

# Studying Religion for Sustainable Development in Nigeria

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## Abstract

*Nigeria is a pluralistic society. This is evident in ethnicity, religion and culture; three concepts that are intertwined and yet different. Most of the conflicts experienced in Nigeria are blamed on these concepts, especially religion. Nigerians do not freely discuss religion. It is a volatile subject to be discussed as a national issue. Institutions of learning shy away from studying religion as such. Religion, nonetheless, underpins and gives force to ethnicity and culture. Of the three dominant religions in Nigeria, Ancestral Religion cushions the missionary religions (Christianity and Islam). In their missionary character, they compete for sphere of influence and indoctrinate people unto fanaticism. The consequence is mutual hatred that often leads to the loss of lives and property. Religion is then seen as dysfunctional to development. The problem, however, is that people are not educated, formally and informally, on the possible contributions of religion to human development. Nigeria's tertiary institutions serve as the starting point. The paper concludes that the study of religion is indispensable for sustainable development in Nigeria. It recommends that for this type of development to be achieved, students of religion should be given a pride of place in Nigeria's politics and economy.*

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## Introduction

A lot of ink has been spilt and energy spent on issues of development especially in the so-called less developed countries of the world like Nigeria. At the turn of the 21st century, the International Community set for itself a twenty year plan of development to reduce human suffering and mortality. The plan is tagged Vision 2020 or Millennium

Development Goals (MDGs). Nigeria is not left out in that global agenda.

It is interesting that attention on the parameters of development is shifting from infrastructure and economic considerations regarding Gross National Product (GNP) to humanistic considerations of the actual wellbeing of humans. The dominant factor now is the quality of human beings that make up the human society. Happenings around the world indicate that economic, political and technical advancements do not offer all it takes to live. These are material accretions that serve humans as quantitative beings. They serve the quantitative dimension of life. But there is, also, the spiritual, the qualitative dimension of humans. These dimensions rest on the composite character of the human person as body and spirit. The spirit is the seat of reason and as such ought to guide the actions of the body. The spiritual is the invisible domain of humans that propels and enables relationships not only with fellow humans but also with the invisible realities of nature. It is the domain of religion, a term so perverse and so common that it is felt by all and lived by all even by those who claim to be nonreligious or antireligious but not fully known by all.

Religion is fundamental to humans' life and living, thinking pattern, attitudes and relationships. Religion is, therefore, considered critical for any meaningful, total and sustainable development in any human society. In pluralistic societies of culture, ethnicity and political affiliations, religion can institutionalize along those lines. This is because religion originates in a culture that is more often than not determined by an ethnic group that is defined by a dominant political party/body. If this plural structure of the society (including religious) is not properly managed, it becomes an instrument of conflict than stability, a situation that undermines development and as such would not have any development to sustain. The way out of dysfunctional character of religion in

human society is rigorous study of religion especially in institutions of learning. The aim would be to understand religion as such: its meaning and content, the basic differences and similarities with the determination to play down the differences and emphasize the similarities. This paper argues that a rigorous study of Religion is important for sustainable development in Nigeria, a pluralistic country of varied cultures, ethnic groups, political affiliations and consequently religious groups. The focus is on how to resolve the conflicts that often greet pluralism to the destruction of sustainable development.

From Wikipedia, Free Dictionary, “sustainable development is a development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. It emphasizes on the quality of life of the people now with an eye to the future. Sustainable development would, in the view of Ibeanu on development, aim at “improving the conditions in which human beings live” (10). This means that human beings are at the heart of development and the measure of sustainable development. Ibeanu makes an inter-play of the views of Walter Rodney and Okwudiba Nnoli to indicate three indices of sustainable development. These include *science* that deals with man’s understanding of the laws of nature (natural and biophysical environment), *technology* that measures the application of man’s understanding of the laws of nature “to creation of tools and other implements that improve man’s working conditions and living environment”, and *social relations of production* that deal with “social or inter-human environment” measuring “organization of work, access to productive resources, and distribution of rewards like workers’ wages” (10). The basic understanding here is that it is human beings in improved conditions of living that would plan for future generations. Sustainable development, therefore, implies continual improvement of the living conditions humans in a particular

community (society) from one generation to another. Correlation of science, technology and social relations (the tripod) is indispensable for sustainable development. To neglect one segment is to neglect creating enabling climate for sustainable development. Religion belongs to social relations segment. As such, religion should have something to contribute to Nigeria's search for sustainable development.

