

IRRELIGIOUSNESS IN THE NAME OF RELIGION (AMOS 5:21-24): DIGITAL-AGE EXPERIENCE WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO NIGERIA

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Abstract

That human society has advanced a lot in our day and age – the digital age – is a truism. The rapid progress of humankind in science and technology, especially in the area of communication, has made the world a global village. Advantageous as this may seem, it also calls for grave concern, especially in the danger of its abuse or misuse – as in social media or even in the proliferation of weapons, especially atomic weapons. Furthermore, these scientific and technological developments, when not properly reckoned with, tend to generate the feeling of undue independence from some people prompting, sometimes, their questioning the need for God and religion in their lives and in the human society at large – ultimately occasioning their abandonment of or indifference to these important realities in irreligiousness. The aim of this paper is to strongly present religion, which is actually part of human culture, as being always important to man and society, including in the digital age. Irreligiousness in whatever form is actually a contradiction of man's essence as a finite being essentially dependent on the divine for his satisfactory existence. The method employed in this article is mainly historical – sociological, with the aid also of the historical-critical method in the exegesis of its biblical section. These methods help to bring out the finding that a deeply religious and, hence, cultured, individual faces life with proper maturity even in our digital age. The recommendation, therefore, is for the true value of religion to be seen in the life of everyone, especially in our country Nigeria. Proper religious education, particularly for the youth, as well as enduring catechesis for all religionists from the relevant religious leaders are also strongly recommended as ways to achieve this.

Key Words: Irreligiousness, Religion, Culture, Society and Digital Age.

Introduction

Our present age and the future are often referred to as a digital age because of the explosion of scientific and technological advancements which have been recorded by humankind especially in recent years, particularly in the area of communication. These developments have actually made the world a global village.

Good as these advancements actually are, they have, nevertheless, been sources of serious concern for humanity especially regarding the negative consequences in the risk of their abuse or misuse – a situation that stares humanity in the face almost on a daily basis. Furthermore, these scientific and technological developments sometimes help to generate the feeling of undue independence from some people who then tend to question the need for God and religion in their lives and in the human society at large, thereby occasioning their abandonment of or indifference to these important existential realities in irreligiousness.

Therefore, this paper strongly presents religion, which is actually part of human culture, as important to man and the society always, including in the digital age. Irreligiousness in all its ramifications actually amounts to a beckoning of conflict and crisis in man's life as such an attitude is a contradiction of his/her essence as a finite being essentially dependent on the divine for his/her fulfilled existence. Proper religious education, especially for the youth, as well as enduring catechesis from the relevant religious leaders are therefore strongly recommended in this paper as ideally helpful for the maintenance of good religious and maturely human values in the society even in our digital age.

The Meaning of Religion

The word “religion” is elusive, meaning that a precise but comprehensive definition or even description of it is difficult. The Latin word for religion is *religio*. But its etymology is also disputed. Some scholars have tried to connect *religio* with other Latin terms (*relegere, religare, reeligere, relinquere*), but each scholar has been influenced by his personal ideas, and no accord has been reached.¹ For example *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* (9th Edition) describes “religion” in five different ways as: 1. The belief in a superhuman controlling power, especially in a personal God or gods entitled to obedience and worship; 2. The expression of this worship; 3. A particular system of faith and worship; 4. Life under monastic vows (the way of religion) and 5; a thing that one is devoted to, e.g., football. In the same vein, that dictionary also describes the adjective, “irreligious”, as being “indifferent or hostile to religion” or “lacking in religion.” “Irreligiousness”, therefore, means being “indifferent or hostile to religion” or even “lacking in religion” completely.

Part of the genesis of the problem of precise definition, as noted above, is that religion is as old as humankind, as man is basically a religious being. Man, as a rational and social animal, articulates the mysteries of existence in order to find rational explanations for these mysteries.² Hence, his strong search for God as well as a meaning for his existence are manifested in the diversity of religious expressions that abound all over the world – as in the major religions and philosophies of life, as well as, sometimes, in animism, magic and spiritism. Metuh summarizes this difficulty in definition as follows:

This is partly because the object of religion for the most part is invisible and spiritual beings who are not subject to observation and are conceived in different ways by different peoples. Besides, the study of religion interests people with as widely differing interests as theologians, anthropologists, psychologists, and sociologists, each of whom see it from a different perspective.³

There is little wonder, then, why “hundreds of definitions of religion litter our textbooks in the social sciences and the humanities. And strikingly enough, none of these definitions has been seen to be flawless on critical analysis.”⁴

Be the above as it may, Arinze indicates that even though religion refuses water-tight divisions –

¹ Joseph Goetz, “Religion”, in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. XII (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1967) 240.

² Joseph E. Ukpo, “Foreword”, in Jude E. Madu, *Fundamentals of Religious Studies* (Calabar: Franedoh Publishers, 1996) vii.

