

## CRITICAL RE-EXAMINATION OF SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES OF RELIGION

**Etim E. Okon**

Department of Religious and Cultural Studies,  
University of Calabar,  
NIGERIA.

[dretimokon55@gmail.com](mailto:dretimokon55@gmail.com)

### ABSTRACT

*The views of sociologists on the nature and social functions of religion do not show any evidence of consensus, but rather great disparity. There is a clear case of over-complication and over-intellectualization of religious phenomena. Even when there is a voluntary declaration of intention to observe agnostic neutrality and academic morality, many scholars are guilty of value judgment and subjective intrusion into the essence of religion. The question that is begging for answer is: if religion is a social institution with practitioners and specialists, is it reasonable to define religion apart, or away from the known practices of the votaries? When scholars in exercise of academic freedom say things, or propound a theory that have no bearing with religion in the practical sense, is it mandatory that such views be taken serious? These are some of the questions that this paper will attempt to answer. The paper examines the theories of religion by leading theorists in sociology of religion and came up with the conclusion that theory is different from practice. It is the opinion of this paper that some of the theories are outdated and do not deserve serious consideration in 21<sup>st</sup> century sociology. Religion as a social institution is dynamic, such that research findings of previous centuries, and epoch cannot remain valid forever. Social scientific study of religion is in dire need of contemporary theoretical analysis and that is the challenge before scholarship.*

**Keywords:** Theories of religion, functionalism, ideology, social change, social institution

### INTRODUCTION

While some people are of the opinion that humanity has outgrown religion because of scientific and technological advancement, religion has continued to defy all negative wishes. Dean Kelly (1972: 36) has observed that "Not only are some religious groups still thriving, but new ones are constantly coming into being, some of them quite unconventional and even bizarre in character. At the very moment when it begins to be accepted that religion is no longer needed and churches are expiring, new manifestations of religiousness appear where least expected".

The fact is that human beings are incurably religious. It is unthinkable to conceive a human society without religion. Kelly has said that the business of religion is to create meaning for individuals and society. "Religious meanings are described as ultimate meanings for several reasons: they refer to the last, most inclusive or most valued things, they come at the end of a succession of questions about the why of human existence..." (1972: 41).

It is not reasonable to pressurize anybody to accept a particular religion. Decision to accept, or follow any religion is a fundamental decision that is often taken at the appropriate time. If such decisions are not taken when things are normal, then it will be taken with every

seriousness, when there is a life-threatening experience. The fact remains that human beings cannot manage for too long without religion. If that is the social portrait and reality of religion, what guided Karl Marx to describe religion as a social anesthesia? Why did Emile Durkheim view religion as the deification of society? These are some of the puzzling questions that this paper will address from the perspective of social scientific study of religion.

## EMILE DURKHEIM ON RELIGION AND SOCIAL SOLIDARITY

One of the pre-eminent figures during the period of classical sociology in France was Emile Durkheim (1858-1917). Emile Durkheim was born into the family of a rabbi. His early childhood education was in Catholic schools. He grew up to be an atheist and an anti-cleric. Durkheim believed that scientific understanding of society was more preferred than religion. Like other theorists of religion, Durkheim believed that religion was a fundamental illusion of human society.

A pupil of Fustel de Coulange at the *Ecole Normale Superieuvre*, Durkheim occupied the chair of sociology at the Sorbonne for about twenty years. Within this period Durkheim edited a journal *Annee Sociologique* which attracted a large company of intellectual disciples. Durkheim was not only a sociologist, but a statesman. As a man of integrity and wisdom, Durkheim was influential in the formulation of government policies. His patriotic contributions to statecraft boosted his social and political image.

Durkheim was inspired by his teacher, the historian Fustel de Coulanges. In his book *La Cite Antique* (1864), translated into English by William Small as *The Ancient City*, Coulanges had contended that the foundations of the Greek and Roman cities were strictly and exclusively religious. Coulanges argued that religious influence was pervasive and comprehensive affecting the family, marriage, laws and political institutions: "A comparison of benefits and laws shows that a primitive religion constituted the Greek and Roman family, established marriage and paternal authority, fixed the order of relationship, and consecrated the right of property and the right of inheritance" (qtd. in Radcliffe-Brown 1952:162).