The religious climate of Nigeria today is not commendable for those who live now and as such appears unfavourable for the present generation to plan and leave improved living conditions for future generations. Nigeria has three major religious groups: Indigenous religion, Islam and Christianity. Before, during and after Nigeria's independence on 1 October 1960, the last two have been struggling for sphere of influence in Nigeria. Nigeria shies away from taking religion as a major national issue. Yet religion is manipulated to score cultural, ethnic and political gains. The concern here is the study of religion in institutions of higher learning in Nigeria as a step towards making the citizenry to have some comfort now and leave some legacy for the future.

Graduates and students of religion are not many in Nigeria. Those who study religion do so as the last option when every other opportunity for admission into higher studies fails. Even as they do so, they struggle to change department; where they do not succeed they are bowed under the load of the worry of job opportunity in Nigeria's economy. Mocking comments on lecturers and students by other believed "happening" departments throw some of the students of religion into trepidation and inferiority. The paucity of students gives both the students and their lecturers who would not like to be out of job serious concern. And so, instead of "Department of Religion" or "Department of Religious Studies", various institutions that offer the study of religion, and there are not many of them, add other appellations to attract students. To follow the trend, University of Nigeria,

Nsukka, of long and enviable tradition has added “Cultural Studies” to its original “Department of Religion”. Some, instead of separating, merge Religion and Philosophy into one department. Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, has added something that appears more relevant in addressing the problems of religion in interpersonal and inter-group relations: “Department of Religion and Human Relations”. Be that as it may, it is interesting to note that at the end of their studies, graduates of religion become overtly convinced of the need to inject the principles of religion into Nigeria’s polity. Though small in number now, they are already shooting into Nigeria’s socio-political and economic orbit. In this, they make their impact in Nigeria in spite of its dense population. They are not discouraged by their fewness. After all, the Apostles of Jesus were only twelve but they spread the Gospel to (made religious impact on) all parts of the then world.

More worrisome in the study of religion in relation to sustainable development is the polarization of the study into: “Islamic Religious Studies” (IRS)/ “Arabic Studies” and “Christian Religious Studies”. This may not expose the students to the basics and, therefore, similarities of religions. Religion-related courses available for admission into institutions of higher learning for 2011 indicate that in the Faculty of Arts, the expected home for the study of religion, twenty Institutions offer Islamic Studies, fourteen offer Arabic Studies, two offer Arabic Language and Literature, two offer Arabic and Islamic Studies, sixteen offer Religious Studies (including many that have modified their identity), two offer Theology and Religious Studies, five offer Theology (all private universities), one offers Christian Studies, and twelve offer Christian Religious Studies. In the Faculty of Education fourteen Institutions offer Education/Christian Religious Studies and fourteen Education/Arabic Studies; in the Faculty of Sciences only one institution offers Computer Science and Islamic Studies. However, in the area of Administration:

Personnel, Resource Management and Social Administration, the religious dimension is silent. It could unfortunately be embedded in such courses as Media Studies and Mass Communication, International Relations and Peace and Conflict Studies. One thing remains clear from this presentation - much of the studies in religion in Nigeria are particularistic and as such biased. Bias is a strong basis of conflict. Religious bias, obviously consequent on religious cosmological exclusivism, then leads to religious conflict, and Nigeria has had quite a dose of it. It could be a reflection of the complex character of Nigerian society reflected in its plurality.

### **The Pluralistic Character of Nigeria: Religion**

Nigeria is undoubtedly a pluralistic society. Its pluralistic character is evident in its varied cultures, varied ethnic groups, varied languages, varied political, economic, legal, and belief (religious) systems. This means that there are many worldviews within Nigeria. Worldviews are sustained by religion. Religion gives meaning to worldviews through sanctions, positive and negative, attached to customs and traditions that culminate in culture. All these systems were pulled together (amalgamated) by the colonialists to form one Nigeria without consultation, discussion and consensus. Naturally, the struggle for group identity initiates and often exacerbates conflict. This is more for a Nigeria of two different major missionary religions that in their maturation stem from two different cultures, Judeo-Roman (Christianity) and Arabic (Islam).

Anthony Etuk sees the amalgamation of over 250 ethnic groups into one political unit called Nigeria in 1914 by Sir Fredrick Lugard as a result of ghastly economic and political accident of history. It was done simply for administrative purposes. The cultural backgrounds of Islam and Christianity could not and has not allowed them blend into the beauty of variety. According to him,

With the population of over 150 million people, Nigeria has its vast Northern part consisting mainly of Muslims. Their cultural and religious influences stem from Arab Countries, and more specifically through the Usman Dan Fodio's Jihad of 1804- 1810, which ended in the establishment of centralized Islamic state before the colonial era. The Southern Nigeria is predominantly dominated by Christians whose religious influence stems majority from the activities of the early Christian missionaries from the West. (29).

