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## COMTE'S POSITIVISM: ITS SOCIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CONTEMPORARY STUDY OF RELIGION IN NIGERIA

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### Abstract

*This article tries to examine religion from sociological point of view. It is area of sociology of religion as created by a French social philosopher, Auguste Comte. Comte's positivism was a positive thinking and critical evaluation of religion in the search for better sociological religion. It is in this context that Auguste Comte launched a total attack on religion. In terms of methodology, the study employed inter-disciplinary method in the gathering of information. Findings from the research revealed that prior to this time there was no sociological basis of studying religion. Thus, in this writing, we will examine his positivism, what led to the propagation of his positivism, the sociological implications of his philosophy and how his position can enhance social cohesion and solidarity through interreligious dialogue in modern Nigeria. It is recommended that sociology of religion should be a central concern in the study of culture and knowledge towards peaceful co-existence in contemporary Nigeria.*

**Keywords:** Auguste Comte, Positivism, Sociological implications, Religion, Nigeria.

### Introduction

The research work is a critical examination of religion from sociological perspective which could be regarded as sociology of religion. Sociology of religion at this point is an organic solidarity or the science of society that studies the role of religion in relationships between individuals, social groups and institutions. In other words, it is the scientific examination of religion in the society. This area of study popularly known as sociology of religion was created in 1837 by a French social philosopher, Auguste Comte. Comte was born on January 19, 1798. He created sociology in France, used a scientific method in the study of sociology. He was at an early age worried by the effects of the social disorganization and anarchy caused by the French revolution. Comte was preoccupied with how to restore peace and

order in the chaotic society (Dzurgba, 2002). Thus, a search for more understanding of society for the purpose of effective organization and management became very urgent. He opined that all aspects of the society (like people, institutions, systems, relations, beliefs, values, knowledge etc) could be studied from a scientific point of view. He was therefore interested in creating a science of society as a way of improving the situation (Odudele, 2006).

Comte created sociology at a period when religion had a prominent influence in society. In the educational curriculum at that time, religion was a fundamental academic discipline. Thus, the students of History, Mathematics, Philosophy, Metaphysics, Biology and other sciences had to do some courses in theology. It was in this

context that Charles Robert Darwin (1952), a student of the University of Cambridge, had to pass an examination on William Paley's Natural Theology before he was admitted for his B.Sc. degree in Biology. If Biology had a theological considerations sociology could not have been exempted. Because Auguste Comte did not want to subject sociology to any theological control, he launched a total attack on religion. He argued that religion has to be eliminated if sociology would flourish. This was the background to Comte's negative attitude to religion.

### Understanding the Basis Comte's Positivism

Auguste Comte began his attack on religion by categorizing the development of human thought

into three stages; each stage representing a different way of discovering truth. The first stage was the

theological stage. This was a stage in which phenomenon are explained as being caused by divine

powers. At this point in time, societies had a military and hierarchical social organization. The second

stage was that of the metaphysical thought. It was when anthropocentric concept of divinity are

replaced by abstract forces. Thus, societies had a democratic and egalitarian social organization during

this period. The last stage of the development of human thought was the scientific or positive

thought. This was when societies could be organized based on the rules of sociological experts (Jim

Herrick, 2006). It was the period when only the constant relations between phenomena are considered.

Thus, this was a stage for a scientific administration of society. The three stages above necessarily

followed one after another and each corrected the faults of an earlier one. Generally therefore it was

an age of a positive thinking and hence, Comte introduced positivism (Martin, 1967).

Positivism is a philosophical attitude. Its main features are trust in science, opposition to metaphysics, and unified science. The last is the thesis that all sciences use the same method. Positivists share a common set of philosophical principles (Comte, 1965). However, sometimes they adopted different views on some important topics. Hence, there have been several strains of positivism. Comte's primary aim was the reform of society. He greatly contributed to the birth of sociology. John Stuart Mill, the English philosopher, was one the best – known representatives of social positivism. Logical positivism was the leading school in the philosophy of science during the first half of twentieth century. It exerted a major influence on American philosophy (Martin, 1967). Logical positivists denied the soundness of traditional philosophy. They asserted that many philosophical problems are indeed meaningless. Comte assigned to positivism the task of improving society. He believed that a reform of society was necessary to prevent moral and political anarchy. The French revolution had destroyed the old social and political system. Every effort to establish a new stable system had failed. Comte ascribed these failures to the lack of understanding of the laws that govern the dynamics of society. He believed that these laws have the same status of the laws of natural

sciences. They are the subject matter of a new science, which Comte called "social physics" and later "sociology" (Fletcher, 1972). The laws studied by sociology are very important, because they can give reliable forecasts, which are essential to predict the effects of the reforms. Comte affirmed that he had discovered an important fundamental law about the development of ideas (Dzurgha, 2002).

