

DECLINE OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES IN AN ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND TECH AGE: EXPERIENCES AND WAY FORWARD

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Abstract

In this study, an attempt has been made to vividly unveil the state of religious studies in Nigeria and the impact of artificial intelligence and technology on the discipline. The objective of the paper is to evaluate the relevance of the discipline. The research also investigates the challenges facing the field and proposes solutions aimed at cushioning its further decline. It is evident that the aspiration of studying religion in tertiary institutions has undermined by the current wave of technological advancement. In the past few decades, greater relevance and preference have been ascribed to Western driven disciplines and technology related skills. The qualitative analysis utilizes both primary and secondary data. This paper observes that enrollment in Religious Studies in Nigeria is declining because of the rise of technology, inferiority complex, secularism, proliferation of private universities and institutions, lack of interest by students, difficulty of some of the language components of the courses, economic instability and bad governance in Nigeria. Notwithstanding that religion has continued to grow, academic study of religion has continued to decline. The research recommends that Religious Studies in Nigeria should be repositioned through a total educational overhaul that incorporates computer practical knowledge and relevant A.I certifications into students' academic activities. It is important that the teaching of these skills be attached reasonably to the various course descriptions and contents of the various institutions. It is also necessary for the lecturers to become acquainted with relevant technological skills to ensure more effective delivery of the courses.

Keyword: Religious studies, Artificial intelligence, Science, Technology and Nigeria

Introduction

The stride of technology advancement is a proof of the constant change prevalent with nature and time. The information age (from 1950s) has birthed digital computer and faster internet procession. The progress of technology and innovations has remained unwavering since then. The ripple effect is however the concomitant change it has on human institutions and ideas. Its speed has inversely disrupted the activities of religion significantly in the western world. The interest in the study of religion has lessened because of preference to empiricism, science and technology. The aversion to religious teachings, beliefs and doctrines in the many developed nations is gradually becoming common among the Nigerian youths. Religion, science and technology have continued to intersect on different levels. Modern science has thus impacted on religion significantly. Scholars affirm the correlation and interaction between religion and technology.

Further Zhao (2019) notes "religion is also expanding with the development of human communication technology and the two continue to influence each other" (p. 2024). However, scholars like McClure (2017) recognize the overwhelming impact of the internet on religion. He remarks "Internet use is associated with increase in being religiously unaffiliated and decreases in religious exclusivism" (p. 482). The present advancement of technological skills and resources in Africa has swayed interest of many students to such paths. The technology affects other aspects or connections of religion including its study. Such colossal effect has diminished the interest in studying religion. This outcome is not surprising as many evidently study what they consider relevant and profitable. The disparity in the number of students applying for these courses considered contemporarily professional therefore for attention. Clearly the radical decline in the study of religion could further exacerbate the already religious decay and crises in Nigeria. Invariably, religion especially in Nigeria when left to hands of quacks would rather worsen the abuse and malfeasance induced by false religiosity. There must be deliberate attempts to revitalize and preserve academic study of religion even in a technological era.

The Wave of Technology and Artificial Intelligence

The landmark phases of the information and technology evolution started from the period of modern science. Notably the transformative impact of artificial intelligence in information technology is invaluable and has changed the tides of innovation. A new era in technology is born in the face of Artificial Intelligence. Azamat (2024) avers that Artificial intelligence has increased automation, enhanced data analytics, improved user experiences, bolstered cyber security, accelerated research and development. The present robust integration of artificial intelligence into information technology however poses different concerns. Its implications could be

discussed from several points in the general society, from the academics and from ethics. Artificial intelligence has created new ways for interaction, analysis and decision-making. It has also transformed user experiences by making digital interactions more intuitive and personalized. Brando (2025) quips that “It appears that AI is quickly becoming a part of everyday tasks. People have observed this in action with AI-enabled personal assistants like Siri, Cortana and Alexa” (p. 149). New AI-powered solutions have also emerged to support individuals in fields such as human resources, technical support, finance, data analysis, fact-checking, programming, translation, writing and art creation. In places today, organizations are using these AI capabilities to increase productivity. Broadly, Ayo (2001) sees information and communication technology as the use of computer system and telecommunications equipment in information handling; consisting of essentially three basic components which are: electronic processing using the computer, transmission of information using telecommunication equipment and dissemination.

