

**MARGINALIZATION OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES IN TERTIARY
INSTITUTIONS IN NIGERIA: THE WAY FORWARD**

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Abstract

Religious studies have over the years been experiencing a series of marginalization in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. This seems to be as a result of a new trend globally and it tends to question the relevance, importance and contribution of Religious Studies to national development. The various governments of the world, including Nigeria, funding agencies, multi-national corporations, educational institutions and parents seem to have adopted this phantasm, thereby starving it of the needed funds, not including it in scholarship/grant programmes, not seeking admission for their children/wards, and not giving them an increased quota in admission. The reason may be because of the wrong notion that science and technology, to the exclusion of all other fields, are omnipotent in solving human problems while religion will ultimately phase out. This paper examined this dastardly trend following qualitative research methodology which involves the analysis of scholarly contents within its reach. It also interviewed respondents who are scholars and students from Religious Studies and other fields of study to ascertain their views on the issue. It was discovered that no society has ever progressed, developed or had interpersonal relationship without religion. It is argued that the hypocrisy associated with the so-called secularity in our constitution and society is destroying religious fervour. That the study of religious studies is not the same as theology but a scientific study of religion (Religionswissenschaft) which affects every stratum of human endeavour including science, politics, economics, medicine and morality. The paper recommends, among others, that the National Universities Commission should treat all departments as equal in the area of admission quota, funding, etc. as no university programme is more important than the other. Also, international organisations such as the Commonwealth, UNESCO, UN, and others, should make adequate

provision for scholarships and grants for students in religious studies as they do for the sciences.

Keywords: Marginalization, Religious Studies, Tertiary

Introduction

Auguste Comte, the French philosopher, founder of classical positivism and inventor of the term sociology, posits that the human mind passes through three successive and different theoretical stages of development. According to him, these stages are: first, the theological or fictitious stage; second, the metaphysical or the abstract stage and, thirdly, the scientific or positive stage (qtd in Ekeke 198). Comte, in his argument in favour of positivism, explains that the theological stage “is the starting point where the human mind seeks the essential nature of beings, the first and final causes and absolute knowledge was attributed to the supernatural beings” (qtd in Okon 26, Ekeke 198). This could be seen as the religious stage.

According to Comte, the second stage is “where the human mind speculates on abstract forces that are inherent in all beings” (qtd in Okon, 26; Ekeke, 198). The third and final stage according to Comte has “nothing to do with the vain search after supernatural or absolute notions or origin of the universe but is focused on the study of natural laws through reasoning and observations” (Ekeke, 198). This final stage is the scientific one.

From Comte’s point of view, it is very glaring that he expected a time when religion will be completely abolished in human reasoning and society. He longed for a time when man will no longer have anything to do with religion or religious issues/studies. It has been observed that this kind of thinking as portrayed by Comte seems to pervade this twenty first century causing Religious Studies programmes in tertiary institutions to be marginalized with the view that religion is gradually phasing out or is not very necessary anymore for the scientific mind.

On the contrary, no person of sound mind will still be thinking this way knowing what religion and religious issues are doing in the world at the present time. It is very necessary that religious studies as a programme of studies be given a pride of place in Nigeria’s tertiary institutions.

It is worthy of note that Religious Studies in tertiary institutions are global enterprises. Distinct from theology/theological studies, religious studies and its accompanying scholars have over the years studied and understood the religions of other times and climes expressly and objectively. It, therefore, means that one could possibly say that a global community of scholars of religion has emerged (Alles, 2). In line with the above, it is pertinent to state that the inclusion and study of a discrete academic discipline which deals with religious

traditions and spirituality or secular alternatives to it, is the most effective, objective and laudable way of addressing religious plurality, terrorism, religious intolerance and world peace (Cush, 217).

