**The Meaning of Religion**

Religion is defined as consisting of institutionalised systems of beliefs, values and symbolic practices which provide groups of men with solutions to their question of ultimate meaning – death, difficulties, suffering, etc. (Glock and Stark 1998). Milton (1996) has also defined religion as “the attempt to bring the relative, the temporary, and the painful things of life into relation with what is conceived to be permanent, absolute and cosmically optimistic”. Religion is a universal human institution. It entails a set of basic beliefs and ritualistic practices.

These beliefs and practices however vary from one religious organisation to another and responsible for the multiplication of religious organisations in society. Religious practices and thoughts are often associated with descriptions such as power, invisible, mighty, all-pervasive omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent, mysterious, miraculous, super-natural and everlasting being. There is a belief that God who is worshiped through religion does good things only. There is also a belief that God can do evil to those who violate his rules.

**Rural Religion in Nigeria**

Like in many parts of the developing world, religion is an important aspect of the social life of Nigerians in both rural and urban areas. There are three major forms of religion in Nigeria namely, Christianity, Islam (Mohammedanism) and the traditional religion. The first two have many denominations, while the third has many sub-types.

**Christianity**: Christianity was introduced during the period of colonialism, first into the southern part of the country. Today it has spread to many other parts of the country. However, there is a larger concentration of Christians in the south than in the northern states. Christians are commonly found in Ogun, Ondo, Osun, Lagos, Delta, Edo, Enugu, Akwa-Ibom, Oyo, Imo, Anambra, Enugu, Abia, Ebonyi, Bayelsa, Cross-River, Rivers, Adamawa, Taraba and Plateau states. The other states have less proportions of Christians. Different Christian denominations have been introduced from Europe and the United States. These are the Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Baptist, the Christ Apostolic Church and the Apostolic Faith.

Several indigenous church denominations have been formed also. Some of these are the African Church, the African Methodist Church, Church of the Lord Aladura, the Cherubim and Seraphim Church, and the Celestial Church of Christ. Some other new Churches introduced are the Redeemed Christian Church of God, the Students Christian Movement and the Four Square Gospel Church. The old denominations and the indigenous groups are more common in rural areas than the new introductions which are largely restricted to the urban areas. The rural branches of the denominations are frequently accountable to the church district and their urban parent bodies. In small towns and cities, the church continues to attract massive following. With increase in social change of rising aspirations among urban residents, there has been corresponding increase in crime rate, armed robbery, cases of hired assassinations, motor accidents among others. People believe that by moving closer to God, they could be spared of these sources of disaster. Others believe that by moving closer to God, their welfare and success in life could be ensured.

**Islam:** The rural Muslims belong to many denominations which have small buildings utilised as mosques. There special occasions are the birth day of Prophet Mohammed and the end of the annual fasting. While Christians pray in the churches on Sundays, Muslims pray in central mosques on Fridays. In addition, Christians pray in the morning and evening daily. Such occasions do not attract many Christians. On the other hand, Muslims are supposed to pray five times daily. Devoted Muslims obey this regularly. Both Christians and Muslims sometimes accompany their prayers with fasting when they have special request to make to God. The Muslims in rural areas often go to the urban areas to celebrate special religious festivals. Among Moslem devotees, particularly the Hausa and Fulani ethnic groups, the prayer period is so strictly observed that even when they have to pray during a journey they stop their vehicles by the road side and pray. The proportion of Muslims in the northern part of Nigeria is greater than that of Christians.

**The Traditional Religion**: This religion is observed mainly in the rural areas of Nigeria. The rural inhabitants of the various states in Nigeria still place much premium on the continued worship of traditional religions. Some of those who claim to be Christians and Muslims still have traditional gods in their rooms which had been passed to them from their ancestors to be worshipped. Among the Yoruba of south western Nigeria, many of the traditional gods are heroes and heroines who have become deified. Good examples are Sango, the god of thunder, Ogun, the god of Iron, Iyemoja, the goddess of water and Ifa, the god of divination.

There are traditional gods which represent the spirits of the deceased ancestors. Examples of these are Egungun, the masquerade, Oro, the god of vibrating sounds, Igunnu, the lofty rotating god. The lofty rotating god actually originated from Nupe ethnic group of Niger State. The annual festival for these gods provide occasions for pomp and pageantry among their adherents. Some even worship Yam during festivals so as to obtain a good harvest. With increase in formal education, the influence of the traditional gods on the people has waned. This is due to the fact that many educated children of the adherents are no more willing to worship such gods. Some that are not well committed worshippers have adopted either Christianity or Islam. Some reasons responsible for this change in traditional attitude include:

1. The missionaries paired introduction of western education with Christianity. Christians are thus seen as embracing western education rather than believers in traditional religions. In addition, the schools attended by many youths taught them Christian religious worship or Islam. No traditional religion is taught in these schools. Many students thus graduate to imbibe the religious beliefs they are taught at school.

2. The method of worshipping traditional gods is unhygienic as it involves the use of things like palm oil, blood of livestock, and food items which are exposed to flies and ants. Educated people are not willing to go through such processes.

3. Many of those who worship traditional gods are old and illiterate. Many of those who are young and still worship them are illiterates. The upcoming literate generations of the society thus mostly accept either Christianity or Islam.

4. It has become fashionable to be a Christian in the south and a Muslim in the north. On the other hand, it has become “primitive” to espouse traditional religious beliefs in the country. Young literate people are therefore willing to accept fashionable religions rather than the outmoded traditional gods.

**Functions of Religion**

Religion fulfils certain universal functions which include:

1. The explanation of the unknown and irregular physical occurrences e.g flood, earthquakes, drought, lightening, etc.

2. The justification of human existence by stating the nature and role of man in terms of super-natural design.

3. Promotion of group solidarity as religion is a cultural possession.

4. The celebration of human achievement. That is, most rituals are connected with some crucial periods in the society. Examples are puberty, planting of crops, harvest, etc.

5. Strengthening of moral order and promotion of social control.

6. Support for other social organisations and institutions, e.g schools, hospital, welfare agencies, etc.

7. The rationalisation of individual suffering in the material world thereby making such suffering bearable