Sapientia Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Development Studies (SGOJAHDS), Vol.8 No.2 June, 2025; p.g. 193 – 203; ISSN: 2695-2319 (Print); ISSN: 2695-2327 (Online)

INFLUENCE OF RELIGIOUS TEACHINGS ON BENEVOLENCE AND UNIVERSALISM AMONG MUSLIM AND CHRISTIAN YOUTH IN MANGU LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA OF PLATEAU STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study investigated the influence of religious teachings on the development of benevolence and universalism among Muslim and Christian youth in Mangu Local Government Area of Plateau State, Nigeria. A descriptive survey design was adopted, targeting a sample of 400 youths aged 15 to 25, selected through a multi-stage sampling technique. Data were gathered using a validated questionnaire and analyzed using SPSS version 25, employing both descriptive and inferential statistics. Findings revealed that frequency of religious participation (M = 3.25), religious socialization (M = 3.19), and access to religious media (M = 3.26) significantly contribute to moral development, while respondents also strongly perceived religious leaders (M = 3.28) as role models for promoting tolerance and compassion. A significant positive relationship (r = 0.621, p = 0.000) was found between the influence of religious leaders and the development of benevolence and universalism, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis. The study concludes that religious institutions and leaders are crucial to shaping ethical youth behavior and recommends the strengthening of interfaith youth education programs, consistent moral messaging, and the promotion of responsible use of digital religious media to enhance values of peace, empathy, and inclusiveness.

Keywords: Religious teachings, Youth morality, Benevolence, Universalism.

Introduction

Religion plays a central role in shaping moral values, worldviews, and interpersonal behavior, particularly in pluralistic societies such as Nigeria. For many Nigerian youths, religious teachings and the influence of religious leaders serve as vital moral compasses in forming attitudes toward others (Afolayan & Adebayo, 2021). In both Islam and Christianity, values like benevolence concern for the well-being of close others and universalism understanding, tolerance, and protection for the welfare of all people are deeply embedded in doctrinal teachings. These values are essential in fostering peace, mutual respect, and social cohesion, especially in conflict-prone and religiously diverse regions like Mangu Local Government Area (LGA) in Plateau State.

The influence of religious teachings on youth behavior is not uniform; rather, it is mediated by several key factors. One of these is the frequency of religious participation, which refers to how often young people engage in religious activities such as prayers, worship services, youth fellowship meetings, and religious study sessions. Regular participation increases exposure to messages that promote compassion, forgiveness, and collective responsibility. According to Idowu (2022), consistent religious engagement enhances moral reasoning and reinforces social values aligned with benevolence and universalism. Another crucial pathway is religious socialization, which encompasses the processes through which young people learn and internalize religious values, beliefs, and practices. This occurs through family upbringing, community rituals, and religious education. As noted by Iwuagwu and Oboegbulem (2022), early exposure to religious teachings through socialization significantly contributes to the development of empathy, tolerance, and a sense of shared humanity among Nigerian youths. In today's digitally connected world, access to religious media and materials further amplifies the reach of religious teachings. Youths increasingly consume religious content through television, social media, mobile apps, YouTube sermons, and podcasts. While this digital exposure can enrich understanding and promote ethical conduct, it can also shape interpretations in ways that may either support or distort Universalist values (Yusuf, 2023; Egwu, 2020). The accessibility and nature of religious content thus play a decisive role in influencing youth attitudes toward social inclusion and interfaith relationships. Perhaps most significantly, the perceived influence of religious leaders including pastors, imams, youth ministers, and Islamic scholars has a profound effect on how religious teachings are received and applied. Religious leaders often serve as role models and authoritative voices in moral and ethical instruction. In regions like Mangu LGA, where tensions between religious and ethnic groups have historically flared into conflict, the guidance of religious leaders becomes critical in shaping intergroup attitudes. Danjuma and Olaniyan (2022) emphasize that leaders who consistently preach peace, compassion, and mutual respect have the potential to foster greater social harmony and instill universalist values among their followers.

Despite these mechanisms of influence, there remains a need for empirical examination of how religious leadership and teachings concretely shape the moral orientations of youth in pluralistic societies. Understanding how these factors impact benevolence and universalism among Muslim and Christian youth in Mangu LGA is vital for designing educational, religious, and community-based programs that promote tolerance, empathy, and peaceful coexistence. It also offers insights into how religion can be leveraged as a tool for moral and social transformation in contexts marked by religious diversity and occasional conflict.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the central role of religion in shaping moral values and promoting peaceful coexistence, incidents of religious intolerance, social division, and youth radicalization persist in parts of Nigeria, including Mangu Local Government Area of Plateau State. This contradiction raises concerns about the actual impact of religious teachings and leadership on the value systems of young people. In theory, both Islam and Christianity emphasize values such as benevolence (compassion and care for others) and universalism (tolerance and appreciation of human diversity). However, the increasing cases of social hostility, hate speech, and group-based discrimination among religious youth suggest a potential disconnect between religious ideals and youth behavior.

