

# IMPACT OF RELIGION ON SOCIETAL VALUE DEVELOPMENT

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## **Abstract**

The article examined the impact of religion on societal value development. Discourse on social values as they relate to environmental and sustainability issues has almost exclusively been conducted in a secular intellectual context. However, with a renewed emphasis on culture as defining and shaping links between people and nature, there has been an increasing level of scholarly attention to the role of religion and spirituality in defining, molding and understanding social values in the society. In this article we explore the intersection of religion and social values for sustainable development. First, we consider this nexus as it has been explored in existing scholarship. We acknowledge a body of research that has suggested that many religions are broadly associated with self-transcendent values. However, the degree to which they are translated into pro-environmental attitudes and behaviour varies according to context and application. Second, we argue that while there is much potential support for human values for sustainability within religious traditions, it is essential that religion is seen as a complex, multi-scalar and multi-dimensional institutional phenomena. Consequently, analysis of the relationship between religion and social values must account for the context of narratives, histories and practices. Third, using this lens, we show how religious perspectives can contribute to operationalising theories of systemic change for sustainability. Finally, we outline key principles for further sustainability research seeking to advance knowledge on the relationship between religion and societal values development.

**Keywords:** Religion, social value and development.

**Introduction**

The contributory role of religion to societal value formation and development cannot be overruled. This is based on the established fact that religion is one of the most prominent and wide-reaching social institutions, touching and shaping virtually every sphere of culture and society (Ibikunle, 2015). In corroboration, according to the Pew Research Centre, approximately 84% of the world's population are affiliated with a religion (Pew Research Centre, 2017). Given this ubiquity and social influence of religion, it is argued that articles or publications on social values development ought to consider the place of religion carefully in order to establish the relationship between religion and societal value development. There is a diversity in the practices and worldviews across (and even within) different religious traditions. This makes identifying a clear definition of religion difficult. However, HaluzaDeLay (2014) provided a concise definition of religion by defining religion broadly to include "beliefs, worldviews, practices, and institutions that cross borders, time and scale from the level of individuals all the way to transnational and transhistorical movements". He also noted that the western notion of equating religion with an established set of beliefs does not represent many eastern or traditional religious systems, which often emphasise collective practices as much as cognitive beliefs and may lack firmly established institutionalised teachings.

Religion is a social-cultural system of designated behaviors and practices, morals, worldviews, texts, sanctified places, prophecies, ethics, or organizations, that relates humanity to supernatural, transcendental, or spiritual elements. However, there is no scholarly consensus over what precisely constitutes a religion. Different religions may or may not contain various elements ranging from the divine, sacred things, faith, a supernatural being or supernatural beings or "some sort of ultimacy and transcendence that will provide norms and power for the rest of life". Ezeanga, (2010) opined that religious practices may include rituals, sermons, commemoration or veneration (of deities), sacrifices, festivals, feasts, trances, initiations, funerary services, matrimonial services, meditation, prayer, music, art, dance, public service, or other aspects of human culture. Religions have sacred histories and narratives, which may be preserved in sacred scriptures, and symbols and holy places, that aim mostly to give a meaning to life. Religions may contain symbolic stories, which are sometimes said by followers to be true, that have the side purpose of explaining the origin of life, the universe, and other things (Odudele, 2006). Traditionally, faith, in addition to reason, has been considered a source of religious beliefs.

Having reviewed briefly the concept religion, it is pertinent that the variable societal value development be reviewed. This will help provide the fundamentals needed to establish the relationship between religion and societal values development. The concept of social values is gaining increasing attention within sustainable societal value development. The word value reflects the importance, worth, desirability and the respect something gets in return (Soykan, 2007). As a sociological concept, values refer to similarities and shared demands. Social values are moral beliefs and principles that are accepted by the majority so as to ensure the continuity of a society (Ergil, 1984). Values, in addition to these qualities, signal not what is there but what should be there in a society in form of moral imperatives (Inkeles, 1964). In that sense, values are accepted as truthful opinions and criteria set for what is expected by a society. Establishing the relationship between religion and societal value development Ibikunle (2015) argued that religion form the basis by which individuals in the society learn, develop and maintain values in the society. He went further to say that a greater number of the attitude exhibited by individuals is largely dependent on the morals and values taught by religious organizations.