It was from Coulanges that Durkheim came to the proposition that social phenomena had a sacred or religious foundation. It was Durkheim's opinion that religious beliefs, in simple or complex form, presuppose a classification of human thought into two classes; the sacred and the profane. By sacred, Durkheim does not limit himself to gods or spirits, it covers natural and inanimate objects like rocks, trees or woods. In fact, anything can be sacred.

Religious rituals, according to Durkheim are expression of the unity of society and that its functions is to 're-create' the society by strengthening the sentiments on which the social solidarity depend. Religion is strong group feeling, which is absolutely necessary for the survival of society. Religion is eminently a collective thing. The gods are man-made symbols of society. Religion is a social fact. It represents something over and beyond individual minds and lives. Religion is thoroughly objective. John Lewis (Lewis 1969: 179) elucidates on the views of Durkheim on religion: "It is transmitted from one generation to another. It is something we grow up into and then pass on to our children. It is accepted and believed by all. In such a primitive community dissent is inconceivable. It is obligatory. To neglect the rites of religion is as impossible as rejecting the language that is spoken".

A greater part of Durkheim's intellectual career was spent in the study of religion, with a concentration on totemism among Australian aboriginal societies. In his *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, first published in 1912, Durkheim argued that totemism represented religion in its most "elementary" form, and that religion's origin is social. He

connected religion with the collective nature of society. People who live in society share similar feelings and sentiments which culminates into the formation of collective conscience. Bibby (2001: 119) explains the Durkheimian views: "When individuals have the feeling of being in the presence of a higher power, the experience is real. But what they actually are experiencing is the collective conscience.... In reality, Durkheim asserted, "God" is the group experiencing itself".

Durkheim made distinction between the sacred and the profane. Giddens, Duneier and Appelbaum (2003: 531-532) avers that in Durkheimian sociology of religion sacred objects and symbols are different from the routine utilitarian aspects of day-to-day existence- which is the realm of the profane. A totem which is an animal or plant with a particular symbolic significance, Durkheim argued, is a sacred object regarded with veneration and surrounded with ritual activities. Religious ceremonies and rituals, in Durkheim's view have the potential to keep society united.

In Durkheim's view, religious belief dictates the nature of the sacred and its symbolic value. Religious rites provide society with the *modus operandi* as to how people should react to the sacred. All human societies have the need to uphold and reaffirm their collective primordial sentiments and that is why in Durkheim's view, people come together to form a church. "The idea of religion is inseparable from that of the church, since it is an eminently collective thing" (qtd. in Bibby 2001: 119).

Apart from meeting the needs of individuals, religion creates, and reinforces social solidarity. Collective life is both the source and product of religion. Durkheim writes: "There can be no society which does not feel the need of upholding and reaffirming at regular intervals the collective sentiment and collective ideals which make its unity and its personality" (qtd. in Bocock and Thompson 1985:54). Durkheim (1965: 62) defined religion as: "...a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a church..."

Society expresses its shared identity and unity through religious ceremonies. Symbols and rituals are fundamental to Durkheim's analysis of the social functions of religion. Symbols such as the Christian cross provide a focus of emotion and belief. Rituals such as the Catholic mass unite people with a shared experience. For Durkheim what people are "worshipping" is society. Religion in Durkheimian postulate is society "deified".

Clan worship according to Durkheim awakens "within its members the idea that outside of them there exists forces which dominate them and at the same time sustain them..." (qtd. in O'Donnell 1992:400). Durkheim avers that group solidarity is a forum for the creation of moral consciousness. "Moral remaking cannot be achieved except by the means of reunions, assemblies and meetings where the individuals, being closely united to one another, reaffirm in common their common sentiments...." (qtd. in Bocock and Thompson 1985: 54, 55).

For Durkheim, God is another name for society. The supernatural world represents the secular world. Religious beliefs reflect social structure, while ritual practices symbolize social values and relationships. The function of religion is to integrate society, promote unity and maintain continuity. Durkheim recommended that for a society to be conscious of itself and also maintain its sentiments, it must periodically assemble itself together for a communal religious rites. Such gathering according to Durkheim will arouse excitement and obedience to social authority.

Religious rites produce ecstasy and feelings of solidarity. Durkheim sought for sacred objects of a totemic nature to serve as the symbol of communal unity. “Vital energies are over-excited; passions are active, sensations stronger; there are even some which are produced only at this moment. A man does not recognize himself; he feels himself transformed and consequently he transforms the environment which surrounds him” (qtd. in Lewis 1969: 179).

