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# An Analysis of Historical and Contemporary Role of Religion in Governance and Political Participation in Taraba State, Nigeria

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**ABSTRACT**

This study analyses the role of religions in contemporary Nigerian society, focusing in Taraba State, North Eastern Nigeria. The research investigates the historical and contemporary roles of religion, its influence on governance and political participation. The study employs a qualitative research methodology, utilizing both primary and secondary sources of data collection, uses structured questionnaires. The study covers the period from 2000 to 2024, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of contemporary trends in religious influence. The findings reveal that religion's historical significance continues to manifest in contemporary society, influencing individual values and community dynamics. Also, the result shows that religion plays a significant role in shaping governance and political participation in Taraba State. It affects decision-making processes and political alignments, often reflecting religious affiliations. The study thus recommends that the government, in collaboration with religious bodies and civil society organizations, should develop policies that promote religious tolerance for effective participation in governance and politics.

**KEYWORDS:** Religion, Governance, Politics and Tolerance

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## INTRODUCTION

Religion is a universal phenomenon that induces the idea of the supernatural and incorporates certain characteristics, emotions and feelings such as wonder, awe and reverence. It plays a significant role in Nigerian politics and governance, influencing policy formulation, electoral processes, and political participation (Ogueche, 2020; Umeanolue, 2020). The relationship between religious organizations and the state is often asymmetric and unstable, with both Islam and Christianity providing moral frameworks for articulating demands and critiques of the state (Nolte et al., 2009). Onuorah (2022) notes that most practices of religion in this contemporary time are seen to be aberrant in the moral standard of its ideal tenet in pursuit of economic interest, materialism and terrorism.

In Nigeria, religious institutions have been criticised for sustained deviation from the original status of sacredness, truthfulness and holiness (Onuorah, 2022). Africans, and especially Nigerians, are notoriously religious. In Nigeria, no religious sect condones evil, yet crime still persists. Thus, the numerical increase in church attendance in Nigeria has no significant impact on the level of virtue and integrity of the society (Onuorah, 2022).

Religion has played a defining role in shaping the social, political, economic, and cultural fabric of Nigerian society. Nigeria is a multi-religious nation with Christianity, Islam, and indigenous African traditional religions serving as significant influences on various aspects of daily life (Ezeanya et al., 2022). These religions affect individual behaviors, social norms, governance structures, economic activities.

In many Nigerian states, religious institutions provide not only spiritual guidance but also serve as centers for education, healthcare, and social welfare. For example, faith-based organizations run schools, hospitals, and charity programs that contribute to national development (Anizoba & Johnson, 2021). Additionally, religious leaders and institutions often play advisory roles in governance, influencing policy decisions at both the local and national levels.

This study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of how religion influences contemporary Nigerian society in governance and politics, using Taraba State as a case study. It will assess both the constructive and detrimental roles of religion, exploring ways in which faith-based initiatives can be leveraged to promote development, and good governance while addressing societal challenges.

## RESEARCH METHODS

**Study Design:** The study adopts a qualitative research methodology, combining primary and secondary data sources. Primary data will be collected through structured questionnaire.

Secondary data will be obtained from academic journals, books, government reports, and media sources that analyze religion's impact in Nigeria. The data will be analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key patterns and draw meaningful conclusions.

**Population of the Study:** The population of this study consists of religious leaders, community elders, government officials, and local residents in Taraba State. For the purpose of this study, 120 respondents were systematically selected from across the various sections of the population.

**Instrument for Data Collection:** The study made use of a structured research questionnaire tagged, "Questionnaire for Religion in Contemporary Nigeria" (QRCN), to obtain the relevant information in answering the research questions. This involves a set of questions that reflect the objectives of the study.

**Validity of the Instrument:** Osuala (2012) defined validity as the procedure adopted in ensuring that the instrument used had measured what it was designed to measure. It was important to establish and report one form of validity or the other for the instrument so as to enhance the strength of the work. The instruments for data collection for this study will be validated by an expert in the field of religious studies.

**Method of Data Analysis:** The study adopted both quantitative and qualitative method of data analysis involving mean and standard deviation, as well as thematic content analysis. Data from questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Qualitative data from the interview were analyzed using thematic analysis. Both methods are valuable tools for answering the research questions.

