

## **Religion and the Public Good: A Philosophical Appraisal**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Every theistic religion postulates the idea of God and inherent in religion is the value it offers to man and society. Religion promotes the evolvement of moral values and the sanctity of human life. This paper argues that religion is essential for the progression of moral values, the promotion of the public good as well as the actualization of the good life for man. Any religion that deviates from this and does not respect the value of life or its sacredness is not fit to be a religion.

Pascal argues that the good life and the public good are at the heart of the belief in God. Religion aids the development of moral values, it introduces and integrates man into a very formidable community, fosters good neighborliness and care for others; it empowers man to discharge his duties effectively because he is empowered divinely.

The distinctive approach in this paper is in questioning the validity of any religion that fails to regard the sacredness of human life and does not add value to man and society. It questions the proliferation of religious groups without attendant enhancement of society or peaceful co-existence. The method employed in this research is critical analysis of the concept of religion and its expected benefits to man and society.

The summation of this research is that religion should invariably improve man and enhance public good. Anything contrary to this is not worthy to be called a religion but a bungled belief about God. Religious cleric ought to demonstrate evidential concern for its adherents as this will result in greater prospects of its evangelization. The Yorubas (a major West African tribe) have a saying that: “if the gods cannot improve my person and life, they had better leave me as they met me”; “*orisa bi o ko ba le gbe mi, fi mi sile bi o se ba mi*”.

### **INTRODUCTION**

For religion to be considered a public good, it presupposes that it has attributes and benefits for its adherents and the society. Religion also has the tendency to unleash passions and certitude, a combination that could be both beneficial and dangerous if not handled cautiously by adherents and the society at large.

What then is religion? What is public good? What is the relationship between the two? And why does it need a critical appraisal?

### **RELIGION DEFINED**

Theistic religion essentially involves an attitude to life and death that includes belief in a supernatural being and order which determines a person’s way of life, values, expectations and fears. Irrespective of its type, it basically adds a spiritual and moral dimension to the lives of its believers or followers. It is also characterized by conviction, a kind of certitude that is absent in all other forms of belief. It is the “conviction that one has found the right way; some having found this way and having found that it gives them comfort, or hope, or joy, are eager – bursting at the seams, in fact – to share this good news with others” (Edwards, 2003: 271).

Inherent in every religion are moral principles, which are implicit both in religious experience and the belief and actions of adherents. These moral principles are the norms that give religion its specificity.

Although their morality is all-encompassing, it aligns with generally accepted paradigm of morality and contributes to the identification of a religion as genuine, beneficial or bogus.

Philosophy of religion, the main critical lens applied to religion, is concerned with the norms and standards that religion must follow and must be judged with a view of determining whether it is genuine or spurious. It is concerned with the principles of religion that state the conditions without which religion ceases to be religion and becomes something altogether different (Oshitelu, 2008:19). What are the benefits of religion?

## **BENEFITS OF RELIGION**

Religion is basically characterized as a private good in any society where there is no official or national religion and where there is freedom of religion. In most of such countries, there is a demarcation between the state and the religion. As a private good, religion is beneficial to its adherents personally in a variety of ways; it gives a certain kind of grounding to an individual that helps to chart a course in the myriad of intersecting junctions and routes through life.

Theistic religious belief imparts the necessary wisdom that comes from the Supreme Being. It is needed to guide humans who value their freedom, people who are free in many aspects of their lives. That is, with political freedom and all forms of freedom guaranteed by the Human Rights Declaration, there is need for the guidance of wisdom that does not come from refined culture or education. It must come from the wisdom of a Supreme Being that legislates between clashing aspects of freedom such as clash of self-interest. According to Tocqueville, religion contains a softening ingredient that would tame any clashes of self-interest and of political freedom, bringing all the clashing sides to the recognition of a higher interest (Tocqueville, 2000: 532)

Religion, according to Edwards, adds a spiritual dimension to life that enriches by immersing one in the comfort of upheld religious beliefs, and the opportunity of fellowship with other believers. It evolves in adherents' moral consciousness, disposition and behavior serving as a moral compass in life. It is a positive force helping individuals and it enhances their positive contribution to society (Edwards, 2003: 270).

