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RELIGIOSITY, MORAL DECADENCE AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT.

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Abstract:
The phenomenon of religiosity in a decaying moral culture is thought provoking, a paradox. Rooted in perversity, it is degradation of religion that borders on magic. It is spurious piety often associated with folk or popular religion. The paper sets out to address the problem of ambiguity created by religiosity and moral decadence that is obstructive of national development. It strives to clarify this ambiguity by exploring the relationships between religion and morality. It claims that as cogs in the wheel of development religiosity and moral decadence are to be eschewed. Adopting descriptive and analytic methods, the paper has for its objective to show that religiosity and moral decadence are forms of decline and as such anti-development attitudes. It affirms that national development will come about only when education in critical reflection paves way for authentic religious and moral life.

Key Words: **Religion, Morality, Mysticism, Magic, Morality.**

Introduction

The contributions of religion to national development are too obvious to be questioned. It has become fashionable within intellectual circle in Africa to say that religion is the womb of African culture. This truth which was evident in African traditional life has remained unchallenged till date, despite evident shift in the people's perception of their world and alteration in their cultural ways of life. The introduction of foreign religions in the wake of contact with Arab and Western worlds appears to enhance and promote development, particularly cultural development, in a way that religion seems not to have done in the past. Religion, Christianity for one, since the last century has continued to advance national development through building of schools and universities, skill acquisition centers, churches and cathedrals, hospitals and provision of portable water for urban and rural populations, and promotion of tourism. However, despite the overwhelming and ubiquitous presence of religion in the life of the people, there is growing signs of moral decay on account of which one is tempted to ask whether religion and morality are distinctively and perhaps diametrically opposed phenomena, or whether they are complementary to one another or necessarily intertwined.

Sometimes, one wonders if the quest for revival in our time which has given rise to the rebirth of superstition and enthusiasm on the one hand, and cultural irredentism and neo-paganism on the other hand, has not introduced confusion between religiosity and genuine religious favour, leading to ambiguity in the relationship between religion and morality. The mind of an earnest enquirer into this state of affairs would be naturally flooded by a number of agitating questions, such as, "How can one explain the disparity between the rise in religious favour and decay of morals in our society?" "Could one be said to be religious without being moral, or conversely, is it possible to be moral without being religious? To what extent is national development possible in a culture of religiosity and moral decay? It is this last question that constitutes the problem that this paper sets out to address. The paper has for its objective to show not just that religiosity is abuse of religion or at best spurious piety and as such contrary to true meaning of religion but that it constitutes with moral decadence cogs in the wheel of development as such are to be eschewed.

Samuel C. Nwankwo (2015), like some writers before him, had taken time to explore the reasons for rise in religious favour and decline in morality, and how the situation affects national development. Decrying what one could term the poverty of value in Nigeria, the author remarks that "in the contemporary Nigerian society, things have fallen apart religiously and morally too". This means that what he had earlier described positively as religious practices embody certain ambiguities which call for sober reflection. He describes Nigerians, more than any other people, as chronically religious. Yet, in pointing out the reasons for moral decadence in Nigeria, the same author alludes to

> the inability of religious leaders to give sound religious instructions and messages which can address the moral state of the society and or failure on the part of religious society to adhere to and practice the tenets of their faith traditions (p. 18).

By implication, the author is saying that, among other factors, the failure of religion also accounts for moral decadence in the Nigerian society. In other words, religion can foster morality but does not necessarily do so. Put differently, religion is extraneous to morality. It is a kind of prop rather than constituting the internal dynamics of morality. In the conclusion of his paper (2015:23) he points out clearly that religious "boom could not be the sole factor, if at all, for flight of moral values in the society". This statement suggests that he was not quite decided on whether or not "religious boom" is a factor in the decay of morals in Nigerian society. As if making morality dependent on religion, Nwankwo claims that religion is the panacea to moral decadence in Nigeria. If this later statement were to be true, it would be difficult to see how a society in which *religion is said to flourish* could be, at the same time, where moral depravity abounds.
When Saheed Olurotimi Timehin (2013) included inadequate religious orientation among the causes of moral decadence, he was being quite definite in his position. Proffering solution to the problem of moral decadence he writes:

> Religious groups too have the social responsibility to reinstate faith in the divine. Religious clerics must through personal conduct rebuild confidence in moral uprightness (p. 5).