³ Emefie Ikenga-Metuh, *Comparative Studies of African Traditional Religions* (Onitsha: IMICO Publishers, 1987) 1.

⁴ Jude E. Madu, *Fundamentals of Religious Studies* (Calabar: Franedoh Publishers, 1996) 17.

being a life thing – there are three characteristics which comprise every religion: beliefs, rites, and laws (dogma, worship and moral). Therefore, religion can be defined subjectively and objectively. Subjectively, religion is the consciousness of one's dependence on a transcendent Being and the tendency to worship him. Defined objectively, religion is the body of truths, laws and rites by which a person is subordinated to the transcendent Being.⁵

From this definition above, one sees that religion brings out the complex relationships between man and the divinity, encompassing all the duties of man towards God. When this relationship is found in the natural order it is called Natural Religion. But it becomes Revealed Religion when it is in the supernatural order. Therefore, religion is also a moral habit, inclining man to render to God such acts that show that he is supreme, whether in the natural or in the supernatural order.⁶

The Practical Implications of Religion

From the definition above, it is clear that religion is the strongest element in man and it influences him tremendously, from man's moral relations with God which is the relation of a creature to the creator. In this relationship, man acknowledges, internally and freely, his dependence on God. He also expresses, externally, acts of cult either as an individual or in community. Thus, in religion, man manifests his beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and officiants.⁷

These acts are possible because every religion, apart from providing man a way of life, also provides him with something of the mind, which is a peculiar world-view. The world-view in each case results from the same effort of a people or community to understand the world or reality around them, which *ab initio* also helped to precipitate the phenomenon of religion itself. Hence, the outcome of that effort is always context dependent, and this explains the wide variations and narrower nuances that are comparative features of different world-views.⁸ Therefore, this world-view considers essentially the origin of the universe, its movement and the final destiny of man, helping to provide answers to the people's quest regarding the mysteries of their existence, value systems and attitudinal orientations. It is based on this world-view that religion could highly influence the characters and lives of its adherents through the invocation of the sacred or the supernatural. This is manifested in their entire lives – feelings, acts and experiences – so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider to be divine.⁹ It is in this sense that religion is really unique.

Religion as part of Culture

Religion is part of culture. This paper would, therefore, dwell a little on that aspect.

If “religion” is elusive to define, “culture” is even more so, as it also covers a wide range of fields and things. Nevertheless, two main senses of the term are often most commonly spoken of. In ordinary language, “culture” denotes refinement of mind, emotions, manners, and tastes observable in some people but absent in others. In the scientific sense it denotes the ideas, habits, skills, arts, instruments and institutions of a given people in a given period. This second sense is mainly

⁵ Francis A. Arinze, *Sacrifice in Igbo traditional Religion* (Onitsha: Brothers of St. Stephen, 2008) 14.

⁶ Joseph E. Ukpo, “Foreword”, vii.

⁷ Madu, *Fundamentals of Religious Studies*, 19.

⁸ Obi J. Oguejiofor, “The Gospel Message, the African World View and the Demands of Scientific and Technological Advancement”, in Francis A. Adedara, ed., *Church Leadership and the Christian Message (Proceedings of the 17th and 18th Conferences of the Catholic Theological Association of Nigeria)* (Ibadan: Stirling-Horden Publishers, 2004) 230.

¹ Alifa Samuel, “Religious Education and National Development: The Christian Perspective”, in *Religions' Educator: Journal of the National Association for the Study of Religions and Education*, Vol 8, no. 2 (2005) 106.

anthropological and also sociological. By the first definition, an individual can be said to be cultured or refined; by the second that every human being (and not only the refined person) participates in a culture.¹⁰

It is the second definition above which people often summarize as the general way of life of a given people, *Omenani* (or *Omenala*) in Igbo Language. This is the culture developed by a people and it is this which distinguishes them from every other “people.”¹¹ It is this second definition that most people see, scientifically, as culture, although as already pointed out, there is practically very little agreement on it.

However, on account of the fact that this paper is not on culture *per se*, one can only emphasize here that culture is dynamic and is not hooked to the past. It is rather a living and changing process which should affect the behaviours of the people who have it as culture and, in that process, be able to move forward. When this dynamism of culture is undermined or even compromised in whatever way and by whatever means, culture loses its progress-oriented drive and may even become self-destructive, being thereby stunted and stagnated in the past.

The Relationship between Religion and Culture

Although religion is fundamentally part of culture, it is, by itself, a serious category of meaning and value in every culture. This emphasis has to be borne in mind always, even when only the word “religion” is mentioned in a particular context. When a religion is part of a particular culture, like African Traditional Religion in African cultures, there are usually no problems of acceptance and adaption. Problems arise when a religion is introduced from outside that culture, as was the case when the Christian religion was brought into Africa where African Traditional Religions were already thriving. The result was the clash of the world-views of both religions, as the world-views of all religions are mutually exclusive to themselves.