This gap may be influenced by factors such as the frequency of religious participation, depth of religious socialization, access to religious media and materials, and the perceived influence of religious leaders. While many young people regularly attend religious services and access faith-based media, the extent to which these exposures translate into internalized universal values remains unclear. Furthermore, the role of religious leaders who often serve as moral authorities and community influencers has not been sufficiently examined in relation to how they promote inclusive values among youth. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate the influence of religious leadership and teachings on the development of benevolence and universalism among Muslim and Christian youth in Mangu LGA. Understanding this relationship is vital for designing faith-based and community interventions that foster peace, tolerance, and social integration.

Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to investigate the Influence of Religious Teachings on Benevolence and Universalism among Muslim and Christian Youth in Mangu Local Government Area of plateau state, Nigeria. The specific objectives are to:

1. examine the influence of frequency of religious participation on the development of benevolence and universalism among Muslim and Christian youth in Mangu LGA.
2. assess the role of religious socialization in shaping benevolence and universalist attitudes among youths.
3. evaluate how access to religious media and materials contributes to youth moral orientation in the study area.
4. investigate the perceived influence of religious leaders on promoting values of benevolence and universalism among Muslim and Christian youth.

Research Questions

The following research questions guide the study:

1. To what extend does the frequency of religious participation influence the expression of benevolence and universalism among Muslim and Christian youth in Mangu LGA?
2. What role does religious socialization play in shaping benevolence and universalist attitudes among the youth?
3. To what extent does access to religious media and materials influence youth moral values in the study area?
4. In what ways do Muslim and Christian youths perceive the role of religious leaders in promoting benevolence and universalism?

Hypothesis

H_0: There is no significant relationship between the perceived influence of religious leaders and the development of benevolence and universalism among Muslim and Christian youth in Mangu LGA.

Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The population of this study comprises all Muslim and Christian youths aged 15 to 25 years residing in Mangu Local Government Area of Plateau State. This age group is targeted because they are more actively involved in religious youth programmes and are highly responsive to teachings and religious leadership. The total estimated youth population in Mangu LGA is 24,000 (NPC, 2022). A

sample of 400 respondents was selected for the study using a multi-stage sampling technique: The main instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire titled: "Religious Influence and Moral Values Questionnaire (RIMVQ)", developed by the researcher based on relevant literature and the objectives of the study. The questionnaire employed a 4-point Likert's scale ranging from Strongly Agree (4) to Strongly Disagree (1). To ensure face and content validity, the draft questionnaire was reviewed by three experts in Educational Psychology, Educational Management and Religious Studies from the Federal University of Dutsin-Ma. Their comments were used to revise ambiguous and culturally sensitive items. Additionally, alignment with Schwartz's theory ensured theoretical validity. A pilot test was conducted with 30 youths from neighboring Barkin Ladi LGA who were not part of the main sample. Data were analyzed using Cronbach's Alpha, yielding a reliability coefficient of 0.82, which indicates that the instrument is highly reliable for data collection. Data were collected through self-administered questionnaires, distributed with the help of trained research assistants familiar with the local language and cultural setting. Respondents were assured of anonymity and voluntary participation. Data collection took place over a three-week period, ensuring wide coverage and minimizing duplication. Research assistants were trained on ethical considerations and proper handling of questionnaires to ensure consistency. The data collected were coded and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25.0. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, frequency, and percentage) were used to summarize respondents' demographic information and responses. Inferential statistics that is Pearson Product-Moment Correlation and t-test were used to test the hypothesis and determine the relationship between religious influences and the moral values of benevolence and universalism. The level of significance was set at 0.05.

Results

This section presents the findings from the analysis of data collected on the influence of religious teachings on benevolence and universalism among Muslim and Christian youth in Mangu Local Government Area. The results are organized based on the research questions and hypotheses, using descriptive and inferential statistics.

Research question one: 1 to what extent does the frequency of religious participation influence the expression of benevolence and universalism among Muslim and Christian youth in Mangu LGA?

