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Religious Pluralism: The New Reality

Lemuel Odeh and Titus Aliyu

Abstract

One of the most currently used concepts in contemporary religious studies is religious pluralism. It has gained considerable importance because of the increasing diversity of religions in various communities of the world and also because of the increasing restlessness in today's world due to religious conflict. This paper analyses the contours of religious pluralism and how the ever-changing religious landscape offers an opportunity to consider the flow of ideas from this new diversity of responses and choices at the individual, group, and state levels. There is therefore the need now for different religions to acknowledge that social dynamics have made their religion a minority player in a pluralistic world. Individual religion should abandon the claim of dominance that is inherent in their socio-political ideas. With this new reality, various religions, in particular, the Christian religion must now find a way to re-energize the traditional power of faith. Christianity must accept the fact that pluralism has appeared in a modern form. The paper suggests that Churches in pluralistic societies should imbibe the virtues of religious tolerance and dialogue. This is the reason why this article adopted the descriptive approach to religious diversity, identifying the normative- changed nature inherent to measure of religion. The paper concludes that, religious pluralism holds the basic belief that there is virtue in every religion, just as all religions are good and are of equal value.

Keywords: Religions, pluralism, Christianity, Churches.

Introduction

The reality of multiple religious rather than just one entails that all the religions are not the same; they describe different religious objects, and they each provide unique forms of salvation. The immediate advantage of this approach is that it explains how all religions are equally valid without glossing over the real differences that define them (Daren, 2013). In the past decades, pluralism has gained a central position on many forums. In theological, and more specifically, in ecclesiological contexts, it has been the main issue, involving a

more positive attitude towards other religions and cultures. At the same time pluralism also led to the appearance of fears, tension and misunderstandings (Roberto, C 2003). The new religious diversity, calls for both understanding and transformation between Christians, Muslims, African religious traditionalists, Buddhists, Hindus, and many others to see themselves as neighbors in our global village. Even before the arrival of Europeans to many continents, religious diversity was a reality on ground. The religious ways of peoples indigenous to this part of the world were themselves varied and alive. In the context of our pluralistic world, Benedict Anderson suggests that imagination plays critical role. In fact, Anderson argues, the most powerful mapping of the world and its boundaries is not done by geographical survey teams or armies to the world. It results from the power of imagination which creates and bears for us a sense of community, a sense of we-national, religious, cultural, and multicultural (David, S 1996). There is we language in every religious tradition, for the we issue is not simply a sociological matter but a theological issue, inextricably related to our deepest religious values (David, S 1996).

Hindus speak of the whole world as a single family-Vasudha Iva Kodambakkam. Buddhists speak of the sangha, ecclesial community, of the four cosmic directions; Muslims find ways of interpreting the umma, the Muslim community, in a broad and open sense to include all people who have aligned their lives towards God. Jews speak of God's covenant with Noah as a covenant with all who keep moral precepts. There may be isolationists who see the future in terms of widening the distance between we and them. But in every tradition, there are also currents of thinking and imaging that are attempts to steer towards a wider we, a we that links rather than divides (David, 1996).

In the Christian tradition, there is the language of the oikos, the household. The Gospel of John (14:2) tells of the household of God in which there are many mansions. It is commonly known that from this term oikos comes the word oikumene (or ecumene), that means the household of the whole inhabited earth. It is not surprising that the Christian ecumenical movement found this term expressive of the worldwide extent of the church, a universal household. And yet clearly the whole inhabited earth is not Christian, or Jewish, or Muslim, or Hindu, or Buddhist. And yet, surely the bard is right (Office on Interreligious Relations). Religious pluralism needs to be addressed not only as theological or doctrinal issue but as

one that has implications for a person's way of life. A theological take on religious pluralism is often based on or leads to the theology of religions. Today, a responsible Christian understanding of God cannot be developed in a contemporary perspective unless one takes into consideration the multi-religious context. The approach that recommends itself for this purpose is one that focuses on religious practices as a result of semiotic processes that constitute the actual content of human experiences (Julian, 2020). It requires also, a theology that acknowledges religious otherness ((Byrne, P 1995).

There is great religious diversity in the world, both of religious traditions (Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism) and of traditions within religions (Protestantism, Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholicism) within Christianity. This religious diversity raises a number of pressing philosophical questions; in particular, questions regarding the epistemic and soteriological import of such diversity (Berlin, P 1995). Some of these epistemic questions include: what epistemic obligation does religious diversity impose on us, given that this diversity highlights substantial religious disagreement (Berlin, P 1995). Soteriological questions include: what does these diversity amongst sincere and pious religious faithful suggest about the soteriological value of any of one of the traditions? Assuming there is at least one good, any of the religious traditions lay sole claim to garnering Divine favor, which one of the religions will claim it? Is it Catholic, Islam, or the Buddhist? While the term religious pluralism sometimes simply designates the phenomenon of religious diversity, in the context of philosophy of religion, it designates a specific philosophical view that aims to answer questions like those above.

No specific religious perspective is epistemologically superior and, what is more, that the religious perspectives of more than one basic theistic system or variant thereof are equally close to the truth (Basinga, D 2002). And in response to the soteriological questions, the religious pluralist claims that there is one and only path to eternal existence with God or divine favor. When religions and their expressions and articulations are addressed from the point of practices and the experiences they produce, it is possible to develop an interdisciplinary discourse that can create mutual understanding and allow for recognition

of similarities as well as differences in and between the diverse religious traditions (Basinga, D 2002).

Theories of Religious Pluralism

Renowned Sociologist, Peter Berger argues that secularization theory- the idea that modernity necessarily leads to a decline of religion has been falsified. Rather than an age of secularity, ours is an age of pluralism. In other words, the problem of modernity is not that the gods have fled, but that there are too many of them around (Berlin, I 2001). As a critically acclaimed theologian as well as a philosopher, John Hick has published a wide range of notable works, many of which especially the more recent ones are about his pluralist vision, which include *God Has many Names: British New Religious pluralism*, 1980. Heim's (1995) theory of multiple religious-ends, mainly because such alternative pluralist model is meant to be a direct challenge to Hick's. The assumption in Heim's theory is that different religions traditions would lead their followers to different religious- ends, and that there is no universal denominator for all religions. These assumptions allow Heim to deal with problem of conflicting truth- claims without diminishing any of them into mere myth like Hick does. This is the main reason why many scholars prefer his model over Hick's, for it is believed to be able to save more religious referential values and leave world religions, or to be more precise, Christianity and Buddhism, as they are (Eddy, P 2002). One may argue that Eddy (2002) and Cheetham (2003) have contributed a more thorough review of Hick's project, Heim's model is chosen not because he is the most significant or influential critic of Hick, but because he has suggested an alternative, confessional pluralist model that functions differently from that of Hick's in many ways. Many Buddhist scholars have used Heim's model as an example to indicate why a confessional model is more preferable than Hick's neutral approach (Eddy, P 2002). John Hick believes that all religions are authentic in the sense that they all respond to the ultimate reality, and that they all have the ability to lead their followers to the same ultimate better religious end. As previously described, Hick's interpretation of the world religious situation is not completely consistent, yet the proposal he came up with in 1989 has remained his standard pluralist vision (Eddy, p 2002).

There are many theories of religious pluralism. The exclusivists – inclusivist pluralist trichotomy has become standard since the 1980s. Exclusivism about religious diversity denies any form of pluralism; it denies that all religion or all major ones are the same in some important respect. It is difficult to make fully clear distinction between exclusivist and inclusivist approaches. The basic idea is that the inclusivist grants more of the values in question to religions other than the single best religion; more truth, more salvific efficacy, more genuine moral transformation, and so forth. Because of their fit with many traditional religious beliefs and commitments, sometimes exclusivism and inclusivism are considered as two varieties of confessionalism, views on which one religion is tried and we must view other religion in the light of that fact (Byrne, 2004).

Historical Influences of Religious Pluralism

What is today called philosophy of religion appears early in the history of western religion – arguably as far back as Plato's *Euthyphro*, where in Socrates's questions the title character as to whether the nature of piety follows on the will of gods or vice-versa. Most early accounts of religion either ignore pluralism or do not tend it as an issue worthy of genuine consideration. Pre-modern sources that do not treat religious diversity seriously tend to adopt exclusivist positions. Once religions began to be considered as such alongside each other, positions approaching pluralism soon appeared (Schwartz, 2019). In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, works by figures such as Spinoza, Lock, Hume and Voltaire presented rational and naturalistic interpretations of religion and argued for religious tolerance (Johan, et al., 2020).

Though this account focused largely on Christianity, and to a lesser extent Judaism, they laid the foundation for future pluralist approaches worth examining here is that of Immanuel Kant. Kant does not offer an argument for religious pluralism, but such a position emerges as a consequence of his account of rational religion and the distinction he makes between it and particular religious tradition (Julian, 2020). In his "Religion within the Bound of Bare reason", he argues that authentic religion is purely rational; specifically, it is grounded in a human being's moral capacity (Byrne, 1995). In his work "The critique of

pure reason” Kant argued that, while the existing religions and their respective sets of particular beliefs and practices can often be for the moral progress of their communities, the rational idea is an “invisible church” made up of persons able to live autonomous moral lives (Byrne, 1995). Thus, Kant makes the following: “There is only one (true) religion; but there can be many kinds of faith. One may say, further, that in the various churches, set apart from each other because of the difference in their kind of faith, one and the same true religion may nonetheless be found (Quinn, et al., 2000).

Schleiermacher in agreement with Kant in his systematic theological work, identifies the feeling that characterizes religion as one of “absolute dependence” – that is, the feeling that one’s very existence depend on something that, in some way or other, transcends oneself (Hick, et al., 1987). For Schleiermacher, religion is first and foremost a matter for the individual, and does not disconnect the possibility that one could live a highly religious life without belonging to a particular religious tradition. He goes so far as to argue that the diversity of traditions is necessary for the task of representing the infinite within the limitations of forms comprehensible to humans (Hick, et al., 1987).

Liberation Perspectives of Religious Pluralism

Liberation theology which advocates a religious duty to aid those who are poor or suffering other forms of inequality and oppression has had a significant influence on recent discussions of pluralism. The struggle against oppression can be seen as providing an enterprise in which members of diverse religious tradition can come together in solidarity (Knitter, 1992). Paul knitter, whose work serves as a prominent theological synthesis of liberation and pluralist perspectives, argues that engaging in interreligious dialogue is part and parcel of the ethical responsibility at the heart of liberation theology. Knitter claims that, if members of diverse religions are interested in encountering each other in dialogue and resolving their conflicts, which can only be done on the basis of some common ground, the quarrel about superiority of religions will be settled. And this common ground, according to Knitter needs to be neither transcendent nor already existing (Knitter,1992). This, Knitter attests provide a common cause with which diverse religious traditions are discussed and towards which they can come together to craft a common agender.

Earth does not only serve as a common physical location for all religious traditions, but it also provides these traditions which Julian perfunter calls a "common cosmological story" (Julian, 2020). That is, the earth is the focal point for our modern scientific knowledge of the cosmos, and this knowledge has become so all-encompassing that it now unavoidably places the entirety of creation alongside humanity in its narrative (Julian, 2020). On this basis, Julian makes a case that different religious traditions share an ecological responsibility and that awareness of this shared responsibility, as it continues to emerge, it can also serve as a basis for mutual understanding.

The problem of pluralism today derives its character from the retreats of religion into the private sphere and the leveling of the differences between religions, as a result of enlightenment critique (Mekin, 2012). To do justice to the others in different traditions, there is need to surrender the claim of the superiority and finality of the other religions. No one should claim that it has final word about God. Theology may be seen as channels, introducing those who ponder them and also to those who accepted their teachings. In our search, for theology of religious pluralism, we must constantly review our traditions if we expect them to survive in a plural context. Community with other religious traditions have to be an intra-communion dialogue fully exposed to the capacity for living in plurality (Mekin, 2012).

The Challenges of Religious Plurality

Today Christians in almost all parts of the world live in religiously plural societies. Persistent plurality and its impact on their daily lives are forcing them to seek new adequate ways of understanding, in relating to people of other religion. Religious identities, loyalties, and sentiments have become important components in so many international and inter-ethnic conflicts that some say the "politics of ideology" which played a crucial role in the 20th century, has been replaced in our day by the "politics of identity" (Ricoeur, 2010). There are greater awareness of independence of human life, and the need to collaborate across religious barriers in dealing with the pressing problems of the world (Ricoeur, 2010).

All religious traditions, therefore, are challenged to contribute to the emergence of a global community that would live in mutual respect and peace. At stake is the credibility of religious traditions as forces that can bring justice, peace, and healing to a broken world (Rowe,1999). Most religious traditions exhibit enormous internal diversity attended by painful division and disputes. Given the context of increased polarization of communities, the prevalent climate of fear, and the culture of violence that has gripped our world, the mission of bringing healing and wholeness to the fractured human community is the greatest challenge that faces the religious tradition in our day (Rowe, 1999). The culture and doctrinal differences among religious tradition, however, have always made inter-religious dialogue difficult. This is now aggravated by tensions and animosities generated by global conflicts and mutual suspicions and fears (Bogarchs, 2002). Therefore, dialogue, reconciliation and peace building across the religious divides have become urgent, and yet they are never achieved through isolated events or programs, but programs that bring all religions and traditions together as one body, believing in one God and master of all creatures (Small, 2020). This involved a difficult process sustained by faith, courage and hope (Small,2020).

These challenges require us to be more attentive than before to our relationship with other religious communities, and check how they can be brought together as people of one tradition and faith in the same God. They challenge us to acknowledge others in their differences, to welcome strangers even if their strangeness sometimes threatens us, and to seek reconciliation even with those who declare themselves our enemies (Mekin, 2012). It is not exaggeration to claim that one of the greatest challenges of our time has been pluralism, since the contact with different cultures and societies are now the daily norm rather than the occasional exception (David, 1996). Such encounters may have fortuitous ramifications, such as the sharing of knowledge and development of new ideas or as others have suggested, they may result in a clash of civilization (David, 1996). Whatever case, pluralism is now a much more widely chocked experience for people than ever in history, and this implies there is urgent need to learn how to live with one another in the midst of a wide diversity of views, beliefs, and custom (David, 1996). Pluralism is now a permanent and irreversible feature of our contemporary world, and therefore, it is critical to learn how

to live with it (Dean,1995). Just recently Pope Francis was in Kazakhstan, a vast country in Central Asia for the Seventh Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions. In his address to members of the Congress he said: "Respecting the diversity of world religion is not relativism". At the religious level, he thanked the Authorities for promoting peace and human brotherhood among the different religions in that country" this means putting religions at the center of efforts to build a world where we listen to each other and respect each other in diversity. And this is not relativism, no, it is listening and respecting. And credit for this must be given to the Kazakh government, which, having freed itself from the yoke of the atheistic regime, now proposes a path of Civilization, clearly condemning fundamentalism and extremism. It is a balanced position and one unity". The Pope encourages the need for interfaith meetings and advised authorities to ignore criticism from people who lacked vision for unity of religions.