In Igboland, for example, Madu points out that the incoming world-view was not interested in the people's existing world-view and, therefore, the incoming one tried very much to strangle the existing one. The incoming world-view looked down on the host world-view, calling their culture and traditions all sorts of derogatory names.¹² Thus, since all world-views are necessary to the people who own them, the most meaningful interaction between religions, and between religions and cultures, is through mutual dialogue, engendering the mutual enrichment of both. It is in this way that religion and culture could better be of influence and relevance to the society as agents of growth and transformation.

¹⁰Nicholas S. Timasheff, “Culture”, in *The Catholic Encyclopedia for School and Home*, Vol. 3 (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965) 353.

¹¹Cf. for instance, F. Chidozie Ogbalu, *Omenala Igbo (The Book of Igbo Custom)* (Onitsha: Varisity Publishers, 1979) for the informative treatment of the different aspects of Igbo cultural heritage.

¹²Madu, *Fundamentals of Religious Studies*, 3.

Brief Exegesis of Amos 5:21-24

The Text¹³

- 21 I hate, I despise your feasts,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
- 22 Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings,
I will not accept them,
and the peace offerings of your fatted beasts
I will not look upon.
- 23 Take away from me the noise of your songs;
to the melody of your harps I will not listen
- 24 But let justice roll down like waters,
And righteousness like an everflowing stream.

Brief Historical Background

The prophet Amos, who hailed from Tekoa in Judah, prophesied in the Northern Kingdom of Israel when Jeroboam II was the King (786-746 BC). Under this king, Israel enjoyed a period of relative tranquility and economic growth. The negative result was the widening of the gap between the rich and the poor and the relegation of religious practice, when it was not idolatrous, to a second place. Amos then appeared at the major national sanctuary at Bethel in which his prophecies of doom prompted the priest, Amaziah, at the king's behest, to order him off the premises of the sanctuary (Amos 7:10-13).¹⁴

The prophet's images are colourful and earthy and he delivers oracles that are full of violence and bloodshed – sparing no one on any level of society (Amos 7:7-9; 8:1-3; 9:1-4). Amos does not speak explicitly of covenant and law, but these concepts underlie everything he says. He is concerned, particularly, with the wealthy classes who disregard and even maltreat their less fortunate coreligionists.¹⁵ Their excessive wealth led to the creation of a leisured upper class who increasingly adopted a decadent lifestyle (Amos 2:8; 4:1; 6:1-6). But other forms of unfaithfulness to the covenant were rampant also, including sexual immorality (2:7) and idolatry (8:14) – and they were hardly limited to any socioeconomic class. Yet, it was the exploitation of the poor and defenseless by the rich and powerful that God particularly exposed through Amos' oracles and this constitutes a remarkably frequent theme in his book. In the light of the overt references to judicial corruption as well (2:7; 5:10-12), it is evident that a genuine breakdown in the delivery of justice to the citizenry had also occurred in the days of Amos.¹⁶

Towards the middle of the eight century, Israel was enjoying peace and prosperity, as already said, as well as some measure of international prestige. A confident nation (6:8) took comfort in its military might (6:13), ignoring its exploitation of the needy and the growing disparity between privilege and poverty, with this unfortunate end result: “Religion per se was enthusiastically practiced (2:8; 5:21-23) but by a people whose fidelity to the covenant was a sham. The nation was characterized by religious hypocrisy. Israel was a people often orthodox in style of worship but disobedient in personal and social behavior.”¹⁷ This situation was highly displeasing to Yahweh.

Brief Textual Delimitation

¹³All biblical citations in this work would be taken from the Revised Standard Version (RSV).

¹⁴Roland J. Faley, *From Genesis to Apocalypse: Introducing the Bible* (New York: Paulist Press, 2005) 128.

¹⁵Faley, *From Genesis to Apocalypse: Introducing the Bible*, 128-129.

¹⁶Douglas Stuart, *Hosea – Jonah*, Word Biblical Commentary 31 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987) 283

All biblical citations in this work would be taken from the Revised Standard Version (RSV).

Roland J. Faley, *From Genesis to Apocalypse: Introducing the Bible* (New York: Paulist Press.

¹⁷Stuart, *Hosea – Jonah*, 283-284.