Available researchers have indicated that there is little or no efforts made by previous researchers to establish the relationship between religion and societal value development. Thus, available studies have been unable to provide concise information on the essence of religion in developing and maintaining social values needed in ensuring the smooth operations of the society. Furthermore, most research institutions do not encourage the study of religion, reason being that people do not exhibit interest in religious studies. As most people view knowledge obtained from such field as irrelevant and practically applicable. Hence, little or no interest is displayed in carrying out studies to provide factual information on the nexus between religion and societal value development. Similarly, the relevance of diverse cultural resources is acknowledged in this scholarship, there is little explicit recognition of the more specific role of religion in establishing and shaping social values in society. In this article we refer to societal values as a broad term which encompasses human values held or expressed at different scales of aggregation and it influence development of values within the society.

## **Religion**

Religion is seen as a social-cultural system of designated behaviours and practices, morals, worldviews, texts, sanctified places, prophecies, ethics, or organizations that relates humanity to supernatural, transcendental, or spiritual elements (Morreall, 2013). Nongbri (2013) opines that religion

is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. It is also seen as the entirety of the linguistic expressions, emotions and actions and signs that refers to a supernatural being or supernatural beings. According to James (2010) religion is a relatively-bounded systems of beliefs, symbols and practices that addresses the nature of existence, and in which communion with others and otherness is lived as if it both takes in and spiritually transcends socially-grounded ontologies of time, space, embodiment and knowing. Religion fosters national unity and development. It offer people the understanding of existence and provide rules and regulations which controls people behavior as it is believed that to live a godly life according to one's religion is to carry out one's duty both to God and men. Religion is also characterized as a sound entity that is functional in the sense that it contribute to the maintenance of societal stability of equilibrium.

### **Values**

The word value reflects the importance, worth, desirability and the respect something gets in return (Soykan, 2007). As a sociological concept, values refer to similarities and shared demands. Social values are moral beliefs and principles that are accepted by the majority so as to ensure the continuity of a society (Ergil, 1994). Values, in addition to these qualities, signal not what is there but what should be there in a society in form of moral imperatives. In that sense, values are accepted as truthful opinions and criteria set for what is expected by a society. In fact, when we say we enjoy similar things and we find the same things beautiful, we refer to shared content of values. What sociologists call collective consciousness are called by philosophers objective soul are the domain of common values (Ülken, 2001). It is clear that without society, there will not be any biological, psychological, and sociological value. Only in society, language, religion, morals, arts, and traditions can appear the result of which is the accepted core of a society. Coming to the world as an organism, human beings come to learn societal dreams, ideals, norms, morals, arts and religion by means of growing into an identity (produce) from an organism (Türkdoğan, 1992).

### **Function of values**

Values in social system always take part at the beginning of activities, inside and at the end of the process because they are the powers which begin in the world of consciousness and conscience. Human beings and societies exist together with their values (Lawal, 2002). Physical wealth of

a society is also based on the perception, belief and values that the society has. Those cultural codes are road maps in a way to determine the routes of an individual and the society. As a result, in almost every society people take values seriously, sacrifice their interest, struggle for them and even they die for them. In this context, some functions of values could be the following:

- 1) They show the ways of thinking and behaving ideally.
- 2) Values are used as means in judging.
- 3) They make people focus on useful and important cultural objects.
- 4) They play a role as a guide to adopt and realize social roles.
- 5) They perform as social control and restraint tools.
- 6) They provide solidarity (Fichter, 1990).

### **Religion and Social Values**

The term 'value' can connote a range of different meanings and interpretations. Values can equally refer to broad underlying principles in life, important features within a landscape, or monetary figures assigned to goods or services. But as it applies in this context, values are standards, principles or ideals with which we evaluate actions, people, things, or situations. Tadaki *et al.*, (2017) helpfully outlined a broad typology of value concepts in an environmental context. In exploring the intersection of religion with social values, we focus our inquiry on transcendental or 'held' values. Most commonly, these values are associated with the work by Shalom Schwartz on 'universal' human values (Schwartz, 1994). Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) first theorised that universal values might be arranged along various continua, and this was refined by a range of scholars, most prominently by Schwartz. Most important were two continua: (1) from self-transcendence (e.g., protecting the environment) to self-enhancement (e.g., social power), and (2) from openness to change (e.g., freedom) to tradition (e.g., self-discipline). Scholars have found strongest support for pro-environmental behaviour and attitudes within the self-transcendence dimension of human values (de Groot and Steg, 2007).