## RESULTS AND FINDINGS

### Demographic Information

**Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the respondents**

| Category | | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Gender** | Male | 101 | 84.2 |
| | Female | 19 | 15.8 |
| **Age Range** | 18–30 years | 2 | 1.7 |
| | 31–45 years | 69 | 57.5 |
| | 46–60 years | 26 | 21.7 |
| | 60+ years | 23 | 19.2 |
| **Religion** | Christianity | 78 | 65.0 |
| | Islam | 16 | 13.3 |
| | Traditional Religion | 26 | 21.7 |
| **Occupation** | Civil Servant | 27 | 22.5 |
| | Business/Trader | 36 | 30.0 |
| | Farmer | 30 | 25.0 |
| | Clergy | 5 | 4.2 |
| | Student | 22 | 18.3 |
| **Educational Level** | No Formal Education | 6 | 5.0 |
| | Primary | 10 | 8.3 |
| | Secondary | 44 | 36.7 |
| | Tertiary | 60 | 50.0 |

**Source: Field Survey, 2025**

The demographic characteristics of the respondents, as presented in Table 1, provide valuable insights into the composition of the study population. The gender distribution shows a significant disparity, with 84.2% of respondents identifying as male and only 15.8% as female. This imbalance may influence the perspectives and experiences shared regarding environmental issues and conservation practices, potentially skewing the findings towards male viewpoints. Understanding this gender dynamic is crucial for interpreting the results and considering the need for inclusive approaches in future research and community engagement. The age distribution highlights that the majority of respondents (57.5%) fall within the 31–45 years age group, followed by 21.7% who are aged 46–60 years and 19.2% who are over 60. Only 1.7% are aged 18–30 years. This suggests that the participant pool is predominantly composed of middle-aged individuals, who often have more experience and knowledge about local environmental issues. However, the low representation of younger respondents may indicate a lack of engagement or interest among youth, which could have implications for future conservation efforts and sustainability initiatives.

The religious affiliations of respondents indicate that Christianity is the most prevalent religion (65.0%), followed by traditional religion (21.7%) and Islam (13.3%). This distribution can shape community values and practices related to environmental stewardship, as religious beliefs often influence individuals' attitudes towards nature and conservation. Understanding the religious context is essential for tailoring conservation messages and initiatives that resonate with the community. In terms of occupation, business/traders (30.0%) and farmers (25.0%) constitute the largest groups, followed by civil servants (22.5%) and students (18.3%). The presence of a significant number of farmers highlights the potential impact of agricultural practices on the local ecosystem and biodiversity. Engaging this demographic in conservation efforts is vital, as their livelihoods are directly connected to land use and environmental health.

The educational background of the respondents shows that 50.0% have attained tertiary education, while 36.7% have completed secondary education. Only a small percentage (13.3%) have no formal education or have completed primary education. This relatively high level of education among respondents may facilitate better understanding and acceptance of conservation concepts and practices. Educated individuals are often more likely to participate in environmental initiatives and advocate for sustainable practices.

**Historical and Contemporary Roles of Religion in Taraba State, Nigeria**

**Table 2: Historical and contemporary role of religion**

| Statement | SA | A | D | SD | Mean | Std. Dev |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Religion has played a significant role in shaping the cultural heritage of Taraba State. | 57 | 19 | 13 | 31 | 2.8 | 1.3 |
| Religious institutions have contributed positively to education and health services in Taraba State. | 36 | 35 | 26 | 23 | 2.7 | 1.1 |
| The influence of religion in Taraba State has changed significantly over time. | 37 | 13 | 39 | 31 | 2.5 | 1.2 |
| Religion continues to shape the moral values and ethical conduct of individuals in the community. | 23 | 22 | 30 | 45 | 2.2 | 1.1 |

**Source: Field Survey, 2025**

Table 2 presents findings on the historical and contemporary role of religion in Wukari Local Government Area (LGA) based on respondents' perceptions. The statement that “Religion has played a significant role in shaping the cultural heritage of Wukari LGA” received a mean score of 2.8, with a standard deviation of 1.3. A substantial number of respondents (57) strongly agreed, followed by 19 who agreed, indicating a general consensus on the importance of religion in influencing local culture. This suggests that religious beliefs and practices are integral to the community’s identity and traditions. Regarding the positive contributions of religious institutions to education and health services, the mean score was slightly lower at 2.7, with a standard deviation of 1.1. A combined total of 71 respondents (36 strongly agreed, 35 agreed) recognize the beneficial role of religious institutions. However, the presence of 26 who disagreed and 23 who strongly disagreed indicates some skepticism about the effectiveness or reach of these contributions. This mixed response suggests that while many see value in religious institutions' roles, there may be differing opinions on their actual impact, warranting further investigation into the specific contributions and challenges faced by these institutions. This aligns with the views of Iwuoha (2021) and Ottuh and Onimhawo (2020) that religion has played a multifaceted role in Nigeria's history, acting as both a catalyst for conflict and a mechanism for peace and development.