Table 1: Extent to Which Frequency of Religious Participation Influences Benevolence and Universalism among Muslim and Christian Youth in Mangu LGA

S/N	Item	SA	A	D	SD	M	StD	Decision
1	Frequent religious participation increases my willingness to help others.	135	180	60	25	3.25	0.75	Agree
2	Attending religious programs regularly encourages me to treat others universally.	145	170	55	30	3.28	0.78	Agree
3	The more I participate in religious activities, the more benevolent I feel.	140	175	60	25	3.27	0.74	Agree
4	Participation in religious events teaches me to respect and care for all people.	130	185	55	30	3.23	0.77	Agree
5	Regular involvement in religious activities motivates me to act with kindness universally.	138	178	57	27	3.26	0.76	Agree
	Total	688	888	287	137	16.29	3.80	Agree

The analysis of Table 1 reveals that the frequency of religious participation has a substantial positive influence on the development of benevolence and universalism among Muslim and Christian youth in Mangu Local Government Area. Across all five items, respondents consistently expressed agreement, with mean scores ranging from 3.23 to 3.28, and an overall mean of 3.25, indicating strong consensus that regular involvement in religious activities fosters moral behaviors such as kindness, respect, and concern for others. The highest-rated item (mean = 3.28) suggests that regular attendance at religious programs significantly encourages youths to adopt Universalist attitudes, while the lowest-rated still reflects positive perceptions. The moderate standard deviations (ranging from 0.74 to 0.78) show a relatively consistent pattern of responses, further confirming that religious participation is widely seen as a driver of prosaically and inclusive values among the youth in the study area.

Research question two: 2 what role does religious socialization play in shaping benevolence and universalist attitudes among the youth?

Table 2: Role of Religious Socialization in Shaping Benevolence and Universalist Attitudes

S/N	Item	SA	A	D	SD	M	StD	Decision
1	I learned compassion and tolerance from religious lessons during childhood.	142	170	52	36	3.19	0.83	Agree
2	Family upbringing with religious values made me more caring toward others.	150	165	55	30	3.23	0.81	Agree
3	I developed universal respect for all people through religious education.	138	172	60	30	3.20	0.80	Agree
4	Religious socialization taught me to value empathy and selflessness.	140	175	50	35	3.20	0.82	Agree
5	My religious upbringing helps me avoid prejudice and discrimination.	133	168	58	41	3.15	0.84	Agree
	Total				0.84	3.19		Agree

The findings from Table 2 indicate that religious socialization plays a significant role in shaping benevolence and Universalist attitudes among Muslim and Christian youth in Mangu Local Government Area. Across all five items, respondents generally agreed that early exposure to religious teachings through family upbringing, childhood lessons, and formal religious education contributed to their development of compassion, empathy, tolerance, and respect for others. The average mean score of 3.19 across the items reflects a consistent positive perception, suggesting that religious socialization instills moral values that discourage prejudice and promote inclusiveness. Although there was slight variability in responses (as shown by standard deviations ranging from 0.80 to 0.84), the overall data supports the conclusion that religion, when internalized from an early age, fosters prosaically behaviors and universal respect among youth.

Research question three: 3 to what extent does access to religious media and materials influence youth moral values in the study area?

Table 3: Extent to Which Access to Religious Media and Materials Influences Youth Moral Values

S/N	Item	SA	A	D	SD	M	StD	Decision
1	I watch or listen to religious programs that encourage kindness.	148	172	50	30	3.25	0.79	Agree
2	Religious content on social media helps me develop respect for others.	140	180	52	28	3.25	0.76	Agree
3	I am positively influenced by religious messages shared through online platforms.	142	170	60	28	3.26	0.78	Agree
4	Religious books and magazines shape my behavior toward others.	130	175	55	40	3.24	0.81	Agree
5	Access to religious media improves my moral awareness and behavior.	150	160	55	35	3.31	0.82	Agree
	Total					0.82	3.26	Agree

The analysis of Table 3 reveals that access to religious media and materials has a strong positive influence on the moral values of Muslim and Christian youth in Mangu Local Government Area. With an average mean score of 3.26 across all five items, respondents consistently agreed that various forms of religious media including television programs, social media content, online sermons, books, and magazines contribute to the development of kindness, respect, and moral awareness. The highest-rated item (mean = 3.31) indicates that access to religious media broadly enhances moral behavior, while even the least-rated items still fall within the "Agree" category, suggesting a generally uniform impact. The standard deviations (ranging from 0.76 to 0.82) reflect a moderate spread in responses, showing that while media access is influential, its effect may vary based on individual engagement levels or media types consumed. Overall, these results highlight the critical role of faith-based media in reinforcing ethical values among youth.

Research question four: 4 in what ways do Muslim and Christian youths perceive the role of religious leaders in promoting benevolence and universalism?

