

A DISCOURSE ON INTERDISCIPLINARITY IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION

**Prof. Boniface A. C. Obiefuna**

Department of Religion & Human Relations  
Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Nigeria  
Email: ba.obiefuna@unizik.edu.ng

&

**Dr. Samuel C. Izuegbu**

Department of Religion & Human Relations  
Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Nigeria  
Email: sc.izuegbu@unizik.edu.ng

&

**Dr. Divine M. Abalogu**

Department of Religion & Human Relations  
Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Nigeria  
Email: dm.abalogu@unizik.edu.ng

**Abstract**

Religion remains a social phenomenon. It is axiomatic that religion permeates all aspects of man's activities hence, it is a social reality especially in this age of interdisciplinary studies. There have been doubts on the relevance of religion as a course of study. Such doubts would have emanated from the 'insider's' study of religion which in most cases remains subjective instead of objective which is the guiding principle of an 'outsider's' (academic) study of religion. The 'absolute faith truth' mentality becomes obvious when religion is studied subjectively which creates a vacuum in the study of religion. Religion becomes a course that is relevant to humanity when objective study is carried out and hence, the interdisciplinarity study of the subject matter-religion. The present research bearing in mind, the pivotal place of religion in human affairs discusses the 'why' it is important to study religion interdisciplinarily in institutions of higher learning and even in the lower levels of education. This work finds out how religion is studied in line with other disciplines with more interest on the importance of such studies. It is clear that religion in its study stretches its tentacles to philosophy, psychology, anthropology, sociology and soon. Various disciplines borrow from religion in the development of literature. This work concludes that as religion is studied interdisciplinarily, such study makes religion more relevant among human beings who are in dire need of answers to their various problems in life. Religion in line with other disciplines provides answers to those problems which in turn translate to societal development. Using phenomenological approach in the study of religion, the present work presents the interdisciplinarity in the study of religion. Data were collected using secondary source of information.

**Keywords:** Religion, interdisciplinarity, sociology, culture, literature

**Introduction**

Religion remains an important aspect of man who finds himself in the midst of other living things and hence requires answers to those things around him especially those that are beyond his imagination. Man's history has been so much influenced by religion that its pivotal position cannot be ignored in man's dealings. For Nwachukwu (2007), religion remains a striking and interesting phenomenon in human life that it cannot be ignored. In that case, in whatever endeavor man finds himself, wittingly or unwittingly, religion is involved. In fact, religion in most cases forms people's ideology and hence their idiosyncrasies tailored along their religious orientation. One can see such clearly when individuals from varied religious background argue or discuss on a particular issue. Therefore, to deny religion is to deny an ever existing reality.

Owing to this fact, the study of religion has become so much important in the institutions of learning. It is believed that objective study of the subject matter-religion promotes development which starts from peaceful co-existence. Obiefuna and Uzoigwe (2012) have argued convincingly that the study of religion enhances development. According to them, if religion is properly studied, the graduates of

religion are capable of enthrone all that it takes to develop a nation but above all to sustain such development. Earlier, Obiefuna (2008) has argued that proper study of religion guarantees human relations and definitely promotes economy which remains a critical aspect of development. Religious study is therefore part of the various disciplines in the institutions of learning. The study of religion remains objective and not subjective and that makes it more relevant as a discipline.

The objective study of religion therefore intends viewing religion as a source of societal progress. As a discipline, religion is not in isolation of other disciplines especially in the present age of interdisciplinary study. In his view, Kessler (2000) states that the academic study of religion challenges the students to develop qualities of openness, honesty, critical intelligence, careful reading and listening, and critical tolerance. Religion to achieve this in its studies links with other areas of study to make a holistic as well as objective analysis of the subject matter. To that end, this work discusses the interdisciplinarity of the study of religion. It looks at how religion borrows from other areas of study or combines with other disciplines for relevant and objective study. It is an attempt to show that religion utilizes other disciplines in its study just as other disciplines borrow from religion. It is therefore a study on interdisciplinarity in of religion.

