

**COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF RELIGION REPORTING IN NIGERIA AND  
SELECTED COUNTRIES OF THE WORLD----- Tsebee, Asor Kenneth and Toyin  
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**Introduction**

Anything that has not been reported, despite the scale or significance of such happening, cannot be considered as news. News is the first disclosure (in mass media) of any story or facts about an incident or event (MacDougal, 1982; Hodgson, 1987). Religion news is any story in which religious faith, spirituality or religious ethics play a significant role (Diane, 2006)

The issue of religion is a very important one in the development of any society it does not matter what the belief system is; even traditional societies, were held together by scary religious beliefs. In modern time, religion has become such a complex matter especially when the issues involve the basic religions ruling the world; Christianity and Islam (Egbu, 2016a, p.42)

Freedom of religion is the first right to be promulgated before political rights; the bloodless 1689 revolution in England was executed to achieve religious freedom; it produced the act of tolerance, which clearly specified rights to hold beliefs and to profess same publicly. It is true that Anglicanism is the state church that the British law still allows for freedom of religion. America improved on what Britain did. In the first amendment to the American constitution there is a clear principle that says; "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof". The congress further added a clear provision called establishment of religion and exercise clause, which the court interpreted to mean never would any denomination or faith be legislated into or accepted.

Religion is a good instrument for the development of society; it can bind a people together, feed their spiritual needs and destroy superstitions, and it can make the mind receptive of ideas. Religion was used by the Egyptian, Roman Empire, Middle East Great Britain to

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craftily remodel their societies. Religion and not law helped America to achieve character modification, Puritanism and great awakening.

Religion almost never makes the top of the list of what attracts people's interests when it comes to what they read or listen to. But faith and spirituality are a powerful undertow in the stories of the day. Often that undertow remains invisible to media audiences because journalists do not acknowledge its persistent pull (Diane, 2006). Religion is a very emotive issue that touches on all aspects of our life (good versus evil, struggle admit hardship, reconciliation and forgiveness, success against all odds, community and family, hence the need to give its news pivotal place and packaging.

**Reporting religion in Nigeria**

Nigeria is a multi-ethnic and mortal religious state. The most dominant religions in the country of more than 170 million (World Bank, 2017) inhabitants are Christianity and Islam. There is a scientific representation of neither the numerical strength of these religious groups nor their geographical distribution. The Islamic faith preponderates in the North-western and North-eastern parts of the country (which is composed of Sokoto, Zamfara, Borno, Yobe, Katsina, Kano, Kebbi, Jigawa, Bauchi, Taraba (although Taraba has an almost equal distribution of Christians and Muslims), Gombe and Adamawa States). On the other hand, Christianity is the more prominent in the southeastern and south-south geographical zones (composed of Imo, Enugu, Anambra, Abia, Ebonyi, Delta, Edo, Bayelsa, Rivers, Cross-River, and Akwa Ibom states with Edo states arguably comprising an equal distribution of Muslims and Christians. The Southwest and North central zones (composed of Lagos, Oyo, Ogun, Ondo, Ekiti, Osun, Kaduna, Niger, Plateau, Nassarawa, Benue and Kogi States) and (the federal capital territory Abuja) have reasonably balanced number of Muslims and Christians; except for Benue State which is entirely composed of Christians and followers of traditional religion (Sampson, 2016).

The religion reporter in Nigeria operates in a very volatile environment because religion in Nigeria is a touchy subject. Among Nigeria's quite even distribution of Moslems and Christians, some also worship traditional deities while few are agnostic concerning religion. There is a wide gap between theory and practice in terms of religious provisions of the law, which prohibits state religion and reckons Nigeria as a secular state, with the freedom of worship and expression. Despite the over 170 million population in the country of about 250 ethnic groups and more than 300 languages, there is an age long debate over the number of Christians and Moslems, but Moslems are won't to claim to be in the majority. Of course Christianity tries to counter such claims (Oikelome, 2007).

In Nigeria's 52 years history, religion has constituted one of the most divisive issues that have led to loss of lives and property. There have been an estimated over 100 religion related riots and disturbances since independence in 1960. The divide between the two religions - Islam and Christianity - is so wide that it often leads to violence. Reporting the out-come of religious crises therefore poses another serious challenge to the reporter. Information on damages of lives and property are often deliberately obscured for fear of inciting reprisals. More worrisome is the fact that the problem of religious news reporting is accentuated by the dominance of politics by faithful of particular religions in different parts of the country and lack of clear-cut demarcation between politics and religion in certain parts. The rather cagy approach to reporting religion in Nigeria seems even more apparent in the broadcast media where there are deliberately stringent rules of licensing and operation. It brings to mind the ban on the telecast of miracles by the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC). The commission's sanction, though now over-ruled