Religious Pluralism: an opportunity or a limitation?

The implications of religious pluralism can be interpreted in two different ways. Either it can be seen as an opportunity to build a better society or as an obstacle that may create disparity in society (Kumar, R 1986). Pluralism as an opportunity can be beneficial for society because it enables the masses to acknowledge other cultures and religions. It opens up a variety of opinions and possibilities where people have the choice to maintain their own religious identity while learning from others. Every person is at a different stage of spirituality (Kumar, 1986). Acceptance of all religions and respect towards other belief systems allow one to grow spiritually. Moreover, pluralism holds the possibility to eliminate the ethnocentric attitude of society and strengthen the unity among the masses (Dale, 2019).

Pluralism as a limitation can be understood in a better way by examining it in the Indian context. In India, pluralism and secularism as an ideology is often seen in conflict (Robert, 2019). There is a constant tiff between the majority and the minority. This is mainly because of the treatment of religious groups in India. Whenever the minority groups are given consideration and benefits under the secular law, it is often seen as act of pampering

the minority by the majority which further turns to a communal issue. Thus, instead of liberalism and secularism, India is experiencing the adversity of communism (Robert, 2019). Pluralism is also connected with the hope that conflict and dialogue, among religions can lead to the realization of the common good that is best for all members of society. In a pluralistic framework, the common good is not given a priori, but can only be found out during and after the process of negotiation (Archard, 1996). The common good does not, according to pluralist, coincide with the position of any one cohesive group or Organization. One group may eventually manage to establish its own view, but only as the result of the negotiation process within the pluralistic framework (Archard, 1996). In Gandhi's assertion, one of the beauties of religious pluralism is, communion through education and inter faith dialogue, through which adherents would be made to understand that all religions have a common mission; hence, all religions are the same. Christians and adherents of other religions are advised to educate their members on the need to imbibe good virtues of religion and religious diversity while taking a series of expedient measures to improve their religion's fervor to serve humanity (George, et al., 2020).

Religious pluralism is like two edged-sword. It could make or mar peoples' belief and faith. An ardent believer of pluralism is betwixt and between; the best he can be is a nominal member. (George, et al., 2020). Another negative implication of religious pluralism is that it has the propensity to undermine national security. Levy (2018) has given the insinuation that it is mainly governments with autocratic and authoritarian bent that do everything to suppress religious pluralism. In an attempt to qualify this claim, he made reference to governments across the post- soviet terrain. In his words: "Since the late 90s, governments across the post – Soviet space have redefined freedom of conscience as freedom from the influence of non-traditional, destructive and extremist religious groups. These groups range from Evangelical Christians and Jehovah's witnesses, to the Chinese spiritual movement Tablighi Falun Gong and Islamic missionary movement Tablighi Jamaat. Governments have... drastically curtailed the rights of the latter to practice and proselytize openly. Levy further observed that the parliament of Kyrgyzstan passed resolution stating that the expansion of non-traditional religions complicates the religious situation in the republic and requires a serious approach and direct involvement of state". It follows from Levy's above observations that some states which are against religious pluralism do so

because of security. They see pluralist model as a fertile ground for breeding extremists and fundamentalists that may in the long run poses a threat to the unity of the state.

Conclusion

In contemporary society with its multiplicity of faiths, there has been an increasing interest in the relationship between different the world religions. A number of conservative Christian theologians have espoused a traditional form of Exclusivism based on the assumption that Christianity contains the one true and final revelation from God. Other thinkers however have critiqued such a doctrine for its narrowness. For the fact that our society itself is a plural society, religious pluralism is unavoidable. Members of other religions must acknowledge the reality of religious pluralism and allow their relationships with one another. It is a bitter truth that has to be accepted that by accepting pluralism, we are taking the position that none of us has the final truth. It has to be noted that whilst religious pluralism calls for peace, this paper posits that the reality of religious pluralism is an acceptance of religious autonomy which it thinks could be manipulated in a negative direction. Having said this, the paper submits that the onus lies on the governments of circular states to device peaceful coexistence amongst various religions in their respective states. Reinhold Niebuhr captured the spirit of pluralism when he wrote: "Absolutism, in both religious and political idealism is a splendid incentive to heroic action, but a dangerous guide in immediate concrete situations. In religion it permits absurdities and in politics...unbearable tyrannies and cruelties". Pluralism therefore, increasingly became synonymous with religious and cultural diversity and secularism.

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**A Rediscovery of St. John Paul II's Theology of the Body to Advance the Status of Women
Today**

Fr. Idahosa Amadasu

Abstract:

More than ever before, we have in our contemporary times a heightened awareness of the injustice of the subjugation of women. The various indignities to which women have often been subjected prove a lack of understanding of the equal dignity of men and women. Hailing from a society with a strong patriarchal heritage, African women have had their share of this discriminating treatment. However, many attempts to respond to these inequalities often advance the cause of women by imitating masculine domination. Here, we have a medicine that is more or at least as dangerous as the disease. This paper argues that at the root of the denigration of women is an eclipse in the understanding of the dignity of the human person whom God created, male and female. Through recourse to St. John Paul II's 'Theology of the Body', the paper shows that understanding this dignity is best promoted by a greater awareness of the true meaning of the human person. Such awareness would lead to an appreciation of the equal and complementary dignity of women and men that would catalyse the advancement of the liberation of women and bridge the gap between the career woman and the mother/wife.

Key Words: *Equality, Complementarity, Feminine, Contemporary, Dignity*

Introduction

The subjugation of women and the need for their liberation is one of the most pronounced moral, social, cultural, religious and political, issues of our time. The feminist movements¹ which sprang up about two centuries ago have been at the forefront of this struggle for the liberation of women. Women's subjugation, rooted as it is in a lack of appreciation of the fact that women are equal in dignity to men, is reflected in various cultural attitudes and societal practices. Focusing

¹ Feminism has been defined as "the belief in social, economic, and political equality of the sexes." See Elinor Burkett, "Feminism", *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, last modified August 27, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/feminism>

our gaze, particularly on Africa, these include among others polygamy and societal tolerance for male adultery, a lack of appreciation for the fundamental human and societal implications of traditionally feminine roles in the home, the practice of giving higher pay to men in comparison to women working the same jobs, women's lack of access to equal opportunities in diverse fields including work and education, and the fact that most of the domestic and sexual violence in society targets women. In sum, the patriarchal and polygamous social systems of African society reveal a deep-seated bias that attributes a higher dignity to men over women, and so exalts and favours men over women. This bias has given rise, over centuries, to ignoble attitudes and practices that are, to various degrees, endemic and institutionalised in African society.

The goal of women's liberation, however, has often been equated with the imitation of masculine domination, with some aspects of the movement exhibiting misandrist tendencies and/or presenting masculinity as antagonistic to femininity resulting in a push for gender neutrality or the abolishment of the concept of gender. These tendencies could be said to be borne out of an insufficient appreciation of the root cause of women's subjugation and consequently, the solutions proposed fail to address the real problem and even create greater problems.

This paper demonstrates that there is a vital need to advance the liberation of women from structures and mentalities that foster their subjugation. But it argues that this liberation is best realised through a vision that appreciates, on the one hand, the fundamental equal human dignity of men and women and, on the other hand, the innate differences and complementarity that exist between them. The first part of the paper shows how women have been marginalised with a particular focus on Africa in general, and Nigeria in particular. Thereafter, the essentials of Pope John Paul II's theology of the body are presented. Attention will be paid to how he envisions the root cause of women's subjugation and the solution he proposes as a remedy. The final part of the paper explains how the element of equality and complementarity of men and women lays the foundation for a true advancement of the dignity of women and their holistic liberation from different forms of oppression.

The Subjugation of Women in a Nigerian Context

In a paper presented at the 27th CATHAN conference in Ibadan, Nigeria, in 2012, Besem Etchi posited that the oppression and subjugation of women in Africa are traceable to the influence of colonialism.² She claims that “European colonial Catholic missionaries sacralised the teaching that women are inferior to men in the Church, as a mechanism to enslave Africans.”³ She continues that the combined efforts of these missionaries of the 15th century and the European patriarchy of the colonisers have groomed African women “to see themselves as inferior to men in humanity; believe that they were created as subject to men; and that serving men’s needs is their highest good and the greatest glorification they can offer their creator.”⁴ Before the advent of the missionaries, Etchi argues that women had an enviable role in African society. She cites the example of the Igbo culture where women had religious power as priestesses and financial independence. However, the foreign influences of the colonisers have reduced the aspiration of the African woman to that of an *Imago Vir* (image of man) rather than being *Imago Dei* (image of God).⁵

Etchi is not alone in this romantic view of the pre-colonial state of women in Africa. Writing from her own Yoruba culture, Oyeronke Oyewunmi also argues that women had an enviable place in traditional and pre-colonial Yoruba culture. She notes that the Western conception of women and gender has created a dichotomy in the relationship between men and women in Africa. She does not think that the Yoruba cultural framework allows for a gender gap that creates an atmosphere for the oppression of women by men.

The fact that Western gender categories are presented as inherent in nature (of bodies) and operate on dichotomous, binarily opposed male/female, man/woman duality in which the male is

² Besem Etchi, “Towards Reclaiming Woman’s Identity in the Church: From Cultural Distortion To Authentic Catholic Teaching”, (2012). 2, Academia, April 18, 2022, https://www.academia.edu/16433889/TOWARDS_RECLAIMING_WOMAN_S_IDENTITY_IN_THE_CHURCH_FROM_CULTURAL_DISTORTION_TO_AUTHENTIC_CATHOLIC_TEACHING

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid, 3

⁵ Ibid, 1, 11.

assumed to be superior and therefore the defining category, is particularly alien to many African cultures. When African realities are interpreted based on these Western claims, what we find are distortions, obfuscations in language and often a total lack of comprehension due to the incommensurability to social categories and institutions.⁶

However, a closer look at pre-colonial African culture does not support the view that the subjugation of African women is rooted in the influence of colonialism. Scholars like Sylvia Chika and Umejiaku Nneka, among others, have listed and commented on harmful and discriminatory customs and practices against Igbo women and girls, practices that pre-date the colonial era, which due to the antiquity of practice have the force of law (customary law) in contemporary Nigeria.⁷

Such discrimination under discourse are legion, they include inter-alia; legalized wife battery; or chastisement; wife inheritance; harmful widowhood practices; payment and refund of bride-price; marginalization of women's right in the event of dissolution of customary law marriages; Female disinheritance; Female gender mutilation; Female trafficking; and Son-preference syndrome and Polygamous nature of customary law marriages, etc. The worrisome aspect of this problem is that, these discriminations appear to be so deeply rooted in our Igbo cultural system, that uprooting same have for decades proved an uphill task...⁸

⁶ Oyeronke Oyewunmi, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 318-319. Cited in Oladele Abiodun Balogun, "Proverbial Oppression of Women in Yoruba African Culture: A Philosophical Overview", *Thought and Practice: A Journal of the Philosophical Association of Kenya (PAK)* New Series, Vol.2 No.1, (June 2010), 24

⁷ According to Late Justice Niki Tobi in a Supreme Court of Nigeria Judgment of 2008: "Customary law emerges from the traditional usage and practice of a people in a given community which by common adoption and acquiescence on their part, and by long and unvarying habit, has acquired, to some extent, element of compulsion, and force of law with reference to the community. And because of the element of compulsion which it has acquired over the years by constant, consistent and community usage, it attracts sanctions of different kinds and is enforceable." Cited in Matthew Enya Nwocha, "Customary Law, Social Development and Administration of Justice in Nigeria," *Beijing Law Review*, 7, no. 4 (2016): 432, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/311971874_Customary_Law_Social_Development_and_Administration_of_Justice_in_Nigeria

⁸ Ifemeje Sylvia Chika & Umejiaku Nneka, "Discriminatory Cultural Practices and Women's Rights among the Igbos of South-East Nigeria: A Critique.", *Journal of Law, Policy and Globalization*, 25, (2014): 18,

While these authors look particularly at Igbo culture, this state of affairs is common in many of the tribal groups that make up the Nigerian polity. A look at the traditional African culture and mentalities that still prevail today shows that despite the presence of cultural elements that appreciate women, there are also deeply rooted cultural categories which sustain the relegation of women and the depreciation of their human dignity. A good example is found in the proverbs of many African cultures. Proverbs are significant because they are the encapsulated wisdom of a people. They express in concise and vivid phrases, the values, beliefs, and experiences that a people hand down from generation to generation. In two separate studies, Oladele Balogun and Emmanuel Chikwelu show how proverbs have served to oppress women in the Yoruba and Igbo cultures of Nigeria respectively.⁹ It is interesting to see how common proverbs that denigrate women are found in different cultures. One of such proverbs in Yoruba culture states: “*Baa fi gbogbo ile nla jin kolekole, kope o ma jale die kun; bi a si fi gbogbo odede jin iyawo agbere, kope o ma tara re f’ale* (Give a mansion to a thief - that does not prevent him from stealing; give a promiscuous wife all you have in a beautiful house - that does not preclude her from selling herself cheaply to a paramour”).¹⁰ The variant in Igbo culture with the same translation is “*E nyegodu onye ohi ulo ukwu, o ma nkwusi ya izu-ohi, enyegodu nwanyi na-agba n’ezi ihe niile, o gaghi egbochi igba n’ezi.*”¹¹ In cultures that practice polygamy where promiscuity is only a crime for the women and not the man, such sexist proverbs paint women as unreliable and unfaithful. The proverbs which usually rely on authority are conceived to serve a dual purpose of putting men on the alert and reminding women of their inferior status to men.¹²

file:///Users/idahosaamadasu/Downloads/DiscriminatoryCulturalPracticesandWomensRightsamongthe.pdf

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/357368475_Discriminatory_Cultural_Practices_and_Women's_Rights_among_the_Igbos_of_South-East_Nigeria_A_Critique

⁹ See Oladele Abiodun Balogun, “Proverbial Oppression of Women in Yoruba African Culture, 21-36 & Emmanuel Chikwelu, “Proverbial Oppression of Women in African Culture: The Case of Female Devaluation in Igbo Proverbs” International Journal of Arts Humanities and Social Sciences, Vol. 4 Issue 4 (May 2019), 13-22

¹⁰ Balogun, “Proverbial Oppression of Women in Yoruba African Culture, 26.

¹¹ Chikwelu, “Proverbial Oppression of Women in African Culture, 19. There are examples of such proverbs in many cultures in Nigeria, for example, in Benin there is a proverb that says *Aisabe gbe Okhuo, a rie he ye owa*. This literally means that if you cannot beat a woman, don’t keep her at home, which effectively translates as do not marry a wife that you cannot dominate.