The text of Amos 5:21-24 deals with Yahweh's rejection of the cult of Israel in preference for justice and righteousness. It is part of the unit of Amos 5:18-27 which exposes "the sickness of the nation's religion and what is required to put it right."¹⁸

Thus, Amos 5:18-27 is a typical "woe oracle" that normally decries covenant violations, pronouncing judgment. A woe oracle is exclusive to the prophets, as the term, "woe" (*hōy*) is also "exclusive to the prophets in the Bible except for one occurrence in Kings (1 Kgs 13:30)."¹⁹ The woe oracles say in effect: "You are in trouble. Here's why and here's what will happen to you."²⁰ Hence, Amos 5:18-27 details the real nature of the day of Yahweh which, contrary to the expectations of the Israelites, would be a woeful day – of darkness instead of light (v. 18 & 20). Its being a unit is shown by the introduction "woe/alas!" (*hōy*) in v. 18 and the fact that the section ends in v 27. A new passage begins in Amos 6:1 with another "woe/alas! (*hōy*) directed, this time, at the capitals of Israel and Judah respectively."²¹

Thematically speaking, Amos 5:18-27 is a unit as well. In vv. 18-20, the "Day of Yahweh" is announced without the specification of why Israel's expectation of deliverance on that is so completely wrong. Vv. 21 to 27 give this specification, explaining to the audience that it is rejection and exile which will rather make up the long-awaited day of Yahweh. But with the declaration of Yahweh's preference of justice and righteousness in v. 24, the unit of vv. 21-24 becomes distinctly marked out as the main emphasis of that unit whose theme of cultic rejection by Yahweh is then made reference to with the rhetorical questions of vv. 25-26, before the unit's conclusion in v. 27. Amos 5:18-27 is delineated in detail as follows: 1. Vv. 18-20, The real nature of the Day of Yahweh, 2. Vv. 21-24, Yahweh's rejection of the cult: injustice, 3. Vv. 25-26, Yahweh's rejection of the cult: idolatry, and 4. V. 27, The ultimate judgment: exile.²²

Amos 5:21-24: Exegesis

V. 21: In this verse, Yahweh expresses his utter rejection of Israel's feasts with two strong words, "I hate", "I despise". The verb "to hate" (*šānē*) is usually legally used to indicate formal renunciation or severance of relationship, as in divorce (cf. Hos 9:15). The use of these two strong verbs with "I take no delight in" *your solemn assemblies* means a total rejection by Yahweh, aimed not only at the feasts but at the sacrifices offered during the feasts and the people who make the sacrifices.²³

Lev. 26:31 warns Israel that if they break the laws of Yahweh: "And I will lay your cities waste, and will make your sanctuaries desolate, and I will not smell your pleasing odours." Thus, the festivals (*hagîm*) and assemblies (*'ašārôt*) are used here in parallel to denote the three yearly pilgrimage celebrations (Exod 23:15-18; 34:22-25; Deut 16:10-16) as well as any other occasions like Sabbaths, new moon festivals (cf. 8:5; Hos 2:11; Neh 10:33) and for gathering to eat and to worship. Yahweh now totally rejects all of them.²⁴

V. 22: Further than the feast aspect of the cult of the Northern Kingdom mentioned in the last verse,

¹⁸J. Alec Motyer, "Amos", in Donald Guthrie, – ed., *New Bible Commentary*, 3rd Edition (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1970) 735.

¹⁹Francis I. Andersen – David Noel Freedman, *Amos*, The Anchor Bible 24A (New York: Doubleday, 1989) 520.

²⁰Stuart, *Hosea – Jonah*, 353.

²¹Stuart, *Hosea – Jonah*, 353.

²²Stuart, *Hosea – Jonah*, 351-353.

²³Andersen – Freedman, *Amos*, 527.

²⁴Stuart, *Hosea – Jonah*, 354.

this verse specifically mentions sacrifices: burnt offerings (*'ōlōt*), grain offerings (*minhōt*) and the communion meal or peace offerings (*šelem*) are now also rejected by Yahweh. Yahweh's refusal of sacrifices here also reflects the language of Leviticus regarding proper and improper offerings (Lev. 19:5-7).²⁵

V. 23: After rejecting the feasts and sacrifices of the cult in the last two verses, Yahweh goes further in this verse to even reject the cult's praise. It is indeed the repudiation of “both the musical culture of the palace and the religious culture of the temple.”²⁶ Integral to worship in OT time was vocal and instrumental music (cf. Ps 150; Ezra 2:65; 1 Chr 15:16-24; 2 Chr 5:13; 23:13; Isa 5:12; Dan 3:5-15). Now Yahweh will no longer look at or listen (*šāma*) to Israel's worship (cf. Deut 13:17, 18; 32:20).²⁷

V. 24: Sacrifices and other elements of worship were rejected in vv. 22 and 23 because they were only occasional, intermittent righteousness and also not complemented by proper living in general. “Justice” (*mišpāt*) comes from “judging” (*špāt*), which “designates an action that restores the disturbed order of a (legal) community,”²⁸ in order to preserve the good among the Israelites. “Righteousness” (*šēdāqā*), is the action which results from the verb “to be right” (*šādēq*).²⁹ Yahweh's people, who should be in harmony with him must therefore practice justice (*mišpāt*) and righteousness (*šēdāqā*) always and everywhere, as Israel's covenant with Yahweh has to be so kept.³⁰ Hence the two expressions, “like waters” (*kammayim*) and “an everflowing stream” (*naḥal 'ētān*), specify this continuity by forming a combination in which the torrential waters of an ever-flowing wadi are specified.³¹