### **Conceptual Clarifications**

**Interdisciplinarity:** According to Wikipedia (n. d.), interdisciplinarity involves the combining of two or more academic disciplines into one activity. Thus, it is a study that involves not only one discipline but that which makes use of more than one discipline to find a solution to a problem. It involves the interaction of two or more disciplines in carrying out research or investigation. Interdisciplinarity study of religion has to do with studying religion by looking at how other disciplines promote its understanding as well as its relevance by examining religion in line with those disciplines which show their interactions as well as interrelatedness which could enhance holistic study.

**Religion:** Religion is one of the concepts that enjoy varied definitions which could be because of the background of the person who defines the concept. This work is not interested in the litany of the definitions. According to Merriam (Ed.) (1980), religion is

The outward act or form by which men indicate their recognition of the existence of God or of gods having power over their destiny, to whom obedience, service and honour are due; the feeling of expression of human love, fear or awe of some superhuman and over-ruling power, whether by profession of belief, by observance of rites and ceremonies or by conduct of life. (p. 250).

The above view of religion remains deficient as it only dwells on the vertical view of religion (God and man) which if one adopts may not fit into the litmus test of interdisciplinarity. Ugwu (2002) views religion as “faith and practices involving the relationship between mankind and what is regarded as sacred” (p.2). This definition suffers the same deficiency. To make religion more encompassing, Obiefuna (2008) asserts that religion involves human relation. In fact, the hallmark of religion in any society is human relation. This later horizontal understanding of religion makes it more relevant in the field of interdisciplinary study. Religion therefore involves the relationship between man and God or deities (vertical) as well as relationship between man and man (horizontal).

### **Why Interdisciplinarity of Religion?**

Religion is a major force in human experience. Across the globe religious agenda have fueled conflict and encouraged acts of terrorism and ethnic cleansing, dislocating populations and destroying economies. But religious traditions have also laid the foundation for human rights, social justice, toleration, and international peace. Religious Studies is therefore by nature a complex, interdisciplinary field with direct relevance to the world we live in.

It is impossible to open a newspaper, listen to the radio, or watch television without being bombarded by debates about the religious and ethical dimensions of medical care, sexual behavior, interpersonal violence, large-scale war, capital punishment, and a host of other issues that fiercely divide the public

both in this Nigeria and abroad. Encouraging students to learn about the historical roots and the cultural effects of these issues, and to discuss them in an academic setting, is of the greatest importance in creating educated, thinking individuals who are prepared to participate responsibly in our complex society. The phenomenon of religion in totality of human society remains sacrosanct. Religion is interested in cultural awareness, ethical awareness, critical thinking and as well interdisciplinary connections.

The study of religion as earlier stated is objective and such is what academic study promotes. It is this objective study of religion that forms the bedrock of its interdisciplinary nature to reach out to all spheres of life. Since Religious Study is a broad rather than a single field, it utilizes the methodologies, procedures, and content of many different disciplines. Obiefuna and Uzoigwe (2012) were aware of this when they state that “This is important as the discipline of religion does not boast of having one single theoretical perspective that explains every aspect of religion. Insight from other disciplines is incorporated” (p. 147). Kimball (2002) saw the need for objective study of religion to avoid what he calls “absolute truth claims” (p. 41) which is capable of making religion evil. The study of religion here is in line with what Fenton et al (1983) view as outsider’s view point. Such is an academic study of religion which makes students stand outside all religious traditions and study religions from the viewpoint of the methods and standards associated with the secular academy. For such study to be achieved there has to be interdisciplinary approach.

In a world that has witnessed faith-based conflicts, it is pertinent that religion is studied in link with other disciplines. Theological study of Religion cannot effectively promote development in a state. Interdisciplinary study of Religion helps to show the relevance of the study by preparing students with adequate knowledge of the world around them so as to function effectively and efficiently in promoting the human society. It is therefore owing to its pivotal position in human community that it is studied using the methods and principles from other disciplines.

### **Religious Studies and Other Disciplines**

#### **Religious Studies and Philosophy**

Philosophy has been one of the disciplines in the institution of higher learning. Philosophy has been described as the science of things naturally knowable to man’s unaided powers, in so far as these things are studied in their deepest causes and reasons. Omoregbe (1993) sees philosophy as a rational enquiry into the nature and meaning of reality. Thus Nwachukwu (2007) holds that the philosopher seeks to know and understand the nature, meaning and purpose of all things knowable to human mind. Philosophy is interested in an unprejudiced investigation into the nature of meaning and purpose of a particular issue.