¹² Ibid

The unequal treatment of men and women and the need to advance the liberation of women in African culture prompted Tess Onwueme's play titled *Wazobia Reigns*.¹³ Wazobia was elected a regent of the town of Illa for three seasons. Women are usually appointed regents to stand in until a new male king is appointed. In questioning why women should only be appointed regents and not kings, Wazobia used her position to challenge the imposition of restrictions on women in a dynamic society.¹⁴ She invited the women to revolt against masculine domination. She queried the subjection of women to discriminatory funeral rites that men are not subject to. She encountered opposition from men, and even from her fellow women. One such pronounced challenge was from Omu the mother of the women in the town. In response to Wazobia's push to abrogate such discriminatory funeral rites for women, Omu replies: "It is our tradition that women who survive funeral rituals dance in the marketplace as final mark of their innocence regarding their husband's death. A woman who dies mourning is unclean and must be left to rot in the evil forest."¹⁵

In the play, Onwueme further showed how the woman was expected to be at the beck and call of the man in a scenario in which a man chased his wife to the king's palace for her failure to carry out domestic roles under the pretext of advancing her educational career. For this man, the action of his wife was abominable in their traditional culture. When Wazobia questioned the rationale of his action, the man responded:

And is that why a woman a mere woman that I paid to get with my own hard earned money should challenge me in my house. Does she think I carry these balls between my thighs for nothing?... the gods of our Land ordained that a man must own a wife to bear him children... does she know her place? Why should a woman that I married...a mere woman... challenge and

¹³ Tess Onwueme, *Wazobia Reigns*, (Ibadan, Nigeria: International Images Net & Ruby Gold Literary Agency and Publishing, Ltd., 2016). Kindle. The book was first published in 1988 by Heinemann Educational Books, Ltd, Ibadan, Nigeria. For a review of the play and discussion of the idea therein, see Taiwo Nolas-Alausa, "The African Woman and Feminism: A Study of Two Selected Texts by Tess Onwueme." (2012), 8-13. Academia. Accessed April 19, 2022, https://www.academia.edu/13539840/THE_AFRICAN_WOMAN_AND_FEMINISM_A_STUDY_OF_TWO_SELECTED_TEXTS_BY_TESS_ONWUEME

¹⁴ Tess Onwueme, *Wazobia Reigns*, Prologue

¹⁵ Ibid, Movement 2

starve me in my own house? Because she now wastes days and hours in that so-called Adult Education School where she fingers toys she calls Computer...Internet and claims that she's learning skills for the Global with Voodoo-Western-Education-Nonsense! Huh! All night long she keeps vigil, leaves me cold and starved just because she's studying to become everything else but Mother and Wife violating all that our Gods ordained for wo...¹⁶

In this passage, while portraying for her readers attitudes and expectations that engender inequality, indignity, and subjugation for African women, Onwueme unintentionally draws our attention to one of the ambiguities faced by the contemporary push towards women liberation: the seeming incompatibility between the educated/working woman and the woman as a mother and wife.

This belief, which has become very common in the West, is a note of caution not to treat a disease with a cure more fatal than the disease itself. In other words, women should not need to deny their feminine nature, characteristics or attributes to gain recognition as the equals of men, to be educated and have careers, and to make their own legitimate contributions to public life and culture. Speaking about motherhood and work, the American feminist, Ann Crittenden laments: New mothers do experience powerful hormonal changes. They do fall in love, to a degree many describe as "besotted." And for many, including myself, this new relationship often does take precedence over all other preoccupations. Men, by and large, just don't seem to be affected in the same way. Acknowledging this reality may help us understand why the "childbirth as appendectomy" model of maternity: leave, have the baby and quickly get back to business as usual, doesn't work for large numbers of mothers. Many want much more time with their newborns than their jobs allow. This forces them either to quit paid work altogether or to rush back to the office too soon, with tears in their eyes and a breast pump clutched in their hands. As

¹⁶ Ibid.

far as I'm concerned, that is unnatural, if not barbaric, and American women are almost the only ones in the developed world who have to make such a cruel choice.¹⁷

Mary Ann Glendon notes that the position of the woman as a mother has become more precarious today, more than ever. A culture that aggressively promotes contraception and abortion as means of women's liberation also undermines the figure of a woman as a mother. Glendon further notes that because of this precarious nature of motherhood today, women have resorted to having fewer children so that they can progress in their careers. Indeed, not only do women not receive societal support and encouragement in the traditionally feminine role of motherhood, but also, there is a prevailing attitude in societies that for women to be recognised as capable and legitimate in public life, they are expected to emulate negative patriarchal characteristics of domination, ruthless competitiveness and an anti-feminine ethos¹⁸ as the content of what it means to be happy, successful and the equal to men. These attitudes, however, do not preserve women from the tragic subjugations they face today which Glendon identifies as four

¹⁷ Cited in Kathryn Lopez "Ms Discovers Motherhood: Ann Crittenden on Mothers and Choices", *CERC*,

2001

<https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/controversy/feminism/ms-discovers-motherhood-ann-crittenden-on-mothers-and-choices.html>.

See also Ann Crittenden, *The Price of Motherhood: Why the Most Important Job in the World is Still the Least Valued* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2001, Reprint, 2002)

Critte<https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/controversy/feminism/ms-discovers-motherhood-ann-crittenden-on-mothers-and-choices.html>.

¹⁸ By anti-feminine ethos, I refer to an attitude and way of being and acting that opposes this feminine value. In a letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World, the then prefect of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the faith, Cardinal Ratzinger, noted that "*Among the fundamental values linked to women's actual lives is what has been called a "capacity for the other". Although a certain type of feminist rhetoric makes demands "for ourselves", women preserve the deep intuition of the goodness in their lives of those actions which elicit life, and contribute to the growth and protection of the other. This intuition is linked to women's physical capacity to give life. Whether lived out or remaining potential, this capacity is a reality that structures the female personality in a profound way.*" Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World*, Vatican Website, May 31, 2004, sec. 13, accessed November 7, 2023

https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20040731_collaboration_en.html

deadly Ds: “disrespect for unpaid work in the home; disadvantages in the workplace for anyone who takes time out for family responsibilities; divorce; and destitution, a condition that afflicts so many female-headed families.”¹⁹

This perceived dichotomy between the career women and the mother reveals deficiencies in the way the problem of the oppression of women has been conceived. It has, consequently, led to solutions that do not truly liberate women but on the contrary, lead them into a new form of bondage. In contrast, an appreciation of the theology of the body as principally expounded by Pope John Paul II holds more promise for a holistic liberation of women.

Pope John Paul II’s Theology of the Body

When the subjugation of women is essentially framed as male aggression to perpetuate selfish masculine interests, something fundamental is missing in this conception. It is the failure to see that the deep roots of this subjugation lie in a distortion in the understanding of human nature and the equal dignity and complementarity of women and men. Hence, not only men, but even women are accomplices in the oppression of women. Christian Revelation enlightens us about the roots of this oppression and subjugation in the sin of our first parents in the garden of Eden. Genesis 3:16 lists the effect of the fall thus: “Your desire shall be for your husband, but he will dominate you.” The consequent domination of the man by the woman is not in accord with God’s original plan. John Paul II’s theology of the body seeks to show how the realisation of God’s original plan for the equal dignity of men and women is part of Christ’s redemptive and restorative mission. This enables him to state in his *Letter to Women* that God’s law enlightens us on the “ultimate anthropological basis of the dignity of women.”²⁰

¹⁹ Mary Ann Glendon, “Feminism and the Family an Indissoluble Marriage”, *CERC*, accessed April 18, 2022, <https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/controversy/marriage/feminism-and-the-family-an-indissoluble-marriage.html>. Originally published in *Commonweal* Magazine on February 14, 1997.

²⁰ John Paul II, *Letter to Women*, Vatican Website, June 29, 1995, sec.6, accessed April 18, 2022, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1995/documents/hf_jp-ii LET_29061995_women.html

John Paul II's theology of the body is a body of teaching that he gave during his Wednesday Catechetical audiences from September 5th, 1979, to November 28th, 1984.²¹ In theology, John Paul II identifies three elements of the original revelation about the human person as original solitude, original unity, and original nakedness. They are called "original" to indicate that they represent the state of man before the fall, and so they reveal God's original plan for man and woman from the beginning. The Holy Father derived these elements from an exegetical and theological reading of the two creation stories in Genesis Chapter 1 1:27-28, and Chapter 2:7-25 respectively.

In the account of Genesis 1, God created man as male and female in his image and likeness (Gen. 1:27). This account shows the fundamental equality of men and women which comes from the foundation of their inalienable dignity in God. The second creation story in Genesis 2, in its more descriptive detailing of the difference and complementarity between man and woman, reveals first the state of man's original solitude. Upon the creation of man, God saw that it was not good for man to be alone. Man, (understood here generically as human beings), shared the same bodily features with other animals, but since he was created in the image and likeness of God and no other living creature had this same imprint of the Creator, he was alone among the creatures that God had made, and a suitable companion could not be found for him from among these other living creatures. It is in this state of original solitude that God put man²² in charge of creation and commanded him to till and subdue the earth.²³

As it was not good for man to be alone, a suitable companion, i.e., one who like him is created in the image and likeness of God, needed to be found for him. Thus, God cast the man into a deep sleep, took a rib from his side, and created the woman. When the man awoke and saw the woman

²¹ We shall make use of the following compilation of the Wednesday audiences: John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, Trans. Michael Waldstein, (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2006).

²² Speaking of man in the state of original solitude, man is understood here generically as man and woman. "It is further significant that the first man ('āḏām), created from the "dust of the ground," is defined as "male" ('īš) only after the creation of the first woman. Thus, when God Yahweh speaks the words about solitude, he refers with them to the solitude of "man" as such and not only to that of the male." TOB 5:2

²³ Ibid, 9.5

he declared: “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called ‘woman,’ for she was taken out of man.” (Gen 2.23). This is the state of original unity; it shows how men and women are called in God’s original plan to be complementary to each other. Like the man, the woman is created in the image and likeness of God; she is taken from his side because she is an equal, a companion; they are to be of mutual help to each other and the completer of each other’s being in the image and likeness of God, who is a community of persons. Even before being called to be husband and wife in Genesis 2:24, the statement of the man in Genesis 2:23 already shows the complementarity of their creation, as brothers and sisters, as persons called to realise themselves in mutual self-giving to each other.²⁴ Thus it is that one of John Paul II’s most cited verses from Vatican II’s *Gaudium et Spes* is: “The only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself.”²⁵ By this, to be a human person is to be male or female, and no one, man or woman, is complete without the complementarity of the other person. Man and woman constitute two proper ways of being an embodied person who are called to fulfil themselves through the gift of self.

When certain feminists and sociologists seek to create a dichotomy between sex and gender, they unwittingly rob the person of his or her most personal and unique qualities as male and female. When gender is reduced to mere social constructs created by a society that can change with time or according to societal preferences,²⁶ the unique and essential attributes of the human person are rendered fluid. Such a dichotomy, made based on the belief that gender designations have fostered the relegation of women and that since society created genders it can also decide to change them, does not overcome the abuse and denigration of women, on the contrary, it plays

²⁴ Ibid, 18.5

²⁵ Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, *Gaudium et Spes* [Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World], Vatican Website, December 7, 1965, sec. 24.3, accessed April 9, 2022, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html

²⁶ One of such definitions of gender is that it “refers to culturally defined ways of acting as a male or female that becomes part of a person’s sense of self. In other words, children’s feelings of being a boy or a girl are defined more by how they are treated by their parents than by their actual biological characteristics... Gender draws attention to socially constructed aspects or differences between male and female.” See Clementina O. Osezua, “Gender Issues in Human trafficking in Edo State, Nigeria”, *African Sociological Review / Revue Africaine de Sociologie* Vol. 20, No. 1 (2016), 39.

into affirming a patriarchal worldview to the exclusion of the feminine, thus offering a cure worse than the disease. Indeed, the problem with equating women's liberation with women's attainment of masculine domination is that it erases femininity to replace it with masculinity, leading to the abolition of women, their feminine genius, and their unique and necessary gift to society.²⁷ John Paul II's theology of the body does not see any hope for the liberation of women in this vision. His theology does not separate sex from persons but maintains their unity as the creation account of Genesis shows. In a *Letter on the Collaboration between Men and Women*, the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith corroborates this point when it noted:

In order to avoid the domination of one sex or the other, their differences tend to be denied, viewed as mere effects of historical and cultural conditioning. In this perspective, physical difference, termed sex, is minimized, while the purely cultural element, termed gender, is emphasized to the maximum and held to be primary. The obscuring of the difference or duality of the sexes has enormous consequences on a variety of levels. This theory of the human person, intended to promote prospects for equality of women through liberation from biological determinism, has in reality inspired ideologies which, for example, call into question the family, in its natural two-parent structure of mother and father, and make homosexuality and heterosexuality virtually equivalent, in a new model of polymorphous sexuality.²⁸

What is at stake here is a loss of God's original plan of creation of man, as male and female, called to complementarity. The redemption of the distortion of this complementary relationship calls for a relational approach to healing and not one of competition.²⁹ John Paul II shows this relationality in his interpretation of Ephesians 5: 21-33, where St. Paul asked wives to submit to their husbands, and husbands should love their wives as Christ loved the Church. For him, this

²⁷ Carrie Gress, author and historian of the feminist movement in the West, has documented in her latest book titled "The End of Woman," how the imitation of masculine dominance as the agenda of the feminist movement has led to the erasing of woman and femininity. She writes: "For over 50 years, women have been clamoring to make themselves into men—mentally and now biologically—but in the scramble we have frittered away what it means to be a woman. The solid ground that used to be beneath our feet has eroded into the sea, leaving nothing to stand on. Our identity has been cobbled together with this grasping at manhood, while what it means to be a woman has dissolved and is now an unanswerable question. There's no place left to see what womanhood is, so enshrined have we made the male model and the neutral notion of person, human being, or individual." <https://www.newsweek.com/feminisms-fairy-tales-have-erased-women-opinion-1817996>

²⁸ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women* sec. 2

²⁹ Cf. Ibid, 8.

text calls the husband and wife to mutual submission in marriage (Eph 5:21) The woman submits to the man from her complementary role as a wife and the man accepts this submission as one who loves the wife in the Lord. He is “to give ‘himself up for her’ (Eph 5:25) and giving himself up for her means giving up even his own life.” This interpretation rules out any meaning that sees the woman as inferior to the man, and it also shows the different and complementary roles of men and women in marriage.³⁰

The third element of the original revelation is the state of original nakedness. It was a state where the man and woman were naked and felt no shame. John Paul II shows that this state symbolises the inner freedom and absence of constraint in the mutual love between the man and the woman. It was a state characterised by original innocence, that is, by a purity of heart that allowed the man and woman to see the world and especially each other as God sees. For this reason, this state of original nakedness and innocence was also a state of original happiness.³¹ But this state was disrupted when Adam and Eve sinned. They lost their inner freedom and could no longer be naked before each other. In other words, their vision was corrupted from one of purity and innocence; it became tainted with concupiscence and its lusts. The mutual self-giving love they had for each other turned into mutual suspicion: “They knew that they were naked, and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves” (Gen 3:7), and then as Genesis 3:16 expresses, their relationship became one of domination and intrigue: “Your desire shall be for your husband, but he will dominate you.” The freedom and openness that fostered a mutual subjection for one another became threatened by the mutual selfishness in which the woman is closed within her instinct of desiring the man and the man is inclined to dominate and rule over the woman. This is the effect of the concupiscence of the flesh that arose from the fall. The three forms of this concupiscence are enumerated in 1 John 2:16 as the lust of the flesh, the lust of the

³⁰ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, [Apostolic Letter on The Dignity and Vocation of Women], Vatican Website, August 15, 1988, sec.24, accessed November 9, 2023., https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1988/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19880815_mulieris-dignitatem.html.