The perception that “the influence of religion in Taraba State has changed significantly over time” received a mean score of 2.5, with a standard deviation of 1.2. While 37 respondents strongly agreed, a notable 39 disagreed, indicating a divide in opinion. This suggests that some community members perceive a shift in religious influence, possibly due to modernization, changing social dynamics, or other external factors. Understanding these shifts is crucial for recognizing how religious beliefs may evolve and adapt to contemporary challenges. The statement on religion’s role in shaping moral values and ethical conduct received the lowest mean score of 2.2, with a standard deviation of 1.1. The majority of respondents (45) disagreed with the assertion that religion continues to shape moral values in the community. This reflects a significant concern about the diminishing influence of religion on ethical behavior, suggesting that other societal factors such as education, economic conditions, or secular ideologies—may be gaining prominence. This trend could have implications for community cohesion and the moral framework within which individuals operate. The result echoes the views of Ngbea and Achunike (2014) that the coexistence of Christianity, Islam, and African traditional religions has profoundly influenced various aspects of Nigerian society, from cultural practices to social norms. Similarly, Minini (2021) found that religion has positively contributed to economic development through the establishment of educational institutions and healthcare facilities that serve communities. However, Adabembe (2024) reported that the commercialization of Christianity has led to the emergence of mega-churches, televangelism, and religious tourism, which can sometimes divert attention from core humanitarian objectives.

**Religion, Governance, and Political Participation**

**Table 3: Religion, governance and political participation**

| Statement | SA | A | D | SD | Mean | Std. Dev |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Religious leaders influence political decisions in Taraba State. | 33 | 21 | 26 | 40 | 2.4 | 1.2 |
| Religion plays a role in voter mobilization and participation in elections. | 27 | 43 | 34 | 16 | 2.7 | 1.0 |
| Political candidates in Taraba State often use religious sentiments to gain support. | 38 | 25 | 20 | 37 | 2.5 | 1.2 |
| Religious affiliations affect access to leadership positions and political appointments. | 22 | 28 | 47 | 23 | 2.4 | 1.0 |

**Source: Field Survey, 2025**

Table 3 presents findings related to the interplay between religion, governance, and political participation in Taraba State. The statement "Religious leaders influence political decisions in Taraba State" received a mean score of 2.4, with a standard deviation of 1.2. A total of 33 respondents strongly agreed, while 40 disagreed, indicating a divided opinion on the extent of religious leaders' influence in political matters. This suggests that while some community members recognize the potential for religious leaders to shape political decisions, a significant portion does not perceive this influence as substantial. The mixed responses may reflect varying levels of trust in political systems or differing views on the role of religion in governance. The finding aligns with the opinions of Ogueche (2020) and Umeanolue (2020) that religion plays a significant role in Nigerian politics and governance, influencing policy formulation, electoral processes, and political participation.

The statement regarding religion's role in voter mobilization and participation in elections garnered a mean score of 2.7 and a standard deviation of 1.0. The majority of respondents (70) agreed or strongly agreed that religious organizations play a significant role in encouraging voter participation. This indicates a recognition of the mobilizing power of religious institutions during elections, suggesting that these entities can effectively galvanize community members to engage in the political process. This role could be crucial in enhancing democratic participation, especially in regions where religious affiliation strongly influences social dynamics. The result reflects the findings of Nolte et al. (2009) and Ogueche (2020) that religion can contribute to national integration and political mobilization but can also lead to conflicts and challenges to state institutions, as seen in the introduction of law in some states and debates over control of schools.

The statement "Political candidates in Taraba State often use religious sentiments to gain support" received a mean score of 2.5, with a standard deviation of 1.2. With 38 respondents strongly agreeing and 37 disagreeing, there is a notable divide in perceptions. This suggests that while some candidates may strategically appeal to religious sentiments to gain voter support, others may not find this tactic effective. The presence of such sentiments in political campaigns could raise ethical concerns regarding the manipulation of religious beliefs for electoral gain, potentially undermining the integrity of the political process. In addition, the statement regarding the impact of religious affiliations on access to leadership positions and political appointments yielded a mean score of 2.4 and a standard deviation of 1.0. The data shows that 47 respondents disagreed with the assertion, indicating skepticism about the notion that religious affiliation significantly affects political opportunities. This could suggest a level of disillusionment regarding the relationship between religion and governance, or it may reflect a belief in meritocracy over sectarian considerations in political appointments. This is in line with the result of Nolte et al. (2009) in which it was found that the relationship between religious organizations and the state is often asymmetric and unstable, with both Islam and Christianity providing moral frameworks for articulating demands and critiques of the state

**DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS**

The demographic characteristics of the respondents reveal a predominantly male, middle-aged, and educated population engaged in various occupations, primarily business and agriculture. These factors will significantly influence the perspectives on environmental issues and the effectiveness of conservation strategies. Future initiatives should consider these demographics to enhance community involvement and ensure that conservation efforts are inclusive and culturally relevant.

