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**SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT: EXPLORING THE RELEVANCE OF RELIGION IN THE PURSUIT OF SOCIAL INCLUSION IN NIGERIA**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Although Nigeria ranks high in religious activities, yet its human development indices remain low. This paper reviews the concepts of social institutions and human development, and specifically tries to situate the relevance of religion in the pursuit of the objectives of social inclusion, peace and shared prosperity in contemporary societies. Although the paper looks at religion as a social institution, it specifically considers the Christian religion and investigates the extent to which it has initiated or can initiate projects that will foster social inclusion in Nigeria. The primary objective of this paper is to establish a basic connection between religion as a social institution, and its role as a vehicle for social inclusion and prosperity. The paper reviewed relevant literature to establish the functions of religion and its potential as a veritable tool for social transformation. It also highlighted the historical activities of some Christian denominations in Nigeria with a view to establishing how relevant they have been in promoting human development. The paper concludes that religion has demonstrated that it has social relevance and can serve as a tool for promoting social inclusion in Nigeria. In a time when religion has been implicated in many conflicts around the world – the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria, the ISIS insurgency in Syria, and even the recent attacks and displacement of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, this topic deserves critical research attention. It is also hoped that other researchers may be inspired to investigate how other religions have or can promote social inclusion, peace and prosperity in Nigeria.*

**KEYWORDS:** Social Institution, Christian Religion, Human Development, Social Inclusion, Social Exclusion

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## **INTRODUCTION**

From a functional perspective social institutions (SIs) regulate the social space, ensuring that there is relative stability and security. Without these institutions, modern societies will be chaotic, dysfunctional, and devoid of social harmony. In other words, society will be socially unbearable without the structures of organisation that SIs provide.

Social Institutions are agencies of socialisation that help achieve the common objectives of human societies. Their primary function is to promote social integration and inclusion. Yet, in what is an apparent paradox in today's modern society, social institutions, in some instances are believed to be functioning in ways that exclude large populations from being part of a shared prosperity. It can be argued that SIs formulate social codes and frameworks that guide behaviour in societies. But many times, these codes/frameworks become obstacles to equal opportunities for many individuals and groups, including women and children.

As a social institution, religion is integral in the building of the moral fabric and ethics of society. In many ways religion mediates how individuals in the society experience other SIs.

Religion as a social institution plays a key role in the development of contexts of meaning, value orientations, symbolic codes and the concept of right or wrong. It is one of the few common grounds between the rich and the poor in Nigeria. Thus, the proliferation of religious organisations and the wide spread practice of religion in Nigeria should have a positive impact on social integration.

At this point, it will be pertinent to note that the term *religion* in this paper, will refer specifically to the Christian religion. The paper will examine the activities of some Christian denominations to see how they have promoted social inclusion in Nigeria. This is particularly relevant because in recent years there has been a significant proliferation in the number of Christian denominations in Nigeria. So, this paper will attempt to determine whether churches are contributing significantly to social integration in Nigeria.

The World Bank Africa Poverty Report by Beegle, Christiaensen, Dabalén, & Gaddis (2016, p.4) suggests that large segments of Africa's population (over 380 million people, especially rural populations) live in extreme poverty and despair. The latest estimates from the report suggest that as at 2012, up to 43% of Africa's population live in extreme poverty. Going by household surveys conducted by the World Bank using the international purchasing power parity (PPP), these are people living on less than \$1.90 a day (p.4). This makes many African countries rank quite low in the human opportunity index (HOI) of the World Bank – a situation which drives migration to urban areas in an attempt by rural dwellers to escape rural poverty, deprivation and the general lack of social infrastructure.

Yet, there is still a sizable number of people who live in urban poverty in Africa. As a matter of fact, the gap between the excluded and the included is more apparent in cities. In the cities, there seems to be opulence and ostentation on the one hand; and poverty, lack and deprivation on the other. As an African country, Nigeria shares in this problem of poverty, deprivation, inequality, and social exclusion. The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2017), using the per capita approach, reported that in 2009/2010 about 62.6% of Nigerians were living in poverty (living on less than \$2/day), dropping slightly from 64.2% in 2003/2004. Today, it is reported that the figure rose to 67.1% at the end of 2016. If such large segments of the population live in poverty, then promoting dialogues and other initiatives that will address poverty and social inclusion becomes relevant.

Against the background of poverty and lack in Nigeria, religion has become a source of succor for the poor, the deprived as well as those excluded and discriminated against. The paper thus reviews the historical activities of some Christian denominations in Nigeria to highlight how religion can be used as a tool for social development.

### **Framing the Concept of Human Development**

In 1990 the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) published the first Human Development Report (HDR) with a simple notion which stated that human development is about expanding the frontiers of choices people have in the society which they live in as they pursue the goal of leading a good life. In effect, the UNDP report was a major attempt at framing the concept of human development to go beyond the brick and mortar of physical infrastructure and the figures of economic statistics. According to the UNDP, the primary goal of human development is shared prosperity for all people, and the improvement of the human condition across the world. Since then, every year the programme identifies specific

issues that bother on the human condition and mobilises resources through international events to sensitise national governments to address the topical issue of the year.