Religious belief (in its non extremist misinterpretation of its religious creed) nurtures the human inclination for compassion and infuses the believer with a will to do good to others, irrespective of whether they hold the same religious belief or not. Religion describes for its adherents who they are and ought to be, how to relate with one another and with others. This is done in such a way that shapes specific moral judgments. Immanuel Kant, in his *Critique of Judgment* argues that belief in the Supreme Being and the believer's subsequent acceptance by the Supreme Being entails having the moral law at heart (Kant, 1793: ii.28 (361-363)). By implication, religious believers are guided in their thoughts, speech and actions by the moral law engrafted in their hearts. This moral law serves as an evidence of their belief as well as the necessary condition for acceptance by the Supreme Being. That is, for any religious adherents to claim a belief in the Supreme Being it is not limited to having the moral law in their hearts, its presence there must be serving a purpose, such as dictating to and directing such hearts in things compatible with the tenets of such religious belief and practices.

Religious belief also provides a platform for the expression of passionate emotions, an outlet for the release of these emotions. Intrinsically, religion has the capacity to inspire devotion in and among its followers. This devotion is sometimes or often powerful and fierce enough to lead adherents to martyrdom and history is replete with such examples.

Every theistic religion exhibits man's lack of self-sufficiency and the need for dependence on the transcendent being. It thus in its own way, fulfills the needs of man and society. How does religion fulfill the needs of the society?

## RELIGION AND THE PUBLIC GOOD

*"This is my simple religion. There is no need for temples; no need for complicated philosophy. Our own brain, our own heart is our temple; the philosophy is kindness" – Dalai Lama*

Religion basically demonstrates to us our connectivity with one another and with others through the act of kindness. To analyze how religion meets the needs of society, religion needs to be understood as both a private and public property with commensurate goods. The word religion, according to Elliot Dorff, has the same Latin root as the word ligament, that is, connective tissue. It therefore describes for its adherents who they are and ought to be, how they should be connected to each other in families and communities and how to act and relate with the environment as well as the transcendent being (Dorff, 2003: 233). Religion shapes its adherents' philosophy of life and values so that human beings generally act based on their values and beliefs, all actions in private and public sphere are value-based. This also implies that human beings participate in the public sphere laden with their religious belief, informed dispositions and values; they consciously or unconsciously invoke their religious heritage in all their public activities.

So how can religion become a public good? Religion is first of all classified as good, for it to be characterized as both a private and public good. Good here denotes "the supposed final end at which action must aim; an intrinsically valuable state classically identified with "eudaimonia" or some compound of happiness, virtue, freedom from care and success" (Blackburn, 2005: 154).

Religion, according to E.E. Evans-Pritchard, has symbolic social functions, such as, sustaining social order, defusing tensions, anxiety, despair, and aggressions (Evans- Pritchard, 1937: 54)

Religion, therefore, becomes a public good when it contributes positively to the society through the actions and lifestyles of those who profess it. That is, religious believers must manifest some traits that are approved and supported by their religion, that are compatible with reason and morality.