It is to the credit of the North that they already had a centralized state before the amalgamation. Their legal system was based on Islamic principles. So was their political system. To stem the tide of resistance of British colonial rule by the dominant Hausa and Fulani ethnic groups, the British administration introduced the "Indirect Rule" in the North to share administrative responsibilities with the leadership of the core Muslim North. That was to service administrative convenience. In spite of the adherents of Christianity and Indigenous religions, though in the minority, the British administration created the Sharia courts for the Hausa and Fulani ethnic groups in 1900. Though Lugard insisted that the practice of Sharia should not be repugnant, that is, be offensive to natural law, equity and good conscience, it set the stage for the Christians to suspect preferential treatment of Islam in Nigeria.

Establishment of Sharia courts has raised religious and political tensions in Nigeria. From Independence in 1960, Constituent Assemblies have only managed to maintain in Nigeria's Constitutions that Nigeria is a secular State. In recent times, however, establishment of Sharia rule in some states of

Nigeria became fashionable. It all started in Zamfara State. The newly elected government of Kano State (April 2011) has promised to keep up the Sharia rule in the State. It is not clear whether that was one of their campaign promises. The fear is that it is the youth and the ignorant that will be fronted to die when the keg of gunpowder is ignited.

Haruna Dlakwa has indicated that the formation of political organizations and parties follow ethnic lines in Nigeria. This is dangerous as policies (especially religious) inimical to the minority could be enacted cushioning minority revolt which is not good for development. S. I. Udoidem made an inciting study of the place of religion in the political life of Nigeria by carrying out a survey of religious-related crises in Nigeria since independence. For him, religion and politics are related. After all, it is often said that all power belongs to God. Islam sees a fusion of religion and politics. Christianity, coming from a more secular West upholds a separation of the two. Granted there are doctrinal foundations for religious conflicts in Nigeria – the nature of God/Allah, the persons of Jesus and Mohamed, the value of their Scriptures (Bible and Koran), the nature of the final revelation – the major problem is the political manipulation of religion to hang on to power. It is the struggle between Islam and Christianity on who owns Nigeria. Udoidem cites Matthew Hassan Kukah as asserting that “these two religions are straddled across the Nigerian polity, each no longer knocking and pleading to be admitted but seeking to take over the architectural design and construction of the Nigerian polity” (154). He went on to examine the underpinning causative factors of religious conflicts, the magnitude of infrastructural destruction and number of deaths in various periods and administrations (civilian and military) in Nigeria. For him, it is the “struggle for control that is the root cause of the conflicts and crises in the nation’s political and religious life” (154). Property worth trillions of Naira and thousands of lives are lost in these

conflicts and crises. It would be convulsive to imagine the added numbers lost in the recent Boko Haram crises, Jos crises, and the post-2011 election crises. Nigerians have been advised to be more security conscious at the death of the world's number one terrorist and Islamic fundamentalist, Osama Bin Laden, a couple of days ago. Be that as it may, Udoidem concludes thus:

What we can deduce from this historical documentation and the analytical study of religious conflicts in Nigeria is that almost all politically motivated riots have religious overtones while all religiously motivated crises have political implications . . . [while] some religious crises are engineered either by politicians or the government in power to achieve a particular political goal or interest. Any solution to religious conflicts in Nigeria must consider these facts (181).

Udoidem is able to make these analyses and give the advice for solution to religious conflicts in Nigeria simply because he studied religion and the social implications of religion. This is more appreciated as Nigerians ought to be on the alert of the consequences of religious crises. Already, in the title of his celebrated work, Charles Kimball warns of “when religion becomes evil” as in destruction of lives and property.

One would not think that prayer is manipulation. Magic could be. Politicians have made it clear that asking for prayers could be part of the manipulation of religion to achieve personal political gains. That is why they identify or fraternize with major religious groups in their constituencies as spring board to political success. According to Hypolite Adigwe,

Our politicians have found it very useful, even more in recent times, to cling to one religious group or the other as if that group were the driving force, or source of their political power, while at the same time wanting all of us to believe that they strive to govern us, or are governing us in the name of God. Political aspirants . . . now have “prophets”, “imams” and “native doctors and seers” whom they consult regularly, especially in times of crises (252).

The same happens with those who want to perpetuate themselves in power. Request for prayers is claimed in some quarters to become of more effective demand if supported with fat envelops. Adigwe is correct that “Religion has become so important to our politicians that those who have no access to a playable pastor, Imam or native doctor have found it necessary to establish their own “Church” and employ their own prophets, pastors and seers” (253). It is the end of the road for Nigeria if political office holders succeed in muzzling up religious leaders and experts who should be watchdogs of politicians in their corrupt and sharp practices. A situation where religion can not shout FOUL to politics in Nigeria, as it appears to be turning out, is a situation of *requescat in pace*, “rest in peace”, Nigeria. This is because politics in Nigeria is based primarily on ethnic and religious calculations instead of clear ideological issues. But that is what studying religion can save Nigeria from. A dead country can not talk of development or of belonging to the committee of nations. It can not, therefore, talk of sustainable development.