While the above statement suggests that religion can promote moral progress, it does not state the precise relationship between religion and morality, even though, the author elsewhere had assumed that morality and religion are intertwined. So, considering the apparent ambiguity created by the co-existence of the phenomena of religious boom and moral doom, it remains to be clarified what accounts for this ambiguity. In his study, Nwankwo did a phenomenology of religion, not in the philosophical sense, but in the sense in which Joseph Dabney Bettis employs the term in his Introduction to *Phenomenology of Religion* edited by Martin E. Marty (1961:1) as broad "application of general phenomenological methods to the whole spectrum of religious ideas, actions, institutions, customs and symbols." Given the limitation of this approach to the culturally conditioned forms of expression men have of religion, it can only lead, at most, to the level of raising reflective awareness on "what is actually taking place in religious activity". It is, therefore, the ambition of this paper to carry the reflection further by seeking for ultimate explanation for the prevalence of moral decay in a highly religious universe. To achieve this end, the paper adopts descriptive and analytic approaches. It proceeds by first, exposing the different perspectives on the relationship between religion and morality, then, incising religiosity from spirituality and showing how it is a fertile ground for misconstruing of religion, it presents religiosity as a comfortable bedfellow to moral decay. The obvious conclusion is that both religiosity and moral decadence are nefarious to national development. Religiosity is presented as spurious piety and so incapable of transformation of life and moral consciousness concomitant of true religion. Religiosity, as borderland in which religion sheds into magic, is a-moral. A self-serving project and indifferent to morals, religiosity, like moral decadence, is incapable of contributing to national development. In the final analysis, the paper calls for reorientation through education, both secular and religious, as means of exorcising the society of religiosity and moral decadence in order to foster genuine national development.

The Relationship between Religion and Morality

Discussion between religion and morality is a delicate one requiring careful steps given that there are various understandings of both phenomena. It is the classification made by Brain Davies that is adopted in this paper here. It may sound attractive to say that morality is possible only where value and duty are not dependent on our own inclinations and reactions, and that, this independence would be what it ought to be only if, as H. D. Lewis (1959) put it, "our standards are imposed or established by God or in some other way due to Him" (p. 323). This view stems from an a priori belief in the existence of God, as in Christianity. The argument goes this way, that belief in the existence of God has practical implications in the life of the votaries of any religion. So morality is assumed to be naturally related in an intimate way to religion. Indeed, in Christianity, religion is seen as the basis of morality. Although this view appears to provide firm foundation for morality, according it a central place in religion, it may be misleading. Studies in comparative religion show that there exists some religion without the notion of God. But more importantly, it is common knowledge that the atheist do not practice religion, yet he admits of the intrinsic values of certain things and

that he has responsibilities. It is to be noted that, from the point of view of studies done in religion, three views are seen to be dominant in matters concerning relationship between religion and morality. Brain Davies articulates the views as follows: "(1) that morality somehow supports religion (2) that morality is somehow included in religion (3) that morality and religion are opposed to each other" (1982:92). It is to be remarked that relationship between religion and morality is one thing and religiosity and moral decadence is another thing. In the opinion of this paper, it is only when the relationship between religion and morality is clarified that that of religiosity and moral decadence could be discerned by way of implication. First, let us briefly consider the three views about religion and morality.

Morality gives Credence to Religion

This view, according to Davies, maintains that "there is something about morality that makes it reasonable to believe in God". Kant is the flag bearer here. While arguing against the case of ontological argument for the existence of God, he nevertheless, does not consider belief in God as irrational. He sees the existence of God as a moral postulate. In other words, morality points to the necessity for the existence of God. If man's highest good, which is manifestly demanded by morality, is to be realized, there must be something other than man which can ensure that man attains this perfect state which is not possible in this life. For Kant, assuming the existence of God is a moral necessity. However, that Kant merely supposes the rationality and logic of the existence of God does not mean that he provides proof of the existence of God. As Wazir Abdulrahman et al (2008:19) put it, Kant insists that the affirmation of God influences moral endeavor. Since complete morality is impossible in this life, it is moral faith that is "an essential premise of the individual's effort in seeking the *summum bonum* (SEP, Appiah 2000:317-322)." Strictly speaking, Kant merely illustrates his concept of morality through means of religion without by that basing his morality on religion (Christianity). In the words of Abdulrahman et al,

> Happiness is to be considered as a second element of the summum bonum (Kant, 1788:127), which therefore means that the rational being who has accepted the categorical imperative, can obtain happiness after reaching summum bonum by acting virtuously and "(…) *only in such a way that it is the morally conditioned, but necessary consequence of the former* (…)" (Kant, 1788:127), which is why religion cannot be the basis of morality (p. 22).