Durkheim's interpretation of religion as the collective consciousness of the society was a direct influence from the theory of functionalism. This is clearly affirmed by Giddens, Duneier and Appelbaum: “Durkheim's theory of religion is a good example of the functionalist tradition of thought in sociology. To analyze the function of a social behavior or social institutions like religion is to study the contribution it makes to the continuation of a group, community or society” (2003:531).

For Durkheim, there was nothing mysterious about religion. It is simply, a creation of the society. Durkheim posited that the most positive consequence of religion is the emergent of a moral community. Moral consciousness is created through the realization of social responsibilities. As individuals struggle to fulfill the transcendent ideals of the society, moral principles will be reinforced. Durkheim believed in the reality of religion. Religion, according to Durkheim (1965:60) is not a mere phantasy, or creation of imagination, but an indispensable social phenomenon necessary for the very existence of society. “This is because society cannot make its influence felt unless it is in action, and it is not in action unless the individuals who compose it are assembled together and act in common. It is by common action that it takes consciousness of itself and realize its position”.

In his assessment of Christianity, Durkheim observed that traditional Christianity was in a state of decline and that society was going through stages of negative transition and moral mediocrity (1965:475). Durkheim did not subscribe to the view that religion will die, or vanish from society, but that forms of religious expression might change with the passage of time. He predicted that social forces that give rise to religion will persist and that there will always be a place for religious expression in the social order.

Although the present writer is partially in agreement with Emile Durkheim, he sees Durkheim in error for elevating social or collective life above personal dimension. Durkheim's sociology has little or no regard for the value of individuals. Durkheim was also wrong in reducing a complex social phenomenon like religion to a simple transaction. Religion for Durkheim is nothing mysterious, but only society deified. That is unacceptable, too simplistic and vague. Durkheim's methodology was unscientific. The Australian aborigines which Durkheim selected for his case study did not provide sufficient data to merit the generalization which Durkheim made. All societies are not totemic. Durkheim's insistence that the sacred and the profane are not only separate, but also hostile and jealous rivals of each other, was merely a theoretical construct lacking practical application. At times, the sacred and the profane dovetails and intermingle. In his functional analysis of the creative dynamism of religion in the social order, Durkheim did not realize that some religions work against the common good of society.

## **KARL MARX ON RELIGION, IDEOLOGY AND INEQUALITY**

One of the greatest and most influential thinkers in the history of social thought was the German-Jew, Karl Marx. Born in Trier on 5<sup>th</sup> May, 1818, to a Jewish Lawyer, Heinrich (Heschel) Marx, Karl was only six years when the whole family became converted into German Protestantism and baptized into the Lutheran Church in August 1824. Religiously, Marx formative years were a combination of both Jewish and Christian traditions.

As a young man, Marx was not hostile to Christianity. A strong evidence of Marx commitment to Christianity was his youthful piece *The Union of Believers with Christ*, published in 1835. In that book, Marx spoke about the inner bond that could cause Christians to love one another. He also observed that union with Christ can bring, "... inner elevation, comfort in sorrow, calm trust, and a heart susceptible to human love, to everything noble and great, not for the sake of ambition and glory, but only for the sake of Christ" (qtd. in Metzger and Coogan 1993:497). Marx was later to shift from belief to unbelief, from Christian commitment to militant atheism.

Many scholars have reached a consensus that alienation and the task of overcoming it was central to Marx's socialist humanism and the aim of socialism. The concept of alienation was originally developed by Hegel who posited that the world which comprises of nature, things and others have become alien to man. Man no longer see himself as the subject of his own acts, as a thinking, feeling, loving person.

Before Marx, Hegel had posited that God was the subject of history. Hegel saw God in man, in a state of self alienation, and that through historical process, God returned to himself. For Ludwig Feuerbach, God represented man's inherent powers transferred from man, the owner of this power, to a being outside of him. "... so that man is in touch with his own powers only by his worship of God; the stronger and richer God is, the weaker and poorer becomes man" (qtd. in Fromm 1980: 42). Marx (1844: 99) in his *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts*, applied theoretically the phenomenon of religious alienation to the alienation of labor. "Just as in religion the spontaneous activity *Selbsttaetigkeit* of human fantasy, of the human brain and heart, reacts independently as an alien activity of gods and devils upon the individual, so the activity of the worker is not his own spontaneous activity".