There is another dimension to socio-religious conflicts that could derail the journey to or process of sustainable development in Nigeria. It is a dimension ancient but new to each generation. Ronald Johnstone put it as “the conflict that

results when religious institutions or representatives challenge one or more sociopolitical aspects of the community or society of which they are a part” (131). This is experienced when religion appears to engage in changing a society’s *status quo* or react to certain laws. Examples include laws regarding alcohol, sex, abortion, birth control and employment. These are social norms that may be given credence or rejected by any religion in a religiously pluralistic society like Nigeria. Though there are universal norms that cut across religions, religions are more often than not guided by their particular norms in a given social system. Provisions of alternate norms, if any, may not be functional as each religion would likely suspect the intentions of governance especially if it does not have greater number of representation in the ruling class. As such, norms guiding sociopolitical aspects of a community could be understood and interpreted differently. No doubt, these sociopolitical norms may concern a particular religion which may initiate verbal or even physical conflict with the political and/or economic institutions in the same society. Other religious groups may be supportive, opposing, or neutral to the concerned religious group depending on how they interpret the practice. That appears the case of Boko Haram in Nigeria. The group appears to be reacting to sociopolitical norms in Nigeria couched within the background of western civilization. Expectedly, government and other religions (especially Christianity) in the country are opposing to the group. In this stance, socio-religious conflicts go on.

It does not really matter whether conflict is initiated by social institutions other than religion or religion itself. What is important is that such conflicts impact negatively on the environment, the local people (segments or entire country), and the future of the country. This situation is made more worrisome because of cultural and ethnic sensibilities that underpin religious and political formations. By this, pluralism is deepened; and if it is not knowledgeably appreciated would

engender more conflicts. That would not be of service to sustainable development in Nigeria. But there is beauty in plurality.

### **In Praise of Plurality**

Plurality is not bad in itself. Human beings can make it evil. The fact of many religions in Nigeria should be a thing of beauty and not instrument of rancour. It destroys monotony and helps in bringing out the rich heritage of the country. It is generally attractive and interesting to display the variety of religious life of a country. This is possible only in the study of those religions within the context of their origin (history), location (geography), influence on people (social life), relevance to issues (current affairs and domestic policies), and how connected they are to the outside world (international relations). Religion influences people in their political, economic, legal, educational and health decisions. That explains why there are varieties also in those aspects of life in various countries of the world including Nigeria. Religion is the basis of human existence. This holds even for those who do not accept the reality of this influence. In the real sense, religion shapes human thought and informs human artistic expressions. Geoffrey Parrinder was right to write that

The religions of the world provide a great record of human thought and artistic expression. From the earliest times of prehistory down to the present day people have expressed their deepest convictions about the universe and mortal life in worship and symbol. All the arts have been brought into the service of religion: architecture and sculpture, painting and writing, music and costume (7).

From the above, it is evident that a study of religion with the intent of being influenced by the knowledge in order to effect better human relations is a sure way to sustainable development. In this case, the study of religion is not the study only of God, the spirits (good and evil), heaven and hell but also of the fundamental element in humans that primarily inform their relationship with the supernatural powers generally believed to be the source and sustainer of creation; and their fellow human beings with whom they daily interact physically in human society. These are the vertical and horizontal dimensions of religion. The vertical refers to the abode of God and the spirits. The horizontal refers to the abode of humans. In the vertical dimension humans draw inspiration and assistance in their daily activities because of their limitations. They use the inspiration and assistance from the vertical realm to creatively interact with humans at the horizontal realm. This interaction is not only religious in nature but also a function of humans who are fundamentally religious. Obiefuna had argued that “man is a *homo religiousus*, a religious man” (8), indicating that religion is a property of humans and not brutes. As such, humans carry their religion to other institutions in human society like in marriage, education, economy, politics, and law and so on. Again, religion influences human thinking about environment (natural, biophysical and inter-human) and posterity as elements of sustainable development.

In fact, there was no separation of religion from every day life in the ancient world. John Haught sees “religion” as a relatively modern concept. He explains that this could be “partly because religion blended so intimately with the rest of life and did not contrast sharply with profane or ordinary life the way it does today” (2). The seeming contrast today is because of modern sense of what is sacred (religious) and what is mundane (secular). Be that as it may, the religious pervades the secular even in the modern times with visible impact on

human environment, human social life and with serious projection to the future. If sustainable development addresses issues of environment, the local people and the future generation, and it is humans who would carry it through, then it is the religious human who would best fit to do so since, as argued here, it is the religious human that determines the past, the present and the future of every society. As such, the study of religion is indispensable for sustainable development of every society especially those that suffer religion related problems as in Nigeria. The next section discusses how best religion could be studied for sustainable development.