Also, in March 1995, the World Summit on Social Development, held in Copenhagen, established the notions of social integration and the creation of an inclusive society as one of the key goals of social development. The Copenhagen Declaration and Programme of Action, a key outcome of that Summit, pledged to make the eradication of poverty, full employment and social integration overriding objectives of development. During that summit, member states made a commitment to promote social integration by fostering inclusive societies that are stable, safe, just, tolerant and respect diversity, promote equal opportunity and participation of all people, including disadvantaged and vulnerable groups and persons (UN-DESA, 2009, p.4)

In summary, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN-DESA) summit report and UNDP's HDR provide an alternative concept of development that is beyond GDP and GNP figures. They provide insight into the human condition. Some of the issues addressed so far include: quality of education in schools, health and wellbeing, lifestyle and longevity, urban planning and development, tree planting and protection of the environment, access to sanitation and clean water, access to energy, access to employment opportunities, reduction in poverty levels, reduction in social insecurity and vulnerability, reduction in conflicts, instability and people displacements, reduction in discrimination and inequalities, reduction in infant mortality, accelerating gender equality and women empowerment, etc. These themes seek to promote social inclusion and shared prosperity. Given the nature of human society, most of these issues are embedded in the workings of the social institutions of society.

### **Social Exclusion and Inclusion as Hallmarks of Human Development.**

In 2013, the World Bank Group announced two ambitious goals - ending extreme poverty and promoting shared prosperity. In furtherance of these goals, the World Bank noted that promoting the creation of inclusive societies across the world was the only sustainable path to ending extreme poverty and promoting shared prosperity for peoples of the world. Such shared prosperity would go beyond economic empowerment to also include social empowerment. According to the World Bank, an inclusive society should have in place, institutional frameworks and processes that empower local communities and peoples and enable them to hold their governments accountable. An inclusive society should make room for marginalized groups – ethnic minorities, religious minorities, indigenous populations, and other such groups, in the decision-making processes. (World Bank, 2013(b), p. 33)

In literature, social inclusion seems to be defined in relation to social exclusion. Some analysts have argued that both inclusion and exclusion are inseparable sides of the same coin and thus, christened the relationship as the *dialectics of inclusion/exclusion*. Therborn (2007) as cited in (UN-DESA, 2009, p.21), argues that “inclusion usually means that something is inner of a boundary with the outer side being exclusion. In other words, inclusion is only possible by the existence of a boundary between those who are included and excluded. Being a member of something means there is a boundary between the members and the non-members. If this is the case, then efforts towards social inclusion should be to lower these boundaries, or make boundaries more permeable (Labonte, 2004). So, understandably, the concept of social inclusion is often expressed in the negative context of the desire to eliminate the existence of poverty, deprivation and other inequalities that exclude large

populations. It is also expressed in terms of the institutional efforts to address such inequalities, and to re-integrate affected people groups into the society by creating conditions which enable them fully and actively participate in all aspects of life in the society.

Generally, social inclusion aims at getting people to have a voice in decisions which affect their lives. It tries to ensure that people enjoy equal access to markets, products and services as well as political, social and physical spaces. Social inclusion aims to empower poor and marginalized people to take advantage of burgeoning global opportunities to promote shared prosperity. But more than just empowering the individuals, it also seeks to provide them with the opportunities to improve their living conditions and to prosper (World Bank, 2013(b)). The inverse scenario will constitute social exclusion and unshared (exclusive) prosperity which is conceptualized below:

### **Social Exclusion**

Social exclusion is a multi-dimensional phenomenon covering a remarkably wide range of social and economic problems which affect various aspects of human life (Aasland and Flotten, 2000; Sen, 2000; Young, 2001; Geddes and Benington, 2001 as cited in O'Reilly, 2005, p. 81). In many cases these dimensions seem to be interrelated and reinforce each other. Groups may be excluded in more than one sphere of activity and at different levels because individuals have multiple identities and touch points with society. These identities and touch points can be based on gender, occupation, caste, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, disability status, or citizenship (World Bank, 2013(a), p.67).

This overlapping nature of human identity is essentially why social exclusion is a condition that affects large populations, especially in Africa, and other less developed parts of the world. The United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs report (UN-DESA, 2009, p. 3) argues that social exclusion can be understood to be the existence of barriers and processes that impede social inclusion. This view of social exclusion suggests a social situation in which certain conditions exist. In other words, it is not a 'process', but a situation or condition. But Rawal (2008, p.161) suggests that it is important to keep in mind that the concept lacks universality in definition and meaning. He argues that while the concept essentially helps the discourse about disadvantaged and underprivileged people groups, it is 'evocative, ambiguous, multidimensional and elastic, and as such can be defined in many ways'. However, Aasland and Flotten (2000) argue that the concept of social exclusion is no more ambiguous than the concept of poverty or any other social phenomenon or concept.

"Social exclusion can be defined as the experience of social, cultural and economic inequalities. It is a situation whereby certain individuals, groups or communities are pushed to the borderlines of society and cannot participate fully because of poverty, inadequate education or underdeveloped life-skills. As a result, some individuals or groups may be excluded from some, but not necessarily all, aspects of daily living which are considered normal for most of society" (The Cavan Local Authority, 2009, pp.8-9).

