

AN ASSESSMENT OF RELIGION AND CULTURE AS INTERTWINE CONCEPTS

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Abstract

The concepts of religion and culture have been aged long which are as old as man. Over centuries, scholars have viewed them as two indispensable and mutually dependent concepts. This is because no one of them can stand on its own without a link of dependence on the other, hence they are inseparable concepts. It is a fact well acknowledged that each religion grows from a culture and cannot progress and prosper without the effective working of cultures. More so, it has been underscored that culture gives religion an avenue to operate while religion sanitizes and purifies culture. This article therefore brings to the limelight the relationship between religion and culture. Hence if there must be a positive impact of religion, there must be adequate knowledge and respect for culture. In this work, the writers made use of secondary sources in its writing. The paper concludes that religion and culture are just like left and right hands of which each makes the other clean and relevant to fulfill its purpose and should not be seen as against the other. The paper therefore recommends that as religion is a vital element in human endeavour, so also is culture and it is not to be seen as otherwise. It is also recommended that culture should not be seen as heathenism just as it occurs in the mind of many people whenever the name culture is mentioned. It finally recommends that if any religionist wants to make impact in a community/society, he must be abreast with the culture of the people in question.

Key words: Assessment, Religion, Culture, Intertwine, Concept

Introduction

It has been an undisputable fact that everybody under this planet earth is from a culture and there are some religions found in that culture. This entails that without religion, culture will not be shaped and without culture, there is no environment for religion to operate. All men are products of one culture or the other and through the culture, man devices way of approaching the divine being. Culture and religion are intertwined, interwoven and inter-cordial and have to work hand in hand for an effective and smooth running of the society, hence any attempt to separate them may bring disorder in the society. In this work therefore, an effort will be made to examine the two concepts and

unravel how they can work together for an effective and productive working of the society.

What is Religion?

The problem with defining religion is because there are too many scholars making attempt to proffer definitions of religion and thus not easy to proffer a definition that will be acceptable to everybody, hence the lack of a general acceptable definition of religion has been one of the problems facing the study. Every scholar approaches the definition from his or her own special areas of interest. This work will therefore attempt to bring out some kind of checklist of definitions of religion without going into their analysis to avoid any bias.

Religion etymologically had been taken from two root words “leg” and “lig”. “leg” means “to take up”, “gather or observe” to observe the signs of divine communication” while “lig” means “to bind” hence from this, religion means a relationship or a communion between the human and the supernatural. Two important Latin words also come to mind whenever the etymologically meaning of religion is mentioned; they are re-legere and re-ligere. For Cicero, religion was derived from the Latin word re-legere-“to read again and again, and again; a derivation which could imply to study or pay attention assiduously to divine things. If this is accepted, religion then means an attentive and deep study of matters pertaining to God and His worship thereof. According to St. Augustine, religion is derived from re-ligere i.e re-election or chooses once more, by which God chose to re-establish man and reinstate him on the grace which man has lost by sin. This may help us to know and explain man’s worship of God and his making God the object of predilection. Lactantius also derived religion from the word “re-ligere”-“to bind, to unite”, hence religion can be seen as the process of binding or fastening oneself to the supernatural being or God in worship and adoration. Having these in mind, it can be said that religion has come to signify a choice of action or path through which man seeks to establish relationship with God or ultimate reality. Man in that path tries to maintain a good relationship by binding himself to God through beliefs and other symbolic expressions of faith. In the strict sense therefore, religion is the consciousness in man which makes him show high degree of conscious dependence in a complex set of laws, rites and culture expression (Anyacho, 2004).

In line with the above premise, Bellah (1969) defines religion as a set of symbolic forms and acts which relate man to the ultimate conditions of his existence. Also Frazer (1986) sees religion as the propitiation or conciliation or powers superior to man which are believed to direct and control the course of nature in human life. Galloway presented his

description of religion as man's faith in power beyond him whereby he seeks to satisfy emotional needs and gain stability of life which he expresses in acts of worship and service (Anyacho, 2004). In the view of Iwe, he approached the definition of religion in a more general perspective, as quoted by Margaret thus:

A spiritual pilgrimage characterized by the quest for and Recognition of some super human power, and acknowledgement of man's limitations and self-insufficiency and the adoption and formation of a path doctrinal and practical moral in life in explanations and answers to the fundamental issues and problems of human existence. (1979:39).

Iwe's definition cuts across many disciplines indicating an attempt to formulate a definition that will cover all the disciplines covered by religion. Perhaps the most quoted definition of religion is that of Emile Durkheim (1955) that defines religion as a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say things set apart and forbidden, beliefs and practices which unite into one moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.