### **Studying Religion for Sustainable Development**

Religion is not as private and personal as some people may think. It is a group function that affects individuals directly or indirectly. Skeptics and atheists look at religious practices as unnatural and clear deviation from normality. For Haught, such religious observances and activities include sacred places, persons, times and objects; “liturgical calendars, meditative moods, extraordinary fastings, self-denials, exceptional private or communal actions, praying, sacrificing, meditating, prophesying” (2). Adherents of one religion could also see others of other religions doing these specifically religious things and regard them as antireligious or, at best, nonreligious. Bias and prejudice come in, consequent on in-group – out-group rivalry. If adherents of one religion know the demands of their tradition and also know the demands on the adherents of other religion(s) of their own tradition and respect them as such, there would be mutual understanding and so, fewer problems. The study of religion that would be contributive to sustainable development, therefore, has to take care of one’s religion as a study from inside and the religion of others out there as from outside. To study is to rigorously and systematically search for knowledge in a specific area of interest following some basic principles. Religion, as Haught

says, is “a multi-faceted phenomenon” (2) and calls for interdisciplinary study. However, the contributions of those from outside religion as a discipline of its own will only be partial and, in the main, reductive to the categories of their discipline: sociology, psychology, anthropology, philosophy and so on. But students of religion can do an insider’s study of religion putting into consideration also the external influencing environment. This is shown in the various methods in the study of religion.

### **Methods in the Study of Religion**

The emic-etic method of John F. Fenton et. al. in the study of religion better summarizes the study for meaning of religion from inside and from outside, according to them, “the *emic* (inside) *meaning* of a religious tradition is a description of that religious tradition by its adherents using their own language and their own categories and systems of organization” (6). This means that that religion means only what the people who live in a particular society say the religion means to them. It is examining religion within its framework. The authors are aware of possible individual differences within a culture that may cause variation in the meaning attached to a religious tradition. Religion can also mean different things to the same people at different times. It is part of the ambiguous character of religion that should also be studied. For instance, Pentecostalism appears to be “forcing” down the walls of denominationalism in Christianity and Islamic fundamentalism puts in check the influence of modernity on Islam. Phenomenology of religion allows a more objective study of religion than theology and metaphysics all of which belong to the emic method.

The *etic* (outside) study refers to the general practice of scholars who use *interpretive categories* derived from their scholarly disciplines in addition to emic categories to understand religion. It complements the insider’s story and is

not valid in proving a case alone. This is important as the discipline of religion does not boast of having one single theoretical perspective that explains every aspect of religion. Insight from other disciplines is incorporated. For example, as Fenton et. al. explains, “historians of religion use categories like the sacred, deity, worship, ritual, myth, priest, and symbol as organizing principles to describe religious phenomena that are similar in many different religions” (6). Moojan Momen supports this view and says that “sociology helps to explain the different social manifestations of religion; psychology can help to explain why people act in the way that they do in religious contexts; anthropology also has important insights to contribute” (3). Other important contributors would be Information/Communication Technology, Human Relations, Literature, Aesthetics, Ethics/Morality, and Sciences. Equally, relationships between religion and politics, economy, law and environment can not be neglected. One point needs to be made: religion need not be reduced to the categories of these other disciplines in their departments but that their insights are brought to bear in the study of religion. These categories are domiciled in the departments of religion under such curriculum designs as philosophy of religion, sociology of religion, religion and information/communication technology, religion and human relations, science of religion and so on. That is the only way such insights will be integrated in the study of religion as such (not the other way round) for sustainable development.

There are other ways religion could be studied. Robert E. Hume noted that students of religion should be exposed to the various emphases that people lay in their conception of religion. These include emphasis on the intellect, moral, emotions, worship, self-advantage (functionality), social (group), and the individual. There are also people who accept only their religion to be true and every other false and therefore infidels that should be eliminated. Such people suffer

from what Kimball calls “absolute truth claims” (41) that contribute to making religion evil. In his, there is claim to the perfect knowledge of God, sacrosanct character of sacred texts (Scriptures) that depict abuse, winner-takes-all expansionist challenge of missionary religions, and human view of truth. This claim can take off from blind obedience culminating in declaring the so-called holy war that has basis on the philosophy of “the end justifies the means” (120).