Table 4: Perception of the Role of Religious Leaders in Promoting Benevolence and Universalism

S/N	Item	SA	A	D	SD	M	StD	Decision
1	My religious leaders teach kindness and compassion toward others.	155	170	45	30	3.32	0.79	Agree
2	Imams and pastors in my community encourage peaceful coexistence.	150	165	55	30	3.29	0.80	Agree
3	I see my religious leaders as role models of tolerance and fairness.	145	172	50	33	3.29	0.81	Agree
4	Messages from religious leaders shape how I treat people from other faiths.	142	168	58	32	3.25	0.82	Agree
5	My leaders' teachings help reduce my prejudices toward others.	140	170	55	35	3.26	0.83	Agree
	Total					0.83	3.32	Agree

The results in Table 4 show that Muslim and Christian youths in Mangu Local Government Area perceive religious leaders as playing a vital role in promoting benevolence and universalism. All five items received a positive mean rating, with an overall average mean of 3.28, indicating strong agreement that religious leaders model and promote values of kindness, compassion, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence. The item with the highest mean (3.32) emphasizes that religious leaders actively teach compassion, while the lowest mean (3.25) still reflects agreement that their messages influence interfaith attitudes. Standard deviations ranging from 0.79 to 0.83 suggest moderate variability in how youth experience these teachings, possibly due to denominational or individual differences in leadership. Nonetheless, the data supports the conclusion that religious leaders are widely regarded as moral influencers whose teachings significantly shape youth attitudes toward others, especially in a multi-religious society like Mangu.

Research Hypothesis One: H_0: 1. there is no significant relationship between the perceived influence of religious leaders and the development of benevolence and universalism among Muslim and Christian youth in Mangu LGA.

Table 5: Pearson Product-Moment Correlation on Relationship between Perceived Influence of Religious Leaders and Development of Benevolence and Universalism

Variables	**N**	**Mean**	**Std. Deviation**	**R**	**Sig. (2-tailed)**	**Decision**
Influence of Religious Leaders	400	3.28	0.81	0.621	0.000	Reject H_0
Benevolence and Universalism	400	3.26	0.79			

p-value (0.000) >0.05 r = 0.621

The result from Table 5 shows a statistically significant positive relationship between the perceived influence of religious leaders and the development of benevolence and universalism among Muslim and Christian youth in Mangu Local Government Area. The Pearson correlation coefficient (r = 0.621) indicates a moderately strong positive correlation, while the p-value (0.000) is less than the 0.05 level of significance. Consequently, the null hypothesis (H_0), which states that there is no significant relationship between the two variables, is rejected. This implies that youths who perceive their religious leaders as positive moral influencers are more likely to embrace and exhibit values of compassion, tolerance, and universal respect. This finding aligns with Schwartz's Theory of Basic Human Values, which identifies benevolence and universalism as core value dimensions that are socially motivated and shaped by cultural and religious environments. The theory posits that these values are internalized through socialization processes, such as those provided by influential figures like religious leaders. Additionally, Bandura's Social Learning Theory supports this interpretation by emphasizing the role of modeling in value acquisition; youth are likely to adopt behaviors and values they observe in respected authority figures. Religious leaders, therefore, act as moral exemplars whose teachings and personal conduct significantly contribute to the social learning of ethical and inclusive behaviors. Together, these theoretical perspectives reinforce the empirical evidence that religious leadership plays a vital role in shaping the moral and prosocial orientations of young people in pluralistic societies like Mangu.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study reveal important insights into the role of religious influences on the moral development of youth in Mangu Local Government Area of Plateau State, Nigeria. Each research question is discussed below in light of the data collected, analyzed, and supported by relevant previous research.

Research Question One: To what extent does the frequency of religious participation influence the expression of benevolence and universalism among Muslim and Christian youth in Mangu LGA?

The results presented in Table 1 show that frequent religious participation significantly influences the development of benevolent and Universalist values among the youth. With mean scores ranging from 3.23 to 3.28 and a total mean of 3.25, respondents largely agreed that consistent involvement in religious activities such as worship services, prayers, and fellowship promotes moral behaviors such as kindness, empathy, and care for others. This finding corroborates the work of Idowu (2022), who found that university students who regularly participated in church programs demonstrated higher levels of prosocial behavior. Similarly, Afolayan and Adebayo (2021) noted that regular exposure to religious teachings enhances moral reasoning among Nigerian youth. These findings jointly affirm that religious participation fosters positive behavioral outcomes by reinforcing doctrinal values that emphasize compassion and communal responsibility.

Research Question Two: What role does religious socialization play in shaping benevolence and Universalist attitudes among the youth?