Durkheim's definition of religion is highly functional especially as it affects life. In line with his definition, Idowu in Anyacho (2004) proposes a lengthy definition of religion which may be as a result of his critical analysis of other scholar's definition vis-à-vis the realities of religion as a social process which encompasses all areas of human life. He asserts:

Religion results from man's spontaneous reaction to his immediate awareness of a living power, wholly other and Infinitely greater than himself, a power mysterious because unseen, yet a present and urgent reality seeking to bring man into communion with himself, this awareness includes that of something reaching out from the depths of man's being for close communion with and vital relationship to this power as a source of life. (p5).

This definition could be seen as a desperate attempt to bring about a definition that covers all the dimensions religion could be considered. It must be observed however that religion is multidimensional for no definition can cover all the aspect, hence the few definitions above.

Culture

This simply refers to the way through which a particular society does her things. Coulson and Riddell define culture as an established way of doing things. Also Taylor has it to mean "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, moral's laws and any

other capabilities and habits acquired by a man as a member of society. In support of the above definition, Linton opines:

Culture of a society refers to the way of life of its members, the collection of ideas and habits which they learn, share and transmit from generation to generation, that which the society made, shares and transmits among its members for perpetuity comes in form of social designs and patterns of living which marks the particular society from other societies. (p.35).

E.B. Taylor in his book, *Primitive Culture* has it thus:

In general therefore, culture may be 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 festival, modes of communication and transportation, the house we live and the food we eat (Taylor. p5).

These constitute of the society's life is what it share among its members and passes from generation to generation. It is the main curriculum as it were which every member of the society is taught and socialized into if he is to be acceptable as a member of that society (Anyacho, 2004). When a child is born, he is governed by instincts which he cannot control, as the child grows, he begins to learn the mode of life in the society, he begins to adapt and adjust himself into the mold through which the life of the society was shaped. In this members attempt to understand themselves, their society and struggle in their environment for survival. Culture in man according to Goldthorpse (1986) consists essentially of a system of tools linked with a system of symbol. He goes further to say that "tools and symbols are inextricably interwoven in the complex whole of human culture which distinguishes man from the great apes and which has enable man to become very successful in life and dominate the natural environment more than any other species. For Pappas and Kelvie (2021), Culture encompasses religion, food, what we wear, how we wear it, our language, marriage, music and is different all over the world.

Religion: An Inseparable Part of Culture

In demonstrating the strong relationship between religion and culture, Abudulla (2018) opines that the relationship between culture and religion is revealed in the motivation and manifestation of cultural expression. He goes further to say that if culture expresses how humans experience and understand the world; religion is a fundamental way in which humans experience and understand the world. Waggoner (2011) demonstrates the relationship also by pointing out that religion has indeed relocated. And that the shift has

taken place that religion no longer resides in the consciousness but within culture. Beyer (2017) concurs with Waggoner and opines that a shift has really taken place and religion is no longer perceived to be subjectively imagined, locating religion in the bodies and brains of people participating in religion, but rather religion is located in culture or a social system. The implication is that religion has changed focus, away from the individual and group consciousness and finding the location of religion in the exterior.

Religion and culture are so related that any attempt to separate them is always met with some difficulties. It plays complementary role to culture thereby enabling culture to perform its functions effectively in the society. These functions are those of provision, integration, systematization, preservation and transmission (Anyacho, 2004). Culture makes provisions through which a society can be maintained and perpetuated. It provides the society with the method of bringing up its ones and establishing orderly relationship among her members. Iwu (1979) has categorized the functions of culture as simplifying and guiding behaviour as well as providing roles, defining relations and exerting social control through its institution and norms. It serves as an identification mark of a people which distinguishes them from others just the ways trademark distinguishes a product from the other or tribal marks distinguish people of one tribe from the other, (Anyacho, 2004). Culture gives meaning and purpose to the institutions and norms of a society. It integrates, systematizes and interprets the societal values. It equips the society with the basis for social unity and solidity thereby inspiring a sense of oneness, affinity and patriotism among members of the society. It functions as a matrix and guiding spirit or a social function. The social values are carefully stored, preserved and transmitted from generation to another (Iwe, 1979).

With strict study, one identifies religious elements in the functions of culture in the society, these include, belief system, ethical system or moral values through which life in the society is directed. Religion also provides the sanction through which social life is directed, controlled and saved (Anyacho, 2004). The main social functions of religion according to Peil (1997) are integration, explanation and making of symbolic statement about society through rituals. Religious rituals provide the avenue through which some aspects of the cultural life are recognized, expressed and certified. For instance, different rites of passage recognized by a particular culture are not deemed to have been performed until they are executed through the vehicle of religion. The social rite whether it is for dedicating or naming a new child or the rite ushering a mourner into normal life are culture ceremonies which cannot be certified without the religious rituals performed.