Even though the views of Karl Marx have dominated sociology of religion for many decades, Marx never studied religion in any detail. His views on religion were derived from the writings of Ludwig Feuerbach, who posited that through the process of alienation, human beings attribute their culturally created values and norms to alien, or separate beings (i.e. divine forces or gods), because of the ignorance of their cultural history. Marx endorsed the view that religion represents human self-alienation.

Marx (1957: 38) argued that religion is man-made without any element of the supernatural and that religion is the self-consciousness of man who has failed to realize his authentic self and capabilities, and that the struggle against religion is therefore indirectly a fight against the world of which religion is the spiritual aroma. "Religion is the general theory of that world, its encyclopedic compendium, its logic in a popular form, its spiritualistic point *d'honneur*, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, its universal source of consolation and justification".

Marx was of the opinion that religion originated from the impact of alienation. Religious beliefs are not only false, but illusory. Religion is a product of class conflict. Religion hinders genuine rebellion as it preaches a heavenly bliss which is prepared and kept for the faithful. Religion is a tool of the oppressors. Religion legitimizes structural violence. Marx (1957: 39) therefore advocated for a forceful abolition of religion as a way to free the society from bondage. "To abolish religion as the illusory happiness of the people is to demand their real happiness. The demand to give up illusions about the existing state of affairs is the demand to give up a state of affairs which needs illusions".

Religion, according to Marx is a poor substitute for social justice and happiness in the present world. Religion is a major obstacle to social engineering; it hinders the emotional and



intellectual development of the working class, and frustrates the evolution of a non-alienated society in the 'real' world. Religion suppresses the explosive tensions of a society; it aligned with the interests of the dominant few and assuages the exploited majority.

For Marx, the criticism of religion is the foundation of all criticism and that the struggle against religion is indirectly a fight against the world which religion is the spiritual aroma. Religion as a false consciousness is a reflection of people's actual condition, and reality and it is the consequence of alienation in society. It is socio-economic frustrations that cause people to be religious. The oppressive condition of the social order has inflicted miseries on people, diminish their humanity and distort their self-understanding.

Religion, according to Marx, originated from, and is maintained by the need of the oppressed and exploited majority to escape from the oppressive and hard conditions of social life. Religious distress is both an expression of real distress and also the protest against real distress. Marx saw religion as a vampire, a social anesthesia, a lullaby that soothes, and assuage genuine revolutionary aspiration and hinders rebellion. Acting as an opiate, religion dull the pain produced by oppression. It is also a distortion of reality.

Marx observed that while religion does nothing to solve the problem, it has the potential to hinder revolution. Religion supports the status-quo: "Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and also the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the hearts of a heartless world just as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions. It is the opium of the people" (1957: 38, 39). The most important task that is before the human society is to shake off the chains of religion and set itself free.

Much as we agree with Marx that religion could be manipulated as an instrument of oppression, we disagree with him on the view that religion originate from pains of alienation. This is erroneous and misleading; the intrinsic nature of religion is deeper than the phenomenological observation. It has been said that man is a political animal, but suffice to say that man is primarily a religious animal. Religious feelings are innate in man. This is justified by man's sense of the "numinous" that is man's idea of the transcendent reality which comes upon man, challenges, seizes and controls him.

Marx contention that religion will come to an end in a classless society is not borne by history, hence baseless. Religion cannot die a natural death. Religion can thrive even when it is banished. Although religion can serve as the sacred guarantor of oppression, deprivation, social inequality, and marginalization of the masses, Marx ought to have carried out a comparative, socio-historical study of religion in order to determine whether religion has always, and everywhere displayed similar tendencies. That Marx failed to do this was a major flaw in his social scientific analysis. It was a serious error for Marx to have said that religion makes poverty tolerable by promising a better world in future. Neither Marx, nor his followers can deny the fact that poverty to some extent is a problematic dimension of human existence. Almost all religions preach the social gains of justice, fair-play, equity and self-abnegation. Marx was too hasty in concluding that religion was socially irrelevant. In war-torn areas, religious groups are always seen providing relief materials. Modern man can testify to the fact that in many parts of the world, religion has provided humanity with food, medicare, habitat, education and culture. Africans throughout the continent, still remember the positive impact of Christian missionary enterprise.

## MAX WEBER ON RELIGION AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Born on April 21, 1864, in Erfurt (Thuringia) in Germany, Weber developed his intellect to the maximum. He was respected all over the world as one of the most prolific sociologist.