³¹ John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 15.5, 16.1, 17.3 &19.1.

eyes, and the pride of life. In fallen man, the spousal meaning of the body, and the original unity of the man and the woman, are threatened by concupiscence.³²

John Paul II emphasises that this effect of the fall or concupiscence did not destroy the original goodness in men and women. Their mutual and self-giving love was not entirely corrupted. This fact, contrary to a Manichaean view that sees sex as evil, is the hope that shows the direction of the redemption of the human body. While we cannot return to the state of original innocence, the redemption of the body seeks continuity with it.³³ This redemption is rooted in the redemption of Christ. Christ's incarnation of the human body inaugurated the redemption of the body. It is Christ's redemption that restores the distortion of concupiscence by proclaiming equal dignity between men and women.

Jesus' favourable attitude to women and his recognition of their dignity is apparent in his interactions with them on different occasions. John Paul II chooses a couple of gospel passages to show how Christ redeems the human body from the inequality of sexes and subjugation of women imposed by concupiscence. The first gospel text is when Jesus preached about adultery: "Everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Mt 5:28). Jesus was not simply referring to adultery of the body, which the Old Law prohibits, but he also spoke about how the spousal love that the law against adultery seeks to protect can be corrupted from within. Thus, John Paul II made a novel comment that a man can commit adultery with his wife in his heart.³⁴ What the pope has done here is to reclaim the true meaning of spousal love. Sex is not a plaything that is divorced from the person. One cannot seek to have

³² It is not only their exterior relationship that is affected, but also, and even primarily, the interior. It introduced conflict into the psychosomatic unity of the human person where the body no longer remained content in being subject to the spirit but was inclined to dominate the spirit. It is this inner disorder that eventually plays out in external disorder. This led to the production of the works of the flesh, against the works of the spirit that St. Paul enumerates in Gal 5:19–23. St. Paul lists the works of the flesh and the spirit accordingly: "Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these...The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-mastery."

³³ John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 48.1 & 49.6

³⁴ Ibid, 43

sex with someone when there is no commitment to mutual self-fulfilment, or when such desire is divorced from the commitment to mutual self-giving. Jesus has directed his admonition to men in asking that they should not look at a woman lustfully, not because men cannot be viewed lustfully by women, but it is to show how women, because of the concupiscence in which the man seeks to dominate the woman, are more vulnerable to abuse. In his *Letter to Women*, John Paul II regrets how women are “valued more for their physical appearance than for their skill, their professionalism, their intellectual abilities, their deep sensitivity; in a word, the very dignity of their being!”³⁵

The second biblical story which John Paul II used to show how Jesus further wishes to redeem the human body and the dignity of the woman from societal biases is Jesus’ reaction to the condemnation of the adulterous women in John 8:3-11. In the narrative of the woman caught in adultery, only the woman is brought forward for condemnation. Jesus’ statement to her accusers exposed the injustice in the system. He rejects such holier than thou attitude of the accusers: “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” (John 8: 7). John Paul II comments: “Jesus seems to say to the accusers: Is not this woman, for all her sin, above all a confirmation of your own transgressions, of your "male" injustice, your misdeeds?”³⁶ He goes further to use the situation of this woman to show how women are left to suffer the consequences of sins that they may have been induced to carry out, which put them in vulnerable situations as we find in cases of unwanted pregnancies where women are also pressured to abort their babies. The episode recorded in the Gospel of John is repeated in countless similar situations in every period of history. A woman is left alone, exposed to public opinion with "her sin", while behind "her" sin there lurks a man - a sinner, guilty "of the other's sin", indeed equally responsible for it... Sometimes, forgetting his own sin, he even makes himself the accuser, as in the case described. How often, in a similar way, the woman pays for her own sin... How often is she abandoned with her pregnancy, when the man, the child's father, is unwilling to accept responsibility for it? And besides the many "unwed mothers" in our society, we also must consider all those who, as a result of various pressures, even on the part of the guilty man, very often "get rid of" the child before it is born. "They get rid of it": but at what price? ...Normally a

³⁵ John Paul II, *Letter to Women*, sec. 3

³⁶ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, sec. 14.

woman's conscience does not let her forget that she has taken the life of her own child, for she cannot destroy that readiness to accept life which marks her "ethos" from the "beginning."³⁷

These words of the pontiff: "that readiness to accept life which marks her ethos from the beginning" express the uniquely feminine, the heart of what has been referred to as the feminine genius. The rejection of gender difference and the exaltation of masculine domination eclipses the uniquely feminine and so does not promote the equal dignity of women and respect their complementarity to men. John Paul II shows that Jesus' accusation is against the evil of concupiscence, and lustfulness, while his appeal³⁸ is to the human heart³⁹: "Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more." (John 8:11). Jesus condemns the sin but invites the sinner to repentance. The invitation to repentance is for men and woman to find, with his redeeming grace, a path to the innocence and unity, that is God's plan for man and woman from the beginning. The richness of John Paul II's theology of the body is missed in a program that seeks to promote the liberation of women by imitation of masculine domination or masculine antagonism. We shall now show how the contemporary struggle to advance the cause of women can benefit from an understanding of the equal and complementary differences between men and women.

Equal Dignity and Complementarity between Men and Women

In March 2022, the Gender Equality Bill⁴⁰ which seeks to promote equal rights between men and women, remove societal discrimination against women, and seek more participation of women in the public space, was rejected for the third time in six years in the Nigerian Senate.⁴¹ In an earlier

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ John Paul II's rejection of a Manichaean view of the body reveals something distinct and original in his theology. It is a standpoint that enables him to show the difference between Jesus' accusation and appeal to the human heart when he invites us to the redemption of the human body and the recognition of equal dignity between men and women.

³⁹ Ibid, 47.4-5

⁴⁰ For a draft of the gender bill see CIRDDOC, Nigeria, "A Bill", <https://cirddoc.org/geo-bill-sb-301/>. Accessed April 19, 2022

⁴¹ QueenEsther Iroanusi, "#IWD2022: Nigeria's parliament fails to break bias, frustrates moves for gender equality, affirmative action" *Premium Times*, March 9, 2022, <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/516319-iwd2022-nigerias-parliament-fails->

rejection of the bill three months before, one of the senators who rejected the bill adduced this reason for his rejection: “From an Islamic perspective which is a socio-cultural practice of Muslims...this aspect of it...by equating opportunities for women and men actually infringes with the provisions of the Quran and also the Bible. ‘I will not support the passage of this unless the word ‘equal’ is removed. ‘If we have it as ‘Gender Opportunities Bill fine. But when you bring equality into it, it infringes into the practice of the Islamic religion.’”⁴²

Whether Islam intrinsically opposes equal opportunities, is beyond our current scope of study. While opportunities between men and women could be different according to their specific gender inclinations, what is most important is that differences in roles are not used to promote inequalities in personal dignity. From a biblical perspective, as we have shown, it is wrong to use the Bible to deny equal dignity between men and women. The recourse to religion as a pretext for fostering selfish and distorted motives is one of the features of the corrupt moral, political, and religious framework of contemporary Nigeria.⁴³

Many women and other well-meaning Nigerians have criticised the rejection of the bill.⁴⁴ While the struggle for the passage of the bill continues, the cause for the promotion of the dignity of

[to-break-bias-frustrates-moves-for-gender-equality-affirmative-action.html](#), (accessed April 18, 2022)

⁴² QueenEsther Iroanusi, “Again, Gender Equality bill suffers setback at Senate” *Premium Times*, December 15, 2021, <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/500980-again-gender-equality-bill-suffers-setback-at-senate.html>, (accessed April 18, 2022)

⁴³ Cf. Anthony Akinwale, “Corruption, Insecurity and the Christian Faith in Contemporary Nigeria” *Academia*, (2018), 9. Accessed April 4, 2021, https://www.academia.edu/43586250/Corruption_Insecurity_and_the_Christian_Faith_in_Contemporary_Nigeria

⁴⁴ See Funmi Falana, “Opinion: Condemnation of the national assembly’s rejection of bills seeking gender equality”, *Vanguard*, March 8, 2022, <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2022/03/opinion-condemnation-of-the-national-assemblys-rejection-of-bills-seeking-gender-equality/>, (accessed April 19, 2022); Ugo Aliogo, “Implications of Rejecting Gender Equality Bills”, March 31, 2022, <https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2022/03/31/implications-of-rejecting-gender-equality-bills/> (accessed April 19, 2022); Ope Adetayo, “Nigerian women protest parliament rejection of pro-equality bills” *Aljazeera*, March 2, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/2/nigerian-women-protest-parliament-rejection-of-pro-equality-bills> (accessed April 19, 2022)

women must be deliberate in advancing a holistic liberation of women and not a one-sided liberation that defends the public space of the woman and at the same time diminishes her domestic influence. The irony of contemporary times is that it loudly proclaims the need for women's equality and influence, but it simultaneously seeks to undermine their femininity and their influence in the most fundamental place of all: the home and the family. When the home loses its place as the vital context for the education of the person who will become a good citizen, then the very health and well-being of the society are at risk. Mary Ann Glendon forcefully expressed this point when she noted: "To spell out the obvious: a healthy economy requires a certain kind of workforce, with certain skills and qualities of character. And those qualities honesty, a work ethic, and the ability to cooperate with others are going to be acquired, for the most part, in the nation's families or not at all."⁴⁵

Therefore, the real issue that is at stake in the promotion of women's liberation is the well-being of the family. If the family ordinarily comes into being because of the equal and complementary choices of the man and the woman, fostering such equality and complementarity is the way forward. The recognition of the equality of the male and female genders does not allow for feminist categorisations of men as adversaries with whom women must compete. Hence, we should begin to move away from such slogans as *what a man can do, a woman can also do*. This undifferentiated equality that is tainted with a tinge of competition can be expressed in a different way that respects equality, without undermining the complementarity of men and women. Perhaps, it can be better said that *what a man does well in his own way, a woman also does well in her own way*. Similarly, proverbs that foster the subjugation of women should also be reconstructed to show the equality and complementarity between men and women. Balogun advocated such reconstruction when he postulated that the proverb that exclusively ties promiscuity to women should be rephrased to show that it is a weakness that is common to both men and women:

Baa fi gbogbo ile nla jin kolekole, kope o ma jale die kun; bi a si fi gbogbo odede jin oko agbere tabi iyawo onisekuse, kope o ma se sina ("Give a mansion to a thief - that does not prevent him from stealing; give a man or woman all you have in a beautiful house - that does not preclude him or her from being promiscuous"). This is neither a counter

⁴⁵ Glendon, "Feminism and the Family..."

abusive accusation nor a one-sided prescription as it was in its original form. Rather, it appears more or less like a fair proverbial portrayal, which actually depicts both the men and women folk as vulnerable when it comes to issues of marital infidelity.⁴⁶

The reconstruction of such proverbs helps us to overcome contemporary forms of discrimination that would generate the objectionable scenario in the Johannine narrative (8:1-11) where only the woman was brought forward for condemnation and punishment.

The recognition of the fundamental equality of men and women must go with the recognition and promotion of their complementarity. Complementarity cannot be promoted without a recognition of the specific and innate differences between men and women. This calls for the promotion of the distinctively feminine genius that recognises a woman's unique capacity for openness, tenderness, and acceptance. Pope John Paul II speaks along this line when he calls for a new feminism. It is a feminism that sees motherhood and fertility as gifts and not as hindrances to be overcome by women. He made this call in his encyclical on the gospel of life: "In transforming culture so that it supports life, women occupy a place, in thought and action, which is unique and decisive. It depends on them to promote a 'new feminism' which rejects the temptation of imitating models of 'male domination', in order to acknowledge and affirm the true genius of women in every aspect of the life of society, and overcome all discrimination, violence and exploitation."⁴⁷ Furthermore, the Pope calls on women to respect their specific feminine geniuses and their unique place in society:

You are called to bear witness to the meaning of genuine love, of that gift of self and of that acceptance of others which are present in a special way in the relationship of husband and wife, but which ought also to be at the heart of every other interpersonal relationship. The experience of motherhood makes you acutely aware of the other person and, at the same time, confers on you a particular task: "Motherhood involves a special communion with the mystery of life, as it develops in the woman's womb ... This unique contact with the new human being developing within her gives rise to an attitude towards human beings not only towards her own child, but every human being, which profoundly

⁴⁶ Balogun, "Proverbial Oppression of Women in Yoruba African Culture, 33

⁴⁷ John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* [Encyclical on the Value and Inviolability of Human Life], Vatican Website, March 25, 1995, sec.99, accessed April 18, 2022, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html

marks the woman's personality"... Women first learn and then teach others that human relations are authentic if they are open to accepting the other person.⁴⁸

The late Catherine Obianuju Acholonu, in proposing Motherism as the African alternative to contemporary Western feminism, corroborates this stance of John Paul II. She describes Motherism as

love, tolerance, service, and mutual cooperation of the sexes, not antagonism, aggression, militancy or violent confrontation, as has been the case with radical feminism...the essence of motherism is partnership, cooperation, tolerance, love, understanding, patience. The motherist is a builder, a healer, not a destroyer, a co-creator with God, a lover of the child. Like the ecofeminist, the motherist respects the interconnectedness of all life, the ecosystem and the entire human race.⁴⁹

Precisely because the promotion and defence of motherhood is an indispensable part of the liberation of women today, it is necessary to address the question of contraception.

The development of John Paul II's theology of the body is also a response to the challenge of contraception. Contraception stigmatises fertility and even presents it as a disease to be cured as shown in the mentality of taking pills to avoid pregnancy. Mary Shivanandan rightly explains the meaning of contraception thus: "The key fact about modern contraception, which is designed to space children technologically, is that it separates sexual intercourse from procreation if not in fact, then in intention. When a couple uses contraception, they say to one another, I want to be united with you, but I do not want to accept you as you are in all your bodily integrity. I reject your fertility. In other words, their love is not total."⁵⁰ Consequently, contraception compromises the mutual self-giving of the married couple. Women bear the greater brunt of this rejection. Shivanandan refers to the findings of a feminist researcher, Niles Newton, that while men engage

⁴⁸ Ibid. For a discussion of John Paul II's new feminism, see Leonie Caldecott, "Sincere Gift: The Pope's 'New Feminism'", EWTN website, April 19, 2022, <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/sincere-gift-the-popes-new-feminism-11049>.