In the UNDP Ghana HDR (2007, p.12), "social exclusion refers to limited/inequitable opportunities and capabilities to participate in decision making, gain access to meaningful livelihood opportunities and social services due to discriminatory institutional practices in the political, economic, social spheres based on gender, ethnicity, geographical location, age, income status, health status, educational attainment, and disability". Peace (2001), sees social exclusion as processes within the labour market, the social and welfare system, by which

individuals, households, communities or even whole social groups are pushed towards or kept to the margins of society. According to Peace, it encompasses not only material deprivation but also more broadly the denial of opportunities to participate fully in social and civil life.

The Cavan Local Authority (2009, p.9) among other writings note that people can be excluded from any of the following systems among others:

1. Production and economic systems; which means that they are unable to access employment and business opportunities;
2. Consumption systems; which means they are unable to afford or access certain goods and services;
3. Social systems and networks; which means they are unable to gain access to certain social, sporting or cultural organizations and spaces, and/or systems/level of social interaction. They are unable to marry certain individuals in the society;
4. Political systems and decision making; which means they are without power to change personal or wider circumstances within the society;
5. Educational systems; which mean they are unable to access basic education or certain level/quality of education that will enable them to compete better in the society.

In extant literature, the factors that may promote social exclusion in any society have been identified to include the following, among others: a) poverty/chronic lack of financial resources; b) discrimination based on race/ethnicity, color of skin, speech accent, sexual orientation, health status, physical disability, etc.; c) lack of social infrastructure such as transportation, healthcare, power, water, schools, etc., which creates physical barriers to access goods and services in certain geographic areas/communities; d) underdeveloped social skills that inhibit people from having the confidence to participate in society and access what it offers; e) religious and cultural beliefs that prejudice people in ways that affect their choices and ability to take advantage of opportunities, and to access goods and services; f) family, racial and ethnic backgrounds that affect the individuals' ability to access social goods; g) lack of education, training and relevant skills/qualifications which may be needed to effectively engage with the society (UNDP Ghana HDR, 2007; World Bank, 2013a). All these factors are matters of human development that re-emphasize the multidimensional nature of the social inclusion/exclusion dialectic. Having put social exclusion in perspective, let us now explore our main concern which is the inverse concept of social inclusion.

### **Social Inclusion**

The concept of social inclusion gained initial prominence in the social policy discourse in Europe and has since replaced the concept of poverty, because it covers more dimensions of people's lives than the poverty concept (Aasland & Flotten, 2000). Rene Lenoir, French Secretary for Social Affairs in the Jacques Chirac led Government of France, in his 1974 publication, is credited with popularizing the concept of social exclusion. But the World Bank, more than any other global institution, has consistently canvassed the issue of social inclusion as part of its agenda for global poverty eradication and for building the foundation for what it calls "shared prosperity for all people". The World Bank's focus on social inclusion began with the observation that within countries, investments made towards

development of the economy and the people of a country produced unequal benefits. Certain groups with distinguishing characteristics consistently failed to benefit from a nation's socio-economic progress.

According to Bouma (2016, p.1) 'social inclusion refers to the processes, structures and policies instituted by a society to promote the degree of social cohesion required to be sufficiently productive to achieve sustainability.' The term social inclusion, essentially, refers to both the 'outcome' and 'process' of improving the terms on which individuals and groups take part in society. It ensures that people have a voice in decisions which affect their lives, and that they enjoy equal access to markets, services, and political, social and physical spaces. Thus, the UN-DESA (2009) notes that an inclusive society is one in which all members, regardless of their backgrounds, are able and motivated to participate in civic, social, economic and political activities. This is based on the fundamental principle that "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights as contained in the International Bill of Human Rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience, and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood." This implies that legal, regulatory and policy frameworks must be inclusive, and uphold and promote just and inclusive processes in all areas of implementation, so that equal access to basic education, public space, facilities and information are ensured, and diversity and cultural pluralism are respected and accommodated.

The World Summit for Social Development (Copenhagen 1995) defined an inclusive society as a "society for all in which every individual, each with rights and responsibilities, has an active role to play". Such society must be based on respect for all human rights and fundamental freedoms, cultural and religious diversity, social justice, and the special needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, democratic participation and the rule of law, among others. Such society promotes social policies that seek to reduce inequality and create flexible and tolerant societies that embrace all people.

According to the World Bank Report (2013b), some of these disadvantaged groups include; indigenous people, new immigrants, people with disabilities, people with different skin tones, people who spoke the official language imperfectly, etc. These are mostly people identified by stigmas, stereotypes, superstitions, and generally discriminated against. In their daily routine activities, they encounter unique barriers that keep them from fully participating in their country's political and economic life. In a nut shell, they are excluded population groups. However, Jackson, (1999) has argued, that exclusion and inclusion can occur simultaneously and concurrently in the life of an individual or group. In other words, it is possible for individuals and groups to be excluded in one domain and included in another.