Religion could also be studied based on the basic sociological characteristics of religion. Johnstone (2004) gives them as group phenomenon, concern with the sacred and supernatural, involving a body of beliefs and a set of practices, and involving moral prescriptions. Poverty as a sociological issue could be examined in relation to religious conflicts as “a hungry man is an angry man”. The same holds for malnutrition and lack of education. Could these be the cause of most of the religious problems experienced in Nigeria especially at the northern parts as most of these problems start at the rural areas?

The point being stressed here is that religion should be given more academic touch in Nigeria. Gary E. Kessler advises that the academic study of religion challenges the students to develop the qualities of openness, honesty, critical intelligence, careful reading and listening, and critical tolerance. Like Fenton et. al., he gives two perspectives in the study of religion: insider’s and outsider’s. These are similar but not exactly the same as the emic and etic methods. For him, “the **insider’s** view is that of someone who participates in a particular religious tradition. This sort of study presupposes religious commitment and promotes an understanding that will lead to greater commitment. It promotes the interest and furthers the causes of a specific religious organization” (3). It is like someone picking the Bible or the Koran to read in order to know more about Christianity or Islam. In this kind of study, the person is broad minded. He understands his religion and

promotes it but not to the point of obstructing the existence or practice of other religions. He is like a person speaking a language he is born into. His study of religion is like being more involved in performing a religious function.

On the other hand, the **outsider's** viewpoint is the academic study of religion in which “the student stands outside all religious traditions and studies religions from the viewpoint of the methods and standards associated with the secular academy . . . .[It] does not presuppose any religious commitment, although it does presuppose a commitment to the standards of the academy” (3). The intention here is not to promote the interests of any particular religion. Though belonging to a religion makes the student have a personal feel of religious sentiment, his training in mental distancing in religious study puts him on a better pedestrian to appreciate, accommodate and tolerate the religious feelings of others. This would not necessarily make the student to abandon his own religion. It would rather make the student to critically study his own religion and weigh his beliefs and practices with other religions for comparative purposes. This has an advantage of soothing sharp edges of religious swords for mutual coexistence necessary for sustainable development. Joseph Omoregbe made this kind of study. Though a Christian, he made a comparative study of Christianity with other major religions of the world. With Islam, he made the comparison under such themes as Abraham as common father in faith, God, Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, Angels and Devils, Judgment Day, Heaven and Hell, Prayer, Fasting, Almsgiving and Pilgrimage, Morality, and Individual Salvation. His finding was that the two religions are not completely different since, from their Scriptures, the Bible and the Koran, they have so many things in common. Both of them agree on the essential aspects of religion. They only differ on matters of details reflecting their difference in cultural background. Omoregbe concluded, “There is therefore no basis for hostility,

discrimination or mutual recrimination between adherents of the two religions”. Such studies create the awareness of oneness that sustains development.

The essence for the study of religion, methods of the study, qualities of a student for the study, and concrete example of a comparative study have been given here to indicate that it is possible and interesting to study religion as religion and not necessarily as theology which focuses on a particular faith tradition. Religion is at the basis of Nigeria’s (and other nation’s) development as religion is not only fundamental to human life but also has taken the front seat in global conflict. It is equally influencing international relations especially between the Western and Arab worlds with their allies or dependents. In Nigeria, however, students of religion are worried with regard to where they belong in Nigeria’s economy. On this note, Obiefuna has argued that students of religion can work in many sectors of Nigeria’s economy especially the Pilgrims’ Board, National Orientation Agency (NOA), Tourism Industry, Oil Industry, serve as Public Relations Officers (PRO), Sustainers of Culture and Civilizations, Conflict and Peace Commissions, Administrators, Law Courts, Banks, Private Sectors especially the Hospitality Industries. In all these places they interact with people and share the benefits of the oneness of religion. That is a principal path to sustainable development. They should, therefore, be given their rightful places by owners of labour in both public and private sectors in Nigeria’s economy. But what are the specific benefits of the study of religion to sustainable development in Nigeria?

### **The Benefits of Studying Religion for Sustainable Development in Nigeria**

Studying is a function of formal education. Of course education is a life-long process. It starts from cradle and ends in the grave. It is informal, non-formal, and formal. In formal

education there is one who teaches and the other who learns. There is a formal setting where the teacher inculcates knowledge in a particular area of life. Uga Onwuka says it “refers to the specific discipline or area of study pursued by all preparing to become professional teachers”. It is different from the broadest sense of education that “consists of all of man’s activities which enable him to realize himself and to live fully as a human being” (512). The two senses should not, however, be separated. To study is to use the benefits of formal education to be fully human as a person and to help others to be equally fully human. To be fully human is to appreciate life, self and others, personal and communal. It is also to respect and protect what enhances life and human living.