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⁴⁹ Catherine Obianuju Acholonu, "Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative," *Ishmael Reed's Konch Magazine*, October 2, 1999, [web.archive.org/web/20000519025431/http://www.ishmaelreedpub.com:80/CatherineAcholonu.html](http://www.ishmaelreedpub.com:80/CatherineAcholonu.html)

⁵⁰ Mary Shivanandan, "Feminism and Marriage: A Reflection on Ephesians 5: 21-33", April 18, 2022, <http://www.christendom-awake.org/pages/mshivana/femmar3.htm>

in only one aspect of the reproductive relationship, which is the sexual intercourse with the woman, the woman engages in three aspects of it: sexual intercourse with the man, childbirth and breastfeeding the child.⁵¹ While feminists “urge the woman to abort her child in order to regain mastery of her situation”, Shivanandan continues that “Such an act not only goes against a woman's psychological nature but interferes with the deepest physiological reactions of her body.”⁵²

A holistic promotion of the liberation of women must move away from the contraceptive mentality, promote motherhood, and seek to overcome the dichotomy between the mother/wife and a career woman. God entrusted the stewardship of the whole earth to both man and woman from the beginning.⁵³ This dichotomy, which is an obstacle to the full and ordered participation of women in both domestic and public life really results in a great loss to the full blossoming and progress of societies. Again, we quote Acholonu:

No nation can survive without the full participation of its womenfolk at every level of life and in all areas of human endeavor. It is time for every African nation, indeed every nation of the world, to make full use of its women potentials. The woman is the spiritual base of every family, community and nation. When women and men work together in partnership and mutual respect the equation of life is balanced and order is the result. Africa's leadership as seen from many African nations has been one-legged. A nation that excludes one vital half of its population, namely the women potentials, from its leadership, is a motherless nation, an amputee, a one-eyed being, an untamed horse.⁵⁴

It is a step in the right direction that the proposed Gender Bill that was sent to the Nigeria senate advocates special protection for pregnant women and calls for the abrogation of any discriminatory practice against women in the workplace due to their pregnant state.⁵⁵ If a woman's career will not be affected due to pregnancy and childrearing, it will be easier to close the gap between motherhood and career advancement. When society realises how the mother

⁵¹ Niles Newton, "Interrelationships between Sexual Responsiveness, Birth, and Breast Feeding," in Joseph Zubin, and John Money, ed., *Contemporary Sexual Behavior: Critical Issues in the 1970s* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973): 77-98. Cited in Mary Shivanandan, "Feminism and Marriage..."

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ See Gen...

⁵⁴ Acholonu, "Motherism..." 1

⁵⁵ See CIRDDOC, Nigeria, "A Bill", secs. 8-10.

who can give more time to her home and domestic affairs contributes greatly to the formation of good citizens, it will refrain from counting the loss of work hours from the pregnant or nursing mother and would rather see such hours as time spent in nation building. Hopefully, this will also help to remove the wedge that has been placed between the career woman and the mother/wife, and in this way remedy the first of Mary Glendon's four deadly Ds, that affect the woman today: "disrespect for unpaid work in the home."⁵⁶

A feminism that advances the place of the mother in society makes the complementarity of the male and female shine out for the harmony and progress of society and the Church. Differentiation of roles will not be superficially tagged as discrimination or unequal access to opportunities. It is in this sense that John Paul II notes that the Church is both Marian and Apostolic-Petrine. The pontiff quotes Hans Urs von Balthasar to elucidate this point: "Mary is the Queen of the Apostles without any pretensions to apostolic powers: she has other and greater powers."⁵⁷ The Marian principle, which Mary represents as the holiest person complements the Apostolic-Petrine principle, which is represented by Peter. Yet Mary is not entrusted with the headship of the Church.

Conclusion

This paper has tried to show that the subjugation of women in our society is a fact that needs to be remedied by a deeper reception of the equality and complementarity of men and women. While the consciousness to fight for the liberation of women is a step in the right direction, this struggle can be misguided when it is pursued in an adversarial way against men. With the guidance of Pope John Paul II's theology of the body, we properly identified the root cause of feminine domination in the lack of purity of vision of the other's dignity and the concupiscence of human nature after the fall. This is contrary to God's original design that created man and women in original unity called to realise themselves in mutual self-giving. God's creation of humankind as male and female in his image attests to the fundamental equal dignity between men and women. The redemption of the body and the liberation of the woman from oppressive

⁵⁶ Glendon, "Feminism and the Family..."

⁵⁷ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, note 55.

structures and relationships seeks continuity with this original design, not in a way that reverses the past, but embraces the redemption of Christ who has invited man and woman to rediscover their call to mutual and self-giving love. They are called to play complementary, not competitive roles. Hence, we advocated for the rejection of societal and cultural practices that are discriminatory and contrary to women's dignity including slogans and proverbs that show women to be inferior to men, the use of contraceptives, and the lack of recognition of the value, dignity and fundamental necessity of traditional feminine roles and above all of motherhood. When the role of the woman as a mother is appreciated as a vital force for building the family and the nation, the gap between motherhood and the career women that is constantly witnessed in our world will be bridged.

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**Parent and Teacher Perceptions of the Influence of Catholic Education on Academic
Performance in Zimbabwean Catholic Secondary Schools**

Kudakwashe Maguraushe

Abstract

Although Catholic schools are generally perceived to be costly in Zimbabwe, parents remain optimistic and send their children to Catholic schools, demonstrating that there is something within Catholic education that benefits their children. This inquiry aimed to explore parents' and teachers' perceptions of the influence of Catholic education on the academic performance of students in Catholic secondary schools in the Bulawayo province, in Zimbabwe. Using an interpretivist paradigm, a qualitative research method was performed using the non-probabilistic purposive sampling technique. Data was collected using focus group discussions from both the parents and the teachers to ascertain their subjective perceptions of the influence of Catholic education on academic performance. The data were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis. The results revealed that parents and teachers believe that the spiritual and moral behaviours which are imparted within Catholic secondary schools in Zimbabwe do influence academic performances. The study also revealed the universal embracement of everyone within Catholic schools, as they do not discriminate. Catholic education plays a pivotal role in the academic performances of students within Catholic secondary schools. It can be perceived as some form of religious parenting which goes beyond helping in the creation of a whole child. Based on the results, it can be revealed that Catholic teachers are highly qualified, highly experienced, and well-remunerated, which could play a major role in high student pass rates within Catholic schools. The study recommends policymakers enforce the use of faith-based personnel within each school for harmony to prevail in communities.

Keywords: Catholic education, parents perceptions; teacher perceptions; Catholic Identity; religious parenting

Introduction

Evangelisation is the main focus of Catholic educational institutions, hence by its very nature, Catholic education is inextricably linked to the Church's evangelisation mission (Baccari, 2018). Catholic education seeks to spread the Catholic faith and offer a comprehensive human formation centred on Jesus Christ to help people achieve their earthly and sanctifying objectives (Madrigal & Oracion, 2018). In simple terms, Catholic schools give students the priceless chance to learn more, pursue their dreams, build communities, develop a stronger sense of self and learn

about God all in a single setting. The legacy of academic excellence in Catholic schools is extensive and deep because they are ranked with exceptional graduation rates and high levels of educational achievement, as attested by Jakuback (2017). Additionally, Catholic education fosters values that mould students into future responsible citizens who are empathetic, with high moral values, and who subscribe to Christian values (Hambulo & Higgs, 2017; Muderedzwa, 2021). Within the Zimbabwean context, Catholic schools are also privileged to have state-of-the-art facilities which enable a student to realise their potential in a faith-based environment (Kugwa, 2019), which creates a favourable environment that allows a student to focus on their studies to achieve academic excellence.

Zimbabwean Catholic secondary schools continue to record high pass rates at both Ordinary (O) and Advanced (A) Levels and they continue to enjoy an academic competitive advantage, as noted by Muderedzwa (2021). Catholic education strives to help learners advance in academics, social development, and spiritual development, among other areas, resulting in students with good academic performances with socially aligned values and education (Giza, 2019). Some studies have revealed that Catholic schools have good student performances as a result of the Catholic education and values inculcated within the schools (Flores, 2020; Marks, 2015; Wodon, 2020). Therefore, this study investigates parents' and teachers' perceptions of the influence of Catholic education on students' academic performance within Zimbabwean secondary schools.

Background of the Study

Some scholars argue that Catholic secondary schools have witnessed a decline in enrolment, especially in the United States (Baccari, 2018; Jakuback, 2017; Schultz, 2008). The decline is attributed to affordability, private Catholic education is expensive as compared to government schools (Madrigal & Oracion, 2018). Contrary to this, Zimbabwe Catholic secondary schools continue to enjoy a competitive advantage and have certain leverage within the academic market (Muderedzwa, 2021). It is the Catholic church that was at the forefront in initiating and promoting education in Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia) as early as 1891 through the creation of Catholic colleges to train teachers and Catholic secondary schools to teach students in formal classes (Kurisa, 2015; Muderedzwa, 2021). Even in some developed countries, Catholic education is still highly esteemed as they still enjoy good enrolments (Giza, 2019).

A new Instruction for Catholic educational institutions was published by the Vatican Congregation for Catholic Education on the 25th of January 2022, emphasizing the character of Catholic schools and their present difficulties (Congregation of Catholic Education, 2022). Human capital development is important in the development of a country, and education development is fundamental to achieving this (Nyoni et al., 2017). Education is perceived as an antecedent for the economic well-being of people, especially in developing countries (Hanushek & Wößmann, 2010), the reason why most parents tend to prefer good education that gives good results, especially in academic performance. Good student performance in Catholic secondary institutions is not unique in the Zimbabwean context as this has been witnessed elsewhere (Wodon, 2020). In his global Catholic education report, Wodon (2020) argued that the creation of respectful religious and faith-aligned students and integral human development and values are some of the key practices that Catholic education instils. Additionally, Hambulo et al. (2020) claimed that Catholic education exhibits a high level of discipline within their schools, which is visible to the students, the teachers, and the administrators, which formulates the school ethos. Furthermore, several school administrators believe that the academic performance of a school depends on the type of leadership that exists within that school that allows that school to adhere to its mission and vision (Vumilia, 2015). This was also concurred by Flores (2020), who specified the view that the environment created also has a greater influence on the attainment of good academic performances within schools. Therefore, Catholic schools nurture an environment that favours academic excellence.

Besides academic excellence, other obligations are attached to Catholic education, with much emphasis on prayers, masses, and moral development/responsibility (Sullivan, 1998; Hawley, 2015). Hawley's (2015) study on stakeholder perceptions of Catholic identity complements and extends the research which was conducted to find out the benefits of attending Catholic schools on academic performance (Flores, 2020). The study pointed out the Catholic culture to be the bedrock within Catholic schools fostering academic excellence, together with multiculturalism and religious mission.

In Zimbabwe, the London Missionary Society founded its first mission camp at Inyati in 1859, marking the beginning of their first endeavour to educate Zimbabwean natives on Catholic

education (Kurisa, 2015). The Jesuits started their missionary work around 1891-2 which gave birth to the long-lasting relationship between the Ministry of Education and the Catholic church since then (Kugwa, 2017). Even after independence, Zimbabwe embarked on building many schools because education was considered a fundamental human right (Nyoni et al., 2017). Such schools are competing with highly regarded Catholic schools, most of which have been in existence since pre-independence. Currently, the Catholic Church in Zimbabwe proudly owns 112 primary schools, 110 secondary schools, and 18 tertiary and skills training centres that are distributed around the country's eight dioceses, (Kugwa, 2017).

Statement of the Problem

Zimbabwe's secondary education system comprises public and private schools. Catholic secondary schools are private. Private schools are expensive as compared to public ones which are government owned. While Zimbabwe has been facing economic challenges for around two decades now, some parents sacrifice so that they can send their children to Catholic institutions. The researcher argues that there must be something entrenched within the Catholic education system that entices parents, despite the high fees that they pay. While Catholic education is believed to foster academic excellence, advance faith-based missions and inculcate multiculturalism (Flores, 2020), its influence on academic education has never been explored from the Zimbabwean perspective. According to Kurisa (2015), it is the oldest education system on the land which has stood the test of time, with the first missionaries believed to have built the first schools in the early 1890s when the country was colonised. The fact that Catholic education is still highly regarded by both parents and teachers up to date within the Zimbabwean viewpoint suggests that there is something good about Catholic education. Unfortunately, there is no clear investigation that has voiced the perceptions of the parents and teachers on student academic performance within the Zimbabwean context. There exist some unsubstantiated theories on the influence that spiritual and moral values have on academic performances within Catholic institutions. Such fragmented opinions on Catholic education have never been properly validated and documented.

Thus, this research aims to ascertain the perceptions of parents and teachers towards the influence of Catholic education on academic performance, using a case of Catholic secondary

schools within the Bulawayo Metropolitan province in Zimbabwe. The study will be limited to Catholic secondary schools that are within the Bulawayo Metropolitan province in Zimbabwe. Hearing and collecting the perceptions of these critical stakeholders' perceptions of Catholic education will be crucial in informing the school administrators, which will ultimately act as a guideline on areas of improvement or adjustment of certain practices. Therefore, this research aims to achieve the following objectives:

Explore parents' perceptions of the influence of Catholic education on student performance.

Explore teachers' perceptions of the influence of Catholic education on student performance.

Analyse the influence of Catholic education on student performance.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This study adopted Bandura's Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1971), to analyse the factors that influence the choices made by parents in opting for Catholic schools as compared to other schools. According to Bandura (1971), social learning theory places a strong emphasis on the value of observing and imitating other people's behaviour, attitudes, and emotional responses. It focuses on the social context-based learning that takes place (Johnson, 2014). Just like any other learning theory, the influence of this is emphasised (Nabavi, 2012). The way other people behave within a certain environment has a lasting effect on motivating others to imitate, replicate and behave in a certain behaviour (Edinyang, 2016). Correspondingly, after closely observing other children's behaviour, a child can assimilate and imitate that behaviour, especially the positively identified observational experiences (Nabavi, 2012). For parents, seeing other students doing well within Catholic schools motivates them to recognise Catholic schools as the academic destinations of their children. The mere dream of academic excellence is the main driving force (Schultz, 2008). Within social learning theory, punishing bad behaviour and reinforcing good behaviour help in developing the right attitude among the learners (Edinyang, 2016).

Bandura's social learning theory can be extended to many Catholic experiences, which both parents and learners can adopt. Based on the document published by the Vatican Congregation of Catholic Education (2022), the Church's maternal image is a powerful sign of her character and mission, hence the church is viewed as the mother and teacher. Catholic education is committed to educating the whole child by focusing on both intellectual and moral values (Koelsch, 2016).

The aim is to provide for fully human life at the service of others as well as the life of the world to come. Wholistic education must form the child's abilities on the levels of their spirituality, intellect, physicality, psychology, sociality, morals, aesthetics, and religion, reflecting the full scope of a child's developmental needs as a way to advance educational equity and ensure that every child reaches their fullest potential (NSBECS, 2021). The NSBECS (2021) implores Catholic schools to create and implement scholarly, extracurricular, faith-formation, and ministry activities to educate students holistically in all these areas.