Accordingly, Mahoney (1998) since World War II information has emerged as a fundamental scientific and technological concept applied to different phenomena. The world is in the age or stage of information. Technological advancements are key to the further penetration and dissemination of these information. Information, science and technology are all knitted into the maze of computing. They claim information as the product of both science and technology. It is the fusion founded in information computer and technology (ICT) that has brought about the latest development in technology albeit years later. In a way, the innovation of Artificial Intelligence refers to the copying or imitation of human intelligence in computers and machine. By this they mimic the human capacity of learning, reasoning, solving problems and performing certain tasks such as speech recognition and decision making. Computer though at its basic phase of history possessed the ability to execute intelligent commands. They were however not as fast and efficient in replicating human intelligence. Navigating the social world today has been made easier by digital infrastructures. Birtchnell (2018) asserts that rapid advances in AI have significantly disrupted the world economy and other sectors like engineering, agriculture, politics and media. The penetration, use and reliance on artificial intelligence have numerous implications that affect different disciplines (Zuniga, Goyanes and Durotoye, 2023).

Furthermore, Graglia and Von-Huelse (2020) consider the six waves of technology revolution. The waves are; the first wave marked by industrial revolution, the second wave marked by modern facilities and communication that improved production in industries. The next is the third wave, this revolution started from the late 19th century to the first half of the 20th century. The third wave was marked by the development of electricity, combustion engine and chemical products. The next is the fourth wave; it began from the last part of the 20th century and was marked by the first computer, ENIAC. The fifth wave began around 1990s and was distinguished by heavily information and communication technology. Other significant technological developments here are: digital cellular phones, digital social networks and development of software industry. The fifth wave also described as the information age brought with it Ultra High Frequency (UHF) and radio Frequency Identification (RFID). Finally the sixth wave, this is the current stage of technology. Some decades into this wave, advancement of technology peaked momentarily this period with development of new technologies. Artificial intelligence was an important part of this technological advancement. The smart features in computers were more pronounced. The speed and efficiency of devices and technological products from this period were exceptional.

The Changes in the Choice of Discipline

The ripple effect of artificial intelligence and technology is the change in the interest of many individuals. The attention towards tech especially modern skill sets is undeniable and those possessing these skills are highly sort after in the employment space. Expedient progress of technology from the latest wave of technology has decimated the problem of physical labour. Businesses and organizations are rather utilizing these devices powered by artificial intelligence to save cost. Leading in this transformation in the work and labour sector are the following; artificial intelligence, biomedicine, hydrogen engine and robots. Digitalization and exponential increase of computational power created favourable conditions for the development of new products and services. Similar to the earliest industrial revolution, artificial intelligence launched competitive career opportunities far advanced from other traditional disciplines. The demand of these skills has skyrocketed over the past few years because of superior salary or wage scales. Other disciplines in many institutions are affected by this radical shift. Some specialties in arts, humanities and education are experiencing significant gap in the number of enrollments.

The reach and advantages of artificial intelligence notwithstanding, many are skeptical about other subtle implications of artificial for the labour force. They fear technology may overtake and kick people out of their jobs. Beyond this the questions of; privacy violation, reduced human interaction and deteriorating human ability of critical thinking concern many as well. This explains why many are choosing health and tech disciplines over many other specializations. Wang (2024) notes that “AI has demonstrated significant potential in revolutionizing

the healthcare, education, finance and computing industries” (p. 195). The various AI theories and software tools have shown notable success in increasing productivity and also addressing difficult and challenging societal problems.

Relevance and Place of Religion and Religious Studies in Nigeria

Religious studies in Nigeria holds important place as a social discipline or discipline in arts and humanities. Religion is an important part of the lives of Nigerians. This integral role of religion remains valid identity of the African culture. Religion in Nigeria cannot be undermined because of its primacy in the lives of the people. Religious studies must be included in any serious attempt to understand any Nigerian social discourse. The essential role and place of religion therefore calls for careful study of the subject. These roles include the following:

Emotional Support: Certain vital obligations and functions to the citizens that ought to be performed by the government are left unattended. Religion fills in the void in some of these areas. It provides guidance and emotional support for the individuals. The religious leaders are critical part of the counseling services in cases where the people may not access them easily. The guidance and counseling services are rendered by these religious functionaries who have little or no professional or formal experience.