This is corroborated by Nietzsche in his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1995) where he proclaimed through Zarathustra that "God is dead" (Nietzsche, 1995: 12). This proclamation, according to Edwin E. Etieyibo, is not an epistemological or a metaphysical nor a religious claim. It is also not a requirement of constructing some proofs for the nature or existence of God; but it is an acknowledgement of a socio-cultural crisis birthed by the Western world's loss or neglect of faith in God, which also led to the loss of the dearth of essential values that are inextricably linked with faith in God (Etieyibo, 2010/2011:6). This implies that belief in God births some religious and moral values that are manifested in such a believer's life both in the private sphere. And in the public sphere; and that when a society or a person loses faith in God, as was the case of the Western society Nietzsche was satirizing, essential values that constitute a good both for individuals and the society are lost. Nietzsche alluded to the fact that when individuals and a society lose faith in God, as well as the values inextricably bound with it, they are ready to be taught the "overman", *ubermensch*. This represents the struggle of people to actualize their potentials through the "will to power", employing their strength alone, to achieve happiness, comfort, convenience and so on. In essence, since the western world have lost faith in God and by implication have lost essential moral values, they are left with using their strength and all that they have to actualize their potential, get happiness, get and protect their freedom and all that they need in life. The consequence of this was understood and expressed by Alexis de Tocqueville thus: "For my own part, I doubt whether man can ever support at the same time complete religious independence and entire political freedom. And I am inclined to think that if faith be wanting in him, he must be subject; and if he be free, he must believe" (Tocqueville, 2000: 532). What this implies is that the loss or neglect of religion consequently leads to loss of essential values that are beneficial to individuals and the society at large, as well as loss of real

freedom – freedom from despair, from being condemned to solve all problems, acquires all one needs by oneself alone. Religion, therefore, is central to the proper and restrained exercise of freedom as well as enjoyment of freedom.

## **WAYS RELIGION IMPACTS THE PUBLIC SPHERE POSITIVELY**

George Washington expressed in his farewell address the correlation between religion and morality and their positive impact on society as good thus:

Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle (Washington, 1796)

This implies that religious belief enhances morality, personal morality manifesting in moral behavior, habits and dispositions, and public morality. Washington admits the place of religion in the public sphere as a good, acknowledging the influence and support of religious belief on habits, dispositions, actions and services that births societal prosperity; and that morality in both individual lives and the society springs from adherence to religious principles. By implication, public service rendered by religious adherents will be guided by religious principles that has transformed into moral principles such as truth telling, honesty, piety, selfless service, dutifulness, fairness etc.; virtues which when imbibed in any workplace promote success, prosperity and progress.

In his famous wager, Pascal Blaise analysed the position of mankind in relation to the proof of the existence or non- existence of God as crisis situations namely: crisis of existence and lack of complete understanding.

While Mankind can discern a great deal through reason, it is also hopelessly removed from knowing everything through it. He describes Mankind as a finite being trapped within an incomprehensible infinity. Thrust into being from non-being for a brief life only to go out again, with no explanation whatsoever of "Why?" or "What?" or "How?" The finite nature of our being constrains reason with respect to every form of knowledge. Now, assuming that reason alone cannot determine whether or not God exists, the ontological question is reduced to a coin toss. However, making a choice to live as though God exists or does not exist is unavoidable even if the ontological question is inconclusive. In Pascal's assessment, participation in this Wager is not optional because Mankind is already thrust into existence. So even if God's existence cannot be independently confirmed or denied, nevertheless the Wager is necessary and the possible scenarios must be considered and decided upon pragmatically (Pascal, 1995).

The fourth version of Pascal's wager according to Jeffrey Jordan implies that the benefits of belief vastly exceed those of non-belief if God exists; and that belief is one's best bet. That is:

- A. For any person S, if among the alternatives available to S, the outcomes of one alternative,  $A$ , are better than those of the other available alternatives, S should choose  $A$ . And,
- B. Believing in God is better than not believing, whether God exists or not.  
Therefore,
- C. One should believe in God

This paper elicit from Pascal Wager the benefits and values of a belief in God without concentrating on the functionality of the wager as a means to affirming one's faith in God. Implied in the wager is that there is a certain way of life that comes with belief in God and there is a certain way of life identified with unbelief in God. The way of life identified with belief in God manifest values and virtues that impact individuals and the public sphere positively; and which gives the believer the gain of life and eternal bliss according to Pascal.