Hence, the World Bank notes that, poverty alone is not the all determining factor that drives deprivation and social exclusion. Rather, race, ethnicity, gender, religion, place of residence, disability status, age, HIV/AIDS status, sexual orientation and other stigmatized markers, confer disadvantages that exclude people from a range of processes and opportunities in the society. This reality makes the twin phenomena of social inclusion and exclusion quite problematic, and thus situating them as human development concerns.

Against this background, the World Bank (2013b, p, 50), provides a twofold definition of the term social inclusion. On one hand, it defines social inclusion as "the process of improving the terms for individuals and groups to take part in society." On the other hand, it also defines the concept as "the process of improving the ability, opportunity, and dignity of people,

disadvantaged on the basis of their identity, to take part in society”. Thus, it defines it from the negative sense of addressing exclusion as well as the positive sense of promoting inclusion. Against this background, Labonte (2004) posed the rhetorical question, should it be a matter of “adapting people to the needs of the market or regulating the market to the needs of people?” This question remains to be conclusively answered.

In summary, social inclusion as a concept describes positive actions and initiatives undertaken: a) to enhance equal access to goods and services in a society/country, b) to assist the individuals within a society to participate and engage with the community and society, c) to encourage the contribution by all persons in a society to the social and cultural life of that society, and d) for every person in that society to be aware of, and to challenge all forms of discrimination. The objective of social inclusion initiatives is to ensure that marginalised groups and those living in poverty and deprivation have greater participation in society, and that policy actions or initiatives are put in place and enforced to enable individuals to improve their standard of living and overall well-being. By implication, social institutions have relevance in the promotion of social inclusion and in the removal of exclusion barriers.

### **What are Social Institutions?**

Several scholars (Horton and Hunt, 1984; Eisenstadt, 1968; Verwiebe, 2014; etc.) have given various definitions of social institutions (SIs) but a core line of thought is present in practically all definitions of SIs – they bring order and organization to society by creating and maintaining societal norms. SIs are the underlying social systems and frameworks set up to structure and pattern human social existence and relationships within society. In other words, SIs provide ordered frameworks that link the individual within a society to the larger culture. They are necessary to give meaning to social life and are important structural components of modern societies that organise specific functional areas of life. They are geared towards promoting inclusion and egalitarianism (relative equality especially with respect to social, political and economic affairs), among other objectives of the society.

These institutions which regulate the behaviour of individuals in core areas of the society include: 1) the family and relationship networks which carry out reproduction and socialization; 2) institutions in the realm of education and training which ensure the transmission and cultivation of knowledge, abilities and specialized skills; 3) institutions in the labour-market and economy which provide for the production and distribution of goods and services; 4) institutions in the realm of law, governance and politics which provide for the maintenance of the social order; 5) cultural, media and religious institutions which further the development of contexts of meaning, value orientations and symbolic codes. This is the core argument of the functional school of thought. However, whether SIs are effectively able to play this role and achieve these societal objectives is a different matter.

Critical theorists (Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, etc. of the Frankfurt School) have argued that social institutions do not perform equally well for all members of society because some are disadvantaged by the way social institutions function. In their view, social institutions are a source of conflict and inequality in modern society. For example, women and other disadvantaged groups in society are structurally excluded from certain benefits and opportunities. In such instances, SIs promote and sustain societal inequalities – ethnic, racial, gender, etc. They posit that because of the very structures created by social institutions, certain groups, especially minorities, are less equal than others.

Critical theorists maintain that social institutions are instruments for the realisation and exercise of power and hegemony – social stratification, ethnic/religious hegemony, etc, and that SIs can function in ways that conflict with the interests and desires of the individual. In constituting the family, for example, some societies prescribe and enforce only monogamy, whereas some people desire polygamy. Also, some societies do not accommodate same sex marriage whereas some people desire it. Furthermore, some people would rather cohabit instead of getting married but most societies insist on marriage as the approved structure for marital/family relationship.

Critical theorists also posit that social institutions are instruments for economic exploitation and basically serve to legitimize and maintain prevailing power structures and relations - capitalism, communism, political and financial systems, and all such structures that may constrain the individual's rights. Those who do not conform to societal dictates may be discriminated against and excluded from fully participating. In other words, they promote social exclusion. This implies that social exclusion is often embedded in the working structures of social institutions, and this seems to lay credence to the views of the Critical theorists.

In summary, there are two broad views about social institutions – the critical and the functional. The critical perspective essentially argues that SIs promote inequality and social exclusion, whereas the functional perspective holds that they promote cohesion and inclusion. This study will specifically review religion as a social institution, and attempt to establish its possible relevance in the promotion of social inclusion and shared prosperity in Nigeria.

### **Religion as a Social Institution**

Religion simply refers to matters of faith and belief systems, and is a creation and an attempt by man to cope with the harsh and uncertain circumstances of life. As a social institution, religion is an important and essential element of the human experience. It attempts to provide explanations for unexplained phenomena and to supply a means for understanding the seen and unseen world. Religion is as old as humanity, but transcends human existence. The practice of religion can be found in virtually every human society. This qualifies religion as a *cultural universal* and a social institution. Religion serves as an instrument of socialization and tends to support the normative structure of the society, including existing class structures.