Weber was versatile in almost all branches of the social sciences. Unlike Durkheim, he was much less directly involved in the political struggles of his day. He was a detached academic, who exerted tremendous influence on sociological thinking. Although he was firmly rooted in the intellectual milieu of Germany, his scholarly fame covered the whole world.

Although Weber drew much inspiration and illumination from the work of great thinkers like Georg Simmel and others, it must be pointed out that it was Weber who gave present day German sociology its direction. A distinctive contribution of Weber was that he transformed sociology from a mere ideology to a science. As a pathfinder, Weber laid the foundation for leading German sociologists like Scheler, Wiese, Brayer and Sander. It was Weber who insisted that the social sciences must be value-free. He mounted intensive intellectual campaign against those political and moral ideologies which often influence the judgment of social scientists.

Weber defined the task of sociology as the description of life in society. Sociology, according to Weber, is no longer the philosophy of human existence. It is a particular science of human behavior and consequences. On the task of sociology, Weber opines that sociology is a science which attempts the interpretive understanding of social action as a prelude to causal explanation of its course and effects. By "action", Weber meant all human behavior with subjective meaning.

Weber's fundamental problem was the origins of capitalism, which to him was a probe into the very foundation of modern society. Weber also wanted to identify the role of ideas in history. Weber stressed the need for objectivity in scholarship. In his analysis of participant observation, Weber insisted that human action should be interpreted in accordance with the motives of the actors.

Weber enriched political science by his distinction between charismatic, traditional and legal rational legitimacy. Marx had postulated that consciousness was dependent on the economic substructure of society, which was later oversimplified into a rigid and one-sided economic determinism. From a position of strength, Weber refuted Marx by pointing out that economic processes are dictated by what goes on in the minds of men, especially values and beliefs. As a reaction against what he regarded as Marx's excessively economic interpretation of history, Weber contended that the most important economic development of modern times, the rise of capitalism, owed much to the doctrines of the reformers, the Calvinists, and Puritans (*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit Capitalism*, 1958: 1-10).

Although the reformers had no intention to promote economic revolution, Weber submitted that this was an unintended consequence of their religio-moral and spiritual doctrines. He observed that the reformers laid great emphasis on the efficacy of work as a form of service to God. He pointed out that Luther was bold to generalize the Christian vocation through his teaching that all honest forms of work constitute Christian callings just as the priesthood. Luther's opinion was at variance with the medieval Catholic view of work as basically a penalty for sin. "Many of the newer Protestant faiths encouraged believers to deny themselves the pleasures of this world and live frugally, a practice which to which led to capital accumulation..." (Qtd. in Lenski, 1970: 331, 332).

Weber, unlike Marx and Durkheim studied religion massively. The focal point of Weberian sociology of religion was the correlation between religion and social change. In contrast to Marx, Weber argued that religion is not necessarily a conservative force. Movements with religious inspiration have often produced social transformations. In *The Protestant Ethic and*

*the Spirit Capitalism*, Weber attributed capitalism in the Western world to the influence of the Protestant Reformation (1958: 1-10).

Weber posited that Calvinism played a major role in establishing a cultural climate that fostered capitalistic spirit. Weber did not mean to say that Calvinism 'caused' capitalism, but that there is a linkage between Calvinist ideas and the tenets of successful capitalism. Mike O'Donnell has this to say on Weberian thesis: "Calvinism preached hard work and frugality, the Protestant ethic is very useful to a businessman. Weber cited many examples of Calvinists who became businessmen while, however, fully recognizing that factors other than the spiritual content of Calvinism contributed to the rise of capitalism" (1992:402).

Weber saw the need for comparative study of religion in diverse societies so that the influence of culture on religion could be examined. In his *Sociology of Religion*, Weber asserted that god-conceptions are related to the economic, social and political condition in which human society thrives. He observed that the gods of light and warmth and of rain and earth are related to economic needs of society. Celestial gods are linked to the problems of death and fate (1963:1-8). Bibby elucidates further on Weberian analogy: "In political conquest, the gods of the conquered are fused with the gods of the conqueror.... He noted that different groups in society vary in their inclination to be religious: peasants are religious when they are threatened; the nobility find religion beneath their honor; the middle class sees religion largely in ethical terms" (2001:120, 121).