In resumé, this unit of 5:18-27 is also related to Amos 4:4-5; 5:5, 8:14 where the prophet makes similar emphases. The priests (7:10-17) with the people (7:10b) did not like this preaching by Amos. Hence, Amaziah tried to gag him (7:16). The people of Israel had deceived themselves into believing that their worship assures Yahweh's presence (v. 14) and their safety (9:10b). They were, therefore, looking forward to the “day of the Lord,” the great day of rejoicing, when Yahweh would destroy its enemies and bring victory to the chosen people. But they were wrong. As a consequence, Amos turns the whole thing upside down. “The day of the Lord will be a day of defeat, gloom, and sadness (5:18,20), of mourning in the city streets and lamentation in the vineyards (5:16-17). False security in the day of the Lord as well as in a hollow cult (5:21-24) are ruled out.”³²

Hence, the text emphasizes one thing: Because the Israelites were faithful to Yahweh only selectively, doing only the very things they wanted to do and ignoring the weightier matters of justice and righteousness – and believing, at the same time, that the little they were doing was enough for Yahweh's blessing and favour – they would be punished: subjugation in war and exile. In short, “Israel's worship displeases Yahweh because it is offered as a substitute for the demands of the covenant.”³³

²⁵Stuart, *Hosea – Jonah*, 354.

²⁶Andersen – Freedman, *Amos*, 525-527.

²⁷Stuart, *Hosea – Jonah*, 354-355.

²⁸G. Liedke, “*špāt*” in Ernst Jenni – Claus Westermann, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Vol. 3 (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997) 1393.

²⁹K. Koch, “*šdq*,” in Ernst Jenni – Claus Westermann, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Vol. 2 (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997) 1049.

³⁰Stuart, *Hosea – Jonah*, 355.

³¹Andersen – Freedman, *Amos*, 528.

³²Rui de Menezes, “Amos”, in *The International Bible Commentary* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1998) 1138.

Jesus takes up this same theme in the NT with a serious emphasis, strongly rebuking the Pharisees and the Scribes: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith; these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others” (Matt 23:23). Amos maintains in 5:21-24 that true covenant keeping for the Israelites should go beyond special, discrete acts of devotion to steadfast loyalty to Yahweh: Jesus also emphasizes it even more strikingly in the NT (cf. also Acts 7:41-43, 51):

Not every one who says to me, “Lord, Lord” shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name? And then I will declare to them, “I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers (Matt 7:21-24).

The Digital Age Experience

A digit, according to *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* (9th edition), is “any numeral from 0 to 9, especially when it is forming part of a number.” Thus, for something to be described as “digital”, it means that the thing in question is “designating, relating to, operating with, or created using, signals or information represented by digits.” This is only possible through scientific and technological advancement. A “digital age” is, therefore, largely descriptive of an age that has attained an appreciable level of development in science and technology, relating especially to the area of social communication. This applies to our present age, the age of “more modern and technological explosion,”³⁴ as well as to the future.

It is common knowledge that the rapid developments in science and technology in this age have made life easier, richer and less cumbersome in almost all fronts. In the digital world, especially, humankind “is faced with the net culture which is characterized with the ability to upload and download, surf and chat, post and design and in fact with exposure to vast amount of incoming information and the struggle of ensuring balance between the digital and physical worlds in terms of values and ethos.”³⁵

This development in scientific knowledge and its application in technology are generally seen as good for humankind. This is because it is what humanity in general would prefer to have rather than not have – and this has been a constant feature of man's earthly striving right from the very early times. Even though some sections of our world are more scientifically and technologically advanced than others, yet, practically speaking, no community or group or nation can really lie completely outside the striving for advancement or away from the ease acquired from the fruition of this striving.³⁶ It is, in fact, part of God's blessing for humankind because according to the biblical account of creation, God created the first human beings, Adam and Eve, blessing them and instructing them to “subdue the earth” (Gen 1:28). Thus, the improvement and ease which the

³³Michael L. Barré, “Amos”, in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Bangalore: Theological Publications, 1994) 214.

³⁴Oguejiofor, “The Gospel Message, the African World View and the Demands of Scientific and Technological Advancement”, 229.

³⁵Inaku K. Egere, “Social Media and Youth Formation: Participative Technology and Ecclesial Transformation”, in Luke E. Ijezie – Stephen Audu – Agnes I. Acha, ed., *Youth Formation and Globalisation in the Nigerian Context* (Port Harcourt: CATHAN Publication, 2018) 497.