Studies in American social science literature (Ebaugh&Chafetz, 2000:74; Min, 2001; Portes&Rumbaut, 2006:301, 329) as cited in Foner & Alba (2008, p. 362), indicate that religion promotes social inclusion for immigrants coming into the US. According to the studies, religion offers opportunities for fellowship and friendship to people of different social categories and classes, who ordinarily would not have anything to do with each other. It provides networking platforms that promote inclusion, especially, for immigrant populations in the US. Furthermore, these studies indicate that religion offers a source of solace and refuge to those who are going through stress, setbacks and difficulties in life. This is especially so for immigrants who suffer the emotional stress and difficulties that can come with relocation and dislocation from ancestral family and friends. In many such circumstances, religious group membership provides platforms for social, emotional and spiritual support that help people go through circumstances of life.

Finally, the studies also found out that religion helps to reinforce human dignity and respect at times when individuals (especially immigrants) suffer racial or ethnic discrimination.



Religious groups provide the needed emotional and psychological reassurance that helps restore dignity. Religious organisations provide alternative platforms for leadership and service, especially, to those who feel denied of social recognition in the larger society. These opportunities of leadership and service bring dignity, respect and meaning to life.

Lotter (2001) as cited by Egan (2014) highlights extreme poverty and deprivation as one of the greatest challenges facing humanity today and notes that poverty means people have insufficient means to access basic needs or lack the resources to fully participate in social activity. He goes on to argue that communities are morally obligated to fight poverty and deprivation in recognition of the humanity of the poor. Religion provides one of such community platforms that can be used to effectively fight poverty. But social researchers are now beginning to understand that there is a relationship between religion, poverty and wealth (Keister, 2011). Essentially, religion provides a source of consolation to those in despair and without hope. Thus, religion thrives in situations where people feel helpless in the face of social deprivation and economic dislocations.

Although religion is not the sole factor affecting poverty and wealth creation, religion has emerged as an important part of the process of wealth generation or a lack of it. Keister (2011) argues that there are two broad reasons for this. First, religion affects wealth indirectly through its strong influence on important processes such as individual drive for educational attainment, decisions about marriage, contraception and how many children to have, women's decisions to work or stay at home to raise the children, etc. He suggests that religion affects these behaviors and processes, which in turn impact household income, expenses, savings and investment. In other words, religion, through the teaching of certain creeds, doctrines and dogmas, affects individual worldviews that influence personal work ethic, productivity and predisposition to engage in certain economic activities. There is therefore, no doubt that religion (or a lack of it) mediates a person's general approach to life - his conception of the world, or that how one lives is molded by religious beliefs and values.

Second, religion has a direct effect on wealth and poverty because it influences intergenerational processes, social relations and orientations toward work and money. Intergenerational processes mean the transfer of both religious ideas and wealth from parents to children. Social relation refers to the social capital/networks enjoyed through membership of religious group which help provide information, capital and other resources for wealth creation. Against this background, social researchers are now learning that religion (or a lack of it) can shape financial outcomes in surprising ways as much as it affects other life outcomes.

Religion is about strongly held beliefs and values, essentially conservative and may in fact retard social change. Most religions have rigidly defined structures, systems and practices, and are like two-edged swords which can either promote or retard social change. It is usually difficult to change opinions, behaviour and lifestyle that are built on religious creeds. If a religious creed endorses a certain type of behaviour that promotes exclusion, then it might be difficult to introduce social change in that regard. In some circumstances, however, religion drives social change. There are many instances where religion has been at the fore of calls for stopping some harmful traditional practices in many cultures across the world. For instance, in many parts of South-east Nigeria, the obnoxious practice and belief system of killing twins was successfully stopped through the activities of some early European Christian missionaries. The efforts of Mary Slessor, a Scottish Christian missionary, in this regard, is well recorded in history.

There is also evidence from many cultures and societies that religion does not always bring positive influence on society. Religion may encourage discrimination, exclusion and conflict in society. In most religions, there are rites of admission and sacraments which essentially discriminate, even within members of such religions. There are observances, doctrines and beliefs that forbid people from participating in certain aspects of society. For example, certain religions forbid children of members from being vaccinated against killer diseases or from having blood transfusion, which are aspects of medical services available to the public. Also, some religions forbid their members from marrying persons of other religions. As a matter of fact, some religions impose a death sentence on those (especially women) who leave the faith to marry persons of other religions. Such attitudes clearly promote social exclusion and highlight the capacity of religious intolerance to instigate conflict in society.

Religious intolerance is without doubt a breeding ground for extremism and exclusion. This has led many commentators to call for the separation of religion and the state as a necessary step toward achieving world peace and prosperity. The activities of organisations like Boko Haram, al Qaeda, ISIS, the Lord's Resistance Army, etc., which claim religion as the basis for their ideology and agenda, all point to how religion has been used to encourage intolerance and promote conflict in the world today. Nevertheless, religion as a social institution continues to play an important role in society.