Religion has some elements which need deep reflections and inquiries. Madu (1997) holds that

Religion is at the core of the personality, exerting a tremendous influence on the lives of individuals, whether intellectuals or the illiterate masses. This is because of certain claims which it makes and which man finds himself adhering to. Religion, for instance claims to be a connecting link between man and God, who is a transcendental invisible being. This claim or assumption is made manifest when man finds himself performing some unintelligible functions in cults or worship, believing that what he is doing has some relevance in his life. (p. 43).

Such practice in academic parlance requires to be well understood owing to its meaning as well as the reasons for the action. Such analysis is the interest of philosophy. In the process of the study of Religion, the scholars utilize philosophical methods of reasoning and analysis to give answers to the ever emerging questions in religious practices. Some elements of religion such as God or deities, demons, existence of supreme being and so on need philosophical appraisal and hence the use of philosophical methods are apt. Philosophy is interested in the search for the truth and so Religion in searching for the truth applies philosophy for clarity. Madu (1997) states that:

Philosophy on its own part is not content with these claims of religion and also not in accepting them just like that. Thus it wants to be enlightened why such claims should be accepted as binding on man. It seeks clarification and explanation of the basis on which such claims are

built. Philosophy therefore is a questioning enterprise seeking knowledge and understanding on the data of experience. It is interested in the “whys” the “whats” and the “hows” of things which man takes for granted. Philosophy is a discourse, a reflection, an interpretation. (pp. 43-44).

It is pertinent to note that the academic study of Religion calls for deep understanding of man’s relationship with the supernatural being. In that case, it borrows from philosophy in its quest for examination. Although, philosophy of religion is a branch of philosophy, its position in the study of religion has been made paramount as far as objective study of religion is concerned. What it implies is that philosophy is interested in religion and there is no way it could do that if it does not borrow religious concepts in its examination. Likewise, Religion in its objective or academic study calls for reflection, interpretation and or discourse of its content thereby borrowing from philosophy. One quickly observes a cross-pollination of the two disciplines in their attempt to achieving their objectives. A researcher for instance in the field of philosophy who is interested in religious belief cannot do that efficiently without reference to religious concepts; a researcher from the field of religion who is interested in critical analysis of religious issues does so by using philosophical methods. Bearing in mind that philosophy is seen as the mother of all disciplines, there is a peculiar relationship between philosophy and religion. Each of the two disciplines is interested in the search for the truth. With that view, one sees an interdisciplinary nature between religious studies and philosophy as academic fields of study.

### **Religious Studies and Sociology**

Man lives with other men in the society. Interactions exist among the individuals or groups that make up the society. Sociology as an academic field of study is interested in such interactions among members of a society. Ogunyiriofo (2001) opines that

Sociology is the study of the pattern of social relationship existing in the society. Social relationship refers to the interaction in a group setting, be it among two or more individuals, members of organized groups such as the family, clan, village, town, nation or the community of nations.... Social relationship includes love, hatred, cooperation, antagonism, accommodation, discord, conflict, competition, kindness, wickedness, hostility, affection, friendship, likeness.... Social relationship may be positive, negative, cordial or antagonistic. They may be integrative or disintegrative factors in social life. (p. 2).

From the above paragraph, it becomes imperative that one of the factors that make the society progressive or retrogressive is religion. In fact, it is in the society that one can fully observe that man is a social cum religious being. No wonder most of the conflicts in the world today is due to religion. This would have prompted Izuegbu (2012) to assert that religion has produced saints all over the world and on the other hand has produced fanatics, bigotry, and extremists who have done damages that cannot be calculated to mankind. In like manner, Anozie (2007) observes that the contributions of religion in the society negatively and positively cannot be overemphasized.

Looking at the above critically, it is natural that a discipline that studies human interactions should also involve sensitive aspect of the interaction which as history has proved is religion. In the like manner, the discipline which claims to promote ethics and values as well as human welfare must have something to do with that discipline that studies human interaction which is sociology. Sociology according to Durkheim (1895) focuses on the study of social facts. Among those social facts is religion. On that note, the influence of religion on interactions in the society is a concern of sociology. In doing so, sociology utilizes the available methods in religion to analyze the impacts it has on the society.