Comte built his classification of sciences on the foundations, provided by the law of the three stages. Sciences reach the positive stage according to the compulsory of their subject. The other sciences that have reached the positive stage are physics, chemistry and physiology (that is, biology). Mathematics, the indispensable instrument needed by every science, plays a special role. The only science that has not still reached the positive stage is social physics (that is, sociology). The aim of positive philosophy is to establish sociology as a positive science. Sociology, in its positive stage, can give reliable forecasts based on exact laws. Hence, sociology can help in improving society, because reliable forecasts are essential tools to reform the society. Comte stated that all sciences employ the same methods (Sergeant, 1971). Hence, there is no difference in principle between mathematics, natural sciences and human sciences. Therefore, sociology uses the same method of biology and of physics. The unity of science is the unity of method, not the unity of theories. It is impossible to explain all events by means of only one general theory.

With this belief, Comte declared an absolute war against religion. For him, sociologists and

natural scientists should throw away religion in order to give room for scientific advancement and

human progress. Since material progress was the target of sociology. Comte argued that religion has

to be eliminated if sociology would flourish. He therefore described religion as a collective delusion,

a symbolic thinking or an understandable behavior (Odudele, 2006). To him, this were the foundations

of religion but they had been considered to be illusions and therefore meaningless. He argued that

religion was unable to comprehend external realities but it deals basically with invisible or non-physical

beings like God, Satan, Angels, Spirits, Ancestors, Divinities etc. Comte was totally against religion

because it possess unanswerable questions to the ultimate origin, meaning and purpose of life.

An elimination of religion was a necessary condition and major task that sociologists had to

accomplish to have orderly society. Thus, he defined religion as an expression of an immature thought

and powerful emotions.

Moreover, Comte suggested a new religion to replace the inadequate and imperfect religious

system of theology. This kind of religion was regarded as sociological religion known as "Religion of

humanity". The religion has the following features: it was a religion without doubtful and dubious

doctrinal content because it was clear and understandable. This new religion was merciful, kind,

considerate and committed to the welfare and aspiration of mankind. This type of religion would meet

man and the society at large at the point of their needs. It would make the society to attain its maximum

level of progress, advancement, development and human ideals. There was cooperation, survival and

security of life and property through this religion. Thus, it was a preferable religion because it does

not substitute the whole love of humanity with the love of God. The whole duty of man is to love

humanity. The religion focuses on man and society. According to him (as cited by Dzurgba, 2002), it

was a perfect religion whose principle says:

**Love is the principle;**

**Order is the basis;**

**Progress is the end.**

In Comte's opinion, only a new religion based upon ideas and realities that would be obvious

to everyone as to achieve universal agreement that would create peace and unity among the people.

His task therefore was to reconceive the whole nature of religion in terms of science, bind the new

religion to the structures of society and unify the powers of reasons and affection in early individuals

life and thereby infuse man's every act with a sense of purpose or direction. He therefore believed that

for this progress to be achieved, love and order in the society is of paramount importance. Comte

observed that since human mind mirror out the real state of things then the mind is "humanity" and

the source of all things. Having substituted humanity for God, he encouraged the natural sciences to

throw away theological considerations. This call was highly crucial because theology was a requirement

for science students at that time. Thus, religion was seen as a dying factor in an increasingly secular

society (Jim Herrick, 2006).

## The Propagation of Positivism

The Comtean school of positivism strongly supported and promoted by Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud. Marx, like Comte, regarded religion as an illusion and advocated for the elimination of religion from the society (Marx and Engels, 1971). Since religion was not helping the people, but rather doing them more harm than good. Marx therefore called upon the workers to reject religion. He perceived there were social injustice, inequality, enslavement, exploitation, oppression, affliction, alienation in a capitalist society. That is to say, the owner of the means of production and distribution of goods and services (Bourgeoisie) were exploiting the workers or labourers (Proletarians) and the masses. Religion negatively affected the workers utilization of

their creative talents because of the influence of religion upon them. According to Marx, religion appreciates resignation of the poor masses from productive endeavours while accepting poverty and suffering as conditions for religious faith (Bockmuchi, 1980). It is painful that in spite of all these social evils and oppression of the poor masses, religion gave its total support to capitalism.

The question now is: what makes them to form the idea of the imaginary being known as God? According to Marx, it was as a result of the economic exploitation and oppression of the masses in the capitalist system. The suffering masses look up to the sky for an imaginary saviour who will come and deliver them from the hands of their capitalist oppressors. In their search for deliverance, a man invented the idea of God to whom they pray. Religion in return offered the people a compensation for their economic deprivations in fantasies of life after death (Tucker, 1978).