Some other thinkers link morality with religion by arguing that the existence of moral commands and laws presuppose a moral law giver or commander. Here morality is attached to sense of responsibility and feeling of guilt. This situation, it is argued, is only possible because there is personal explanation to moral law. The guilt and responsibility inspired by moral law are accounted for by the fact that the personal will of God provides basis for them. Davies alludes to some thinkers like Trethowan who tried to reduce this argument to a simple idea that consciousness of one's obligation tantamount to consciousness of God. But critics have not spared the claims made by this group of thinkers. Against Kant who thinks that it is absurd to conceive of morality without God's existence and that man without God's aid cannot attain the highest good, critics say he is mistaken. This is because something more powerful than man, yet less powerful than God could have realized it. Moreover, his argument is inconsistent, since what he claims to be impossible for man can be realized with God. Generally, the argument based on the existence of moral law is controversial given that there is no consensus on the idea of objective moral law. Besides, even for those who maintain the idea of objective moral laws, it is not to be inferred by that, that God exists.

Morality is included in Religion

This second group of thinkers holds the claim that being moral is part of what being religious is all about. Davies tells us that there are two versions of this line of argument. While one version says that God always wills what is morally obligatory, even though the very fact of God willing a thing would not make it morally binding, the other version claims that an action is ipso facto binding by the mere fact that God wills it. In other words, moral standards are established by the will of God such that there is no other standard by which God's can be judged. To imagine that one has moral reasons not to do what God wants is to have failed to understand what morality is all about. It means then that it is part of religion to be moral, since being moral is doing what God wants or wills.

This view of morality and religion is saddled with criticism. The problem is to determine whether there are morally obligatory actions for God to will. Granted that there are, it presupposes here that there is a God who can will things and whose will can be known; and secondly, that all morally binding actions are willed

by God. This lands us in a thorn field of controversy. Many would not readily accept the claim that God's will determines what is morally obligatory. Their reasoning, according to Davies is as follows:

> (1) the view is morally unacceptable since it entails that if God willed some morally despicable action the action would thereby become a morally obligatory one; (2) the view assumes that from the fact that God wills some action it is possible to conclude that the action is morally obligatory. But from 'P will X' one can never infer 'X is morally obligatory'. The way one responds to these arguments may be dependent on one's fundamental moral options as well as "on whether it is possible to say that there is a God whose will can be known (1982:101).

The other side of the controversy is the contemporary distinction between statements of facts ('God wills X') and statements of value ('I ought to do X'). Critics will remind us that "statements of value cannot be derived from statements of fact" – God willing something does not imply the necessity of doing it. There is however some point in the view that morality is a part of religion, even if there exists religion that does not subscribe to any form of belief in God. The truth is that religious facts have to be approached with caution. This is because, unlike facts in the normal way of thinking, religious facts are not open to public investigation. For example, (a) "There is a God" may sound like "There is a President", but they are quite different, just as "Henry is in a state of grace" seems on different level from "Henry is in a state of tension" (Davies, 1982:101ff).

Seen from a purely religious point of view, the theology of grace provides an amply explanation of God's intervention in the performance of virtuous act in a way that is in accord with man's conscious; in other words, God allows man to act in a way that is entirely his own making, such that the influence of grace is more a gain in sensitivity and insight, and in moral matters, the refinement of character.

Morality and Religion stand in Opposition

We have pointed out from the first two views that there is no opposition between religious and moral points of view. However, there are thinkers who have contrary opinion. For this group of thinkers, there is real opposition between religion and morality. It is claimed that moral agency calls for autonomy and self-directed action and so, the idea of total and unqualified commitment to obey God's will is inappropriate for a moral agent. James Rachels is mentioned by Brian Davies as advocating this view with the argument that God's existence can be disproved on the basis of the under mentioned argument:

> (1) If any being is God, he must be a fitted object of worship.
> (2) No being could possibly be a fitting object of worship since worship requires the abandonment of one's role as an autonomous moral agent.
> (3) Therefore, there cannot be any being who is God (1982:95).

Some other thinkers have argued from their experience and practice of religion to say that religion causes more harm than good and not all religious people are good citizens. In other words, there are religious people who are not moral, meaning that religion and morality are two distinct and opposed phenomena. Some protestant theologians like Soren Kierkegaard have also argued against the relationship between religion and morality. In his commentary on God's demand on Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac (Genesis 22), he remarks that ethical reason would make Abraham hesitant over doing the will of God. However, Abraham's accent to the will of God involved what he calls teleological suspense of the ethical. The religious concept of duty is shown here, according to Kierkegaard, to be quite different and even opposed to the concept of moral duty. For the believer, duty refers to the will of God, but the "ethical" can be an obstacle as in the just mentioned case.