Seemingly, the Departments of Religious Studies in tertiary institutions have over the years brought to the fore the recognition and acceptance of two important facts on the place of religion and the need for its study in our contemporary globe. For one, they posit that the concept “secularization” does not mean that religion would decline in significance as an influence in public life as Comte opined; rather, religion will continually be an important factor in human affairs, thus the need to study it objectively. Secondly, they state that man ought to be more and more aware of the sheer diversity of beliefs labelled as “religion” (Cush, 219).

Therefore, whether explicitly or implicitly, religion is assumed to be a phenomenon that is distinct and which requires special department and methodology for its study. It is quite pathetic that this department in Nigerian tertiary institutions, as important as it is, has faced series of marginalization from all aspects in the arts/humanities faculties. The Religious Studies Department is often regarded as the lowest in the cadre of its departments. This has resulted in low funding from the university management, little or no provision of basic facilities to aid learning which other departments receive at random and so on. There is also the fact that Religious Studies Departments have low quota percentage in admissions. Amongst other departments, they are given the lowest number of intakes with the excuse that other “important career” disciplines ought to have higher cuts. Students admitted into the department are more of candidate who either failed or had low grades in related disciplines like sociology, law or sister Arts departments.

The cutting edge of the marginalization of the department forms the integral aspect of this work. This paper seeks to point out the relevance of the discipline and the need for the National Universities Commission, University Governing Boards and Management, as well as the Arts/Humanities Faculties to put a stop to the incessant discrimination and marginalization of the course, and give the discipline the support and the level playing ground it affords to other disciplines.

This paper is much more interested in bringing to the fore the relevance and compulsive necessity of religious studies/education as a discipline in the nation, which has been plagued by incessant religious intolerance, violence, hate speeches, terrorism, ethnicity and political/religious divisions and tensions.

The Relevance and Objectives of Religious Studies Departments in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions

The Religious Studies Department is an essential component of a broad and balanced form of education. Through its objective style of teaching and learning, religious studies afford students and the nation at large deep meanings to what individuals and groups make of their life experiences and help them give purpose to their lives. The course provides a template to explore, make and respond to the meanings of life, and religious experiences in relation to the beliefs and teachings of other religious traditions (Barne,s 7–10).

Moreover, religious studies make distinctive contributions to scholarship and the nation through teaching and understanding the knowledge of religion, religious beliefs, practices, language and traditions, as well as their attaining influence on individuals, communities, societies and culture. It affords the university and the society a response to a range of important questions related to spiritual development, development of values and attitudes and, moreover, a response to fundamental questions concerning the meaning and purpose of life (<http://www.sandwell.gov.uk/info/200295/schools-and-learning/965/religious-education/5>).

Therefore, the study of religions in tertiary institutions is rather a compulsive necessity in Nigeria. This assertion is anchored on the fact that Nigeria as a nation stands at the risk of undermining the place of a core discipline at a time when deeper learning and reflections on religion, belief, spirituality and ethics could contribute enormously to the emergence of a society that would seek to enhance differences and diversity in religion, culture and ethnicity, as well as a Nigeria that is comfortable to celebrate the presence of a variety of religious and other belief systems (Bryne 3).

It must also be stressed and understood that the purpose of religious studies departments is basically and specifically academic. The courses and programmes are designed and taught to enable students and budding scholars appreciate the phenomenon of religion in general and its important role in the society (www.iiste.org). Thus, scholars of religion can best explain ethical relationships in a multi-religious society like Nigeria, delineate impartial approaches towards the handling of religious concepts, resolving of conflicts from religious and Afro-cultural standpoint, and as well mediate in challenges of religious belief in a science oriented global world (“Philosophy and Objectives...” <http://socialscs.unn.edu.ng/religion-cultural-studies-history/>).

Religious studies in tertiary institutions represent the study of religion as universal human phenomena and religions found in a variety of cultures. By this mandate, it means that

religious traditions are studied without favouring or discriminating against any faith, and without promoting adherence to any particular tradition or any somewhat. The aim of the discipline and what it actually seeks is towards enhancing the constitutional values of citizenship, human rights, equality, freedom from discrimination and freedom of conscience, religion, thought, belief and opinion (*Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Articles 1-30: 1-8 *Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999*, Chapter IV paragraph 33-43).