Religion constitutes a public good by the virtue of its positive influence in all areas of the society. For instance, religion has been the pillar of the legal system in the Western world. This is the case, especially, in Europe and America and most of the developing countries whose legal systems were bequeathed to them by the Western colonial countries. Most of these laws are tailored after Christian ethics. Also, concepts of democracy, political participation and equality all owe their distinct feature to the revivalist tradition of evangelical Protestantism (Wolfe, 2003:187). And, as these concepts move from the developed world to the developing world, they extend this stamp of religion there.

Furthermore, education almost throughout the developed and developing world has benefited from the impact of religion. While America's educational institutions have borne the definite stamp of Protestantism, most of Europe's educational institutions bore that of Anglican and Catholic brands of Christianity; most of the educational institutions in the colonized countries bore the religious imprints of their colonizers' educational institutions.

Religion in most countries has contributed immensely to the provision of social services and this makes it a fundamental public good. Besides the injunction of most religion to their adherents to do good to others, especially the less privileged, religious groups have and control substantial resources which they channel towards welfare services to their members, and in assisting the government through corporate social responsibility agenda. Religion ought to be visible more in good works than in profession or sermonizing. It is important for religious institutions to invest directly in the well being of the society and show evidential concern for the present reality of its adherents as this will result in greater prospects of its proselytization and evangelization as well as the public good.

Religion would continue to impact the public sphere positively, if society realizes like Thomas Jefferson did that "the practice of morality is necessary for the well-being of society... The interest of society requires observation of those moral principles only in which all religions agree" (Dorff, 2003: 236). In furtherance of this realization, Dorff suggests that the following considerations need to be adopted by religious and non-religious adherents interacting in the public sphere for the common good:

1. Religious considerations ought to be taken as well as secular ones on all public issues, as the effectiveness and wisdom of public policies depend essentially on all members of the public.
2. Public debates ought to recognize the religious motivations of religious adherents in advocating or opposing a particular policy even when other rationales given by non religious adherents lead to the same conclusion. Acknowledging religious beliefs and the roles they play in their adherents' lives is essential and this does not necessarily mean establishing a national religion.
3. Furthermore, religious institutions should participate more in defining basic moral values to be taught in schools, at the religious centers and in homes (Dorff, 2003: 242-243).

In the words of Gottsegen, religion would contribute to political renewal if and when religious education and preaching aim at "cultivating a sensibility that feels the suffering of others as one's own suffering and feels the common good to be one's own good as well". He posits that, "they must charge adherents to reevaluate the contours of how they have chosen to live their lives; to break with the authoritative consensus that places work and family ahead of everything (Gottsegen, 2003: 219).

## **A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF RELIGION AS PUBLIC GOOD**

Religion is a two-edged sword, which, without the necessary condition, could become a menace to the society. In invoking their religious heritage in the course of social interaction and service, there is a possibility, if great care is not taken, for adherents to work to the detriment of society and make religion become a public evil. In this regards, history is replete with such instances such as the pogrom of Czarist Russia, the holocaust of Hitler's Germany, the Spanish Inquisition, Jim Jones deadly concoction that silenced his followers on November 20, 1978, the 2001 September 11 attacks in America, Lee Rigby that was hacked down by religious fundamentalists in 2013 and the insurgency of the "Boko Haram" sect that birth the reign of terror in parts of the northern Nigeria.

As earlier discussed, religion is both a private and public good. And this claim portends that *religion contributes to the commonwealth by directly and indirectly enhancing our public life through its effects upon our political ethos and upon the quality of our civic deliberations. That is, we will be better and more capable citizens both individually and collectively and not just better persons, individually, in a moral sense, to the extent that we are religious people* (Gottsegen, 2003: 200).

It is also a reality that religion can become a public evil, when instead of contributing to the betterment of the society; it becomes a source of concern, anxiety and even risk to human lives. What situations transform religion into a public menace?

This originates from the passions and certitude inherent in religious belief as well as intolerance for views different from ones' belief. This also springs from the "hard perspective" lens of viewing one's religion as the only right one and the excessively passionate zeal to convert others to it.