In Africa, many communities set apart some periods when relations mourn their dead. The period starts from the day of death of the relation to any duration culturally determined for each community, to separate the period of mourning, significant religious rites are

performed. For the traditional religionist, it may range from simple prayers to sacrifice which aim at appeasing the spirit of the dead and gods. But for the Christians, special prayer is said in the church for a mourner or a group of mourners. These prayers are symbolic actions which reintegrate the mourner back into the full force of social life. What is the difficult thing in a mourner, say a widow whose period of mourning is over to cast her mourning cloth aside and put on a new one? It may be easy and looks very simple but underneath is a complex which may torment her unless a religious rite is performed to cut every relationship between her and the dead husband which is finally accomplished in the outing ceremony.

The naming ceremony of a baby is another cultural behaviour prominent in Africa. There is a very strong religious imperative in the manifestation of this behaviour. The eight days or one month as the case may be approved by the culture for a child to stay before the child is named have serious religious undertone. In a very deep sense, it is the religious rites which accompany the ceremony that gives the real meaning it holds for the people. The religious significance can be seen in some cases when the same rite is repeated. For instance, some Christian parents after naming their children in the traditional way where elders are called to pray for the child and accept it into the family still take the same child to the church for baptism.

Culture shows what people can do to make a living, when, where, how and the extent they can do it is influenced by religion. In some agrarian communities, there are religious interpretations on when to and when not to go to the farm, when to and when not to eat farm products especially yam. It can be seen in some part of the country that a farmer cannot start clearing a new forest for farming any day he chooses without observing some religious laws. It can also be understood why some farmers in some parts of the country can be suffering from hunger even when their yams are mature for harvesting until the day the yam deities first eat for the year and certify them fit for human consumption. Here, culture determines the tools for and method of planting but religion strongly built in the culture to determine when to enjoy the fruit of labor. Culture includes everything the society does even the way traditional society appoints their kings; it sets up the principles and processes of appointing and coronation of a king but uses religion to sanction and legitimize the authority of the king before he assumes his position as the grand custodian of the law and custom of the land. One can understand why the coronation of a Benin Oba has intricate religious dimension. This rite makes him a cultural and religion expert at least in the tradition sense (Anyacho, 2004).

We are trying here to demonstrate that religion to a great extent gives significant meaning to culture, in the same way; religion cannot be practiced in the absence of culture.

Religion is full of symbols and becomes meaningless without the symbols. In the words of Maritain (2008), religions are strongly embedded in a particular historical, social and cultural context. At the same time, cultures are profoundly marked by the religious traditions that inspired their development. Anyacho (2004) goes on to say that symbols are visible signs or emblems representing truth of religious faith, whether it is the cross for the Christians or the Muslim's crescent or the Jews star of David, all are means of expressing deep truth about their belief. Some of the tangible symbols like the wine and bread for the Christians are product of culture which helps the Christian adapt to conceptualize the truth in the Christian faith. Religious language is symbolic language hence language may be seen as the element of culture developed in the belief, practice, knowledge, experience and consequent dimensions to make a meaningful communication between the profane realm and sacred realm, between man and God. Cultural products in form of symbols are indispensable.

Following the ongoing, we can say that, religion and culture are like the right and left hand which the washing of each other makes both clean. They are indeed inseparable though not one and the same; the consideration of one would lead to the consideration of the other, against this background, Iwe (1979) opines that as religion purifies and illuminates culture, culture gives flesh and substance to religion and as culture incarnates religion, religion redeems and serves culture. To consider religion as a cultural product also demands that we look into some aspects of the culture because religious practice is culturally conditioned. Consequently, scholars have suggested that religion should be studied contextually taking into account the cultures in which individual religious traditions exist. Any person of religious inclination who fails to pay attention to the culture in which the religion is entrenched will not understand religion and will make inaccurate descriptions, analysis, interpretation of and conclusion about the religion in question. As to the interrelatedness of culture and religion.

Conclusion

Religion and culture are two concepts that call for serious understanding of their dynamics. They are intertwined concepts that their vivid and comprehensive understanding and application in the society bring about smooth and peaceful governance. Some religious personnel have not done well in their field of endeavour because of the inability to balance these concepts. Once they fail to recognize and study the culture of their primary place of assignment, the effort is worthless. The French policy of assimilation in Africa failed because of their failure to take cognizance of our culture but once they did that by policy of association, they progressed. It is important to posit here

that it is the culture that gives religion environment to operate and then in turn, religion sanitizes the culture. Each of them has a crucial role it plays on the other.

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