On the other hand, religion in its studies borrows from sociology. As a social fact, it is academic for religion to use sociological methods in its investigation. Obiefuna (2007) states that “Most theories used in religious studies are borrowed from social sciences especially sociology. There is no firm agreement to the actual number of theories. But the prominent ones include structural functionalist, conflict, symbolic interactionism, cyclical, evolutionary, ethnomethodology theories” (p. 81). These theories are used especially in the area of religion and society or what may be called the sociology of religion. For instance, Izuegbu (2012) found the functionalist theory relevant in analyzing the church and politics of

Nigeria. The structural functionalist theory as Crossman (2013) holds interprets each part of the society in terms of how it contributes to the stability of the entire society. Again, the symbolic interactionism could be used in research within the periscope of religion. The theory which suggests that people act toward things based on the meaning those things have for them; and these meanings are derived from social interaction and modified through interpretation. For Herman and Reynolds (1994)

The objective world has no reality for humans, only subjectively-defined objects have meaning. Meanings are not entities that are bestowed on humans and learned by habituation. Instead, meanings can be altered through the creative capabilities of humans, and individuals may influence the many meanings that form their society (p. 2).

Religion is full of symbols with varied meanings. These symbols determine the mode of behavior or interaction of the people of the same faith. A symbol of star and moon in Islam differs in meaning with the cross in Christianity and so on. In the process of carrying out research in understanding the meaning the adherers attach to the symbols, religious scholars borrow the symbolic interactionism. Furthermore, studying for example the Boko Haram insurgence in Nigeria and other religious crisis, conflict theory is utilized for proper analysis. It is therefore obvious that religion is studied as an interdisciplinary course. One can assert the existence of cross-pollination between religious studies and sociology as academic fields.

### **Religious Studies and Scientific Method**

Scientific method according to Nworgu (2006) “is a formalized and systematized approach employed by scientists in carrying out investigations. It is sequential and consists of some identifiable steps in solving an identified problem” (p. 2). Madu (2008) has asserted that religion makes use of tools available in man’s intellectual faculty to arrive at conclusions. Research in religious studies remains systematic. Investigations carried out in religion follow systematic approach thereby showing the scientific methods. Obiefuna (2007) strongly argued that in the study of religion, there is unavoidable use of scientific tools as theories, paradigms and models. He argued that scientific study of religion is possible owing to the fact that research in religion is made through scientific approach.

In scientific method of investigation, a problem is identified. Such problem is defined in precise and clear terms. Hypothesis is formulated following the problem that was identified. Data are collected for testing the hypothesis. There is analysis of the data so collected. From such analysis, there is drawing of conclusion. Such approach in carrying out scientific research makes the process objective that the findings stand the test of time. In the study of religion, the researcher follows similar pattern. A problem must be identified. For instance, the problem of proliferation of churches in Nigeria. The problem so identified is articulately defined to show the area of interest. The researcher can formulate his hypothesis based on the problem. For instance: economic hardship in Nigeria is a reason for proliferation of churches in Nigeria and so on. Data are collected with the view of testing the hypothesis. Such in religion could be collected through interviews, questionnaire, observation which is either participatory or non-participatory and so on. Although, in religion, the data are not subject to laboratory analysis but rather the researcher critically examines the collected data so as to draw conclusion.

It is therefore evident that scientific method is used in carrying out investigation on religious problem. The possibility of interdisciplinary of religion and science is clear. Madu (2002) probably had this view when he states that as far as religious conviction “can be translated into practical actions, religion therefore qualifies as a theoretical science and a practical science” (pp. 6-7). In Obiefuna (2007)’s stand, “objective study of religion therefore is scientific study of religion that is possible only if the study agrees with the basic assumptions of the basic tools of scientific investigation” (p. 80). Religious studies hence borrow the scientific methods for proper investigation.