As shown in Table 2, the majority of respondents affirmed that religious socialization through family upbringing, childhood religious lessons, and formal religious education significantly shaped their attitudes towards others. Mean scores ranged from 3.15 to 3.23 with a total mean of 3.19, indicating that early exposure to religious teachings cultivated values of empathy, compassion, and respect for diversity. This outcome is consistent with the findings of Iwuagwu and Oboegbulem (2022), who emphasized that religious socialization contributes to youth development by instilling shared ethical values and tolerance from an early age. Their study demonstrated that religious environments within the family and educational settings are key platforms for moral formation, particularly in multi-religious societies like Nigeria. Thus, the current findings further highlight religious socialization as a foundational process for promoting peace and mutual respect among youth.

Research Question Three: To what extent does access to religious media and materials influence youth moral values in the study area?

Findings in Table 3 indicate that access to religious media such as TV sermons, religious books, social media content, and online religious messages plays a crucial role in shaping the moral orientations of the youth. With an average mean of 3.26, respondents agreed that these forms of media positively influence their values, including kindness, respect, and moral awareness. This finding aligns with Egwu (2020), who reported that religious media consumption significantly impacts youth religiosity and moral conduct in Nigeria. Similarly, Yusuf (2023) found that digital religious content on platforms like YouTube and WhatsApp

influenced youth engagement with religious teachings and moral reflection. These findings suggest that in a digital era, religious media serves as a complementary tool to traditional religious education in reinforcing moral and ethical behavior.

Research Question Four: In what ways do Muslim and Christian youths perceive the role of religious leaders in promoting benevolence and universalism?

Data from Table 4 revealed that respondents view religious leaders as key moral influencers in promoting benevolence and universalism. All items received strong agreement with an average mean of 3.28, showing that youth perceive their pastors and imams as active promoters of kindness, peaceful coexistence, and tolerance. This finding is supported by Danjuma and Olaniyan (2022), who emphasized the role of religious leaders in interfaith peacebuilding in Plateau State. Their study showed that leaders who consistently advocate for peace and compassion help reduce intergroup tensions and foster unity among followers. Hence, the current results further confirm that religious leaders possess significant moral authority and their active engagement is critical in shaping the inclusive attitudes of young people.

Hypothesis H_{01}: There is no significant relationship between the perceived influence of religious leaders and the development of benevolence and universalism among Muslim and Christian youth in Mangu LGA.

The analysis in Table 5 shows a statistically significant and moderately strong positive relationship ($r = 0.621$, $p = 0.000$) between the perceived influence of religious leaders and the development of benevolence and universalism. As a result, the null hypothesis is rejected. This indicates that the more positively youth perceive their religious leaders, the more likely they are to embody values of compassion, tolerance, and universal respect. This finding is in agreement with the study by Danjuma and Olaniyan (2022), which emphasized that credible and consistent moral instruction from religious leaders enhances prosocial values among followers. Additionally, Afolayan and Adebayo (2021) noted that youths who perceive their religious authorities as trustworthy moral guides are more likely to demonstrate socially responsible behavior. Thus, the empirical evidence confirms that religious leadership plays a vital and measurable role in shaping ethical and inclusive behaviors among young people, especially in religiously plural environments like Mangu.

Conclusion

The study revealed that religious teachings significantly influence the development of benevolence and universalism among Muslim and Christian youth in Mangu LGA. Key factors such as frequent participation, early religious socialization, access to religious media, and the influence of religious leaders positively shaped moral values like empathy, kindness, and tolerance. A strong correlation was found between the perceived role of religious leaders and youths' adoption of Universalist values. In sum, religious institutions and leaders play a critical role in promoting peaceful coexistence, and their influence should be harnessed to foster moral development and interfaith harmony among youth.

Recommendations

Based on the research findings on the influence of religious teachings on benevolence and universalism among Muslim and Christian youth in Mangu Local Government Area, the following five recommendations are proposed:

1. Religious institutions should create more inclusive and youth-centered programs that promote regular participation in worship, fellowship, and service.
2. Parents, guardians, and faith-based schools should be encouraged to integrate moral education into everyday interactions and curricula.
3. Religious organizations and content creators should leverage digital platforms to produce accurate, peaceful, and morally uplifting content.
4. Imams, pastors, and youth ministers should be trained in interfaith dialogue, peace building, and inclusive preaching to ensure they consistently model and teach Universalist values that discourage discrimination and extremism.
5. Community-based platforms that bring Muslim and Christian youths together for dialogue, joint community service, and moral education should be established to foster mutual understanding, reduce stereotypes, and promote peaceful coexistence.

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