It must also be stressed that the issue of religious tolerance as a panacea for national peace and development anchors on religious studies departments. This is drawn from the premise that religious studies bring about harmonious co-existence among people of various religious backgrounds. They simply avail the knowledge of other people's religion, and when there exists a fair understanding of one another's faith, there will definitely be spiritual sanity, which goes ahead in ensuring the sustainability of peace and stability - necessities for development. The study of religion affords moral, psychological, social and spiritual infrastructures on which stronger structures of socio-economic development thrives. Religious studies also bring to the fore moral and spiritual values, virtues in interpersonal human relations, respect for dignity of labour, and a sense of responsibility for the common good of the society (Ikechukwu 78–80). Despite these laudable objectives and relevance of religious studies, the level of marginalisation seems alarming. We, therefore, examine the variant ways religious studies have been marginalized in tertiary institutions.

Systemic Marginalization of Religious Studies in Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria

There exist variant ways by which religious studies have been marginalized. Erudite scholar, Professor Ishaq Abdulabi, avers that the foremost of this anchors on the NUC admission quota for universities. He opines that when universities receive their quota percentage for the admission year, the senate and board of management in turn share this quota to faculties, faculty boards as well share percentages of admission to umbrella departments. It is on record that yearly, the religious studies departments receive the lowest admission quota while other departments go home with the lion share (oral interview). Another prominent scholar of Religious Studies, Professor Wotogbe Weneka, on his part, avers that in the Humanities, Religious Studies is looked at as the department that has no relevance. Little wonder her students go about with inferiority complex and low self esteem. He stated that in a federal institution like the University of Port-Harcourt, Religious Studies admission list is always the last to emerge, because "other career" courses/departments ought to be filled within the quota scope of the NUC; thus, the remnant of the quota which is always a menial percentage is accorded to the department to admit entries from candidates (oral interview). Another striking, systemic marginalization of Religious Studies Departments is in the area of scholarship and study grants given to departments by bodies such as PTDF, UNESCO,

Commonwealth, etc. Dr. Ini Udoka stated that, although scholarships rarely come to the Arts/Humanities Faculty, as compared to the sciences and law, when it does, the Religious Studies Departments rarely benefit from such. Other sister departments are first considered, and even when scholars indicate interest from the Department of Religious Studies, they are often not considered simply because religious studies is not “a career” discipline.

Recently, there was an orchestrated plan to totally eradicate Christian Religious Knowledge (CRK) and Islamic Religious Studies (IRS) from the curricula of primary and post primary institutions in Nigeria. You can agree with us that this was an ultimate plan to wipe off the Departments of Religious Studies from Nigerian tertiary institutions as the only requirement for admission was targeted for destruction. This is a systemic marginalization.

Also, study grants given to departments in the umbrella Art Faculty rarely get to Religious Studies Department. For example, only two post graduate students of the department have benefitted from the PTDF study grants given to the University of Uyo and only one given to the University of Calabar from 2010 till date. Religious studies departments are noted for incessant failures during accreditation exercises conducted by the NUC. Ubong-Abasi Akpan of the University of Ibadan is of the view that these failures are as a result of the marginalization inflicted upon the department by Universities’ Managements and Boards.

For example, the Religious and Cultural Studies Department in the University of Calabar block is shared with History and International Studies, the latter has erected a magnificent sign post at the entrance of the building, as well as a photo gallery at the balcony. This act simply suggests the Department of Religious Studies is squatting in the block as there is little or no signpost attached to the building. The building itself is called after the Department of History, making it difficult for new students and visitors to locate the department. This situation is more worrisome when one considers the fact that religion and philosophy were Siamese departments who got separated some years ago. The Philosophy Department in University of Calabar now owns a two-deck building of its own, while the Religious Studies Department is being relegated to squat in a building which was originally given to them but now dominated by History Department. Besides, it is quite pathetic that they are not given classrooms of their own. There are ten offices for twenty- six lecturers including four (4) Professors, two (2) Associate Professors, three (3) Senior Lecturers, six (6) Lecturers 1, and eleven (11) others, a little room for E-Library/Resource Centre, etc.