Concerning Rachel's case for the non-existence of God on the basis of the inconsistency of the claim about God's existence with the idea of a moral agent, it is assumed that such argument is limping given that the existence of a being worthy of worship does not necessarily imply its interference with the autonomy of moral agents. On the contrary," it is also possible", Davies argues, "that a being worthy of worship will require that people always act as autonomous moral agents" (1982:103). To underscore this point, Davies alludes to Philip I Quin's critique of Rachels in these formulations:

> (a) God exists.
> (b) God sometimes commands agents to do certain things.

> (c) God never commands anything an autonomous and well informed human moral agent would, on reflection, disapprove (1982:104).

It appears, from all intent and purposes, that there is real difficulty with marking out a sharp dividing line between religion and non-religion. This makes the claim that religion and morality are necessarily opposed to each other a bit difficult. Sometimes, some of the argument for the opposition between religion and morality are based on confusion between what people do in the name of religion and what religion actually requires. However, this is not to deny the fact that some have religious beliefs that are quite at variance with the demands of many ethical and secular thoughts.

Contentious as the relationship between religion and morality may be, the fact remains that morality devoid of absolute foundation which religion provides will end up in relativism. A religion devoid of morality would be a contradiction. Moral decadence can only be attributed to irreligion or false religion, what has been identified in this paper as religiosity. When humans drift away from the spirit of true religion, clinging to the outward appearances of religion while emptying their actions of the content of religion they end up in hollow mysticism which is disruptive of human development.

The Phenomenon of Religiosity, Moral Decadence and Development

According to *Chambers 20th Century Dictionary* (1985:1093), religiosity, a noun, means "spurious or sentimental religion: religious feeling". The adjective "spurious" used in connection with a statement, refers to it's not being based on fact or good reasoning, and so is likely to be incorrect. With respect to attitude, the word "spurious" means "insincere". As "religious feeling", religiosity refers to that form of sentiment about religion which lacks rational or factual basis. In this paper, the word religiosity is therefore used to refer to mystical hankerings with flashes of illumination which engenders fervent attachment to the details of outward ceremonies and observances by which votaries of a given religion hope to bestow sacred character on their own persons in order to solve the riddles of life. It is spurious piety often associated with folk or popular religion.

It is the tendency to abscond from this-worldly historical tasks by taking refuge in the safe haven of conformist, uncritical privatization of faith. Religiosity, understood in this sense, represents the negative elements of popular religion. It is hollow practice of religion which tends to confuse faith with gullibility or rather replaces love with discipline of the will. It is the breeding ground of superstition, fetishism and craze for miracle. As Evelyn Underhill (1990) points out, ceremonial religions generally shades into magic. Magic and mysticism are considered as two basic attitudes towards the unseen. Between magic and mysticism lies religion. In her own words,

> … at one end of the scale, pure mysticism 'shades off into religion – from some points of view seems to grow out of it. No deeply religious man is without a touch of mysticism; and no mystic can be other than religious, in the psychological if not in the theological sense of the word. At the other end of the scale,…, religion, no less surely shades off into magic (p. 70).

The fundamental difference between magic and mysticism lies in the fact that while the former wants to get, the latter wants to give. Although both attitudes promise their initiates power that is hidden from ordinary people, the reasons for embarking on these activities and the objective "to which these powers are applied differ enormously". As McGinn (1994:3) rightly observes, mysticism deals with the modes of attaining direct experience of the presence of God. These are often "tied to particular ascetical practices, sacramental rituals and forms of prayers" all of which are based "on the spiritual values, patterns of life, and paradigmatic figures" which religious leaders propose for the edification of the faithful. In Christianity, the scripture is considered fundamental. It is meditation on the word of God that orients the spiritual life of the believer towards union with the divine.

Mysticism is a spiritual quest for the point of encounter between God and humanity; a point, the attainment of which brings the individual into union with the divine, a union that is an act of love and complete self-surrender to the overwhelming experience of divine presence. It is this kind of experience that motivates and directs religion. However, only few individual members of a given religion fervently pursue this religious ideal. Since spirituality is something dynamic, a form of life, the tendency is that either one aspires towards mystical union or one degenerates into religiosity, a species of religious mediocrity by which one readily collapses into magical attitude in an attempt to face up to the vicissitudes of life.