### **Religion and Societal Values: A Complicated Relationship**

As we have already hinted above, while religion certainly can be viewed as a fertile source of values that align with sustainability, simply equating religion with certain sets of values does not adequately capture the more complex interplay of religious belief, belonging, and environmental values (Ayuba and Alex, 2006). Any serious consideration of the intersection between religion and values for sustainability must not

simply force religion into existing value frameworks, despite the empirical relationships described in the previous section.

One of the dominant discourses that has considered human values is within the field of social psychology. Although social psychology has amassed detailed knowledge of the structure and composition of values in societies around the world, few scholars of social values have explored why certain values emerge in different contexts. Recently, some social psychologists have emphasised the systems view of values, namely that values are not simply static constructs in people's minds, but are deeply embedded in culture and ecology (Kitayama 2002; Manfredi *et al.*, 2014). We also adopt this perspective, but suggest that values are in part an expression of dominant narratives within cultures, withheld narratives providing a locally inflected mesh in which values carry their meaning. Taking the broad view of religion that we outlined above, even 'secular' narratives can be seen to have some religious or quasi-religious dimensions. Moreover, in reality, there is a melding of myriad narratives within most societies. These narratives may be considered as forming part of a larger 'worldview' out of which individuals operate. According to research by Hedlund-de Witt (2012) and Hedlund-de Witt *et al.*, (2014), worldviews are comprised of inter alia axiology (core values), as well as ontology (including a cosmogony), anthropology (the purpose of the human being) and societal vision (how society should be organised or function). Understanding values (axiology) apart from these other dimensions is, therefore, a superficial reading of society.

Another key factor which must be considered in seeking to understand the role of religious values in sustainability is the way that religious identity and belonging works at multiple scales, from individuals to groups to international bodies and values across these scales do not always align. For ease of explanation, we conceptualise religious values as present across three scales: the individual scale, the community scale, and the formal institutional scale. These three levels interact with one another and are permeable to the (often notionally secular) socio-cultural and ecological context within which they are embedded. The formal institutional scale includes public statements by major religions or denominations. For example, the Buddhism Faith Statement on Ecology (Fossey 2003), the World Council of Churches "Justice, Peace and Creation Concerns" (World Council of Churches 1983) or the Bristol Faith Commitments compiled by the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (The Alliance of Religions and Conservation 2015). The community scale would represent the teachings and viewpoints of particular churches, temples or faith communities. The individual scale is the values held by individual members of these

communities, which may be highly diverse and conflict at times with the values espoused at the other scales.

To demonstrate the complex dynamics across these scales, we take as one recent example the Roman Catholic encyclical by Pope Francis, *Laudato Sí* (which is examined in depth by Christie et al. 2019). The publication of encyclicals are major events, occurring infrequently, and carrying particular normative force as formal religious teaching by the leader of the Roman Catholic church. *Laudato* (2015), the first encyclical on the environment, was widely hailed as precipitating a change towards (or intensification of) pro-environmental values among Roman Catholics, who number nearly a billion worldwide. Interviews conducted by Kidwell (unpublished data), indicated that there was indeed a boost perceived by elite actors (priests and denominational leaders). Again, our point here is not that values are uninfluenced, but that the dissemination and mobilisation of values is complex (Kidwell *et al.*, 2018). Popular views often hold that the Roman Catholic Church is hierarchical and top-down. However, in practice, this research suggests that within the American Roman Catholic context, values are often consolidated in free-standing ways at different scales: from individual, to parish, to diocese, to regional ecumenical partnerships, to global community. As Li *et al.*, (2016) suggest, at each of these levels, actors may be subject to different cross-pressuring effects, whereby political and religious affiliations are in conflict around an issue like “sustainability” may itself also be unstable (Johnston, 2013). It is impossible to locate a universally agreed upon definition of sustainability and as such scholars and practitioners have developed definitions to fit specific purposes (White, 2013). In this ambiguous context, we may appreciate a range of ways that religion doesn’t always sit comfortably with ‘sustainability’ as a concept. Not only may religious communities emphasise particular dimensions of sustainability—emphasising human health over ecological integrity for instance—religious perspectives may also challenge sustainability as a normative goal. The concept of the “common good” discussed by Christie *et al.*, (2019) within Catholic teaching as an alternative (albeit not inconsistent) aspirational goal to sustainability is a good example. Appreciating narratives and worldviews of faith communities relevant to conservation activities has recently been emphasised as best-practice (Schaefer and Higgins, 2017).