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SELECTED COUNTRIES OF THE WORLD----- Tsebee, Asor Kenneth and Toyin  
Onayinka**

by the courts, was said to be part of government's measure to regulate the contexts of religious messages as well as check purported make-believe miracles in the airwaves, which allows some preachers to manipulate the psyche of viewers:

The ardent display of miracles on air has come under strident criticism in the past. In July 2001, this made the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) to sanction miracle-based television programmes. It was against the broadcast code. Certain sections of the code forbid programmes that could instigate one section of the religious populace against another (Ayotemi, 2002 p.14)

On the whole however, of the two-dominant religions in Nigeria, Christianity seems to be more reported. (Ibid, P. 14). This has been attributed to certain peculiar difficulties in accessing news reports on Islam in Nigeria. Lack of structural headquarters has been identified as a major problem of Islamic news reporting in the country. While the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), the body prompting the interest of Christians all over Nigeria, has a headquarter from where news can be accessed; the apex Islamic organisation in the country, Nigeria Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) has none. Despite existing for more than 20 years NSCIA has no functional head office. So, except for personal contacts with Islamic Leaders, it is difficult to generate reports on Islamic activities to a certain extent. The North-South cleavages in social political calculations in Nigeria appear very evident in Islam. Another problem with Islamic reporting in Nigeria is what some have called the media bias. The mainstream media –radio, television and print - in the country are controlled by Christians mainly from the south in terms of censorship and practice (Oikelome, 2007).

**Reporting Religion in Selected Countries of the World: an overview**

**Reporting Religion in Indonesia**

The population of Indonesia is put at 225 million people. Out of this, Islam takes 85.2 percent of the population, Protestant 3.9 percent, Catholic believers are 30 percent, Hindu 1.8 percent, Buddhist 0.8 percent and others 0.3 percent. Although Indonesia is the country with the largest Muslim population in the world, it is still regarded as a secular state. In Media practice in Indonesia, special attention is not paid to religious news. It is treated as other news. However, there are reporters who cover religion news. For the media practice, hajj pilgrimage is one of the main events covered as many journalists get state sponsors from the state department of religion and travel agents to cover this event. Christian journalists cover Pilgrimage to Jerusalem, Mount Sinai et c. but there is no government involvement. Challenges in covering issues with religious nuances such as marriage and divorce, movement from one religion to another as a result of marriage, quarrel about who takes custody of the children, polygamy and contract marriage. The challenge in covering religious issues in Indonesia has to do with maintaining balance and remaining unbiased in reporting such situations.

**Religion Reporting in Malaysia**

Malaysia case is not different from the Indonesian situation except that whereas Indonesia is a secular state, Malaysia is not. Islam professed by 60 percent of the 27 million

**COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF RELIGION REPORTING IN NIGERIA AND  
SELECTED COUNTRIES OF THE WORLD----- Tsebee, Asor Kenneth and Toyin  
Onayinka**

populations is the official religion. Other major religions of the world as practiced here are Buddhism 19.2 percent Christianity 9.1 percent including Catholic, Hinduism is 6.3 percent, Confucianism/Tao and other traditional Chinese religions 2.6 percent. One major challenge of covering religion in Malaysia is the multi-ethnic and multi-religious nature of the country and its people. Over 50 percent of the populations are Malay 24 percent Chinese, 8 percent Indians, 7 percent are non-Malay with other groups making up the rest. One would need to be an expert or at least knowledgeable in major religions in Malaysia to be able to cover them accurately. Apart from that, the coverage is hardly ever theological in nature or packaged to help readers understand theological issues. Coverage of religious dimensions of everyday news seems to be influenced by ethnic divisions largely of the Chinese or Malay press. The key word is the impact on that particular group. The Chinese group would slam any attempt by the government or other authorities to impose Islamic culture or norms on the Chinese such as requiring a non-Moslem Chinese to wear Malay costume. The impact of this is that the reporting is along cultural lines. Only English language Newspapers, like the Sun, take issues beyond the slim boundaries of impact to wider contest of constitutional rights and liberties since the papers draw readers from different communities and ethnic groups. Expectedly, Islam receives a lot more coverage especially during the months of Ramadan (Ibid.)