Weber was convinced that ideas can change history. His hope was that his work would contribute "to the understanding of the manner in which ideas become effective forces in history" (*Sociology of Religion* 1963:90). Reginald Bibby writes: "Weber maintained that ideas, regardless of whether they are objectively true or false, represent one's definition of reality and therefore have the potential to influence behavior" (2001:120). Admittedly, Weber's major and unique contribution to sociology of religion was the view that ideas can change history.

While Marx saw religion primarily as justifying and aiding existing social and economic situations. Weber viewed religion as a veritable tool for social change. Weber accepted Christianity as a salvation religion which has revolutionary consequences on society. He observed that while Oriental religions cultivate the attitude of passivity, Christianity requires total struggle against sin, which can stimulate rebellion against the status-quo. Weber noted that revolutionary religious leaders like Luther or Calvin actually re-interpreted existing church doctrines in a way to challenge conservative forces in organized Christianity (Giddens, Duneier and Appelbaum 2003: 532, 533).

Weber demonstrated that religion is not only a dependent variable, but also an independent variable, or a determinant factor for social change. Weber maintained that religion is never purely the reflection of society, but also contain, within its traditions, critical and creative elements. Weber's approach to the study of religious phenomena was an evolutionary perspective. He shared the views of anthropologist like Frazer who posited that religion evolved from magic. Weber's concern was to discover the influence of religion on society.

On the distinction between religion and magic, Weber pointed out that the transition from magic to religion has a social root. As a point of agreement with Durkheim, Weber suggests that while magic seeks divine power for private ends, religion acquire similar power for social ends, Weber stated that religion is a principle that create a believing community, while the priest as guardian of religion speaks in his own name as a man of great personal power.



The major reason for the transition from magic to religion is the rational understanding of man's social life. Man as a meaning-making animal, realizes that significant progress can take place in culture and society when the various aspect of social life is properly coordinated. When personal needs are integrated into the need of the community, society will achieve a more unified world-view. Religion, by overcoming personal trends which was intrinsic in magic, creates a more complex and ordered society whose demands supersedes private and vested interest.

It was because of this unifying role of religion that led Weber to describe religion as a principle of socialization which detaches people from fulfilling their personal ambition. Religion, Weber observed, generates a selfless and sacrificial communal spirit by sacralizing the destiny of the entire community. Weber shares a theoretical similarity with Durkheim. Both theorists magnify the social functions of religion. Weber's description of religion as a principle of socialization is analogous to Durkheim's description of religion as a "collective consciousness of the society".

Like Durkheim, a major flaw in Weberian thesis is the preoccupation with the view that religion is a communal consciousness and the seeming neglect of personal religion. It must be emphasized that communal religion is a cumulative, or aggregate of personal religion. It is the individual's religiosity that produces communal consciousness. Communal religion will be impossibility without personal religion. Weber also posited that religion originated with the rise of a charismatic leader and emergence of an innovative movement. Weber did not account for how individual members of the movement came to have personal encounter with the belief structure of the movement. Weber ignored the essence and efficacy of personal religion, and like Durkheim, magnified the indispensable impact of communal religion.

### **ROBERT BELLAH ON SOCIAL ECOLOGY AND CIVIL RELIGION**

Robert N. Bellah, a renowned sociologist of religion has distinguished himself both as a believer in the social efficacy of religion and as a defender of religious and moral values in the social order. Bellah has confidence in religion as an instrument for social development. He has spent his entire academic career to sensitize the academic world on the indispensable social functions of religion.

When American people in the elections of 1984, debated on the separation of church and State, Bellah authoritatively confronted the liberal view. He told Americans that from the evidence of history, no society can survive without religious influence on social life. "No State, and certainly not the contemporary behemoth State, can fail to have an influence on the ends of life: on war and peace, on wealth and poverty, on racial and sexual equality" (qtd. in *Christianity and Crisis* 1984:391, 392).

Bellah is convinced that the State needs spiritual and moral guidance, which can come only through religion. Society, he argued cannot survive for too long without religio-moral influence. He described the liberal stance of anti-religion as a dangerous option. He told Americans that a religionless society is going to be atomistic and humanly unbearable. "The liberal theory is dangerous not only because it is a fiction. It is dangerous because the society it envisions would not be humanly bearable. Such a society would be composed of abstract atomized individuals, sharing nothing in common" (qtd. in *Christianity and Crisis* 1984:391, 392).