³⁶Oguejiofor, “The Gospel Message, the African World View and the Demands of Scientific and Technological Advancement”, 229.

advancement in science and technology has engendered in life is seen as the fulfillment of this divine command.³⁷

So far so good. But these rapid developments in science and technology also confront humankind with manifest dangers, enough to cause serious concern and anxiety: The uncontrolled arms race between the more developed nations of the world, which has escalated since after World War II, is undoubtedly an alarm signal; as the world still shudders at the astronomically catastrophic effects of the atomic bombs which were dropped by the allied forces at Hiroshima and Nagasaki respectively towards the final stages of that war. This fear becomes more potent these days in the face of the present devastating war between Russia and Ukraine where the actual deployment of such weapons is proximately acute. The mobile telephone which is today in the hands of most adults and which facilitates communication in all sectors of human interaction, is also used, sometimes, for sinister purposes like fraud, kidnappings, ambushes and wanton terrorism, to mention but these. What of the internet which has today made the social media unrivalled sources of information and development? Its flagrant abuses stare us in the face including cyberbullying, cybercrime, Cybersex trafficking, Malaware, sending spam mails and the dissemination of false and damaging news items³⁸ – generally termed “fake news” in today's common parlance. It is this disturbing dichotomy which tends to create serious confusion and dilemma for humankind in this digital age:

In the light of the foregoing factors there appears the dichotomy of a world that is at once powerful and weak, capable of doing what is noble and what is base, disposed to freedom and slavery, progress and decline, brotherhood and hatred. Man is growing conscious that the forces he has unleashed are in his own hands and that it is up to him to control them or be enslaved by them. Here lies the modern dilemma.³⁹

Part of this confusion and dilemma is sometimes the wrong feeling of undue freedom and independence on the part of some human beings. Many people these days, especially abroad, tend to think that God is now irrelevant and can be done without. The same also goes with religion. At best they are indifferent. This is irreligiousness at its peak! It is a situation which, unfortunately, is prone to bring about personal conflicts for many people, sometimes even leading to suicide, as they are, by their irreligiousness, trying to deny something which is basic to their nature and existence as human beings. But has religion really much to offer to the society, one may further ask?

The Importance of Religion to the Society

That religion is part of culture has already been underlined above. Hence, what is said of religion here, presumes that close relationship between it and culture. Generally speaking, religion is very important to any society. The proper understanding of religion and its practice would, therefore, help a lot in man's existence. Its influence on the society could further be itemized as follows:⁴⁰

1. Cultural Identity: Religion plays a very important role for a person in giving him/her a cultural identity. This comes from the fact that each religion has festivals, traditions and mythologies which form a part of the tangible and intangible heritage of the country or society in question. To that end, religion contributes in protecting this heritage and also adds to the diversity in the given society in question.

³⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2293.

³⁸ <https://www.en.m.wikipedia.org> (accessed on May 30, 2022).

¹ Vatican II, “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*”, no. 9.

¹ Cf. <https://www.tutorialspoint.com/what-is-the-importance-of-religion-in-our-lives> (accessed on May 29, 2022).

2. Values and Ethics: Religion helps in creating an ethical framework and also a regulator for values in the day to day life of people in every society. It thereby acts as an agency of socialization. Therefore, religion helps in building values like love, empathy, respect and harmony in any given society.

3. Spiritual Connect: The quest to fulfill the economic and material pursuits in the world of today is what preoccupies people most of the time. But it is religion which plays the crucial role of establishing our connection with the divine and developing the belief that there is a supreme energy that acts as regulator in our day to day lives and occupations. Thus, the components of prayer, chants, hymns and other religious exercises create the spiritual bond between the adherents and the divinity on the one hand and between the adherents themselves, on the other.

4. The Idea of Welfare: Every religion promotes its philosophy and the crux of it has always been the welfare and wellness of the people. For example, in the Christian religion, the emphasis is on the love of God which manifests and proves itself also as the love of neighbor. In this way, the spiritual and the bodily welfare of all the adherents is greatly taken care of.

Thus, religion remains truly a great influence, as already said, on human beings and on society at large. The quest then is how to optimally harness this influence, to reduce irreligiousness as much as possible. This would be important for all human beings but, as seen from our biblical exegesis above, this paper would highlight this influence a little more to those who use the canons of the OT and NT – the Jews and the Christians.

Some Observations and pertinent suggestions for the Future

As has already been said, this digital age has its special appeal on the youth. Since the youth make up a high percentage of every society, training them properly would be certainly for the benefit of everyone – and religious/moral education contributes immensely in this direction. Religious education aids “the growth of young people to mature so that they can develop self-understanding, good relationship with other people and the world around them; and become capable of responding to what they believe to be divine.”⁴¹ In other words, they would be more “cultured” or “refined,” according to our first definition of culture above. Being, thus, more disciplined and resourceful, they would be better able to adapt more maturely and suitably to life in a digital age – to the betterment of the general society.