Rationalizing Reality and Explaining Various Conflicting Situations: Religion has helped many individuals in resolving various existential crises. In a country like Nigeria where poor leadership and poverty many people are confounded with this overwhelming problems. Religion in Nigeria offers succor and hope to the people. In its aspect of theodicy, religion helps many to understand these insurmountable Nigerian challenges as part of God's bigger plan.

Providing Sense of Security: The surging insecurity in Nigeria has left many Nigerians in distraught and fright; religion however buffers such feelings. The belief and hope in the supreme reality extends a feeling of security and protection amidst the uncertainty and chaos. Seeing that the security of the citizens is not assured in the nation, religion assuages such apprehension while assuring spiritual and physical security of the religious adherents.

Influences Lively Economic Activities: Religion boosts individuals to do businesses. The assurances, motivations, hopes and affirmations obtained through prayers and religious activities help the people to build positive mindset for excellence in business and career. Also the trainings and economic empowerment projects by different religious organizations are targeted to ensure that financial independence is actualized by many Nigerians.

Solidarity and Community: Religion in Nigeria partakes in building solidarity in the typical cultural setting. This sense of solidarity in traditional religion has been adopted by other foreign religions in Nigeria. They have acclimated themselves as a binding force in the society. The communities founded through such solidarity fuel unity and self development also community development. Solidarity obtainable in religious groups are solid support system for many of adherents of the religion.

Moral Development and Cultural Framework: Religion supports the moral structure of the individuals in traditional environment. Cultivation and equipping of moral consciousness and orientations marks a vital role played by religion. People get acquainted with the ethical injunctions and its diverse forms of operations through the institution of religion. Remarkably within the seasoned traditional and cultural identity of the Nigerian people, it further augments the cultural status of the people. It has refined many cultural practices as well elevated a host of others in the traditional setting.

Religion Supplements Government Efforts toward National Development: Nation building and national development in Nigeria were historically spurred by various missionary bodies. Religion has maintained this essential role by being vested in human, capital and resource development. Consistently religion has shown its capacity as a force for instituting and running different sectors of the society particularly education and health sectors in Nigeria. The prime examples by missionary agencies were critical to efforts of other religious bodies. The evident later attempts by others with these earliest missionary models facilitated significant development in Nigeria.

Sense of Identity: Religion offers a sense of identity, where individuals belong. Religious identity is an influential identity many often associate with in Nigeria. They understand life, the world and their activities through the lens of this identity. This firm need to identify with religion explains the traditional worldview and overtures of African as a religious world. Amidst scarcity of resources and alternatives, religion fills the void and answer to the question of what is the meaning of life itself.

Religion Act as an Agent of Social Cohesion and Stability: religion as a binding factor has united many people together. Individuals from different backgrounds are brought into a common fold. This is more evident in Christianity and Islam in Nigeria. This common religious union often propels individuals to relate better with others whom they are having common belief and spiritual system. It further offers a distinct level of stability to the individual members of the religion. Stability, social connections, psychological well-being and stability for overall self-development contribute to these crucial qualities provided by religion.

Observably religious studies examine and facilitate holistic appraisal of these various contents of religion in Nigeria. It explores these functions in relation to the Nigerian reality and experience. Imperatively, religious studies remain a relevant discipline for understanding the Nigerian identity and cannot be discarded or disregarded. The importance of studying religion in Nigeria is therefore emphasized in this work as means of revitalizing and restoring authentic religiosity. Since religion influence diverse areas of life, studying it as a social phenomenon and part of the culture of the people is paramount.