Founded on submissions made by Ray-Timoney (2015), Catholic education is fundamental in the creation of intelligent human beings that are prepared to serve the world in the promotion of the common good. The religious dimensions clearly distinguish Catholic schools from others, and the educational environment, students' personal growth, and the relationship that exists between culture and the gospel allow for the illumination of knowledge with the light of faith (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988). Convey (2012) argues that there must be clear distinctions between students who are enrolled at Catholic schools with those who are at government schools, as illuminated by its unique characteristics.

Pope Francis said that "Catholic education gives soul to our globalised world and radiates the promise of Christian salvation" (Vatican News, 2018). Catholic education is founded on the Catholic understanding of Christianity, and it is through this that Catholic schools seek to proclaim, embody, and impart the virtues of Jesus Christ (Wanden, 2009). The main goal of Catholic education is to nurture children with the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual grounding they need to grow up to be productive and civic-minded people (Flores, 2020). This is instrumental in creating future leaders of nations. Accordingly, Catholic education must be in tandem with the mission of Catholic schools, which is to educate the whole child mentally, spiritually, physically and emotionally (Middendorf, 2020). Cho (2017) opines that Catholic education is based on three key tenets: 1) being founded on the philosophical and theological perspective of the Catholic Church; 2) the Catholic faith and values underpin how students engage in the classroom and the community, and 3) addressing religious and moral formations. These are the founding principles of Catholic education. According to the Congregation for Catholic Education (2022), parents have a pivotal natural role in fostering Catholic education for

their children. Parents can also actively get involved in the decision-making process for their children and the school community (Congregation of Catholic Education, 2022), which can also help in creating an environment that can nurture good moral foundations.

Pons, van Zanten, and Da Costa (2015) argue that Catholic education focuses on achieving two distinct objectives, which are teaching the Catholic faith as well as teaching for society and the nation. Although there is a general belief that students who enrol at Catholic schools are indoctrinated with Catholicism by the clergy, the opposite is true (Chambers, 2012; Gleeson, O'Gorman, Goldberg & O'Neill, 2018; Sullivan, 1998). Catholic education embraces diversity and inclusiveness (Ilo, 2018). Furthermore, Leatherwood (2019) argues that the future existence of Catholic education relies on a commitment to supporting schools in having a common understanding, a common mission, and the spirit of collaboration. Therefore, it is hoped that a student that emerges from a Catholic school embraces inclusivity and universality based on the type of education he/ she receives.

The latest policy on Catholic education was launched in 2017 by the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference (ZCBC) (Kugwa, 2017). Addressing the gathering at the launch, the Bishop-in-charge of the Education Commission, Bishop Rudolf Nyandoro on 16 October 2017 gave a comprehensive overview of Catholic and said:

At the heart of Catholic education is Jesus Christ and everything that happens in Catholic institutions of education is aimed at holistically developing faculties of the body, the mind, and the soul. Thus, all learners who pass through Catholic institutions are equipped with skills that enable them to contribute to society. The Catholic Church educates for life and not only for academic success. The thrust of our institutions is to groom good and God-fearing leaders and citizens who contribute to the development of sustainable livelihoods. The success of any nation rests upon the quality of education and the moral formation of its members. Hence, the Catholic Church in Zimbabwe tries to foster this fundamental value in its education system.

As indicated by Bishop Nyandoro in October 2017, these are some of the key objectives of Catholic education. It is not limited to academia only; it also applies to other aspects which prepare the learner to be a whole child. As Baccari (2018) and Kugwa (2017) posit, the majority of parents send their children to Catholic schools for more than just academic success; they would also want to see that they are being socially, morally, and spiritually guided to be

respectable citizens and above all, some parents want their children to be close to Jesus. This is in tandem with the ZCBC Education Commission's viewpoint on Catholic education, founded on the following principles: guided by Christ's teaching as the main principle, cultivating the spirit of discipleship and family, provision of character formation, academic, vocational, technical and professional skills, incorporating cultural values that are consistent with Christian values, recognition of parents as primary educators, fostering holistic growth and development, and fostering a personal relationship with Christ.

Influence of Catholic Identity on Catholic Education

The document published by the Vatican Congregation of Catholic Education (2022), "The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue" reiterated the need to clarify the *Catholic Identity* within the various Catholic educational institutions all over the world (CCE, 2022). This should be clearly defined. As Stock (2013 p.19) stated:

Within the school's legal governing documents there should be clear clauses that specify the school's Catholic identity or character and the ecclesiastical authority (diocese or religious institute) under which it operates, and which require that religious education and religious worship will be provided under rites, practices, discipline and liturgical norms of the Catholic Church and any specific directives issued by the diocesan Bishop.

The characteristics shown above play a significant role in giving a school its true Catholic identity (Hambulo et al., 2020). This encompasses religious education as well as religious worship, to be done according to the practices, rites, norms, and discipline of the Catholic church. Above, Hambulo and Higgs (2017) argued that Catholic identity uniquely identifies a Catholic school from the rest of other educational schools. Therefore, there is a need to understand its influence on academic performance.

Catholic education is perceived to be the largest faith-aligned school system globally out of the whole world. According to Stock (2013), the school's position in the service of the universal and local Church remains true to its Catholic identity and incorporates the religious requirements found in the school's legal governing documentation into all aspects of school life. Catholic identity is a result of multi-faceted dimensions that include the philosophy of education,

community life, the curriculum, and human capital processes in the selection of staff and other support staff as well as the physical environment (Jakuback, 2017).

Religious Parenting

Petro et al. (2017) opine that religious values have strong foundations in parenting a child who has good behaviour needed for academic excellence. Parents used to prefer a scenario where school parenting is religion-centred as opposed to child-centred (Frosh, 2004). With Catholic school communities growing in diversity, parents are becoming more concerned with the quality of education offered, leaving religious parenting and religious education as secondary issues (Gleeson et al., 2018). According to Horwath et al. (2008), religious parenting is a concept that has been practised by many parents as many children grow up in a religious setup. Certain religious attitudes, coupled with the schools' structural support are critical in parenting students to become who we want them to be, for the future good of nations (Frosh, 2004). While acknowledging the challenges that children face at the adolescence stage, religious parenting gives hope in influencing better child behaviour and well-being, according to Petro et al. (2017). When it comes to parenting at the adolescent stage, there is greater uncertainty because the roles and responsibilities are not clearly defined (Horwath et al., 2008). Catholic schools are centres responsible for educating the whole person, and parents note the role of religious parenting in the behaviour of their children (Stock, 2013).

Parent and Teacher Perceptions of Catholic Education

As Vumilia (2015) asserts, the perceptions of both parents and teachers on the type of leadership embedded within Catholic education for success in academic performance are equally essential. Parents believe that there is a need for more emphasis on aligning students with a personal commitment to Jesus, than just merely teaching students doctrine, moral values, and bible teachings (Convey, 2012). In fact, in the Convey (2012) survey, the majority of the teachers were clear about what is expected of them in terms of imparting academic knowledge and the promotion of religious faith to their students. It is disparagingly imperative to nurture teachers

who commit to upholding the central idea and subscribe to a culture of Catholicism, which will result in a firmly integrated believing community (Shields, 2008).

Teachers are both learners and teachers in Catholic education especially if they are from other denominations (Madden, 2020). The teacher needs faith development within the Catholic education system so that they can be witnesses to the child's faith development, according to Coll (2007). Coll (2007) also pointed out that some teachers are even aware of their shortfalls within Catholic education which are needed in shaping students to be the whole child. In such cases, there is the general acceptance of Catholic education being perceived to proffer good behaviour amongst the students.

Teachers agree that failure to impart religious skills and behaviour to a student will result in countless problems. One of the problems is the lack of respect by the student for the teacher in class or even their peers (Mucci, 2014). Therefore, in this regard, the purpose of religious foundations in the pedagogical domain, according to some teachers, is to teach Catholic traditions for their spiritual emancipation and development (Wanden, 2009). Teachers find students who have Christian conscience and values as responsible students within their society and often have a higher chance of achieving academic excellence (Coll, 2007).

Academic Performance

This will embody the various theories relevant to revealing what Catholic education instils in students, which results in better student performance. There seems to be a *Catholic effect* being inculcated in students, that creates a supportive environment to allow students to reach their academic potential, which is difficult to find in non-Catholic schools (Morris, 2009). In fact, Catholic schools are chosen by parents for their good academic reputation (Agirdag, Driessen & Merry, 2017). Catholic education also employs religious parenting, where children are nurtured in an environment that offers religious and spiritual values and beliefs (Un, 2020). Additionally, Hambulo et al. (2020) reasoned that Catholic schools recognize everything from a spiritual perspective, which plays a pivotal role in nurturing and maintaining proper discipline. This can in turn hypothetically result in good student performances. In the top ten academic performances

of Zimbabwean secondary schools last published in 2020, there were six Catholic schools (60%), based on a report by Ajira (2022) further strengthening the influence of Catholicism on academic performances, considering the ratio of Catholic to non-Catholic schools. The schools were Monte Cassino Secondary School (96.15%); Nyanga High School (Marist Brothers) (96%); St Ignatius College (95.95%); Regina Mundi Secondary School (93.75%); St Dominics Chishawasha School (93.26%) and Kriste Mambo Secondary School (92.3%), according to Ajira (2022).

In this study, the conceptual framework will include concepts like perceptions of parents and teachers, student academic performance, leadership styles in Catholic education, Catholic education, religious and spiritual activities, and religious parenting, amongst others.

Research Methodology

Using an interpretivist paradigm, an inductive qualitative methodology was adopted (Saunders et al., 2016) that utilised focus groups to solicit data from the parents and teachers. This was done to acquire detailed data, from the subjective perceptions of both parents and teachers (Saunders et al., 2016), on how they perceive the influence of Catholic education on the academic performances of the students.

The internet-mediated focus groups were used, as pronounced by Saunders et al. (2016). In qualitative research, focus groups are a type of group interview that focuses closely on a certain subject or theme and includes some form of interactivity (Neuman, 2014; Walliman, 2021). Focus groups tend to explore emotional experiences, where there is a link realised in the conversation of the participants, leading to some insightful self-disclosure that would otherwise remain hidden in using one-on-one interviews (Salkind, 2017; Tracy, 2013). The focus group discussions for both parents and teachers were guided by research questions in the Appendix. Focus groups typically have between 4 to 12 participants (Neuman, 2014; Saunders et al., 2016) and this research involved 5-6 participants in each focus group. 2 Catholic secondary schools were selected from the Bulawayo Metropolitan province using purposive sampling and 2 focus groups: one for the teachers and the other for the parents. Purposive sampling was used to select the schools and participants arbitrarily, hinged on the premise that they were representing the

perceptions of parents and teachers from all Catholic schools (Saunders et al., 2016; Swerdlik, 2010). Thus, purposive sampling was selected based on the researcher's judgement (Kothari, 2012; Neuman, 2014). Each focus group session lasted between 30 to 45 minutes long, it was audio-recorded and later transcribed.

A few steps were taken to maximise the benefits of a focus group in this research study (Saunders et al., 2016 p.418):

Encouraging every member of the group to participate. The researcher acted as the moderator to allow for the smooth flow of discussions and neutralising a scenario where a few individuals would end up dominating the discourse,

Encourage every member to respect one another's contributions and perceptions and not inhibit other participants' contributions and perceptions,

Finding ways of ensuring that the participants were comprehending one another so that the perceptions are clear. This was done by encouraging further clarity on points raised.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Catholic University of Zimbabwe (CUZ) to permit the conduct of the research (see Appendix 1). For the respondents involved in the research study, participants were asked for their consent to participate before the commencement of the research. Confirming that participation in the research was voluntary, the participants were also assured that their responses will be kept confidential and anonymous (Greener, 2008; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017).

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was considered relevant in identifying the overarching themes that speak to the perceptions in Catholic education. Pen and paper were used for the thematic analysis process, as opposed to the use of the software. The thematic analysis focused on identifying some themes or patterns that emerged within the qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017) on Catholic secondary schools concerning academic excellence from the perspectives of parents and teachers. Its main advantage lies in its flexibility as it is not tied to any specific methodology (Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

The first step was for the researcher to familiarise himself with the data. The researcher transcribed the verbal data from the focus group discussions in full (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The data was then collated systematically so that it could address some specific research questions (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). The initial codes were noted as each respondent was articulating their perceptions on the value of Catholic education on academic performance within secondary schools. Colours were used to select themes from each respondent. After this, searching for themes was done. Interesting or significant patterns in the data were captured by the themes (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). Visualising the data is perceived as helpful, hence the use of tables was adopted in this research. The themes were reviewed and refined to allow the researcher to focus on candidate themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The next step was to define and name the themes (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). This allowed the researcher to set boundaries and distinctions within the data, thereby reducing confusion about the themes and data. The new names for the emerging themes were noted. Finally, the researcher wrote up identified and redefined themes. The write-up followed a logical, concise, and interesting account of a story on the influence of Catholic education on academic excellence, based on evidence supported by emergent themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Results and Discussion

Demographic Information of Participants

67% of the parents who took part in the focus group were Catholic, with 4 out of 6 parents indicating that they were Catholic. More so, from the 5 teachers who participated in the focus group, 3 were Catholic, 1 a non-Catholic, and 1 did not subscribe to any religion. All teachers indicated that they had at least a Bachelor's degree. Additionally, all teachers interviewed had at least 10 years of teaching experience.

Spiritual and Moral Values within the Catholic Education

Most participants agreed that Catholic education imparts spiritual and moral values which help in the creation of a whole person. Parents expressed satisfaction in having their children nurtured in a religious environment that:

As a parent, you will be worried about how your child would become especially if no moral and spiritual guidelines are given to them about life experiences. Drug use and abuse, alcohol, pre-marital sex, and various crimes are all rampant these days, especially among these kids who have no fear of God's word. I am doing all I can to make sure that I avoid regretting it. (Parent 1).

The teachers also acknowledged the part that the spiritual and moral values within Catholic schools play in the creation of a whole child. This, as one participant articulated, holds a view that this helps the student to remain focused. As espoused by Muderedzwa (2021), Catholic education exists for the transformation of students' life, where they become so responsible for all aspects of their lives, upholding Christian values. One teacher also made her subjective comment on the contribution of the Angelus prayer which the students practice every day at midday. The teacher said:

There are teachings that I found here that I believe are critical in the creation of a whole being. A human being is both spiritual and physical therefore spiritual wellness helps one understand who they are and what their purpose is. Once that is clear a learner can be more focused. Also, involving them in most activities such as the Angelus prayer makes them understand why they have to do what they are asked to do. (Teacher 3).

Convey (2012) asserted that teachers associate religious practices as important in a child's development, concurring with this study's findings on the contribution of the Angelus prayer. Another teacher also spoke about the pillars of the Catholic Identity (study, prayer, service and community) as the founding principles in imparting spiritual and moral values to the students within Catholic education. The participant mentioned the pillars as study, prayer, service, and community:

The identity of respecting all forms of life. Education operates under four pillars which are study, prayer, service, and community. As the learners study, they also pray, serve others and live in a community. Now, having a child who is grounded on the four mentioned pillars is the reason why most parents would have their kids learn within a catholic setup. (Teacher 1).