### **Role of Religion in the Society**

Religion permeates every aspects of man’s existence in the universe, be it politics, social, cultural or economic life of the people (Bankston and Zhou, 1995). It has been used as the most important instrument in the

social control of man and the society. It performs the social functions such as providing aims, purpose forms, defense and sense of direction. The role of religion in promoting peace security and eradicating the youth's militancy cannot be over emphasized.

### **1 Religion Stimulates Social Habits and Checks Anti- Social Behavior.**

Religion is "an efficient means of social control, stimulates social habits and checks anti-social tendencies". It offers the whole society a concept of its own sacred value. It prescribes a particular kind of behavior or conduct to its adherents in terms of knowledge, thinking, reflection decisions, choices, tastes, opinion, habits, feelings and freedom of actions (Benson, Leffert, Scales & Blyth, 1998). Such particular life styles are created, maintained and sustained through religions doctrines, ethics, and laws safe guards are prescribed against deviation from these life styles. Religion polishes and fashions morality in positive dimension. To neglect religion is to do away with morality, without religion moral development of the society will be meaningless.

### **2 Religion gives Emotional Security, Spiritual and Material Support.**

Religion is an instrument for defense. It provides belief and attitudes that help to defend the people against vexing doubts, anxieties and aggression. As people do struggle with life of uncertainties, powerlessness and insecurity religion provides answer to the things that threaten people's life and survival. It was even noted that religion offers emotional, spiritual and material support to its members in times of tension, stress or hardship (Lawal, 2003). The poor and wretched ones are to be given alms or gifts from the rich ones among them. Victims of natural hazards or wars are to be aided and their life must protect as a sacred entity and peaceful coexistence of the society. Also religion offers resistance against frustration, hostility, suffering, anxiety, despair and hatred

### **3. Religion Reforms and Resettles Deviants**

A deviant is person who is deficient in moral and social standards from what is normal and accepted. Religion can be used to call the out law persons or sinners back to repentance, and makes them become socially integrated into the society (Odudele, 2006). Religion struggles with the ultimate problems of human life that deprive man from behaving in the morally and socially accepted ways. It gives a sense of direction and makes people to perceive, feel, think, act and behave in a specifically desired ways. It moves people a way from despair and restores confidence in them. Armed robbers, adulterers, drunkards, drug- addicts, law- breakers and frauds to mention a few have been changed to behave

in a socially approved manners and society see and treat them with trust and confidence.

#### **4. Religion Fosters Social Solidarity and Friendships.**

Religion serves as a powerful means for the solidarity among its members and nearly all the great social institutions have been born in religion (Ezeanya, 2010). Also, religion regulates social life of the society by creating some sort of order for its members to live together. Religion encourages solidarity, consensus, cordially, harmony, cooperation, unity, stability, security and peaceful co-existence. Religion creates several fellowship groups for the adults and youths alike. Out of these fellowships, friendships, marriage and brother hoods emerged. It allows the adherents to coordinate their activities in submission to rules and regulations under the guidance of values, so that they can live harmoniously with their fellow human beings.