Various Obstacles and Challenges to Religious Studies in Nigeria

The following are the obstacles and challenges of studying religion in Nigeria. They include these:

Conflict with Science: The contents of religion largely differ from science. Science contradicts religion by its use of empirical evidence. Both religion and science address issues and human experiences using distinct methods. One based on faith, the other on experiment and verifiable proofs. Many individuals in the society are finding the methods of science more relatable and straightforward unlike religion. Ezeonwumelu (2021) writes “The problem for which people consulted religion for are now more adequately attended by science” (p. 106). The widening gap has drastically reduced the value placed on religion by many people. Against the novelty of science, religion is pitied as archaic and a study that has outlived its relevance. Notwithstanding the position of science, religion has continued to impact meaningfully on many Nigerians across all social strata.

Advances in Technology: The advancement of technology especially in the current sixth wave of technology has introduced more challenges for religion. Though religion may benefit from technological advancements as it aides the religious propagation, however they are becoming averse to the growth of religion. The study of religion in Nigeria is tainted by some aspects of these technological devices and advancements. Chief among these negative impacts is the shift from traditional method of worship and a new rush for social media presence of religious groups. Falana (2025) recognizes other impacts of social media on Christianity. For him some of the negative effects it poses are: addiction or uncontrollable attachment to technology, lethargy or laziness, source of immorality and a godless society. The resentment and distance from religion and religious is intensified by the spread of technology. Ibezim and Chukwuma-Offor (2024) likewise argue that digital technology interferes with African religion and values.

Perceived Lack of Relevance and Professional Status: Amongst the students, the festering feeling of inferiority lingers and discourages many from studying some courses. They are not proud of their discipline because of the discerned low status of religion. This would collaborate with others who regard religion as archaic. Such view is however tainted because religious proliferation in Nigeria is persistent despite similar condensation of religion. The increase and exponential growth of religion is constant and it has asserted principal place in the lives of the people. The current popular trend of classifying some courses as professional leaves out other courses and disciplines to be in less demand and thus less attractive to applicants.

Poverty and Scarcity of White-Collar Jobs: It is becoming increasingly difficult for many graduates to gain white-collar jobs after school. It appears that only but a few disciplines are sought because they are seen to have higher chances for job opportunities than others. The vogue of healthcare and tech jobs admittedly has taken over the formal job space in Nigeria. It is evident that education in Nigeria is primarily for economic and employment purposes because of the grave impact of poverty in the country. According to Olaogun and Ekundayo (2023), there several factors and challenges in career choices. Among them are lack of guidance, financial conditions, copycat decisions and needs in the labour market.

Secularism: Since modern science began to make waves, a trend that has appeared obvious is secularism. In Nigeria today, many youths are drifting towards secularism. Their disinterest in faith system could be because of better experience with technology and the obvious change in values and beliefs. Total apathy and atheism are gradually gaining momentum even the in the religious Nigerian society. Correspondingly, many acclaimed irreligious and privately religious individuals may not choose studying religion as a discipline.

Absence of Measurable Index/Values for Religious Claims: Religious ideas, beliefs and doctrines are difficult to measure. They do not possess any standard measure for measuring and verifying its claims. This is mostly because the major contention of religion relies on the invisible and supernatural. Religion however depends on faith for its evaluation and analysis. Brenner, LaPlante and Reed (2023) write that “religious affiliation as one of the measures of religious belonging, which itself one of three main dimensions of religiosity along with belief and behaviour” (p.405).

Poor Funding, Infrastructure and Teaching Equipments: The Nigerian public institutions are challenged by inadequate funding from the government. It mitigates against the total teaching methods thereby impeding on qualitative education system. Non-science departments suffer the most from this poor funding as the equipping of science laboratories takes the greater quota of the available funds. Odediji, Folawiyo and Akinsuroju (2023) note that “It seems that the educational sector is encountering several problems ranging from infrastructural deterioration to inadequate manpower, lack of funds and inconsistent educational policies” (p. 107).

Limited Candidates/Students Allocation to the Religious Studies' Departments: Some institutions in Nigeria give little attention to religious studies. The number for their students continues to decline as against other departments. The import of such abysmal allocation is the inadvertent fall in the number of new students for the various departments of religion. Measures must be taken by various admission units of Nigerian institutions to improve on the quota of the students.