### **The Relevance of Religion in the Pursuit of Social inclusion in Nigeria.**

Having established an understanding of the key terms, this paper will now examine the role and function of religion in promoting social inclusion and human development in Nigeria. Historical facts show that religion was a major part of Nigeria's colonial experience. During the period of British colonialism, Christian religious organisations and missions provided social amenities to placate the local people. They educated the people and encouraged the discontinuation of harmful traditional practices and certain forms of discrimination practiced in the traditional societies.

Even today, Christian denominations in Nigeria continue to demonstrate, through various initiatives, that religion can play a significant role in the fight against poverty and deprivation within the community. They have built healthcare centres, schools, vocational skills training centres, and provided other forms of social support to bring succour to the poor and deprived. Given the proliferation of churches and other religious organisations in Nigeria, it will be worthwhile to rethink the role religion can play in the realization of the global idea of sustainable human development.

Conversely, religion can also be a source of conservatism that perpetuate oppressive cultures and institutions. It is quite common to observe that the practice of exclusive beliefs and doctrines by religious faithful can alienate non-believers and promote social exclusion. Fortunately, most religions preach the message of peace, justice, human solidarity, self-restriction and moderation. These are important virtues and principles that can promote shared prosperity, restrain greed and corruption, and lead to a better society. Religious leaders are in a pole position to influence how people in society conduct themselves, interact and relate with others. The unique opportunity of weekly interaction with congregants provides to the Church a useful platform to change mind-sets and attitudes.

As the central focus of this paper, it is important to note that the Christian religion primarily encourages members to shun social exclusion. On the contrary, they are expected to promote

social inclusion and shared prosperity as implied in messages of love for God and for other humans. Based on its central message of love, Christianity can be used as platform to carry out a coordinated campaign for moral rebirth and social change in Nigeria. Given the impact official corruption has had in the provision of social infrastructure in Nigeria, the Church may present a viable pathway to discourage greed and official corruption in public service. Its teachings can be used to change corrupt mind-sets and lead to better public governance that is committed to the provision of badly needed social infrastructure that promote inclusion.

In countries like Nigeria where the quality of public education infrastructure has suffered continuous neglect, religious organisation, with the resources at their disposal, can provide alternative and complimentary platforms to bring education to the less privileged. The ability to participate in the economic, social and political life in today's knowledge-driven societies is near impossible without being literate and educated. Literacy empowers people with the ability to think critically and to make better choices in life. Critical thinking enables people make choices that are important for healthy living and disease prevention, family planning, financial planning and poverty reduction, better education for children, etc. Thus, literacy and access to basic education are now within human rights. According to the United Nations, education is a right to which all human beings are entitled. This recognition of education as a right is contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) document. This is because literacy plays an important role in promoting social inclusion and other aspects of human development.

Religious organisations can promote social inclusion by providing platform to educate poor, deprived and discriminated groups. The early Christian missionaries that came to Nigeria demonstrated this as they brought with them, education and capacity building initiatives to the indigenous people. Many Christian denominations like the Catholic Church, the Anglican and the Methodist set up schools in Nigeria. Prominent among these schools are, St. Gregory's College, Lagos, established in 1928, Christ the King College, Onitsha, established in 1933 and St Finbarr's College, Lagos, established in 1956. All these schools were set up by the Catholic Church. But the Catholic Church was not alone in this because the Methodist Church mission set up Igbobi College, Lagos in 1932.

With better education, people stand a better chance at participating in society. Therefore, these initiatives in secondary education, provided many indigenous people access to education even when the colonial government did very little to educate the population. Today, such efforts are being replicated by some Christian denominations like the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Deeper Life Bible Church, among other Churches in Nigeria. These Christian religious organisations have set up schools and donated infrastructural materials to augment government efforts. For example, the Deeper Life Church has built many secondary schools (Deeper Life High Schools) in many cities in Nigeria.

Also, as listed in its website, the following are some of the projects already executed and completed by a Christian denomination based in Lagos – Daystar Christian Center, in the area of education: 1) renovation of five schools damaged by the 2001 bomb blast in the Ikeja Military Cantonment; 2) distribution of free exercise books to some public schools in Lagos; 3) donation of science equipment, chairs and desks to some public schools in Lagos; 4) building of laboratory, toilet facilities and school hall for Oregon Secondary School, Lagos; 5) donation of Ultra-modern toilet facility to Ajao Estate Junior High School, Lagos; 6) renovation of the Brighter Future School for the Deaf (<https://daystarng.org/>).

It is however ironic and important to note that some of the schools set up by some Christian churches not mentioned in this paper, are as expensive (if not more) as the private schools set up purely for profit making. Some have argued that this ought not to be so. But it is not within the purview of this paper to interrogate the ethical issues in the running of these schools. Rather, the objective is to examine their relevance in providing platforms that develop human capacity and improve choices in society.

In health care, Christian denominations have embarked on social inclusion initiatives to help rural populations in Nigeria. Many of the Christian missionary hospitals and healthcare initiatives in Nigeria have an umbrella body known as Christian Health Association of Nigeria (CHAN). In an article published online on May 13, 2015 ([www.nursingworldnigeria.com](http://www.nursingworldnigeria.com)), Omegoh (2015), highlighted how Christian hospitals help sustain Nigeria's healthcare sector. The article states that there are about 4,400 registered hospitals under CHAN, and goes on to provide details of some of the activities of Christian based hospitals in Nigeria.