In religion, God as the other confronts us in a way that transcends our turning him into an object of our own making. This encounter is so overwhelming that it shatters the structure of our previous experience, introducing a new and profound way of experiencing our world as being constituted of "something real in itself". In this relationship of encounter, to use the words of Marty (1961:220) "there is no longer any question of our controlling or shaping the being which confronts us". This is what Martin Buber refers to the *I-Thou* relationship. It is this that precisely distinguishes religion from magic. Spiritual life or mysticism is the dynamics and pattern of fostering this form of relationship. But there is the natural tendency to convert the other into an object for us. Each moment the "I-Thou" degenerates into "I-IT", love gives way to knowledge, self-giving surrenders to control, and the veritable interest of magical attitude lies in exploiting secret knowledge for control to one's benefit. It is to be pointed out immediately that "I-It" relationship, a natural relationship, is not necessarily evil. It is indifferent to morality as such, given that it is based on usefulness. It is a relationship which permits us to manipulate and control our environment so as to get things done. When the practice of religion tends to assume this form of relationship, it quickly drifts into magical attitude which is largely manipulative. Although religiosity is not synonymous with magic, sharing borders with magic, it is a way of escape. Like magic, it involves training in inflexible will by which supra-sensible energies are stimulated through sensible means, reducing faith as trusting love to what Underhill (1990:156) speaking of magic refers to as "the limitless power of the disciplined human will".

The essential determinant of the goodness or intrinsically evil nature of a given moral conduct lies not in the culpability, responsibility or imputability of the action, but in generic morality or the moral order. Moral order, here, refers to the acceptable mode of behavior. As it were, morality is a property of human action insofar as it is bound with the being of the agent. It is the correct order of being that provides basis for the feeling of moral obligation. The action of a being follows from its nature. The common platform for moral and the immoral is the moral order or ethos. Although opposed to one another, morality and immorality are species of the moral order. Moral decadence is dissimilarity with the moral order as religiosity is to the religious order. Moral decadence is deviation from the standard of behavior set by a society by which right and wrong, or good and bad conduct are determined. Although every deviation from the generally accepted standard is frowned at by the society, not all deviations are decadent since moral progress is a form of deviation from the accepted standard. Decadence refers to that form of deviation which is a process of decline and decay in societal ethos or moral traditions. It is antithetical to growth or progress, and so, incompatible with development, be it individual or national.

If moral conduct is said to be bound to the being of the agent, then the question of development of people could be said to touch on the problem of the historical continuity of identity and value. For a people or nation with a history of tremendous religious disposition, resistance to development in the forms of religiosity and moral decadence is a sign of fundamental disorientation. This calls for radical change of behavior and cultural revolutions without which development will be impossible. No theory of development – modernization, dependency, world system, globalization - is permissive of religiosity or religious perversity and moral decadence. Given the recent accent on the impact of cultural factor on the political, social and economic conditions of nations as proposed by globalization theory of development change in behavior pattern and cultural forms conduce to development. The diversity of opinion with regard to the solution to the problem of identity and value as articulated by Anne-Cécile Robert (2004:140) demands that only critical attitude would help pave way for a new tradition that could be adapted to the new exigencies of life.

Despite the proselytization force of missionary religions, traditional religion has continued to maintain its grip on the people's unconscious such that adaptation and intermarriage are taking place in the domain of culture. Schooling and urbanization may weaken the hold of certain tradition on the people, but the role of the family and group affinity, despite drifts and adjustments, is still important. It is on this account that the envisaged cultural revolutions which will bring about the desired reorientation will have to take into account the importance of social learning in behavior modification. But social learning is no "mimicism." It means that the new path to be taken has to draw from the cultural resources of the people's millennial civilization characterized by humanistic values of solidarity, conviviality and respect for the environment and education for excellence. It calls for what Robert (2004:142) quoting Pierre Merlin refers to as "symbioses between human freedom and belongingness to the community".

It is this freedom that makes morality possible. It is equally by upholding freedom as condition of possibility of letting-being-be which is characteristic of "I-Thou" relationship, the soul of religion, that mysticism is

enhanced and religiosity abolished. Since perversion, animated by indoctrination, error, make-belief, ignorance, conformism, is an essential ingredient of religiosity, true education would require instilling in the people the ability to recognize things for what they are. It is in this connection that Underhill (1990:163), cautioning against drift from mysticism into magic, remarks that "the duty of the church is to appeal to the whole man, as she finds him living in the world of sense".

Conclusion

So far we have tried to explore the nature of religiosity so as to reveal the source of the ambiguity in the coexistence of rise in religious favour with moral decadence. Our analysis shows that religiosity and moral decadence are forms of decline and as such anti-development attitudes. To reverse the downward trend in religious practices and moral life, a call for radical behavior change and cultural revolutions has been suggested. It is through education in critical reflection which fosters freedom that encounter with reality as it is would be made possible. It is only by recognizing things for what they are that perversity which engenders general disorientation will be curbed and development enhanced.

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