Possibility of Migration/Transfer to Other Departments: In many Nigerian universities, some students are in the character of accepting admission into religious studies because they are hoping to transfer out the next year. This is fueled by the initial inability of these students to meet up with the admission requirements of their desired departments. They therefore accept admission only to desert after a while. This attitude has seriously affected the growth of the departments of religion.

Uninspired Students: the outbreak of students that are disinterested in education is a menace battled in many institutions. Severely affected by their poor academic background, it is usually difficult for them to take their studies seriously. This outright disinterest in education and the general department of religion stunts their overall performance. Similarly this also overtime weakens the motivation and enthusiasm of lecturers to impact on such unmotivated students.

Revitalization of Religious Studies in an Artificial intelligence and Tech Age

Reinvigorating religious studies in the contemporary Nigeria is a dire call for all individuals. Considering the primary and essential role of religion in the lives of many Nigerians, the study of religion deserves further attention. As a critical component of the social personae of Nigerians, religion is a concept and a reality that must be assiduously managed by professional. This is especially from the point of academics and not necessarily as a faith profession. It is on this foundation of religion that some other social realities are fully realized. Constructing accurate profile of different dimensions of the Nigerian people's lives would require the understanding of religion as practiced in Nigeria. In the situation where individuals are finding meaning and hope in life by the various interventions of religion, its study is therefore salient. Again in the current age of artificial intelligence incorporating the essentials of modern technology and development should not be undermined.

Fundamentally, departments of religious studies and its various academic associations have duty of championing for integration of modern technological systems into the department. Therefore, developing curriculum that is tune with technological advancements and skills is inevitable. A general and nationwide education intervention must be made to salvage the condition. Building educational applications, building of virtual communities/forum for teachers and students, live streaming techniques, content creation for religious teachings, YouTube and podcast hosting are some of the ways of creating relevant contemporary knowledge with religion. Other artificial intelligent tools to be included are Virtual Reality (VR) and the Augment Reality (AR). Virtual reality as tool could be used to create immersive environment for worship and virtual touring of religious sites from the comfort of the classroom. On the other hand, augment reality can be used for interactive sessions and lessons on artifacts and historical events. Augment reality (AR) also useful in producing engaging essays and more so used to learn speech/public speaking and sermon delivery skills.

The utilization of these technological applications and skills can help in the seamless blending of faith, academics and technology. The aim is to introduce contemporary employable and marketable skills into religion. Embracing a more technology complaint education system her would further open up the students to many contemporary in-demand skills and opportunities for self-employment.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has traced the decline of Religious Studies in many tertiary institutions in Nigeria. The influence of science, technology and more recently, artificial intelligence has contributed to the sharp decline. The study explains this change in the dynamics of career and educational choices in the Nigerian institutions. In most cases, the search for greener pastures and prospects for better job opportunities motivates these choices. The study also evaluates the relevance and place of Religious Studies in a highly religious society such as Nigeria. Technology, particularly artificial intelligence and social media, has had positive impact on Religious Studies. At the same time, the vast technological advantages tend to overshadow the importance of Religious Studies as an academic discipline. Religion has maintained its fundamental position in the value system and social hierarchy of Nigerians; therefore, its study here must be encouraged. Instead of abandoning religion in a religious and traditional society, it should rather be integrated with various technological and practical skills. The study therefore recommends the following:

- Evaluation of the existing academic curriculum with the aim of aligning it with current technological advancements.

- Inclusion of relevant artificial intelligence (A.I) and social media management skills into humanities and social disciplines. Skills such as YouTube and podcast hosting, use of Virtual Reality and Augment Reality among others are needed to enhance career opportunities.
- In the era of Learning Management System (LMS) in Nigerian universities and institutions, other artificial intelligence tools such as; MagicSchool, Education Copilot, Canva, QuilBot, Perplexity, AI lesson planners, Grammarly, and other research AI tools should be introduced into the teaching system even for students of religion.

It is therefore concluded that Religious Studies must, as a matter of urgency, re-evaluate its curriculum, teaching methods and instructional tools. Efforts must thus be made to harness modern educational technologies and techniques for the contemporary teaching and study of religion.

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