Sacred Heart Hospital, Abeokuta, Ogun State, believed to be the oldest health facility in Nigeria was set up by the Catholic Church in 1895. This general hospital built and run by the Catholic Church of Nigeria caters for all peoples, especially the poor. It has also a special unit for chest related diseases like Tuberculosis, and operates eye and dental care clinics. It is also involved in the training of health care personnel - nurses and midwives and doctors who specialize in family medicine. It provides adequate practical learning experiences for doctors, pharmacists and laboratory technologists during internship. Ever since its establishment more than 100 years ago, this health facility has stood out as a beacon of hope to many, especially the poor. In the same philosophy of providing healthcare to the people, especially the poor, the Catholic Church also set up St. Joseph's Hospital, Asaba, Delta State in 1934.

Still in healthcare, the ECWA Hospital, Egbe, commonly referred to as Egbe Hospital, is in Egbe, Kogi State, Nigeria. This hospital was founded in 1952 by 'Serving in Missions' (SIM) missionaries. It was later transferred to ECWA (Evangelical Church Winning All), the Nigerian mission agency affiliated with SIM. Egbe Hospital is a rural teaching hospital serving a large population in Kogi State. The hospital currently has about 100 staff including medical, administrative and maintenance staff, as well as resident physicians who specialize in family medicine.

During one of CHAN's zonal conferences in 2015, CHAN members from its headquarters in Jos, Plateau State and others from its Zone D, comprising Delta, Edo, Lagos, Ogun Oyo, Osun, Ondo and Ekiti states, converged at Sacred Heart Hospital in Lantoro, Ogun State, to examine how hundreds of hospitals in their care had fared in the past months. In its presentation at the conference, St Joseph's Hospital Asaba, Delta State, disclosed that in 2014, the hospital recorded 24,228 patients in the Out-Patient Department (OPD), admitted 1,501 patients, handled 8,030 old cases and recorded only three deaths. Also, the hospitals screened 2,298 patients for HIV AIDS.

Faith Mediplex Hospital, Benin city reported that the hospital has expanded to Abuja and Uyo, and presently has 218 beds, 26 doctors, 108 nurses and 4 laboratory scientists. The hospital provides accident and emergency services, pediatrics and neonatology, dentistry, dermatology, ear, nose and throat, ophthalmology, orthopedics, HIV/AIDS relief, mortuary and ambulance services.

It was also disclosed at the conference that the records of CHAN member hospitals in the Ogun State showed that 728,098 people accessed mission hospitals in the state in 2015, out of a total population of three million people. It, therefore, means that CHAN member hospitals attended to almost 30 per cent of the state population. Furthermore, it was reported that the mission hospitals screened 735,000 primary and secondary school students for various eye diseases, and provided other medical services to the less privileged in 2015. Of these numbers, the Sacred Heart Hospital attended to 66,633 patients, took 2,830 deliveries and performed 1,629 surgeries ([www.nursingworldnigeria.com](http://www.nursingworldnigeria.com).)

The God Bless Nigeria Church, another Christian denomination based in Lagos, has also listed some of its activities in the mental health and drugs/substance abuse segment of the healthcare sector. According to their website, they have initiatives aimed at rehabilitating the destitute, hopeless, drug addicted, prostitutes, social miscreants and street urchins (<http://www.godblessnigeriachurch.org/>). Their cardinal mission is to transform the individuals who found themselves in these situations and prepare them to reintegrate and positively engage with mainstream society. The God Bless Nigeria Church has outreach centres in key neighbourhoods in Lagos – Ajegunle, Mushin, Yaba, Ijora, Lagos Island and Surulere, where they provide these individuals with temporary accommodation and enrol them for vocational training as they get them ready for reintegration. Areas of vocational training include driving, fashion design and garment making, soap making, leatherworks, computer appreciation etc.

By these initiatives many who could have been excluded from modern health facilities are able to access health care. Without a doubt, the impact that these Christian mission based health care centers have on the population cannot be discounted. Given the pervasive poverty in Nigeria today, these opportunities are still there to be exploited in the pursuit of social inclusion. The poverty level, lack of provision of health and educational facilities to rural Nigeria, and the declining quality of public infrastructure in the educational and healthcare sectors of the nation provide opportunities for intervention by this important social institution.

Beyond undertaking social work to support deficits in public infrastructure, the Christian religion also provides a platform for moral and social re-orientation in a society like Nigeria. This is because of its messages are trusted and sometimes considered as sacrosanct by the faithful. Many times, religious congregations cut across different social categories and strata. The Christian religion accommodates individuals from different social classes. This multi-class population can be a useful platform for mass mobilisation and enlightenment in ways that promote social inclusion in the society.