**Reporting Religion in Philippines**

Religion in the Philippines is given much publicity because of the government and Filipino population. This is because Christianity in the Philippines has been deeply rooted since the early 15<sup>th</sup> century when the Philippines were Christianized by Spain. Statistics has it that more than 85 percent of the populations are Christians, of which 80 percent are Catholics. Aside the foregoing, for almost 500 years, the influence of the Church hierarchy, has been tremendous. So powerful is the church in the Philippines in the last 21 years – it played significant role in the ouster of two sitting Philippine presidents – Ferdinand Marcos (1986) and Joseph Estrada (2001). Mainstream media have their eyes and ears on the church at all times to ask their opinions on such raging issues as birth control, morality, same sex marriage, gambling and controversial government policies. In every major issue that affects the Filipinos, it is obvious that the Catholic Church is deeply involved. The media is also there to set agenda on issues. Apart from reporting such events as Christian and other related fiestas, one major event which causes a lot of stir during Lenten seasons is the regular sacrifices by penitents as flagellants, especially on Good Friday. This involves actual crucifixion of seven to eight people which occurs in the province off Pampanga, some kilometers from Manila. The event attracts thousands of tourists who come to witness the crucifixion of seven to eight people. The bloody episode is always beamed live on television and radio. In all, the Church and the press function as watchdogs on topical issues in Philippines (Ibid.).

**Reporting Religion in India**

Although a majority of the 1 billion plus population of India is Hindu, there is a sizeable number of Moslems, Christians, Buddhists and people from other religions even atheists, who have co-existed with the people belonging to the “majority” religion for centuries. Today, India has the world’s third largest Muslim population, after Indonesia and Pakistan. In addition, about 2.2 million people in India follow the Bahai faith forming the largest community of Bahais in the world. (<http://www.bahaindia.org>, 2016) India is also home to followers of Zoroastrianism, who in India are called Parsis. (<http://www.culturemedia.com>,2016). They

**COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF RELIGION REPORTING IN NIGERIA AND  
SELECTED COUNTRIES OF THE WORLD----- Tsebee, Asor Kenneth and Toyin  
Onayinka**

represent about 0.006 percent of the total population with a concentration in and around the city of Mumbai the capital of Western state of Maharashtra.

Religion plays a key role in the lives of Indians just like Nigerians. Rituals, worship and other religious activities form a very important part in the daily life of individual Indians like Nigerians. Religion also organizes social life especially in rural parts of India. India hosts numerous pilgrimage sites for almost all religions. Most festivals are celebrated by People of all communities, irrespective of which religion induced the festival. There are close to 60,000 daily newspapers published in over 100 languages, in addition to the 40 domestic news agencies in the country. The reach of the press medium (dailies and magazines combined) has increased from 216 million to 222 million in 2016. The number of readers in rural India (110 million) is now equally equal to that in urban India (112 million). Similarly there are more than 100 TV channels, and the number of news channels is growing. TV has grown considerably in reach from 207 million watching in an average week in 2005 to as many as 230 million in 2006, further expanding the lead over the number of readers (Indian National Readership Survey 2006). Reports on Christian Missionaries indulging in “conversions” are common place in Hindu Newspapers. The largest selling Dainik Jargan daily is the best example in the trend. The local edition of Dainik Jargan in Himachal Pradesh state has been carrying provocative stories maligning the local Christian community for the last two years. It has been publishing a series of reports with the same headline “*Isaiyon Ka gorakth chanda*” (misdeeds of Christians) each time carrying a picture that shows a trishul (trident one of the signs of a Hindu god) piercing the cross and stains of blood.

Several Dainik Jargan stories have alleged that Christians eat beef (the cow considered a holy animal and worshiped by Hindus) and “forcibly” convert Hindus identifying Christian workers with their names. Those extremists somehow get hold of their in-house magazines and misquote from these publications in the newspaper to support their allegations. In fact, there is the feeling among Christian workers that it is as a result of the anti-Christian campaign in the Local media that the congress party government in Himachal Pradesh Assembly passed an anti-conversion bill on December 30, 2006, alleging that “Conversions” are happening leading to law and order problems in the state, and the local people wanted a law to ban “forcible” conversions. Most English national Newspapers in India have special religion columns but there is no regular dedicated programmes on religion in news channels. However the news channels, mainly Hindi, do like to highlight people’s superstitions.

Hindi News channels obsession with spiritual healing and occultism is easily perceivable. Reporting on such practices featured in almost every news bulletin. To give an example, the Aaj Tak channel on July 28 showed a “healer” stepping on young children to “heal” their diseases. The coverage lasted for more than 15 minutes and the clip repeated several times in the day. TV channels showed devotees of the Hindu god Ganesha in Delhi and other parts of the country offering milk to an idol, claiming that it was actually drinking. The coverage was shown the whole day after short intervals, and Hindu priests were interviewed on the possibility of an idol drinking milk. A few days later, the channels showed a clip of devotees of a temple on seashore in Numbai, the capital of Maharashtra, drinking sea water, which had reportedly turned sweet. The devotees attributed the “Miracle” to their god.