#### **5. Religion helps to bring about Social Change.**

A change takes place in religion as a social phenomenon. In Nigeria, religion helps to bring about social change. Social change has been described as the change that occurs in world views, ideas, values, beliefs, rules, relationships, institutions, symbols speech, languages, style of thinking and behaviors and the means of production and distribution of goods and services (Fadiyimu, 2004). A social change is the alteration in the patterns of social action and interactions. Religion introduces and disseminates new ideas and information about education, medicine, literature, agriculture, games, markets organization and administration. Religion brings about new forms of education, dressing, marriage, law courts and languages in Nigeria.

#### **6. The Relevance of Religion in Cultural Development.**

Religion helps in transforming the society by introducing new cultural elements. Religious doctrines, laws organizations, modes of dressing, dogma, buildings, patterns of marriages, training of children, burying the dead and many other items of culture are influenced through religion. Morality is used to give meaning and purpose to the cultural behavior (Obikunle, 2015). Wherein the culture deviates from the real religious meaning, then it has to be checked, so that there is a balanced relationship between the cultural elements and religious ideology. Indecent modes of dress, is discouraged for the sake of modesty and moral implication given.

#### **7. Religion Ensures the Continues Existence of the Society.**

Ayuba and Alex (2006) opined the positive role of religion is to hold the society together as a form of "social glue". Religion serves as a social bond that holds the society together. It strengthens the basic beliefs and values of the society. It stresses for the social cohesion of all its members

to live in unity and peace. Religious ceremonies are performed to remind people that they have a common history and identity, thereby ensuring the continuity for the existence of the society. There are events in the life of an individual and in the life of a society that point to the fact that God is working out this purpose for the common good of the individual and the society.

### **Impact of Religion on Societal Value Development**

Man as a human being, cannot exist without religion because it is intrinsic in his nature. One cannot isolate religion from the life situation. Religion determines its true value from the role it plays in the enrichment of the quality of life. It has a role to play, a contributive role in the evolution of man and developmental of societal values, by providing society with ethical codes, social rules and ideals, rituals and devotion that guide the activities of man in the course of social interaction. Religion also enhances human values and self-awareness (Bjarnason, 1998). Religion helps one to lead a disciplined and purified life. Religions always stand for the betterment of human soul. The different religions, though devotedly called by different names, show a surprising likeness of spirit and life. It is a unique specific expression and cannot be equated with anything. There is no religion which does not stress one form or other of universal brotherhood, and which does not advocate kindness to all living things. In the religions of the non-vegetarian people, there is an acceptance, in principle at least, of the non-killing commandment. And there is the general acceptance by the Semitic religions that a form of grace accompanies fasting and abstention from meat eating on certain days (Lawal, 2003). Buddhism in principle is solidly based on non-hurting (*ahimsa*), and Jainism makes the high level of this principle.

When religion is not influential in a society or has ceased to be, the state inherits the entire burden of public morality, crime and intolerance. It then must use punishment and police. Yet, this is unsuccessful as morality, integrity and self-respect not already inherent in the individual, cannot be enforced with any great success. Only by a spiritual awareness and inculcation of the spiritual value of these attributes can they come about. There must be more reason and more emotional motivation to be moral, etc., than threat of human discipline.

### **Conclusion**

We have explored in this article the complex relationship between religion and development of societal values development in the society. While there are consistent trends regarding values promoted by major faith traditions and certain values operationalised within universal

human values theory, religion comprises far more than the promotion of particular values. To progress research on the intersection of human values and religion, we suggest that religion must be understood as a multi-faceted embodied institution of substantial social and political relevance. This broad understanding of religion thus enables scholarship on social values for sustainability to connect with theories of social transformation. We encourage scholars pursuing such a research agenda to recognise that values are not freestanding but are connected to social practices and institutional dynamics, to pay attention to local expressions of values embedded in religious contexts, and to embrace more embedded vernacular than that of social psychological theory (e.g., concepts such as compassion/love rather than self-transcendence). Thus, it has been established that religion contributes significantly to the development of positive societal values.

### Recommendations

Based on the observation made in the course of the theoretical review on the impact of religion on societal value development, the study suggests that the teachings and activities of religious organizations in Nigeria should be encouraged, since it contributes significantly to positive societal value development. More so, similar study should be pursued by potential researchers on the impact of religion on societal value development as this will help the researcher pursue the objective the current study was unable to pursue owing to the limited timeframe allotted to this study.

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