This is in tandem with the findings of Village and Francis (2016), who made a comparative study on Catholic schools and non-denominational schools and found that Catholic schools scored highly on spiritual and religious values. This is an indication of the values (both spiritual and religious) that uniquely identify Catholic schools. The results affirm the notion that Catholic schools should educate spiritual and moral values (Ray-Timoney, 2015). Schultz (2008) also revealed that Catholic schools are well known for their concentration on morality and the spiritual growth of the students. These help the child in the development of their spiritual and moral values.

Diversity within the Catholic Schools

Some parents allude to the fact that Catholic education embraces diversity and tolerance, especially in cultural, religious, and linguistic practices and values. From the data, there appears to be no segregation within the Catholic schools as they embrace everyone from any religious and cultural background. To them, everyone is treated equally, without any form of favouritism based on one's religion. On this, one parent said:

I believe that Catholic school communities are enriched by the presence of people from a diversity of cultural backgrounds and many faith traditions. The members of Catholic school communities are drawn to the Catholic church and many other faith churches. This resonates well with real and practical life, therefore the Catholic school does not base its decisions on the faith background of the student but on the spirit of diversity. (Parent 6: Focus Group Discussion).

Additionally, another parent had this to say on the concept of diversity:

Good moral values entail the aspect of accepting diversity within our society. Diversity includes different cultural values, any cultural changes, and shocks in the curriculum and leadership skills. (Parent 4: Focus Group Discussion).

Catholic schools contribute to social cohesion by practising equal treatment, tolerance, and no discrimination. This is in line with Shield's (2008) research, which acknowledges the multicultural reality within Catholic schools. More so, embracing diversity within Catholic schools is one key value that the school aims to achieve and create products that are capable of being positive change agents in their communities (Coughlan, 2009).

Quality of Catholic Education

In this study, both the parents and teachers acknowledged that Catholic education offers quality education to students. It emerged that the students were taught life skills. Both parents and teachers argued that there is a higher chance of passing when a child learns at a Catholic school, as opposed to other government schools. One parent said:

Check the national rating of schools, you will discover that what I am telling you is the truth about Catholic schools in terms of their performances. It is almost guaranteed to pass at a catholic school as compared to the other government-owned schools that are all over the country. (Parent 2: Focus Group Discussion).

A teacher participant acknowledged the importance of spiritual and moral values as the factors underpinning good behaviour and consequently, good academic performance.

Because of the spiritual and moral values instilled within catholic education, we do not face challenges in whipping them in line. As a result, the results here are well above the other schools. Learners participate in serving others, as a principle. (Teacher 2: Focus Group Discussion).

Teachers also believe that academic excellence is brought about by collaboration and teamwork that is instilled in the students as they engage in group discussions. To the teachers, this creates a culture where the students can self-educate themselves for the betterment of their studies and develop a spirit of excelling together oneness. The participants highlighted that the curriculum is designed to achieve quality education. One teacher said:

Learners pray as a family, learners study together, and learners understand some in the community are less privileged hence they serve in whatever form they can. The good about studying together is that they develop a culture of teamwork. Discussions are done until late because the students stay here. This is very valuable because, in a discussion, almost everyone walks out fully understanding the concept under discussion. A good curriculum creates an environment conducive to academic excellence. (Teacher 3: Focus Group Discussion).

Teachers also believe that adherence to the Catholic identity of the school fosters academic excellence. Another teacher added:

I was under Catholic administration during high school, there were behaviour, moral and spiritual obligations that we made. One would adhere to such things lest there would be consequences. Without being too pompous, I would say this is the reason why we are

having this discussion right now, as I achieved in life. (Teacher 4: Focus Group Discussion).

This was also pointed out by Muderedzwa (2021), who also researched the quality of education within Catholic schools as a result of various practices like prayers, good moral values, and adherence to the Catholic ethos. Such values create responsible citizens with Christian values as emphasised in this study, which concurs with Wanden (2009). A teacher participant in this research concurred with the study findings by Coughlan (2009), that quality education is a result of an effective curriculum that gives all the necessary prerequisites for academic excellence (Coughlan, 2009). Quality education is espoused in religious parenting that is assumed within Catholic institutions, a case which was also raised by Petro et al. (2017).

Structures within Catholic Education

In this study, parents agreed that the structures within Catholic schools create an enabling environment for the student to achieve academic excellence. This ranges from highly qualified teachers, experienced teachers, well-remunerated teachers, and the overall management of the schools and the type and relevance of school work that the students receive during their studies. One parent mentioned that:

The structure of the school is above average, the teachers are top quality and above all, the school is well remunerated which motivates them to focus on teaching passionately.

Parents revealed that Catholic education has structures that advance good moral behaviour in the child. This is in line with the research by Weitzel-O'Neill and Torres (2011) who stated that academic excellence is one characteristic of Catholic schools. To the parents, the structures help in nurturing a child who understands and respects themselves as well as their society. One parent mentioned that:

I would want a situation whereby my child is nurtured in such a way that he/she has good moral behaviour, respects everyone within our society, and lives in harmony with people of different backgrounds. You always get that if you are attached to God.

This confirms that respect has a closer association with Christian values. Christian values are acquired when one is living a godly life or subscribes to Godly teachings. This endorses Mucci

(2014)'s study which suggests that the lack of respect among the students was a result of a lack of religious foundations.

Furthermore, based on the information obtained from the study, it can be suggested that Catholic schools are equipped with experienced and highly qualified teachers. The minimum qualification for one to teach secondary students is a Diploma in Education. All teachers who participated had at least a first degree. Additionally, they all have at least 10 years of experience in teaching, which is enormous. The following were the church affiliations, qualifications and teaching experience of the five teachers who participated in the focus group discussions:

Table 2: Church affiliation, qualifications and teaching experiences of teachers

Teacher participant	Qualifications
Teacher 1	Catholic (since birth); Bachelor's degree, Post Graduate Certificate in Education; 11 years of teaching experience
Teacher 2	Catholic at birth, changed churches; Bachelor's degree in Education; 16 years of teaching experience
Teacher 3	Non-Catholic (goes to Methodist church); Master's degree and a Bachelor's degree; 24 years of teaching experience
Teacher 4	Catholic (since birth); Master's degree and a Bachelor's degree; 14 years of teaching experience
Teacher 5	No church, just pro-African beliefs. Diploma and Bachelor's degrees; I have 10 years of teaching experience

The professionally qualified and experienced teachers within Catholic schools were confident of the value their experience and qualifications would add to the quality of education. Research by Gimbert, Bol, and Wallace (2007) concurred and suggested that an experienced teacher is likely to impart knowledge that yields academic excellence.

Conclusion

The study was conducted to explore parent and teacher perceptions of the influence of Catholic education on academic performance in Zimbabwean Catholic Secondary Schools. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that parents and teachers believe that spiritual and moral values that are embedded within Catholic education are the building blocks that are fundamental in moulding children. Catholic education, as a system, imparts church practices like prayers and moral values that help in nurturing the children to be close to God. The parental education found within Catholic schools helps children to display good behaviour as opposed to what is witnessed in other government schools. All of these would help in the creation of a whole child who is focused on their education and performs with excellence in their studies.

It can also be concluded that the spiritual and moral values instructed within Catholic schools, ultimately translate to good behaviour and the creation of focused students. Catholic schools also employ highly qualified teachers, who have vast experience in teaching and are also major factors for high pass rates within such schools. Equally important for academic excellence are the study discussions that the students are encouraged to do during their study times, which influence positively high academic grades.

Catholic schools do not discriminate based on religious background. They accept everyone who qualifies. This includes both the students enrolled and the teachers. This aids in fostering children who respect everyone despite their religious background, race, colour, tribe, or cultural beliefs.

Limitations

The following are some of the limitations which were discovered in the execution of this study:

The study was only conducted at two Catholic secondary schools within the Bulawayo Metropolitan schools in Zimbabwe.

The population of the sample was small, a larger sample would give a fuller view of the perceptions of both parents and students on the phenomenon under discussion.

Little research has been done on Catholic education in the context of Zimbabwe. There are a few sources that could be used to understand the pass rates of various schools within the country, which were online articles and not peer-reviewed articles. This created a vacuum in understanding the influence of Catholic education on academic excellence in Zimbabwe.

Recommendations

The study recommends government schools adopt Catholic values as a way of instilling good behaviour among their students. With the rambling cases of substance use and abuse, this might be the panacea to this diabolic behaviour engulfing most school-going children as it deters bad behaviour. The study also recommends policymakers enforce faith-based practices within schools for harmony to prevail within communities. For nurturing responsible citizens, policies must be put in place to effect this at tender ages. They need to grow up knowing their obligations and responsibilities within their societies.

Areas of future research

There is a need for more research on Catholic education in both the Zimbabwean context as well as the entire African context. The generalisations from a study covering the whole country or even the whole of Africa would be a true representation of the influence of Catholic education on the academic performance of the students. More so, a study that makes a comparative analysis of Church schools (as opposed to only Catholic schools) against government schools could bring some interesting results. This would also allow policymakers to make various adjustments in a bid to achieve academic excellence in all schools, whether Church or government.

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Appendix: Focus Group Guide Questions

A - Parents Focus Group Discussion

1. Briefly share your religious background.
2. Why did you take your child (children) to a Catholic secondary school?
3. As a parent, what are your views of the Catholic secondary school imparting spiritual and moral values to your child?
4. What is your opinion of the influence of Catholic education on the academic performance of your child?

B - Teachers Focus Group Discussion

1. Briefly share your religious background.
2. Kindly share your highest qualification.
3. Kindly share your teaching experience in terms of the number of years
4. Describe the influence of Catholic Identity on the quality of education.
5. As a teacher at a Catholic secondary school even from another religious background, what competencies do you possess to align with your Catholic education identity?
6. In the spirit of creating a whole child, what additional activities do you think will be fundamental in advancing academic excellence, spiritual growth, and good moral behaviour amongst the students?

Towards Curbing the Two Pristine Musketeers in the Nigerian Political Space

Akiti TGlory Alamu and Caleb Oladokun Ogunkunle

Abstract

It is of immense interest to note that the independent and post independent political space in Nigeria is controlled by religion and ethnicity. These two musketeers have dovetailed into virtually other aspects of governance and bureaucratic sectors. In point of fact, these two musketeers brought about incompetent leaders, unqualified leaders, bad governance, religious bigotry, ethnic sentiment and amongst others. The aim of this study is to ensure curbing religion and ethnicity in the Nigerian political space. Whereas the objectives are to critique religion and ethnicity in the light of the political unwholesomeness in Nigeria. The research methods employed in this paper include historical and descriptive approach. The historical method will help to trace the origin of the two pristine musketeers, while the descriptive approach will help to elicit information through qualitative method. The study seeks to posit that the current political quagmire in contemporary Nigeria is heightened by religious cum ethnic fangs. The study concludes that religion and ethnicity should be kept away from public policies and Nigerian governance. Therefore, the paper recommends that Nigeria should rather utilize the tenets of religion to help stabilize the country than promoting religion and ethnicity.

Keywords. Religion, Ethnicity, Nigeria, Political space, Musketeers

Introduction

Nigeria, as a nation has been experiencing socio-political convulsion on the basis of religion and ethnicity as the two pristine musketeers. The independent and post-independent Nigeria is not an exception from this political miasma. It is clear that leadership in all tiers of Nigerian government on the basis of religion and ethnicity, has successfully dislodged the good ancient and traditional system of merit, credible and competent leadership at the altar of ethnic sentiments, religious persuasion, prejudice, ignorance and parochialism. As a diverse and heterogenous nation, two or three geo-political zones have been producing leadership since the first republic till date. The aftermath of the promotion of religion and ethnicity in the Nigerian political space is the triumph of mediocrity, incompetent, unpopular and irrational leaders. It is therefore the thrust of this paper

to examine religion and ethnicity as the two musketeers by juxtaposing them and well discussing the implications in the Nigerian political space.

A Synopsis of Religion

Religion as a concept and phenomenon is open to various meanings and interpretations. Different approaches have been introduced into its study. This reason makes it academically tasking to offer a universally acceptable definition. Be that as it may, the word religion is derived from a Latin word '*religare*' and it etymologically means "to bind", to bring together, to come together to exist side by side and to fuse people together.¹ Some scholars have correctly observed that religion is that particular phenomenon that brings people together. As far as it has the propensity of bringing people together, it is within the province or agora of religion.² Religion by extension is all-encompassing and all-embracing.

Ilega defines religion as a concept that is all embracing and can bring people together, no matter their differences, to embrace each other and live peacefully with a common agenda for the progress of a nation.³ In a similar sense, the *Chamber 20th Century Dictionary* describes religion as "belief in, recognition of an awakened sense of a higher unseen controlling power or with the emotion and morality connected therewith".⁴ The above view has brought into the fore the concept of unseen controlling power or powers with emotion and morality, which some theologians and other scholars would regard as God, Supreme Being or Transcendent or Supersensible Being. Kenny as quoted by Ayantayo aptly describes Religion" as any system which relates men to ultimate values, whether God or something else and which embodies, a creed, a code and a cult.⁵ Again, Keqley as cited by Ayantayo distinguishes three basic features of religion as belief, feeling and action. It is

of interest to note that what is central to religion is belief in God or gods, the nature and destiny and the meaning of history and the end. We come to appreciate the fact that religion does not only command loyalty, but also gives its adherents something they are glad to live for and if need be, die for.⁶ In like manner, Ejiofor attests to the fact that:

Religion is the complex of belief and behaviour of man in the Supernatural Sphere and realities and in the dynamic linkage of supernatural with the natural... Religion is the major drive behind human behaviour. Religion has had an important disciplinary effect on the whole social order in any given civilization.⁷

Religion is a very deep factor in the lives of mankind. As a matter of fact, religion identifies itself with the first instinct for self-preservation. According to Ejiofor “Men take off from religion, march along with religion and they arrive at religion with a minute to minute phenomenon”.⁸ He further buttresses the fact that religion is the pride of the mind, the strength of the will, the relish of human emotions and coveted object of delicate sentimentality. In short, it is the comprehensive résumé of man’s spiritual, rational and corporate existence.⁹ Kukah opines that religion is an explanation of it within the context of a set of rituals by which the human beings relate with the higher being has come to be accepted while its derivation from the Latin word ‘*religare*’ (to bind) has come to be understood as reflecting the effort by fallen man to re-establish contact with his creator.¹⁰

Religion is a delicate issue; but as sensitive and volatile as it is worth living for, a pride of place for people as they derive satisfaction from it, as well as a sense of security.¹¹

Ethnicity: A Panoramic Overview

Ethnicity can be approached as a socially used cultural symbol of complementarity of “we are what they are not”¹². Ethnicity, according to Nnoli, may be regarded as a social phenomenon associated with interactions among members of different ethnic groups.¹³ Ethnic groups are social

formations distinguished by communal character. Gbade asserts that ethnicity is characteristically a common consciousness of being one in relation to other significant group. This relevance becomes evident in their language, culture or both.¹⁴ It is vital to add that ethnic groups are cultural not natural groups. Salamone argues that ethnic groups are quite simple groups organized around the principles of common descent. The progress of this degree to which this difference is tolerated, respected, or even ignored is dependent on a number of factors; racial difference, religious beliefs and practices, occupational opposition or complementarity, and a thousand of other factors human cultures can invent or give salience to”.¹⁵

Francis cited by Olayode, remarks that ethnicity has cultural affinities that manifest in shared linguistics, religious, racial or other faces, which enable one community to differentiate itself from others.¹⁶ This entails people’s loyalty to and identification with a particular ethnic nationality group within a nation state.