### **Religious Studies, Culture and Literature**

Could there be culture divorced of religion? In actual sense a question as such could be rhetorical. The study of religion is the study of element of culture. Culture includes knowledge, belief, art, oral, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. Religion as an integral part of culture remains a subject of interdisciplinary study in any cultural study. This would

have prompted some institutions of higher learning like University of Uyo, Nigeria to create a department known as Religion and Cultural Studies. In that case, religious beliefs aid the understanding of cultural practices. In fact, it is not exaggeration to say that almost all cultural practices have their roots in religion. In Igbo area of Nigeria for instance, new yam festival, masquerade festivals, traditional marriages, rites of passages and so on are all religious practices that influence the peoples ways of doing things. The study of culture cannot be divorced from religion. Religious beliefs of people remain the major tool for interpreting cultural practices in any cultural research especially in Africa. The interdisciplinary study of religion and culture could be seen as natural owing to the fact that they are interwoven. In the area of religion, researches in some cases are carried out based on a particular culture. Take for instance, a study on the socio-economic importance of new yam festival requires the understanding of the culture of the people that celebrate the festival. So, the thesis here is that religion and culture qualify as interdisciplinary studies.

Again, the field of literary studies has always been interwoven with religious ideas. There is the capacity of religion and literature to contribute to the understanding of each other. Religion can be seen as a set of institutions, a set of ideas and beliefs, or a lived practice all of which have complex relations with each other, and all of which are affected by and in turn affect literature. The interdisciplinary approach of religion and literature asks how these impulses compete, coordinate, or otherwise inform one another and other practices and traditions. In many parts of the world, religion has tremendously influenced the development of literature. Literature of any part of the world is not devoid of the religious practices inherent in those places. In most cases, to understand the literature of those areas requires the proper understanding of the religious beliefs and practices of the people. The interdisciplinary study of literature and religion takes seriously the study of belief and disbelief, studying how each emerges from and shapes literary, political, and philosophical traditions of a people. Literary works have been influenced by religion and on the other hand religion has been promoted through literature; thus, the interdisciplinary study of the duo. Looking at the Igbo of Nigeria for example, the notable “Things Fall Apart” of Chinua Achebe shows the religious belief of the people which met another set of religious belief that led to change. A student of literature that is interested in the study of such literary work could only make a scholarly conclusion if he combines literature and religion in the process of his research. It would amount to un scholarship for one to carry out such a research by divorcing religion from the process.

Religion and literature has mutual relationships that aid the understanding of each other. The interdisciplinary study of religion and literature remains sacrosanct. The Ola Roitimi’s “The Gods Are Not To Blame” is another example of where religion is on the play in literary development. In fact, religion remains the most factor that influence literary works. It is on that notion that one can clearly see that religion and literature are qualified as interdisciplinary study. Each has contributions in the development and understanding of each other.

### **Conclusion**

Religion as a field of study remains an interdisciplinary course. For the fact that religion is studied objectively, it has a lot to do with other disciplines for proper solution to man’s problems which academic studies pursue. It is not a discipline separated totally from other disciplines. In its bid to carry out empirical as well as reasonable research, religion is in agreement with other fields of studies for proper investigation. A critical investigation into the divides between religion and other fields shows the interdisciplinarity in the field. Religion has links with philosophy and so, there is mutual effect of the disciplines of religion and philosophy as fields of academic study. Philosophy plays major role in understanding of religious phenomena. In the same vein, religion and sociology even anthropology, psychology aid the understanding of each other. On the evidence, the interdisciplinarity of religion stands.

Scientific methods are used in carrying out proper investigation in the field of religion. Though, not subjected to laboratory examination, religion utilizes scientific principles in the process of research. The possibility of making use of those principles is an indication that religion is an interdisciplinary course that does not exist in the world of its own but rather comfortably adopts principles from other

disciplines for objective investigation. In the field of literature, one observes such intermingling. Obiefuna Boniface (personal communication) opined that in most cases, literature ends up addressing religious issues. Where such is the case, the influence of religion and literature on each other remains sacrosanct. Such symbiotic relationship helps in understanding each other in academic studies.

In all, the divides between religion and other fields to a large extent has been negotiated in this work. One finds out more of mutual compatibility between religion and other fields especially those addressed in this work. It is therefore comfortable to state that religion remains one of the academic courses that enjoy interdisciplinarity which has philosophy and literature as part of such interdisciplinary approach. It does so as part of ways to solving man's numerous problems. As religion has influence on almost every aspect of life, it follows that religion has more to do with development and progress of any human society.

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