Sadly, though, religion could sometimes also be used or “exploited” to create problems in the society. This is sometimes caused by ignorance on the part of some of the adherents of the particular religion, with regard to its teachings and tenets, leading to fundamentalism or religious fanaticism.⁴² Madu has some words on this: In discussing the social integrative function of religion, he outlines the positive aspects, which are also largely similar to the ones already detailed out above in this discussion on the importance of religion to society. But he also adds: “Religion may help to preserve a social order which from state value premises is bad.”⁴³ He goes on: “Certain conditions weaken, or even reverse the place of religion in social integration. In some times and places it becomes involved, as symbol and cause in social conflict and the reduction of order. Again, whether this is desirable or undesirable can be stated only with reference to certain stated values and cannot be determined 'in general.’”⁴⁴

Hence, by the use of the scientific and technological advances in our digital age, especially the social media, this “social conflict and the reduction of order” often becomes more wide spread and

⁴¹Samuel, “Religious Education and National Development: The Christian Perspective”, 106.

⁴²For more on this, cf. Emmanuel U. Dim, *Pentecostalism and its Challenges: The Pertinent Question*(Lagos: Sovereign Prints, 2012) 82-85.

⁴³Madu, *Fundamentals of Religious Studies*, 31-32.

⁴⁴Madu, *Fundamentals of Religious Studies*, 32.

devastating. The recent case of the gruesome hacking to death and burning of late Miss Deborah Samuel, the student of the Shehu Shagari College of Education, Sokoto, by her school mates in the name of religion – which went viral in the social media – is one that is still sending shock waves to well-meaning human beings both here in Nigeria and abroad – and this is not just an isolated case!

The Nigerian Situation

That the youth are seriously influenced in this digital age, has already been noted – and this case applies equally to Nigeria. In the area of religion, for example, many of our youth these days are making a “u-turn” from their Christian religion and orientation to the Traditional Religion in what is sometimes termed neo-paganism. Some even go to the extent of attacking the Church and disturbing religious worship in some cases.⁴⁵ Unfortunately, many of these young people also end up in heavy personal conflict because, as they are not really groomed in their “new” religion, they never worship at the shrines of the gods in question. Rather, they only attend the eating festivities. Owing to the fact that there is actually no true conviction for most of them regarding their “new” religion, their behavior ultimately amounts to irreligiosity.

From the example given above, this writer thinks that even the same digital world could be positively harnessed for these young people who are actually at a very impressionable stage of their lives. Yes, they are said to be “digital natives,” because many of them, if not actually most of them, spend more than half of their day in the virtual world with their virtual families and friends connecting, interacting and sharing meaning with one another. Thus, the world of digital communications becomes a veritable instrument for the proper religious and moral education and formation of these young people so that the modern technological and digital boom would be truly seen to be the blessing, which it is actually meant to be, for society at large.⁴⁶ This is really imperative for everyone but more especially for all educationists and religious groups, particularly the more established Churches who have large numbers of these youths as their members.

It is on this note that immense thanks must go to Mr. Peter Obi, the former Executive Governor of Anambra State, for handing schools back to the Churches and the Voluntary Agencies who founded them. This is because it was actually after the state take-over of all schools immediately after the Civil War in 1970, that our present decadence generally commenced. The overall positive outcome of this noble and courageous gesture by Mr. Obi, is already clear and incontestable, and, happy enough, many other states in the country have also followed suit in doing the same. In fact, no sensible government should leave the education of its citizens only in its own hands.

That said, the special and ambivalent religious situation of Nigeria, whose citizens are internationally acknowledged to be very religious, also begs for some attention. Tasié describes the rather puzzling situation as follows: “Today in the country, every nook and corner is littered with shrine, mosque or church. In a society with such a religious tradition one expects a high sense of morality and decorum in both public and private lives. But Nigeria is an enigma; so religious yet so morally depraved.”⁴⁷ Nwankwo situates the cause of this ambivalence in what he describes as the “compartmentalization of life” – the “tendency to undertake religious practices without allowing them to influence everyday life.” He then concludes: “That is why some claim that there is so much

⁴⁵For a more detailed view on this phenomenon, cf. Emmanuel U. Dim, “Abraham the Father of Faith (Gen 12-17) – Challenge to Christians in Nigeria,” *Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (2022) 61-63.

⁴⁶Egere, “Social Media and Youth Formation: Participative Technology and Ecclesial Transformation”, 502-503.

