matthew 25:45), Christians did not only oppose infanticide, abortion, and abandoned children, they cared for the sick. The particular condition or who they were whether Christians or pagans made no difference. They followed Christ’s example of healing the blind, lame, deaf, palsied, and lepers. In every healing, Christ was also concerned for the individual’s spiritual well-being. This was in drastic contrast to the Greco-Roman world (Alvin 27).

Dionysius, a Christian bishop of the third century, described the existing behavior of the pagans toward their fellow sick human beings in an Alexandrian plague in about A.D. 250 as quoted in Alvin (28): “the pagans thrust aside anyone who began to be sick, and kept aloof even from their dearest friends, and cast the sufferers out upon the public roads half dead, and left them unburied, and treated them with utter contempt when they died”. Because of the severe persecution during early Christianity, for three centuries Christians could only care for the sick as they found them. It was not until A.D. 369 that the first hospital was built by the church. Evidence shows the hospital included rehabilitation units and workshops that allowed unskilled patients to learn a trade during healing. This shows an even higher level of humanitarian awareness. More Christian hospitals were built either as separate

units or attached to monasteries and, by 750, had spread from Continental Europe to England. Christianity also initiated the establishment of mental institutions, professional medical nursing, and the Red Cross. The precedent that the early Christian hospitals set not only alleviated human suffering but also extended the lives of multitudes of people, whether rich or poor. Moreover, these institutions reflected Christ's love for mankind (Alvin 28).

Fundamental Human Rights: Iwe (1986: 63-78) did a detailed work on the contributions of Christianity to fundamental human rights. He shows that Christianity by exerting its influence and moral standing against those inhuman practices perpetrated against human life by the ancient pagan world, it laid the foundation for the sanctity of human life. Christianity saw in all beings in possession of human life as worthy of its care and charity. Those born of adulterous union are not excluded. Thus right from its early days, Christianity had always sought to protect human life from inhuman treatment and from the dangers to which the sacredness of life is expected.

The historical origin of fundamental equality of all men is traced to Christianity who asserted equality energetically and emphatically, but without violence. Before the eyes of Christianity, all the unnecessary and iniquitous distinctions and discriminations vanished and were firmly detested. The common fatherhood of God was asserted and the consequence son ship of all men in God was professed with clarity. Having recognized the worth of human personality, Christianity went further to assert the rights of human person; and for the first time in the ancient world, the figure of man, as really and practically a person – a bearer of intrinsic and

uninfringeable rights has emerged and possessed in Christianity, an inviolable and untiring defense.

Man's Liberty was highlighted by Christianity. But the liberty which Christianity preached was fundamentally a spiritual one. It however gave man's liberty a broad and universal spiritual base. "Now this Lord is the Spirit, and where the spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (11 Cor. 3,17; Rom. 6, 16-17; 8,15-22.). Christianity sought to and did lay the basis for real human liberty. It is liberty for construction, justice and uprightness that Christianity brought to this world. Peter spoke for Christianity when he admonished his audience: "You are slaves of no one except God, so behave like free men, and never use your freedom as an excuse for wickedness. Have respect for everyone and love for our community; fear God and honour the emperor" (1 Pet. 2, 16). Christian liberty, thus, made neither room for lawlessness, nor for licentiousness. It allowed for no perpetration of iniquities in the name of liberty. It made for law, order and peace. It was liberty in loyalty and loyalty in liberty. It was on the issue of liberty that Christianity and the ancient pagan world contrasted most with each other. The institutions of slavery, the unrestrained powers of the Pater-families, the polytheistic and emperor worship of the Greco-Roman world were the highly explosive matters which were ignited with the emergence of Christianity.

Antislavery and Abolitionist Attitude was achieved by Christianity. Though the ruthless conditions of slaves had begun to be mitigated by the time of the Antonines and Constantine, it was not until the time of Justinian, with the penetration of Christianity, the Christian idea and ideal of freedom continued to exert its influence that the hard lot of slaves began to be appreciably ameliorated and fairly

human. Christianity did not violently destroy any institution which was closely linked with the laws and customs of the ancient world. The preaching of spiritual liberty prepared the soil for eventual emancipation, and prepared both the masters and their slaves for the perception of liberty and its use. So, when Peter and the other Apostles advised slaves to be loyal and obedient, it was not a confirmation of slavery nor its approval but rather a prudent and patient preparation for the eventual abolition of slavery.

The right to religious freedom could be traced to Apologetic Fathers who defended the religious liberty of the Christians before the authorities of Roman Empire and showed that they were law-abiding and orderly citizens. They fought for it but it was not until Christianity had gone through the crucible of the fires and swords of the early persecutions, then the declaration of religious liberty in 314 A.D. in Milan by the Emperors Constantine and Licinius. The religious liberty remained uninterrupted except for the interlude by Julian the Apostate, until Christianity became under the Emperor Theodosius in 394, the official religion of the empire. This might be well taken as the prizes for Christianity for its struggle for religious freedom, and for man's right to liberty in religious matters. This marked the end, at least officially, in paganism, polytheism and the emperor-worship of the ancient Roman Empire.

Christianity did not fail to make substantial contributions in domestic stability. In the family, the powers of the paterfamilias had to be humanized to square with the ideals of Christianity. The reciprocal rights and of both husband and wife, and of parents and their children were proclaimed by Christianity and there could be no more of the absolute dominion of the paterfamilias over the

family. Couples were exhorted to mutual fidelity, to mutual love, to temperance and domestic harmony. Christianity founded marriage on sound love and its dignity and not on passion. The personal status of women was greatly enriched by Christianity. It modified the relations between parents and children without weakening the authority of the first or the respect and obedience of the second.” From its emergence, Christianity has never failed to recognize its duty to defend the rights of the Family and its members.

Christianity laid the foundation of favourable attitude to work. As regards manual work, the attitude of Christianity was no less innovating. The Christian attitude to work was positive and noble. It was a Pauline principle that those who refuse to work should not be given to eat. “We gave you a rule when we were with you, not to let anyone have any food if he refused to do any work”. For Christianity no work could any longer be mean. The Christians were encouraged to all forms of good works and humanitarian engagement. This elevation of work raised the morale of the despised and impoverished working class. Diligence to work became appreciatively and effectively more honourable and rewarding than gifts or division of property could have done. The society was imbued with a new spirit, which was to become the first condition of the progress and industry of modern civilization. The early Christians did not think manual labour ignominious.

Conclusion

Although religion has been seen as a source of worry to humanity due largely to misconception and selfish interest which negates the spirit of religion, it has been clearly seen that religion as institution, has played enormous role in the sand of history in the

development of humanity and made more changes on earth for good than any other institution. Religion laid the foundation of formal education, library system and university institutions. It contributed to scientific discoveries and technological innovations and advancements in intellectual culture in general.

It is worthy of note that religion fought against cannibalism, superstitious beliefs, the killing of twins, trial by ordeal, slavery and human sacrifice. It contributed so much to alleviate human misery by building hospitals, rehabilitation units and workshops to take care of the sick, motherless babies, mentally ill-destitute, the physically challenged, lepers and empowered unskilled patients to learn a trade during recovery. Professional medical nursing and Red Cross trace their origin to religion. Religion laid the foundations for the sanctity of human life, the fundamental equality of all men, man's liberty, antislavery and abolitionist attitude, religious freedom, domestic stability and favourable attitude to work.

In view of the reality of the positive and essential role of religion to human development, the study recommends that religious leaders should as a matter of urgency and commitment review the tenets and creeds of their religions and get rid of anything that tends to erode their cherished value of human development and focus more on their works of civilizing humanity.

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