Religious claims and beliefs are fundamentally value laden and value giving; they corroborate moral norms and practices. However, when religious beliefs and acts begin to nullify these moral and positive values, it becomes nothing but bungled religion and such religion need to be checked. If and when religion begins to endanger lives and property, when it does not respect the sanctity of life and poses security risk to the society all in the name of fanaticism, it has then lost the right to be called a religion. The distinguishing characteristic of religion is its ability to benefit its adherents individually and by extension through them, the public. What benefit is there in religious reign of terror, religious unrest and massacre? Any religion that engages in such or supports such ought not to be named among religions.

In the same vein, religious adherents must exercise self-restraint, a good measure of discipline and imbibe an attitude of tolerance of the "other" that is different, strange, and incomprehensible in their interactions in the public sphere. Also adherents of religion in a contemporary society are citizens of a country and are subject to the guiding influences of their country's constitution. This brings to question the claim to finality of religion in the regulation of the behavior of its adherents. There are competing levels of authorities which are seeking at every point in time to influence the behavioural and attitudinal disposition of religious adherents in a modern state. In multi-religious enclaves like Nigeria, the necessity and utility of a national body or council to regulate inter-faith relations within the ambit of the country's constitution cannot be over-emphasized. Medieval philosophers like St. Augustine and 17<sup>th</sup> Century thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes and Auguste Comte were of the view that some human institutions could help moderate man's anti-social and self destructive propensities regardless of their religious professions. Given that religion is complementary to the efforts of extant regulatory institutions in promoting and securing the public good, it however should not be allowed unfettered freedom in multi religious societies because of the risk of heightening divisions and attendant crises of identity and legitimacy in pluralistic societies.

Other things that religious adherents ought not do according to Dorff in their interactions in the public sphere are as follows (Dorff, 2003: 241):

1. Religious adherents ought not to present their religious stance (beliefs and values) in the public sphere or at the market place of exchange of ideas, as the only intelligent or moral one. Individuals irrespective of their religious or non-religious affiliations should present their views, in cases where any view is opposed or rejected, objective reasons should be provided and response to such objective opposition by those, whose views, ideas and propositions were rejected, should be respectful of such decisions.

2. No particular religion ought to be allowed to proselytize in the public area where there are multiple religions (Dorff, 2003: 241). Similarly, no religious group ought to in the guise of religious duty, employ coercive power to defend and propagate their religion.

3. Since in reality, there is a significant confluence between an individual's religious views and his or her public and private action as well as political actions; there is a need for caution, self-restraint and a good dose of discipline so that religion does not cross the line between zeal and intolerance.

There is, therefore, the need for the formulation and presentation of a reasonable prescription for relation and interrelation among religious adherents and between religious and non-religious adherents that will provide grounding for respectful and productive participation in the public sphere. A fundamental factor in that formula is tolerance, which, according to Stephen Carter, in his *The Dissent of The Governed*, is "not simply a willingness to listen to what others have to say. It is also a resistance to the quick use of state power – the exclusive prerogative of violent force – to force dissenters and the different to conform" (Carter, 1995: 45). Furthermore, the structure of the society, which in actual fact specifies and defines the atmospherics of the operation of any religion, is also an essential factor.

## **CONCLUSION**

Religion adds values to man, meets his need, and that of society. Hence, religion is a public good. It helps man to comprehend the essence of man's existence in a community of other humans. It can greatly facilitate the creation, promotion and sustenance of public good for the benefit of the greatest number of people in the society. Thus, the object of religion is the promotion of both private and public good. Also, every good adherent of religion pursues the greater good of his community and the larger society with a passion and devotion that his/her religion elicits.

However, for it not to become a public menace, thereby losing its value to individuals and society, religious adherents must participate in the public sphere with the essential recognition that no one religion has the only prerogative of seeing and doing things intelligently and morally.

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