⁴⁷George I. K. Tasié, “Religion and Moral Depravity in Contemporary Nigeria,” in *The Nigerian Journal of Theology*, Vol. 19 (June, 2005) 89.

religion – with its formal and public practices – but very little spirituality, that is, that transformative inner connectedness with the divine.”⁴⁸ The general result is, naturally, this rather pessimistic picture:

The overall picture is that of a country that is highly religious and whose citizens know no religious vacuum both in private and public lives. What is baffling, however, is that it is this (*sic*) same Nigerians burning with religious zeal that are engaged in money laundering; smuggling of contraband goods, child and human trafficking, importation and manufacturing of substandard and fake drugs and all manner of vices.⁴⁹

In furtherance of the above view, Molagun admits that Nigeria is now going through “a period of the highest occurrence of features of moral bankruptcy” in which, regrettably, our institutions of higher learning are also fully involved. Hear her: “Moral decadence is not limited to the government circle in form of corruption. Our institutions of higher learning are also full of several heart-breaking immoral activities.”⁵⁰ She lists these disturbing activities to include examination malpractices, which are totally against the National Policy on Education in Nigeria, promiscuity and sex-related misbehaviours as well as cultism – all having very grave consequences on the Nigerian nation, the family system and our educational development.⁵¹

This general situation is really a sad one, even up to the point that places of worship may today be deceitfully set up, just in camouflage, for pure business enterprises: “And increasingly, churches are being set up solely as business concerns rather than to win souls or to depopulate the kingdom of darkness as Pentecostals like to say. Many pastors are no better than common thieves who turn to the job because they cannot find any other job to do.”⁵²

Serious indeed and really concerning! Yet, depressing as these observations are, they, nevertheless, constitute clarion calls, in my opinion, for a personal decision and carefulness on the part of everyone – as no situation, in any place, is really without some difficulties. Religion, when seriously practiced, brings a lot of benefits both spiritual and corporeal. Irreligiousness helps no one. Rather it breeds problems and personal conflicts for the people involved – as is the case in our country today. It is, therefore, strongly condemned by Amos, the prophets and Jesus Christ himself. Strong catechesis is highly recommended for all religious groups to help their believers to avoid selective faithfulness to God which also helps to breed irreligiousness on the part of their members. This should also involve the youth and all institutions of learning in the country. A convinced motive on the part of those who preach the word of God to all religious adherents would also eliminate deceit and outright irreligiousness from the part of those preachers and the other religionists. This is actually imperative for our country Nigeria.

Conclusion

⁴⁸Lawrence Nwankwo, “Religion, Culture and Social Regeneration”, in Anthony B.C. Chiegboka – al, ed., *A Bountiful Harvest: Festschrift in Honour of Very Rev. Msgr. Prof. J.P.C. Nzomiwu* (Nimo: Rex Charles and Patrick, 2012) 363.

⁴⁹Tasie, “Religion and Moral Depravity in Contemporary Nigeria,” 96.

⁵⁰H. M. Molagun, “The Role of Education and Religion in the Promotion of Decency and Moral Uprightness in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions”, in *Religions’ Educator: Journal of the National Association for the Study of Religions and Education*, Vol. 8, no. 2 (2005) 144.

⁵¹Molagun, “The Role of Education and Religion in the Promotion of Decency and Moral Uprightness in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions”, in *Religions’ Educator*, 145-147.

⁵²B. Kolade-Otitoju, “Profiteering Pastors”, in *The News*, Vol. 32, no. 23 (June, 2009) 19.

This paper has amply dwelt on “Irreligiousness in the name of Religion (Amos 5:21-24): Digital-Age Experience with particular Reference to Nigeria.” In doing this, it looked closely at the words “religion” which is actually a part of “culture”. It also noted the close relationship between them: Both affect the human person at the deepest level of his/her being by the provision of a particular world-view which deeply relates him/her with the divine and with others in the society. As a result of the solidly formed conscience, character and behavior, the human person becomes maturely suited in life in the society, even in a digital age having serious scientific and technological developments, especially in the field of communication.

That “digital age” is actually our present day society and age as well as the future – as already noted. The healthily formative education, which the individual has received, would go a long way to minimizing the undue abuse of the scientific materials in question. It would also reduce irreligiousness in our society, especially among the youth – the leaders of tomorrow. Hence, good religious education and orientation are strongly recommended for everybody, especially the youth who are very much at home in the social media. The active participation of the government, Churches and voluntary agencies in the field of education – which is today the case in many parts of Nigeria – is, therefore, a very welcome development.

The situation of selected faithfulness to Yahweh on the part of Israel was explained in the exegetical section of this article. It displeased Yahweh greatly. It also displeases him today, as the trend is found among us here in Nigeria, as well. Hence, the call for greater effort and conviction on the part of all religious educationists and on continuous catechesis is also made in this paper. Irreligiousness displeases God and precipitates disorder in the society. It does no one any lasting good.

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