Every religion teaches that life comes from the Supernatural Powers especially the Supreme Being, called God, Allah, *Chukwu* (Igbo) or whatever else in any other indigenous language in Nigeria. In the study and practice of religion there are two related dimensions: the vertical and the horizontal. The vertical dimension appreciates the Being that gives life and the horizontal dimension appreciates the life given to others. Life is and continues to become a common factor in religions. That is why one of the major themes in the study of religion is Salvation which is to rescue or liberate life from predicaments. It is equally the assurance that life does not end: there is life after death. The study of religion in Nigeria of incessant religious conflicts resulting to the destruction of lives and properties will inculcate in the students better appreciation and respect of life as a common gift of a Supernatural Reality. Life should not be terminated in the name of religion through which humans, individually and collectively, petition this Reality for its (life) protection. The students would be able to teach this, formally and informally, to the rest of Nigeria’s citizenry. And sustainable development is to sustain life around which every other thing revolves in human finitude.

Secondly, the study of religion will enhance meaningful inter-religious dialogue that would save Nigeria from mutual destructions in mayhems to peaceful co-existence. Hypolitus Adigwe and Sixtus Njoku accept that the greatest source of religious conflicts in Nigeria is ignorance. This makes dialogue difficult and, *ipso facto*, makes co-existence suspicious. They blame Islam and Christianity for the religious unrests in Nigeria. And these religions have Scriptures and so their adherents could, as David C. Okeke titled his work, be referred to as “People of the Book”. (This is without prejudice to the fact that Christianity is more a religion of *the* Person, Jesus Christ.) The study of these religions has been more of emic than etic, more of an insider’s than an outsider’s. In that case, the student is stuck in the “Absolutes” of religion encapsulated in the “my own is better than your own” philosophy. Sticking to “Absolutes” is clear indication of intellectual limitation that would make dialogue problematic. An objective study of religion is a combination of emic and etic methods. *Studying* religion, therefore, removes ignorance, cushions dialogue and, by that fact, eliminates religious conflicts and their consequences on human life and properties.

Njoku discusses the problems of inter-religious dialogue in Nigeria as including lack of preparation, lack of interest in dialogue, violation of religious liberty, religious fanaticism, religious ambiguity caused by Nigerian government, politics, and the presence of democracy. For Adigwe, they include insufficient grounding in one’s faith, insufficient knowledge and understanding, cultural differences, socio-political factors arising from the experiences of the past, wrong understanding of the meanings of major religious terms, self-sufficiency (exclusivism) that engenders defensive or aggressive attitude, lack of conviction on the value of inter-religious dialogue, intolerance that is often rooted in political, economic and ethnic factors (often leading to frustration), and Nigeria’s present religious climate of materialism, religious

indifference, and proliferation of sects that more often than not create new problems.

A critical review of these problems reveals abysmal lack of systematic, holistic and informed approach to dialogue. People have not been sufficiently trained in the rules of the game. This is evident in lack of co-existence that eminently contributes to downward trend of development than upward trend. It is not presumptuous to state that only graduates of religion as religion are by their study informed enough on the principles of religious dialogue. They can, therefore, very significantly contribute to sustaining development in Nigeria; dialogue is indispensable for sustaining development. They do this through auto-dialogue (self or intra-dialogue) that leads to dialoguing with the local community regarding environment, economy, politics, and ethnicity. This dialogue could also be formal (with experts) or informal (on daily encounters in the family, work places, buses, playfields, market places and so on).

Closely knit to dialogue is communication. One of the principal characteristics of humans is that they communicate using uniformly understandable symbols within communities. Religion is fundamental to humans. Religion is therefore eminently communicative. Rituals are belief expressions in vertical and horizontal communication of humans, individually or collectively, with divinity and with one another. Communication is the passing on of information from a source to a receiver through a medium. Kunle Oshodi-Glover says that to communicate basically means to share ideas, information, opinion, experience or feeling between people; in other words, the basis of communication is the ability to establish a common ground with another person or group of persons” (73). The most basic common ground for human communication is religion (not economy as Karl Marx would think). Studying religion can lead to common experience and common feeling which when commonly shared make people

work together for the common good, a *sine qua non* for sustainable development. Graduates of religion can initiate inter-religious liturgies where these commonalities could be shared. This has the power to change antagonistic attitudes to mutuality.

Like in the case of dialogue, there can be intra-communication or intercommunication. Intra-communication is the communication that occurs within a person. Joseph Obe and Stephen Adebayo say that it is “essentially a neuropsychological activity which involves some mental interviews for the purposes of information processing and decision making” (127). It enables one to convert raw data from environment to information; to interpret and give meaning to the information and then use it. The raw data here is the religious environment in Nigeria replete with crises.