Also, there are special half hour programmes on most Hindi channels showing the fame and claims of occultists, claiming to have supernatural powers. English news channels also report on incidents related to people’s superstitions, but the frequency is way lower than their Hindi counterparts. From time to time, superstitions do figure in debates on English Channels.

## **COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF RELIGION REPORTING IN NIGERIA AND SELECTED COUNTRIES OF THE WORLD----- Tsebee, Asor Kenneth and Toyin Onayinka**

The media can blame the viewers from this trend; as such coverage does increase the Television Rating Points (TRP) of a channel but it is also true that this is promoting superstitions among the people. (Arora, 2009).

### **Reporting Religion in Pakistan**

Good journalism is difficult work at the best of times. There is never enough information and not enough time. Reporters rely on the training and standards to overcome these difficulties and deliver news which is accurate and impartial. This is the traditional role of journalism to enable the public to make well informed decisions (the Nigeria voice 2016). But every year brings new challenges and difficulties.

A journalist working with Pakistan's largest circulated newspaper, covering dawn religion in journalism is a taboo and entails complications and in some cases, life threats. Pakistan came into being on August 1947, in the name of religion in the eastern and Northwestern regions of the British India, where there was a Muslim majority. Since its inception religion has been an important part of people's lives. In the modern Pakistan, one can see mosques with four tall minarets, churches and walls full of religious graffiti, politicians vowing to talk on Islam and vow to make Pakistan a castle of Islam where other religious minorities will live in peace with religious freedom.

But religion has been the most conflicting issue and cause of bloodshed in the country in recent years and yet journalists are not ready to call it as a beat. Pakistan, which is under violent attacks from religious extremists of the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Taliban (TTP), has seen 68 journalists murdered since 1994. Since 2001, 28 journalists have been killed by TTP militants for not following their orders in coverage. Besides this, every political party uses religion as their slogan to attract voters' journalists cover it as a routine matter.

### **Comparative Analysis of Religion Reporting in Nigeria and other Selected Countries of the World**

Reporters of religion in Nigeria operate in a very difficult environment when compared to other countries of the world such as India, Malaysia, Indonesia and Philippines. In Nigeria's 52 years history, religion has constituted one of the most divisive issues leading often to destruction of lives and property. The divide between Christianity and Islam is so wide that it often leads to violence. Reporting the outcome of such crises often poses a serious case to the reporter. This is not the case in some countries like the Philippines and Indonesia. In Indonesia for instance where Islam is the dominant religion journalists cover hajj pilgrimage more than any other religious event. Unlike Indonesia where special attention is not given to religious news, in Nigeria religion is given special attention in news reportage. In terms of population the Indonesian population is larger than that of Nigeria. While Nigeria has a population of 160 million people, Indonesian's population is put at 250 million. In terms of sponsorship journalists who cover hajj operations in Indonesia enjoy state sponsorship while their Christian counter parts do not. But in Nigeria, journalists who cover the two dominant religions Christianity and Islam are sponsored by government if they are public servants or private sector if they are working in private media organisations. Malaysia is not a secular state like Nigeria; however, covering religion in Nigeria is difficult because religion is considered one of the most divisive

**COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF RELIGION REPORTING IN NIGERIA AND  
SELECTED COUNTRIES OF THE WORLD----- Tsebee, Asor Kenneth and Toyin  
Onayinka**

issues, often times there is politicization of religion by national leaders and elites. Egbu (2016b) submits that:

Religion is not a complex issue but we have made it so because some people want to achieve selfish agenda at the expense of national peace and blood of innocent citizens. This ought not to be where reason and good conscience prevail. It should not even be contemplated in our kind of society where given the configuration no one faith can overwhelm the other no matter how hard we try, yet mischievous ones are still pushing their

A confirmation of the above are the cases of Jigawa State government which is constructing 99 mosques with public funds while Imo state government has directed each local government to build a chapel at their secretariat. Building churches and mosques in government houses would have made sense if our society were to be a non-faith one, but in this case we are not, so common sense should detect that no matter how fanatical one wants to be about his faith, your right, even constitutionally guaranteed should stop where the rights of other begin. Politicization creeps in when the state, through political players begins to make deliberate steps to make the state favour one faith above others and to make laws that attempt to make one particular faith look like a state religion. In the same vein, covering religion in Malaysia is also difficult because of the multiethnic and multi-religious nature of the people and its people. Coverage of religious dimensions of everyday news tends to follow ethnic dimensions of Chinese and Malay press.