It was because of the necessity for collective religio-moral guidance that Bellah adopted the theory of social ecology. Ecology is the study of the relationships between living organisms

and their environment. Bellah's social ecology is analogous to the social pathology theory. Bellah is of the view that it is not only war and violence that can disorganize the social system, but that dearth of solidarity is equally dangerous. According to Bellah social ecology is damaged not only by war, genocide, and political repression, but also by "the destruction of the subtle ties that bind human beings to one another, leaving them frightened and alone ....But individuals need the nurture of groups that carry a moral tradition reinforcing their own aspirations" (Habits of the Heart 1985: 284, 285).

Society requires moral instruction to reinforce its aspirations. From the facts of history, there has never been a moral code without religious contents. Religion has always dominated the content of moral education. Bellah does not see life as a struggle for personal success and accumulation of wealth. "Perhaps life is not a race whose only goal is being foremost. Perhaps true felicity does not lie in continually outgoing the next before. Perhaps the truth lies in what most of the world outside the modern West has always believed, namely that there are practices of life, good in themselves that are inherently fulfilling" (Habits of the Heart 1985:295).

There are practices of life that are inherently fulfilling. Religion brings contentment, hope, courage and inner peace to man. There is no dimension of social life that religion is not useful. It gives man a sense of fulfillment, which cannot come from rival alternatives. Religion has the highest interest of mankind at heart and has worked toward the promotion of the welfare of mankind. Religion does not only link man to God, it also influences interpersonal relationship. It teaches love, forgiveness, empathy, self-abnegation and humanitarianism. Bellah is of the opinion that "enduring commitment to those we love and civic friendship toward our fellow citizens is preferable to restless competition and anxious self-defense...." (The Broken Covenant 1976:50).

It was from the concept of social ecology that Bellah propounded another novel idea that will represent the full integration of religion in society that is, civil religion. There is a consensus among scholars that it was Robert Bellah who first coined the term "civil religion". By civil religion, Bellah was proposing a process of integration and harmonization that will eventuate in social religionization. Bellah's civil religion shares ideological similarities with Richard John Neuhaus's idea of public religion. Thus instead of treating religion as a separate sector, the two scholars are calling for a comprehensive religionization of the 'social order'.

Although there is no agreement on the meaning, content and nature of civil religion, Bellah and his ideologues have given five different categories of definitions: (1) folk religion, (2) the transcendent universal religion of the nation, (3) religious nationalism, (4) the democratic faith, and (5) protestant civic piety (Richey and Jones 1974:60). Here, it stands to reason that civil has to do with total positive religiosity of any nation and its folk religion.

Civil religion harmonizes faith and culture into a holistic whole. As the transcendent universal religion of the nation, civil religion is projected as the pivot of nationalism, social mobilization and patriotic feelings. For any group of people to think otherwise is dangerous. Much has been said on secular alternatives to religion. Of course, these "alternatives" if they exist at all, are not only theoretical but also cerebral, hence a preoccupation, of a scholarly minority. Some of the so-called secular alternatives to religion are religions in disguise.

Bellah's civil religion was rooted on the American vision of freedom. It was an ideology meant to sacralize, and provide a solid socio-political foundation to the American dream-sense of mission and national destiny (Civil Religion in America 1968:15). The intellectual justification for civil religion was America's election as the chosen people to carry out God's

purposes in the world. Civil religion was therefore a legitimation for self-serving national interests and for claims to international authority.

It was Bellah's considered opinion that civil religion can introduce a transcendent dimension into the political process, provide a standard of wrong and right, serve as a source of human rights and also provide a platform for prophetic judgment of the social order. Civil religion can provide a realistic goal for national dedication and patriotism. Civil religion could be abused, when it becomes a form of national self-worship and also when it promotes the virtue of individual self-reliance.

## CONCLUSION

Sociology of religion in its 19<sup>th</sup> century origins was hostile to religion. As a direct product of secularization, the founders of sociology of religion viewed sociology as a possible replacement for theology that was seen to be obsolete. The fundamental commitment of sociologists of religion to place religious phenomena in their social context led to reductionism. For instance, Peter Berger's view that ecumenism is an ecclesiastical equivalent of business integration was criticized for ignoring the scriptural injunction for the unity of believers. Sociologists are also criticized for the exaggeration of social factors. Critics have also faulted Berger's views on what he calls "plausibility structures" which imply that the credibility of a doctrine is dependent on the group who accept it as being true. Ferguson and Wright (1988:650) have this to say: "While it is almost self-evident that it is easier to believe when surrounded by others who share that belief, this consideration may amount, if taken too far, to a denial of the importance of the truth of a given doctrine for its survival".