According to these authors, this kind of communication could be done through writing by hand or word processor (one interviews oneself as one writes); making gestures while thinking, sense-making as in interpreting maps, texts (here Scriptures and their commentaries), signs and symbols; interpreting non-verbal communications like raising of hands in prayer, genuflecting and eye contacts; sense feelings of hunger and discomfort; day dreaming and nocturnal dreaming; soliloquizing, reading aloud and repeating what one has heard. Intrapersonal communication is necessary if one is to be patient enough to understand and acknowledge the reasonableness in the seemingly senselessness of religious beliefs and practices of other people.

On the other hand, interpersonal communication occurs when one communicates with others in a one-on-one basis. It is generally informal and unstructured. It could also occur between groups of persons. According to Obe and Adebayo, interpersonal communication is desirous for a number of reasons: to gain information, to build a context of understanding, to establish identity, and to identify and assist

interpersonal needs. Graduates of religion are expected to seek, give and receive information regarding others' religions and their own; to build a context of understanding of those religions; to establish their own religious identity and that of others, and to identify the religious needs of others and, not only assist them to meet them but also convince others on why they too should assist irrespective of individual religious affiliations. Of interest is the contextual character of interpersonal communication: psychological context, relational context, environmental context and cultural context. The study of religion that will aid sustainable development in Nigeria can not but be contextual: Nigerian context which is marked by plurality (economy, politics, ethnicity, religion and so on) and confusion attendant to managing this plurality. In this confusion, corruption thrives and contributes to initiating and exacerbating conflicts. Appeal to objectively religious principles would help in effectively managing Nigeria's plurality as Nigerians are eminently religious in nature. Within this context, the student of religion is psychologically prepared to relate most cordially with other Nigerian people in their environment and culture. This would improve human relations, reduce antagonisms and, therefore, contribute in no small measure in sustaining development.

### **Suggestions**

Based on the above facts, this paper suggests that Nigeria should encourage the study of religion in its tertiary institutions. Every tertiary institution in Nigeria should establish a Department of Religion. If that institution is specialized, for example, University of Technology or Agriculture, religion should be a two or more semesters General Studies (GS) programme. Religion should also hold as a GS course for all tertiary institutions in Nigeria. This is important so as to divest the students of some of their religious Absolutes before their youth service. They would learn, as Jude Emeka Madu indicates, of the paradox of the "one" and

the “many” in religion, meaning that religion *as* religion is one but with many systems. Again, in exploring the unity of all religions, S. G. McKeever has equally argued that paths are many but truth is one. When, therefore, students are tutored unto convictions on these realities, it would help to reduce inter-religious crises experienced in some institutions of higher learning which most of the times turn out to be national religious conflicts.

The paper suggests that each religion is free to establish its own study center which should be monitored to make sure there is no “indoctrination” to the hatred of other religions. The monitoring should be done by experts in religious affairs, graduates of religion as religion, with the authority/backing of Nigerian government.

There should be no discrimination against graduates of religion in Nigeria’s economy. In fact, the more they are employed the more the opportunities they have to formally and informally build bridges for religions in Nigeria, especially between Islam and Christianity. They do this through dialogue and communication.

Since religion is relational; and sustainable development in Nigeria, as this paper has argued, rests principally on cordial relationship between Nigeria’s two major missionary religions, Islam and Christianity, it is suggested that no department in any tertiary institution in Nigeria should be identified with the study of either Islam or Christianity. This is not secularism. It is a step towards religious sanitization in a religiously beleaguered society. It would create neutrality in the study of religion that would enhance such religious relations in Nigeria that would heal old wounds and manage new problems. It would lead to reducing religious conflicts drastically. It is based on the fact that poor religious relations undermine development that is human centered; and that rich religious relations improve and sustain

development that this paper suggests that the study of religious relations, which is part of human relations, be incorporated in the study of religion in Nigeria's tertiary institutions. The paper is therefore suggesting, and very strongly too, that all departments that study religion in Nigeria's tertiary institutions be renamed *Departments of Religion and Human Relations*. Undoubtedly, this takes care of all aspects of human culture and philosophy. It would study religion in relation to human environment and culture with the view of each generation leaving a better society for the coming generation. That explains, in the words of Huston Smith, "why religion matters". In Nigeria, that is why the study of religion matters more.

### **Conclusion**

The quest for sustainable development is good. This is without prejudice to those who hold opposite view. Nigeria can not have sustainable development if it does not have the political will to discuss religion as an issue of development. Islam and Christianity have been on each other's neck since the amalgamation of the country. The paper concludes that the study of religion as religion would lay the foundation for sustainable development in Nigeria. The overall dividend is peaceful co-existence between the major religions in Nigeria especially Islam and Christianity. Their identity would be respected while mutually respecting each other. That is the only way to live happily now and have a promising future. It remains to work out modalities for achieving this.

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