A Juxtaposition of Religion and Ethnicity in Nigerian Political Space

In the annals of Nigerian political history, religion and ethnicity have been the musketeers that spice up the nation’s polity. Indubitably, the creation of political party is drawn along ethnic and religious persuasion. Put differently, the geography of politics in Nigeria is the geography of religion.¹⁷

In the pre-independent Nigerian State, the amalgamation by the colonial overlords failed to unify the Northern and Southern protectorates; rather, it was an unholy, incompatible and inconvenient marriage that has so far jeopardized our common existence. Kukah argues that:

Colonialists did not help in sharpening the boundaries of prejudices which have now come to dominate our landscape. In Nigeria, for example, British colonialism was enamoured with the Fulani whom they believed were imbibed with leadership qualities. This thinking... later took root in the midst of the Fulani and made them

unresponsive to the quest of other citizens for a place in the power ladder in Nigeria.¹⁸

Sequel to the above, the boundaries of prejudices have given impetus to Northern hegemony by asserting its ethnic superiority over ethnic minority of the South. Besides, the struggle for power, dominance and control by Northern hegemony are further consolidated by the advent of Islam. However, Kukah again asserts that the foundation stone of Hausa/Fulani hegemony in the Nigerian polity was the consolidation of Islam through the Jihad of 1804 of Uthman Dan Fodio that legitimizes the expansion of Islam.¹⁹

Although, the advents of Islam and Christianity in Nigeria vary significantly with the regard to historical and cultural experiences, when both Islam and Christianity arrived at the shore of the Nigerian soil, they sought to assert themselves by dislodging the indigenous religion of the people and offered them their new gods as a basis of moral legitimation.²⁰ The adherents of the indigenous religion have consistently maintained a long history of co-operative interaction with Christianity and Islam in Nigeria.²¹ This principle of 'live and let live' has been fostered by the adherents of the indigenous religion despite the derogatory nomenclatures perpetrated by the adherents of proselytizing religion of Islam and Christianity. In other words, the cooperative interaction fostered by the followers of indigenous religion, was truncated by the adherents of both Islam and Christianity, who promoted and still promote superiority, particularity, fanaticism and contestation of space.

There is scintilla of reason to recall that the geography of religion paved way for the consolidation of ethnic supremacy with other favoured ethnic groups as minority, South interjecting into the geography of political parties before independence in 1960. This politicking snowballed into the creation of different parties such as Action Group (AG), headed by Late Chief Obafemi Awolowo, Northern People's Congress (NPC) pioneered by Late Aminu Kano and National Congress for the

Nigerians and Cameroons (NCNC) masterminded by Late Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe. Action Group was of Yoruba ethnicity, NPC was of Fulani/Hausa ethnicity and NCNC was seen as Igbos' ethnic party. The alliance of Azikiwe's NCNC with NPC was rather formidable than Awo's Action Group. The effect of the alliance or coalition brought about the Hausa and Igbo fraternity, which led to political flexibility at the expense of the Yoruba minority. The unusual betrayal of Chief Akintola and others affected Action Group and Unity Party of Nigeria in the Nigerian political space.

The Nigerian Civil War of 1967-70 left behind many untold and gory tales and sights. In fact, the Civil War tested the unity and faith of the country. The "Aburi Accord" could not stop the homicide, hence no victor and vanquish in the War. The post-War analysis by the Northerners presented the Igbos as betrayal as a result of the 1966 *Coup de tat* and the Counter Coup of the same year. Since the independent Nigeria, the Igbo have not been considered for the highest position in the Nation.

It is of interest to note that the predominant Christian denomination in the Eastern Nigeria is Catholic church, which penetrated into the region 19th century. Kukah asserts that the Catholic church woke up and initiated the process that would later jump-start the struggle for democratic reforms. Its moral voice no doubt helped galvanize others forces within Military and Civil society, thus leading to that nation's termination of civilian dictatorship to which they had been forced since independence.²² In Nigeria, Association of Episcopal Conferences of Anglophone West Africa (AECAWA) tried to trace the origin of the issue of religion and ethnicity. Within the Catholic church and its hierarchy, according to Bishop Sarpong, there are underlining traces and manifestations of these ethnic prejudices.²³ Kukah asserted that 'the transfer of a priest to another part of the same diocese can be a problem on ethnic grounds...The faithful of one ethnic group

often dominates the parish and would not countenance people from other ethnic groups taking positions of importance.”²⁴

Apart from the conversion to Catholic faith on a competitive basis, education and other forms of social services are also rendered in order to win converts. Education for the South, the most important instrument for gaining access into the colonial bureaucracy. Kukah corroborates the submission of Abemethey who writes that “the gospel of ethnicity and the gospel of education were thus mutually reinforcing. Educational schemes sponsored by the tribal unions fostered ethnic consciousness in the rural areas.”²⁵ One of the most outstanding contributions of the Catholic Bishops Conference to our quest for democracy in Nigeria, came with the issuing of a Pastoral statement in 1983 titled ‘Civil and Political Responsibility of the Christian .In this document, the Bishops trace the history of the struggle for justice and established a linkage between socio-political responsibility and citizenship. Catholic Bishops tried to strengthen the confidence of the masses and they were also sternly warned against buying of votes and rigging.²⁶ Despite the warning, the 1983 elections were full of manipulations. The Catholic Bishops’ warning was not heeded and civilian government was overthrown on December 31, 1983. During 1993 elections of SDP and NRC, the Catholic Bishops remained unbowed. The courage and leadership credentials of the catholic Bishops was acknowledged by a cross section of Nigerians. The Bishops condemned the Muslim-Muslim ticket of the SDP of M.K.O. Abiola and Kingibe. Despite the free and fair elections conducted Professor Nwosu, General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida annulled the June 12, 1993 elections. From 1999 till date, it has been religion and ethnicity as the two musketeers destroying the Nigerian nation. As a matter of fact, the 2023 general elections were not left out of religious and ethnic sentiments. Interestingly, Peter Obi, the Presidential flagbearer of Labour Party in the 2023 election is a Catholic faithful and an Igbo, who was massively

supported for the fact that an Igbo has never been voted for in that position. His political credentials were second to none and his sense of diversity. Here, it must be established that Peter Obi was voted for by the majority of the populace, but Professor Mahmood Yakubu in conjunction with his cronies rigged the election in favour of Ahmed Bola Tinubu. It must however be argued that his nativity and faith notwithstanding, his character, capacity and political credentials spoke volumes of why he was endeared to the masses. The 2023 Presidential election will never be wished away in the annals of Nigerian political space.

Apart from religious interest of these parties, ethnicity became the driving force from the outset, while in the 1970s, the likes of Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) replaced Action Group, National Party of Nigeria (NPN) and Nigerian Peoples Party (NPP) replaced former Northern People Congress (NPC), while People's Redemptive Party (PRP) and National Advanced Party (NAP) shared some tides with the North and middle-belt. In retrospect, Action Group (AG) had Yoruba Nationality, which was not in the majority party. Northern People's Congress was predominantly North in the majority, while (NCNC) was the Easterners which also falls in the minority group. In the 1990s, General Ibrahim Babangida floated two parties namely Social Democracy Party (SDP) and National Republican Convention (NRC). The former belonged to the Southern ethnic minority while the latter belonged to the Northerners who are in the Majority. Late Sanni Abacha, before his demise also established his five political parties. General Abdulsalami Abubakar established People Democratic Party (PDP), All People's Party (APP) that metamorphosed to All National People Party (ANPP), and later developed to All Progressive Congress (APC), Advanced Democracy (AD) and Labour party.²⁷

Since Nigerian Independence, sixteen leaders who could be traced to same religious and ethnic stocks have emerged. Suffice it to name them chronologically. Tafawa Abubakar Balewa, 1960-

1966, JTU Aguiyi Ironsi – January 1966-July 1966, Yakubu Gowon 1966-1975, Muritala Mohammed 1975-76, Olusegun Obasanjo 1976-1979, Shehu Aliu Shagari 1979-1983, Muhammadu Buhari, 1983-85, Ibrahim Babangida, 1985-August 1993, Ernest Shonekan August 1993-November, 1993, Sanni Abacha 1993-1998, ABdulsalami ABubakar 1998-1999, Olusegun Obasanjo 1999-2007, Umaru Musa Yar'Adua, 2007-2010, Jonathan Goodluck, 2010-2015, Muhammadu Buhari 2015-2023 and Ahmed Bola Tinubu 2023 till date. The above has shown that out of the sixteen Nigerian leaders, ten are predominantly Northerners. This had further buttressed the dominance of Northern political hegemony. Ovwasa and Idowu have opined that in the political arena, there have been a Northern domination and monopoly of political power at the expense of the other region.²⁸ Even in the face of Nigerian Federal Character and the purported six geo-political zones formula, religious and ethnic learnings of the Northern hegemony hold sway.

The issue of dominance is fundamental to them, and they re-echo it as a password. Kukah recently reiterates the statement of Sultan of Sokoto who said that “let the Northern elite who have surrendered the space claim it back immediately”.²⁹ In 1995, Alhaji Maitama Sule, one of the Nigeria’s respected bureaucrats created a storm among Southern intellectuals when he noted that different communities in Nigeria were differently endowed: the Fulani with leadership qualities, the Igbo with industry and the Yoruba with diplomatic skills.³⁰ All these point to the fact that the Northerners see leadership and power as their birth right. The issue of ethno-religious factor, especially in the post-independence has assumed a new apparel that murders the process of development. Promoting and advertising religion and ethnicity in the nation’s polity, permit incompetent, unpopular and irrational leadership that explains away the beauty of diversity in Nigeria.

Implications of Religion and Ethnicity on the Nigerian Nation

Exploring the interplay of religion and ethnicity in the politics of the Nigerian nation has shown that it has caused more damages to the polity, balkanized federalism and caused a lot of setbacks to the nation. The politics of ethno-religiosity in Nigerian has already consumed both the wielders and the targets. To show that it is unhealthy to employ ethno-religiosity in Nigerian politics, Kukah bemoans that political mobilizers have become arrogant in exploring and exploiting religion to their own advantage, which is a minus to the nation.³¹ It is of essence to note that Nigeria as a nation has been in open confrontation since her creation and amalgamation by the colonial overlords. The implication has been the tussle between the North and the South, as well as between Islam and Christianity. In addition, the supremacy of the North for power, dominance and control led to the balkanization of federal or regional system of government in our nationhood.

Despite the fact that the Northerner is ruling, there are no answers to the plight of millions of young children on the streets in Northern Nigeria; the North still has the worst indices of poverty, insecurity, stunting, squalor and destitution.³² Moreover, a social media commentator did not only blame religion and ethnicity on the basis of non-performance, but also blame the Southerners, especially the Yoruba for their collaboration. According to the commentator,

We are all contributors to the very hopeless situation we have now in the country. We complain about our leaders but when the opportunity to make choices come, we rally round religion, ethnicity and other mundane interests. Many of us are also non challant on this issue, only a few think of competence while making choices concerning those who lead us and determine our present and future existences. We then invoke God or pray to God when we begin to suffer the dire consequences of our choices. The situation has never improved, and will not, otherwise, why hasn't God answered all these years? I have heard this prayer point since I was in primary school but things have gone worse.³³

So far, we have seen that religion and ethnicity as the two musketeers have been powerful weapon, used by the North against the South. This has opened up rooms for mediocre, dullards and irrational

leaders to govern Nigeria with impunity. Machi posits that anyone who promotes ethnicity than nation should consider such a nation a failed one.³⁴

Towards Curbing the Musketeers in the Nigerian Political Space

Wole Soyinka has advocated that religion should be privatized in Nigeria.³⁵ In the same vein, El Mahdi asserts that religion should be shut out of politics and public life, while national integration is required by the development of the political system.³⁶ In spite of the fact that these scholars have advocated for national integration, the true talk remains that religion and ethnicity are a thriving political force in under-developed societies. It is out of place politically to think that primordial phenomenon of religion and ethnicity can be totally erased in the Nigerian political space. Both Christians and Muslims lack a united voice and moral authority to address, for example, the issue of corruption in the polity, abuse of power and moral decadence.³⁷

Since El Mahdi advocates for national integration as one of the changes required by the development of political system, this can only be evident in religious re-orientation and patriotism as the weapons to cage the musketeers. Our excursion has shown vividly that religion and ethnicity are recipes for strife within the religious communities itself, between different creeds, and indeed a prelude to international polarization and conflict. To notice such hazards and so attempt to expel religion from public life is equivalent to throwing the baby with the bath water.³⁸ Instead, some noble ideals of religion should be tapped and harnessed for good governance. El Mahdi supports the fact that the challenge before our nation is to recognize religious worth in its own right and so achieve divine blessing, and harness the considerable religious energy in nation building and national development.³⁹

Patriotism energises and makes us seek to remake the world in the way we believe God wanted it to be. If we love our nation, we will be concerned about how it is administered and by whom? If we love our nation, we will be concerned about whether those in authority exercise their power in the way God Himself would be happy.⁴⁰ When this patriotism is permitted and becomes front burner, then politics to us like Kukah rightly posits becomes the art of managing the fruits of God's gift to humanity, an equitable management of the abundance of humanity that is God's children and the art of restraining the strong and the greedy from destroying the weak. This is the vision of politics in the mind of God, not our selfish nature which has turned politics into the art of exploitation.⁴¹

Lastly, international politics or interference should be resisted by all means. Pope John Paul II corroborates this idea when he states that "it is my conviction that Africa when allowed to take charge of its own affairs without being subjected to interference and pressure from outside by its achievements, but be able to share its wisdom, its sense of life, its reverence for God with other continents and nations, thus establishing that it is exchange and partnership in mutual love of the part of God's earth."⁴²

Conclusion

The horror of today's political system in Nigeria is central to religion and ethnicity. The consequences of this are regrettably divisive, insensitive, rudderless, precarious and anti-progressive. The travail of the ever-with-us political structure in Nigeria is the trauma and dilemma of incompetent and unpopular leadership we currently experience in Nigeria.

The study has advocated that national integration as couched in the reappraisal of noble religious ideals, patriotism and non-interference from external forces. Once, these noble ideals are put to

use religiously, no doubt, Nigeria will be wriggled out of the current political quagmire and becomes a success story.

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