Berger (1970:57-59) described his approach as methodological atheism. By methodological atheism, Berger meant that sociologists of religion should always "bracket" personal commitments to religion when engaging in the scientific quest. Ferguson and Wright have argued that Berger's theory sounds fine as a hygienic precaution, but that in practice, Berger himself is not neutral in his analysis of religious phenomena. Bryan Wilson (1982: 1-26) in his defense of scientific objectivity admitted that the founders of sociology of religion viewed religion from the beginning as an antiquated method of perceiving the world, which needed replacement by scientific method. Another sociologist Kingsley Davis (1949: 1-10) has argued that although religion is false, it is socially efficacious. Charles Glock along with B. B. Ringer and E. R. Babbie (1967: 5-12) have propounded a new theory called "relative deprivation thesis" in which religion is viewed as a compensatory response of deprived people. The point here is that religion is the response of people who are socially deprived and vulnerable. Religion is a mechanism where the socially deprived feel compensated.

Sociologists of religion at the very beginning of the discipline established a fundamental methodological principle that makes it impossible to practice Sociology of Religion as a religious believer. Wilson (1982: 13,23) has attempted to present a revisionistic viewpoint: "... This is not to say that a sociologist of religion cannot be personally a religiously-committed man; clearly that is a possibility. But in his sociological work he must adopt the professional stance of the detached, neutral and objective investigator".

Dewi Arwel Hughes (1996:132), avers that superficial analysis of religious belief shows that it is *prima facie* a world-view, that is, the world is understood through a religious belief, and the "world" in this context includes society. To that extent, faith and understanding cannot be separated. "For believers, what they believe is like the wearing of spectacles by a severely short-sighted person. What they see without the spectacles is a muddle of shapes and colors.

The spectacles brings into focus so that they can be seen as they really are". It is obvious that the definitions of "scientific objectivity" by some sociologists deliberately, and absolutely excludes religious believes from the social scientific study of religion. Admittedly, this is the legacy of the anti-religious roots of sociology in a positivist world-view.

Random survey of the religious beliefs of academics in the United States shows that sociologists are the most antagonistic towards religion (Hughes 1996: 133). Some scholars have taken scientific objectivity to mean either atheism, or religion-phobia, which is not only a myopic vision, but also a subjective illusion. David Fraser and Tony Campolo (1992:1-10) are of the opinion that the anti-religious ethos of sociology was a survival strategy for a discipline that took a long time to gain recognition in the universities, and that the claims of being a science is a desperate plea for endorsement. Sociologists needs a structure of ideas and practices that gives identity, and that for sociology to be accepted by the scientific community, religion must be branded with a negative image, and the implication is that all it takes to be a sociologists of religion is to display aversion to religion.

While this study is not dismissive of the worth of sociology of religion, we however criticize sociologicistic views which obviate the role of human agents, or view religion as a social epiphenomenon. It is our view that any attempt to analyze religion without recognizing its language and the mind-set of the votaries is counter-productive. It is time for sociologists to realize that the supernatural dimension of religion cannot be subjected to empirical analysis. Explanation of religious behavior through a secularist, or ethnocentric theory and the denial of the epistemological validity of faith, revelation and intuition should be rejected in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Scientist should recognize the fact that all knowledge is tentative and that science is not the perfect approach to truth (Hayward 2000: 894).

There is a scholarly consensus that society cannot do without religion. On the methodology for study of religion and society, we have advocated an integrated approach instead of, departmentalization of knowledge. Religion as a complex social phenomenon traverses both the humanities and the social sciences. It is only when there is a "disciplinary cooperation" that the nature of the religions could be discovered, Like the Greek myth of *Khimaira*, religion is a fire-breathing monster with the head of a lion, body of a goat, and tail of a serpent, indeed a fabulous beast made up of parts taken from various animals. Religion is a chimera.

Opinions on the social functions of religion vary according to the background of each scholar. Scholars who had pious and religious upbringing see religion as indispensable. Scholars who were influenced by the humanists view of anti-religion advocates total abolition of religion from the human society. Thus, for Marx, religion is the opium of the people. For Durkheim, it is the collective consciousness. For Weber, religion is the principle of socialization. For Bellah, religion is a veritable instrument for patriotism and national consciousness. Nobody should be allowed to impose his personal views of religion on individuals and society.

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