The results indicate that while religion is recognized for its historical significance in shaping cultural heritage and providing social services, there is a critical and evolving perception of its contemporary influence, particularly regarding moral values. The varying responses highlight the complexity of religion's role in Taraba State, pointing to a need for further exploration of how religious institutions can adapt to meet the changing needs of the community and reinforce their relevance in modern society. Understanding these dynamics will be essential for fostering community engagement and addressing the challenges that arise from shifting religious influences.

The results indicate a complex relationship between religion and politics in Taraba State, with varying perceptions of religious influence on political decision-making and participation. While there is recognition of the mobilizing role of religion in elections, skepticism exists regarding the influence of religious leaders and the impact of religious affiliations on political access. These findings underscore the need for a nuanced understanding of how religious factors interplay with governance and political engagement, as well as the potential implications for democratic processes in the region. Enhanced dialogue among religious and political leaders may help address concerns and foster a more cohesive political environment that respects both religious values and democratic principles.

The results indicate that religion plays a dual role in social cohesion and conflict resolution. While religious teachings and institutions contribute positively to peace and development, religious intolerance remains a major challenge. The variations in responses further suggest that the effectiveness of religion in fostering harmony and resolving conflicts may depend on the specific religious institutions involved and the prevailing socio-political context in Taraba State Nigeria.

The results reveal that religious institutions and community-driven initiatives (such as discouraging hate speech and promoting interfaith dialogue) receive more support than government-led interventions (such as engaging religious leaders in conflict resolution). The highest level of agreement was found in the need for religious institutions to actively combat extremism, while the lowest level of agreement was in the government's role in conflict resolution. This suggests that grassroots efforts may be perceived as more effective than top-down approaches in addressing religious tensions. The moderate standard deviations indicate some level of consensus but also reveal existing divisions, particularly in the perceived role of government policies and religious leaders in fostering peace.

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this study highlight the multifaceted role of religion in Taraba State, influencing cultural heritage, political participation, social cohesion, and conflict resolution. While religious institutions have historically played a significant role in shaping societal values and providing essential services, their contemporary influence is viewed with increasing complexity. The interplay between religion and politics reveals both positive and negative aspects, as religious mobilization remains a key factor in elections, yet concerns persist regarding undue religious influence on governance and political access.

Additionally, religion serves as both a unifying and divisive force in the community. While religious teachings promote peace and development initiatives, religious intolerance continues to challenge social harmony. The study also underscores the preference for grassroots and community-led initiatives, such as interfaith dialogue and discouraging hate speech—over government-led interventions in conflict resolution. This suggests a need for context-specific, locally driven strategies to promote interfaith harmony and mitigate religious tensions.

Ultimately, fostering a more inclusive and peaceful society in Taraba State, Nigeria requires a balanced approach that leverages the strengths of religious institutions while addressing their limitations. Collaboration among religious leaders, policymakers, and civil society is essential to ensuring that religion remains a force for unity rather than division.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

i. Religious leaders and community stakeholders should intensify efforts to promote interfaith dialogue and peace building programs. By fostering open discussions between different religious groups, misconceptions can be addressed, and mutual understanding can be enhanced, ultimately reducing religious intolerance.
ii. Religious organizations should expand their contributions beyond spiritual matters to include more structured interventions in education, healthcare, and social welfare. This will reinforce their positive societal impact and ensure they remain relevant in addressing contemporary challenges within the community.
iii. While religious institutions can play a role in civic education and voter mobilization, religious leaders should avoid partisan politics to prevent deepening political divisions along religious lines. Instead, they should advocate for good governance, ethical leadership, and democratic values that serve all members of society regardless of religious affiliation.
iv. The government, in collaboration with religious bodies and civil society organizations, should develop policies that promote religious tolerance and regulate hate speech. These policies should also support community-based conflict resolution mechanisms that leverage traditional and religious peacebuilding strategies.

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