Also, in the aspect of culture, there are many harmful traditional practices that target women, children and other minority groups in many cultures in Nigeria. A classic example of how religion can help stop some of these practices remain the role Mary Slessor, a Scottish missionary of the Christian religion, is believed to have played in stopping the killing of twins in Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Today, some harmful and obnoxious traditional practices include; female genital mutilation, wife inheritance, widowhood rites, women dis-inheritance, discrimination against the girl child or male child preference, child abuse and early/forced marriage, food taboos, social caste systems and other taboos against population groups. The Church remains a veritable platform to campaign against these practices that tend to exacerbate exclusion. The practices vary across Nigeria, but are common place in the rural areas where women, children and minority

groups are subjected to all forms of discrimination that lead to exclusion. Widows have been the worst victims, ranging from dis-inheritance to rites that violate their human rights and negatively affect their health and wellbeing, along with that of their children. Although some of these practices are perpetrated through religion, it is important to note that the Christian religion has been at the fore of the fight for the abolition of many harmful traditional practices.

Religion can also be used to initiate direct action against poverty, deprivation and social empowerment through other forms of social work and/or advocacy. Faith based agencies like the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), and their counter-part for men, YMCA, have over the years played a major role in this regard in Nigeria. The YMCA is known to have set up residential accommodation (hostels and apartments) in urban areas to accommodate struggling youth, at subsidised rates, until they find their feet. Through this seemingly simple initiative many who got jobs in urban areas such as Lagos have received assistance in terms of accommodation, thereby helping many to escape rural poverty and deprivation.

Beyond, residential accommodation, faith-based agencies affiliated to religious organisations can provide subsidised offices and entrepreneurial resource centres to incubate small time entrepreneurs/start-ups. Such entrepreneurial hubs with internet connections and other resources can provide internet access, digital libraries and other modern social resources to the poor and deprived. Some organisations affiliated with the Catholic Church of Nigeria (Opus Dei and its associate organisations) are currently providing such resource centres in Lagos. Many of such resource centres are also being provided by other Christian denominations as part of their contribution to social development.

## CONCLUSION

There is evidence that social institutions exist to regulate the behaviour of individuals in core areas of society. They are geared towards engendering relative equality and social harmony especially, with respect to socio-cultural, political and economic affairs. Religion as one of the social institutions of society has a key role to play in the realisation of some of these important objectives in human society. Specifically, the institution of religion addresses the spiritual needs in human society and is integral in the building of the moral fabric and ethics of society. It essentially mediates, in many ways, how individuals in the society experience the other social institutions. It also plays a key role in the development of contexts of meaning, value orientations, symbolic codes and the concept of right or wrong.

Nevertheless, as critical theorists have noted, social institutions, including religion do not treat all members of society equally too. The result is poverty, deprivation, discrimination and social exclusion. As has been established and documented in various human development reports, large population groups in Nigeria and many other countries of the world still wallow in extreme poverty and deprivation. Some have argued that social structures and institutions are directly responsible for these inequalities. This situation has led to many international conferences and meetings on how to eradicate some of these social problems with the UN and its agencies (UNDP, World Bank, UNESCO, UNICEF, UN-DESA, etc.) leading the effort at reducing illiteracy, discrimination, poverty and deprivation on one hand, and promoting social inclusion and shared prosperity on the other hand.

In historicizing the Christian religion in Nigeria, this paper presents facts which reveal how early Christian missions played a significant role in the provision of social infrastructure that aided the social and economic development of pre-independence Nigeria. Their efforts included public social infrastructure in the areas of education, healthcare and clean water supply. Specifically, the Catholic Church stands out among its peers in the Christian religion in terms of providing social infrastructure that better the lives of rural and urban populations in Nigeria. Its initiatives at augmenting government efforts in the provision of critical social infrastructure provides evidence that religion can contribute significantly in bridging the gaps in social infrastructure to augment government efforts at improving the human condition of the poor and excluded.

Religion can also contribute beyond the provision of physical infrastructure. With the level of religiosity that is relatively high among the populace in Nigeria, and given that many people take the word of the clergy as sacrosanct, religion can be used as a platform to promote public morality, peace and harmony. Also, with the high level of corruption in present day Nigeria, religion can be used as a platform for moral rearmament, mass mobilisation and re-orientation of the society. This will lead to better public governance and hopefully a reduction in poverty and deprivation. Also, religious leaders can become a voice for the voiceless by speaking up against oppression and official corruption in a manner that helps promote accountability, good governance and social inclusion in Nigeria.

Religious leaders can become a voice for the culturally oppressed by speaking up against oppressive and discriminatory cultural practices. Church leaders can be used to preach against cultural practices that essentially discriminate and exclude individuals and minority groups. These include discrimination based on circumstances of birth, race, ethnicity, gender, religion, place of residence, disability status, age, HIV/AIDS status, sexual orientation and other stigmatized markers, that foster social exclusion in the society. The Church as a social institution, and with its platform for weekly communication, can be used to re-orient members of the society against such practices that exclude population groups. In doing these, religion will to a large measure promote social inclusion in Nigeria.

It is important to note however, as Alkire (2006) argues, that religion is no panacea to development, but aspects of it can complement as well as motivate development, even though it can also obstruct and undermine it. Therefore, the aspects by which religion can influence development activities in different faiths and religions should however, be exploited. This paper highlights factual activities of Christian denominations in Nigeria which demonstrate the possible role religion can possibly play in social development.

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