Unlike Indonesia where Islam is given much publicity, in Philippine Christianity is given much publicity because of the government and the Philippines population. This is because Christianity in the Philippines has been deeply rooted since the 15<sup>th</sup> century when the Philippines were Christianized by Spain. In Nigeria too, Christianity is much more reported. This has been attributed to the difficulties in accessing news reports on Islam in Nigeria. Lack of structural headquarters has been identified as one of the major problems of Islamic news reporting in Nigeria.

Religion plays a key role in the lives of Indians like Nigerians. While Christianity and Islam are the two dominant religions in Nigeria; in India, the dominant religions are Hindu and Islam. Today India has the world third largest Moslem World's population after Indonesia and Pakistan. In addition, about 2.2 million people in India follow the *Bahia* religion. Apart from that, the largest selling Dainik Jargan Newspaper in *Indiais* often used to carry provocative stories maligning the local Christian community. In Nigeria, there is no newspaper or a media organisation for that matter that is dedicated solely for maligning any other faith. Most English national newspapers in India have special religion columns but there is no regular dedicated programme on religion in news channels. However, the news channels, mainly Hindi, do like to highlight people's superstitions. In Nigeria, on the other hand, there are newspapers that have special religion columns especially of the two main religions (i.e. Christianity and Islam). Also in Nigeria, next to alcohol, Christian religious programmes appear to be the biggest spenders on prime time television. (Ayotemi, 2002) notes that a lot of money is being expended on spreading the gospel through the tube. Televangelists are spending millions of naira propagating the gospel of Jesus Christ. Sunday is always a busy day for church programmes. Sermon based programmes that hit the airwaves include Pastor Tunde Bakare's Moment Of Truth, Chris Okotie's Apocalypse, The Redeemed Christian Church Of God's Redemption hour and so on.

## **COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF RELIGION REPORTING IN NIGERIA AND SELECTED COUNTRIES OF THE WORLD----- Tsebee, Asor Kenneth and Toyin Onayinka**

Although some Islamic preachers too do engage in televangelism, Christian religions programmes on evangelism appear to be the biggest.

In Pakistan, just like Nigeria religion has been the most conflicting issue and a cause of bloodshed in the country in recent times. Pakistan, which has been under violent attacks from religious extremists of Pakistan Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), has since seen 68 journalists being killed by TTP militants for not following their orders in coverage. The situation of journalists and journalism is not any different in Nigeria, as it is with Pakistan, it may only have its own dynamics. Officially the Federal Republic of Nigeria, it is federal constitutional republic comparing 36 states and its Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. Since 2002, there has been a spate of clashes, particularly in the North of the country between government forces and Islamist group Boko Haram, militant jihadists who seek to establish sharia law. Reporting this brings with it several risks. On April 26th 2012 there were coordinated bomb attacks on *Thisday* Newspapers offices in Kaduna and Abuja. The attack left several others injured. The first attack was at the newspapers office in Abuja while the second occurred at a complex that houses a *Thisday* newspaper office along Kotangora road by Ahmadu Bello way in Kaduna. In Nigeria, there are few journalists that venture into religious reporting or even write on Religion and politics (Ibid).

### **Conclusion**

The trends in the way religion and religion related issues are reported in Nigeria when compared to other selected countries of the world gives us three inferences. First, religion reporters in Nigeria operate in a very volatile environment because it is a touchy issue among Nigerians. Apart from that, there is no clear cut demarcation between politics and religion. Secondly, the Indian media gives substantial coverage to religion and religion related issues, by highlighting the negative and divisive aspects. Thirdly, covering religion in Indonesia and Philippine is not as challenging as covering religion in Nigeria and Malaysia. This is because Indonesia is a secular state that is dominated by Muslims; as such journalists covering hajj operations are the most favoured. In Philippine 80 percent of the population is Christian Catholics. Consequently mainstream media have their eyes on the church at all times to ask their opinions on raging issues such as birth control, mortality same sex marriage, gambling, and controversial government policies.

There is no gain saying the fact that, in all the countries of the world selected for this study the issues of religion have been used to promote secularism, hate campaigns against minorities, segregation, division and false spirituality. There is therefore the urgent need for the individual reporters and editors to do their bit in promoting world peace in religion reportage while at the same time emphasizing positive developments in culture, agriculture and social work across the globe rather than the present approach of media reportage which dwells mostly on stories with oddity for purely commercial benefits.

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**COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF RELIGION REPORTING IN NIGERIA AND  
SELECTED COUNTRIES OF THE WORLD----- Tsebee, Asor Kenneth and Toyin  
Onayinka**

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