According to Marx, the easiest way to get rid of religion is to destroy the oppressive capitalist system and replace it with socialism. If this is done, no doubt religion will die a natural death and disappear with capitalism. Also, since religion was popular among the poor people, Marx believed that religion would be eliminated by the advancement of civilization. However, Karl Marx failed to explain why some members of the ruling class have been consistent believers in religion. Secondly, his theory inadequately explained the phenomenon of religion. It is doubtful and uncertain that the elimination of capitalist system would also lead to total disappearance of religion. In spite of all these, Marx effort is highly appreciation. First, there are some elements of truth in his theory especially when we see that religion is practiced more among the poor and the suffering than among the rich and well-to-do. Secondly, it is true that people seems to become more religious in times of affliction and difficulty than when things are normal with them. Thus, Karl Marx theory of religion is still very relevant to the contemporary society.

Sigmund Freud was a positivist in Austria. As a founder of psychoanalysis, Freud gave a psychological explanation of religion and the concept of God. According to him, God is an imaginary being as well imaginary father. It is nothing other than projection of a child's image of his father. He sees religion as childlessness and as a disease which he regards as childhood neurosis resulting from the father complex which continues to haunt man in his adulthood. Freud observed that this malady has to be overcome one day because mankind cannot continue this childlessness forever (Odudele, 2013).

On this note, Sigmund Freud described religion as a mental sickness (Freud, 1961). He concludes that the childhood neurosis can only be overcome through intellectual sophistication and scientific knowledge. Freud held that religion had no rational grounds. As a result, religion is based on falsehood. This psychological theory of religion as propounded by Sigmund Freud raised a great deal of argument in his days. Some people strongly opposed this theory while others agreed with him. Those who against Freud's theory are of the view that his theory is becoming more outdated and less relevant to the contemporary society. Religion to him has no paramount importance, but religion as we know it today is a very powerful force to reckon with. Nevertheless, if religion is considered from the social point of view, solution to man's problem may not be divorced totally from it. Religion is becoming more real and significant than ever before (Lawal, 2003). Thus, Freud's theory was contended against

because it possesses unanswerable questions of the ultimate origin, meaning and purpose of life.

Another Objection to Sigmund Freud's psychological theory of religion is that he regarded God as a fantasy figure (Carole and Carol, 2000). This is evidently inadequate and inappropriate. The question now is: if God or religion in general is meaningless and of no relevance, why has Freud bothered himself so much to talk about God or religion? Has he himself succeeded in saying nothing? It cannot be doubted that the church especially opposed Sigmund Freud because his theory reduced God to a mere fantasy (Odudele, 1996). One of the supporters of Sigmund Freud was Karl Marx who said the first word of religion is a lie (Olusola, 2000). In other words, God was regarded as an illusion. Freud suggested that ritualistic religion is a group response similar to the individual response to his frustration. The fundamental inadequacy in this theory is that it treats religious beliefs and behaviour in an over simplified way. Freud's theory of religion is apparently faulty, inadequate, controversial and unacceptable to many people. He only examined religion from negative point of view without considering the positive aspects of religion. He deliberately neglected the role, impact and function of religion in the society. In spite of all the above criticisms, Sigmund Freud's theory is a very interesting one and hence, it has considerable relevance for the contemporary study of religion. Above all, Sigmund Freud's theory is worth of our commendation at least for presenting to us the psychological basis of religion. This has genuinely enriched our understanding in the area of psychology of religion, even if it does not fully portray all that religion signified.

### **Sociological Implications of Positivism for the Contemporary Study of Religion**

It cannot be doubted that Comte made a tremendous contribution to scholarship. For instance,

the past neglect of the sociology of religion has its origin in the Comtean school of positivism. He

further laid the foundation of the discipline of sociology. For a long period of time, many people have

considered sociology as being important, necessary, useful and beneficial to mankind.

In spite of this, notwithstanding, the persistence of religion is a fact that cannot be ignored

even in our modern society. Religion is a central concern, not a marginal indulgence (Idowu, 2004).

Consequently, sociology of religion is also a central concern in a study of culture and knowledge.

Besides, the rise of political sociology in recent times has increased our awareness of the social

significance of religion. It has made up impossible the neglect of the religious factor in party affiliation,

campaign hustling, voting behaviour and pressure-group formation. As a result, a theory of society

which does not take account of the religious component in culture and knowledge is not viable and

cannot stand the test of time. Thus, the study of religion requires the attention of the most intelligent,

candid and erudite scholars (Odudele, 2013). Therefore, it is obvious in modern times that the positive

aspects, functions and impacts of religion has a paramount influence on the individual and entire

society in the following ways:

Every aspect of human existence in the universe, be it political, social, cultural or economic, is influenced by religion. Violence is not preached by any religion. Peace is promoted and preached by all three principal religions in Nigeria, which are Christianity, Islam or African traditional religion. Peace and the peaceful coexistence of all citizens. In the sphere of human and society's social control, this has been used as a most important instrument. In this context, it cannot be emphasized that religion is a powerful tool for dealing with the current ethno religious crisis.