Most departments of Religious Studies do not have well-functioning and equipped resource centres. This malady alone has caused its failure to be accredited by the NUC in many universities over the years. Professor Essien A. Offiong, a former head of department of

Religious Studies in the University of Calabar, decries that the department has gotten weary of writing to the university management to equip them with necessary tools for learning as these pleas have been falling on deaf ears. He reiterated the fact that the E-Library owned by the department was donated by a philanthropic post-graduate student: Okegbue Nzeribe. Even when few computers were approved for the department during 2016 accreditation exercise, the then DAP decided to divert it to somewhere else. But for serious pleas and intervention by others, it would not have been released. This shows the height of marginalization of the department.

Again, majority of the books in the resource centre are gifts from religious bodies, lecturers, authors and publishers/publishing houses. As such, these highlights summarize the systemic marginalization of Religious Studies in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. The management of various universities in Nigeria seem to have dislike for the Religious Studies discipline, so they find it difficult to listen to anything that concerns their academic progress. This has to stop.

The Way Forward

This paper has emphasized that it can only take the study of religion objectively, which in turn breeds understanding, that the nation will experience tolerance and understanding of one another's faith. It has also noted that religious tolerance is the only panacea to a peaceful and developed society. The study of religion therefore compels an end to religious violence, feminism, political wars, and ethnic tensions, among others issues. The above assertion, therefore, suggests that there is need for more to be done towards the recognition of the discipline, thus giving it its rightful place in the educational system and nation at large.

It is a compulsive necessity for the government through the NUC and other agencies to accord the discipline a level and fair playing ground in scholarship. Departments of Religious Studies should be granted full acceleration and not neglected because it contributes toward the development of the nation greatly. There is hardly any first-class university in the world that does not have the Department of Religious Studies/Theology. This is because any society that develops without caring about the belief system of its members is at the verge of a terrible collapse.

Admission quotas should be shared equally amongst departments in Arts/Humanities as all departments are important in their own accord. There should be no favouritism or high-handedness in funding or study grants. Offices, E-Libraries, books and journals should be bought to furnish resource centres in the departments. Support should be granted to the departments to organize and host seminars/symposiums towards teaching citizens the

compulsive necessity for religious education of tolerance and peace. Lecturers, scholars, students and ex-students of Religious Studies should not see themselves as academic relegates wherever they find themselves. They should lift their heads high among the committee of scholars because they are not inferior. A popular adage says “If you are rejected, you cannot reject yourself”. The battle against marginalization of religious studies programme in the Nigeria tertiary institutions continues, no retreat, no surrender, until we achieve national and international recognition in the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

The marginalization of Religious Studies in tertiary education in Nigeria has been the focus of this paper. It highlights first the relevance of the discipline in a multi-religious ethnic society like Nigeria, and the compulsive place that it ought to occupy as such in the society. This study specifically pointed out the systemic marginalization the programme faces in the Arts/Humanities faculties. The paper concludes by looking at the way forward in terms of recommendations to the government and relevant agencies as well as university managements to do more in promoting the department as Religious Studies holds the key to a society that is free from religious crisis, violence and terrorism.

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Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Articles 1-30: 1-8

Table of Oral Interview

Names	Age	Status	Place of Interview	Time of Interview	Date of Interview
Ishag Abdulabi	68	Professor	University of Ibadan	02:40pm	12/02/2018
Ini Udoka	62	Professor	University of Uyo	01:15pm	13/02/2018
Wotogbe-Weneka W.	68	Professor	University of Port-Harcourt	09:45am	14/02/2018
Essien A. Offiong	68	Professor	University of Calabar	11:15am	20/02/2018
Ubongabas i Akpan	27	Post Graduate Student	University of Ibadan	12:10pm	21/02/2018