It is religion that ensures the continuation and continued existence of society. Odiba (2002) stresses that religion plays an important role as "social glue" in keeping societies together. It is therefore necessary to have peaceful coexistence and recognition of both human and moral values, given that religion plays a social role which keeps society together. This will strengthen the basic beliefs and values of society. In order to live in peace and unity, religion continues to maintain societal cohesion of all its members. In order to raise people's consciousness of their shared history and identity, so as to maintain the continuity and viability of societies, ritual rituals are carried out.

Religion is helping to provoke a radical change in society. In the case of religion there is an extraordinary change as a societal phenomenon. Religion has played a vital role in bringing about radical social change in Nigeria. Where necessary, religion provides space for tolerance and dialogue. The changes in the patterns of social activity and interaction are a societal change here. Religion is helping to provoke a radical change in society. In the case of religion there is an extraordinary change as a societal phenomenon. Religion has played a vital role in bringing about radical social change in Nigeria. Where necessary, religion provides space for tolerance and dialogue. The changes in the patterns of social activity and interaction are a societal change here.

Cultural transformation is another factor. In cultural development, the importance of religion can be seen. As a result of the introduction of new cultural elements, religion helps to transform society. Through religion there are influences on beliefs, laws, organizations, ways of dress, belief systems, buildings, wedding patterns, rearing children, funeral rites and many other aspects of culture. Morality is used to express the meaning of cultural behaviour and its purpose. When culture deviates from the real religious meaning, this must be checked in order to ensure that there is no imbalance of cultural elements and religious ideology.

Religion reforms and resettles deviants. The deviant is someone who, out of what they are accustomed to and acceptable, has a lack of moral or social standards. Religion can be used to call the out-law persons or sinners back to repentance, and makes them become socially integrated into the society. Religion has to deal with the ultimate problems of human life, which prevent men from behaving in ways that are morally and socially acceptable. It will give people a sense of direction, and they will be acting precisely the way they want to. It is a way for people to escape their despair and regain confidence in themselves. Those who are religious tend to be more faithful, loyal and less deviant. This is because, as an

instrument of social correction, religion gives rise to a fusion ideology

In addition, we have self-adjustment and solace as another impact of religion on man and society. Religion, especially when it comes to the issues of life and neuroses for men, is a very useful complement or tool in helping them cope with themselves. It's a mechanism to make adjustments and solve problems. It is in this context that religion provides a patterned and familiar way of overcoming life and environmental crisis and of the preparation and hope for a comfortable future. Religious believers are better adjusted on measures of psychiatric impairment, and religious activity is positively related to adjustment in old age. Hence, religious individuals may be able to face better life crisis and less likely to commit suicide.

Religion stimulates social habits, and it controls antisocial behaviour. Odiba (2002) says that religion is "the most effective way of controlling social behavior, stimulating social behaviour and checking antisocial tendencies". The moral life of humans is guided by religion, and religions have a profound influence on morality. In the Christian Law, it upholds a set of moral standards. Morality's been born out of religion, and no society can survive without morality. In order to promote peace, ethical standards and harmonious coexistence within the community, religions have imposed taboos. Some religious laws have forbidden the mechanism of birth control, the sale of alcoholic beverages, abortion, conducting business on sacred days, adultery, stealing, murder, lying, unhealthy, rivalry competitions, crisis etc.

Social solidarity and mutual friendships are fostered by religion. Religion is an important tool for collective solidarity, and the vast majority of society's major institutions were born out of religion. With the help of religion, we can strengthen cohesion, orderliness, stability, unity, harmony, collaboration, security consensus, cooperation and peaceful coexistence. So, in its efforts to eliminate loneliness and isolation, religion serves as an anchor of unity (Lawal, 2003).

However, it must be recalled that conflicts may also arise from a lack of effective use of religion. Experience proves that religion is a source of conflict; and conflicts lead to lack of law, disorder, insecurity and instability in societies. A religious demand that its members have exclusive possession of the truth, knowledge, goodness and salvation is considered to be fanaticism. Fanaticism thrives on dissent, because it is necessary to have another religion that can determine its membership. The tendency is to create religious intolerance and militancy which have caused a lot of crises worldwide.

## Conclusion

Auguste Comte originated positivism and declared an absolute attack on religion. He alienated

and isolated religion from sociology. He declared that religion was an illusion and advocated its total

extinction. His followers who also supported Comtean school of thought in the negative criticism of

religion included Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud. According to Comte, he believed that it is in new

religion that progress could be achieved. To him, progress was a necessary condition for the

development of order under the influence of love. His argument was very interesting thereby leading

to a greater awareness of the importance of religion for sociological analysis in the contemporary

society. Thus, religion was a pervasive and powerful factor especially in the Nigerian society.

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